

PANDEMIC FANTASIES:
DISCOURSES OF ESCAPISM DURING COVID-19

by

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To the Brightest Star in the Sky

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by

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Pandemic Fantasies: Discourses of Escapism During COVID-19 observes media environments that proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic, how discourses of escapism were expressed within these environments, and how those environments contributed and shifted conversations about our relationship escapism and media use. By closely examining the intersections between fiction and real life as described by audiences and fans, I examine the shifting discourse around escapism as the pandemic pushed many people towards digital media interactions. Applying theories of critical media studies and fandom studies, this dissertation challenges normative critiques of popular media as meaningless while also questioning alternative narratives of empowerment and misinformation. This dissertation asks how escapist media discourses shaped the perception and reception of media engagements during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, what a counter-discourse regarding these media engagements suggests about those who partake in those media environments, and what these counter-discourses and media engagements suggest when we approach them as serious attempts at sensemaking and worldbuilding.

Escapism is, to its detractors, a derivative practice wherein a person attempts to escape their daily lives by seeking out something else, such as a work of fiction, an online community, or a vacation. As a result, escapism is presented as a break from reality, time set apart and kept at bay with skepticism of its constructed nature for fear of losing oneself to fantasy. Yet the pandemic provoked a mass exodus of sorts to any escape route—from *Animal Crossing* to QAnon—that could provide a haven for the weeks, months, and years of COVID protocols and social distancing measures. In contrast to this dominant perception, I analyze narratives about what is characterized as escapist media consumption—media practices that are frequently regarded as “disconnected” from reality yet powerful enough to change people for good or ill. Taking seriously these narratives of escapism’s ability to transform lives, I interrogate how escapism helped shape the pandemic.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Significance of the Problem

As we now know, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic—also known as 2019-nCoV, the novel coronavirus, or COVID-19—began with an outbreak in the city of Wuhan in China’s Hubei Province on December 12, 2019. Over four years later, the World Health Organization reports that there have been 774,469,939 cases reported globally, with 7,026,465 deaths and counting attributed to the virus.¹ As COVID-19 spread across borders faster than hospitals could treat patients, countries ordered citizens to stay at home, to maintain distance from one another, and to close non-essential businesses. These closures would fluctuate in effectiveness as political will, economic pressure, and social anxieties overcame the desire to protect vulnerable populations.

Curiously, narratives of apocalyptic proportions surged in popularity in the early days of the pandemic, such as the 2011 film *Contagion*’s depiction of scientists working around the clock to discover a cure for a viral pandemic. Documentarian Dan Olsen, in a March 31, 2020, video about his newfound obsession with *Contagion*, recalls how he had watched the film “over fifteen times in the last two weeks,” with some days leaving it “on repeat two or three times,” a habit that many people turned to in the early days of lockdown.² Alongside other horror films depicting realistic and fanciful viral pandemics like *Outbreak* (1995), *28 Days Later* (2002), and *Train to Busan* (2016), *Contagion*’s newfound audience turned to the film for a number of

¹ World Health Organization, “COVID-19 Cases | WHO COVID-19 Dashboard,” WHO Data, January 28, 2024, <https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19/cases>.

² *I Can’t Stop Watching Contagion | Folding Ideas* (YouTube, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsSzfVhdVuw>.

reasons: to see how a pandemic might play out, to be reminded that people are working around the clock to cure COVID, or to see people working to do the right thing to help the most people. This last sentiment, as Senior Editor at *Rolling Stone* David Fear laments, “is something we really aren’t getting right now when we hear about travel bans in lieu of testing, delayed responses instead of determination...past leaders being defensively blamed rather than current ones acting with accountability. In that sense, maybe *Contagion* really is escapism.”³

This notion that a film depicting a past vision of what would become a terrifying reality could provide escape undergirds how escapism is often regarded and addressed in popular culture. Fear does not bother to describe what he means by “escapism,” instead alluding to how the movie is “hopeful” and optimistic.⁴ Escapism here is presented as media that promotes generally good feelings while also showing audiences a world that, as Fear notes from *Contagion*’s portrayal of effective government strategies and agencies, we do not live in. Even in this use case where escapist media is shown to be beneficial in some capacity, said media is written off as mere entertainment, with critics presenting several mixed opinions on its benefits or dangers. Escapism can be a healthy diversion from the stressors of daily life. Escapism is an indicator of mental illness. Escapism will ruin your life or can save your life. Anything can be escapism, from sports to climbing the corporate ladder, yet indulging in any of these disguises some hidden turmoil that must be uprooted. Even scholarly definitions of escapism paint the experience as an attempt to “avoid, temporarily, unpleasant truths that we must live with...” or

³ David Fear, “How ‘Contagion’ Suddenly Became the Most Urgent Movie of 2020,” *Rolling Stone* (blog), March 13, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-features/contagion-most-urgent-movie-of-2020-964532/>.

⁴ Fear, “How ‘Contagion’ Suddenly Became the Most Urgent Movie of 2020.”

as a form of self-deception.⁵ Similarly, Patrick Jagoda points to how those who enjoy media like poetry, television, and video games are viewed as suffering from “escapist self-indulgence, psychological tendencies toward imitation of harmful ideas, wasteful use of time that took away from labor, and physical harm to eyesight.”⁶ Escapism continues to be viewed as a vice utilized by those who cannot handle the pains of real life.

Despite these claims of escapism’s potential harms, the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily reversed—or at least quieted—these fears as people increasingly sought out new avenues for escapism to replace those that were once lost. Francisco Garcia recalls how he had felt how his purchase of a video game console was “something shameful enough to be concealed from all but my closest friends,” until the pandemic turned his hobby into “a form of escapism to be envied.”⁷ As bakeries closed, people turned to social media and offered advice on how to bake sourdough bread, sharing photos of their results and discovering a plethora of techniques and communities with advice for keeping their yeast “Tamagotchi” alive.⁸ Some started using TikTok to document their dough’s progress, joining a rapidly growing group of first-time users creating videos about dancing, comedy skits, and anything they could think of that they could share with others.⁹ Even

⁵ John L. Longeway, “The Rationality of Escapism and Self-Deception,” *Behavior and Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (1990): 1.

⁶ Patrick Jagoda, “From Suspension of Disbelief to Production of Belief: The Case for Alternate Reality Games,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Fiction and Belief*, ed. Alison James, Akihiro Kubo, and Françoise Lavocat, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2023): 203.

⁷ Francisco Garcia, “Escaping Lockdown into a World of Video Games Is Nothing to Feel Guilty About,” *The Guardian*, May 23, 2020, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/23/escaping-lockdown-world-computer-games-guilty-refuge-animal-crossing>.

⁸ Josie Delap, “Why Sourdough Went Viral,” *The Economist*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2020/08/04/why-sourdough-went-viral>.

⁹ Natalie Finn, “Everything That Officially Made 2020 the Year of TikTok,” *E! Online*, December 26, 2020, <https://www.eonline.com/ca/news/1221921/everything-that-officially-made-2020-the-year-of-tiktok>.

animal shelters, fearful that they would be overwhelmed with requests to take in pets, were instead cleaned out as people sought out rescue animals to comfort and be comforted by as stay-at-home orders extended throughout 2020.¹⁰ As people turned to new experiences, old loves, and present company, common sentiments around these escapist practices commented on how they allowed time for contemplation and reflection on those that were lost in the pandemic and for who they could become after lockdown, for slowing down long enough to consider how the world became like this, and for coming to terms with the pandemic itself.

This dissertation examines multiple examples of escapism as described by those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the discourses created by audiences, critics, and others navigating this tumultuous period. As the pandemic and the various government responses to the coronavirus led many citizens to isolate at home, escapism was recontextualized as a helpful polemic for those trying to survive the horrors of the coronavirus even as parallel discussions continued to weigh the potential harms of increased media use and of which escapes should be utilized. This dissertation interrogates how escapist media discourses shaped the perception and reception of media engagements, identifies counter discourses regarding those media engagements that questioned who should partake in them, and surveys what these counter discourses and media engagements suggest when we take escapism seriously.

¹⁰ Megan McCluskey, "Rescue Animals Are TIME's 2020 Pet of the Year," TIME, December 9, 2020, <https://time.com/5912616/pet-of-the-year-2020-rescue-animals/>.

1.2 Literature Review

Escapism is generally considered in relation to the everyday experiences of life and often as a reaction to daily stressors, sudden changes, or potential threats to one's routine. In fact, escapism tends to be positioned in relation to media practices, presenting media like television and games as uniquely capable of mentally transporting the viewer to virtual realities where their life's worries hold no sway. Yet this attitude takes what one can escape *with* for granted. Stepping outside for a breath of fresh air, for instance, presumes one lives or works in an environment with "fresh air," something that the COVID-19 pandemic pulled into question through imperceptible microbes. Likewise, a video game can be viewed as a window into another world that contains infinitely renewable entertainment, where slaying dragons dampens the mundanity of paperwork and office drama, but the power required to keep a computer's lights on is generated by larger systems of labor, supply chains, and capital, all three of which struggled to hold fast against the pressures of the coronavirus—and that only matters if those systems can keep producing the hardware necessary to play those games, as many unfortunately found out when chip shortages made prices skyrocket and devices scarce.¹¹ Even then, one can escape into a daydream or fall asleep.

¹¹ Nick Statt, "Nintendo, PlayStation Earnings: Warn of Chip Shortage - Protocol," May 13, 2022, <https://www.protocol.com/entertainment/nintendo-switch-sony-ps5-shortage>; Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Anna Brown, and Rachel Minkin, "A Year Into the Pandemic, Long-Term Financial Impact Weighs Heavily on Many Americans," *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project* (blog), March 5, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/03/05/a-year-into-the-pandemic-long-term-financial-impact-weighs-heavily-on-many-americans/>; Ian King, Debby Wu, and Demetrios Pogkas, "Microchips Needed in Your Car, PlayStation and Phone Are In Short Supply," *Bloomberg.Com*, March 29, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2021-semiconductors-chips-shortage/>; Nicole Wetsman, "Last Year's Record-Breaking Power Outages Are a Red Flag for Public Health," *The Verge*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.theverge.com/2021/11/15/22782892/power-outage-health-record-covid-climate-change>.

These ethereal properties of escapism—wherein one can escape into fantasies and partake in activities viewed as distasteful or improper—highlight the perception that escapism is a “magic circle.” Attributed to Dutch historian Johan Huizinga and his study of play *Homo Ludens*, the magic circle presents a scenario wherein “we can experience things not normally sanctioned or allowed in regular space or life,” such as how rage rooms are designed to allow participants to destroy objects like computers, plates, and cars; within this philosophical structure, we are permitted to engage with the world differently.¹² However, Huizinga’s original conception was that a *literal* magic circle, used as part of a series of locations like temples and playgrounds, represented “temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.”¹³ The spatial bounds of the magic circle permitted behaviors and activities therein that could not apply elsewhere, much like how the destructive freedom of the rage room would result in vandalism charges outside of it. Likewise, one’s escapist pursuit can result in another’s headache.

Because escapism does not hinge on any singular mediating force and is not confined to any particular place, I frame escapism as a practice to emphasize the role of the escapee as an active participant rather than ascribing mystical power to any particular media object. This is in contrast to the notion that one must be “deceived” into suspending their disbelief by presenting the participant with a carefully constructed fantasy that is not too fantastic (which would be too alien) or too realistic (and thus break the illusion). The concept of a willful suspension of

¹²Mia Consalvo. “There Is No Magic Circle.” *Games and Culture* 4, no. 4 (October 2009), 409.

¹³Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Reprint. International Library of Sociology. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, 10.

disbelief foregrounds the primacy of media-as-escape in common discourse, as if only well-crafted works can turn off the suspicious faculties of the mind that knows that the actors and actresses depicted on the screen will go on to live in another movie. Instead, I draw escapism as a practice to build upon Janet Murray's conception of an active creation of belief, wherein "we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than question the reality of the experience."¹⁴ If escapism can be considered an immersive experience, Murray's active creation of belief states that we do not let the waves wash over us, for we must be the ones to jump in.

But where does one jump in to? The general assumption is that one escapes from reality into fantasy or from the real world to a false one, an easy enough perception if one looks to the wealth of fiction on display in any given medium. But many people opt to "escape" to national parks or to the wilderness. In this way, Yi-Fu Tuan writes in *Escapism*, "What one escapes to is culture," which is "in a fundamental sense, a mechanism of escape..."¹⁵ In Tuan's view, Nature—not "nature" in general but the grand concept "encapsulated in such words as 'countryside,' 'landscape,' and 'wilderness'"—is kept separate from human civilization and development under the pretense that it must be preserved, but it is only through human acts of regulation and conservation that Nature can exist as its own category.¹⁶ We establish the borders of the national park where "Nature" exists just as much as we do the borders of a city, a state, or

¹⁴ Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Updated edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017): 136.

¹⁵ Yi-fu Tuan, *Escapism* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998): 23, 27.

¹⁶ Tuan, *Escapism*, 81.

a country. One's capability to escape also relies on one's personal tastes and desires. As Caetlin Benson-Allott adds, escapism is "an intensely personal aesthetic experience that involves both viewers' biographies and their viewing conditions."¹⁷ Many turned to watch *Contagion* and similar films as their escapism of choice, but many others could care less for the drama or cannot stomach the gore depicted in those movies. My fear of bees, wasps, and other flying, buzzing bugs means that certain areas of a forest would be less of an escape and more of a potential panic attack. What we call escapism thus depends on who is escaping, what has been culturally marked as an escape route, and what scenario or condition has sparked the need to escape.

Escapism as a personal experience also underscores its affective qualities. Affect, sometimes described as an amalgamation of emotion and feeling that escapes linguistic capabilities to name them, is by definition tricky to define. While emotions can be broadly defined as such, affects shape one's interactions with other people, things, and the world through the communities, possessions, professions, and media one connects with on a precognizant level. Susanna Paasonen describes affect as a powerful force that "grabs, appeals and disturbs, attracts and repulses" whether or not we are aware of it.¹⁸ Paasonen further elaborates that affect can drive one's search for engaging media as the seeker is often "driven by a desire for something that will grab and stick, rather than just slide by—no matter how contingent and temporal such attachments may be."¹⁹ Jodi Dean posits that the "stickiness" of certain media can create an

¹⁷ Caetlin Benson-Allott, "On Platforms: In Praise of Escapism," *Film Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (September 1, 2020): 75–79, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2020.74.1.75>.

¹⁸ Susanna Paasonen, "A Midsummer's Bonfire: Affective Intensities of Online Debate," in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit, ARTECA Ebooks. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015): 40.

¹⁹ Paasonen, "A Midsummer's Bonfire," *Networked Affect*, 40.

“affective circuit” where one’s engagement with a work creates a feedback loop.²⁰ As one escapes through walks in nature, phones, computers, radios, televisions, bookcases, pictures, paintings, and roadside billboards, these circuits can be reinforced and thus provoke a desire to engage with that escape again.

Escapism’s ability to evoke these bodily reactions and feelings from participants carries a stigma of fanaticism, excessive emotion, and hyper-consumerist behavior, especially if one’s enjoyment of a certain escape is shared by others. Fandoms, communities established by those who associate themselves with a particular work or genre of media, are regularly belittled for the crime of liking something “too much” and for disconnecting from the real world in favor of fantastical ones. Joli Jenson notes that this social stigma pathologizes the fan as either “an obsessed loner, suffering from a disease of isolation, or a frenzied crowd member, suffering from the disease of contagion.”²¹ Fandom and escapist practices have also been accused by moral entrepreneurs of everything from being the organizing factor of new religious cults in the 1970s, criminal Satanist organizations in the 80s, transforming teenagers into “super predators” through violent television in the 1990s, and in more recent years converting children to the “gay agenda” through media depictions of LGBTQ+ lives.²² Once again, escapism is discussed as antithetical to the “real world,” but here these characterizations revolve around the demonization of excess emotion and a perceived lack of rational thought in those who find joy in media.

²⁰ Jodi Dean, “Affect and Drive,” in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit, ARTECA Ebooks. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015): 94.

²¹ Joli Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa Lewis (Routledge, 1992): 13.

²² Joseph Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015): 6.

Another oft-regarded notion of escapism concerns its relationship with labor. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels describe the worker's relationship to their labor as alienating, isolating the worker from their connections to "the sensuous external world" while they struggle to find meaning in the "alien object" that they create through their labor but cannot claim ownership of.²³ A sports car that promises drivers the thrill of high speeds and the luxury of comfort will be sold for far more than what those paid to make it were given as compensation. The figure of the sports car also showcases what Marx and Engels refer to as commodity fetishism, wherein we provide the object with values as a "social hieroglyphic" to gain recognition from others.²⁴ The actual use of that item is less important than the item itself and, to a certain extent, one's ability to pay a premium for it. This commodity fetishism complicates escapism by essentially weighing certain measures of escape as more valuable than others and through that perceived value, forcing those who lack economic means to settle for less prestigious methods of placating the feeling of alienation from their labor. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno take this notion of escapism as a social tool and a salve for the working class and posit that the mass production of culture promotes the "stunting of the mass-media consumer's powers of imagination and spontaneity."²⁵ This culture industry, in their view, obliterates distinctions between "genuine style" and "imitation" and acts instead as a form of social control wherein "Everything down to the last detail" must adhere to the dominant ideologies that the industry and its benefactors seek

²³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2010, 653.

²⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. "Capital, Volume 1." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd ed., 663–71. New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2010, 666.

²⁵ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. "Dialectic of Enlightenment." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd ed., 1110–27. New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2010, 1113.

to reproduce in audiences.²⁶ In other words, escapist media created via industries like Hollywood only allow for certain approved forms of escape in their audiences and instrumentalize their leisure into social pressure that keeps them from straying from the status quo.

This view of escapist media hearkens to escapism's association with "low" or mass culture, consumed without thought or free choice. This is placed in comparison to, as Stuart Hall describes, "unpopular culture, elite culture, or folk culture, traditional culture, or aristocratic culture or whatever."²⁷ Hall dismisses the idea that popular and elite cultural forms are all that different from one another, but he acknowledges that culture is "a field of relations always structured in dominance."²⁸ This structure can be further examined in how fans of culture perceived as "popular" are often regarded as both an uncultured horde and as social outcasts. Nicolle Lamerichs' exploration of fans of Japanese popular culture or "otaku" finds that although anime has exploded in mainstream popularity worldwide, "otaku are still stereotyped as loners who may be involved in otaku subculture to some degree, but generally stick to themselves. These representations may be carried out further to the degree that otaku are depicted as having phobias or mental illness" while also being "believed to be either desperate, single fanboys, or virgin fangirls."²⁹ In contrast, audiences that engage with media as "aficionados," "critics," or even the dreaded "academic" position themselves as capable of "remaining suitably detached

²⁶ Horkheimer & Adorno, "Dialectic of Enlightenment," 1114.

²⁷ Stuart Hall. "Popular Culture, Politics and History." *Cultural Studies* 32, no. 6 (November 2, 2018), 929.

²⁸ Hall, "Popular Culture," 932.

²⁹ Nichole Lamerich, "Otaku: Representations of Fandom in Japanese Popular Culture," in *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, ProQuest eBooks. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 256, 259.

observers” of exclusive and supposedly more complex works.³⁰ Jenson, however, calls attention to the dissonance between these two perceptions of escapism and fandom: “Apparently, if the object of desire is popular with the lower or middle class, relatively inexpensive and widely available, it is fandom (or a harmless hobby); if it is popular with the wealthy and well educated, expensive and rare, it is preference, interest or expertise.”³¹ As a result, football or soccer fans are labelled as destructive hooligans whereas the culture around golf or chess emphasizes polite rationality, elegance, and intelligence, even as both of the later sports frequently deal with outrageous scandals and bouts that rival their lower-class peers.

The use of language to denote whether a particular escape is a valid intellectual pursuit or a pitfall for fanatical whims is crucial to understanding how escapism is depicted in conversations, media, and society. Michel Foucault supposes that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality.”³² What people say, write, and create are all constructed within structures of power and capability that encourage certain perspectives, disincentivize so-called undesirable ones, and make others near impossible to articulate. This self-censoring can make escapism difficult to analyze based solely on how discourse surrounding escapism is produced and how it is reproduced. Instead of looking at any

³⁰ Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen, *Fandom at the Crossroads: Celebration, Shame and Fan/Producer Relationships* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2012): 1.

³¹ Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology,” *Seeing Fans*, 19.

³² Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, World of Man (New York: Vintage Books, 2010): 216.

specific statement that has notoriety, exploring an idea's "reappearance" across multiple contexts can grant insight to what opinions and ideas about escapism are commonly shared as well as what aspects of escapist media practices are championed or derided.³³ It should be noted, though, that not all discourse is "true;" after all, people can lie, embellish, or change their opinions. However, the discourses examined here reflect a sample of the conversations surrounding escapist practices and media use during the pandemic. Rather than take any one statement at its face value, this dissertation locates patterns of discourse and engages with how people describe their experiences and feelings around escapism and media during this time frame.

In addition to looking to the contexts of these discourses, I also turn to the media themselves, practicing what N. Katherine Hayles deems media-specific analysis. While it is possible to discuss a work's qualities in terms of story, characters, and other universally understood terms, she notes, media "must always be embodied to exist in the world."³⁴ How a platform like Twitter or YouTube presents discourse to audiences and circulates further discourses within an affective circuit of likes and dislikes, of sharing and doomscrolling is integral to understanding how they operate as both facilitators and as restrictors of discourse. This is especially true in the contexts of the pandemic, as many discussions were hosted through digital tools and social media as lockdowns and social distancing limited face-to-face conversations and casual discourse. Yet, one must take care not to attribute too much weight onto digital technologies, as if introducing a computer transforms all communication the same

³³ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 221.

³⁴ N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (MIT Press, 2002): 31.

way as it converges onto media feeds. Shelia Murphy warns that although “media do become deeply entwined formally and technologically...our tales of convergence must be situated in a framework that accounts for each form’s specificity of use.”³⁵ As such, this dissertation looks to each case study within the specifics of the platforms that circulate discourse in addition to the discourse itself.

I also emphasize the importance of a platform’s allowances because this research project became, incidentally, an examination of digital media technologies. While not every case study exists purely online or is mediated exclusively through digital means, the accessibility and availability of these technologies during the pandemic cannot be understated. Much of the discourse examined in this dissertation appears online through social media, video, and digital news channels. As such, how one establishes the credibility of a statement of an op-ed published by *The New York Times* will differ from how one does so on Reddit or Facebook. In that vein, each platform has its own social cues and dialects, its cliques and groups, its style guides and editorial practices, and its own limitations for engaging with other users. For instance, a news post on Twitter may be written to garner attention and retweets, but a post on Facebook may be tailored to a specific group’s interests. In addition, these digital technologies are still physical, reliant on human labor to gather their raw materials, make their constituent parts, and create the infrastructures necessary to maintain their usage.³⁶ While a full accounting of these platforms is

³⁵ Sheila C. Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011): 57.

³⁶ See Rahul Mukherjee, *Radiant Infrastructures: Media, Environment, and Cultures of Uncertainty*, 2020, and Lisa Nakamura, “Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture” in *American Quarterly* 66 (4): 919–41 (2014).

beyond the scope of this research project, their overwhelming presence throughout the pandemic requires one to take them and how they intersect with the lives of those that use them into account.

1.3 Chapter Breakdown

This dissertation centers on three major questions surrounding discourses about escapism and the media engagements through which audiences and fans claimed to have escaped during the early years of the pandemic. Each of these chapters turns to publicly available information on social media sites like Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube as well as numerous websites, blogs, and news sources to establish these discourses. While far from a complete scan of the pandemic's contexts and effects, these case studies provide a sample of the respective discussions that escapist media practices facilitated during this time. As with most studies of online cultures and digital media use, many of the participants within these discussions are based within the United States of America and conducted most of their digital conversations in English. While the discussions depicted in these chapters may have also occurred outside of these contexts, the scope of the project is limited due to time, funding, and current ability.

Chapter 2 focuses on the immediate impact of the March 2020 lockdowns in the USA and how audiences used animal media to debate the effects of the pandemic and to cope with the upheavals of both the virus and social distancing measures. Released as much of the world had entered lockdown, Nintendo's *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and Netflix's *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness* entered a media environment filled with animals: bats, big cats, dogs, tanuki, and so on. The proliferation of animal media during lockdown illuminated initial concerns of the novel coronavirus, a zoonotic disease whose origins and ability to spread

between all animals ignited environmental and economic concerns. In addition to discussing the effects of the pandemic in plain speech, audiences used *Animal Crossing*, *Tiger King*, and other animal representations to communicate their fears of lockdown, to explore possibilities of being, and to commune with others stuck inside.

Chapter 3 shifts to the summer of 2020 and to discourses of tabletop role-playing games as potential avenues for empowerment as the pandemic continued to reshape public life. Notably, tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* were presented as potential avenues for reinvigorating one's mental health as concerns of prolonged stay-at-home orders and the pain of the pandemic became ever-present. While non-gamers were just discovering role-playing games and debated the medium's ability to provide escapism through power fantasy, embedded players negotiated how the contested relationship between the players and the developers of these games established boundaries for who could participate and who can be empowered. The empowerment offered by this escapist practice is further contested by those within and outside these circles, such how the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 spurred deep conversations about how race is depicted and reified by *Dungeons & Dragons* and other role-playing games.

Chapter 4 advances beyond 2020 as it studies the rise of conspiracy theorists and the surging popularity of unfiction media. Though conspiracy theories have long been lampooned as something only believed by the uneducated and as vulnerable to the power of science, the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol Building called traditional approaches to proving reality into question. Many blamed the rioters for improper research or pitied them for being duped by con artists and fake scientists, but these discourses position conspiracists as being unable to determine fantasy from reality. In contrast, unfiction narratives—a genre of storytelling

that intentionally blurs the distinction between fact and fiction—grew in popularity during the pandemic for their reality-warping capabilities, even as unaware readers found themselves caught up in what ultimately was revealed to be artifice. By juxtaposing discourses around conspiracies with unfiction, I argue that we can better address how escapist practices and their practitioners are discussed by stepping away from claims of fact and fiction and instead examine what one does with the fictions they may (or may not) believe in.

CHAPTER 2

WE'RE ALL ANIMALS:

TIGER KING, ANIMAL CROSSING, AND ANIMAL MEDIA IN LOCKDOWN

“I’m quite glad that I’ll be sharing this desolate island with such a hard worker, oho!”

- Tom Nook, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

“I’m in a cage. You know why animals die in cages? Their soul dies.”

- Joe Exotic, *Tiger King*

2.1 Introduction

As the world experienced a series of sudden lockdowns in response to COVID-19’s rapid spread in the spring of 2020, Nintendo’s video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and Netflix’s documentary series *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness* became two very different media experiences through which audiences sought to catch their breath from the swiftly changing world around them and escape into humorous, wacky, and animal-filled media. Released simultaneously on March 20, 2020, and coinciding with multiple stay-at-home orders across the United States and other countries, *Animal Crossing* and *Tiger King*’s twinned success has been attributed to the disruption of the entertainment industry, a captive audience unable to participate in their regular activities, and a “pandemic bump” that focused attention on these works due to their sheer dominance on social media. These explanations sidestep the role of the audiences who developed a resonance with these works as well as the ability of the works themselves to create meaningful experiences. While many scholars, authors, and fans have

written about the connections between the individual works and the COVID lockdowns, none have explicitly explored the works as a paired experience.

In this chapter, I explore the connections between *Animal Crossing*, *Tiger King*, and the COVID-bound audiences that converged around them. This chapter begins with an overview of the media landscape just prior to the *Animal Crossing/Tiger King* release with an interest in how the relationship between humans, animals, and animal representations was being negotiated through the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and stay-at-home orders. I continue with a look at a period in the US response to the COVID pandemic as the first state-wide lockdowns coincided with Spring Break for schools and universities, and at how audience reception to and fan cultures for *Animal Crossing* and *Tiger King* reflected or heightened the myriad affective responses to COVID and quarantine. As the nationwide response to the pandemic drifted into discourse of the value of public health over the health of the economy, I follow the discourse surrounding *Animal Crossing* and *Tiger King* throughout the year of 2020 as they remained cultural touchstones for fans. These works and their associated, cross-pollinating audiences offered a space for audiences to escape to where they could process the stress, boredom, and pain of the pandemic alongside animal representations in media, within which audiences claimed a moment of recalibration to reflect on modern living with human- and non-human animals as well as redefining these relationships after quarantines ended. As COVID-19 is a zoonotic virus, people also reexamined the role of animals in daily life as they regularly appeared online and in popular media.³⁷

³⁷ There remains space to interrogate fandom responses outside of the U.S., following Rukmini Pande's criticism of fan studies over-observing media produced by the US or UK—works that often prioritize white, cisgender, and middle-class people in those regions. As both *Tiger King* and *New Horizons* are dependent on access to technology and to the Internet, certain voices and communities will lack representation here, such as those in rural areas, those that cannot afford said technologies, and

2.2 A Long Spring Break

On March 18, 2020, tens of thousands of college students, vacationers, and others flooded the beaches of Miami. When asked by a CBS News reporter why they were willing to put their lives and their loved ones at risk of contracting the coronavirus for a chance to party, a young man offered this now infamous response: “If I get corona, I get corona. At the end of the day, I’m not going to let it stop me from partying.”³⁸ Though the youth later apologized for his brash response, the interviewer recorded numerous Spring Breakers complaining about how COVID “ain’t that serious” while they were also “trying to get drunk before everything closes.”³⁹ Everything would eventually close throughout that weekend as Florida shut down the beaches and its state parks while businesses and stores closed across the country to comply with social distancing recommendations and stay-at-home orders. While urban areas like Los Angeles and New York struggled to keep people away to contain COVID, some residents opted to move from cities full of closed shops to rural areas that had yet to be shut down, renting places via Airbnb or selling their homes and moving for good.⁴⁰ This flagrant breaking of lockdown by

those for whom access is prohibited by ability or location. Nevertheless, I attempt to provide a plurality of voices in critique and to represent various audiences within each fandom to the best of my ability.

³⁸ Quoted in Christopher Brito, “Spring Breakers Say Coronavirus Pandemic Won’t Stop Them from Partying,” CBS News, March 25, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/spring-break-party-coronavirus-pandemic-miami-beaches/>.

³⁹ CBS News [@CBSNews], “‘If I Get Corona, I Get Corona. At the End of the Day, I’m Not Gonna Let It Stop Me from Partying’: Spring Breakers Are Still Flocking to Miami, despite Coronavirus Warnings. <https://cbsn.ws/33sb67i> <https://t.co/rfPfealLrC>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, March 18, 2020, <https://twitter.com/CBSNews/status/1240371160078000128>.

⁴⁰ Louis Sahagún, “Hoping to Escape Coronavirus, City Dwellers Are Fleeing to California’s Deserts and Mountains,” Los Angeles Times, March 22, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-03-22/californians-flee-cities-as-coronavirus-pandemic-spreads>; Jessica Menton, “Get Me out of Here! Americans Flee Crowded Cities amid COVID-19, Consider Permanent Moves,” USA TODAY, May 1, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/05/01/coronavirus-americans-flee-cities-suburbs/3045025001/>.

opportunistic home buyers and nonchalant spring breakers became a regular point of contention as urban and rural hospitals struggled to maintain enough intensive care equipment for current patients and to take care of new ones in the post-Spring Break surge.⁴¹ Despite the mixed success of the initial phase of lockdowns throughout March and April of 2020, these social distancing measures did temporarily help to “flatten the curve” by slowing the spread of the virus, allowing the healthcare system to treat current patients with the care and resources required.⁴² However, the sentiment voiced by the Spring Breakers indicates an inoculation of sorts towards the CDC’s messaging about who was in danger from the coronavirus, as it had to compete with decades of news media-fueled scares about and government responses to previous disease epidemics and pandemics.

Prior to COVID-19, many in the United States feared the arrival of the Zika virus in 2016, Ebola in 2014, and SARS in 2003, each one accompanied by a blitz of alarmist news coverage featuring “oversimplified headlines and misleading statistics touted by government officials.”⁴³ Yet COVID-19 shares something far more insidious with epidemics like the recent monkeypox outbreak and the HIV/AIDS pandemic: healthcare officials designated a portion of the population that was at risk and thus structured a response around that population. For the

⁴¹ Anna Medaris, “People Are Fleeing Coronavirus Hotspots for Rural Areas That Don’t Want Them to Come. Experts Say It’s a Natural ‘fight or Flight’ Response.” Business Insider, March 26, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/people-are-fleeing-cities-for-rural-areas-hospitals-arent-prepared-2020-3>; Ben Kessler, “As Florida Coronavirus Cases Surge, Spring Breakers Express Regret,” NBC News, March 25, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/florida-coronavirus-cases-surge-spring-breakers-express-regret-n1168686>.

⁴² Siobhan Roberts, “Flattening the Coronavirus Curve,” *The New York Times*, March 27, 2020, sec. Science, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/flatten-curve-coronavirus.html>.

⁴³ Caroline Chen, “I Lived Through SARS and Reported on Ebola. These Are the Questions We Should Be Asking About Coronavirus.” ProPublica, accessed September 6, 2022, <https://www.propublica.org/article/i-lived-through-sars-and-reported-on-ebola-these-are-the-questions-we-should-be-asking-about-coronavirus?token=c7xq5qRVz-SDNc0FqyR6X28Kch69Abcj>.

coronavirus, the elderly and the immunocompromised were singled out as uniquely susceptible to the virus, which led to much of the world's economies halting to ensure that transmission was as reduced as possible. The opposite was true of the response to HIV/AIDS as gay men and other members of the queer community were shunned by governmental bodies and healthcare officials for years. In fact, the overwhelming belief that HIV/AIDS was exclusively transmitted between gay men (hence its old designation as "gay-related immunodeficiency" or GRID) "obscured cases that were surfacing among individuals who did not fit into the category of 'homosexual man,' which delayed important discoveries about the syndrome, including its transmissibility through sex between men and women and through blood transfusion."⁴⁴ As queer people continued to die from "gay cancer," the lack of communication between state officials, doctors, and the public allowed hateful rumors to spread rapidly: "only gay people can get AIDS; ... women are tricking men into having sex with them so they can give them AIDS; AIDS was developed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to kill off African Americans and gays; it's not caused by a virus at all."⁴⁵ Similar myths arose as COVID-19 rose to prominence, like how young people would be able to shake off the virus faster and more effectively than their parents or grandparents or were just immune to it.⁴⁶ As a result, misconceptions about the virus and the failed pandemics of the recent past likely led some to claim that that they should not have to change their lives to accommodate those who were at risk.

⁴⁴ Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Duke University Press, 2008): 219.

⁴⁵ Jacob Heller, "Rumors and Realities: Making Sense of HIV/AIDS Conspiracy Narratives and Contemporary Legends," *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 1 (January 2015): e43.

⁴⁶ Harmeet Kaur, "Coronavirus Myths and Misinformation, Debunked," CNN, accessed September 6, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/04/health/debunking-coronavirus-myths-trnd/index.html>.

Granted, this sentiment was reversed for people working essential jobs. As many were relegated to their homes during lockdown, numerous videos featured neighborhoods around the world celebrating health care staff from their windows and balconies via applause and cheers. NPR's Gary Hardcastle recorded one of New York City's daily salutes, a raucous affair that aimed to reinforce the popular notion that "The applause, the cheering is to show we care."⁴⁷ These cheers continued for weeks because of the strenuous working conditions for health care workers, and while other essential businesses like grocery stores and mail delivery remained open in limited capacity, all these workers were celebrated for their willingness to sacrifice their health for the benefit of others. Yet these celebrations belied the realities of these jobs, much of which were staffed by women of color who were paid very little and few alternatives. One New York Times analysis claims that 52% of all essential workers in the U.S. were women and that "Of the 5.8 million people working health care jobs that pay less than \$30,000 a year, half are nonwhite and 83 percent are women."⁴⁸ Underpaid, overworked, and short on critical supplies like personal protective equipment, health care workers staged protests in response to terrible working conditions and to advocate for the increased distribution of N95 masks and other essentials. Similar protests have broken out since March 2020, predominantly in service industries like fast food and distribution outlets like Amazon, as the lack of protections for workers throughout the pandemic left many workers feeling less essential and more expendable.

⁴⁷ "Every Night, New York City Salutes Its Health Care Workers," *All Things Considered* (NPR, April 10, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/10/832131816/every-night-new-york-city-salutes-its-health-care-workers>.

⁴⁸ Campbell Robertson and Robert Gebeloff, "How Millions of Women Became the Most Essential Workers in America," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/us/coronavirus-women-essential-workers.html>.

While hospitals and delivery workers struggled for basic protections against the virus, other businesses wasted little time in pivoting to a “work from home” (WFM) strategy. Utilizing already present technologies and services like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Slack, WFM was generally praised as a safe yet effective alternative to traditional office work.⁴⁹ Even two years later, six-in-ten American workers surveyed by the Pew Research Center currently using this model of work would prefer to keep this model as it “makes it easier to balance work and personal life.”⁵⁰ Even with this tactic, unemployment spiked to 14.7%—over 23 million people—by May 2020, although estimates at the time feared that number was woefully short of the actual labor shortage during the March-April lockdown.⁵¹ According to CDC researchers, over 97% of the U.S. counties affected by lockdown orders saw a marked decrease in population movement as people were out of jobs, left stranded by school closures, or unable to travel safely.⁵² Thus, much of the U.S. found itself working from home, out of a job or on extended school break, or working overtime without the comforts of daily life and social interaction.

As the pandemic extended from week to week, the question was raised as to what jobs should be deemed “essential.” While healthcare and grocery delivery were generally considered

⁴⁹ Jay Peters, “Google Advises All Employees in North America, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa Work from Home Due to Coronavirus,” *The Verge*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/10/21173994/google-coronavirus-north-american-employees-work-from-home-sick-leave-fund>; Kirsten Korosec, “Amazon Asks All Employees to Work from Home, If They Can,” *TechCrunch* (blog), March 12, 2020, <https://social.techcrunch.com/2020/03/12/amazon-asks-all-employees-to-work-from-home-if-they-can/>.

⁵⁰ Kim Parker, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, and Rachel Minkin, “COVID-19 Pandemic Continues To Reshape Work in America,” *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project* (blog), February 16, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/02/16/covid-19-pandemic-continues-to-reshape-work-in-america/>.

⁵¹ Christopher Rugaber, “US Unemployment Surges to a Depression-Era Level of 14.7%,” *AP NEWS*, April 20, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-us-news-ap-top-news-international-news-virus-outbreak-908d7a004c316baceb916112c0a35ed0>.

⁵² Amanda Moreland et al., “Timing of State and Territorial COVID-19 Stay-at-Home Orders and Changes in Population Movement — United States, March 1–May 31, 2020,” *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69 (2020): 1199.

essential, some businesses attempted curious arguments as to why they should be allowed to continue operating. Video game retailer GameStop pitched to the public that it could “offer a wide array of products and devices that are important to facilitate remote work, distance learning, and virtual connectivity,” though this clashed with employees’ claims that the corporation was “keeping its stores open to profit off of a video game shopping spree during a global pandemic.”⁵³ Similarly, the craft chain Hobby Lobby reopened its stores in defiance of stay-at-home orders and at the behest of its evangelical Christian owners. Tweeting a photo of Hobby Lobby’s hours, one critic retorted, “Hobby Lobby, closed Sundays to allow employees time for family and worship. Open during a pandemic because our morals aren't really all that great.”⁵⁴

Though GameStop and Hobby Lobby’s reopening was delayed, concerns about boredom grew during lockdown. Specifically, researchers worried that lockdowns would become less effective the more bored an individual would become. Corinna Martarelli and Wanja Wolff theorize that “a person that is adhering to the pandemic containment measures, might get bored because the available behavioral options become less attractive as a function of exposure, while attention for more rewarding alternatives increases as a function of time.”⁵⁵ Boredom could lead people to willingly break stay-at-home orders and endanger themselves and others around them

⁵³ Brian Welk and Samson Amore, “GameStop Says Work From Home Products – Not Just Video Games – Makes Them ‘Essential Retail,’” March 20, 2020, <https://www.thewrap.com/gamestop-stores-stay-open-amid-coronavirus-company-says-its-essential-retail/>; Shannon Liao, “GameStop Closes All Stores | CNN Business,” CNN, March 20, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/20/tech/gamestop-open-essential-business/index.html>.

⁵⁴ Neil Saunders [@NeilRetail], “Hobby Lobby, Closed Sundays to Allow Employees Time for Family and Worship. Open during a Pandemic Because Our Morals Aren’t Really All That Great. <https://t.co/zA4pbCkPcB>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, March 20, 2020, <https://twitter.com/NeilRetail/status/1240795206363963392>.

⁵⁵ Corinna S. Martarelli and Wanja Wolff, “Too Bored to Bother? Boredom as a Potential Threat to the Efficacy of Pandemic Containment Measures,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7, no. 1 (December 2020): 2.

just to avoid it, an event that Martarelli and Wolff found precedence for in a 2014 study where “some participants... preferred to self-administer mild electric shocks instead of being on their own with their thoughts.”⁵⁶ Boredom paired with other negative affects and emotions also led to people struggling with “Covid time,” the sense that the days were moving too fast or too slowly. Droit-Volet et al. found that instead of stress about COVID or work “it was the emotional experience of everyday life during the lockdown that influenced the sense of time... the most reliable predictors of this slowing down were the feelings of boredom and sadness.”⁵⁷ Collective grief over the loss of life during lockdown (and later, as lockdowns lost effectiveness and other variants of the virus grew dominant) mixed with this boredom from being unable to experience life outside of work and one’s home pushed many to find alternative methods for entertainment.

2.3 A Menagerie of Delight

Digital media exploded in popularity during lockdown, thanks in part to their growing accessibility and to a wave of people with abundant time searching for low-cost entertainment. With Netflix alone gaining nearly 16 million new subscribers, the demand for streaming content grew to such exorbitant heights that internet service providers pleaded for platforms like Netflix and YouTube to lower the quality of their videos to take up less bandwidth.⁵⁸ Other digital technologies saw similarly massive spikes in usage as people searched for technological

⁵⁶ Martarelli and Wolff, “Too Bored to Bother?”, 2.

⁵⁷ Sylvie Droit-Volet et al., “Time and Covid-19 Stress in the Lockdown Situation: Time Free, «Dying» of Boredom and Sadness,” *PLoS ONE* 15, no. 8 (August 10, 2020): 12.

⁵⁸ Julia Alexander, “The Entire World Is Streaming More than Ever — and It’s Straining the Internet,” *The Verge*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/27/21195358/streaming-netflix-disney-hbo-now-youtube-twitch-amazon-prime-video-coronavirus-broadband-network>.

solutions to the lockdown. For example, Zoom became an overnight necessity for workers participating in online meetings, for students adapting to digital classrooms, and for impromptu social gatherings. Social media sites like Instagram, Tik Tok, Twitter, and Facebook helped connect friends and family while simultaneously offering the latest information on the COVID pandemic and new methods of passing time in quarantine.

Video games also overperformed throughout the pandemic as the industry, health officials, and fans established the medium as a go-to source for at-home entertainment and an alternative method of communing with others online. Global console sales spiked before and during the lockdown with digital game sales jumping 52.9% the week of March 16; meanwhile, physical game purchases were hampered by quarantine guidelines as supply chain disruptions left some regions without any tabletop experiences, puzzles, or card games to purchase, no doubt adding to the push towards digital games.⁵⁹ Ray Chambers, U.S. Ambassador of the World Health Organization, promoted video gaming as part of a healthy social distancing practice on Twitter, pushing people to “#PlayApartTogether.”⁶⁰ News organizations like *The Washington Post*, *Forbes*, and *VICE* all published articles offering advice for those interesting in video games with headlines like “So you want to be a gamer. Here’s how you can start,” “So You’re Suddenly Working From Home And Want To Try Gaming? Here’s How To Get Started,” and “The Social

⁵⁹ Christopher Dring, “What Is Happening with Video Game Sales during Coronavirus,” GamesIndustry.biz, March 31, 2020, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2020-03-28-what-is-happening-with-video-game-sales-during-coronavirus>.

⁶⁰ Ray Chambers [@RaymondChambers], “We’re at a Crucial Moment in Defining Outcomes of This Pandemic. Games Industry Companies Have a Global Audience - We Encourage All to #PlayApartTogether. More Physical Distancing + Other Measures Will Help to Flatten the Curve + Save Lives. <https://Businesswire.Com/News/Home/20200328005018/En/Games-Industry-Unites-Promote-World-Health-Organization>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, March 28, 2020, <https://twitter.com/RaymondChambers/status/1244011120551022594>.

Distancer’s Guide to Gaming.”⁶¹ Game developers held massive sales or gave their games away for free on digital storefronts like Steam and itch.io to “make your time social distancing a little easier.”⁶² Even streaming media such as Twitch and YouTube Gaming rose alongside this push with one industry report claiming a spike in streams of 45% between March and April 2020, with Amazon’s Twitch platform garnering the largest growth.⁶³ Video games, in this conception, were practically designed for a stay-at-home scenario thanks to their ability to generate worlds of entertainment from the comfort of one’s living quarters.

Throughout this digital games evangelism, a frequently cited starting point was Nintendo’s *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Available exclusively for the Nintendo Switch platform, *New Horizons* “invites you to create your personal island paradise on a deserted island brimming with possibility,” giving players free rein to build, terraform, and remodel their island home to their hearts’ content.⁶⁴ Players would not be alone on their island, however, as they would in time attract a small community of anthropomorphic characters as enthusiastically charming neighbors and explore their “island utopia” alongside friends and family through the game’s online features. Unlike other games which allow players to effectively freeze the game’s

⁶¹ Gita Jackson, “The Social Distancer’s Guide to Gaming,” *Vice* (blog), March 20, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgen44/social-distancing-guide-to-gaming-quarantine-coronavirus>; Gene Park, “So You Want to Be a Gamer. Here’s How You Can Start.,” *Washington Post*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2020/03/27/so-you-want-be-gamer-heres-how-you-can-start/>; Matt Perez, “So You’re Suddenly Working From Home And Want To Try Gaming? Here’s How To Get Started.,” *Forbes*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattperez/2020/03/13/youre-working-from-home-and-want-to-try-gaming-heres-how/>.

⁶² “Games to Help You Stay inside - Collection by Itch.Io,” itch.io, accessed August 30, 2022, <https://itch.io/c/757294/games-to-help-you-stay-inside>.

⁶³ Bijan Stephen, “The Lockdown Live-Streaming Numbers Are out, and They’re Huge,” *The Verge*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/5/13/21257227/coronavirus-streamelements-arsenalgg-twitch-youtube-livestream-numbers>.

⁶⁴ “Animal Crossing™: New Horizons for the Nintendo Switch™ System – Official Site,” accessed September 13, 2022, <https://animal-crossing.com/new-horizons/>.

progress when put away, the real-time system of *Animal Crossing* requires players to check on their towns daily to complete construction projects like bridges, catch fish and bugs available only in the mornings or at night, visit special vendors on certain days of the week for unique clothing and furniture, and participate in seasonal holiday events. The ubiquity of *New Horizons* and its emphasis on online features encouraged players to make their islands into personal expressions while others used the game as a forum for artistic expression, political activism, and corporate branding throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the fifth main entry to the *Animal Crossing* series, *New Horizons* had no shortage of eager fans as Nintendo only published spin-off titles for the franchise since 2012's *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*. Announced in September 2018 with an initial launch window of 2019, development delays pushed it to March 20, 2020. While anticipation surrounding the game's release had already built up before the pandemic, fans joked that their constant wishing for a new *Animal Crossing* unleashed a "monkey's paw"-like curse upon the world as lockdowns went into effect (Figure 1).⁶⁵ Another fan expressed guilt for wanting to play *New Horizons* in quarantine, writing that "YES quarantine is bad and coronavirus is BAD and I DON'T WISH IT ON ANYONE but you have to turn lemons into lemonade and all I'm saying is that I guess it isn't the WORST time to be forced to stay home.."⁶⁶ The game was the first Nintendo Switch title to reach five million digital sales within a month of its release and sold 11.7 million total copies

⁶⁵ Teeben [@Teeben_Art], "Everything Has a Cost. #AnimalCrossingNewHorizon <https://t.co/pzP0zMOPRR>," Tweet, *Twitter*, March 16, 2020, https://twitter.com/Teeben_Art/status/1239440639902625793, Figure 1.

⁶⁶ Lhotsecrossing, "So Recent News Has Been Warning the Nation That We May Have a Week or Two of Required Quarantine," *Tumblr* (blog), March 2, 2020, <https://lhotsecrossing.tumblr.com/post/611508676825579520/so-recent-news-has-been-warning-the-nation-that-we>.

globally in the two weeks following its release and would later prove to be the most popular Nintendo title from April 2020 to March 2021, representing almost 10% of all games sold for the Switch during that period.⁶⁷



Figure 1. “Everything has a cost.” Art by Stephen Lee (@Teeben_Art).

⁶⁷ John Friscia, “Animal Crossing: New Horizons Has Sold over 26M Copies, on Pace to Be Top-Selling Switch Game,” *Destructoid* (blog), November 6, 2020, <http://www.nintendo.destructoid.com/animal-crossing-new-horizons-has-sold-over-26m-copies-on-pace-to-be-top-selling-switch-game/>; Josh Coulson, “Animal Crossing Made Up Almost 10% Of All Switch Game Sales For The Past Year,” *TheGamer*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.thegamer.com/animal-crossing-10-all-switch-games/>.

While *New Horizons* benefited from a wave of pre-lockdown media support, Netflix's *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness* managed to become a worldwide sensation despite how little advertising it had received. Directed by Eric Goode and Rebecca Chaiklin, the true crime documentary series began as an investigation into the reptile trade in South Florida and quickly grew into an exploration of the sale, breeding, and exploitation of tigers, lions, and big cats in North America. Though the series tries at times to focus on issues of conservation and of the exploitation of these animals and of their human caretakers, much of the series follows the bombastic zookeeper, tiger breeder, musician, influencer, magician, and failed politician Joseph Allen Maldonado-Passage aka "Joe Exotic" and his increasingly violent feud with rival cat-lover and political aspirant Carole Baskin.

In contrast to *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*' pre-established fandom and massive advertising push, *Tiger King* relied on one brief trailer uploaded to YouTube by Netflix on March 10, 2020, ten days before the show debuted. Set to the frenetic orchestra of "In the Hall of the Mountain King," the trailer advertises "murder, drug lords, cults, polygamy, money, [and] magic" as it establishes the boisterous and outlandish persona of Joe Exotic as one of many big cat owners in the U.S. profiting from roadside attractions and illicit business dealings.⁶⁸ Though the trailer garnered over 250,000 views by March 20, 2020, viewership of the trailer spiked after the show's release, rising to over 1.5 million views a week later as viewers and fans shared comments about the series and as the trailer itself was passed around social media. Word of mouth became integral to *Tiger King*'s success, reaching even the most unlikely of audiences

⁶⁸ *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness* / Official Trailer / Netflix (YouTube, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acTdxsoa428>.

within days as fans and casual viewers were enraptured by the show’s larger-than-life cast and its coverage of the unpredictable events that ensued. Nielson reports estimated *Tiger King* received 34 million viewers within the first ten days of release, while Netflix—in a rare showcase of transparency—boasted that *Tiger King* was watched by 64 million households in its first month.⁶⁹ Though it has since been dethroned, *Tiger King* became the most-watched show on Netflix in the platform’s history, holding on to the #1 spot for over two weeks.⁷⁰

Animal Crossing and *Tiger King* were far from the only animal-related media that had gone viral during lockdown. Though closed to tourists and visitors, zoos and aquariums shared numerous videos and photos of their animals. The Dallas Zoo offered to “#BringTheZooToYou” through educational tweets, interviews with the staff, and entertaining clips of “all the cuteness on camera.”⁷¹ Although the Monterey Bay Aquarium livestreamed their sea otters, turtles, sharks, jellyfish, and other animals before the pandemic, Ken Peterson—the communications director for the aquarium—estimated that web traffic to these streams rose “ten-fold” after shelter-in-place orders went into effect.⁷² The Shedd Aquarium in Chicago sparked a series of copycat endeavors after releasing their penguins into the empty hallways and posting videos their

⁶⁹ Todd Spangler, “‘Tiger King’ Nabbed Over 34 Million U.S. Viewers in First 10 Days, Nielsen Says (EXCLUSIVE),” *Variety* (blog), April 8, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/digital/news/tiger-king-nielsen-viewership-data-stranger-things-1234573602/>; Cynthia Littleton, “Netflix: ‘Tiger King’ Watched by 64 Million Households, ‘Love Is Blind’ Grabs 30 Million,” *Variety* (blog), April 21, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/netflix-tiger-king-love-is-blind-viewing-64-million-1234586272/>.

⁷⁰ Paul Tassi, “‘Tiger King’ Has Been Netflix’s #1 Show For 15 Straight Days,” *Forbes*, accessed August 23, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2020/04/07/tiger-king-has-been-netflixs-1-show-for-15-straight-days/>.

⁷¹ Dallas Zoo [@DallasZoo], “Malawa Explored the Savanna alongside His Kudu Neighbors for the First Time Last Week, and We Got All the Cuteness on Camera! (There’s Even a Special Appearance by 8-Month-Old Zuberi. ❤️) #BringTheZooToYou <https://t.co/8aUTgj1iGS>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, March 17, 2020, <https://twitter.com/DallasZoo/status/1239915242349527041>.

⁷² Matt Frassica, “A Quarantine Aquarium,” *The Briny*, accessed September 14, 2022, <https://thebriny.net/2020/04/02/a-quarantine-aquarium/>.

adventures on TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook with captions like “While the guests are away, the penguins will play!”⁷³ Animal-centered accounts on Instagram like @dogsworkingfromhome (an account dedicated to cute photos of dogs in business attire and sitting at computer desks) and @mochiloaf (chronicling the life of Mochi the Corgi) appeared en masse as pet adoptions soared throughout lockdown. Photographs of animals venturing into abandoned streets and lonely neighborhoods brought joy to some who espoused that “nature is healing. We are the virus”; however, the majority of these were faked or made to ridicule the notion that the global lockdown would somehow undo centuries worth of climate change.⁷⁴

This last sentiment—that lockdown would be beneficial not just for slowing the spread of COVID-19 but also for the natural world—reasserts the notion that humanity is somehow separate from the rest of the world: humanity versus Nature. Yet humans are also animals and are just as much a part of nature as cats, dogs, and tigers. Yi-Fu Tuan calls such pleas to “escape to nature” something that is ultimately shaped by human design and “culturally defined.”⁷⁵ Nature is presented as something that humanity can only ruin and must be protected and cultivated, but humans define what is considered “natural” based on its appeal. For instance,

⁷³ #WheresWellington? Brb, Exploring! 🐧 #sheddaquarium (TikTok, 2020), <https://www.tiktok.com/@sheddaquarium/video/6829001968413986054>.

⁷⁴ Natasha Daly, “Fake Animal News Abounds on Social Media as Coronavirus Upends Life,” *Animals*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/coronavirus-pandemic-fake-animal-viral-social-media-posts>; Emmanuel Felton, “The Coronavirus Meme About ‘Nature Is Healing’ Is So Damn Funny,” BuzzFeed News, accessed September 20, 2022, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/emmanuelfelton/coronavirus-meme-nature-is-healing-we-are-the-virus>; Delilah Friedler, “The ‘Nature Is Healing, We Are the Virus’ Memes Are My Plague Comfort.,” *Mother Jones* (blog), accessed September 20, 2022, <https://www.motherjones.com/coronavirus-updates/2020/05/plague-comforts-nature-is-healing-we-are-the-virus-memes/>; “The Urban Wild: Animals Take to the Streets amid Lockdown – in Pictures,” *The Guardian*, April 22, 2020, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2020/apr/22/animals-roaming-streets-coronavirus-lockdown-photos>.

⁷⁵ Yi-fu Tuan, *Escapism* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998): 19.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons' deserted island presents itself as a paradise untouched by artificial development but quickly develops into a community of houses, paths, and curated gardens. Likewise, *Tiger King*'s roadside zoos and wildlife attractions promise tourists the ability to see Nature allegedly tamed, such as by allowing audiences to hold tiger cubs that exude both cuteness and exotic danger. While both experiences evoke the imagery of escaping to the natural world, they are merely "an alluring conception of [nature]" that is couched in an exoticism that serves to differentiate these experiences from everyday life.⁷⁶ By watching livestreams of animals in zoos playing, talking to anthropomorphic tanukis in *Animal Crossing*, and sharing reactions on social media to *Tiger King*'s depiction of the horrors of the big cat industry, audiences were exposed to a dynamic relationship between the human, the animal, and media representations of animals.

The human/animal/animal-representation triad acknowledges the ways that the human animal distinguishes itself from "animals" while ascribing humanistic traits to pictures, logos, characters, and other representations of animals. Debra Merskin describes this latter practice in *Seeing Species* as "re-presentation," referring to how discussions of animal imagery often remove the signified creature from discourse in lieu of that which is presented.⁷⁷ For example, the Twitter logo is styled after a bird, but the "bird" re-presented does not depict a singular bird but instead a vague notion of "birdness." Humans rely on animals and animal imagery to convey cultural beliefs, political ideas, and affective responses. The sheer number of metaphors and

⁷⁶ Tuan, *Escapism*, 19.

⁷⁷ Debra L. Merskin, *Seeing Species: Re-Presentations of Animals in Media & Popular Culture*, Peter Lang Media and Communication List (New York Bern Berlin Brussels Vienna Oxford Warsaw: Peter Lang, 2018): 106-7.

sayings about animals (copy cat, fishy, rat race), the ways that animal traits are given human characteristics (dogs being more friendly, cats being independent, sheep being suggestible), and the adoption of animal characteristics in fashion (leopard spots, tiger print, zebra stripes) all function as communicative devices in our daily lives.⁷⁸ This usage of animals as interlocutors of human experience can also be seen in *Animal Crossing*'s anthropomorphic neighbors, who blend their animal-ness with regular speech, and in *Tiger King*'s comparison between the caged tigers and Exotic's workers, who both feed the animals and are in turn "fed" by Joe Exotic's paycheck.

The proliferation of animal media during lockdown signals how crucial the cultural role of animals as conduits for escape to "Nature" remains while also reaffirming how integral animals are to human connections. Multiple reports of animal shelters being "emptied out" during lockdown further highlight how many households turned to animal companionship, with one woman citing it as her primary reason for adoption: "I have all day to spend with her now... I can adapt to her schedule, and she can adapt to mine."⁷⁹ Even those who could only experience "Nature" through their re-presentations used cat memes, dog photos, otter streams, and other animal media to maintain a connection to the world outside. Jody Berland writes in *Virtual Menageries* that such media depictions "help to constitute and connect the landscapes that surround us and flow into and through the Internet."⁸⁰ These "animal emissaries" do not serve any singular purpose but rather slide "forward and backward as a logical and discursive entity

⁷⁸ Merskin, *Seeing Species*, 86-107.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Chris Erskine, "The Latest Shortage? Dogs and Cats, as Folks Foster and Adopt Pets during Quarantine," *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 2020, sec. California, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-04-02/requests-to-foster-and-adopt-pets-surge-as-coronavirus-keeps-us-at-home>.

⁸⁰ Jody Berland, *Virtual Menageries: Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures*, Leonardo Book Series (Cambridge, [Massachusetts] London: The MIT press, 2019): 171.

intersecting the tangled threads of colonial conquest, the extraction of wealth from nature, the fissures in modern culture, animal rights, visual and digital media, the loss of species, and climate change.”⁸¹ In this way, animals are re-presented through these representations, gaining additional meanings and contexts through their numerous media depictions.

At first glance, these animal media can seem like harmless fun, but the overproduction of animal re-presentations can cause misconceptions about both animals and people. Merskin motions to cases where endangered animals were believed to be more prosperous and predatory animals more dangerous because of media saturation, such as how sharks have been viewed as mindless predators thanks to horror movies like *Jaws* (1975).⁸² As the search for the origins of the COVID-19 outbreak continued, bats became a target of mass culling after speculation that the virus originated in bats before it spread to humans; despite further reports clarifying that bats were unlikely to have been the primary carrier of the disease, fear of bats rose alongside disturbing or harmful media depictions of them with one survey finding nearly 85% of participants believing that bats could transmit SARS-CoV-2.⁸³ Most notably, a video showing a woman eating “bat soup” circulated rapidly on social media during lockdown, evoking anti-Chinese racism and adding to zoophobic anxieties; however, the video actually depicted Wang Mengyun, a popular Chinese vlogger, eating the dish in Palau and was filmed in 2016.⁸⁴ This

⁸¹ Berland, *Virtual Menageries*, 8-9.

⁸² Merskin, *Seeing Species*, 106.

⁸³ Manman Lu et al., “Does Public Fear That Bats Spread COVID-19 Jeopardize Bat Conservation?,” *Biological Conservation* 254 (February 2021): 4.

⁸⁴ Korin Miller, “No, Coronavirus Was Not Caused by ‘Bat Soup’—But Here’s What Researchers Think May Be to Blame,” *Health*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.health.com/condition/infectious-diseases/coronavirus-bat-soup>.

video stoked fears that Chinese food was contaminated by COVID-19, which led to both Chinese and other Asian restaurants to see rapid declines in patronage, the latter due to a more generalized anti-Asian sentiment accented by then-President Donald Trump calling the virus “Kung Flu.”⁸⁵ Although many communities rallied to combat Asian hate and stereotypes about Chinese culture, bats continued to be associated with the coronavirus, and other animals found soon found themselves scapegoated for possible contamination and as transmission vectors. Although pet adoptions rapidly rose at the start of the pandemic, pet owners would later abandon many cats, dogs, and other animal companions over concerns that their pets might catch the virus, a mindset exacerbated by media reports of such (admittedly very rare) cases proliferating across social media.

However, even as cases of zoonotic spillover of COVID-19 remained few and far between, these numbers paled in comparison to human-to-human transmission. By December 2020, over a million people had contracted the virus. Cases in dogs and cats at the time numbered in the double digits at most, and no definitive evidence proved that those cases were infectious to humans.⁸⁶ Though an overwhelming focus rested on pets and bats as carriers of the coronavirus, animals occasionally contracted the virus from humans, such as Nadia—a Malayan tiger at the Bronx Zoo in New York City—who was infected by an unknown zookeeper.⁸⁷ Perhaps the most prolific example of the fear of human-animal contagion came from Denmark,

⁸⁵ Justin T. Huang et al., “The Cost of Anti-Asian Racism during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 7, no. 5 (January 19, 2023): 688-689.

⁸⁶ Nicola M.A. Parry, “COVID-19 and Pets: When Pandemic Meets Panic,” *Forensic Science International. Reports* 2 (December 2020): 2.

⁸⁷ Nathan Layne, “Tiger at New York’s Bronx Zoo Tests Positive for Coronavirus,” *Reuters*, April 6, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN21N0X1/>.

which slaughtered over 17 million minks in response to outbreaks of the coronavirus in mink farms and hastily buried them in shallow mass graves.⁸⁸ Humans are an animal like any other, except in their ability to quickly and rapidly shape the fates of other animals. These contradictory responses—a desire to maintain a connection to animals and a paranoia of how closely the health of humans and non-human animals were intertwined—were among the most notable reactions to COVID-19 during lockdown, and animal re-presentation in media played an outsized role in how audiences navigated the media landscape and their time while social distancing. This mixture of anxiety and want can likewise be found in the responses to both *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*.

2.4 Tiger King Fever

“I’m not 2 mins into episode 1 of #TigerKing and Joe Exotic’s mid 90s left leaning white girl figure skater bangs from when he calls from jail in the opening montage has me convinced I’m not ready for this mess...” starts writer Denne Michele Norris’ late night Twitter thread reacting to the first moments of *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness*.⁸⁹ If any term best summarizes the reactions of many audiences to *Tiger King*’s first few episodes, “incredulity” captures the shock, awe, and rapid-fire revelations introduced within less than two hours of viewing. Shortly after being introduced to conservationist and documentarian Eric Goode and his

⁸⁸ Emma Bubola, Isabella Kwai, and Jasmina Nielsen, “Denmark’s Leader Apologizes for Botched Mink Cull During Pandemic,” *The New York Times*, July 1, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/01/world/europe/denmark-mink-report-covid.html>.

⁸⁹ Denne Michele Norris [@TheDenneMichele], “I’m Not 2 Mins into Episode 1 of #TigerKing and Joe Exotic’s Mid 90s Left Leaning White Girl Figure Skater Bangs from When He Calls from Jail in the Opening Montage Has Me Convinced I’m Not Ready for This Mess...” <https://t.co/mo7LakBKfS>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, April 1, 2020, <https://twitter.com/TheDenneMichele/status/1245213677944557573>.

pivot from exploring the illegal reptile trade to investigating the sale and breeding of big cats, viewers witness Goode’s bizarre journey through a subculture built around roadside zoos—filled with exotic animals in just-too-small cages and owned by increasingly ludicrous and suspiciously wealthy characters.

The series showcases many interviews with these exotic animal owners including, but not limited to: Bhagavan “Doc” Antle, director of Myrtle Beach Safari and eventual subject of his own investigative series; Mario Tabraue, a former drug dealer and alleged inspiration for the 1983 film *Scarface*; and Jeff Lowe, an entrepreneur who earned his wealth by sneaking tiger cubs into hotels for wealthy patrons to play with. However, Goode and co-director Rebecca Chaiklin largely frame the pageantry and exploitation of tigers as accessories and pawns of Joe Exotic and Carole Baskin, whose rivalry makes up the bulk of the series. While early episodes attempt to highlight the abuses and danger of these roadside attractions, hinting at a more environmental or conservationist theme, the show is largely viewed as a true crime documentary (and labeled as one by Netflix) centered Exotic’s attacks against and attempted murder of Baskin. As Chaiklin claims in an interview with *The Oklahoman*, *Tiger King* was not originally intended to be a true crime series and instead be a straightforward examination of the animal abuse inherent to these tourist attractions: “Of course, this whole true crime element...and how that all unfolded - and what had actually unfolded - we never in a million years thought it was going to take this whole true-crime twist. It was just never in the cards when we started out.”⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Quoted in Brandy McDonnell, “Interview: ‘Tiger King’ Co-Director Rebecca Chaiklin Talks Joe Exotic, Carole Baskin, Oklahoma Impressions and More,” *The Oklahoman*, accessed September 27, 2022, <https://www.oklahoman.com/story/entertainment/columns/brandy-mcdonnell/2020/04/04/interview-tiger-king-director-rebecca-chaiklin-talks-exotic-carole-baskin-oklahoma-impressions-more/62932365007/>.

Though it may not have started out as a true crime series, *Tiger King* nevertheless became one of the most watched series on Netflix, reaching a peak of 19 million views per minute in the U.S.⁹¹

Curiously, the merits of the series are often superseded by attributing *Tiger King*'s success to a “pandemic bump,” referring to a surge of 15.8 million new subscribers to Netflix within the first three months of 2020.⁹² The argument implies that boredom during the pandemic directly contributed to the popularity of *Tiger King*, which would have floundered otherwise. Put another way, there was no way *Tiger King* could have failed because Netflix had a captive audience that had nothing else to do. One could see the logic here by casting a quick glance at *Tiger King* Season 2, which was critically panned on release and is largely ignored by fans of the original. However, this does not fully explain why *Tiger King* became popular in the first place, and viewing it as a fluke deflects from other notable factors, such as Netflix's internal changes like its addition of the Top 10 system. *Tiger King* spent 25 days at the number one spot of Netflix's Top 10 and remained within the Top 10 for some time.⁹³ , Whereas Netflix typically uses algorithmic recommendations “to autocurate selections of content geared around individual users' data profiles,” the Top 10 system—added on February 24, 2020—is based on sheer volume of views within one's country, updated daily.⁹⁴ This change allows shows that receive a

⁹¹ Nikki Bennett and Elizabeth Johnson, “The Potential for a ‘Tiger King Effect’: Analysis of Public and Media Response to the Netflix Series ‘Tiger King,’” *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network* 14, no. 2 (October 31, 2021): 124.

⁹² Josef Adalian, “Can Netflix's Surge Last?,” *Vulture*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.vulture.com/2020/04/netflix-subscription-surge.html>.

⁹³ Charlie Ridgely, “Netflix Top 10: Tiger King Finally Dethroned After 25 Days at #1,” *TV Shows*, accessed September 27, 2022, <https://comicbook.com/tv-shows/news/tiger-king-netflix-top-10-streak-snapped-despicable-me/>.

⁹⁴ Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*, *Critical Cultural Communication* (New York: New York University Press, 2019): 40-41.

sudden spike in popularity—say, a true crime series about big cat park owners—to quickly climb the ranks and present to audiences that would otherwise never encounter them via Netflix’s algorithm. Under this system, a popular show will likely receive more views overall and remain in the viewing public’s eye longer than before, thus facilitating a feedback loop of sorts where a series that grows in popularity can then garner even more attention from those who want to stay current with what is popular or who just want to see what all the fuss is about. In the case of *Tiger King*, the show’s early watchers—those who saw the trailer, true crime fans, and others for whom Netflix’s algorithm targeted as likely viewers—bolstered the show to appear on the Top 10, which then introduced many new subscribers to Netflix and seasoned viewers to the series while also granting the series the additional prestige of being number one.

While critical reception for the show overattributed the effects of the pandemic on viewer participation, audiences did genuinely enjoy watching *Tiger King*. Viewers expressed a wild mix of emotions to *Tiger King*, grateful for a bizarre spectacle that “offered drama and excitement without being directly related to the daunting crisis of the coronavirus” which they could enjoy “from a safe distance.”⁹⁵ In Bennett and Johnson’s analysis of Facebook comments referencing the show, the majority of responses relayed some positive sentiment towards the show, such as this comment: “One of the most amazing train wrecks of humanity I have ever seen! It was shocking, disgusting, and strangely delicious. The sheer amount of What The Fuckery in this docuseries was fantastic!”⁹⁶ The report also indicated that Facebook users frequently shared their

⁹⁵ Hammonds, Kyle, “Tiger Kingdom: Coronavirus, Conspiracy, and US Popular Culture,” *The Phoenix Papers* 4, no. 2 (2020): 147.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Bennett and Johnson, “The Potential for a ‘Tiger King Effect,’” 132.

favorite scenes and their opinions on the show's cast in far greater number than posts critiquing the series. These scenes were often shown through screenshots, video clips, and other meme formats. A widely circulated image of the Saturday Night Live fictional "city correspondent" Stefon Meyers alters the trailer's collage of the show's topics, claiming *Tiger King* has "everything: Tigers, rivalries, cults, gay polygamy, missing people, murder for hire, and a really bad eyebrow piercing."⁹⁷

Fans also found humor among the show's more serious contexts. Perhaps the most recognizable line in *Tiger King* comes after a tiger bites off employee Saff Saffery's arm. After assessing the situation, Joe Exotic offers refunds to the parkgoers gathered in his zoo's gift shop, lamenting, "I'm never gonna financially recover from this."⁹⁸ Despite the series' emphasis on highlighting the dangers of working at Exotic's zoo and the callousness of Exotic focusing on his bottom line, writer and actor Bridger Winegar posted the clip on Twitter not long after the show's release, adding, "Me after I spend six dollars."⁹⁹ This recontextualization of the scene and other variations served multiple purposes, such as accentuating minor costs and inconveniences during lockdown, allowing audiences to share their financial hardships due to being furloughed or losing their jobs, and provoking debates on the situation presented in the episode. Tanya Horeck describes *Tiger King*'s meme culture as a mixture of posts that capture the "incongruity" of quarantine with the lives of the show's dramatis personae and more

⁹⁷ pastelparrotlet, "Me Telling People to Watch Tiger King on Netflix," Tumblr, *Cautiously Optimistic* (blog), accessed May 31, 2022, <https://pastelparrotlet.tumblr.com/post/613249691295137792/me-telling-people-to-watch-tiger-king-on-netflix>.

⁹⁸ *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness*, season 1, episode 2, "Cult of Personality," aired March 20, 2020, on Netflix: 1:30.

⁹⁹ Bridger Winegar [@bridger_w], "Me after I Spend Six Dollars <https://t.Co/2h3J8ZZQpe>," Tweet, *Twitter*, March 21, 2020, https://twitter.com/bridger_w/status/1241243912301248515.

humorous posts that act “as a means of venting and destressing in the midst of a global health crisis.”¹⁰⁰ Humor, as Limor Shifman notes, “augments sharing, as people wish to amuse their friends and to be associated with wittiness.”¹⁰¹ *Tiger King* memes like Exotic’s tearful grieving of his wealth allowed audiences to remix the show’s memorable lines, colorful cast, and strange twists with the recognition that their recipient would not only be in on the joke but would be able laugh along across time and distance.

Thankfully for these fans, *Tiger King* centers Joe Exotic from the start and therefore offered plenty of material to work with. From Exotic’s excessive overstatement of his musical talents to his polyamorous gay marriage, the self-proclaimed Tiger King continuously searches for ways to grow his stardom and advertise his zoo in the process throughout the series. For example, episode five, “Make America Exotic Again,” largely focuses on Exotic’s failed race for Oklahoma governor as a Libertarian despite having “no idea what a Libertarian is.”¹⁰² In another episode, Exotic opens a pizzeria in the zoo, which allegedly used the expired meat that was both fed to the tigers and handed out to workers who could not afford fresh food based on what their glamorous boss was paying them. The *Tiger King* series, in a way, presents Exotic with yet another avenue to fame and fortune, even if his awareness of why Goode and Chaiklin are there in the first place is debatable. Hunter Hargraves posits that Exotic’s relationship to the camera is an intentional one, adding that “Joe Exotic operates on a level of calculated televisual

¹⁰⁰ Tanya Horeck, “#carolebaskinkilledherhusband: The Gender Politics of Tiger King Meme Culture,” in *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness: A Docalogue*, ed. Jaimie Baron and Kristen Fuhs (New York: Routledge, 2021), 55.

¹⁰¹ Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (MIT Press, 2013), 96.

¹⁰² *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness*, season 1, episode 5, “Make America Exotic Again,” aired March 20, 2020, on Netflix: 11:08.

performativity, in that all attempts to document his life, including in *Tiger King*, render him both average ('Joe') and otherwise ('Exotic').¹⁰³ Exotic's curious blending of tiger print shirts and blue-collar antics boasted a camp appeal, leading to a cavalcade of virtual performances by drag queens, parodies, and "a mini-Broadway musical."¹⁰⁴ Others expressed awe at Exotic's unabashed, messy queerness, with one critic contrasting Exotic's "shamelessness" to 2020 Democratic Presidential Candidate Pete Buttigieg's "corporate GaynessTM".¹⁰⁵ Contrary to Hargrave's belief that Exotic "no longer has the capacity to author and brand his own image" in prison, Exotic has since leveraged *Tiger King* and his newfound infamy to find new ways to self-promote his brand, such as a hosting a "Bachelor King" contest to find a new husband and to appeal to then-President Donald Trump to pardon him.¹⁰⁶ Despite the documentary's less-than-appealing portrayal, Exotic became a symbol of sorts for audiences during lockdown.

Perhaps to Exotic's dismay, the *Tiger King*'s nemesis Carole Baskin has also thrived in her newfound stardom following *Tiger King*'s release, perhaps to an even greater degree. Regularly introducing herself with her catchphrase, "Hey, all you cool cats and kittens!", Baskin adorns herself with cheetah print shirts and a flower crown—perhaps denoting an antithesis to Exotic's title of Tiger King—and is seen guiding visitors and volunteers around her tiger sanctuary, a non-profit organization. Her animal rights activism is frequently contrasted to

¹⁰³ Hunter Hargraves, "Tiger King, Stranger-Than-Fiction, and the Insistence of Reality Television," *Communication, Culture and Critique* 13, no. 4 (December 1, 2020): 557.

¹⁰⁴ Hannah Boast and Nicole Seymour, "Captive Audiences: Quarantining With 'Tiger King,'" in *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness: A Docalogue*, ed. Jaimie Baron and Kristen Fuhs (New York: Routledge, 2021): 15.

¹⁰⁵ Brandon Arroyo, "From 'Mayo' Pete to Joe Exotic: How Tiger King Taught Us How to Be Queer Again," *Communication, Culture and Critique* 13, no. 4 (December 1, 2020): 564-5.

¹⁰⁶ Megan Butler, "Joe Exotic Searching for New Mate with 'The Bachelor King' Contest," KOKH, July 6, 2021, <https://okcfox.com/news/local/bachelor-king-contest>.

Exotic's profiteering, yet the series is quick to make comparisons between Baskin's volunteer laborers and Exotic's workers, how both tiger enclaves are structured around the image of big cats and the patronage of tourists, and their equally stubborn natures. As bold as Baskin is, most audiences know her due to Exotic's claims that Baskin fed her first husband Don Lewis, who disappeared under mysterious circumstances, to her tigers and his frequent use of billboards and tip lines promising cash rewards. The series does engage with Lewis's murder as a potentiality, shifting from a handy cam style to a cinematic, dramatized perspective as the facts of the case are presented. In response, audiences debated on whether Baskin did in fact kill her husband, with one fan asking their mail carrier to drop their packages under "Yes" or "No"; predictably, the carrier voted "Yes."¹⁰⁷ Another popular image presents a "message" from Baskin posing near a tiger, promising a "solution" for ladies whose husbands have "become unbearable during this coronavirus quarantine..."¹⁰⁸ But where Exotic's attempted murder-for-hire plot against Baskin firmly cast him as the villain in the series and for audiences, Baskin has only gained more notoriety. Although she denies the accusations, she too has capitalized on her presumed infamy by making a (brief) appearance in a lion costume on *Dancing with the Stars* and dancing with fans on TikTok to a popular parody song parroting the murder allegations.¹⁰⁹ Others viewed

¹⁰⁷ GuantanamoEbay, "Getting to Know the Delivery Guys," Reddit Post, *RTigerKing*, April 4, 2020, www.reddit.com/r/TigerKing/comments/fuz13o/getting_to_know_the_delivery_guys/.

¹⁰⁸ Summer [@ChahtaSmmr], "The Last Couple Days Have Been Pretty Rough for Me, so Today People Are Only Allowed to Communicate with Me via Tiger King/Joe Exotic Memes. This Is an Official Decree for My Kingdom. Htps://T.Co/OBEIzGZWmK," Tweet, *Twitter*, March 26, 2020, <https://twitter.com/ChahtaSmmr/status/1243225008681320453>.

¹⁰⁹ Scottie Andrew, "Carole Baskin Is Eliminated from 'Dancing with the Stars,'" CNN, accessed May 30, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/29/entertainment/carole-baskin-eliminated-dancing-with-the-stars-trnd/index.html>; Andrew Court, "Carole Baskin Dances to TikTok Song That Claims She Killed Husband," *The New York Post*, March 24, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/03/24/carole-baskin-dances-to-tiktok-song-that-claims-she-killed-husband/>.

Exotic and Baskin’s rivalry as one between polar opposites. In Hannah Ewen’s article equating different cast members to tarot cards, Exotic is portrayed as “the Fool” while Baskin is “the Empress” and described as capable of “nurturing...an enormous unpaid workforce, and the creative expression required to tend to a decades-long battle against a perceived enemy.”¹¹⁰

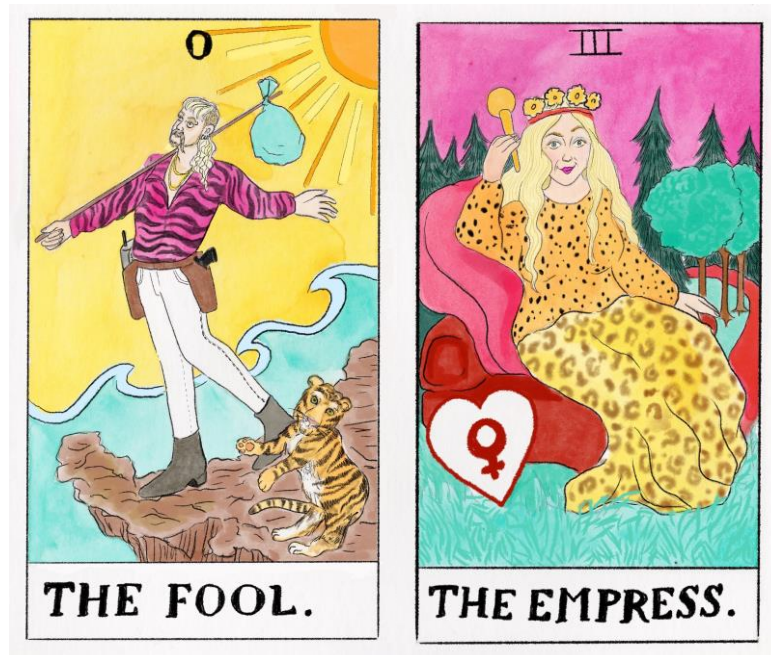


Figure 2. Joe Exotic (left) and Carole Baskin (right) depicted as tarot cards.
Art by Esme Blegvad.

The vilification and adoration of *Tiger King*’s stars is a common trope of true crime series like *The Last Podcast on the Left* and *My Favorite Murder*. Since the release of the podcast *Serial* in 2014, true crime has continued to grow as a genre and find new fans eager to discuss the lives and deaths of those featured. Justin Sayles found that in the year since the

¹¹⁰ Hannah Ewens, “The ‘Tiger King’ Cast, Matched to Tarot Cards,” *Vice* (blog), April 10, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bvgevv/the-tiger-king-cast-matched-to-tarot-cards>; illustrated by Esme Blegvad, Figure 2.

platform introduced a “Top 10” feature, eight different true crime series reached the top spot—this includes *Tiger King*, which stayed in the Top 10 for 35 days—with many more resting somewhere within the lower nine.¹¹¹ Despite a clear appetite from viewers for true crime series, the genre regularly finds itself lambasted by critics, and this distaste extends to *Tiger King* as audiences unaccustomed to true crime or who otherwise would avoid it grappled with their thoughts on the wildly popular series. Viewers expecting to watch a serious documentary about America’s big cat enterprise presented through a more objective lens chafed at the show’s resemblance to reality television, with one author describing the show’s “incessant self-reflexivity” strangling its “documentarian ambitions” and another portraying it as “prestige trash: narratively ambitious but self-aware.”¹¹² Yet this self-reflexivity a trademark quality of true crime. Mark Seltzer relates in *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity* that true crime positions a “self-reading reader,” able to see the story and the construction of the story and whom “reflects on that reflexivity.”¹¹³ The generic conventions of true crime evoke suspicion towards the interviewed, the interviewee, the facts presented, *and* the narrative constructed from those facts which is then presented for the audience to judge.

Accordingly, true crime as a genre presents itself as a sort of public court wherein the viewer can assess the available evidence and decide who is guilty. Fans of *Tiger King* and true crime aficionados delighted in speculating whether Joe Exotic’s murder-for-hire plot was

¹¹¹ Justin Sayles, “We’re Watching More True Crime Than Ever. Is That a Problem?,” *The Ringer*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.theringer.com/tv/2021/7/9/22567381/true-crime-documentaries-boom-bubble-netflix-hbo>.

¹¹² Hargraves, “Tiger King, Stranger-Than-Fiction, and the Insistence of Reality Television,” 558; Doreen St. Félix, “The Crass Pleasures of ‘Tiger King,’” *The New Yorker*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/13/the-crass-pleasures-of-tiger-king>.

¹¹³ Mark Seltzer, *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2007): 166-9.

actually as a ploy by Jeff Lowe to steal his zoo, whether Carole Baskin fed her husband to her tigers to fund her animal activism, or whether everyone depicted on the show should be locked up—save for the staff at Exotic’s zoo that resorted to eating off “the Walmart food truck” intended for the tigers from how little Exotic paid them.¹¹⁴ In *Justice on Demand: True Crime in the Digital Streaming Era*, Tanya Horeck centers this pleasure as a core element of true crime’s appeal:

The driving pleasure of these recent long-form true crime shows comes from the activity of passing judgement on guilt and innocence, of distinguishing the “good” guys from the “bad” guys; there is a strong sense that watching (or listening to) and “interpreting” these accused men and sharing our affective responses to them through networked digital media *actually counts for something*.¹¹⁵ This desire to *do* something that “counts for something” likely resonated with fans trapped in their homes during lockdown. Unable to really contribute to the fight against the coronavirus beyond occasional cheers for essential workers or working from home, viewers could investigate the disappearance of Don Lewis, share accounts and receipts of the shady dealings of Jeff Lowe, and advocate for Exotic’s release from prison.

In many ways, *Tiger King* inadvertently parallels the initial phases of the pandemic media ecosystem. The search for the source of the outbreak and the race for a vaccine perpetuated an environment of mystery that encouraged speculation. As conspiracy theories surrounded COVID-19’s origins and prompted blame between nationalities, governments, and those who

¹¹⁴ little livengood 🐯 [@tialivengood], “Every Single Person on the Tiger King Deserves to Be in JAIL. If You Didn’t Eat off the Walmart Meat Truck, You Deserve to Be Locked up. Saff Gets Immunity. John R Gets Immunity. Erik Gets Immunity. Joshua Dial Gets Immunity. Everyone Else: JAAAIHLLLLLLLLL.” Tweet, *Twitter*, March 30, 2020, <https://twitter.com/tialivengood/status/1244480849858494464>.

¹¹⁵ Tanya Horeck, *Justice on Demand: True Crime in the Digital Streaming Era*, Contemporary Approaches to Film and Media Series (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019): 127, emphasis added.

adhered or disobeyed social distancing measures, *Tiger King* was in contrast “conspiratorial without posing immediate danger,” offering a space for audiences to conjecture things that would not affect public health to the extent that conspiracies about how to cure COVID would eventually become.¹¹⁶ *Tiger King*’s hyperactive pacing and propensity to jump from one alarming topic to the next also blended seamlessly with pandemic news coverage that continuously updated and presented ever more drastic news. In this way, as Jeff Scheible notes, *Tiger King* became an “accidental allegory” for lockdown as viewers became “locked down in their own metaphorical cages, contaminated by viral media” just as Joe Exotic’s imprisonment made him feel “like a tiger in a cage.”¹¹⁷ Boast and Seymour likewise compare *Tiger King*’s fascination with caged animals and imprisoned zookeepers to “questions about the ethics of caging animals and, perhaps, humans.”¹¹⁸

However, the show’s harsher critics drew different parallels between the series and the pandemic. Liza Bauer disagrees with readings that *Tiger King*’s animal messaging is ultimately positive, pointing to how the “ambivalent staging of human-animal relationships unveils how humans’ love for nonhumans can go awry” and thus “can be anything but warm and fuzzy.”¹¹⁹ Lagerwey and Nygaard point out that *Tiger King*’s constant deference to Joe Exotic and the frequent depictions of his anger toward Baskin “elucidate the overwhelming negative affect associated with rural and working-class white masculinity in the 2010s, often expressed via

¹¹⁶ Hammonds, “Tiger Kingdom,” 146.

¹¹⁷ Jeff Scheible, “Tiger King as Accidental Allegory,” *Communication, Culture and Critique* 13, no. 4 (December 1, 2020): 569.

¹¹⁸ Boast and Seymour, “Captive Audiences,” *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness: A Docalogue*, 10.

¹¹⁹ Liza B Bauer, “Of Animal Love and Abuse: Exploring Ambivalent Human-Animal Relationships in Tiger King (2020) During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*, no. 9 (2020): 7.

violent misogyny and only heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic by white anti-face mask and anti-lockdown protesters flexing power through their weaponization of white grievances.”¹²⁰ Even the proliferation of memes about the characters reflects how the “visual excess of all of these images and the narrative’s structural disorganization encourage affective readings over argumentative or intellectual ones,” and adding that the spectacular nature of the show makes it “easily mocked, trivialized, and dismissed.”¹²¹ Horeck also details how many *Tiger King* memes seek to establish “superior laughter” by punching down at the “women, stereotyped ‘white trash,’ and queer others,” behavior possibly encouraged by the show’s framing of Joe’s (now former) husband John Finlay as a shirtless hick and of Baskin as a(n alleged) murderer.¹²² Pavithra Prasad questions if the show even desires viewers to feel anything for the animals abused by Exotic and others as the show “suppresses our instinct for empathy, encouraging us instead to slip into a passive gaping.”¹²³ Perhaps Doreen St. Félix presents the most accurate reading in her article for *The New Yorker*: “The only observation that feels true is that ‘Tiger King’ is what we watched two weeks into our isolation.”¹²⁴

Regardless of whether the series was a biting commentary of the big cat trade or a mediocre true crime documentary, *Tiger King*’s rapid success led Netflix to release a follow-up reunion episode to capitalize on the increased attention. “The Tiger King and I” released on April

¹²⁰ Jorie Lagerwey and Taylor Nygaard, “Tiger King’s Meme-Ification of White Grievance and the Normalization of Misogyny,” *Communication, Culture and Critique* 13, no. 4 (December 1, 2020): 562.

¹²¹ Lagerwey and Nygaard, “Tiger King’s Meme-Ification,” 563.

¹²² Horeck, “#carolebaskinkilledherhusband,” *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness: A Docalogue*, 55.

¹²³ Pavithra Prasad, “The Casual Horror of Boredom in Tiger King,” *Communication, Culture and Critique* 13, no. 4 (December 1, 2020): 572.

¹²⁴ St. Félix, “The Crass Pleasures of ‘Tiger King.’”

12, 2020, during the height of “Tiger King Fever.” However, neither Goode nor Chaiklin’s names appear in the credits to this special, which presents a series of web-based interviews hosted by comedian Joel McHale and featuring some of the breakout stars of the show. From McHale’s introduction ripped straight from Baskin’s mouth (“Hey, all you cool cats and kittens!”) to asking Jeff Lowe if Baskin’s alleged murder of her ex-husband Don Lewis was more disturbing than her awkward wedding photos with her current husband Howard Baskin, the special was panned for its hackneyed attempts to entertain fans with dull, reaction-based humor and for its lack of new information about the people involved, aside from Rick Kirkham’s assertion that “Joe was actually afraid of tigers.”¹²⁵ One fan mocked McHale’s pandering, writing, “hEy tHeRe ALL yOu cOoL cAtS aNd KiTtEns I hear you have TIGER KING FEVER!” while others noted that the episode “really missed the point of the series” and relied too much on “trivia, memes and other funny tidbits.”¹²⁶ *Tiger King* eventually fell off the Top 10 chart but continued to circulate on social media and in conversation through memes and references that could be easily shared and reminisced thanks to the series’ wide reach and cultural saturation. Although the story of Joe Exotic, Carole Baskin, and their feud would remain as touchstones for the early days of the pandemic, they certainly were not alone.

¹²⁵ Sam Adams, “The Tiger King and I Almost Offers a Corrective to the Hit Series,” *Slate*, April 13, 2020, <https://slate.com/culture/2020/04/tiger-king-and-i-netflix-special-bonus-episode-review.html>.

¹²⁶ ever-optimist, “The Worst Thing on EARTH Is the Bonus Episode That Comes after a True Crime Series. Tiger King Ends on This Really Serious Thoughtful Note with a Vague Call to Activism and Then the Dude from Community Pops up like ‘hEy tHeRe ALL yOu cOoL cAtS aNd KiTtEns I Hear You Have TIGER KING FEVER!’,” Tumblr, *Good Vibes, Bad Times* (blog), accessed February 5, 2024, <https://ever-optimist.tumblr.com/post/625827391209619456/the-worst-thing-on-earth-is-the-bonus-episode-that>; ChobanRadovan, “You’re Right. These ...,” Reddit Comment, *R/TigerKing*, April 12, 2020, www.reddit.com/r/TigerKing/comments/fzs4jt/episode_8_discussion_the_tiger_king_and_i/fn72la8/; keeleon, “I like Joel Mchale But...,” Reddit Comment, *R/TigerKing*, April 12, 2020, www.reddit.com/r/TigerKing/comments/fzs4jt/episode_8_discussion_the_tiger_king_and_i/fn7lo8f/.

2.5 A Group of Islands is an Archipelago

Prior to the release of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and as lockdowns were going into effect worldwide, producer Hisashi Nogami expressed mixed feelings about releasing a lighthearted game about taking an island vacation amid growing tragedy and global strife: “I am very disheartened and saddened by the events happening across the world. Considering the timing, we hope that a lot of the *Animal Crossing* fans will use this as an escape, so they can enjoy themselves during this difficult time.”¹²⁷ Nogami’s hope that fans would be able to enjoy the game could have rung hollow if no one could play it, but unlike past games in the series, *New Horizons* was released simultaneously to every region of the world with physical and digital copies available for purchase through stores and the Nintendo Switch eShop. The ability to purchase and download the game from the Switch itself proved vital for the game’s success as supply chain disruptions quickly limited the procurement of physical copies and new Switch consoles, though the game’s ease of accessibility on already existing consoles likely helped.¹²⁸ Despite these issues, initial reviews echoed Nogami’s sentiment that *New Horizons* was an escape from the stress of the pandemic. Paul Tamayo of *Kotaku* wrote in the days leading up to the game’s release that it was “the perfect digital getaway” from “our current dystopian cyberpunk nightmare.”¹²⁹ Describing the game as a “vacation simulation in the face of self-

¹²⁷ Quoted in Andrew Webster, “The Creators of Animal Crossing Hope New Horizons Can Be ‘an Escape’ in Difficult Times,” *The Verge*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/18/21185608/animal-crossing-new-horizons-nintendo-switch-coronavirus-escape-interview>.

¹²⁸ Nintendo Co., Ltd., “Fiscal Year Ended March 2020 Financial Results Explanatory Material” (Nintendo Co., Ltd., May 7, 2020), https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/pdf/2020/200507_4e.pdf.

¹²⁹ Paul Tamayo, “Animal Crossing: New Horizons Is The Escape We All Need Right Now,” *Kotaku*, March 16, 2020, <https://kotaku.com/animal-crossing-new-horizons-is-the-escape-we-all-need-1842320037>.

imposed isolation,” *Polygon*’s Russ Frushtick lauds the game as a “respite from the current state of the world.”¹³⁰ Louryn Strampe relays in her review for *Wired* that *New Horizons* “offers a semblance of control” compared to the unpredictable nature of the coronavirus.¹³¹ Even mainstream outlets like *CNN* and *The New York Times* reported on the game’s portrayal of “normalcy” and overall sense of “calmness” as a salve for the chaos of the pandemic.¹³² These articles and the excitement of the already established fanbase helped predetermine *New Horizons* as *the* game to play during lockdown.

The vibrantly positive critical response may have set the stage, yet another significant factor in *New Horizon*’s success lay in its overwhelming presence on social media. To say that *Animal Crossing*-related content took over Twitter is an egregious understatement; throughout 2020, *New Horizons* dominated Twitter feeds to the point where, as one user writes, quarantine Twitter consisted exclusively of “push up challenges, top-5 lists, animal crossing screenshots and news.”¹³³ Twitter itself revealed that over two billion tweets in 2020 were in some way related to gaming and that the largest contribution of those tweets were about *Animal Crossing*, although it is not known to what degree.¹³⁴ Even though *New Horizons* lacked the ability to quickly post to

¹³⁰ Russ Frushtick, “Animal Crossing: New Horizons Is a Much-Needed Escape from Everything,” *Polygon* (blog), March 16, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2020/3/16/21178911/animal-crossing-new-horizons-review-nintendo-switch>.

¹³¹ Louryn Strampe, “‘Animal Crossing’ Is the Game We All Need Right Now,” *Wired*, accessed May 31, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/story/rave-animal-crossing-new-horizons/>.

¹³² AJ Willingham, “Animal Crossing Is Letting People Live out Their Wildest Fantasy: Normalcy,” *CNN*, accessed May 31, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/30/us/animal-crossing-mental-health-escape-coronavirus-wellness-trnd/index.html>; Imad Khan, “Why Animal Crossing Is the Game for the Coronavirus Moment,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 2020, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/arts/animal-crossing-covid-coronavirus-popularity-millennials.html>.

¹³³ Joseph Hoyt [@JoeJHoyt], “Quarantine Twitter: Push up Challenges, Top-5 Lists, Animal Crossing Screenshots and News.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, March 29, 2020, <https://twitter.com/JoeJHoyt/status/1244059139820658688>.

¹³⁴ Rishi Chadha, “Over 2 Billion Gaming Tweets in 2020!,” *Twitter*, January 11, 2021, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/insights/2021/over-2-billion-gaming-tweets-in-2020-.

social media, its multiplayer features—limited largely to visiting friends’ islands—allowed players to gather virtually while maintaining social distance guidelines, and higher profile social media personalities championed this aspect of the game. For instance, Olympic medalist, UFC champion, and professional wrestler Ronda Rousey streamed her first days of the game from the comfort of her bed and rallied fans to raise funds for the United Nations Foundation while encouraging fans to “#StayHome.”¹³⁵ Over on Reddit, players flocked to the r/AnimalCrossing subreddit, swiftly growing the community threefold from just over 295,000 users in February 2020 to over one million by May 2020.¹³⁶ There, redditors shared their thanks for the game’s coincidental release and for the reprieve the game’s relaxed atmosphere provided. One fan commented on March 21, the day after release, that *New Horizons* “really has been such a band-aid for all the fear and anxiety I’ve been battling lately. Tonight four of us friends who are separated due to social distancing hung out on video chat and played...I felt happy and relaxed for the first time I lost my job. Thank you Nintendo.”¹³⁷

New Horizon’s calming effect was a common experience shared between players, in part due to how the games frequently present themselves as idyllic portrayals of close community, cute aesthetics, and relaxing ambiance. One group of researchers relayed participants’ views that

¹³⁵ *I Practice Social Distancing While Playing Animal Crossing #StayHome #WithMe | Ronda Rousey* (YouTube, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96PincyTmuM>.

¹³⁶ “R/AnimalCrossing Subreddit Stats (r/AnimalCrossing),” Subreddit Stats, accessed May 31, 2022, <https://subredditstats.com/r/animalcrossing>.

¹³⁷ u/strongdogs, “It Really Has Been Such a Band-Aid for All the Fear and Anxiety I’ve Been Battling Lately. Tonight Four of Us Friends Who Are Separated Due to Social Distancing Hung out on Video Chat and Played...I Felt Happy and Relaxed for the First Time since I Lost My Job. Thank You Nintendo,” Reddit Post, *R/NintendoSwitch*, March 21, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/NintendoSwitch/comments/fm9f05/comment/fl3a9qa/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

New Horizons' "natural and peaceful visual environment," hourly musical interludes, and "real-time simulated features" such as sunsets, sunrises, changing weather and seasons, and visiting shops and characters created a "calming effect" for players.¹³⁸ Interviewees for a study published in the journal *Games and Culture* on *New Horizons*' use as a coping mechanism during the pandemic also describe their experiences with the game as calming or stress relieving, with one mother recounting how after a busy day of managing her cooped-up household "I could just play the game for an hour—that was my relaxation."¹³⁹ This study featured a number of families who used the game to get through the day, with one mother stating, "work was so stressful I was in tears almost every day, transitioning online, and helping my kid transition, and dealing with my husband and I seeing each other 24 hours a day—we're not used to that—I am kind of emotionally and mentally not in a good place," elaborating that playing ACNH at the end of the day was her "escape from reality."¹⁴⁰ Another participant was grateful for the small tasks presented by the game, such as collecting fruit or building tools to traverse the island, claiming that it gave "a really good way to busy myself through all of this."¹⁴¹ A similar study of *New Horizons* players by Chris Comerford found that over a third of players surveyed played the game explicitly for the daily routine of maintaining their island, adding that the stability of this routine "proved crucial, especially to those who suffered hardship during the lockdown, whether

¹³⁸ Xin Tong et al., "Players' Stories and Secrets in Animal Crossing: New Horizons-Exploring Design Factors for Positive Emotions and Social Interactions in a Multiplayer Online Game," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5, no. CHI PLAY (October 5, 2021): 9.

¹³⁹ Quoted in Katy E. Pearce et al., "Families Playing Animal Crossing Together: Coping With Video Games During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Games and Culture*, December 5, 2021: 9.

¹⁴⁰ Pearce et al., "Families Playing Animal Crossing Together," 7.

¹⁴¹ Pearce et al., "Families Playing Animal Crossing Together," 10.

it be losing their job, experiencing anxiety and adverse mental health, or someone they knew being afflicted with COVID-19.”¹⁴²

New Horizon's vacation aesthetic also resonated with players, who quickly took to creating beautiful landscapes, perfectly decorated homes, and fashionable outfits. With the ability to share custom outfit codes, players could recreate glamorous fashion pieces or create their own looks. The Instagram account Nook Street Market, for example, was established by a trio of women working in the fashion industry and aimed to bring haute couture to the island paradises of quarantined folk instead of the runway. One of the trio, Vivian Loh, underlined that their work was not about “‘dream pieces’ and more about the passion and effort put into researching runway looks, archival pieces, what’s new to market, and translating those into the Animal Crossing world. Simply put, we make what we can.”¹⁴³ On YouTube, videos of “island tours” and guides to making specific furniture and clothing have received millions of views. By sharing outfit codes and collecting items in the game that reflected their personal aesthetic tastes, players could shape their island into their perfect getaway while also showcasing their work to friends, family, and online admirers. Yet even with this flurry of artistic prowess and elaborate use of *New Horizon*'s features, others merely enjoyed the fact that the game made them “generally excited to wake up in the morning” during quarantine.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Chris Comerford, “Coconuts, Custom-Play & COVID-19: Social Isolation, Serious Leisure and Personas in Animal Crossing: New Horizons,” *Persona Studies* 6, no. 2 (2020): 108.

¹⁴³ Quoted in Finlay Renwick, “Animal Crossing: New Horizons Is An Archive Fashion Paradise,” *Esquire*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.esquire.com/uk/style/fashion/a32169322/animal-crossing-fashion-archive/>.

¹⁴⁴ Kate Leth [@kateleth], “Animal Crossing Makes Me Genuinely Excited to Wake up in the Morning and in These Times, I Can’t Believe That Feeling Only Cost \$60,” Tweet, *Twitter*, April 26, 2020.

As COVID-19 loomed large, *New Horizons* presented an opportunity to hang out and to celebrate momentous life events. Multiple couples hosted weddings on their own private beach, children blew out candles on virtual birthday cakes, and couples went on dates in one another's island homes.¹⁴⁵ Other players utilized *New Horizons*' construction and terraforming tools to host far more elaborate spectacles. Animator and game developer Nikko Ronsayro hosted a talent show asking participants to "either perform a fashion show, tell a joke or play some music," while YouTuber Alpharad remodeled his island to host a variety of minigames to create a "competitive Animal Crossing."¹⁴⁶ As lockdowns continued into May, some students created virtual graduation ceremonies as alternatives to "watching your name pop up on a screen," with one student changing the island flag and music to match that of their home university.¹⁴⁷ Although not designed with these specific needs in mind, *New Horizons* did provide the tools necessary for players of different ages and abilities to keep in touch and to commune with one another.

However, *New Horizons* also offered a space for players to observe another important and all too prevalent life event during the pandemic: funerals. When *New Horizons* released,

¹⁴⁵ Kari Paul, "Dating, a Talk Show and a Dominatrix: Animal Crossing Gamers Explore New Horizons during Pandemic," *The Guardian*, May 9, 2020, sec. Life and style, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/may/09/animal-crossing-nintendo-game-coronavirus-pandemic>; Aron Garst, "The Pandemic Canceled Their Wedding. So They Held It in Animal Crossing.," *Washington Post*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2020/04/02/animal-crossing-wedding-coronavirus/>; Tom Phillips, "People Are Using Animal Crossing: New Horizons for Birthdays, Weddings and Dates While Stuck Inside," *Eurogamer* (blog), March 27, 2020, <https://www.eurogamer.net/people-are-using-animal-crossing-new-horizons-for-birthdays-weddings-and-dates-while-stuck-inside>.

¹⁴⁶ Nikko Ronsayro [@NikkoGuy], "Animal Crossing Talent Show Thread: Had Some People over and Got Them to Either Perform a Fashion Show, Tell a Joke or Play Some Music! 🌟🌟🌟" <https://t.co/I54a0IvYwJ>, Tweet, *Twitter*, March 29, 2020, <https://twitter.com/NikkoGuy/status/1244076528511488000>; *Competitive Animal Crossing* (YouTube, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8amXGP7GNy8>.

¹⁴⁷ Matt DiSanto, "Hosting A Penn State Graduation In Animal Crossing: New Horizons," *Onward State*, May 8, 2020, <https://onwardstate.com/2020/05/08/hosting-a-penn-state-graduation-in-animal-crossing-new-horizons/>.

over a quarter of the U.S. was in lockdown, and an estimated 250 deaths had been reported. By the end of May—when some states and lawmakers had begun pushing to reopen—the U.S. death toll had passed 100,000 while global deaths reached 300,000.¹⁴⁸ Unable to gather in person to grieve the loss of family and friends, players erected memorials, shrines, and dioramas digitally. One player’s family canceled her mother’s memorial service due to COVID, which prompted her to place “a few flowers, a headstone, and a candle” on her in-game island’s beach, noting, “I sit here every day. Every time I log off, I come sit on this little stone over here. I don’t sign off anywhere else.”¹⁴⁹ Another player created a space to remember their father, adding, “Because of the quarantine we can’t go visit him, but at least I can do it on my island... I’m glad we all can find a little comfort in doing this.”¹⁵⁰ Headstones and flowers blossomed on these virtual islands as the need for a place to mourn and remember loved ones grew. Even those who avoided contracting the virus expressed grief for the lives they once lived, longing to return to normalcy. Though able to explore virtual beaches and listen to the synthetic breeze, one player remarked how they missed “being able to be outside all the time.”¹⁵¹ A high school art teacher used *New Horizons* to recreate his classroom, complete with desks and chalkboard, and admitted on Reddit

¹⁴⁸ “United States Coronavirus (COVID-19) Death Toll Surpasses 100,000,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 29, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/s0528-coronavirus-death-toll.html>.

¹⁴⁹ Nicole Carpenter, “Animal Crossing Players Are Building In-Game Memorials: ‘It’s Kind of like She’s Living on in the Game,’” *Polygon* (blog), July 1, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/7/1/21309893/animal-crossing-new-horizons-memorials-nintendo-grief>.

¹⁵⁰ Gabby DaReinzo, “Exploring Grief in Animal Crossing: New Horizons,” Exploring Grief in Animal Crossing: New Horizons | The Order of the Good Death, May 13, 2020, <https://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/article/exploring-grief-in-animal-crossing-new-horizons/>.

¹⁵¹ Ariella Markowitz, “Using ‘Animal Crossing: New Horizons’ to Escape Coronavirus Anxiety? I’ve Been There,” KQED, accessed September 25, 2022, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11808711/using-animal-crossing-new-horizons-to-escape-coronavirus-anxiety-ive-been-there>.

that he “didn’t realize how much I missed my students.”¹⁵² Caroline Thompson, writing for the *Huffington Post*, tried to capture the feelings of many of the people who turned to *Animal Crossing* during lockdown: “I missed my friends. I missed traveling, and I missed feeling in control of my life on any level.”¹⁵³ While playing with the digital neighbors of *Animal Crossing* could provide entertainment and bring a smile for long-time fans, the actual experience of play for many was frequently mixed together with grief and longing.

These instances of joy, sadness, calm, and creativity prove how integral *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* became for players who turned to the game to escape the boundaries of their homes and extend their lives through digital avatars. Although these worlds are not “real” in the sense that the beaches of these islands are mere representations, the characters, worldspaces, and other players all offer and receive affective charges to and from the player through the player’s avatar. Acting as extensions for the player’s self, “avatars direct attention to themselves less as representations and more as actual traces of human operators, rendered lively and available through telepresence.”¹⁵⁴ Chris Comerford’s investigation into *New Horizons* players’ social habits during the COVID-19 pandemic echoes this: “The players of [*New Horizons*] understand one another through shared affinities, and the characters are seen as extensions of the players’ selves rather than ones that are alternative to them.”¹⁵⁵ Unlike virtual worlds such as

¹⁵² pepchamp, “Didn’t Realize How Much I Missed My Students... :(,” Reddit Post, *R/AnimalCrossing*, April 13, 2020, www.reddit.com/r/AnimalCrossing/comments/g0l65i/didnt_realize_how_much_i_missed_my_students/.

¹⁵³ Caroline Thompson, “‘Animal Crossing’ Is Getting Me Through Quarantine — And I’m Not Alone,” HuffPost, August 28, 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/animal-crossing-coronavirus-therapy-feeling-in-control_1_5f458668c5b697186e2dedb8.

¹⁵⁴ Ken Hillis, “The Avatar and Online Affect,” in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit, ARTECA Ebooks. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015): 80.

¹⁵⁵ Comerford, “Coconuts, Custom-Play & COVID-19,” 114.

Grand Theft Auto Online or *World of Warcraft* that encourage role-play and interaction based on one's needs as a player character, *New Horizons* enables players to express their already established personalities and style through fashion, decoration, relationships, and optional goals. Although you play as a "villager," this character is entirely defined by the player's aesthetic tastes and can be shaped into a simulacrum of oneself without much difficulty.

Further differentiating *New Horizons* from other popular video games, players are encouraged to move slowly through its game space. Moving too quickly through flowers can uproot them, and insects and fish will flee if approached too suddenly. In addition, rocks, benches, blankets, and tree stumps prompt players to sit on them and soak in the game's atmosphere as the game's interface fades from view, the music lightens, and the sound of the wind blowing or the rain falling is accentuated. These little moments that *New Horizons* provides—from sitting on a rock next to a memorial for a loved one to inching slowly towards a beetle chirping on a tree to watching the waves roll in—illustrate the affective draw of *New Horizons*. Many video games like *Doom: Eternal*, which also released on March 20, 2020, place undo emphasis on the player to move faster, win more, and devour every shred of content within them before moving on to the next game. *New Horizons* asks little from the player, and as one commenter notes, this lets players "play...at my own pace instead of feeling like I have to rush to 'win' it because it isn't a game that you 'win.'"¹⁵⁶ Because of this lack of a rush or a way to "win," Merlin Seller describes *New Horizons* as a "place to dwell in," acting not as a place to engage in in emotional highs, lows, and catharsis—functions typically prescribed to media and

¹⁵⁶ Tong et al., "Players' Stories and Secrets in Animal Crossing: New Horizons," 10.

escapism—but instead as “space to be bored.”¹⁵⁷ Boredom, from Seller’s perspective, can be “usefully absorbing,” taking away negative affects but not necessarily replacing them with new ones.¹⁵⁸ Compare this to doomscrolling, an affective circuit of anxiety that provokes more scrolling through Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and other social media sites only to grow in intensity and fervor. Seller continues, describing *New Horizons*’ small tasks like fruit collecting and interior decorating as “an attractive alternative to anxiety, an opportunity to be absorbed.”¹⁵⁹

As much as *New Horizons* offered a way to relieve anxieties and create new and positive memories during an extremely difficult time, it unfortunately was not designed for the overwhelming number of new and returning players eager for their island escape during a global outbreak. Fans old and new held heated debates over the pacing of the game’s introductory days, as upon beginning a new game, players must wait approximately nine real-life days for every major feature to become available. Housing upgrades, bridge & ramp building, and other gameplay mechanics ask players to come back the next day after introducing them to unlock the next one. Other aspects of the real-time system like fish that only appear at night or insects that spawn in the mornings bothered players who wanted to quickly collect all the game’s fauna for the in-game museum. This system made sense in the context of past *Animal Crossing* titles, as the games were designed to be played one day at a time. Impatient players, however, opted to time travel. By disconnecting from the Internet and setting the Nintendo Switch’s system clock

¹⁵⁷ Merlin Seller, “Ever-Lockdown: Waiting through Times of Playbour and Pandemic in Animal Crossing,” *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network* 14, no. 1 (July 5, 2021): 110, 108.

¹⁵⁸ Seller, “Ever-Lockdown,” 104.

¹⁵⁹ Seller, “Ever-Lockdown,” 108.

to their preferred time and date, time travelers could fast-forward to force projects to complete and then realign the clock to use online services. Numerous guides on how to time travel popped up as long-time fans familiar with the practice educated newer players on how to do this. This, some fans claimed, goes against the spirit of *New Horizons*. Even Reggie Fils-Aimé, the former president of Nintendo of America, responded that even he would never cheat the game in this way: “Never!!”¹⁶⁰

From the perspective of dedicated fans of the *Animal Crossing* franchise, time travel grants unfair advantages to savvy players and places an unnecessary competitive element on one’s play. Rather than engaging with one’s anthropomorphic neighbors and friends in a relaxed and leisurely manner, purists argue these fans ignore “what makes the Animal Crossing series special to begin with.”¹⁶¹ However, people were not engaging with *Animal Crossing* within normal circumstances. With the weight of the COVID-19 pandemic bearing down, players were often sold on the promise that *New Horizons* would be an escape, only to be told to wait and that they would be unable to partake in the game’s core routines and practices until a week and a half from that day. Critically, players eager to visit loved ones’ islands would have to wait until their second day of playing to access *New Horizons*’ multiplayer features; for instance, a player who bought the game on March 20th would have to wait to visit their friend’s island on March 21st. Players who continued to work throughout the pandemic and those stuck at home could either suffer through the wait or take a few moments to change the in-game clock to speed things up.

¹⁶⁰ Reggie Fils-Aimé [@Reggie], “Never!!,” Tweet, *Twitter*, April 16, 2020, <https://twitter.com/Reggie/status/1250616675201716224>.

¹⁶¹ Brendan Lowry, “This Is Why You Shouldn’t Time Travel in Animal Crossing: New Horizons,” *iMore*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.imore.com/why-you-shouldnt-time-travel-animal-crossing-new-horizons>.

This discussion on time travel in *New Horizons* also reflects how lockdown was viewed by some as an extended Spring Break, rather than the months-long (and now multi-year) pandemic that it would become. Infectious disease experts optimistically predicted that lockdowns could be lifted as soon as May 2020, and news of vaccine trials spread quickly even though said medicine would take “at least a year to 18 months” to fully complete.¹⁶² With the prospect of a short lockdown period, players of *New Horizons* may have felt that they needed to rush to enjoy the game while they had the time.

The game’s widespread adoption and subsequent takeover of social media feeds likewise put untoward pressure on players to compete with one another for attention. One player bemoaned how “after playing for a couple hours daily I finally have a museum on my humble island but then I open twitter and apparently everyone else has just finished constructing the mesopotamian empire.”¹⁶³ New players felt overwhelmed by how far seasoned *Animal Crossing* fans had managed to progress based on their familiarity of the game’s core mechanics, with one relating it to feeling like they “tripped out of the starting gate of a race.”¹⁶⁴ Contrary to Seller’s interpretation of *New Horizons*’ boredom as capable of absorbing anxieties, these players expressed feeling that they were missing out on some integral part of the game, that they had fallen behind their peers and had to play *New Horizons* more efficiently to keep up. Some fans

¹⁶² Amelia Nierenberg, “How Long Will the Coronavirus Outbreak and Shutdown Last?,” *The New York Times*, March 16, 2020, sec. Health, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/16/health/coronavirus-shut-down.html>.

¹⁶³ shinsei [@nise_shi], “I Don’t Understand Animal Crossing. after Playing for a Couple Hours Daily I Finally Have a Museum on My Humble Island but Then I Open Twitter and Apparently Everyone Else Has Just Finished Constructing the Mesopotamian Empire,” Tweet, *Twitter*, March 24, 2020, https://twitter.com/nise_shi/status/1242282288097808384.

¹⁶⁴ Quoted in Patricia Hernandez, “Animal Crossing’s Social Media Explosion Leaves Some Fans Frustrated, Jealous,” *Polygon* (blog), March 31, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/3/31/21193971/animal-crossing-new-horizons-unlocks-progression-nintendo-switch-fomo-multiplayer-time-travel>.

encouraged players to slow down as “Animal Crossing isn’t a game you grind;” others voiced frustration that they were “making no progress,” especially when it came to recruiting fan favorite characters.¹⁶⁵

Few aspects of *New Horizons* demonstrate the incongruence between the game’s cozy vibes and players’ aggressive playstyles than how players treated their animal neighbors. *Animal Crossing* features many anthropomorphic villagers that have become official or unofficial mascots for the series. Perhaps the best-known character, the business savvy tanuki Tom Nook offers players “loans” to upgrade one’s island home that can be repaid by completing various tasks like selling fruit or digging for fossils. Although fans have argued over whether Tom Nook has an ulterior motive for doing so, there is no way to remove the character from the game. The same is true for the shopkeepers and other supporting characters like Isabelle, a yellow dog who presents the players with announcements every day. But the neighbor characters—drawn from a pool of over four hundred—will randomly appear and offer to set up on the player’s island. Rather than get to know and appreciate these characters, players partook in finding ever more creative ways to harass their in-game neighbors in the hopes of evicting them to make room for their preferred candidate or to remove characters that were “ugly or weird.”¹⁶⁶ At the same time, a black market of sorts developed around villagers like Raymond, a male cat with heterochromia

¹⁶⁵ Gita Jackson, “‘Animal Crossing: New Horizons’ Is Not the Game We All Need Right Now,” *Vice* (blog), April 14, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgezvk/animal-crossing-new-horizons-is-not-the-game-we-all-need-right-now>; Jack Crosbie, “It’s Time to Admit ‘Animal Crossing: New Horizons’ Is a Dumb, Boring Game for Children,” *Business Insider*, accessed September 25, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/animal-crossing-new-horizons-is-bad-2020-4>.

¹⁶⁶ Patricia Hernandez, “Animal Crossing Fans Are Torturing Villagers to Get Them to Move Out,” *Polygon* (blog), March 31, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/3/31/21195907/animal-crossing-new-horizons-how-to-make-villager-move-out-island-nintendo-switch-torture-tiktok>.

and a smug personality, and offered to “trade” their island’s copy of these characters to one another by “recommending” the leaving neighbor travel to their buyer.¹⁶⁷ The comparisons to the trade of exotic animals are obvious, as these characters are treated as extensions of the player’s aesthetic sculpting of their island paradise rather than as their own beings. However, as some players spent hundreds of hours on their islands meticulously sculpting and beautifying their space, those worn out by the mad dash to relax or burned out from having *New Horizons* as their only escape route may have used these markets to make someone else’s day a little brighter.

2.6 Conclusion

Considering the popularity of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness*, it should come as no surprise that fans found ways to express their appreciation for both works. Players of *New Horizons* quickly crafted designs depicting Joe Exotic, Carole Baskin, and their animal-print attire, which were shared via QR codes generated by the game. Others used existing decorations like tiger statues, fences, dog houses, hats, and prison bars to recreate tiger pens and other environments seen in the series.¹⁶⁸ One inventive recreation—“Nookflix and Chill” by elpinkosp—reimagines *Tiger King*’s launch trailer almost entirely through the aesthetic lens of *New Horizons*, albeit with some additional jokes and visual gags based on fan-favorite scenes.¹⁶⁹ Some fans even used signs in game to demand Joe Exotic’s

¹⁶⁷ Kenny Probeck, “Animal Crossing: Why Raymond Is the Black Market’s Hottest Commodity,” CBR, May 27, 2020, <https://www.cbr.com/animal-crossing-raymond-black-market/>.

¹⁶⁸ Karen Han, “Animal Crossing Fans Are Trying to Re-Create Netflix’s Tiger King,” *Polygon* (blog), April 1, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/entertainment/2020/4/1/21202991/animal-crossing-new-horizons-tiger-king-netflix>.

¹⁶⁹ *Nookflix and Chill* (YouTube, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC7y9bP2P6A>.

release from prison, often accompanied by tiger statues and iron cages to further illustrate the point.¹⁷⁰

There was a moment of shared unity stoked by *Tiger King* and *New Horizons* in the initial lockdowns, even as the political right became eager to restart the economy and as there was a growing sense that COVID-19 would not go away quickly. Uncertainty of the virus's longevity led to a series of on-again-off-again stay-at-home orders, each differing in effectiveness and severity depending on one's city, county, or state. This waffling at the government level and the disruptions of the growing anti-lockdown movement left the individual largely responsible for their own health and safety, especially as supply chain problems and mixed messaging from the CDC prevented people from obtaining personal protective equipment like face masks.

The lack of protections did not stop crowds from gathering to protest the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, and those that could not attend Black Lives Matter demonstrations due to health risks or location congregated in *New Horizons*, using the same techniques that had been used for fun with *Tiger King* to demand police reform or defunding. Adelle Lin, a non-binary artist and engineer, desired to “use my animal crossing powers for good” and organized a “memorial + rally + fundraiser” on their virtual island to benefit the NAACP and other organizations fighting for justice; even though eight fans could join the island simultaneously due to the limitations of the game, this one fundraiser raised thousands of dollars, and it was far

¹⁷⁰ caitlin [@caitoakesss], “#TigerKing #JoeExotic FreeJoeExotic #AnimalCrossing #ACNH #NintendoSwitch <https://t.co/j6nyIzTors>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, March 28, 2020, <https://twitter.com/caitoakesss/status/1243733962448502785>.

from the only such protest held in *New Horizons*.¹⁷¹ *Tiger King* fans also found their own methods to advocate for the Black Lives Matter protests. Author and illustrator Jarrett Krosoczka drew charming depictions of Joe Exotic and his tigers to “get your attention” before using that attention to advocate for racial justice, citing that the art “received more than double the link clicks” compared to a similar post simply sharing anti-racism resources.¹⁷² Another writer compiled a list of films and documentaries detailing the history of black life in the U.S. and the continuation of white supremacy, arguing that “We’re not watching as much television, but we nevertheless should come together for a national conversation. If we could do it for *Tiger King*, it’s our absolute duty to do it for racial justice.”¹⁷³ Joe Exotic himself wrote in a letter to a fan calling for prison reform, accusing the for-profit prison system of perpetuating the “American slave trade.”¹⁷⁴

While these two works were appreciated throughout 2020, by the time their respective creators released sequels in late 2021—for *Tiger King*, a second season and a spin-off series focused on Doc Antle; for *New Horizons*, a large content patch and a paid expansion—many had adjusted, however effectively, to the “new normal.” Vaccines and treatments had begun rolling

¹⁷¹ Adelle [@Adellelin], “I’m Hoping to Use My Animal Crossing Powers for Good. Please Join My Memorial + Rally + Fundraiser. Standing Together with All of y’all out There Right Now. <https://Turnip.Exchange/Island/Be409a99#BlackLivesMatter#equality#letsfixthesystem#acnh> <https://t.co/NfxKdtPTro>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, June 7, 2020, <https://twitter.com/Adellelin/status/1269443425117626374>.

¹⁷² “Jarrett J. Krosoczka - But Jarrett...Why Tiger King Fan Art? ...,” accessed September 29, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/studioijk/photos/a.761275703987540/2996632750451813/>.

¹⁷³ Elaine Roth, “You Watched ‘Tiger King’ — Now Watch This,” *Scary Mommy*, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.scarymommy.com/white-people-watch-documentaries-race>.

¹⁷⁴ Quoted in Isobel Lewis, “Tiger King’s Joe Exotic Calls US Prison System the ‘American Slave Trade,’” *The Independent*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/joe-exotic-prison-tiger-king-netflix-letter-health-reform-a9572271.html>.

out in earnest in the U.S., manufacturers and stores managed to reconvene supplies of food, sanitizer, and face masks, and the entertainment industry resumed the production and release of new games and television. Once “Tiger King Fever” began to ebb, other Netflix presentations like the period drama *The Queen’s Gambit* (2020), Bo Burnam’s *Inside* (2021), and the South Korean thriller *Squid Game* (2021) would each surpass *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness* as the most watched on the platform. Similarly, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*’ newfound gaming audience drifted to other titles like *Hades* (2020), *Inscription* (2021), and *Elden Ring* (2022). While some fans returned for *Tiger King 2* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons: Happy Home Paradise*, conversations around these additions were relegated to their respective fandoms and barely reached audiences outside of them.

That said, these works did work to create a short but noticeable effect for those who had to stay at home during the initial COVID-19 outbreak as audiences related how they could feel normal through these media. *New Horizons*’ real-time system and checklist of tiny tasks—picking up an orange here, building a bridge there—granted players a sense of routine after their entire lives had been uprooted and shifted online or completely severed from what it used to be. One player relates that the routine offered a sense of stability as “Every day there is something to do. Every day there is a goal.”¹⁷⁵ Another found serenity within the peaceful shores of his island, even as the world outside grew stranger: “I’ll always know that things on my tiny island are

¹⁷⁵ Shreyas Banerjee, “The Joys of ‘Animal Crossing: New Horizons’ in a Time of Quarantine,” *The Observer* (blog), accessed September 29, 2022, <https://observer.case.edu/the-joys-of-animal-crossing-new-horizons-in-a-time-of-quarantine/>.

going to be okay.”¹⁷⁶ Jared Richards writes in an article for *Junkee* that, opposed to the “apocalyptic air” of lockdown, *New Horizons* is “kind of boring, which is why it’s perfect,” echoing Seller’s conceptualization of the game “not as a retreat, but a means of staying in place.”¹⁷⁷ *Tiger King*, in tandem with *New Horizons*, gave audiences something bizarre and exciting to talk about other than the pandemic and granted space for people to process the changes in their lives in comparison to a cast of larger-than-life characters. Audiences resonated with the broader themes of the series as “the experience of lockdown is mirrored in the program’s thematization of confinement and incarceration.”¹⁷⁸ The collective watch-along also “created a sense of simultaneity, of a widely shared reality” that was difficult to achieve before the pandemic and has become seemingly impossible since.¹⁷⁹ That simultaneity helped to circulate what Kathleen Stewart refers to as “ordinary affects” or “the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences.”¹⁸⁰ These affects which would have come from shaking hands with acquaintances, smiling at strangers across the street, breathing the same air as loved ones, and sitting in a dark movie theater with dozens of others found replacements in caring for tulips and roses outside a virtual home, sharing a screencap of *Tiger King* that brought a weary

¹⁷⁶ Patrick Kernan, “Seeking Serenity: ‘Animal Crossing’ an Island of Peace amid Stormy Seas,” *Times Leader*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.timesleader.com/opinion/columns/779559/seeking-serenity-animal-crossing-an-island-of-peace-amid-stormy-seas>.

¹⁷⁷ Jared Richards, “‘Animal Crossing: New Horizons’ Will Make You Feel Normal Again,” *Junkee*, March 25, 2020, <https://junkee.com/animal-crossing-switch-review-mindless-covid/248481>; Seller, “Ever-Lockdown,” 111.

¹⁷⁸ Boast and Seymour, “Captive Audiences,” *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness: A Docalogue*, 9.

¹⁷⁹ Boast and Seymour, “Captive Audiences,” *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness: A Docalogue*, 12.

¹⁸⁰ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007): 1-2.

laugh with one's friends, hosting watch parties and play-alongs over Zoom, and talking about these things knowing that although the pandemic continued to be a threat it would not take away our joy.

Audiences also used these works to reconsider the environment and their relationships to animals. *Tiger King*'s showcase of the horrendous treatment of big cats in roadside zoos and in suitcases smuggled into hotels bolstered recognition of the Big Cat Safety Act bill, which Carole Baskin promoted and has since passed the House of Representatives. This bill “would prohibit keeping tigers, lions and other big cat species as pets, and ban direct public contact like cub petting.”¹⁸¹ NextGen America, an organization mobilizing younger voters, used *New Horizons* to host an Earth Day rally to discuss climate change, and other activists hosted island parties to discuss animal rights and conservation.¹⁸² Players have even taken to using the in-game decorating tools to imagine what eco-friendly homes and neighborhoods would look like.¹⁸³ While neither work presents the most persuasive arguments for thinking about human-animal relations, they nevertheless draw interest—“inquisitiveness, curiosity, wonder”—which can spark those conversations.¹⁸⁴ The lifespans of these works may have been short, yet they did for a time remind us that we're all animals on the same earth.

¹⁸¹ “Breaking: Big Cat Public Safety Act Passes the U.S. House of Representatives on International Tiger Day,” The Humane Society of the United States, July 29, 2022, <https://www.humanesociety.org/news/breaking-big-cat-public-safety-act-passes-us-house-representatives-international-tiger-day>.

¹⁸² Aimee Percy, “‘Animal Crossing’ Isn’t Just a Game — It’s a Political Platform,” *OneZero* (blog), May 28, 2020, <https://onezero.medium.com/animal-crossing-isn-t-just-a-game-it-s-a-political-platform-c12a29e7cde>.

¹⁸³ *Mathilda's Eco-Friendly Environment! - Animal Crossing: New Horizons - Day 761 (Year 3, Day 31)* (YouTube, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSbomhyFXXI>.

¹⁸⁴ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: Harvard University Press, 2015): 116.

Although *Tiger King* and *Animal Crossing* both promised a form of escapism through their animalistic characters, neither should be viewed exclusively as mere entertainment. Doing so elides the ability of audiences to negotiate their experiences with media and the capability of media to affect audiences in new and varied ways depending on their contexts. However, as I show in the next chapter, fans often turn to media as a source of empowerment to help them overcome life's challenges, but how that empowerment takes shape and who can be empowered by certain media can be more challenging to figure out.

CHAPTER 3

A DIFFERENT KIND OF POWER FANTASY:

TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES AND EMPOWERING MEDIA

3.1 Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic showed little sign of fading before the summer of 2020 and popular forms of entertainment hurried to adapt themselves to a long-term online-only environment, players of tabletop role-playing games—a style of play wherein a gamemaster (GM) creates scenarios for players to encounter and potentially overcome using a predefined ruleset, also known as TRPGs—opted to escape into fantasy worlds and championed the bonds of camaraderie against social isolation. Traditionally considered a niche hobby, TRPGs have exploded in popularity over the past decade thanks to actual play shows like *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* and ties to nerd culture through works like Netflix’s *Stranger Things*, numerous novelizations, fan works, and merchandise. As technical limitations, pandemic restrictions, and global supply line disruptions rendered many entertainment avenues inert, TRPG makers across the industry saw record profits and increased interest from new players searching for something else to try during COVID lockdowns. Virtual tabletop services like Roll20 and D&D Beyond helped to replicate the pen-and-paper, dice-on-tabletop experience that many were unable to partake in, and voice chats such as Discord helped connect players and GMs across time zones, borders, and eventually lockdown orders.

Although TRPGs have existed in gaming spaces for roughly fifty years (with role-playing in general reaching back millennia), this style of play is often regarded by both detractors and players as “power fantasy,” a style of play wherein the player is granted a significant level of

agency over both how the game is played and how the narrative takes shape. Discussions around power fantasy, in the case of TRPGs, center on the abilities of player characters to perform larger-than-life feats of daring, to participate in acts of violence that can be simultaneously comedic and gratuitous, and to charm non-player characters (NPCs) through charisma or force them via strength to abide by their will. Popular conceptions of power fantasies liken them to being “The Chosen One, a Super Hero, or just badass with a cool longcoat” where “everyone who ever pissed you off will have to pay.”¹⁸⁵ Power fantasies in gaming cultures are similarly derided, as critics argue that games “try their damndest to make sure that the gamer can forget whatever sense of impotency they might feel in their normal lives.”¹⁸⁶ These analyses begin with the assumption that the gamer/player has little to no power to affect change in their day-to-day and end by positioning games as illusions of control. Since many felt powerless in the wake of a globe-spanning virus, such a view of gaming can seem intuitive, especially when the record sales of “Power fantasy ‘Doom Eternal’” in March 2020 seem to confirm this suspicion.¹⁸⁷

Paranoia of media’s “empowering” capabilities extend beyond games. Though the idea of empowerment in contemporary discourse can be traced to feminist thought and marginalized communities recognizing their disempowerment by societal pressures and systems of governance, Anne-Emmanuèle Calvès also notes that the concept of “empowerment” was never established in concrete terms, allowing it to “become a vague goal, a fashionable term that is

¹⁸⁵ “Power Fantasy,” TV Tropes, accessed May 25, 2023, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PowerFantasy>.

¹⁸⁶ Wayne Santos, “Gaming’s Power Fantasy: The Hero Complex,” *CGMagazine* (blog), October 20, 2010, <https://www.cgmagonline.com/articles/editorials/hero-complex/>.

¹⁸⁷ “PC Download Charts: ‘Doom Eternal’ Soars as Steam Sets New Record,” *INQUIRER.net*, March 24, 2020, <https://technology.inquirer.net/97677/pc-download-charts-doom-eternal-soars-as-steam-sets-new-record>.

impossible to implement in the field” and that “has become synonymous with individual capacity, realization, and status.”¹⁸⁸ As a result, empowerment has been used by the managerial class to improve morale in otherwise demoralized workers, and at times this strategy of empowerment can be a thinly veiled excuse to “provide employees with additional responsibility and challenges at work” which could result in workers feeling more stressed and burdened by the workload.¹⁸⁹ This rebranding of empowerment as a nebulous positive feeling extended to the pandemic, as workplaces sought to encourage one another to “empower their employees with new tools as COVID has decentralized the workforce.”¹⁹⁰

Instead of offering a salve for the individual or an excuse for one’s inability to affect change, I propose that the ways that players of TRPGs discuss the importance of these games within their lives reveal the importance of escapist fantasy modes during times of crisis and in day-to-day living. For longtime players and newfound fans, TRPGs provided both a way to pass time during the COVID lockdowns and a method to exercise new and radical concepts in fiction and reality. To illustrate this, this chapter will explore how TRPG players and designers navigated the pandemic as a community and how TRPGs were presented to a wider audience that was struggling with social distancing and connection. In addition, this chapter will interrogate how discourses of escapist media practices have shifted from exclusively paranoid to potentially life-altering. Finally, this chapter will examine notable examples of TRPG players’

¹⁸⁸ Anne-Emmanuèle Calvès, “Empowerment: The History of a Key Concept in Contemporary Development Discourse,” *Revue Tiers Monde* 200, no. 4 (2009): 9-10.

¹⁸⁹ Allan Lee, Sara Willis, and Amy Wei Tian, “When Empowering Employees Works, and When It Doesn’t,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 2, 2018, <https://hbr.org/2018/03/when-empowering-employees-works-and-when-it-doesnt>.

¹⁹⁰ Carsten Lund Pedersen, “Empower Your Employees Through the Pandemic With These 4 Ts,” *California Management Review Insights*, September 30, 2020, <https://cmr.berkeley.edu/2020/09/empower-your-employees/>.

attempts to wield the empowerment they found at the table to the streets, whether these discourses of empowerment extended beyond the table, and where the limits of this counter-discourse of escapist media practices may lie by examining how TRPG players and designers participated in discussions of racial justice that grew in prominence during the pandemic.

3.2 “Escape Your Reality With Role-Playing Games”

Tabletop role-playing games, by the nature of their inception and general practice of play, should not have been as successful as they were throughout the coronavirus pandemic. The classic depiction of playing a TRPG requires a group of players to travel to a local game store or, ideally, the gamemaster’s home, wherein everyone gathers around the table to discuss and debate about the actions of their fictional characters in a scenario of their creation. While some who turned to TRPGs had the fortune to live in the same household or neighborhood, many others were stranded by the pandemic. As travel and in-person gatherings were either disallowed or outright banned, players increasingly turned to digital tools to facilitate play. Virtual tabletop services (also known as VTTs) provided online alternatives to maps, dice, character sheets, and rulebooks for a variety of popular TRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) and *Pathfinder*. Nolan T. Jones—co-founder and managing partner of Roll20, one of the most popular VTTs pre-pandemic—noted that when Italy began lockdowns, new players joining the site in a massive wave: “There was a day last week where we had more Italians sign up for the service than we had Americans. We’ve never had that happen before.”¹⁹¹ This trend continued throughout the

¹⁹¹ James Grebey, “Dungeons & Dragons Players Turn to Virtual Tabletops in Record Numbers Due to Coronavirus,” SYFY WIRE, March 25, 2020, <https://www.syfy.com/syfy-wire/dungeons-dragons-roll20-fantasy-grounds-virtual-tabletop-online-coronavirus>.

pandemic, leading to Roll20 recording over 100 million total hours of TRPGs, social meetings, and other forms of play in the following months logged by more than five million accounts; of those, nearly 60% were logged playing *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition*.¹⁹² This wave of growth was not limited to Roll20 alone, as numerous virtual tabletop services experienced increased player counts. Yet, the sheer number of new players illustrates a desire by some TRPG players and neophytes to use role-playing to escape from their lockdowns and into fantasy.

News media quickly turned their attention to TRPGs as newcomers scrambled to find playgroups and veterans noted the genre's unique advantages. Zofiya Acosta in *preen.ph* claimed that "Tabletop RPGs are getting me through lockdown," adding that "it's a good idea to play a tabletop RPG if you're already getting a bit sick of the people you're quarantining with" since "You're playing different people, and you get to adopt different roles and personalities"; in other words, they offer a chance to meet and socialize with "new" people.¹⁹³ Justin Stabley, writing for *PBS News Hour*, relates how someone who might not have ever considered playing a TRPG might decide to do so: "You're at home. You've already binge-watched everything, reorganized your furniture, fiddled with your dusty guitar or finally finished 'War and Peace.' You're yearning for a new creative outlet or at least find a new way to connect with family and friends. Why not give the world of tabletop games a closer look?"¹⁹⁴ Stabley's article presents the hobby

¹⁹² J. R. Zambrano, "D&D Accounts For More Than 60 Percent Of Roll20 Games," *Bell of Lost Souls* (blog), October 20, 2020, <https://www.belloflostsouls.net/2020/10/dd-accounts-for-more-than-60-percent-of-roll20-games.html>.

¹⁹³ Zofiya Acosta, "Tabletop RPGs Are Getting Me through the Lockdown," *Preen.Ph* (blog), March 25, 2020, <https://preen.ph/107614/tabletop-rpgs-to-get-through-the-lockdown>.

¹⁹⁴ Justin Stabley, "10 Games to Help You Escape Stay-at-Home Boredom," *PBS NewsHour* (blog), April 14, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/10-games-to-help-you-escape-stay-at-home-boredom>.

as a healthy and underappreciated alternative or read more pessimistically, a last resort for entertainment after literally trying everything else.

Gaming specific outlets explored TRPG use in more detail and allowed established players to air their grievances about playing during the pandemic. Board game news outlet *Dicebreaker* reported that players who turned to online spaces were suffering from “a greater sense of dissonance and fatigue” caused by the shift from tabletop to virtual tabletop.¹⁹⁵ One player interviewed in the article recalled how “People were enthusiastic in the first month of quarantine, but it waned and by the third month, people kept saying on the day of the event, ‘Something just came up and I can’t make it today,’ over text. ... If this happens a couple weeks in a row, the group dies.”¹⁹⁶ *TheGamer* remarks likewise that war-game based TRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder* “often rely on outside elements, like maps and minis,” elements that can be replicated through digital means but are “never quite as satisfying as the real thing.”¹⁹⁷ Nevertheless, players and game makers expressed how the hobby brought them a sense of “comfort, connection, and control in a world that’s taken them away.”¹⁹⁸ Game designer Chloe Mashiter argues that because “It feels very much like we don't have agency over how the country is being run, or over the pandemic,” role-playing games can act as “an arena where you

¹⁹⁵ Khee Hoon Chan, “The Fatigue and Loneliness of Playing Tabletop RPGs Online in a Pandemic,” *Dicebreaker* (blog), September 8, 2020, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/categories/roleplaying-game/feature/playing-tabletop-rpgs-online-fatigue-loneliness>.

¹⁹⁶ Chan, “The Fatigue and Loneliness of Playing Tabletop RPGs Online in a Pandemic.”

¹⁹⁷ Scott Baird, “How Tabletop RPGs Broke Away From The Table And Brought People Together,” *TheGamer* (blog), December 31, 2020, <https://www.thegamer.com/tabletop-rpgs-online-2020-dnd-vampire/>.

¹⁹⁸ Peter Ray Allison, “Tabletop Roleplaying Has Given Players Comfort, Connection and Control in a World That’s Taken Them Away,” *Dicebreaker* (blog), April 21, 2021, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/categories/roleplaying-game/feature/tabletop-roleplaying-comfort-connection-control-covid-19>.

feel like you have some control over the stories that are told.”¹⁹⁹ TRPG developer momatoes describes how their work in creating the roleplaying game *Tiny Stories* was “my tiny attempt at making things a little better. A little game, for friends who want to spend a little time together, in these complex and trying times.”²⁰⁰

For many players, tabletop role-playing games became lifelines. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in early January 2021 that players were “Turning to Dungeons & Dragons to escape a real-life monster—COVID-19,” with one player recorded as saying, “I can have a measure of control over the world, at a time when we have no control in the world.”²⁰¹ Another player remarked to the *BBC* that because many of his friends were isolated during lockdown, playing *D&D* was “the only interaction” he had with other people and that playing together helped him to work through his COVID-incited anxieties: “That’s one of the greatest things we’ve done as a group, we’ve been able to express our worries, our stresses, as well as the joy that we’ve had all playing together.”²⁰² Playing as a gamemaster—the one in charge of the story—gave one player a push to keep going, adding that “Finding the motivation to do anything other than go through the motions can be excruciating in a COVID-19 world, but when you’re the [GM], the game doesn’t happen without you... I’ve come to find that there’s no greater motivator than hearing

¹⁹⁹ Allison, “Tabletop Role Playing Has Given Players Comfort.”

²⁰⁰ maruya, “All My Stress and Panic over the Lockdown Just Made Me Want to Play Make-Believe with Friends. So I Made a Tiny Game: Tiny Stories,” Reddit Post, *R/Rpg*, March 17, 2020, www.reddit.com/r/rpg/comments/fk93qv/all_my_stress_and_panic_over_the_lockdown_just/.

²⁰¹ Sarah Parvini, “Turning to Dungeons & Dragons to Escape a Real-Life Monster — COVID-19,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 2021, sec. California, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-01-13/online-d-d-provides-relief-covid-19-pandemic>.

²⁰² Gwyndaf Hughes, “Covid-19: ‘Dungeons and Dragons Got Us through Lockdown,’” *BBC News*, July 2, 2021, sec. Wales, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-57636378>.

someone say, ‘Thank you. This was fun. I can't wait to see what happens next week.’”²⁰³

Professional gamemaster Satine Phoenix regularly stresses the potential of TRPGs to foster community and to improve mental health: “We need something to latch onto, to actually accomplish. ... Maybe we can't put on pants today, but we can fight that dragon.”²⁰⁴ These feelings of connectedness and forward progress in a period of prolonged stagnation are frequently cited results of these online gatherings.

As access to mental health services grew increasingly strained during the pandemic, the popularity of *D&D* and other TRPGs encouraged some researchers and therapists to integrate the practice into therapy. Sören Henrich and Rachel Worthington's overview of current research into *D&D* as a therapy aid found that “D&D facilitates higher levels of creativity and empathy,” which were “linked to a variety of other factors, for example, maintaining friendships and general feelings of connectedness, exploring varying lifestyle models, as well as a heightened ability to consider group's needs and more balanced differential moral reasoning.”²⁰⁵ Baker, Turner, and Kotera also examined the increased use of role-playing games as an “emergent coping strategy” and found that “playing RPGs ... can aid in friendship and relationship maintenance, mitigation of social anxiety, improved social skills, reducing stress, alleviation

²⁰³ Stewart Shearer, “Pandemic Play: How COVID-19 Changed Tabletop RPGs for Then and (Maybe) Forever,” *Side Quest*, February 22, 2022, <https://side-quest.ghost.io/pandemic-play-how-covid-19-changed-tabletop-rpgs-for-then-and-forever/>.

²⁰⁴ Eric Fransisco, “How Covid-19 Is Changing ‘Dungeons & Dragons,’ Maybe Forever,” *Inverse*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.inverse.com/gaming/dungeons-and-dragons-online-coronavirus-zoom>.

²⁰⁵ Sören Henrich and Rachel Worthington, “Let Your Clients Fight Dragons: A Rapid Evidence Assessment Regarding the Therapeutic Utility of ‘Dungeons & Dragons,’” *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* (December 4, 2021), 11.

from mental health challenges, and providing connection with others.”²⁰⁶ This growing body of evidence does point towards potential therapeutic applications of TRPGs, yet similar research also exists regarding video games, board games, and media fandom in general.²⁰⁷ Even without overwhelming evidence of their effectiveness as therapeutic aides, TRPGs have become the basis for entire enterprises dedicated to training gamemasters to perform group therapy via role-playing.²⁰⁸ Rather than view *D&D* and related works as a unique solution, this may instead be further proof of a changing relationship with escapist media practices.

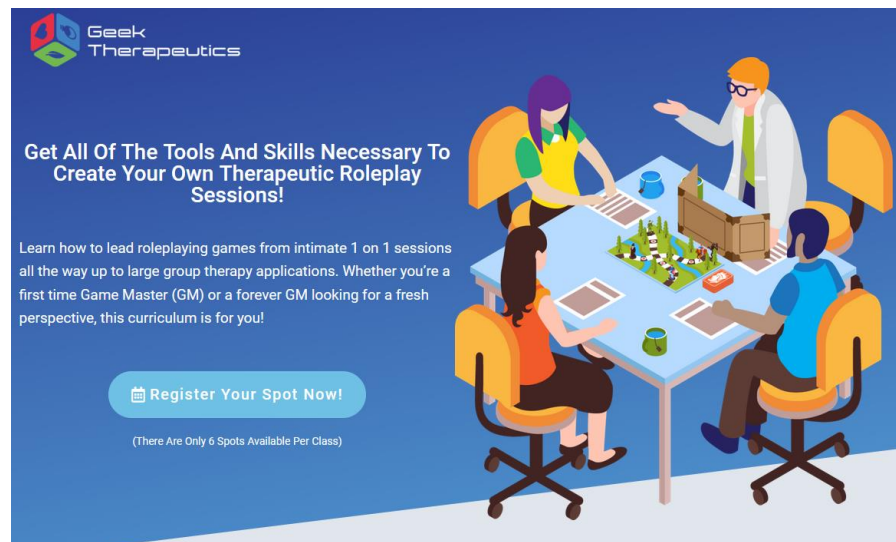


Figure 3. *Geek Therapeutics*, a 9-week course for tabletop therapy.

²⁰⁶ Ian S. Baker, Ian J. Turner, and Yasuhiro Kotera, “Role-Play Games (RPGs) for Mental Health (Why Not?): Roll for Initiative,” *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, May 11, 2022, 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-022-00832-y>.

²⁰⁷ Francesco Bocci, Ambra Ferrari, and Marcello Sarini, “Putting the Gaming Experience at the Center of the Therapy—The Video Game Therapy® Approach,” *Healthcare* 11, no. 12 (January 2023): 1767; Heidi Kaduson and Charles E. Schaefer, *Play Therapy with Children : Modalities for Change*, APA PsycNet. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2021); Thorana S Nelson and Terry S Trepper, “The Play Is the Thing: Using Self-Constructed Board Games in Family Therapy” (Routledge, 1998), 234–39; Maria Pramaggiore, “The Taming of the Bronies: Animals, Autism and Fandom as Therapeutic Performance,” *Alphaville*, no. 9 (2015): 6–22; Stephen Reysen et al., “‘Coming Out’ as an Anime Fan: Cosplayers in the Anime Fandom, Fan Disclosure, and Well-Being,” *The Phoenix Papers* 4, no. 1 (2018): 1-9.

²⁰⁸ Geek Therapeutics, “Become a Therapeutic Game Master with RPGs,” Therapeutic Game Master, accessed February 16, 2024, <https://therapeuticgamemaster.com/>, Figure 3.

Escapist media and the fandoms that developed around them have traditionally been presented as harmful, disruptive, anti-social, and childish. Joli Jenson remarks in “Fandom as Pathology” that fans were viewed as either “the obsessed loner, who (under the influence of the media) has entered into an intense fantasy relationship with a celebrity figure” or as “a frenzied or hysterical member of a crowd.”²⁰⁹ Similar claims were made about fans of TRPGs, which fed into the Satanic Panic of the late 20th century and produced a pop culture understanding of *D&D* that “was shaped by growing fears about cults and the vulnerability of young minds.”²¹⁰ The notoriety of TRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Vampire: The Masquerade* from this media exposure has since been bolstered by the mainstreaming of nerd culture and the increasing monetization of fandom by cultural industries. Where getting the materials to play a TRPG would have previously involved trips to specialty game stores or purchasing used copies, fans and interested parties can now collect the latest editions while shopping for groceries, listen to their favorite actors and comedians weave a tale of dice and dwarves via podcasts or actual play streams, and watch movies and play video games based on the same rules that players use at home.

Although fandom around video gaming, board games, comic books, superhero films, and other nerd culture staples have garnered critical acclaim in recent years, this newfound spotlight on TRPGs as an escapist media practice has occasionally led to some contradictory coverage of the hobby that echo Jenson’s categories of the loner and the childish, hyperactive fan. One article

²⁰⁹ Joli Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa Lewis (Routledge, 1992), 11.

²¹⁰ Joseph Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 76.

by Alexis Soloski for *The New York Times*—“Escape Your Reality With Role-Playing Games”—exemplifies this dichotomy. Published as the pandemic continued to shape social interaction in early 2021, the article does relay the potential benefits of TRPG play relayed by other reports—the ability to play virtually, the connections to fantasy and sci-fi communities, and the digital tools available that can enhance a play session through music, visuals, and sound effects, among others—arguing that TRPGs are “pandemic-friendly escapism that allows your friends to escape with you.”²¹¹ However, Soloski’s article includes many popular cultural assumptions about nerd culture, such as how the hobby is “Not your nerdy teenager’s Dungeons & Dragons” and how games have moved “From the basement to Zoom,” referencing the game’s juvenile associations and the stereotype of the basement-dwelling gamer.²¹² Even though the article approaches TRPGs in a somewhat positive manner, the arguments in favor of “pandemic-friendly escapism” focuses on the entertainment value produced through role-playing as it downplays discourses of the medium’s potential to enrich the lives of its players, unable to conceive of these power fantasies as anything other than a distraction from the pandemic.

3.3 The Problem with Power Fantasy

The competing perceptions of tabletop-role playing games as either safe, albeit childish entertainment or a life-changing medium—in the sense of empowerment and in the associations with negative social behavior—echoes how TRPGs are viewed in popular culture with a

²¹¹ Alexis Soloski, “Escape Your Reality With Role-Playing Games,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2021, sec. At Home, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/06/at-home/role-playing-games-online.html>.

²¹² Soloski, “Escape Your Reality.”

reluctant acknowledgment of their capabilities while reserving a passive disdain for their players. In *Dangerous Games*, Joseph Laycock notes that “there has been a long tradition of associating the imagination with delusion.”²¹³ His account of the Satanic Panic recalls how TRPGs and other fictions were criticized for being simultaneously so realistic that they can act as a “corrupting influence” and so unimportant as to be “a waste of time and energy,” a two-pronged attack that lambasted role-playing as both too dangerous for people to play yet so meaningless as to be beneath critical discussion.²¹⁴ The very idea that role-playing as an elf for a few hours could be a good and moral activity led some early researchers (and many concerned parents and moral entrepreneurs) to assume that TRPGs “must be associated with socially unacceptable and/or stigmatized behaviors, such as criminality.”²¹⁵ Even though the genre’s pandemic-fueled boom of popularity allowed many to “escape their reality” through fictional stories shared through virtual means, those that actively play these games take pride in the power fantasy, emphasizing how playing TRPGs in lockdown gave them a sense of control, provided opportunities to create and maintain social ties, and participate in a novel experience when all other options were moot.

Academic discussions of power fantasies traditionally emphasize the person being empowered. Conceptions of the “male power fantasy” denote the positionality of a presumed heterosexual masculine audience, wherein male characters represent a “more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego” while female characters are relegated to “pin-ups and

²¹³ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 289.

²¹⁴ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 226-230.

²¹⁵ Henrich and Worthington, “Let Your Clients Fight Dragons,” 12.

striptease.”²¹⁶ In fandom studies, the literary trope of the “Mary Sue” refers both to “a popular genre of fan writing in which (typically) female authors insert themselves as primary characters into the universe of a beloved media text” and a character that is simultaneously idealized, hyper-competent, and beloved by all, a trope often criticized for overshadowing other characters for the benefit of the author’s all-powerful avatar.²¹⁷ Power fantasies are also a popular topic in the discussion of superhero comics and film, but they too tend to center on discussions of specific persons, such as how *Ms. Marvel* comics could be viewed as a “power fantasy of a young woman of color” in a medium dominated by white male gazes.²¹⁸ However, scholarly discussion about power fantasy tends to terminate here once the individual or group using fantasy to imagine power has been identified. Even game studies is lacking in discussions of power fantasies beyond this threshold. Given that games provoke additional reactionary commentary that marks them as solely designed for the gratification of the player, power fantasy as seen by game studies hones in on how games could propagate in-game and real world violence while reinforcing hegemonic depictions of masculinity and race, though Chad Habel notes that such one-to-one attributions presume “an unproblematic and simple expression of male power” that may “not always [be] successfully performed via the avatar.”²¹⁹ Yet, even unsuccessful power fantasies, as conceived of through these lenses, supplement an audience’s regular life with

²¹⁶ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 2089.

²¹⁷ Beth E. Bonnsetter and Brian L. Ott, “(Re)Writing Mary Sue: Ecriture Feminine and the Performance of Subjectivity,” *Text & Performance Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (October 2011), 342, 349.

²¹⁸ Erika Chung, “Ms. Marvel: Genre, Medium, and an Intersectional Superhero,” *Panic at the Discourse* 1, no. 2 (July 2019), 14.

²¹⁹ Soraya Murray, *On Video Games : The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*, International Library of Visual Culture ; 27 (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2018); Chad Sean Habel, “Doom Guy Comes of Age: Mediating Masculinities in Power Fantasy Video Games,” *M/C Journal* 21, no. 2 (April 25, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1383>.

“illusions that render the helplessness of one’s everyday circumstances more salient,” thus reminding the audience of their inability to act.²²⁰

If power fantasies just remind us of what we lack or elevate a specific perspective to the detriment of others, one might conclude that TRPGs must operate upon this same logic, growing in popularity among a niche group of gamers that sought to escape lockdown but, unable to do so without endangering themselves and their loved ones, imagined themselves in a collective hallucination of verdant plains and mighty foes. Players from around the world, of all different nationalities, ethnicities, and ages, claim to use role-playing games not just to imagine having control over their lives but to actively work towards exercising that control. Jessica Hammer and Meguey Baker in “Problematizing Power Fantasy” elaborate on this sense of agency, describing games as “spaces in which the player *gets to make a choice*” while granting players the ability to “control over their fate, to experience authority, and to enact power in a safe environment.”²²¹ Hammer and Baker, drawing from the work of theorist M. P. Follett, view the popular conception of power fantasy as one that perceives a player’s agency in a game as “power-over, or power in the form of dominance and control,” which often “implies escapism and meaninglessness, evoking outsize explosions and equally outsized displays of dominance” that encourage violence above all else.²²² However, power fantasy does not necessarily equate to (re)enacting systems of control or oppression. In fact, many games offer more nuanced and

²²⁰ Aaron Taylor, “Playing Peter Parker: Spider-Man and Superhero Film Performance,” In *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe*, ed. Matt Yockey. (New York: University of Texas Press, 2017), 268.

²²¹ Hammer and Baker, “Problematizing Power Fantasy.” Jessica Hammer and Meguey Baker, “Problematizing Power Fantasy,” *The Enemy*, no. 2 (May 19, 2014), 1. Original emphasis.

²²² Hammer and Baker, “Problematizing Power Fantasy,” 1.

liberatory fantasies of power that aim to provide players with a sense of agency. Hammer and Baker further Follett’s work by claiming that games “also encompass ‘power-to’ ...[which] allow players to have control over their fate, to experience authority, and to enact power in a safe environment.”²²³ This “power-to” grants players agency in a setting that allows them to practice making meaningful choices.

Although TRPGs can provide a space for power-over fantasies by granting players near unrestricted authority over the fictional worlds they create and can illustrate power-to enabled by their character’s abilities and actions within the narrative, they perhaps most accurately embody what Hammer and Baker call “power-with.”²²⁴ In most TRPGs, players must collaborate with one another, though the power between them is shared unevenly. While most of the players will create a single character to act through, the gamemaster “gets to wear many hats,” playing as the scriptwriter creating scenarios and plot threads for players to encounter, the storyteller who describes how these encounters play out in a narrative fashion, the actor who takes up the roles of any non-player characters (NPC) including monsters and ordinary citizens, and the referee who is “in charge of the game.”²²⁵ It is typically the role of the GM that can allow one to experience power-over, and there is no shortage of horror stories of player characters being held hostage by this player’s desires. Despite this danger, players are also free to walk away from the table (or on virtual tabletops, to log off) and find a different player to take on the role of GM. Thus, all players at the table must work together and share responsibility alongside the game

²²³ Hammer and Baker, “Problematizing Power Fantasy,” 1.

²²⁴ Hammer and Baker, “Problematizing Power Fantasy,” 4.

²²⁵ *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, 5th ed., Dungeons & Dragons (Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast, 2014), 4.

system, which itself is highly malleable to the wishes of the players but must be agreed upon by all of them. Power-with provides players with a power fantasy, but this fantasy is one of their collective design.

As players have also noted, these fictional worlds are also considered *meaningful* as opposed to the supposed meaninglessness of power fantasy. Even Gary Alan Fine’s examination of the then-burgeoning TRPG subculture found that through play, players can create “a social world that is...made meaningful by the significance given to it by its participants.”²²⁶ Rather than attributing the power fantasy to a specific TRPG system, players instead locate the power of fantasy within the communal narrative space—“we’ve been able to express *our* worries, *our* stresses, as well as the joy that *we’ve had all playing together*.”²²⁷ It is through this communal aspect that players could feel empowered through play, even when they felt powerless in lockdown.

3.4 Collective Fiction & Collective Action

Discussions of empowerment can border on the skeptical, viewing such acts as illusions or systems of control. In lieu of answering whether such empowerment can actually occur, I turn now to explore a variation of Mary Flanagan’s question: If power fantasy is to be empowering, “exactly *who is to be empowered?*”²²⁸ Throughout the pandemic, tabletop role-playing games provided a way for people to occupy their lives and maintain social ties. The lockdown was

²²⁶ Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, Paperback ed (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 231.

²²⁷ Hughes, “Covid-19: ‘Dungeons and Dragons Got Us through Lockdown.’” Emphasis added.

²²⁸ Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 205.

instigated by the spread of a virus, but it was not the only change in the social fabric. Issues of racial justice not only grew in political prominence but also became topics of discussion in TRPG playgroups as players and activists exercised power-with to alter the fantasies presented to be more equitable and accessible.

TRPGs have historically been made by and for a straight, white, male audience. As Aaron Trammell notes in “Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games,” because the development teams for role-playing games were so homogenous they would “develop homogeneous games and are often blind to the racial, ethnic, or gender stereotypes they reproduce in them.”²²⁹ Such depictions attracted a sympathetic audience, which created a community that could “reproduce their stereotypes and police their notions and norms of ‘normal’ identity.”²³⁰ For example, the *Dungeon Master’s Guide*—a key rulebook for the gamemaster of *Dungeons & Dragons*—is constructed with a default setting within a medieval European fantasy world by way of J.R.R. Tolkien or George R.R. Martin. Although the book does promote alternative non-medieval-European settings, they are presented in a very brief or stereotypical fashion, leaving the implementation to the GM and players to figure out how to convert all the Eurocentric systems of *D&D* to fit a wuxia or ancient Greek setting.²³¹ Stefan Huddleston also recounts how, as TRPGs were growing in early popularity, they lagged behind other “nerdy” media in their representations: “Comic books by this time featured several BIPOC

²²⁹ Aaron Trammell, “Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games,” in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, ed. José Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (Routledge, 2018), 443.

²³⁰ Trammell, “Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games,” 443.

²³¹ *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, 38-41.

characters, yet, [TRPGs] rarely incorporated people of color who were not from other media and original or converted white characters remained the norm.”²³²

Perhaps the primary way that race is interpreted in role-playing games is through character creation. Before a player does anything in a TRPG, they must make a character through which they can interact with the world. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, the first step to making a character is to “Choose a Race” from a list of options inspired by Tolkien-esque fantasy or folklore, including dwarves, elves, halflings (i.e., hobbits), gnomes, and humans. Each of these is featured alongside details that describe how each race relates to one another and range from tolerated (“It’s not wise to depend on the elves.”) to mistrust and hatred (“People tend to be suspicious of tieflings...”).²³³ Unlike race in the real world—a concept increasingly understood to be a social construct—race in role-playing games is largely used to emphasize a character’s narrative arc or to obtain a number of bonuses to one’s abilities. Antero Garcia comments that although the *Player’s Handbook* “is clear that racial strife and differences function as playful affordances” wherein race is used to provide gameplay advantages to players or to explore these dynamics through storytelling, “Understanding that strife between races exists and not having to know the fictional origins of this strife constitute a key way that race functions in the D&D system and setting.”²³⁴ Players are thus not asked to question why, for instance, a half-orc

²³² Stefan Huddleston, “When Worlds Collaborate: The Style of Early Tabletop Role-Playing Games | Analog Game Studies,” *Analog Game Studies* 10, no. 1 (December 18, 2022), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2022/12/when-worlds-collaborate-the-style-of-early-tabletop-role-playing-games/>.

²³³ *Player’s Handbook*, 19, 43

²³⁴ Antero Garcia, “Chapter 1: ‘I Piss a Lot of People off When I Play Dwarves like Dwarves’: Race, Gender, and Critical Systems in Tabletop Role-Playing Games,” *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* 123, no. 13 (April 2021), 19.

emphasizes the “orc” parent and are not also called a half-human. This emphasis on non-human characteristics when determining race in TRPGs acts as narrative shorthand that separates “real” humans from non-humans, something that Tanner Higgin points out: “Fantasy or not, a race is termed *human* with the specific and calculated intent of transplanting cultural understanding of the words *human* and *humanity* so it can be modified in the fantasy world as necessitated by the diegesis of the game while maintaining a needed intelligibility.”²³⁵ Higgin also critiques the use of a human default, adding that “humanity will only be understood within the fantasy world if it is primarily coded White.”²³⁶ While one could argue that this racial coding is often based on the setting or narrative construction and not encoded in the rules of the game, meaning that players weren’t required to implement them as presented, in Garcia’s survey, “players were enacting racism within D&D *as the game guided them*” thanks to both the mechanical bonuses or disadvantages of their choice of race and their exposure to other popular cultural examples of that fantasy race (i.e., dwarves with Scottish accents).²³⁷

These depictions of racism also extend to the cultures and peoples in our world that fictional races tend to refract. In *Curse of Strahd*, for example, the Vistani travel in *vardos*, curse ne’er-do-wells with their “evil eye,” and sell fake potions to adventurers “for as much money as they can get.”²³⁸ Many players were quick to point out how closely the Vistani resemble the real-world Roma people and how characters are directed to view them with suspicion and scorn.

²³⁵ Tanner Higgin, “Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games,” *Games and Culture* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2009), 11.

²³⁶ Higgin, “Blackless Fantasy”, 11.

²³⁷ Garcia, ““Dwarves,”” 11.

²³⁸ *Curse of Strahd* (Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast, 2016), 26-28.

Meanwhile, orcs in *D&D* and *Pathfinder* hew very closely to Tolkien’s depiction of human-but-not or as author N.K. Jemisin puts it “human beings who can be slaughtered without conscience or apology.”²³⁹ *D&D* depicts orcs as “motivated by their hatred of the civilized races of the world and their need to satisfy the demands of their deities,” who “breed prodigiously” with other races, and often “subjugated by a powerful and charismatic individual.”²⁴⁰ Orcs are also depicted as innately less intelligent than other races, receiving a -2 Intelligence modifier in exchange for increases to Strength and Constitution.²⁴¹ Meanwhile, *Pathfinder* describes orcs as “violent and aggressive, with the strongest ruling the rest through fear and brutality.”²⁴² These characterizations of orcs reflect historical and continuously-prevalent racist attitudes toward people of color, disdain for non-Christian religions, and the conspiracy theory of the “Great Replacement” wherein non-whites would overrun white majorities in the United States and Europe.²⁴³ The Vistani and orcs are far from the only examples of these sorts of depictions, as the dark-skinned drow or dark elves—frequently depicted as dark skinned and cruel—have been shifted over the years from dark brown or obsidian black skin tones to a less-realistic purple hue to further distance them from racist depictions of black and brown populations in the real world.²⁴⁴ Rather than simply creating unproblematic villains for heroes to slay, these portrayals

²³⁹ N.K. Jemisin, “From the Mailbag: The Unbearable Baggage of Orcing,” *Epiphany 2.0*, February 13, 2013, <https://nkjemisin.com/2013/02/from-the-mailbag-the-unbearable-baggage-of-orcing/>.

²⁴⁰ *Volo’s Guide to Monsters* (Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast, 2016), 82-90.

²⁴¹ *Volo’s Guide to Monsters*, 120.

²⁴² *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game: Bestiary* (Paizo Inc., 2009), 222.

²⁴³ National Immigration Forum, “The ‘Great Replacement’ Theory, Explained,” December 1, 2021, <https://immigrationforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Replacement-Theory-Explainer-1122.pdf>.

²⁴⁴ Cecilia D’Anastasio, “D&D Must Grapple With the Racism in Fantasy,” *Wired*, January 24, 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/dandd-must-grapple-with-the-racism-in-fantasy/>.

replicate hurtful rhetoric about marginalized communities within these fictional worlds and at the tables of their players by positioning entire groups of people as irredeemable or inherently evil.

While discussions concerning race in TRPGs have carried on for decades, these conversations gained traction during the pandemic following the death of George Floyd by police. On May 28, 2020, Black Lives Matter protesters and allies “took to the streets in cities across Latin America, Europe, Australia and Canada to demonstrate against racial injustice” while wearing masks and distributing supplies to those in need.²⁴⁵ This call for racial justice also resounded in the TRPG community, such as how Green Ronin Publishing, producer of *Mutants & Masterminds* and license tie-ins for *Dragon Age* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*, called for “Justice for all” while encouraging players to “tell stories about the fight for justice and heroism in the face of oppression.”²⁴⁶ In addition, Multiple fundraisers allowed those who wanted to support the movement but were unable to due health concerns or restricted budgets a way to affordably access TRPG materials while benefiting Black Lives Matter, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the National Police Accountability Project.²⁴⁷

Amid these larger calls for racial justice, players also sought to change the rules and lore of *Dungeons & Dragons* to allow for a less bio-determinist depiction of race. Wizards of the Coast responded with a statement detailing how these depictions would be altered to better

²⁴⁵ Laurin-Whitney Gottbrath, “In 2020, the Black Lives Matter Movement Shook the World,” Aljazeera, December 31, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/12/31/2020-the-year-black-lives-matter-shook-the-world>.

²⁴⁶ Chris Pramas, “Justice for All. Black Lives Matter.,” *Green Ronin Publishing* (blog), June 11, 2020, <https://greenronin.com/blog/2020/06/11/justice-for-all-black-lives-matter/>.

²⁴⁷ Matt Jarvis, “DriveThruRPG Black Lives Matter Bundles Include Cyberpunk, Zweihander, Spire and Dozens of RPGs for \$10,” Dicebreaker, June 12, 2020, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/companies/drivethrurpg/deal/drivethrurpg-black-lives-matter-bundles>.

reflect its players. Though they note that one of their goals with the Fifth Edition of *D&D* was “to depict humanity in all its beautiful diversity by depicting characters who represent an array of ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and beliefs,” they acknowledge that “some of the peoples in the game...have been characterized as monstrous and evil, using descriptions that are painfully reminiscent of how real-world ethnic groups have been and continue to be denigrated.”²⁴⁸ To rectify this, Wizards of the Coast pledged, among other things, to depict orcs and drow “as morally and culturally complex as other peoples,” to change the ways the Vistani are depicted in *Curse of Strahd* while “working with a Romani consultant,” and to offer “a way for a player to customize their character’s origin, including the option to change the ability score increases” associated with one’s race.²⁴⁹ These changes came in the form of a new sourcebook—*Tasha’s Cauldron of Everything*—and a reprint of the *Curse of Strahd* adventure with a number of changes to not only the Vistani but to other problematic depictions.

However, these changes were haphazard at best. Even though the *Curse of Strahd Revamped* re-release did remove some of the more glaring comparisons, “the Vistani remain much as they were—a thinly veiled Romani stereotype.”²⁵⁰ The *Tasha’s* sourcebook gives players the *option* to change how their character’s stats are distributed, but as the option is within a sourcebook sold separately from the *Player’s Handbook* and *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, players could miss its inclusion or ignore it entirely. Game designer and critic Graeme Barber further

²⁴⁸ Wizards of the Coast, “Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons,” *D&D Official | Dungeons & Dragons* (blog), June 17, 2020, <https://dnd.wizards.com/news/diversity-and-dnd>.

²⁴⁹ Wizards of the Coast, “Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons.”

²⁵⁰ Matthew Gault, “Dungeons & Dragons’ Racial Reckoning is Long Overdue,” *Wired*, December 31, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/dungeons-dragons-diversity/>.

highlights how the “optional” aspect of this rule change makes it difficult to integrate into the Adventurers League, Wizards of the Coasts’ efforts to provide structured play at local game stores with pre-written adventures and limited customization options, adding, “If it wasn’t a full shift,...it was just a pointless exercise of literal virtue signaling.”²⁵¹ Wizards of the Coast’s pledge has been made all the more hollow with the release of the *Astral Adventurer’s Guide* for the Spelljammer setting, which includes a playable race of formally enslaved monkey people (the Hadozee) shown in poses reminiscent of minstrelsy. Though the company has since retracted the Hadozee from online copies of the sourcebook and won’t reprint the offending portion, the fact that it was published at all contradicts Wizards of the Coast’s stated goals. Even with the news that the upcoming *One D&D* version promises to change the terminology from race to “species,” *Dungeons & Dragons* seemingly cannot imagine a fantasy world without genetic determinism, let alone one that does so with a nuanced understanding of how race is performed and constructed.²⁵²

The discourse around *D&D*’s attempts to alter or limit the racialized aspect of the game calls attention to conflicting attitudes towards how race should be depicted in TTRPGs. The original switch to racial difference as an option points towards accommodating fans that are content with modding the rules of the game to fit their table’s needs but otherwise letting the rules remain as written for the majority (White) players, while the pivot to using the word

²⁵¹ Graeme Barber, “Tasha’s Cauldron of No Change,” *POCGamer* (blog), November 20, 2020, <https://pocgamer.com/archives/1276>.

²⁵² J. R. Zambrano, “D&D: New Racial Ability Score Rules Revealed In Online Guide,” *Bell of Lost Souls* (blog), September 16, 2020, <https://www.belloflostsouls.net/2020/09/dd-new-racial-ability-score-rules-revealed-in-online-guide.html>; Owen S. Good, “D&D Rule Change Replaces ‘Race’ with ‘Species,’” *Polygon* (blog), December 1, 2022, <https://www.polygon.com/23488097/dungeons-dragons-race-species-rule-change-announcement-wotc-uneearthed-arcana>.

“species” in lieu of race could allow for a distancing from historical representations of race yet, per Higgin, still centers (White) humans as a default upon which to build Others.²⁵³ Players have presented numerous additions, alternatives, and creative rationale for how race should be depicted in TRPGs, and they may be enough for their specific playgroup’s needs. Yet, no amount of narrative rewriting or mechanical tweaks can change the fact that players can experience racial discrimination or privilege in the real world.

3.5 Conclusion

These reactions from designers and players of tabletop role playing games to the Black Lives Matter protests in the COVID pandemic makes clear that although discussions of racial justice did spur some players and games to change how they describe and use race in their games, little evidence supports the idea that these changes impacted wider discussions on police brutality, racial discrimination, and other notable causes spurred by the BLM movement’s protests in 2020. Yet, players reported that TRPGs helped them to overcome social isolation and other ills brought on by lockdown measures. Because the actual measurable effects of these actions are either too difficult or too limited to surmise, it is possible to view the efforts of the TRPG community as a form of slacktivism, a moniker granted to “low-risk, low-cost activity via social media whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity.”²⁵⁴ Often, slacktivism refers to scenarios where participants are

²⁵³ Higgin, “Blackless Fantasy,” 11.

²⁵⁴ Dana Rotman et al., “From Slacktivism to Activism: Participatory Culture in the Age of Social Media,” in *CHI '11 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, CHI EA '11 (New York, NY, USA: Association for Computing Machinery, 2011), 821.

only asked to engage with an issue in minute fashion, such as by purchasing a charity bundle of role playing games or sharing posts online to advertise a particular movement. As a result, Slacktivism can be considered a form of power fantasy, evoking feelings of empowerment for a very small cost.

One notable example of slacktivism during the pandemic can be seen in the #BlackoutTuesday trend on Instagram early June 2020. While initially started by members of the music industry as #TheShowMustBePaused, #BlackoutTuesday encouraged users to “black out” social media by reposting an image or video of a black square, representing a moment of visual silence in honor of George Floyd.²⁵⁵ However, some activists decried #BlackoutTuesday for flooding social media in a sea of black squares rather than sharing information about racial justice.²⁵⁶ People posting these black squares with #BLM or #BlackLivesMatter made it difficult for organizers to organize protests and raise funds, raising questions on the validity of the movement and its usefulness.²⁵⁷ #BlackoutTuesday allowed posters to engage in the appearance of activism by participating without “the use of a direct, proactive, and often confrontational action towards societal change” that typically accompanies activist movements, making it more difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of the event.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁵ André Wheeler, “#TheShowMustBePaused: Music Industry Plans Day of Silence for George Floyd,” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2020, sec. Music, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jun/01/george-floyd-music-industry-theshowmustbepaused>.

²⁵⁶ Lanre Bakare and Caroline Davies, “Blackout Tuesday: Black Squares Dominate Social Media and Spark Debate,” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2020, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/02/blackout-tuesday-dominates-social-media-millions-show-solidarity-george-floyd>.

²⁵⁷ “Using #BLM with Blackout Tuesday Posts Could Hide Important Information,” NBC News, June 2, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/pop-culture-news/celebrities-warn-using-blm-blackout-tuesday-posts-could-hide-important-n1222106>.

²⁵⁸ Rotman et al, “From Slacktivism to Activism,” 821.

Through the example of #BlackoutTuesday, the push for racial parity in TRPG spaces can appear to be another instance of slacktivism. Rather than actively pushing for protests, joining activist groups, or partaking in any other form of direct action, the discourse largely centers on how racial minorities are depicted within the narratives of their respective games—such as the Orcs or Drow in *D&D*—and how real-world racial coding can be reflected by the TRPG’s mechanics (e.g., racial bonuses). While some publishers and players participated or contributed to fundraisers to support Black Lives Matter and other racial justice activists—itch.io’s “Bundle for Racial Justice and Equality,” which included hundreds of TRPGs, raised over \$8 million for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and the Community Bail Fund—this did not appear to translate into larger protests or more successful campaigns to any noticeable degree.²⁵⁹ One might even call this discourse a distraction as emphasizing the potential representation in abstract fantasy worlds belies the noticeable gap in representation for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities in film, television, and other cultural industries. Instead of directly helping marginalized creators within the community, TRPG players and designers seem inclined to improve the lives of fictional characters, an act of slacktivism that ignored lived realities for a superficially cleaner power fantasy.

Yet, it is important to remember that these protests, social media movements, and discussions were all occurring within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many would-be activists sought ways to contribute to causes they cared about in a way that would not endanger

²⁵⁹ “Bundle for Racial Justice and Equality by Itch.Io and 1391 Others,” itch.io, accessed August 3, 2023, <https://itch.io/b/520/bundle-for-racial-justice-and-equality>.

their own health or the wellbeing of their loved ones. As social media was and remains an accessible and readily available outlet, joining supposed slacktivist movements like #BlackoutTuesday became a way for people to participate while being watchful of their health, their safety, and their communities. Social media also collapses space, allowing for rural populations or those whose protesting might put them in harm's way to join in solidarity with large in-person events. In addition, movements like #BlackoutTuesday—as in, those started by cultural industry insiders and producers—differ from grassroots movements, as while both can “allow for amplification and momentum” in public consciousness, they “have unequal, asymmetrical relationships with government, media, and other institutions” that can grant certain movements legitimacy while others are discarded as fantastical or slacktivist.²⁶⁰

Instead of viewing the discourse of the TRPG community concerning how important play was to their lives during the pandemic and the debates over depictions of race as irrelevant or limited to only that community, we can read them as indicative of a desire by players to change the narratives around the relationship between escapist media and reality, especially when lived reality was marked by the ever-present reminder that human action can, and will, ripple to affect the world. This desire to change the story of what power fantasies can be and what they mean connects to Dill-Shackleford and Vinney's exploration of how fictional narratives can influence “the stories we tell about ourselves,” which “connects our past to our current self and our current self to our imagined future self”.²⁶¹ Likewise, Stephen Duncombe notes that lofty aspirations

²⁶⁰ Monica L. Ponder et al., “Does Online Activism Impact Offline Impact?: A Cultural Examination of Slacktivism, ‘Popcorn Activism,’ Power, and Fragility,” in *Strategic Social Media as Activism* (Routledge, 2023), 259.

²⁶¹ Karen Dill-Shackleford and Cynthia Vinney, *Finding Truth in Fiction: What Fan Culture Gets Right - and Why It's Good to Get Lost in a Story* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 173.

depicted in fantasy—such as worlds without racial disparity or simply one where COVID-19 is managed in a controlled and humane manner—can become an ephemeral focal point around which to build identity, community, and solidarity,” providing “inspiration and direction” to their dreamers.²⁶² This too can connect back to Hammer and Baker’s concept of power-to, as even the smallest of attempts to make a change can reflect one’s desire “to have control over their fate, to experience authority, and to enact power...”²⁶³ Gaining a bit more control over how one presents themselves in their favorite game may not be as awe-inspiring as a march down Main Street, but it can nevertheless inspire awe in a player who felt incapable of seeing themselves there.

Escapist media like TRPGs can be viewed as inspirational, but they can also be used to *orient* those who use them. This concept of orientations, as Sara Ahmed notes, “shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward.”²⁶⁴ As one aligns themselves with a particular object (for Ahmed, a writing desk; for a TRPG player, their character), we can become familiar with it to the point where the body “feels a certain way” with or around it, such as how one can become saddened by a character’s loss or ecstatic when their favorite twenty-sided die rolls a 20.²⁶⁵ A player orienting themselves around TRPGs could explain how they would later find hope or better themselves and their communities through those same games. Others have pointed to research that indicates that role-playing games can enkindle creativity and empathy, help players

²⁶² Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 169.

²⁶³ Hammer and Baker, “Problematizing Power Fantasy,” 1.

²⁶⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

²⁶⁵ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 57.

create and sustain relationships, and help players deal with difficult issues they may not normally feel comfortable sharing.²⁶⁶ Similarly, queer folx have reveled in the openness of *D&D*'s character creation and role-play, trying out pronouns and appearances in a space that allows for experimentation.²⁶⁷

If what players bring into their orbits “orients the body in some ways rather than others,” bringing certain actions and beliefs within reach will necessarily cause friction with others or orient one closer to other beliefs.²⁶⁸ This could be something as harmless as believing, however faintly, in superstitions about lucky and unlucky dice to as harmful as reproducing racist stereotypes. This is not to say that someone playing as a terrible person will become terrible, as gamemasters regularly oscillate between playing “good” and “evil” characters within a single session, but it can lead to players who have aligned their conception of playing TRPGs in a certain way may find it difficult to shake out of routines and habits. Those who want to create characters that look and act more like their ideal selves can regularly find themselves the odd one out at the table for going against the grain, as one player describes: “There was always pressure from the outside for me to make my characters conform to narrow boxes.”²⁶⁹ This also applies to gameplay choices like ensuring a character has plenty of hit points to narrative conventions like adhering *D&D*'s construction of race relations. Ahmed's concept of orientation applies here, too.

²⁶⁶ Henrich and Worthington, “Let Your Clients Fight Dragons,” 1-19.

²⁶⁷ Alex Viney, “Playing Only Trans Characters in Tabletop RPGs Helped Me Understand Myself,” *Dicebreaker*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/categories/roleplaying-game/opinion/trans-characters-tabletop-rpgs-help-understand-myself>; Linda H. Codega, “The Power of Queer Play in Dungeons & Dragons,” *Tor.com*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.tor.com/2020/02/03/the-power-of-queer-play-in-dungeons-dragons/>.

²⁶⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 57.

²⁶⁹ Cecilia D'Anastasio, “D&D Must Grapple With the Racism in Fantasy.”

Like a well-trodden path, a person's orientation causes some things to "become reachable and others [to] remain or even become out of reach."²⁷⁰ If someone is accustomed to only playing TRPGs that use race in a superficial manner but do not deal with racism in their own lives, they may not ever grasp the concept that the Hadozee are racial caricatures or may even actively refute the assertion.

This difficulty to imagine possibilities outside one's reach speaks to what adrienne maree brown calls an "imagination battle."²⁷¹ Far from considering the imagination pure fiction, brown notes that imaginations shape the world and that escapist media like science fiction "is simply a way to practice the future together."²⁷² Notably, brown calls for "Collaborative Ideation," or "to collaborate on the process of dreaming and visioning and implementing that world" in our lifetimes.²⁷³ Escapist media like TRPGs can allow for this style of creative thought, especially when it invites participants to work toward "Imagining a world that is *possible*" regardless of the logistics or realism.²⁷⁴ This is not to say that every world imagined in a TRPG or every instance of escapist media will completely shatter harmful worldviews, but by continuously exploring new concepts (even if they are only new to some), one can experience many possible futures, some of which may offer ways to live better. Building on the work of the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, José Esteban Muñoz remarks that by allowing for a concrete

²⁷⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 14.

²⁷¹ adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico: AK Press, 2017), 18.

²⁷² brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 19.

²⁷³ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 158.

²⁷⁴ Amanda Leduc, *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space*, First edition, Exploded Views (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2020), 38. Original emphasis.

imagination of utopia—utopia as an evermoving destination one can strive towards, a horizon—we can create “a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*.”²⁷⁵ In other words, the imagination can provide escape *routes* rather than the escape itself; whereas most discussions of escapist media view the experience as “losing yourself,” escapism can also allow for those who are already lost to instead find themselves. Trans artist Felix Kawitzky sees TRPGs as one possible method of practicing utopia, noting that they can operate as capable tools for expanding players’ imaginations through play, adding:

“TRPGs offer up a space where no revolutionary project is too bold – one that can playfully and ambitiously provide resistance to, relief from and insight into, real-world dominant, oppressive socio-political institutions. ...It is by virtue of this playfulness – by virtue of the ways in which it allows an interfacing between reality and potentiality – that these utopian seeds of hope may begin to grow.”²⁷⁶

While it remains unclear what effects the discourses around TRPGs during COVID will have on the hobby going forward, this counter-discourse of escapist media and power fantasy could shift public perception away from the belief that these practices are harmful or isolated purely within the realm of the imagination, embolden creatives to use TRPGs as tools for establishing a praxis of community building, and create worlds that players want to make real.

Tabletop role-playing games can be used to not only allow players to explore fantastical worlds but also to engage in power fantasy without discrimination or re-encoding harmful cultural tropes, to create worlds that are not solely reflections of our own but windows of what the world could be, and to foster a kind of agency that can be brought into our world in order to

²⁷⁵ José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th Anniversary (NYU Press, 2019), 35. Original emphasis.

²⁷⁶ Felix Rose Kawitzky, “Magic Circles: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as Queer Utopian Method,” *Performance Research* 25, no. 8 (November 16, 2020), 132.

make that future vision possible. The medium's burst of popularity during the pandemic can be read as a desire by many disenfranchised lockdowners to obtain a sense of community, control, and continuity during a period of extended stay-at-home orders, social distancing, and uncertainty. While it remains to be seen if the pandemic boom will carry into a post-pandemic (or, rather, COVID endemic) world, the continued efforts of unions and racial justice movements within TRPG spaces and other industries indicates that people desire to be empowered, both in their waking lives and their fantasy adventures. Yet, some might worry that those who believe in fantasies may cause more harm than good. What happens when those who believe in theories want them to become real and when fiction becomes difficult to distinguish from fact?

CHAPTER 4

THE BOUNDARIES OF UNREALITY:

UNFICTION, CONSPIRACY THEORIES, AND FICTION AS ESCAPE

4.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how many people turned to cute, outlandish, and creative depictions of the world through various methods of escapism such as television, digital games, and tabletop role-playing. As we explored in the previous chapters, audiences communicated their experiences with the initial onset of the 2020 lockdowns through animal media, utilizing *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*' furry neighbors and *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem, and Madness*' animal-printed cast to relay their anxieties and find community while physically isolated. Likewise, tabletop role-playing communities sought solace and empowerment within their play groups and their games as the pandemic highlighted racial and social disparities in both daily life and in the construction of fantasy worlds. While media attention to these disparate groups made note of the fictionalized nature of their objects of conversation, discussions of escapism during the pandemic centered largely on the overwhelming rise in conspiracy theories about the coronavirus, rumors about how the socio-political landscape was being (re)shaped by public policies aimed at combatting the spread of COVID-19, and fantastical speculations of what the post-pandemic world order would be like.

These discourses often treated conspiracy theorists as uneducated or ill-informed outliers, yet conspiracy theories surged into public conversation as rational dialogue seemed unable to contain these ideas or to comprehend how they came to swiftly dominate political arenas and personal lives. These theories at times spread and mutated faster than the coronavirus itself,

leaping from accusations that the virus’s symptoms were caused by 5G cell towers to bizarre claims that vaccinated people could “shed” and “infect” the unvaccinated.²⁷⁷ The conspiratorially minded would eventually push against various government-led initiatives like vaccine drives or drive-through voting, all while these conspiracies looped into one another under the banner of QAnon—an *ur*-conspiracy that seemed to connect every possible theory, secret society, and allegedly top-secret government plot together as the scheme of liberal politicians who feed on the supposed life-restoring hormone adrenochrome harvested from children. Despite how often and how easily QAnon’s accusations have been debunked, adherents claiming that the coronavirus could be treated with ivermectin, a horse dewormer, provoked a shortage of the drug, and QAnon would eventually be a driving force for many of the insurrectionists who stormed the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021, a hodge-podge of anti-government militia groups, white supremacists, MAGA Republicans, military veterans, businesspeople, grifters, and urbanites who responded to then-President Donald Trump’s calls to “fight like hell” in the most direct manner possible.²⁷⁸ Although the attempted coup failed, it brought renewed attention to the prevalence of conspiracy theories and the supposed ineptitude of the conspiratorially minded. The rising popularity of conspiracy theories—both in a staunchly American sense and in a global capacity—highlights what has often been referred to as the “post-truth era,” a period marked by a

²⁷⁷ Tom Warren, “British 5G Towers Are Being Set on Fire Because of Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories,” *The Verge*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/4/21207927/5g-towers-burning-uk-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-link>; “No, COVID-19 Vaccines Do Not ‘Shed,’” *AP News*, April 29, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/fact-checking-422789651769>.

²⁷⁸ Olivia Rubin, Lucien Bruggeman, and Will Steakin, “QAnon Emerges as Recurring Theme of Criminal Cases Tied to US Capitol Siege,” *ABC News*, January 19, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/qanon-emerges-recurring-theme-criminal-cases-tied-us/story?id=75347445>; Aymann Ismail, “We Know Exactly Who the Capitol Rioters Were,” *Slate*, January 4, 2022, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/01/january-6-capitol-riot-arrests-research-profile.html>; Charlie Savage, “Incitement to Riot? What Trump Told Supporters Before Mob Stormed Capitol,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/10/us/trump-speech-riot.html>.

decline in social trust in institutions of power and by a lack of consensus in what seem to be basic tenets of reality. Politicians lie, and scientists can make mistakes, certainly; but what happens when people can no longer hold calm, rational debate on topics like city planning because one participant believes that a push for more walkable communities was the justification for a secret “direct-energy weapon” to be fired at the city of Lahaina “to rebuild it with the 15-minute city concept”?²⁷⁹ How can we talk about the problems facing our homes, our neighborhoods, our cities, and our countries when we cannot agree on what is true?

This discussion of “truth” and “post-truth,” however, elides a core fact of our human existence. What counts as true has historically remained the purview of those in positions of power and ability. A consensus of reality is built from facts, which are negotiated by communities, people, and ideologies. Yet these facts may not be about “real” things. If someone reads a fiction novel that completely alters their perspective of what it means to be a kind, compassionate person, we cannot say that the book—though scientifically, verifiably untrue, and false—does not have a *real* impact upon the world. On the opposite end, conspiracy theories can in fact be true and reveal how certain groups of people have sought to gain power and keep secrets, as proven by the Church of Scientology’s Operation Snow White and the Watergate scandal, yet can be dismissed as fanciful or wishful thinking. If conspiracy theories are only valid if they turn out to be true, then the entire enterprise of speculation and hypothecation is at risk for their lack of pre-established evidence.

²⁷⁹ Rachel Baig, “Fact Check: Maui Fires Caused by Directed Energy Weapons?,” Deutsche Welle, August 17, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-no-maui-wildfires-were-not-caused-by-directed-energy-weapons/a-66556025>.

In this chapter, I argue that through the examination of conspiracy theories we can explore how we culturally define what is true and untrue and how belief is negotiated as a process of truth and worldmaking. Just as science is used as a process of discerning truth, conspiracy theorists use evidence and expertise to prove their beliefs and question the world around them, even if the substance of their claims is suspect. To highlight how conspiracists create belief and engage with fantasy, I draw parallels to a style of storytelling that similarly engages these questions around veracity and belief: unfiction. Building on the immersive promise of ARGs, unfiction encapsulates a practice of storytelling and audience reception that relies upon a central premise: this is (not) a story. Practitioners of unfiction use the phrase to distinguish how their works can, and occasionally do, pass as legitimate to unsuspecting readers by utilizing everyday language, aesthetics, and technologies to blur the line between reality and fantasy. This structure allows for participants to engage with these fictions as if they were just another part of an ever-estranged reality, yet they can easily be mistaken for genuine articles by those who are unaware the narratives they are encountering are an escapist practice, a boundary problem that captures the perils of a “post-truth” era. By approaching conspiracy theories and unfiction as sites where we work out what counts as fiction and what counts as fact, as both require us to engage with what is fiction and fact, we can explore how we come to believe that fantasy can shape how we interpret reality and how we define and distinguish what counts as reality from fiction.

4.2 Fact of Fiction

Warnings concerning the spread of misinformation (accidentally incorrect or inaccurate) and disinformation (willfully misleading or fabricated) influence our everyday discussions,

online interactions, and even our research efforts. Over the course of the COVID pandemic, experts such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have warned of a similarly disastrous “infodemic” that could “negatively impact people’s mental health and increase vaccine hesitancy, and can delay the provision of health care.”²⁸⁰ Unfortunately, such warnings were not only unheeded but often lambasted as disinformation itself by a variety of political pundits appealing to an anti-authority base, purveyors of bogus health supplements, and conspiracy theorists who rationalized that government agencies were burying important information on the dangers of COVID vaccinations. These groups instead pointed eyes and ears toward *Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19*, a 26-minute-long video by filmmaker Mikki Willis documenting his interview with discredited researcher Judy Mikovits. Released onto various social media sites on May 4, 2020, the film increased public ire towards Dr. Anthony Fauci, the then-director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and one of the lead members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, as the documentary claims that Fauci played a role in the creation of COVID-19 and that “wearing the mask literally activates your own virus.”²⁸¹ While the true scope of the documentary’s popularity will never be known as it has been deleted, re-uploaded, and rehosted on various websites since its release, *Plandemic* was, within a week of its release,

²⁸⁰ “Infodemics and Misinformation Negatively Affect People’s Health Behaviours, New WHO Review Finds,” accessed October 23, 2023, <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/01-09-2022-infodemics-and-misinformation-negatively-affect-people-s-health-behaviours--new-who-review-finds>.

²⁸¹ Shahin Nazar and Toine Pieters, “Plandemic Revisited: A Product of Planned Disinformation Amplifying the COVID-19 ‘Infodemic,’” *Frontiers in Public Health* 9 (2021), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2021.649930>; Martin Enserink and Jon Cohen, “Fact-Checking Judy Mikovits, the Controversial Virologist Attacking Anthony Fauci in a Viral Conspiracy Video,” *Science*, May 8, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abc7103>; Judy Mikovits, qt. in We Are Iowa Local 5 News, *VERIFY: The “Plandemic” Documentary Being Shared on Social Media Is Full of Misinformation*, YouTube video, 2:05, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjnLkhyi4KE>.

“viewed more than eight million times on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram,” assisted in its spread by various groups such as QAnon believers, doctors, anti-lockdown activists, politicians, celebrities, and others just looking for information on COVID-19.²⁸² In response, more calls have been made to combat mis/disinformation, though the methods recommended have largely centered on “traditional methods of risk communication and community engagement.”²⁸³

At the same time as these calls for community building and for finding ways to discuss the benefits and risks of vaccination in an accurate manner, others have turned to criticizing or even attacking the very demographic these programs are supposed to help. For example, NPR likened these beliefs to the “Satanic Panic” of the 1980s, with one person interviewed collapsing the entirety of both the prior hysteria over the supposed satanic ritual abuse of children and the current arguments over whether Democratic politicians are harvesting adrenochrome from children as “social contagion, and it’s that simple.”²⁸⁴ Meanwhile, reports on studies of conspiratorial beliefs frame the believers as deficient in some way such as having “less developed critical thinking abilities.”²⁸⁵ Paul A. Kottman goes on to write that “such people are

²⁸² Sheera Frenkel, Ben Decker, and Davey Alba, “How the ‘Plandemic’ Movie and Its Falsehoods Spread Widely Online,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 2020, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/technology/plandemic-movie-youtube-facebook-coronavirus.html>.

²⁸³ Md Saiful Islam et al., “COVID-19 Vaccine Rumors and Conspiracy Theories: The Need for Cognitive Inoculation against Misinformation to Improve Vaccine Adherence,” *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 5 (May 12, 2021): e0251605, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0251605>.

²⁸⁴ Noah Caldwell et al., “America’s Satanic Panic Returns — This Time Through QAnon,” *NPR*, May 18, 2021, sec. National, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/18/997559036/americas-satanic-panic-returns-this-time-through-qanon>.

²⁸⁵ Eric W. Dolan, “New Study Indicates Conspiracy Theory Believers Have Less Developed Critical Thinking Abilities,” *PsyPost*, July 3, 2021, <https://www.psypost.org/2021/07/new-study-indicates-conspiracy-theory-believers-have-less-developed-critical-thinking-ability-61347>.

seen to be susceptible to propaganda (‘gullible’), scientifically illiterate, or undereducated (‘low information’ or ‘too much wrong information’): either that, or such people are said to be stuck in a rut of distrust or radical skepticism vis-à-vis relevant expert authorities...”²⁸⁶ Not only are conspiracies the supposed result of distrust and media illiteracy, but research frequently notes that belief in one conspiracy often denotes beliefs in other, similarly outlandish conspiracies, even if they contradict one another.²⁸⁷

Yet *Plandemic* is far from the only instance of anti-COVID discussions questioning the directives and motives of major health organizations, governments, and pharmaceutical companies. As hospitals, healthcare workers, and those suffering at home scrambled to find any medicine that could help ease COVID symptoms, some turned to ivermectin, an inexpensive anti-parasite drug often used with livestock and, occasionally, humans. While some initial research in 2020 found that ivermectin could, in exceptionally large dosages, produce “antiviral action against the SARS-CoV-2 clinical isolate *in vitro*,” the actual usage of the drug and its benefits were still unproven and had not yet been replicated by other scientists.²⁸⁸ For many, this was all the evidence that was needed, as prescriptions for ivermectin exceeded supply to such a degree that even variants explicitly developed for horses were being sold and consumed.²⁸⁹ As

²⁸⁶ Paul A. Kottman, “Dark Times, Again: The Limits of Weber’s Vocation Lectures, a Century Later: Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures, Max Weber,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 89, no. 2 (June 2022): 339–50, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2022.0023>.

²⁸⁷ Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas, “Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Basic Principles of an Emerging Research Domain,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 7 (December 2018): 897–908, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2530>.

²⁸⁸ Leon Caly et al., “The FDA-Approved Drug Ivermectin Inhibits the Replication of SARS-CoV-2 in Vitro,” *Antiviral Research* 178 (June 1, 2020): 104787, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.antiviral.2020.104787>.

²⁸⁹ Bryan Pietsch, “Horse Owners Can’t Find Ivermectin as Americans Flock to Unproven Coronavirus Cure,” *Washington Post*, September 19, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/09/19/ivermectin-horse-dewormer-owners-covid/>.

the Food and Drug Administration sternly warned that “You are not a horse. You are not a cow. Seriously, y’all. Stop it.,” reports of people suffering from and dying from ivermectin toxicity grew rapidly.²⁹⁰

As the FDA’s “You are not a horse” comment indicates, many looked to these cases of crisis and laughed at their absurdity. Late night talk show host Jimmy Kimmel, in response to news that hospitals were facing difficulties in assigning intensive care units for all their patients, quipped to thunderous applause, “That choice doesn’t seem so tough to me. Vaccinated person having a heart attack? Yes, come right in. We’ll take care of you. Unvaccinated guy who gobbled horse goo? Rest in peace, wheezy.”²⁹¹ In another instance, Dr. Sherri Tenpenny of Cleveland, OH, testified at an Ohio legislature committee that the COVID-19 vaccines were making people magnetic: “They can put a key on their forehead, it sticks. They can put spoons and forks all over them and they can stick because now we think that there’s ...an interface between what’s being injected in these shots and all of the 5G towers.”²⁹² As MSNBC’s Brian Williams remarked on the ludicrousness of the Dr. Tenpenny’s and other conspiracy theorists’ assertion of vaccine-caused magnetism by pointing towards how misinformation can cause harm, comments YouTube wasted no time in ridiculing her, joking that “She must get REALLY distressed when someone does the “got your nose!” Trick on her!”, “Sometimes I wonder how the human race has survived so long”, and more than one reposting of comedian George Carlin’s

²⁹⁰ “U.S. FDA: ‘You Are Not a Horse. You Are Not a Cow. Seriously, y’all. Stop It.’” Twitter, August 21, 2021, https://twitter.com/US_FDA/status/1429050070243192839.

²⁹¹ Jimmy Kimmel Live, *Jimmy Kimmel Is BACK and Very Much ALIVE*, YouTube Video, 2:50, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Sk4mAPS3zQ>.

²⁹² Dr. Sherri Tenpenny, qt. in MSNBC, *Conspiracy Theorists Think Covid Vaccine Makes You Magnetic*, YouTube video, 00:40, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWIOYiSmTKs>.

adage, “Think of how stupid the average person is, and realize half of them are stupider than that.”²⁹³ This popular framing of the conspiracy theorist as an uneducated loon continues a long-running trend in discussions of how to be a proper citizen, that believing in the fantastical is an anti-intellectual pursuit and is thus antithetical to the prospect of a well-informed public.

However, the concept of a well-informed public is itself fantastical. Political scientist Benedict Anderson’s theory of the imagined community notes that the concept of a “nation” is based on the ability of someone to conceive of themselves as a member of that group and have “complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity;” just as how one American “will never meet, or even know the names of the handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow-Americans,” so too will it be impossible for every single one of those citizens to possibly comprehend every single issue affecting their individual and collective selves, even as many will rally to the banners of Republican, Democrat, and QAnon when called.²⁹⁴ Likewise, according to philosopher Jürgen Habermas the idea of the “public sphere” as a contiguous, stable, and presumably well-educated mass is based on one’s ability to produce “property and education,” typically to the exclusion of those who did not meet bourgeois standards and ideology.²⁹⁵ This could explain why the emphasis is on debunking conspiracy theories—proving one’s own education over another’s lack thereof—which assumes that people desire rationality and exclusively use accurate logic and verifiable deduction to discuss the world around them in the

²⁹³ @fredsmith4106, @uncle592, and @mikeletterst9882, 2021, Comments on qt. in MSNBC, *Conspiracy Theorists Think Covid Vaccine Makes You Magnetic*.

²⁹⁴ Benedict Anderson, “Cultural Roots,” in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised (Verso, 2006): 26.

²⁹⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (MIT Press, 1991), 87.

first place. As the argument goes, if someone is misinformed about a subject, then they will correct their behavior or beliefs when presented with enough evidence to the contrary. This faith runs counter to the ways people make decisions and experience the world. In an analysis of how citizens learn about and use various government service channels like websites and phone numbers to request assistance or relay information, Ebbers, Jansen, Pieterse, and van de Wijngaert note how “demographics and personal characteristics, situational constraints, experiences, the nature of the interaction, values that citizens place on public service, the overall satisfaction that citizens place on the service that they receive from their government, trust, and emotions” as well as a citizen’s general habits all affect how they choose to interact.²⁹⁶ The complexity of everyday living makes it difficult to choose the most rational course of action at all times. If someone believes that it would be faster (and, especially in the US, significantly cheaper) to take an injured person to the hospital via their personal car than calling an ambulance, the severity of the injury and the heightened emotional and affective moment will alter what one opts to do. Someone who believes their government does not have their best interest at heart will also change how they interact with the world based on that belief, even if it is not based on rational dialogue.

This divide between the ideal of a well-informed public sphere and who is allowed to be a part of that public sphere embodies what philosopher Jacques Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible,” the construction of an order of things that allows for certain forms of discourse

²⁹⁶ Wolfgang E. Ebbers et al., “Facts and Feelings: The Role of Rational and Irrational Factors in Citizens’ Channel Choices,” *Government Information Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (July 2016): 506-507.

and debate within certain conversational modes and practices.²⁹⁷ From a rationalist perspective, conspiracy theorists, politicians, and my mother are not considered credible sources of health advice as they lack training, certifications, and socio-political credibility, but another could just as easily view generational wisdom, lived experience, and first-hand knowledge as more valuable than studying theoretical models and earning diplomas. This is doubly true of marginalized communities, who are regularly disregarded by institutions of power and who suffered immensely during the pandemic as they operated as essential service workers whose jobs “often do not provide livable wages or adequate personal protective equipment.”²⁹⁸ In short, who gets to be viewed as a sensible, reliable source is tied up in larger political discourses and socio-economic barriers, and who gets to exist in the “public sphere” depends on a number of factors such as gender, wealth, cultural capital, and political favorability.

A “well-informed public” may thus exist as an abstract goal to be achieved, but being well-informed is still not a guarantee that the most accurate, efficient, or effective choice will be selected. In fact, people described discomfort with what they described as being *too informed*. The pandemic’s rapid development provoked many to seek out more and more information on social media about what was going on, but as much of this news offered little hope for a swift end to lockdowns or a return to normalcy, social media users frequently found themselves “doomscrolling,” or “persistently scrolling through their social media newsfeeds with an

²⁹⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Pbk. ed (London ; New York: Continuum, 2006), 12.

²⁹⁸ Leah Cha et al., “Pacific Islanders in the Era of COVID-19: An Overlooked Community in Need,” *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* 9, no. 4 (2022), 1352.

obsessive focus on distressing, depressing, or otherwise negative information.”²⁹⁹ Through doomscrolling, one could theoretically be up-to-date on the latest developments, and with normal life disrupted, social media was a space to spend time and debate the news with others. However, this media practice had notable effects, as a study of Generation Z during the 2020 lockdowns in the UK found that the sheer volume of COVID-related media online created “psychological discomfort, thereby leading to user fatigue in relation to social media” and “[hindering] their ability to develop an unbiased assessment of COVID-19, which led to a higher level of fear of the coronavirus pandemic.”³⁰⁰ The sheer amount of information surrounding the pandemic, doomscrolling, and the panic and fear these practices developed led to the WHO describing an accompanying “infodemic – an over-abundance of information—some accurate and some not—that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.”³⁰¹ Wen-Hua Kuo, writing in the context of Taiwan’s response to the pandemic, states that infodemics cannot be the result of too little information, only too much: “The less the information released, the less the possibility that rumours will flare up.”³⁰² According to Kuo, Taiwan was able to keep the pandemic at bay when many countries around the world were struggling. Taiwan’s Central Epidemic Command Center assuaged fears about the coronavirus

²⁹⁹ Bhakti Sharma, Susanna S. Lee, and Benjamin K. Johnson, “The Dark at the End of the Tunnel: Doomscrolling on Social Media Newsfeeds,” *Technology, Mind, and Behavior* 3, no. 1: Spring 2022 (January 10, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1037/tmb0000059>.

³⁰⁰ Hongfei Liu et al., “COVID-19 Information Overload and Generation Z’s Social Media Discontinuance Intention during the Pandemic Lockdown,” *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 166 (May 1, 2021): 8.

³⁰¹ World Health Organization, “Novel Coronavirus(2019-nCoV) Situation Report - 13,” February 2, 2020, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>.

³⁰² Wen-Hua Kuo, “Channeling Facts, Crouching Rumours: Taiwan’s Post-Truth Encounter with the Covid Pandemic,” *Science, Technology and Society* 27, no. 2 (June 1, 2022): 276.

through Q&A sessions that kept rumors “confined, if not neutralized.”³⁰³ When COVID did start spreading in Taiwan, though, “rumours found their places in public discussions” as citizens raised more questions than the government could respond to, and as the Central Epidemic Command Center continued to provide curt replies in a bid to minimize confusion, multiple alternative outlets provided multiple possible answers through as many channels as possible, creating the information overload Taiwan had hoped to avoid.³⁰⁴

This scramble to understand what the best course of action to take during a time of great uncertainty continues to be a longstanding issue between the scientific community, the political arena, and everyday citizens. As Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway note, most people “think science is about facts—cold, hard, definite facts. If someone tells us that things are uncertain, we think that means that the science is muddled,” but that such belief “is a mistake,” because science is full of uncertainties and “is a process of discovery.”³⁰⁵ Yet because science has a legacy of being the instrument of enlightenment, any disagreement between scientists or other experts is viewed as proof that the facts of the matter are still being contested, such as how ivermectin was seen not as a longshot by select scientists who disagreed with academic consensus but instead as a conspiracy by Big Pharma to curtail the sale of a cheaper and more accessible cure. We can also see this uncertainty played out through the public discussion around masking during the early stages of the pandemic in the US. Initial fears about the virus led to massive shortages of

³⁰³ Kuo, “Channeling Facts, Crouching Rumours,” 279.

³⁰⁴ Kuo, “Channeling Facts, Crouching Rumours,” 281.

³⁰⁵ Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010): 34.

masks and other personal protective equipment in late February 2020, prompting U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Jerome Adams to pointedly declare people “STOP BUYING MASKS,” adding that “They are NOT effective in preventing general public from catching #Coronavirus” and were better suited for healthcare workers. By April 2020, however, this advice was shifted to incorporate masking as part of daily, public life to prevent the spread of Covid-19 by asymptomatic or presymptomatic carriers.³⁰⁶ Though the messaging of mask usage was based on available information and changed to adapt to new circumstances—in this case, growing awareness that COVID-19 would be a long-term issue—the appearance of a lack of certainty granted weight to alternative perspectives, like how masks could decrease one’s oxygen supply or poison wearer’s with their own exhalations.³⁰⁷ Various examples of “citizen science” attempted to prove these hypotheses using off-the-shelf instruments such as gas detectors, tools that Pennsylvania firefighter Jeff Neff describes in a viral video on Facebook as ones where “If you want science...we rely [*sic*] our lives on these things.”³⁰⁸ Though experts would debunk these tests for improper testing or falsified evidence, their existence points to attempts to reclaim power and certainty where science has failed to grant it.

These discussions of the veracity of science and where people can uncover the truth of the world around them display an intriguing pair of paradoxes. In the first, the sale of gas testing

³⁰⁶ Deborah Netburn, “A Timeline of the CDC’s Advice on Face Masks,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 2021, sec. Science & Medicine, <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2021-07-27/timeline-cdc-mask-guidance-during-covid-19-pandemic>.

³⁰⁷ Stacey Burling, “Some People Think Face Masks Are Dangerous. Can That Be True?,” *Medical Xpress* (blog), June 23, 2020, <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-06-people-masks-dangerous-true.html>.

³⁰⁸ Jeff Neff, “Face Masks: You Decide. This Is Worth a Few Minutes of Your Time...,” *Facebook*, June 27, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/jeff.neff.528/posts/face-masks-you-decide-this-is-worth-a-few-minutes-of-your-time-if-you-want-to-wa/10223325921401685/>, 6:15 – 6:30.

equipment to discover if masks cause harmful gases to build up and the reliance on unreviewed scientific articles that claim ivermectin's potential to assist those suffering COVID symptoms indicates a level of trust in the scientific method, in the ability of the tools and medicines to perform and to verify claims, and in the people who advocate for their use. At the same time, trust in science as an *institution* is failing as the larger field of "experts" proves inadequate to slow down or stop the spread of COVID-19 while offering seemingly contradictory advice. This paradox, which Marjolein van Asselt and Ellen Vos have dubbed the "uncertainty paradox," "is the consequence of getting stuck in the middle of recognizing the meaning of uncertainty," which is to say that "the role of the experts was framed in terms of providing certainty about uncertain risks."³⁰⁹ The second paradox is seen in how conspiracists and non-experts are lambasted for questioning the findings of experts when "the foundational ethic of scientific work," as Oreskes and Conway describe, "take reviewers' comments and criticisms seriously"—literally, to question the findings of experts.³¹⁰ Bruno Latour describes this as a reliance on "matters of fact," wherein the world around us must be debated and tested to be considered a fact until some new test or debate debunks it. This "rather poor trick...allows critique to go on" by continuously reexamining the facts of a case instead of addressing the core issues as a "matter of concern."³¹¹ This desire to relitigate information to remove all uncertainty can lead to seeking out additional sources and investigating the claims by all sides as if they were all equally valid.

³⁰⁹ Marjolein B. A. van Asselt and Ellen Vos, "The Precautionary Principle and the Uncertainty Paradox," *Journal of Risk Research* 9, no. 4 (June 1, 2006): 317, 331.

³¹⁰ Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, 3-4.

³¹¹ Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (January 2004): 241.

The problem with this “all sides” approach to information gathering is that it presumes that those challenging the facts are doing so out of valid curiosity and not out of political opportunity. Climate change, as an example, has well been established as a verifiable, persistent, and destructive event that must be addressed, yet on average only 54 percent of all U.S. adults view climate change as a threat in 2023, in large part because it has been promoted as a contentious topic for decades by political leaders, oil executives, and journalists, among others.³¹² In an article chronicling various experiments that presented participants one or both “sides” of the climate change discussion, psychologists Megan Imundo and David Napp found that in all three of their experiments, “exposure to claims arguing against climate change reduced participants’ perceptions about the scientific consensus on the issue and their personal belief in it...regardless of whether the contrarian source was a climate science expert, an expert in a different scientific field, or lacked scientific expertise.”³¹³ In other words, attempting to hold a balanced debate where anyone can share their views can result in more people siding with the professed skeptic than the academic consensus. If just expressing skepticism about a topic in convincing enough language can be enough to cause beliefs to sway, then the ability of conspiracy theories to cast doubt onto public discourse makes far more sense than presuming conspiracists are inept or uniquely gullible.

³¹² Alec Tyson, Cary Funk, and Brian Kennedy, “What the Data Says about Americans’ Views of Climate Change,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed January 13, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/09/what-the-data-says-about-americans-views-of-climate-change/>.

³¹³ Megan N. Imundo and David N. Rapp, “When Fairness Is Flawed: Effects of False Balance Reporting and Weight-of-Evidence Statements on Beliefs and Perceptions of Climate Change,” *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 11, no. 2 (June 2022): 268

But what are we to do when our peers, friends, and families' posts links to *Plandemic* on Facebook, cite doctors with questionable advice and far more dubious credentials, start taking ivermectin as treatment, and purchase typo-filled cards that allegedly allow their wielder to carry on their day mask free?³¹⁴ In one sense, conspiracists want to reclaim a measure of certainty, but doing so requires them to potentially endanger themselves and others. Yet attempting to “correct” people like anti-maskers typically results in reactions that “generates further arguments against the effectiveness of masks,” as they cite sources and figureheads that seem to completely lack any relevance or expertise while simultaneously dismissing more commonly accepted solutions as debatable or unreliable.³¹⁵ The correct approach to uncertainty remains uncertain, especially as conspiracy theorist seem to be everywhere from Facebook to the U.S. Capitol building.

4.3 A Culture of Conspiracy

The presence of conspiracy theories in American politics is nothing new and has been a driving force for a variety of movements such as the House Un-American Activities Committee's hunt for Communist sympathizers and former President Donald Trump's repeated claims of voter fraud. The founding of America itself was a conspiracy against the British Crown and, as Lance deHaven-Smith notes, “The United States Constitution was designed with the expectation that public officials are likely to conspire to abuse their powers and undermine

³¹⁴ Ben Decker, “Membership of Anti-Mask Facebook Groups Jumps Sharply,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 2020, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/01/technology/membership-of-anti-mask-facebook-groups-jumps-sharply.html>.

³¹⁵ Steven Taylor and Gordon J. G. Asmundson, “Negative Attitudes about Facemasks during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Dual Importance of Perceived Ineffectiveness and Psychological Reactance,” *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 2 (February 17, 2021), 10.

popular control of the government,” and thus was explicitly designed to counteract similar political conspiracies.³¹⁶ Yet, Mark Fenster cautions in his book *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* that “the prevalence of conspiracy theories is neither necessarily pernicious nor external to American politics and culture but instead an integral aspect of American, and perhaps modern and postmodern, life.”³¹⁷ Writing post-9/11, Fenster claims that America’s founding principles were built on an “especially intense strain” of populism that “can have violent, racist, and antidemocratic effects (as well as salutary and democracy-enhancing ones) on the political and social order, but a strain that is neither independent from nor necessarily threatening to the country’s institutions or political culture.”³¹⁸ This can seem particularly difficult to reason, as the January 6th, 2021 insurrection and the many who have died from COVID-19 while believing the vaccines were more deadly speak to the opposing opinion. However, Fenster’s argument is not that conspiracy theories are harmless but that “conspiracy theory represents an impossible, almost utopian, drive to seize and fetishize individual signs in order to place them within interpretive structures that unsuccessfully attempt to stop the signs’ unlimited signification;” in other words, as people encounter infodemics and pandemics in tandem, struggle to make sense of the fracturing world around them as consensus falls to disagreements, and still try to make ends meet by the end of the day, conspiracy theorizing can

³¹⁶ Lance deHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America* (University of Texas Press, 2013): 58

³¹⁷ Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Rev. and updated ed (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 9

³¹⁸ Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 9

be a way to sift through all of that information and assign it a fixed value—even if that fixed value is Q.³¹⁹

QAnon is a curious beast: simultaneously a web of seemingly disconnected concepts linked together through spurious connections and a unifying rally point for white supremacists, anti-vaxxers, Trump’s biggest fans, antisemites, and COVID skeptics. Even one of the most famous images illustrating the grand theories of QAnon is a multicolor-coded web of fragments, famous individuals and groups, dates, and arrows that indicate connections but often lack any sort of rhyme or reason.³²⁰ The “Q-Key” artist, Dylan Louis Monroe, implores readers, “Use it as a nuclear red-pill to devastate people’s misinformed preconceptions of reality with overwhelming data!”³²¹ And overwhelming it is, including such important information as Steve Jackson’s 1982 *Illuminati* card game (here referring to the collectible *New World Order* set released in 1994), Anton Lavey’s Church of Satan placed beside both “genetic engineering” and the institution of the Freedom of Information Act, and the prevalence of Big Pharma as responsible for vaccines, fluoridation, and “climate change.” Perhaps most frighteningly and despite its indexical listing of nearly every world event, national tragedy, and fringe conspiracy theory, this poster still does not contain the entirety of QAnon’s myriad beliefs, in part because each member of QAnon brings their own research and ideas that add to this *ur*-theory of the world. Rather than look to the Q-Key as a map, we should instead behold it as QAnon’s version

³¹⁹ Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 13.

³²⁰ Dylan Louis Monroe, “Q-KEY POSTER (WHITE) 24 x 36”, 2022 Edition – DEEP STATE MAPPING PROJECT,” 2022, <https://deepstatemappingproject.com/product/q-key-poster-white-24-x-36/>, Figure 4.

³²¹ Dylan Louis Monroe, “Introduction to the Q-Web,” DYLAN LOUIS MONROE, accessed January 14, 2024, <http://www.dylanlouismonroe.com/q-web.html>.

of a bibliography, a references page, or a works cited for conspiracists to draw knowledge from when their families show them articles that show how effective vaccines are, how lockdowns stop the spread of COVID-19, how their irrational fears are simply unjustified, and how everything they thought they knew about the world around them is, in fact, wrong.



Figure 4. A fragment of the 2022 “Q-Key Poster” by Dylan Louis Monroe.

Monroe’s assertion that the Q-Key map will allow adherents to convince their peers and correct “misinformed preconceptions of reality” mirrors ways we talk about conspiracy theorists and how to “debunk” their beliefs. The notion of “debunking” conspiracies to combat

misinformation claims to resolve societal dissonance by removing the incorrect or incomplete information, seeking out the hidden truths in a manner also like conspiracy theorists: looking for shadowy figures who profit from the sheeple who fall for the wolves' ruse. The drive to ferret out the Truth is what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the "paranoid style" of research, drawing from Paul Ricoeur's concept of the "hermeneutics of suspicion."³²² Under this banner, conspiracy theories would lose their power once their hidden truths and untruths have been brought to light and their ideologies untangled from their narrative yarn. Regretfully, Sedgwick points out, "The paranoid trust in exposure seemingly depends...on an infinite reservoir of naïveté in those who make up the audience for these unveilings. What is the basis for assuming that it will surprise or disturb, never mind motivate, anyone to learn that a given social manifestation is artificial, self-contradictory, imitative, phantasmic, or even violent?"³²³ Turning back to conspiracy theories and their professed believers, "proving" that narratives of microchips hidden in COVID vaccinations are false does little to combat their circulation and could even backfire, as many conspiracy beliefs are self-sealing and interpret counter-evidence as proof of their theory's legitimacy.³²⁴

Still, the desire to connect, to help, and to heal those impacted by grifters peddling miracle cures, the coronavirus and its variants, and potentially lethal misinformation clashes with the difficulty of trying to find common ground, to engage with someone with a shared sense of

³²² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 2. pr, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004): 124.

³²³ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 141.

³²⁴ Quassim Cassam, "Conspiracy Theories," *Society* 60, no. 2 (2023): 190–99, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-023-00816-1>.

reality. Journalist Kelly Weill recounts how she encountered this rift in *Off the Edge*, as she grew more estranged to the world around her to the point that a man accosted her for wearing a mask, shouting “Trump 2020! That mask is for nothing!” to her face while on a walk with her family.³²⁵ She goes on to lament how fact-checking and deplatforming conspiracies and misinformation have limited effects and focuses on the core of why we try so hard to form a consensual reality:

I would like my old neighbors to stop invoking a fictional cannibalism ring when the diner down the road takes basic health precautions during a pandemic. I would like to live through an election devoid of conspiracy theories about vote rigging and racial minorities. But when an increasingly vocal population believes that they live on a completely different planet, how can I find common ground for conversation? When some weirdo is sending spittle flying in the direction of my kid while yelling about a hoax he saw on the internet, how am I supposed to politely debunk his premises?³²⁶

Weill’s internal tug of war between the rational imperative to disprove conspiracy theories and the longing for emotional, communal connections demonstrates how difficult it is to truly form a singular yet shared perspective of reality while maintaining skepticism about that same reality. Weill’s plight also shows how conspiracists want the world to work in ways that make sense to them and, when presented with evidence to the contrary, can react with confusion and anger—not unlike how many people look at conspiracy theorists with scorn and pity.

It follows that the issue at hand here cannot be solved through fact-checking and more scientifically accurate propaganda, in part because the wrong problem has been identified. Yes, there are plenty of conspiracy theories based on highly questionable data or misremembering world events and history, and these theories can and have resulted in actual harm. However,

³²⁵ Kelly Weill, *Off the Edge: Flat Earthers, Conspiracy Culture, and Why People Will Believe Anything*, First edition (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2022), 199

³²⁶ Weill, *Off the Edge*, 200.

attributing the harm to the fact these beliefs are “untrue” or lack a rational basis ignores the immense role of fiction, stories, fantasy, and belief in human experience. These things may not be “true” in the literal sense, yet they too affect the world around us in their (re)telling. In media psychologists Karen E. Dill-Shackleford and Cynthia Vinney’s book *Finding Truth in Fiction*, the authors recount how escapism, storytelling, and fantasy possess an important role in their own lives:

We don’t only experience narratives when we pick up a book or tune into a television show. We are forming narratives in our minds constantly. They are the water we’re swimming in. Whenever someone dismisses movies, television shows, or books as a waste of time or “not real,” whenever they dismiss fans or lovers of stories as “out of touch with reality,” that tells us that they don’t understand the very serious and important role of story in our lives. It comes down to this: Our human experience doesn’t exist without story. Period.³²⁷

The authors specifically point to how people can find meaning in stories, such as how a favorite character can “help us sort out what risks we are willing to take in life and which aren’t worthwhile to us” or how “the stories we love can speak for us and as us...”³²⁸ Dill-Shackleford and Vinney’s adamant defense of fiction is not uncommon, and the studies they draw from express how “reality” and “fiction” are far less distinct categories than popularly believed. For example, Jim Blascovich and Cade McCall’s analysis of virtual environments—specifically those set up for experiments by researchers but also through media technologies—“need not require any technology at all” as “humans have virtual experiences endogenously via dreams and daydreams,” with some estimates claiming we daydream roughly one-third of our waking

³²⁷ Karen Dill-Shackleford and Cynthia Vinney, *Finding Truth in Fiction: What Fan Culture Gets Right - and Why It’s Good to Get Lost in a Story* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 121-122.

³²⁸ Dill-Shackleford and Vinney, *Finding Truth in Fiction*, 46, 170.

hours.³²⁹ Dill-Shackleford and Vinney thus argue that if our minds are spending much of the day “telling us stories about what might happen,” then “like fiction produced by someone else, daydreams are fantasies that could become realities, they are simulations of possible futures.”³³⁰ Left to our own devices, we will invent theories and fictions to entertain us, to decipher the world around us, and to picture what may happen to us as we walk down the street or wonder if the next pandemic will be treated with more regard; alternatively, we can look to others’ ideas.

Attempting to pigeonhole certain stories as uniquely false and capable of being stamped out through community programs also fails to recognize how stories are both true *and* false, containing the ability to communicate truths, falsehoods, and everything in between. Girão, Irigaray, and Stocker consider storytelling and fake news as “two identical coins,” as they both “can deceive readers and are inserted in a social and historical context that regulates the production, circulation, and reception of discourses” and “are not limited to what is (obviously) true or false but seize and maintain power, seduce voters and consumers, obtain funding from (inter)national economic groups, or even maximize financial returns.”³³¹ Even if the “real” news story is measurably accurate, it still seeks to persuade readers to act according to bias, ideologies, and assumptions. Even if the news is pure information that possesses no narrative construction, Walter Benjamin writes that one who reads it must “interpret things the way he understands

³²⁹ Jim Blascovich and Cade McCall, “Social Influence in Virtual Environments,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Media Psychology*, ed. Karen E. Dill (Oxford University Press, 2012): 305.

³³⁰ Dill-Shackleford and Vinney, *Finding Truth in Fiction*, 136.

³³¹ Mel Girão, Hélio Arthur Reis Irigaray, and Fabricio Stocker, “Fake News and Storytelling: Two Sides of the Same Coin or Two Equal Coins?,” *Cadernos EBAPE.BR* 21 (March 13, 2023), 11-12.

them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.”³³² While the popular conception of narrative divides stories into fiction and non-fiction—often read as untrue and true—both negotiate what is literally true through the process of storytelling and can affect the ways people interact with the world. Thus, as novelist E.L. Doctorow concludes, “...there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative;” though some things remain true and others remain false regardless of belief, how we experience and interpret truth is regularly filtered and mediated through myriad cultural forms.³³³

As an example, documentary media largely operates on the basis that what is presented to the audience is, if not 100% true, at least accurate enough to convey its narrative and maintain storytelling authority. This presumed trust has invited filmmakers to create “fake” documentaries like Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman*, which simultaneously retells the history of the systemic disenfranchisement of early Black Hollywood actors as well as the difficulty of researching and archiving their work while also discussing people and events that did not happen in ways that “mimic and at the same time mine the tools, institutions, forms, and technologies of history making.”³³⁴ The specifics of *The Watermelon Woman* are not literally true, a fact that Robert F. Reid-Pharr describes as provoking feelings in audiences of being “cheated by the

³³² Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” *Illuminations*, 1st Schocken pbk. ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 4.

³³³ E. L. Doctorow, “False Documents,” in *E.L. Doctorow, Essays and Conversations*, ed. Richard Trenner, Ontario Review Press Critical Series (Princeton, N.J.: New York: Ontario Review Press ; Distributed by Persea Books, 1983): 26.

³³⁴ Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, “Introduction: Phony Definitions and Troubling Taxonomies of the Fake Documentary,” in *F Is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth’s Undoing*, Visible Evidence 17 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2006), 17.

revelation of the work's lack of verisimilitude."³³⁵ But the fiction of the work underscores the glaring lack of historical traces of Black American cinema and how "our work is never more artificial, more fake, than when it comes freighted with all the trappings of the real."³³⁶ Compare Dunye's work with documentaries like Willis' *Plandemic*—which promotes verifiably false claims that "a shadowy cabal of elites was using the [coronavirus] and a potential vaccine to profit and gain power" and utilizes the documentary form to not only spread their beliefs but also appeal "to specific groups that were already inclined to believe the truth claims they presented about issues that affected everyone."³³⁷ Where *The Watermelon Woman* uses the form of documentary to tell a false story about true things, *Plandemic* strives to tell a true story about false things using many of the same techniques, both striving to be viewed as sensible objects of study and attention.

The ability for documentaries to communicate fictional stories as truths and vice versa is not unique to the form. Jacques Rancière writes, "Writing history and writing stories come under the same regime of truth," adding that "Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct 'fictions,' that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done."³³⁸ Though some may despise the idea of media "lying" or misinforming us, we also use fictions as foundations for

³³⁵ Robert F. Reid-Pharr, "Makes Me Feel Mighty Real: *The Watermelon Woman* and the Critique of Black Visuality," in *F Is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing*, Visible Evidence 17 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2006), 131.

³³⁶ Robert F. Reid-Pharr, "Makes Me Feel Mighty Real," 140.

³³⁷ Frenkel, Decker, and Alba, "How the 'Plandemic' Movie and Its Falsehoods Spread Widely Online.," Kris Fallon, *Where Truth Lies: Digital Culture and Documentary Media after 9/11* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019), 12.

³³⁸ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 38-39.

communities and shared realities, be it a fictional story with an impassioned fanbase or anti-vaxxers relating anecdotes of doctors who would not listen to them. These stories then shape what we consider to be “true” and how we should engage with the world. To illustrate the world-making ability of fiction, I turn to a more recent storytelling form that also blurs the line between reality and story: unfiction.

4.4 Understanding Unfiction

Unfiction is still being defined by the creators of the works, the fan-scholars that have strived to compile and preserve these projects, and the audiences who appreciate and critique them. Like how Seo-Young Chu relates science fiction not to what tropes or genre conventions it applies but rather how one interacts with its ability to represent and cognitively estrange the world for the reader, unfiction can be viewed as a storytelling mode that desires to blur the distinction between fact and fiction.³³⁹ The use of “unfiction” can be traced to alternate reality gaming (ARGs), both as a shorthand for the fusion of puzzle and live-action role playing that has become more commonplace today and for unfiction.com, the early 2000s to mid-2010s forum for players to discuss ARGs and similar works.³⁴⁰ However, fans of unfiction have strived to delineate ARGs as a related mode that can be incorporated into a larger unfiction work, while not being unfiction on its own. Responding to one confused redditor, a user described unfiction as “ANY media that presents itself as Non-Fiction while knowing it is Fiction,” adding that it

³³⁹ Seo-Young Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep? A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 7-10.

³⁴⁰ While it is unlikely that unfiction.com coined the term, it was one of the first to associate the ways ARGs play with the borders of fiction and reality with a subversion of the reader-turned-participant. I have followed some of the historical traces and antecedents of the storytelling form in this chapter, but more work is to be done here.

“works as a classification above genre.”³⁴¹ This idea of unfiction acting not as a genre but as a whole category of works is important, as unfiction has a reputation of being described somewhat dismissively as “Internet horror,” based on the success of projects like *Marble Hornets* (2009), *This House Has People In It* (2016), *Petscop* (2017), and *The Mandela Catalogue* (2021). Other fans like YouTuber and unfiction archivist Night Mind take a more formalistic approach to defining unfiction, describing it as “a form of fictional storytelling that utilizes varying measures of interaction, immersion, or multimedia delivery beyond traditional bounds of the mediums used to conduct an experience under the roleplaying premise, ‘this is (not) a game,’” before blithely adding “(it’s basically playing pretend on the internet as a storytelling method.)”³⁴² This tongue-in-cheek nod to the constructed nature of fiction—“playing pretend”—does call to both the charm of and difficulty in defining unfiction, as it points to how the audience relates to their understandings of fiction and reality.

For my purposes here, I define unfiction as a transmedia storytelling practice that requires participants to be able to understand the boundaries of what is constructed, engaging in a paradoxical relationship wherein the participant is aware that the work is fiction yet must engage with the work on the presumption that the impossible occurrences within it are plausible. Participation ranges from testing the capacities by which the reader can tell what is text and what is “real,” engaging with the work’s creator and other fans as if the characters, scenario, and events were truly happening and thus “literally” participating, to blithely discussing the story or

³⁴¹ TheOneWes, “Unfiction Is ANY Media . . .,” Reddit Comment, *R/ARG*, October 15, 2021, www.reddit.com/r/ARG/comments/q8wc6j/what_is_the_difference_between_arg_and_unfiction/hgsqy9x/.

³⁴² Night Mind, “Unfiction,” Night Mind Index, accessed June 7, 2023, <https://www.nightmind.info/unfiction>.

predicting where it may lead as it develops. Though not a singular genre or medium, unfiction utilizes the human ability to engage with and become immersed in fictional scenarios by using different technologies and techniques to allow the reader to create belief, rather than suspend disbelief. To an outside observer, both the storyteller and their audience are trading profoundly ridiculous and untrue facts about the world and how it works, ignorant of the reality they cannot escape from. Creators and contributors to Unfiction projects are crafting a narrative experience unlike mainstream storytelling practices yet able to appropriate everyday technologies and languages in ways that are near indistinguishable from genuine usage. Using web videos, social media accounts, websites, real-life meetings, video games, geocaching, and other well-known tactics, unfiction can tease out the boundary between medium and fantasy, provoking audiences to determine how much of this boundary they are willing to bend or break while confusing or collapsing others to the point where any event could be another part of the tale. This dual nature—knowing the work is constructed yet allowing it to maintain its narrative conceit—is reflected in an oft-quoted adage of the unfiction community: “This is (not) fiction.”³⁴³

While unfiction as a coherent storytelling practice has only been recently defined, the category draws from the ways alternate reality games and “real” horror have played with the idea of fiction being real. Night Mind’s definition of unfiction and the community’s use of the phrase “this is (not) a game” alludes to unfiction.com’s frequent use of TINAG—“This is not a game.”—to describe the relationship between the storyteller’s use of “real” narrative stakes and the importance of the player’s efforts to both play and play along. ARGs make this phrase

³⁴³ Night Mind, “Unfiction.”

somewhat literal, as the game is typically presented as if it were real and implicitly requests players buy into the veracity of its scenario. The textbook example, Stephen Spielberg's 2001 film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, led players to an ARG now known as "The Beast," once curious minds reading the film's credits discovered more to the story of the film after looking into the (fictional) backstory for "Jeanine Salla, Sentient Machine Therapist."³⁴⁴ The trail led to a multitude of specially crafted web pages, scanned newspapers, and even phone calls to players, all in the effort to make the fictional world of The Beast feel "real, all the way to the ground."³⁴⁵ The niche popularity of The Beast led to numerous ARGs produced for various media properties, such as *I Love Bees* (a 2004 promotion for *Halo 2*) and *The Lost Experience* (2006) for the J.J. Abrams' helmed TV show *Lost*.

Unfiction projects often incorporate ARGs to further draw readers into the storyworlds their creators have invented. Wham City Comedy and AB Video Solutions' *This House Has People in It* was a twelve-minute-long, short "infomercial" that aired on Adult Swim that presented a surrealist nightmare allegedly recorded on a home monitoring system. The short film hints that more information can be found on the website of the company who sells the cameras, AB Surveillance Solutions. Viewers then figured out the various passwords needed to access over two additional hours of footage, uncovered related websites that helped provide more context for the bizarre occurrences (admittedly with equally bizarre logic), and even messages

³⁴⁴ Rich Hoxsey, "Stranger than Unfiction," *Print*, July/August 2005: 102.

³⁴⁵ Sean Stewart, "The A.I. Web Game," *Seanstewart.org*, March 22, 2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070322025024/http://www.seanstewart.org/interactive/aiintro/>.

between the characters.³⁴⁶ The ARG elements allow for a collaborative experience of *This House Has People in It* as players work together to figure out the passwords and share their discoveries. The ARG also connects the disparate texts, videos, and ephemera of the project together by framing the audiences' actions within the project's storyworld, describing the act of entering in passwords as gaining access to a "real" company's hidden archives. This collaborative practice instrumentalizes what Henry Jenkins describes as the "new knowledge culture" that engages with media works "through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge."³⁴⁷ By pooling resources, skills, and abilities, unfiction participants can speculate on a work's mysteries, work together to solve its puzzles, and provide a niche fandom for new authors to appeal to.

The second wellspring for modern unfiction stems from horror movies like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) which proclaimed that "What happened is true" in its advertising, which was "strategically evoked to defend the film's brutality, and in fact the filmmakers did frequently point to real-life horrors as justification for those depicted onscreen," acting as a "cover story" for the movie.³⁴⁸ This penchant for pointing at the possibility of horror being true to life was exemplified by 1999's *The Blair Witch Project*, which presented supplementary proofs of the "real" disappearances of the film's characters including "an elaborate presentation of the legend surrounding the Blair Witch, photographs of the three students, interviews with the students' friends and relatives, excerpts from (fictitious) news bulletins related to the search for

³⁴⁶ *This House Has People In It (CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER) - All Videos, Recordings, And Texts*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I31T0Yt7GxU>. As of writing, the short film is the only official piece remaining of this unfiction project. It is in part thanks to fans and fan scholars' archival efforts that some of the experience can be salvaged.

³⁴⁷ Henry Jenkins, "Spoiling Survivor: The Anatomy of a Knowledge Community," in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press, 2006): 27.

³⁴⁸ Martin Harris, *Leatherface vs. Tricky Dick: The Texas Chain Saw Massacre as Political Satire* (Oxford: Headpress, 2021), 39.

the three missing students, excerpts from the students' diary" and even a second TV documentary, *The Curse of the Blair Witch*, that aired shortly before the film's release.³⁴⁹ *The Blair Witch Project's* success led to numerous "found footage" horror films like *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and *Cloverfield* (2008), Alexandra Heller-Nicholas records, exciting audiences "not because their events may or may not have happened, but from the formal innuendo that if they *did* occur, this is how they might look, seemingly filmed as they are on the same ubiquitous consumer-grade technology that many of us have ourselves..."³⁵⁰ *The Blair Witch Project* and found footage horror tap into a desire for an authentic(ish) story that continues to grow, as the rise of true crime as a popular genre indicates.³⁵¹

The technologies used by unfiction tend to be those used every day by audiences, such as emails, YouTube videos, web pages, and video games. Though the storytelling techniques emphasize the authenticity of the work through narrative framing, Unfiction's use of everyday technologies draws frequent descriptions by fans of it being more "immersive" than other media. Immersion, according to Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, relates the feeling of "being submerged" in a narrative to the point where it "takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus."³⁵² Murray goes on to describe immersion as a balancing act and a "threshold experience" that weighs the ability of storytelling to "evoke our deepest fears and

³⁴⁹ Margrit Schreier, "Please Help Me; All I Want to Know Is: Is It Real or Not?": How Recipients View the Reality Status of The Blair Witch Project," *Poetics Today* 25, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 319.

³⁵⁰ Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014), 7.

³⁵¹ There is, of course, more to the discussion of how true crime structures its authenticity through editing and narrativizing, but that is outside the scope of this chapter.

³⁵² Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Updated edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 124.

desires” within a discursive space that is “not there.”³⁵³ Colloquially, immersion refers to the ability for unfiction projects to blend into the media landscape, drawing audiences into a narrative experience in a seamless, uninterrupted manner by mixing the known world with unknown fictional realms. Unfiction projects often attempt to immerse readers by camouflaging the fictional elements with reality, such as through practical effects and placing props to be found by participants in the wild. The reverse is also true, as unfiction can also bring in elements from the real world that cast the fictional elements in a plausible light. *Petscop* (2017), for example, appears to be a playthrough of an obscure, unreleased PlayStation game complete with commentary from the uploader, yet elements of the game appear to reference actions the developer of *Petscop* undertook, including the kidnapping of his own daughter. While the fantastical elements presented in the let’s play videos were scrutinized for detail, they worked to hide the fact that *Petscop* cannot be played and is closer to a “puppet show’ that used a game engine” than a full-fledged game.³⁵⁴ In this way, unfiction aims not to suspend disbelief but, as Murray notes, to “create belief” to “focus our attention on the enveloping world and...use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience.”³⁵⁵

Storytelling has long been a site where we question fact and fiction. From Plato chastising poets who “misrepresent people in extremely important ways” by portraying “immoral people as happy and moral people as unhappy” to the current debates on whether reading works

³⁵³ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 126.

³⁵⁴ Phillip Moyer, “There’s Something Hiding in *Petscop*,” *EGM* (blog), March 18, 2020, <https://egmnow.com/theres-something-hiding-in-petscop/>.

³⁵⁵ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 136.

produced by queer authors “could cause children to alter their sexuality or gender,” fiction’s power to create belief and to shift perspectives coincides with its history playing with and legitimizing emerging media forms.³⁵⁶ Epistolary novels like Daniel Defoe’s 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe* and Samuel Richardson’s 1740 book *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* entered a literary environment in which letters, journals, and the like were not only commonplace but required knowledge among the burgeoning middle class of 18th Century England. Defoe & Richardson’s audience could explore the (fictional) letters and journals of these titular characters and in so doing read how they “convincingly narrate thoughts, point out interpretive clues, and describe events from multiple perspectives” in a format that they were not only accustomed to but, perhaps, expected to encounter.³⁵⁷ Richardson literary framing of himself as Pamela’s editor, rather than as *Pamela*’s author, is also notable because novels at the time often “had to observe all the same sense-making procedures as the conduct book,” for “shaping individuals” into model citizens; thus, the ruse was needed to allow the character of Pamela to speak on her own behalf—as a character rather than just a rhetorical tool—just as it was needed for Richardson to be “merely ‘reporting’ the protagonist’s version of events,” which include sexual assault, workplace harassment, and kidnapping.³⁵⁸ Granted, *Pamela* is still interested in promoting an ideal of

³⁵⁶ Plato, “From *Republic*,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd ed (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2010): 58; Hannah Natanson, “Objection to Sexual, LGBTQ Content Propels Spike in Book Challenges,” *Washington Post*, May 23, 2023, sec. Education, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/05/23/lgbtq-book-ban-challengers/>.

³⁵⁷ Elaine McGirr, “Interiorities,” in *The Cambridge History of the English Novel*, ed. Clement Hawes and Robert L. Caserio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 81.

³⁵⁸ Nancy Armstrong, “The Rise of the Novel,” *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): 116, 108; Diana Rosenberger, “Virtual Rewarded: What #MeToo Can Learn from Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*,” *South Central Review* 36, no. 2 (2019): 22.

proper conduct between men and women, husbands and wives, to the extent that “Richardson is imagining the power of a new hegemony, which asserts the good of England in terms that somehow transcend those of social experience as he knew it to be,” but this is not an uncommon occurrence in fiction; to a certain extent, one expects there to be a message or moral lesson to bookend the tale no matter the medium.³⁵⁹ However, as Diana Rosenberger notes, the usage of letters and the centering of Pamela’s experience through them presents her as someone who could be real, making the act of reading her internal thoughts “equivalent to violation, and even more unnervingly, a violation we might take pleasure in. The novel lays bare the awkward choices forced by the writing *and* reading of Pamela’s interiority.”³⁶⁰ The epistolary novel can thus be viewed as a strategy to make the narrative believable without requiring the audience to believe that Pamela as a person really exists or that Robinson Crusoe was literally writing journals on an island.

The epistolary novel’s adaptation of common media has been expanded within unfiction, as authors and artists strive to tell winding, complex tales across multiple media (websites, email, geocaches, role-playing, video games, etc.) while maintaining a veil of verisimilitude even as the audience is fully aware on a meta-narrative level that what they are engaging with is a work of fiction. This struggle to balance the evocative with manufactured credibility, Murray warns, must keep audiences and the narrative “balanced squarely on the enchanted threshold without letting [them] collapse onto either side.”³⁶¹ However, there is no perfect recipe for preventing someone

³⁵⁹ Armstrong, “The Rise of the Novel,” *Desire & Domestic Fiction*, 140.

³⁶⁰ Rosenberger, “Virtual Rewarded,” 23.

³⁶¹ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 126.

from mistaking the fictional as truth and vice versa. Many fictional works present a world set apart from our own and thus feel no need to make such a distinction, yet people can still be emotionally impacted by those fictional worlds, such as how some viewers of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) struggled with depression based on "sorrow from feeling disconnected from nature, worries about the future of our own planet and feeling dissatisfied with modern life" after viewing the film for the first time.³⁶² *Avatar*'s world of Pandora exists only through computer animation and special effects and makes no attempt to convince the viewer that what they are seeing is anything but a visual spectacle, we as the audience can still find ways to make connections between the fictional world and our own.³⁶³ On the flip side, unfiction projects are regularly designed to slip into one's day-to-day experience, occasionally drawing audiences unaware that they are experiencing a story and not a genuine article. As an example of this boundary problem, one accidental reader exploring various fan videos and theories about *SpongeBob SquarePants* realized that one series by YouTuber Alex Bale contained an entire unfiction narrative, using multiple YouTube accounts and supplemental websites to tell its tale.³⁶⁴ More experienced audiences may quickly recognize these "rabbit holes," "trailheads," or

³⁶² Sian Cain and Steph Harmon, "'Post-Avatar Depression Syndrome': Why Do Fans Feel Blue after Watching James Cameron's Film?," *The Guardian*, December 15, 2022, sec. Film, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/dec/15/post-avatar-depression-syndrome-why-do-fans-feel-blue-after-watching-james-camerons-film>.

³⁶³ Though true in the immediate sense of *Avatar* the film, there does exist a section of Disney's Animal Kingdom park—"Pandora—The World of *Avatar*"—that promises tourists the ability to "literally" go to Cameron's world of "Dances With Blue Cat People." As it remains quite popular since its opening in 2017, there is more to be said for how fans desire to actively create belief in the world of Pandora as national parks see declining visitation.

³⁶⁴ Cee Arr, "Nerd Church - Ensnared In An ARG," *Dora Reads* (blog), March 27, 2022, <https://www.dorareads.co.uk/2022/03/NCEnsnaredInAnARG.html>.

“gates” for what they are: calling cards for the curious. But even a rabbit hole can be just large enough for someone to stumble into.

Conventional perspectives of unfiction presume that its audience can discern the boundaries of what is playing along with the work, becoming part of the storytelling process, and what is real (and thus irrelevant to one’s enjoyment of the project). An ideal example of unfiction can be found in *The Sun Vanished*, told largely through Twitter since April 30, 2018, wherein the titular account describes a world where the sun has indeed disappeared. Via a collection of screenshots of text messages, video uploads, and a casual (albeit panicked) writing style, the story invites participation from the audience, as the authors reply to questions and speculations posited by readers, even allowing them opportunities to shape the narrative through polls in a manner not unlike classic choose-your-own-adventures.³⁶⁵ Obviously, the sun did not actually vanish, yet the audience preserves the narrative experience by engaging with the account as though it were real even as discussion of the story-in-progress and theories about where the story will go next propagate in alternative channels. This style of engagement bears similarities to kayfabe, an “unwritten code of conduct” by fans of professional wrestling that both performers and fans “should be in a constant state of suspended disbelief, even when they know exactly what is going on.”³⁶⁶ Kayfabe can allow audiences to participate wholeheartedly in the experience—not unlike a live-action role play—and still engage in in-group discussions about the narrative’s inner workings. Breaking kayfabe is generally regarded as a faux pas, reserved for

³⁶⁵ Nat (TheSunVanished) [@TheSunVanished], “I’m Really Conflicted. Some of You Say I Should Go, Some of You Say I Should Stay. What Should I Do?,” Tweet, *Twitter*, May 6, 2018, <https://twitter.com/TheSunVanished/status/992962855317262337>.

³⁶⁶ Rex Sorgatz, “Kayfabe,” in *The Encyclopedia of Misinformation* (United States: ABRAMS Ignition, 2018): 147.

emergencies such as—in the case of *The Sun Vanished*—declaring a hiatus.³⁶⁷ However, this coyness about a project’s realistic nature cannot only be dangerous to those trying to figure out if the experience presented is real or not; in fact, it can suffer from its own success.

The risk inherent to unfiction stems from how these projects frequently draw on the aesthetics of the everyday, from merging into one’s Twitter feed to presenting their narratives in ways that mimic popular YouTube trends. This everydayness means that an unfiction project can be seen as legitimate by those without prior knowledge of the format. Unlike satire or parody, unfiction does not necessarily mock what it appropriates, hewing closer to pastiche. Unfiction also does not typically try to convince outsiders that what is presented is literally real, like the numerous Loch Ness Monster hoaxes. From outside its community forums and online playgrounds, though, unfiction can look an awful lot like conspiracism.

4.5 Birds Aren’t Real

“Not to startle you, but you have a highly advanced governmental surveillance drone in your house, watching your every movement, picking up every word of your conversations, and sending that data into to the pentagon.” One could easily mistake such a statement for a call for better privacy protection in cell phones or to rally against the sheer amount of data collected on digital devices by the National Security Agency since the passage of the 2007 Protect America Act. This statement instead cautions owners of “Pet Birds” to “not

³⁶⁷ theo!! [@didyoueverheal], “Hey Everyone, I Have Some Unfortunate News That’s Not Fun to Talk about. Due to Extraneous Circumstances in the Industry Right Now, We Have Decided to Put TSV on an Indefinite Hiatus. I Feel like I Say This Ad Nauseam, but This Journey Has Truly Been a Life Changing Experience.” Tweet, *Twitter*, September 8, 2023, <https://twitter.com/didyoueverheal/status/1700191754908037134>.

bring up any matters you'd prefer to remain confidential around your 'Pet Bird,'" claiming that they are military robots.³⁶⁸ The "Birds Aren't Real" conspiracy theory hinges on the belief that from 1959 to 1976, the C.I.A. conducted a secret operation called "Water the Country," wherein an engineered virus would be distributed across the U.S. to wipe out all known bird species for the twin purposes of public surveillance and of sheer hatred for the pigeons of the D.C. Metro area "as they would often poop on their cars in the parking lot of the C.I.A. headquarters."³⁶⁹ Commonly used evidence for the theory cites how the "drones" recharge their batteries by perching on power lines and that a car marked by "Bird Poop" is actively being tracked since "87% of Bird Poop in populated areas falls on people's cars."³⁷⁰ Although video evidence has surfaced of television spots in the late 1980s advocating against the "surveillance robots," the movement gained significant traction in recent years due to the testimony of Eugene Price—an ex-C.I.A. agent allegedly tasked with destroying the evidence of Operation Water the Country—and the work of Peter McIndoe, who conducted the interview and runs the *Birds Aren't Real* YouTube channel.³⁷¹ McIndoe has since traveled across the U.S. in a white van decked with satellite dishes and anti-bird spikes, plastered with the movement's slogans of "Pigeons Are Liars" and "Birdwatching Goes Both Ways," and flying both the American flag and an accompanying flag simply stating "Birds Aren't Real."³⁷²

³⁶⁸ Birds Aren't Real, "I Have a Pet Bird, What Do I Do?," FAQ, 2023, <https://birdsarentreal.com/pages/faq>.

³⁶⁹ Birds Aren't Real, "Chapter 1," About, 2023, <https://birdsarentreal.com/pages/about#chapter-1>.

³⁷⁰ Birds Aren't Real, "What is bird poop?," FAQ, 2023, <https://birdsarentreal.com/pages/faq>.

³⁷¹ Birds Aren't Real, *Birds Aren't Real 1987*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXu4_s5nuwI; Birds Aren't Real, *CIA Agent Confesses to Bird Drone Surveillance*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l30_APBNPXg.

³⁷² Birds Aren't Real, *THE JOURNEY BEGINS*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kp9PmdAs7FI>, Figure 5.



Figure 5. Peter McIndoe's "Research and Surveillance" van.

The "truth" behind *Birds Aren't Real* has since been revealed to the wider public, a truth that the entire movement had spent years in on and had known from the start. Birds *are* real; the theory is not. Peter McIndoe, the originator of the "Birds Aren't Real" faux-conspiracy, states that the inspiration for the project was an impromptu counterprotest to the 2017 Women's March in Memphis, Tennessee, recounting that these counter-protesters were "older, bigger white men. They were clear aggravators. They were encroaching on something that was not their event, they had no business being there."³⁷³ In response, McIndoe hastily crafted a sign based on "the most absurd thing" he could think of—that "Birds Aren't Real"—and ad-libbed the general tenets of the theory in a matter of minutes. The recordings of McIndoe's conspiratorial performance

³⁷³ Zoe Williams, "'The Lunacy Is Getting More Intense': How Birds Aren't Real Took on the Conspiracy Theorists," *The Guardian*, April 14, 2022, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/apr/14/the-lunacy-is-getting-more-intense-how-birds-arent-real-took-on-the-conspiracy-theorists>.

gained a cult following, which convinced him and his collaborators to codify the satirical conspiracy theory and to portray himself as a personality in the vein of Alex Jones and other conspiracists.³⁷⁴ Many “true believers” delighted in the hackneyed aesthetics of McIndoe’s “Research and Surveillance” van and his many appearances on local news stations attempting to debunk the movement, all while McIndoe maintained kayfabe for nearly five years. Inviting McIndoe for an interview after a billboard proclaiming “Birds Aren’t Real” appeared in Memphis, TN, in 2019, WREG News Channel 3 directly ask if the “theory” is satirical, to which he bluntly replies, “Honestly, that’s kind of offensive...I don’t think you would have said that if I’d said, ‘Birds are real.’ I don’t know why the other side of the argument can’t be treated with equal respect,” a rhetorical response popular with conspiracists.³⁷⁵

Though *Birds Aren’t Real* does not claim to be a work of unfiction, I identify it as an unfiction project because of how much of its aesthetics, “beliefs,” and events blended into the cultural milieu of QAnon and the rise in conspiracism throughout the COVID pandemic, allowing participants to become immersed within the community and the shared, co-created fiction produced therein while also exploring how conspiracy theories and those who believe them operate and are treated by others. McIndoe’s boisterous, confident character, for example, is based on his upbringing within an extremely religious and conspiratorial community where “evolution was a massive brainwashing plan by the Democrats and Obama was the

³⁷⁴ *The Truth Behind “Birds Aren’t Real,”* My Life Online (Vice, 2022), https://video.vice.com/en_us/video/the-truth-behind-birds-arent-real/618d509f2b5e414b16210b73.

³⁷⁵ WREG News Channel 3, “*Birds Aren’t Real*” Campaign, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNtr0RahRqM>, 0:57-1:30.

Antichrist.”³⁷⁶ Mia Bloom and Sophia Moskalenko in *Pastels and Pedophiles: Inside the Mind of QAnon* draw a clear line between spiritual belief and conspiratorial belief, noting that “QAnon blended its beliefs with religious dogma, cherry-picking verses from religious texts to substantiate its most outlandish claims” and that quarantines and COVID restrictions pushed these groups into online spaces where QAnon beliefs ran rampant.³⁷⁷ In addition, the rough-and-tumble iconography of the *Birds Aren’t Real* van and the many images and videos created by fans in support of the movement reference the slipshod infographics and signs of QAnon supporters “screaming about Hillary Clinton and martial law.”³⁷⁸ McIndoe’s raucous appeals against authority, the media, and the nebulous “they” also call to a widespread “death of expertise” in American culture, wherein legitimate experts in science, technology, information, and politics are lambasted as corrupt while “ignorance is considered a virtue.”³⁷⁹ Though parodic in nature, *Birds Aren’t Real* can struggle to be read as such because of how widespread conspiracism has become.

If *Birds Aren’t Real* can be considered an unfiction project—one that manages to blur the distinction between performance and reality—then what should we make of it? On one hand, *Birds Aren’t Real* expertly mimics the cult of personality and ludicrous beliefs of conspiracy theorists, anti-vaxxers, and QAnons. Zoe Williams applauds the movement, calling it:

³⁷⁶ Taylor Lorenz, “Birds Aren’t Real, or Are They? Inside a Gen Z Conspiracy Theory.,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2021, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/technology/birds-arent-real-gen-z-misinformation.html>.

³⁷⁷ Mia Bloom and Sophia Moskalenko, *Pastels and Pedophiles: Inside the Mind of QAnon* (Stanford (Calif.): Redwood press, 2021): 151-152.

³⁷⁸ Mike Rothschild, *The Storm Is upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything* (Brooklyn London: Melville House, 2021): 148.

³⁷⁹ Bloom and Moskalenko, *Pastels and Pedophiles*, 153.

“the most perfect, playful distillation of where we are in relation to the media landscape we’ve built but can’t control, and which only half of us can find our way around. It’s a made-up conspiracy theory that is just realistic enough, as conspiracies go, to convince QAnon supporters that birds *aren’t* real, but has just enough satirical flags that generation Z recognises immediately what is going on. It’s a conspiracy-within-a-conspiracy, a little aneurysm of reality and mockery in the bloodstream of the mad pizzagate-style theories that animate the ‘alt-right.’”³⁸⁰

Others, however, fear that the project may be too clever for its own good. Although McIndoe argues that *Birds Aren’t Real* provides a space for people to “accept the lunacy of it all and be a bird truther for a moment in time when everything’s so crazy,” the focus on parodying conspiracy theorists can cause other issues to fade out of view.³⁸¹ Lauren Shoemaker writes that “BAR’s ironic style obscures humans’ threats to avian life by scapegoating birds as surveillance mechanisms, all the while profiting from people’s apathetic stances,” adding that the movement “runs the risk of reinforcing helplessness rather than stoking agency when time is of the essence for action on climate change and agricultural practices, two large threats to birds.”³⁸² In other words, BAR’s joking antagonism towards artificially constructed birds downplays the continued harm perpetrated by humans towards actual birds. Another critic warns of other performances-turned-conspiracies such as how the Bavarian Illuminati’s “free-form art project-cum-prank-cum-political-protest” now influences much of modern conspiracy culture as a legitimate explanation for the world order.³⁸³ The risks of *Birds Aren’t Real* thus range from distracting the

³⁸⁰ Williams, “The Lunacy Is Getting More Intense.”

³⁸¹ 60 Minutes, *Birds Aren’t Real: The Conspiracy Theory That Satirizes Conspiracy Theories*, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsgrYog6W0>, 4:00-4:22.

³⁸² Lauren Shoemaker, “Birds Aren’t Real: Narrative and Aesthetic Irony in For-Profit Conspiracy,” in *Avian Aesthetics in Literature and Culture: Birds and Humans in the Popular Imagination*, ed. Danette DiMarco and Timothy Ruppert (Lexington Books, 2022): 225; 216.

³⁸³ Ben Davis, “What If the ‘Birds Aren’t Real’ Movement Backfires? + More Questions I Have About the Week’s Art News,” *Artnet News*, December 15, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/curiosities-birds-arent-real-google-indie-aesthetics-2048616>.

populace from other serious issues to accidentally creating a “real” conspiracy theory held aloft by those who simply are not in on the joke.

There may very well be a handful of people who look at the tongue-in-cheek screed of *Birds Aren't Real* and believe it wholesale, and Connor Gaydos, who helped write the lore of *Birds Aren't Real's* website, argues that, “If anyone believes birds aren't real, we're the last of their concerns, because then there's probably no conspiracy they don't believe.”³⁸⁴ Gaydos' statement echoes the common narrative that conspiracy theorists are gullible, deceived, or unintelligent, which does lend some credence to Shoemaker's argument. However, Shoemaker's notion that the movement profits from “apathetic stances” ignores how members have swarmed anti-abortion protesters and work to “de-escalate tensions and delegitimize the people they are marching alongside with irreverent chants.”³⁸⁵ And though they are vocally, yet playfully anti-bird, the movement does state that the merchandise they sell to help fund the movement “is free from predatory labor practices, damaging environmental operations, or anything else that may hurt our community around the globe.”³⁸⁶ Based on the efforts of McIndoe and certain wings of the movement, *Birds Aren't Real* as a project that satirizes conspiracy theories and is viewed by both its participants and detractors as a joke has proven a desire to use their bending of fantastical and fact to do more than make puns about birdwatching.

In a sense, part of the paranoia surrounding *Birds Aren't Real* and real conspiracy theories comes from the need to construct a boundary between fact and fiction. Thomas Gieryn

³⁸⁴ Lorenze, “Birds Aren't Real, or Are They?”.

³⁸⁵ Lorenze, “Birds Aren't Real, or Are They?”.

³⁸⁶ Birds Aren't Real, “Is Birds Aren't Real ethically sourced and sustainable?,” FAQ, 2023, <https://birdsarentreal.com/pages/faq>.

describes scientists as performing “boundary-work” that uses “their attribution of selected characteristics to the institution of science (i.e., to its practitioners, methods, stock of knowledge, values and work organization) for purposes of constructing a social boundary that distinguishes some intellectual activities as ‘non-science.’”³⁸⁷ Elaborating on Gieryn’s work, Josef Nguyen states that creating a clear boundary between science and non-science or fact and fiction “depends on conventional cultural perceptions of science as equivalent to nature, fact, and objectivity,” while framing everything else as “fantasy, fiction, or bias.”³⁸⁸ So then, because birds are verifiably true by scientific standards, *Birds Aren’t Real* conspiracists are regarded as fanciful larks crowing about nothing based on the idea that their primary act of engagement is fictional. By viewing the fiction of *Birds Aren’t Real* in comparison to avian conservation efforts, Shoemaker effectively argues that people gathering outside of Twitter to protest its blue bird logo could thus contribute to the eradication of bird species. While an oversimplification, the idea that something like *Birds Aren’t Real* could negatively impact the world by not being the “right” kind of fiction—one that seriously advocates for the birds, not jokingly against them—harkens back to Plato’s belief that fiction must refrain from presenting the unvirtuous as virtuous. In a similar vein, the idea that *Birds Aren’t Real* could be absorbed as fact by conspiracists speaks to fears that the fictional can become, or is already, real and thus a measurable threat. By treating the movement as something that needs to be debunked, the question of “How can we read this performance?” is replaced by “How can we prove that this

³⁸⁷ Thomas F. Gieryn, “Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 6 (1983): 782.

³⁸⁸ Josef Nguyen, *The Digital Is Kid Stuff: Making Creative Laborers for a Precarious Economy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 134.

performance is fictitious?” and curtails attempts to view the work of the birdwatchers as anything other than a total break from reality to reify the status quo. In other words, *Birds Aren't Real* is treated as a matter of fact that must be contested, not a matter of concern that can be addressed in its terms.

Examining the project under the lens of unfiction reveals a much finer point to be made, that beneath the playful chanting and fake conspiracy is a practice of collaborative narrative and worldmaking. McIndoe considers *Birds Aren't Real*, “like an igloo. Making a shelter out of the same thing that’s posing the threat. Take the materials of what is around us, build something with them, be safe in there together, and laugh.”³⁸⁹ This description of the project bears similarities to what Stephen Duncombe describes as real, ethical spectacle, “a dream self-consciously enacted,” wherein participants can “build identity, community, and solidarity.”³⁹⁰ The reality of spectacular performances like *Birds Aren't Real* is “real” in that it is “what it claims to be;” though at first incongruous with the movement’s parodic nature, Duncombe argues that such spectacle “cannot be ‘exposed—it is already what it appears to be.’”³⁹¹ Because *Birds Aren't Real*’s bombastic claims and knowing audience are keenly aware of both what the movement is for (to allow for communion and community based on a shared fiction) and why it exists (the growing disconnect and distrust between people fueled by conspiracies and those who reject them as fools and fakes), the project can “reveal and amplify the real *through* the spectacle,” and thus use its

³⁸⁹ Williams, “The Lunacy is Getting More Intense.”

³⁹⁰ Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 169.

³⁹¹ Duncombe, *Dream*, 153, 154.

unsettling of reality as a site of conversation and change.³⁹² Instead of trying to cleanly sever empirical reality and imaginations of alternative worlds—worlds where conspiracy theorists are viewed as people while their ideas about pizza parlors, 5G towers, and the Great Awakening can be engaged with on their own ludicrous terms—*Birds Aren't Real* signals how unfiction can provide a space that is real enough for its participants.

4.6 Conclusion

What unfiction points to is that focusing on whether someone truly believes in a fiction, be it that birds are government drones or that COVID vaccines secretly inject tracking devices, ultimately does not matter; at least, it should not matter because the communities that form around these fictions are more than capable of organizing and acting out their beliefs, ironically or seriously. The overwhelming emphasis on disproving conspiracy theories emphasizes the current harms conspiracists are capable of, yet it downplays the conspiracists' understanding of the world as illegitimate, uneducated, or factually incorrect. This is not to say that conspiracists are harmless—far from it—but that they are no less harmful than legitimate scientists that cast doubt on current scientific consensus for profit.³⁹³ Using factual (or fabricated) evidence as a weapon for asserting one's worldview goes both ways.

The emphasis on belief in conspiracy theories also overlooks two notable issues that discourse analysis can struggle to interpret and that makes debunking these theories an even more difficult endeavor: classifying “belief” and false belief. For the first, one only needs to flip

³⁹² Duncombe, *Dream*, 155.

³⁹³ See Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*.

back to Monroe’s Q-Key map to grasp how encompassing QAnon is as a conspiracy theory. If someone believes there was a second gunman on the grassy knoll that killed JFK, do they believe in QAnon? Similarly, if someone opts not to believe in parts of the QAnon theory but adhere to other parts, do they still count as a true believer? Kaleigh Rogers of FiveThirtyEight remarks on the difficulty of defining who fits into the larger conception of conspiracists, who can be labeled a “Q” believer, and who believes the average number of conspiracy theories for an American: “What if someone thinks a few Q ideas sound plausible? Should a poll consider them a ‘believer?’ What about Americans who endorse QAnon beliefs without realizing they’re associated with QAnon?”³⁹⁴ The point here is that gaging “true belief” in QAnon or any conspiracy requires taking people at their word, something often not freely given to researchers.

And this assumes that conspiracists are *real* conspiracists. QAnon believers have dealt with numerous scam artists, grifters, and moral entrepreneurs that have stated a belief in these conspiracies to gain their confidence and, in time, their money. These scams include cryptocurrency pump-and-dump schemes banking on distrust in public finance, digital marketing firms spreading disinformation, and “Trump Bucks” that will allegedly increase in value if Donald Trump wins the 2024 election.³⁹⁵ Those impacted by these scams signed up believing that they were legitimate, only to find out otherwise. On the flip side, long-time adherents of

³⁹⁴ Kaleigh Rogers, “Why It’s So Hard To Gauge Support For QAnon,” *FiveThirtyEight* (blog), June 11, 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-its-so-hard-to-gauge-support-for-qanon/>.

³⁹⁵ Nick Robins-Early, “Disinformation for Profit: Scammers Cash in on Conspiracy Theories,” *The Guardian*, February 21, 2022, sec. Media, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2022/feb/20/facebook-disinformation-ottawa-social-media>; David Gilbert, “Inside the QAnon Crypto Scam That Cost People Millions and One Man His Life,” *Vice* (blog), June 28, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/pkgda8/qanon-crypto-scam-whiplash347>; Jack Colwell, “Colwell: You Can Take This Deal to the Bank,” *South Bend Tribune*, accessed April 5, 2024, <https://www.southbendtribune.com/story/opinion/columns/2023/06/08/trump-bucks-are-shockingly-a-scam/70297305007/>.

QAnon have opted to renounce their belief in the theory, with some admitting fault for believing in the first place. Although one may presume some sort of victory for doing so, it is also just as likely done for political or strategic gain. Jacob Chansley, the “QAnon Shaman” seen wearing a horned headdress while participating in the January 6th insurrection, pitched an unsuccessful congressional bid in Arizona while attempting to, in his words, “rebrand” his beliefs, adding that “the QAnon label has been stigmatized with the number of sub-labels or subcategories, conspiracy theories, white supremacists, terrorists...I don't want to be associated with anything that the media has already maligned.”³⁹⁶ Even Ron Watkins, who has been suspected of being “Q” himself, attempted a congressional run that showcased him repeatedly denying the existence of QAnon, which highlights just how tenuous “belief” can be.³⁹⁷

Bruno Latour cautions that “The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles.”³⁹⁸ While there is value in combatting harmful misinformation and in disproving conspiracy theories that can lead people to view others with suspicion and hate, looking to those who believe in untrue things as gullible, unintelligent, and uneducated will only serve to drive them further into isolation. Likewise, an overreliance on skepticism and doubt can create an endless loop of debate instead of real change. Instead of arguing over whether people literally believe that birds exist or not, we can choose to look at what they do with their beliefs, be they strongly held or instrumental.

³⁹⁶ Katherine Fung, “QAnon Shaman Rejects Conspiracy Theory That Helped Make Him Famous,” *Newsweek*, December 18, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/qanon-shaman-rejects-conspiracy-theory-that-helped-make-him-famous-1853297>.

³⁹⁷ Jacob Rosen et al., “QAnon Promoter Ron Watkins Is Running for Congress in Arizona - CBS News,” October 29, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/qanon-promoter-ron-watkins-is-running-for-congress-in-arizona/>.

³⁹⁸ Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”, 246.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

What does it mean to escape? This dissertation has argued that the COVID-19 pandemic shifted conversations about escapism and highlighted how discourse surrounding media practices of storytelling, fandom, and audience participation responded to lockdown and to societal issues like conspiracism, environmentalism, and social justice. However, this description does not fit within the common understanding of escapism, which can often explicitly state that media and media practice can be used to waste time, to distract, to be useless, or to indulge in fantasy. This dissertation project is not capable of disproving these claims nor is it interested in recuperating escape as something that can be instrumentalized. Rather, this research highlights how the ways we talk about escape *as* useless often obscures the rich discussions people engage in about the media they turn to. Many people claim that escapist media helped them to survive the loneliness of lockdown, better understand the world around them, and prepare them to confront a bizarre reality where cheers for those at the frontlines of an international pandemic were drowned out by hatred and violence towards those same people. My research here extends that discourse as escapism itself should be examined with serious intent. By doing so, we can better understand how escapism is structured by privileges of class, race, and identity and can pay attention to what specific subjects are allowed to escape into fiction and by what practices they do so.

As this dissertation has shown, escapism can take many forms and cross social barriers. *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness* grew well beyond its true crime audience, and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* gave novice players opportunities to connect with long-time fans and friends alike. Through both, audiences could communicate their experiences and affects

through the motifs of animal media, comparing their life in lockdown to the cages of Joe Exotic's tigers and Tom Nook's islands. Tabletop Role Playing games, long relegated as a nerd's hobby, became a central part of people's weeks and something positive to look forward to as the pandemic carried on. Yet these avenues for power fantasy were negotiated by players and developers as they sought to establish who held real power and how these fictions could influence real change. Unfiction continues to garner attention from audiences attuned to the signs that what they read online might be a gateway to a deeper story that can reflect reality through a fictional lens. Attempts to "disprove" unfiction projects mirror efforts to disprove conspiracy theories shared by family and celebrity alike, and this emphasis on asserting a singular consensus of reality detracts from how these fictions—whether believed to be real or just pretend—can still be used to affect the lives of others.

These discussions and discourses of escapism and escapist media will likely shift and change as the methods and media used to escape grow in popularity or fall into obscurity. Disregarding escapism as meaningless ignores all of this in favor of a simpler narrative where those who enjoy the wrong kinds of media become the wrong kinds of people. Taking escapism seriously can instead allow for a more thorough accounting of how periods of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic can encourage certain kinds of escapism and how these periods differ from our usual practices of escape. Regardless of how escapism is studied in the future, the discourses surrounding escapism depicted in this dissertation can serve as an insight into a brief, tragic, and complex period where fiction—at least for some—became a treasured part of reality.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Cameron Irby (he/him) is a doctoral candidate in the Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication program of the Harry W. Bass Jr. School of Arts, Humanities, and Technology at The University of Texas at Dallas. Since 2018, he has been working as a teaching and research assistant and as a collaborator for the Fashioning Circuits and Studio for Mediating Play labs. Fascinated by the proliferation of conspiracy theories, "alternative facts," and urban legends as well as the overwhelming number of writings (books, fanfictions, social media posts), visual media (comics, movies, videos, memes), audio (music, remixes, podcasts), and other miscellaneous forms of storytelling (analog and digital games, Live-Action Role Play, pop-up exhibitions), Cameron studies how stories express the power of the imagination and are able to shape the world. His research interests also include critical media studies, fandoms and fan culture, queer affect theory, media preservation and archaeology, and digital cultures. Cameron completed his master's in English in 2018 at the University of Louisiana—Monroe. His research has been presented at the Narrative Society, Fan Studies Network-North America, and Console-ing Passions conferences.

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University of Louisiana—Monroe	Monroe, LA
Masters in English	2018
Thesis: Teaching Electronic Literature: Methods and Integration	
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Bachelors in English	2016
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Teaching Assistant for “Attitudes and Behaviors,” School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication, UT Dallas, Fall 2020

Teaching Assistant for “Introduction to Technoculture,” Bass School of Arts, Humanities, & Technology, UT Dallas, Fall 2019, Spring 2020

Instructor of Record for “Composition I” and “Composition II”, School of Humanities, University of Louisiana—Monroe, Fall 2017, Spring 2018

Teaching Assistant for “Honors Seminar – Electronic Literature Studies,” School of Humanities, University of Louisiana—Monroe, Spring 2016

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

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Collaborator, Studio for Mediating Play
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CONFERENCE PRESENTATION, PANELS, AND INSTALLATIONS

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“Role-Playing World-Making: Tabletop Role Playing Games as Utopian Practice.” Panelist on Designing Counter-Narratives in Games and Gaming Culture with Cody Mejeur, Michael DeAnda, and Wendi Serra. 2023 International Conference on Narrative. Dallas, Texas. March 2023.

“We’re All Animals: Tiger King, Animal Crossing, and Finding Escape in Lockdown.” Panelist on Fandom on Lockdown with Emily Coccia, Pilar Lacasa & Rut Martine, Martin Lukanov, and Melody McMullan. Fan Studies Network-North America 2022 – Inside Voices. October 2022.

“Disenchanted the Magic Circle.” Panelist on Not Just a Game: Disenchanted, Blurring, and Breaking the Magic Circle with Jack Murray and Atanur Andic. Console-ing Passions 2022 – Reinvention, June 2022.

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