Mapping the Extended Frontiers of Escapism:

Binge-watching and Hyperdiegetic Exploration

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ABSTRACT (125 words)

Through a micro-ethnographic engagement with consumers' binge-watching experiences of the web-TV series *House of Cards*, this videography explores what we consider to be the "extended frontiers" of escapism. In contrast to passive/active classifications of escapism which risk reducing escapist fare to a *textual resource* which can be categorised discretely at the point of consumption, we consider "sustained encounters" with escapist fare as *appropriable textures* characterised by ongoing and less immediately discernible processes. Drawing upon Hills' (2002) concept of hyperdiegesis, we consider potentially "projective" forms of narrative transportation in binge-watching; heterochronic breaks from normal patterns of time; and *post-object* behaviours. In doing so, we outline how forms of escapism traditionally considered passive may under certain conditions represent much richer and more complex enterprises than previously imagined.

Vimeo video link: https://vimeo.com/231742345 Password: JMM

Keywords: binge-watching, consumer culture, consumer experience, ethnography hyperdiegesis, theory

Summary statement of Contribution (150 words)

This research extends our understanding of the nature of escapist pursuits for consumers by going beyond the imposition of a clear "active versus passive categorisation" to conceptualisations of escapism (Kuo, Lutz & Hiler, 2016: 499). Through exploring behaviours during and around "binge watching", this research complicates the imposition of divisions between the passivity and activity of escapism and documents the ambiguous nature of sustained exposure to a particular text. We show that the lengthy and enveloping journey constituted by bingeing an ontologically secure, long-form TV series exposes audiences to "hyperdiegetic" worlds which disrupt time and catalyse use of imagination, the interaction of one's thoughts with those worlds and ongoing ideational involvement in narratives and character activities beyond the screen. We suggest hyperdiegesis enables consumers to prolong and extend "the frontiers" of what might have previously been considered passive escapism in ways that involve participation as *more* than an observer.

Introduction

> *"[Binge watching's] so profoundly antisocial… Consumed at such dosage, there's a lag between consumption and absorption. You emerge punch-drunk, eyes swimming. The characters visit you in your dreams. Real life seems messy by comparison and a pain to get back to."*
>
> Emma Brockes, *The Guardian*, August 2013

Since Holbrook & Hirschman's (1982) rallying call for consumer researchers to better account for the importance of fantasy in consumption, the market has regularly been recognised for its role in the provision of a myriad of resources and activities for circumventing the mundane (Belk & Costa, 1998; Goulding & Saren, 2009). The concept of escapism – or the self-selected separation of oneself from one's immediate reality – through the consumption of media resources, or *texts,* such as television, music, games and movies has long been an important subject of consumer culture studies (Batat & Wohlfeil, 2009; Giddings, 2009; Molesworth, 2009). The videographic research that this paper accompanies however centres not just on a solitary text as a resource for escapism, but is attentive to the complete temporal, spatial and cognitive commitment consumers make to this resource. Specifically we account for the alchemy of space, narrative involvement, personal time, and imagination captured within "binge-watching" which we define as the marathon-consumption of serialised content from the same TV show for an extended period of time. While previous work has explored the liberatory dividends consumers as escapists can enjoy from short-term engagements with characters and stories in texts through theories such as narrative transportation (Batat & Wohlfeil 2009; Green & Brock 2000), immersion (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010) and parasocial interaction (Giles, 2002), we suggest new concepts are needed to interrogate the wider existential nature and character of escaping through narratives over longer, more sustained periods.

We draw upon the potential of binge watching to extend beyond the frontiers of a "passive" or observational form of escapism, and induct escapists into the more active arena of what Matt Hills (2002) refers to as "hyperdiegesis", i.e. the potential for playful intervention and ideation with a narrative. In short, we contend with the ability of consumers to *actively* fill in gaps and secure answers within the TV narrative itself but also within their own life-worlds throughout and around the time spent binge-watching. We classify this state of thinking about and engaging with a text over and beyond the core site of consumption (i.e. beyond the point of actual watching/observation) as the "extended frontiers" of escapism.

Through a micro-ethnographic engagement with consumers' binge-watching experiences of the Netflix series *House of Card*s, our videography problematises invoking clear distinctions between "active" and "passive" categorisations of escapism (see Kokho & Birch, 2014; Kuo *et al*. 2016). We theorise an ambivalence characterised by consumers' sustained exposure to these imaginary playgrounds, which are based on a stable and coherent possibility of spaces and events, and are free to be subjectively interacted with and consumed both within and around the actual practice of binge-watching. In total, our research is guided by the following question: how, under certain conditions, might forms of escapism which are traditionally considered passive exhibit aspects of an active character and what does this ambiguity mean for our understanding of consumers' use of escapists texts?

We therefore follow calls for videographers to "think more critically"; to adopt a *critical edge* and problematise theory through the medium of video rather than remaining simply descriptive and representational (Hietenan & Andéhn, *in this issue*). In contrast to the passive/active dichotomisation which risks conceptualising escapist fare as simply a textual resource which can be anatomised neatly at the point of consumption according to antecedents and processes, we consider sustained encounters with escapist fare as

appropriable textures characterised by a more agglutinate existential state which goes beyond the point of consumption. Here, we propose the extendability of escapist mediated realities. To begin our commentary, we first provide some theoretical background to our videography.

Hyperdiegetic Worlds: Looking beyond Passive vs. Active Escapism

In a recent attempt to better crystallise a tacit "active" versus "passive" categorisation of escapism, Kuo & colleagues (2016) provide a useful discussion of the differences in interactivity and presence as key points of differentiation amongst escapist texts. For these authors, conventional television viewing represents a clear form of passive escapism (or third person observation) as it lacks ability for both interactivity and real presence in the narrative world. In contrast, pursuits that require interactivity and presence from a first-person orientation, such as taking control of a character in a videogame, are painted as active forms of escapism. These thresholds, while intuitive, become difficult to delineate however when looking beyond *diegeses* (i.e. constructed and presented narrative structures within the primary text) and accounting instead for the possibility of *hyperdiegeses* (i.e. narrative structures amenable to co-construction and extension beyond the primary text). Recognising the possibility of hyperdiegeses allows for texts which are conventionally considered passive to be revisited as sites that can, under certain conditions, offer greater forms of interactivity and closer text–audience presence than previously observed. This, we argue, necessitates that particular pursuits, such as binge-watching, must be recognised as ambiguous phenomena that require alternative conceptualisation.

Hills (2002: 137) originally defined hyperdiegesis as, "a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension". The

phenomenon catalyses the cognitive abilities of those who live outside of the text to work within its depth and coherency to complete ludic and narrative gaps. Hyperdiegesis suggests mediated realities, while delivered through primary narratives, image and sound which cannot be objectively changed, can nevertheless be appropriated by consumers in their own imaginings and interactions with others. Hills coined the term to denote the internal consistency, comprehensibility and longevity that makes cult TV serials such as *Doctor Who* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* cohere as ontologically secure worlds that can support discussion with others and internal dialogues with oneself, while fostering speculation, conjecture and ongoing cultural production. The hyperdiegetic world demands critical, committed and active engagement from its audience or, as Hills (2002: 138) suggests, requires "stimulating creative speculation" to fully become "a trusted environment for affective play". Elsewhere, hyperdiegetic explorations have been conceptualised as going "beyond" the television set (Ross, 2008) and existing in the minds and lives of consumers as "vast and incompletable metatexts" (Gwenllian-Jones, 2004: 85). Moreover, such explorations cannot be discretely bracketed away as "passive escapism" because of the ambivalent interactions between the text itself and the consumer's imagination:

> "Immersive experience is an alchemical effect of text and imagination, a species of willed hallucination that transports the reader into another realm. It is not a passive experience; the reader must play an active part in creating and sustaining its integrity, drawing on memory as well as imagination to reinforce its perceptual substance." (Gwenllian-Jones, 2004: 84)

In contrast to Kuo et al's (2016: 501) understanding of interactivity as objectively exerting discernible control and opportunity to "directly influence" the mediated reality, media scholars (including Hills and Gwenllian-Jones) suggest interactivity must also be understood more subjectively as a less discernible form of cognitive process constituted by an indirect interaction of the consumer's imagination with the narrative world. Moreover, these authors

did not at the time of writing consider the on-demand, self-scheduling binge-watching activities of consumers and so, in the current research, we submit the importance of *sustained exposure* to televisual narratives. This adds a temporal aspect to Gwenllian-Jones' "alchemical effect" quoted above.

We suggest consumers' exposure to consistent themes, characters and plots of a single text over sustained periods provides an even closer, longer proximity to on-screen issues, further facilitating the conditions for hyperdiegetic exploration. Sustained exposure, we suggest, creates "continuous flow" (Williams, 2003: 95) between episodes, and ameliorates unnatural gaps, recaps and unwieldly continuity devices between the ongoing production of narrative which might otherwise challenge consumers' presence in the text, thus allowing for continued immersion and absorption, and contrasting with Kuo *et al*.'s (2016: 501) positioning of such viewing as "passive" or "predominantly observational in nature". To provide an empirical case for problematising the passive-active dichotomy and the possibility of more ambiguous extended frontiers of escapism, we now turn to the context of our study, *House of Cards* – a series designed by Netflix's streaming video service to be binged (Klarer 2014), and we detail how some of the principles of hyperdiegesis exist within the text.

The Hyperdiegesis of House of Cards

Escapism, like all forms of consumer behavior, is not the endogenous result of individual agency alone but is prefigured and enabled by structural and contextual conditions of the market (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Hietenan & Andéhn (*in this issue*) argue video plays a particularly important role in the subjectifying machinery of the capitalist system. By extension, marketised video services such as Netflix act with machine-like efficiency towards inducing and activating desire and indoctrinating audiences as consumers. In Netflix's

political drama series *House of Cards* (2013 – Present, *HoC* thereafter), narratives around power and its corrupting influences, and the dramatic characterisation of those in power, are handled strategically to ensure that the serial is particularly amenable to ongoing audience analysis, deconstruction and speculation. The agentic interpretative powers of audiences are thereby leveraged as a source of value by Netflix and audience members are "put to work" as reflexive, loyal consumers of complex, marketizable narrative worlds.

HoC's antihero protagonist Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) and his aides represent complex carnivalesque remoldings of real-world political figures. Off-screen threats to Frank's political career and faint glimmers of backstories, characters, circumstances and places of relevance to his past are carefully punctuated into the series to allow for reflection and discussion by the audience. The "overarching intricacy" and "coherence and continuity" between episodes that Hills (2002: 138) considers to be so central to the phenomenon of hyperdiegesis is carefully leveraged as the flagstone upon which *HoC* is built. The series' director David Fincher has asserted the importance of producing narratives according to a "long-form" nature, implying that texts such as film do not afford audiences the same complexity, longevity or richness of characterisations that television facilitates (Sepinwall, 2013). To preserve the "ontological security" of this long-form televisual nature (Hills, 2002: 138), *Netflix* ordinarily releases all episodes of a new season of a show as a package, thus circumventing interruptions between the narrative and thereby eliminating audiences' wait for subsequent episodes (Klarer, 2014: 205).

Through binge-watching *HoC*, audiences are immersed in "Frank's world" and while its entirety may never be fully revealed to them onscreen, they are left with enough textual detail to imagine possibilities beyond the material presented to them. Following Hietenan & Andéhn, we must recognize that the producers behind video material such as *HoC* engage

and encourage consumers through providing "the frame of possibilities of our unconscious desires" (*in this issue*). The hyperdiegesis that these producers help to incubate reflects desires to express identity and connect with others through shared discourse and debate. These desires are further assisted by web resources such as fan forums, fan-based websites, and social media pages which extend opportunities for speculation, fantasy and rumination beyond the television set and ensure that the experience of escapism cannot be fully contained to or exhausted within a single medium.

A Note on Methods

The decision to conduct our research using a videographic design rather than more conventional modes of representation was largely galvanized by nascent conversations that center on the belief that videographic work can and must have an explicitly critical orientation (Hietenan & Andéhn, *in this issue*). In our study, we wished to take a critical approach to the concept of consumer escapism using a medium suitably equipped both to deliver a polemic engagement with extant conceptualizations of escapism and to represent the evidence that problematizes these conceptualizations. The graphic nature of film, we felt, provides a suitable canvas to theorise the ambivalence between both the passivity and activity of escapism as it is lived and might otherwise lose its communicative impact in more conventional, textual forms of representation. Videography makes visible what otherwise might never be seen or remain unsaid (Belk & Kozinets, 2005) and, in our study, allows for the passing of time and the changing of space to be captured as they occur rather than retrospectively summarized in the static, introspective accounts of traditional interview-based work. This dynamism was particularly important in telling our theoretical story through the context of binge-watching, which includes participants' long-haul commitment to the TV

series, real-time expressions of emotion, and ongoing speculation about what may or may not occur next on the screen.

Overall, our videographic research is based upon an improvised micro-ethnographic approach (Streeck & Mehus, 2005; Erickson, 1992) and is part of a larger research project which explores the motivating conditions and social dynamics of binge watching. Micro-ethnography typically works within "small-scale", localized ecologies to derive limited segments of data to describe "brief moments of everyday technocultural activity" (Giddings 2009: 149). Micro-ethnography lends itself particularly well to video-/image- based data collection, and has previously used such visual means to provide close readings of transitory, proximal sites of escapism (Taylor, Kampe & Bell, 2015). Our micro-ethnographic videography of binge-watching centres on 15 binge watchers who have professed to bingeing *HoC* and other TV shows. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling approach: the lead author approached acquaintances identifying as binge watchers with an interest in *HoC*, and from this initial participant-set was introduced to others.

Departing from traditional micro-ethnographic investigations, which may avoid consulting participants' opinions/reflections, we follow Taylor et al.'s (2015) approach to discussing with participants their techno-cultural activities. In-depth interview were therefore conducted with each participant in February 2016 before the release of season 4 of *HoC* to ascertain their binge-watch motivations, their thoughts on the narrative worlds of *HoC* to date, and to gain an a priori understanding of the role of the binge as a resource and medium for escapism. A second post binge interview was conducted with these same participants within a few days of their completed binge of the 13-episode 4th season to explore relevant emergent and conceptual areas. A number of these interviews were video-recorded and all participants captured provided signed consent to be featured in a final video product in addition to permitting material be used for research purposes more generally. A collaborative

approach between the first author and participants was nurtured to produce videographic images of the material settings (Belk & Kozinets 2005), chiefly consumers' living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms over long periods, sometimes late into the evening.

As a research team, analysis of the full range of data was undertaken in a hermeneutic and recursive back-and-forth approach to ensure that the representations, conceptualisations and subsequent interpretations truly reflect the recorded data (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990). The video-based data was then collated thematically, reviewed by the full research team, compared with written analytic notes, and ultimately produced into a short film. The iterative hermeneutical approach of shifting back to the data, researcher notes and the literature continued throughout post-production of the film.

Running Commentary

In our videography, we visit first how sustained commitment to the hyperdiegetic world of *HoC* represents a form of "projective" narrative transportation, whereby consumers project their thoughts, concerns and ideas onto the text during immersion. Second, our film explores the often-solitary nature and long-haul commitment a consumer makes to a binge, and how self-scheduling their own narrative pace outside of standard time can be considered as a form of "heterochronism" (Foucault, 1986). Third, our film captures the practices by which consumers mourn the conclusion of their favourite, serialised content, and prolong their escapism through post-binge behaviour. We now explore these three areas in more detail.

Projective aspects of Narrative Transportation

One of the most striking areas of discussion to emerge in our research is that the often long-term commitment made to alternative worlds is not simply a practice in detached or *mindless* transportation. Rather, binge-watchers bring personal and social concerns with them on their journeys, and often return to reality with learned insights and speculations to better accommodate their own lives. This phenomenon closely relates to the concept of narrative transportation, conceptualised as a process by which "the consumer actively seeks to be taken away from one's everyday life into different narrative worlds, where one could experience a different self" (Batat & Wohlfeil, 2009: 372). Previously, Kuo et al (2016) have suggested that narrative transportation, while achieving captivation, ultimately lacks opportunity for true interactivity, thereby positioning this phenomenon as a passive form of escapism. We agree that while binge-watching certainly does lack potential for genuine presence and influence over on-screen activities, classifying the narrative transportation involved in prolonged binge activities as unconditionally passive becomes problematic. When taking into account both the time committed to the transportation, as well as conditions that a consumer departs from, interactivity is detected between the textual events and the consumer's own biographical experiences and knowledge.

The questions that are left open, the plots that are hinted at but never executed, and the spaces that are left unvisited in the *HoC* world allow for hyperdiegetic exploration. In the film, one of our participants goes so far as to describe feeling as though she has come to know on some level how it is to live and work in the White House while watching *HoC*. The considerable amount of time that binge-watchers invest in living with characters takes viewing beyond the domain of passivity, and provides them with texture for actively probing, introspecting upon and interacting with real-world issues. More than simply retreating to other worlds to be transfixed, our videography shows evidence of the transportation being

projective, where participants use narrative worlds as a platform upon which to project their fantasies, concerns, worries, anxieties and problems.

In our film, we hear how participants project aspects of their own lives onto Frank's narrative world over the course of their binge and, in the hours and days that follow, they reflect upon his world as a basis for figuring out their own reality. Participants discuss their processes of rationalising the world of *HoC* as *more real* than current political realities, and the fictitious Frank Underwood administration as more sensible than, and perhaps preferable to, real-world political bids for presidency. Ultimately, the narrative world, over the lengthy and enveloping journey of a binge, becomes a platform that consumers can use to make sense of their real-world concerns.

Heterochronism and Temporalities of the Binge

Throughout the micro-ethnography, time and its displacement emerged as an important theme. While other research has explored consumers' scheduling of transgressive and energetic communal pursuits towards the search for more intense, authentic, and liberatory encounters than what is afforded to them over the rhythms of day to day life (e.g. Belk & Costa, 1998; Goulding, Shankar, Elliott & Canniford, 2009; Goulding & Saren, 2009), our videography documents a more individuated, sombre, and markedly less bacchanalian usage of time. Binge-watchers schedule opportunities for binges in their personal diaries, and save up 'free' time after work and at the weekend to retreat under blankets, *cocoon*, and consume television for extended periods. Our participants discuss strategies such as storing up episodes to "treat themselves to a binge" and relishing such dedicated periods as opportunities to really *"get in"* to the on-screen worlds. Such willingness to sacrifice time for personal periods of escape conform loosely to what Foucault (1986) has described as

"heterochronism", or temporalities of *otherness* which separate individuals from the usual rhythms of time and presence, thus providing "a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucualt, 1986: 26). Our film documents the localised commitment to long-form television, such as *HoC*, as functioning as a transitional territory that exists somewhere, or rather *sometime*, on the peripheries of everyday life.

Participants are seen to disregard the standard division of night and day, and draw instead on the number of episodes or seasons watched as a benchmark of the time passed. This shifting of participants' recognition of their continued progress from the clock to the text provides an unusual dimension to escapism that sits beyond discourses of passivity or activity. While Kuo et al (2016: 503) suggests passive escapism such as watching TV "offers the benefit of mental absorption through narrative transportation without the need for mental or physical exertion", in our film we hear a participant recount the disregard of her typical sleeping schedule to watch an entire season and a half of *HoC*. She describes beginning her binge in the evening but finishing that same binge around 5am the following morning. Curiously, we see that for many informants, such lengthy commitments of their time (and their concentration) are not registered as particularly lengthy at all – rather, time almost ceases to exist during the binge. Binge-watching is instead situated in a "quasi-eternity" where both the typicality and record of passing events are allowed to dissolve and disappear, yet the time committed is still recognised as "fleeting, transitory, precarious" (Foucault, 1986, 26). Our film captures the idea that time itself is up for scrutiny, its orthodox measurement can be escaped, and the enjoyment of texts such as long-form television series becomes almost unlimited by the enticing prospect of holding in there for *just one more episode*.

Additionally, besides the ambiguity surrounding the passing of time, the currencies of speed, completion and "newness" are important components of binge-watching. The power granted to consumers to complete an entire season of *new* episodes upon their collective release is discussed by participants in the film as comparable to a race to the finish. The time dedicated to completing this race also extends far beyond the hours spent in front of a screen. In our film, we account for binge-watchers committing time to discussing and unpacking the events and occurrences of the TV series with others during water-cooler conversations at work, on online forums, and across social media posts and community fan pages. While the time associated with binge-viewing appears at face value to be sunken into a solitary, hermit-like domestic activity, our film also documents how consumer's appetite for hyperdiegetic exploration demands time away from the screen and outside of the home.

Combatting the "Post-Binge Malaise"

The final thematic area documented in our film is concerned with the balance between the felt rewards of hyperdiegetic exploration within and around the binge and the sense of loss that can emerge and linger after reaching season finales. Our participants describe mourning processes which are similar in tone to those described by Russell & Schau (2014). This section of the film captures participants' wistful and melancholic feelings of encountering the end of a season and contending with a vacuum now left in their recreational time, a period referred to by journalist Matthew Schneier (2015) as the "post-binge malaise". Participants can be seen turning to social media, online forums, web-commentaries, after-show talk shows, and even award shows, to extend the relationships formed with TV characters and to keep their narrative playgrounds alive for hyperdiegetic exploration. These activities fit within a domain known as post-object fandom, a category of transitional

behaviours that may occur as "responses to the specific moment when a fan object moves from being an ongoing text into a dormant one which yields no new instalments" (Williams, 2011: 266). Unlike other forms of bingeing (e.g. alcohol, food and drugs), future availability of the vice in this context (i.e. the TV show) is not immediately available after the fix has finished. Binge-viewers must sometimes wait for over a year until the release of the next season. Because participants have committed long, heterochronic and concentrated bursts of their time to texts such as *HoC*, the conclusion of a season serves as a disruptive or destabilising threat to consumers' escapist potential. In this period of mourning, looking to the TV series' actors' other work and activities helps offer some semblance to the aesthetic universe that binge-watchers have spent much time immersed in. Consumers' desires to keep their hyperdiegetic exploration active, and to seek continued imaginings of on-screen characters suggests a residual state of escape that centres on the personal resolve and ingenuity of the escapist rather than textual nature of the escapist fare itself, thereby sitting outside of active-passive dichotomisations of escapism. Finding ways to overcome the post-binge malaise ultimately sustains binge-watchers' links to the narrative world, allowing its characters and events to remain immortalised in their lives.

Conclusion

Our improvised micro-ethnography has allowed us to think critically about what we consider to be the frontiers of escapism. We find recent efforts to set the boundaries of escapist pursuits through anatomising discrete mechanisms and classifying these pursuits as active or passive to be useful, though we suggest there is difficulty in clearly delineating such categorisations within activities which draw heavily not just upon a central text but also the diversity of the escapist's personal resources and the displacement of time itself. Drawing on

binge-watching, we depart from the idea that such contexts constitute a resource for specific and discrete forms of escapism but might be more usefully thought of as *appropriable textures* which can be variably committed to and extended at will. The hyperdiegetic explorations which are brought about from sustained exposure enables consumers to prolong and extend the frontiers of their escapist pursuits beyond their immediate consumption of the text alone. The on-going nature of the binge, and personal reflection and speculation over the course of that binge, allows consumers to believe that the world is bigger than the one that has been represented to them, and escapism to this world becomes a richer and more complex enterprise.

We recognise that video is by no means "an innocent practice" (Hietanen et al., 2014: 2020), rather video is situated in a particular political agenda and its consumption is tied to purposeful planned simulations and thereby loaded with power dynamics. The strategy of service providers like Netflix to encourage bingeing and to catalyse individuals' imaginative expansion of worlds in a variety of endless directions ultimately suggests that there are extended frontiers of escapism worthy of further exploration and theorisation. While our micro-ethnography broke ground on these frontiers through theorizing individuals' experiences of bingeing as it is lived, we recognize that this approach risks sustaining views that are more individualistic than they are systemic (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Therefore, we urge future videographers to look beyond first-person accounts of hyperdiegesis toward unpacking, through film, the governing machineries that shape these phenomena but might be less amenable for introspection and discursive expression. Namely, we propose that powerful videographic work could be delivered through accounting for the affective and contextual powers of the Netflix "desiring-machine" that inscribe and encapsulate the micro-social experiences accounted for in the current study.

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