



online

HEIDELBERG JOURNAL OF RELIGIONS ON THE INTERNET

Institute for Religious Studies - University of Heidelberg



Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll (Eds.)

Religion in Digital Games Respawned

Special Issue

Volume 10 (2016)

HEIDELBERG
UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING

Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, Volume 10 (2016)

As an open-access journal, *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* can be permanently accessed free of charge from the website of HEIDELBERG UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING (<http://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de>).

ISSN 1861-5813

This work is published under the Creative Commons license (CC BY-SA 4.0).



Editors:

Simone Heidbrink, M.A., Institute for Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany
Tobias Knoll, M.A., Institute for Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany

Editor in Chief:

Prof. Dr. Gregor Ahn, Institute for Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany

Members of the Editorial Board:

Dr. Frank G. Bosman, Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Netherlands
Prof. Dr. Oliver Krüger, Chair for the Study of Religion Department of Social Studies,
University of Fribourg, Switzerland
Dr. Gernot Meier, Studienleiter Ev. Akademie Baden, Karlsruhe, Germany

Contributors to this Issue:

Frank G. Bosman
Simone Heidbrink
Mark R Johnson
Tobias Knoll
Roman Ohlendorf
Stefan Piasecki
Dennis Ramirez
Jenny Saucerman

© 2016



Table of Contents

- 01 **Towards „a New Province of Humanity“! - Introduction**
Simone Heidbrink & Tobias Knoll
- 06 **'Nothing is true, everything is permitted' - The Portrayal of the *Nizari Isma'ilis* in the *Assassin's Creed* Game Series**
Frank G. Bosman
- 27 **Playing with the legend - Ostension and Extra-Textual Production in *Minecraft***
Roman Ohlendorf
- 45 **Redemption through Annihilation?! - Game Designer's Views on Religion, Culture and Society and Its Influence on Digital Games**
Stefan Piasecki
- 74 **Praise Helix! - Christian Narrative in *Twitch Plays: Pokémon***
Jenny Saucerman & Dennis Ramirez
- 95 **Interview: Mark R Johnson, Creator of *Ultima Ratio Regum***



Playing with the Legend

Ostension and Extra-Textual Production in Minecraft

Roman Ohlendorf

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 eggs*¹, *creepypastas*² 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

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 *copyypasta*, 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

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 legends³: *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:

Pseudo ostension describes the telling when it is through a fake performance of the legend in order to deceive an observer.

Quasi-ostension is happening when the performance is in fact imaginary and therefore only perceived subjectively.

False ostension describes when the performance is knowingly fabricated and the retelling is a conscious, but not necessarily malicious, lie.

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 Bascoms 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.

Markus Persson – 8. January 2011 (Persson, 2011)

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 gamespace. 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 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.

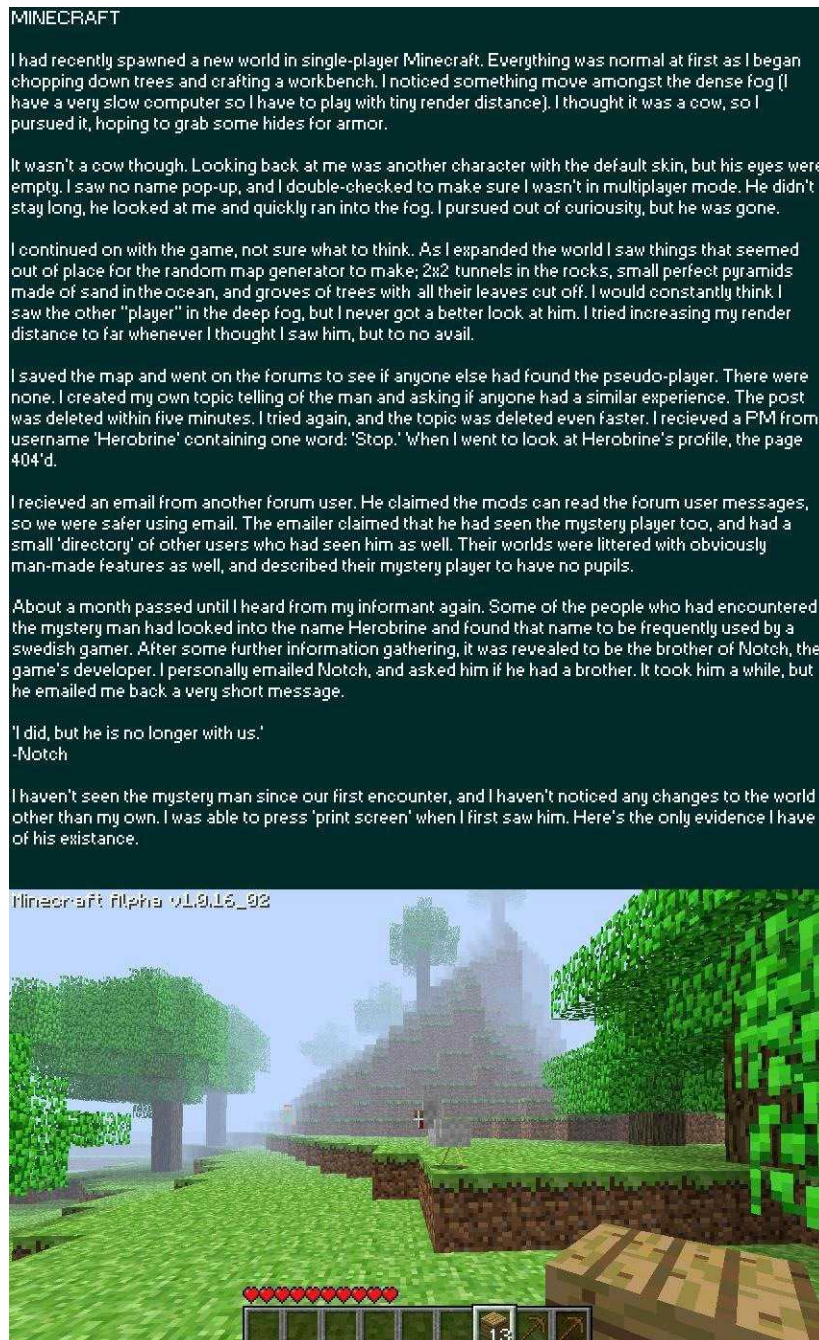


Figure 1

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 modded⁴. 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

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 believe 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

baldurk, 2012. *Let's Play Archive*. [Online], available at: <http://lparchive.org/history> [accessed 20 April 2015].

Bascom, W., 1984. The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives. In: A. Dundes, ed. *Sacred Narrative - Readings in the Theory of Myth*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 5-29.

- Bergstrom, K., de Castell, S., Jenson, J. & Taylor, N., 2015. Alienated Playbour: Relations of Production in EVE Online. *Games and Culture*, pp. 1-24.
- Bird, E. S., 1994. Playing with Fear: Interpreting the Adolescent Legend Trip. *Western Folklore*, 53(3), pp. 191-209.
- Bird, E. S., 2006. Cultural studies as confluence: the convergence of folklore and media studies. In: H. E. Hinds, M. F. Motz & A. M. S. Nelson, eds. *Popular culture theory and methodology: A basic introduction*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 344-355.
- Blank, T. J., 2009. Toward a Conceptual Framework for the Study of Folklore and the Internet. In: T. J. Blank, ed. *Folklore and the Internet - Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*. Logan: Utah State University Press, pp. 1-20.
- Blizzard Entertainment, 2004. *World of Warcraft*. s.l.:Blizzard Entertainment.
- Caillios, R., 1961. *Man, Play, and Games*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Conway, S., 2010. A circular wall? Reformulating the fourth wall for videogames. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 2(2), pp. 145-155.
- Corliss, J., 2011. Introduction: The Social Science Study of Video Games. *Games and Culture*, 6(1), pp. 3-16.
- Cragoe, N. G., 2015. RPG Mythos: Narrative Gaming as Modern Mythmaking. *Games and Culture*, Issue DOI:10.1177/1555412015574195, pp. 1-25.
- Dégh, L. & Vázsonyi, A., 1983. Does the Word "Dog" Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 20(1), pp. 5-34.
- Denegri-Knott, J. & Molesworth, M., 2007. Digital Play and the Actualization of the Consumer Imagination. *Games and Culture*, 2(2), pp. 114-133.
- Downs, J., Howard, S. & Vetere, F., 2013. *Paraplay: exploring playfulness around physical console gaming*. Cape Town, Proceedings of the 14th IFIP TC13 Conference on Human-Computer Interaction (INTERACT 2013).
- Dundes, A., 1964. On Game Morphology: A Study of the Structure of Non-Verbal Folklore. *New York Folklore Quarterly*, pp. 276-288.
- Dundes, A., 1984. Introduction. In: A. Dundes, ed. *Sacred Narrative - Readings in the Theory of Myth*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 1-4.
- Eaket, C. et al., 2008. *Neo-immersion: Awareness and engagement in gameplay*. Toronto, Canada, Proceedings Future Play.
- Eco, U., 1979. *A Theory of Semiotics*. s.l.:Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Ellis, B., 1989. Death by Folklore: Ostension, Contemporary Legend, and Murder. *Western Folklore*, 48(3), pp. 201-220.
- Friedman, T., 1995. Making sense of software: computer games and interactive textuality. In: S. G. Jones, ed. *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 73-89.
- Green, S., 2011. Ritual Assertions of Independence: Structural Similarities in Children's Games and Hiking Narratives. *Children's Folklore eNewsletter*, Volume 2, Issue 1, pp. 1-12.
- Gu, J., 2014. A Craft of Call Mine: Creative Appropriation of Minecraft in YouTube Animations. In: N. Garrelts, ed. *Understanding Minecraft: essays on play, community and possibilities*. Jefferson: McFarland, pp. 132-147.
- Günzel, S., Liebe, M. & Mersch, D., 2010. Logic and structure of the computer game. In: S. Günzel, M. Liebe & D. Mersch, eds. *Logic and structure of the computer game*. Potsdam: Potsdam University Press, pp. 16-34.
- Henricks, T. S., 2010. Caillois's Man, Play, and Games - An Appreciation and Evaluation. *American Journal of Play*, 3(2), pp. 157-184.
- Henrikson, L., 2013. Here be monsters: a choreomaniacs's companion to the danse macabre. *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 23(3), pp. 414-423.
- Hong, S.-h., 2015. When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games' Reappropriation of History, Myth, and Ritual. *Games and Culture*, 10(1), pp. 35-56.
- Huizinga, J., 1949. *Homo Ludens*. New York: Routledge.
- Jumanji*. 1995. [Film] Directed by Joe Johnston. USA: TriStar Pictures.
- Juul, J., 2011. *Half-Real - Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. 3 ed. Cambridge, USA: MIT Press.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B., 1998. Folklore's Crisis. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 111(441), pp. 281-327.
- Kontour, K., 2009. Revisiting violent videogames research: Game Studies perspectives on aggression, violence, immersion, interaction, and textual analysis. *Digital Culture & Education*, pp. 6 - 30.
- Koven, M. J., 2008. *Film, Folklore, and Urban Legends*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press.
- Krzywinska, T., 2006. Blood Scythes, Festivals, Quests, and Backstories - World Creation and Rhetorics of Myth. *Games and Culture*, 1(4), pp. 383-396.
- Laycock, J. P., 2015. *Dangerous Games - What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*. Oakland: University of California Press.

- Lindahl, C., 2005. Ostensive Healing: Pilgrimage to the San Antonio Ghost Tracks. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 118(468), pp. 164-185.
- Lindsey, M.-V., 2015. The Politics of Pokemon – Socialized Gaming, Religious Themes and the Construction of Communal Narratives. *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, Volume 7, pp. 107-138.
- Lowood, H., 2006. High-performance play: The making of machinima. *Journal of Media Practice*, 7(1), pp. 25-42.
- MacCallum-Stewart, E., 2014. "Someone off the YouTubez": The Yogscast as Fan Producers. In: N. Garrelts, ed. *Understanding Minecraft: essays on play, community and possibilities*. Jefferson: McFarland, pp. 148-159.
- Malaby, T. M., 2007. Beyond Play - A New Approach to Games. *Games and Culture*, 2(2), pp. 95-113.
- Manivannan, V., 2012. Attaining the Ninth Square: Cybertextuality, Gamification, and Institutional Memory on 4chan. *Enculturation*, Issue 14.
- McDowell, J. H., 1982. Beyond iconicity: ostension in Kamsa mythic narrative. *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 19(2), pp. 119-139.
- Menotti, G., 2014. Videorec as gameplay: Recording playthroughs and video. *Game - Games as Art Media Entertainment*, 1(3), pp. 81-92.
- MinecraftWiki, 2015. *Herobrine*. [Online], available at: <http://minecraft.gamepedia.com/Herobrine> [accessed 20 April 2015].
- Mojang, 2010. *Minecraft*. s.l.:Mojang.
- Mojang, 2011. *Minecraft Patch 1.6.6 Released*. [Online], available at: <http://www.minecraftforum.net/news/7313-minecraft-patch-1-6-6-released> [accessed 30 July 2015].
- Myers, D., 2014. *The attack of the backstories (and why they won't win)*. s.l., s.n.
- Newman, J., 2005. Playing (with) Videogames. *Convergence*, 11(1), pp. 48-67.
- Parsec Productions, 2012. *Slender: The Eight Pages*. s.l.:Parsec Productions.
- Pearce, C., 2006. Productive Play - Game Culture From the Bottom Up. *Games and Culture*, 1(1), pp. 17-24.
- Persson, M., 2011. *Twitter*. [Online], available at: <https://twitter.com/notch/status/23849639551700992> [accessed 30 July 2015].
- Ringu*. 1998. [Film] Directed by Hiedo Nakata. Japan: Omega Project.

Rockstar Games, 2004. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. s.l.:Rockstar Games.

Stewart, S., 1982. The Epistemology of the Horror Story. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 95(375), pp. 33-50.

Taylor, T., 2009. The Assemblage of Play. *Games and Culture*, 4(4), pp. 331-339.

Tolbert, J. A., 2014. "The sort of story that has you covering your mirrors": The Case of Slender Man. *Semiotic Review*, Issue 2.

Tosenberger, C., 2010. "Kinda like the folklore of its day": Supernatural, fairy tales, and ostension. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, Volume 4.

X Files - First Person Shooter. 2000. [Film] Directed by Chris Carter. USA: Ten Thirteen Productions.

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.

Brunel University London
College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences
Social Sciences, Media and Communications
Media - Games Design
Kingston Lane
Uxbridge
Middlesex UB8 3PH
United Kingdom

Email: romanohlendorf@gmail.com