

POPULAR CRIME AND POPULIST INVESTIGATION: THE *CSI* FRANCHISE AND MULTI-MEDIA PARTICIPATION

ELKE WEISSMANN

The worldwide success of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS, 2000-2015) has attracted a number of publications which aim to understand the series' popularity (Allen 2007, Byers and Johnson 2009, Cohan 2008, Kompare 2010). As a defining US series of the 2000s which had a significant impact on the representation of crime on television, it opens up several avenues of investigation, and I am here particularly interested in understanding *CSI* as paradigmatic for the ways the US television industries have come to engage with their audience. Television in the United States changed dramatically from the 1970s onwards when a combination of regulation—the FinSyn Rules (1972)—and a development in delivery technologies—in particular cable— brought a sense of economic crisis to the until then burgeoning industry. As John T. Caldwell (1995, 5) chronicles, this economic crisis, combined with changes in programming practices, the industry's mode of production, and audience expectations affected the look of US television, but also had ideological implications. Caldwell emphasizes that the 1980s' "televisuality" was a historically situated effect, though much of what he describes continues well beyond the decade, including the sense of crisis. Indeed, the US television industries continue to experience similar issues as they did in the 1980s, particularly as a result of audience fragmentation, which in the era of digitization, if anything, has become more exacerbated. My interest in *CSI*, then, is driven by the wish to understand how this sense of crisis has affected the relationship between the industry and its audience, and in particular how the attempts by the industry to harness popularity through merchandising and franchising has led to the creation of additional texts that engage the audience in particular ways.

CSI became crucial for CBS after the network executives realized its popularity with audiences. CBS originally understood the series to be a high risk production as the show was not driven by big stars and had been created by an unknown writer, Anthony E. Zuiker. Moreover, Disney's Touchstone Pictures, who was originally listed as coproducer, pulled out of the deal and was replaced by the Canadian owned Alliance Atlantic (Cohan 2008, 1–3). But the series garnered a loyal audience, and was strong enough to help CBS overtake NBC in the particularly lucrative Thursday primetime slot (Cohan

2008, 3). Eventually, the franchise was considered to be the most successful programme in the world (Reuters 2006) as it garnered sizeable audiences in some of the world's largest television markets, including Germany. For CBS, then, the series was crucial in helping to return the network to the top of the Nielsen ratings, which had positive financial implications. As a result, CBS wasted little time and commissioned two further series—*CSI: Miami* (CBS 2002–2012) and *CSI: NY* (CBS 2004–2013)—as well as creating a wide range of merchandise, including DVDs, TShirts, novels, cups, video games, board games, baseball caps etc.

In the following, I want to analyse one of these extensions, namely the Facebook game: *CSI: Crime City*. As an extension of the brand, the game draws on key elements of the series and plays them through for the audience that engages with it. This chapter attempts to unravel how, in offering the fans something extra, the producers define their relationship with the fans, and more importantly, the fans' relationship with the series in particular ways that is ultimately unsuccessful as is evidenced in the rather tepid reactions of the fans to the game. In order to understand the resulting dissatisfaction amongst fans, the article will draw on a number of theoretical frameworks, including literature on branding, new media, and Ernesto Laclau's (2005) discussion of populism. I draw on Laclau's work in particular in order to provide a counterbalance to the current debates on new media, participation and audiences which tend to be split into two mutually exclusive camps. On the one hand several scholars (see amongst others Turkle 1997, Jenkins 2008) celebrate new media for their participatory potential, while on the other hand researchers point to the limitations of this participation, particularly as far as the impact on the central (programme) text is concerned (Carpentier 2011). Although Carpentier's work attempts to grapple with the complexities of possibilities in terms of audience engagement by drawing up a gradation of participation, his model cannot fully explain the intricacies of mutual interdependence that exists between producers and audiences. Laclau's model of populism, although it was developed to understand *political* populism, is useful in this context. The article will largely be theoretical, but will draw on textual analysis (Creeber 2006) and netnography (Kozinets 2006) in order to provide some evidence. A more fully-fledged empirical study needs to be reserved for a different time due to constraints of space. The following section then will set up the parameters of the analysis and discuss why the Facebook game must be understood as an example of failed populism.

Television, Brands and New Media Extensions

An increasing number of publications (see ChanOlmsted and Kim 2001, Bellamy and Traudt 2000 etc.) respond to the more extensive branding

strategies of all industries. Many of these publications approach branding purely from the point of view of marketing. Celia Lury (2004), in contrast, situates branding within the larger context of communication and argues that brands function as media where brand owners connect with brand users to define the values incorporated in the brand. Each additional product changes the brand, just as the specific take-up of the product—its specific uses by audiences—determine its meanings. As a result, brands allow for a two-way flow of communication, which allows for the input of users into the meaning of the brand. Thus, the specific use of audiences can determine what “*CSI*” comes to stand for: whilst certain parameters will remain unchanged, for example its connections to the crime genre, its focus on forensics as means of investigation etc., new elements, such as a focus on specific relationships, could theoretically be added. However, as Lury (2004) highlights, brand owners—i.e. the media companies behind *CSI*—have little or no interest in opening the brand up to audiences, and indeed often create a legal framework that ensures that the brand values remain defined by brand owners.

As Catherine Johnson (2012, 4) indicates, television, through advertising and marketing, centrally contributes to the definition and closing down of brand qualities and values if these qualities and values belong to products other than television. Branding television itself, however, is more complicated. Here, two brands emerge which can be relatively easily identified: the programme brand and the broadcaster/channel brand. These need to intersect and inform each other (Johnson 2007). Thus, *CSI*’s programme brand—of a slick, but generic, if “different” crime drama—needs to connect to the CBS brand, the Channel 5 brand in the UK, the RTL brand in Germany etc. As Paul Rixon (2006) points out, each importing broadcaster assimilates (and thereby changes) the programme to fit its own needs. In terms of branding, this can involve a complete redefinition of core brand values, as Paul Grainge (2009) shows in relation to the assimilation of *Lost* into the UK’s Channel 4 brand strategy. In addition to these two intersecting brands, a third brand, namely that of the corporation, impacts on the relationship between product, channel and audiences (Johnson 2012). This suggests that television brands consist of a group of intersecting relations which are largely controlled by television institutions, and not by audiences. It also draws attention to the fact that any extension of a brand into a different medium (such as a video game console or a social media website) will inevitably have to renegotiate the brand values through the prism of the new medium brand.

The emphasis on the role of ownership in the literature on branding appears at first glance to be antagonistic to a large number of publications investigating the uses of new media. In particular, early scholars of new media (e.g. Turkle 1997, Gimpler 2001, Bucy and Gregson 2001) express a deep sense of optimism in relation to the participatory potential of new media.

Indeed, Antje Gimmler (2001) goes as far as to propose that the internet could form a new public sphere which could be used for political deliberation and decision making. Jingsi Wu (2011) indicates that in countries such as China where there is little space in the political process to make democratic decisions, programmes such as *Super Girl* (Hunan Satellite Television, 2004–2006, the Chinese, unlicensed adaptation of *Pop Idol*, ITV, 2001–2003) enable viewers to practice democratic models, thus contributing to the opening up of China towards democratic ideals. But even in societies which understand themselves to be democratic, such as the USA, new media have largely been celebrated as a means to democratize the consumption processes of traditional media and enable wider participation that feeds back into program texts (Jenkins 2008, Gillan 2011, Ross 2008). Thus, brand extensions into new media appear to offer the creation of the two-way flow of communication between brand owners and users. Indeed, the participatory nature of new media, both Ross (2008) and Jenkins (2008) argue, enables better feedback loops which allow for the incorporation of audience ideas into program texts.

The literature that celebrates new media as a space of participation and interaction, however, often subscribes to technologically deterministic views and has been met by a similar if not larger number of publications that express concern about the participatory potential of new media. For example, Andy Bennett (1999) highlights that rather than organizing a coherent, united public sphere, the internet helps to organize us into tribes that congregate as a result of shared taste cultures. These tribes can be international, but are rarely political in nature. Natalie Fenton (2012) goes further by drawing attention to the fact that the move to taste cultural tribes actually de-democratizes us, as it distracts us from the business of politics. Moreover, these publications criticize the literature which celebrates the potential of new media as indicative of a wider discourse around new media where the possibilities of the technologies overshadow understandings of their use (McFarlane and Thornham 2013), or perhaps more importantly, where these possibilities overshadow actual change (Kember and Zlyinska 2012). On a more fundamental level, however, several publications (Carpentier 2011, Ziegfeld 1989) highlight that interaction—including clicking or liking—is often misunderstood as participation. Acts such as clicking actually only facilitate linear, or even nonlinear narratives on the web: “if you want to find out more, click here.” In other words, clicking is comparable to choosing a particular channel on television. Liking, on the other hand, seems to offer a participatory element as what we do here is vote. But there are two issues with that. As Fenton (2012) rightly highlights, voting is often restricted to areas of entertainment (baby or cat videos on YouTube, *The XFactor* (ITV since 2004), *Big Brother* (Veronica, 1999–2000) or *I’m a Celebrity... Get me out of Here* (ITV, since 2002) on television). But on the other hand, such

forms of participation can be understood as minimalist (Carpentier 2011): they give an indication of personal preferences but rarely have a true impact on the text. Considering that we supposedly “decide” the outcomes of programs such as *The XFactor*, this might seem counterintuitive. However, these programs channel participation in ways that are predictable and basically only determine the name of the winner—but not the structure of the program itself (Carpentier 2011). In other words, the creative input of audiences is non-existent.

Much of this is due to how the business is now regimented—even if it has become increasingly deregulated (Johnson 2012). As Jody Smith (multiplatform commissioning editor for comedy and entertainment for Channel 4) said at the 2013 Salford Media Festival, within a commercial system, where money is necessarily being made from creative ideas, using material generated by audiences is a legal nightmare: the question becomes who owns intellectual property. Of course, this is particularly important to British producers who have made an art out of selling ideas internationally in format bibles (Esser 2009, 2013), but it also applies to the US context: whilst the sale of formats has become more important in that country too, the sale of completed episodes creates a similar problem in terms of intellectual property because the sale of finished material across national borders nevertheless requires the stipulation of licenses for sales across the world in each participant’s contract which is impossible to do if the participants are not known well in advance. All in all then, we have to approach the participatory potential of new media with a lot of critical analysis. As Carpentier (2011, 271) highlights, media technologies are embedded in organizational, social and cultural structures which determine how they are used. Technologies cannot be understood as neutral, then, because they are being used—also by media corporations.

In the following, however, my aim is to complicate both positions. I want to indicate that the extension of brands into the online world does not necessarily have to imply a closing down of brand values and qualities, even if, in the case of *CSI: Crime City* it does. This requires first a more detailed understanding of the populist and its application to media use.

The Concept of the Populist

Laclau’s concept of the populist was developed in order to complicate the reductive debates on populism in politics. Laclau emphasizes that his aim is to highlight the similarities in different populist projects—not just right-wing ones—in order to understand the appeal of populism on the one hand and their failure on the other. Drawing on several apparently unconnected areas of theory, including linguistics, and in particular semiotics, and Freudian and

Lacanian psychoanalyses, he develops a complex theory that recognizes the role of affect as well as equivalence chains.

Unlike other writers on populism, the smallest unit he assesses is not “the people” but that of social demand. Indeed, he argues, that it is the articulation of a specific social demand that is shared by a number of groups that helps to constitute “the people.” “The people,” then, is not a preexisting unit, but one that needs to be constructed from a number of differentiated, but equivalent demands. This has several effects: first, “the people” is defined by its relation to a lack in society. Thus, although it at first seems focused on “the plebs,” the excluded, the populist needs to reframe this lack to include, and construct, “the populus,” the people as a whole. But Laclau goes even further by highlighting that “the plebs” as a partiality already includes the construction of the universal, and thus inevitably includes “the populus” which becomes apparent when the populist, through a series of social demands, constructs the people as a whole. And second, by doing this, the populist relies on a heterogeneous understanding of society, but at the same time constructs a hegemony. Such a hegemony is created by developing a series of equivalences that are unified through one identified social demand which is expressed as a general and universal lack in society. Third, the populist needs to use an empty signifier in order to incorporate all these heterogeneous demands. Fourth, it often relies on a charismatic leader or centre who comes to signify these demands and becomes the empty signifier.

The advantage of Laclau’s definition of the populist is that he recognizes the process of constructing the social group, “the people,” through the experience of identification of what he calls “populist reason”: the moment when a number of social demands are converted into a series of equivalences that are unified through an empty signifier. Put simply, it’s the populist that constructs the group, not the other way round. This has several benefits for this project: first, it does not rely on an assumed opposition between media institutions and audiences; second, it recognizes that the (assumed, and articulated) audience is actually constructed from a number of audiences; third, it nevertheless allows for a recognition of issues of power and hierarchies; and fourth, it emphasizes process and recognizes that these power relations can change and are more complex than a simple opposition. In addition, Laclau’s model allows media scholars to return the debates from the emphasis on consumptive behaviour (and commercial imperatives) to that of cultural needs.¹

¹ The implications of that are of course that such a model allows us to work against the neoliberal conviction that a commercial system in which audiences show what they want by how they behave is best. Thus, giving them more of what they are already watching seems a logical step. Instead, it recognizes that audiences’ needs are constantly changing and are diverse and differentiated. This means cultural output, in order to cover those needs must be diverse

How might this look for the *CSI* franchise? The popularity of *CSI* does not simply stem from one identifiable consumptive behavior, but rather rests on a number of different (but equivalent) cultural needs which have until then been unfulfilled. Importantly, these needs might not have been conscious or articulated, but rather become clear through the process of identification as a “fan of *CSI*.” In other words, there were several things lacking or missing in the existing television output that *CSI* was able to fulfil. These equivalent needs can be subsumed under the larger cultural demand for “more *CSI*” and cover, amongst others, the demand for more “pure” crime drama (without emphasis on the relationship between detectives), the demand for more visually stunning TV drama, the demand for more of William Petersen or Marg Helgenberger or any of the other cast, the demand for more forensic-based crime drama, the demand for crime drama that develops its narrative in a particular way, the demand for access to one or several audiences (this coming from different institutions involved in producing *CSI*), and the demand for a good career and remuneration (coming from any of the crew involved in producing *CSI*). So already, we see that the social group is quite heterogeneous, but brought together as a group by the demand for “more *CSI*” and can perhaps be defined as a group of people who care about the program.² In order for these demands to be brought together, however, an empty signifier is needed—which in this case is “more *CSI*”—and, perhaps more importantly, someone to articulate the empty signifier: Laclau’s charismatic leader. In this respect, *CSI* has had a much more difficult task at hand than perhaps some other series, particularly those with a clearly defined showrunner, or in older cases, writers, such as Joss Whedon for *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, UPN, 1997–2003), Stephen Bochco for any of his work, Russel T. Davies for both *Queer as Folk* (C4, 1999–2000) and *Doctor Who* (BBC One since 2005), Dennis Potter for his work, or, in one of the rare cases with a woman at the helm, Ann Biderman for *Southland* (NBC, 2009, TNT, 2010–2013). But as already indicated, Anthony E. Zuiker appeared too inexperienced, though some interviews indicate that there was an attempt to establish him as “charismatic leader” for a short time, while Jerry Bruckheimer, as producer, was perceived as too much focused on mass appeal blockbusters to provide something different

and differentiated. Such an understanding takes us closer to the approach the Annan Committee (1977) took in their recommendations for the development of broadcasting.

² Such language of “care” is often adopted by institutions within the television industry that produce material, particularly when the programme is threatened by cancellation by its broadcaster. This was for example noticeable when the news came in that the BBC had decided to cancel *Ripper Street* (BBC 2012–2013 and Amazon from 2014). Thus, Jerome Flynn who plays Sergeant Drake emphasized the “shock” that the actors were feeling, and the “wonderful job” that the series was (Moss 2013). In this context, we see again how Laclau’s model allows us to make sense of the competing institutional forces within the television industries—also internationally—which enables television institutions to align themselves with audiences.

and identify gaps. For a while it looked as if William Petersen, who not only fronted the cast but was also one of the key producers of the series, might take on the role, though his departure from the starring role made this more difficult. The role of the charismatic leader, therefore, remained unoccupied, which implied that the articulation of what “more *CSI*” meant was largely left in the hands of the producing and commissioning institutions (including CBS, but also Alliance Atlantis, RTL in Germany etc.) who have no other means of communicating this articulation than through, on the one hand, branding, and on the other, brand extensions and merchandising. It is for this reason, as I will show, that *CSI*’s attempts to create a universe for the fans that they experienced as satisfying were largely unsuccessful. The following provides a largely theoretical discussion of the issues at hand, though some (limited) evidence drawn from internet ethnography³ will provide further back up.

Watching *CSI*

CSI is both a crime narrative and a broadcast series which follows a number of recognizable conventions, including its episodic form (Creeber 2004), its overreliance on stories about murder (Boyle 2005) and its emphasis on a narrative structure of equilibrium, disruption, working through which leads to the solution and the reestablishment of the initial equilibrium in its amended form (Todorov 1977). Despite these well-established generic conventions, or perhaps because of them, the television series provides many spaces for the audience to intersect and interpret the program along a range of negotiated positions (Morley 2000). The following attempts to unravel some of the spaces to intersect by highlighting different aspects of the series that might be at the center of a viewer’s interpretation.

One aspect of the series which evidently remains compelling to audiences in the US and beyond, as the proliferation of crime narratives on television indicates, is its interest in crime. In part, this is the result of crime narratives being able to allow audiences to explore moral and ethical issues as Thomas Leitch (2002) rightly argues. Julia Kristeva’s (1996) concept of the abject is helpful to understand why this is compelling: *CSI*, even more than other crime dramas on television, revolves largely around murder. In part, this is connected to the centrality of the body and the process of DNA analysis for

³ I draw in particular on the methodologies discussed by Philip S. Howard (2002) who indicates the difference between traditional online ethnography and an examination of online reviews of audiences where there is no community into which the “ethnographer” has to negotiate entry. Indeed, I largely follow the example of Ann Steiner (2008) who examined the customer reviews on online retailer Amazon, which I will do for the TV series, as it allows me to compare British, American and German reviews with each other, to emphasize potential cultural differences. For the Facebook game, I need to draw on a number of different internet sites and rely more heavily on semiprofessional reviews to collect my evidence.

forensics, a relatively new methodology which had become increasingly sophisticated (and well known) as a result of the Human Genome Project, which got under way in 1990, only 10 years before CSI first aired on CBS. But CSI's focus on the body is also part of its specific aesthetics of affective spectacle (Lury 2005) which moves the viewer's body. With its emphasis on gore and bodily fluids, CSI borrows heavily from the horror genre in order to emphasize the body as "the ultimate abject" (Kristeva 1996) which threatens both social and individual boundaries and hence requires exploration in order to be resolved. Crime narratives therefore allow us to engage with two key issues relating to our identity: what does it mean to be human who is a body that will die and rot away one day? And what does it mean to be a human being within the context of a fragile social contract which can so easily be disturbed through violence? The investigation plot of the series which not only establishes whodunit, but probably more importantly—why—allows us to reexamine the workings of this social contract and reframe it if necessary. Importantly, the crime narrative allows us to question the ethical and moral underpinnings of our social contract, draw attention to its weaknesses and hence—potentially—improve it.

All of this, of course, means that crime narratives are engaging. But they also offer a level of semiotic uncertainty (Hall 2000): there are spaces to intersect, to interpret and understand the text in line with our social and cultural identities. Our previous encounters with crime and television drama as well as any other social and cultural experiences furthermore determine our hermeneutic horizons (Gadamer 1965) which will influence where the interpretative process starts and ends. In many ways, then, this linear, one-directional medium of broadcasting with its generic boundaries offers a sense of interactivity that Marshall McLuhan (1994) described in relation to "cold media." McLuhan's problematic proposition was based on technologically deterministic assumptions about television being low definition (because at the time of writing, images were small and resolution low, requiring us to talk to each other in order to get the meaning of television images). However, we now know enough about audiences, their complex relationships to media, the role of their previous experiences to the process of interpretation (Morley 2000) and indeed the fact that audiences are also constituted socially (Thornham 2011, Hills 2002) that we can make a stronger argument for the importance of social interaction in our understanding of media content.⁴ If anything, new media have made this more visible (Jenkins 2000, Gillan 2011).

⁴ And there seems to be a trend back to the emphasis on social interaction, not just by sitting around the television together and watching together (which, in the UK, at least, experienced somewhat of a renaissance; see BARB 2013), but also via the second screen which is used to interact with other audience members who are spatially absent but who nevertheless share and interact about the same viewing experience.

But CSI is also spectacular—and it engages a deliberate “quality of the surface” (Goode 2007) which relies on audiovisual spectacle rather than narrative depth. As Tom Gunning (1990) has argued, early cinema similarly used such a visual spectacle of making things seen which captured some of the spirit and energy of working class culture precisely because it wasn’t closed down by narrative. This energy, this synergy, and the semiotic and hermeneutic uncertainty, opens audiovisual communication up to a variety of audiences, and we can see how CSI draws on elements of this. On the one hand, it does present us with a linear narrative which unfolds a fabula—the crime narrative (Allan 2007). At the same time, the way it presents us this narrative is by drawing on elements of televisuality (Caldwell 1995) and flexinarrative (Nelson 1997): the focus is less on presenting causal connections between elements of narrative (this leads to that), but to provide visual and aural spectacle, and to engage the viewer affectively (Weissmann and Boyle 2007). The emphasis on affect also implies an engagement with the content that goes beyond signification and hence allows for a sense of (embodied) experience. Whilst such an embodied experience might not quite have the power of symbolic encounters as imagined by Baudrillard (1993), it nevertheless suggests a deeper, more meaningful encounter than has traditionally been ascribed to media. Importantly within such an encounter also sit quite a few pleasures for audiences: the encounters with the abject and with the spectacular move us. It is CSI’s potential for multifaceted engagement—from narrative to the spectacular—that constitutes the foundations for its ability to be popular. It is important to emphasize that at this stage, CSI facilitates popular engagement, but does not close it down in order to harness the popular demand (see Laclau 2005). In other words, at this stage, the popular is constituted in our engagement with the text and remains extremely heterogenous, as the following discussion of viewer responses to the first season of CSI: Crime Scene Investigation makes evident. These responses were collected from the IMDB website. As it allows for the recognition of the country of origin which, in line with Rixon (2006), I assume, gives audiences different contexts and hence meanings through which they can understand the series. Whilst I appreciate that the posting audience on the IMDB is a small, self-selecting minority, and hence not representative of the overall audience, the reviews allow me to indicate that there are differences in understanding and cultural appreciation between different countries which suggests that CSI can satisfy several cultural demands.

The responses from the US range from an unqualified “best shows on television,” over an emphasis on the actors, and in particular William Petersen, and their ability to engage the audience, to the relationship to the Sherlock Holmes narratives of rational, scientific investigation, which is perceived as “dead on accurate.” British viewers similarly emphasize

character, narrative and the representation of forensics, but there is also more evidence of evaluation of the style of the show, the use of music and spectacular visuality. Thus, audiences highlight the “stunning visuals,” the “ultra-hip manipulation of new technology” and “the music of Pete Townsend, used to great effect.” There is also a surprising amount of criticism for the goriness of scenes which does not stand in the foreground of the American reviews. The German reviews are closest to the British ones, though what the British audiences seem to experience as problematic gore is understood as realistic detail in Germany. In addition, the German reviews indicate that the elements of humor, particularly as provided by the character of Gil Grissom (“the dry humor of Gil Grissom”), are an additional draw. The differences in responses highlights that the cultural needs covered by *CSI* are manifold and rely both on individual and national differences. Whilst in the US, *CSI* fulfils needs to do with actors, character, plot and narrative, British viewers are also attune to style—perhaps as a result of the perceived lack of similarly over-stylized series on British television. It is very noticeable that the aspect of humor plays no part in either the British or the American responses, suggesting that this might be either specific to the German temperament, or due to the translations of the dubbed German version. All in all, it highlights that *CSI* manages to unite a heterogeneous group of demands.

Playing CSI: Crime City

Crime City is a game that is available only on Facebook, a social networking site that facilitates multiple forms of interaction. At first glance, Facebook offers a space of true participation, which Carpentier (2013) defines as the interaction and mutual decision making of multiple actors who have the same status. However, in the case of a game, which is largely played by a single player, with only the occasional boost from other players (here in the form of energy from their “coffee cups”), the game rather seems to offer “interaction” which is channeled in particular ways by the organizations who control it. In that respect the game is another example of forms of “connected viewing” that largely aim to create particular forms of engagement in order to return power to media companies that perceive to have lost this power (Lee and Andrejevic 2014, Steirer 2014, Payne 2014). The game is designed as a treasure hunt (Ashby 2010), which means that the avatar searches different virtual spaces for “treasure”—here evidence. This is done by being propelled to different crime scenes where the avatar “searches” tiles by clicking them. Once evidence is found, it is taken to the lab, where it will be analyzed through different processes. In order to vary the game play, there are several other elements built into the game: the searching uses up energy which is only replenished through time or by

drinking a coffee which can be gotten by “hopping into” another player’s lab (without them realizing, however). The avatar also increasingly moves up the ranks and with that comes more energy. Plus, in addition to finding evidence, the avatar also finds memorabilia and is given funding boosts which add up so that the player can buy new equipment which uses up less energy. In addition, the searching of locations is connected to larger crime narratives which are told through cutscenes which are, however, not interactive and are often lost sight of as the player waits for the energy to replenish. Overall, then, the narrative emphasis largely lies on the forensic investigation of crime scenes; other aspects such as the crime narrative or the spectacle of the abject body appear as less important. This suggests that the specific game format—but also the control of the powerful organizations (including Facebook, the developer UbiSoft, and the license holders of *CSI*—now CBS)—reduce the semiotic uncertainty that made the series popular. This becomes clearer when we consider the different aspects of the game contributing to this.

Crime City is clearly an extension of the CSI brand: it uses familiar imagery (including the helicopter shots of Las Vegas), characters and music and other aural elements of the series to reconnect the audience to the main brand object—the series. As Hazel Grian, interactive media producer, who worked amongst others on the multimedia and offline media campaign of Star Trek, indicated at a talk at the Salford Media Festival (2013), such extensions are usually funded by marketing and hence have to fulfil a certain purpose. Grian identified this as a problem, as the product is largely meant to take audiences back to the broadcast or film text (see also Lee and Andrejevic 2014) and create audience hype around the product, rather than allow for an experience that is meaningful in its own right and hence allows audiences to experience and create new meanings beyond the main brand object. Of course, these extensions are also about creating audience loyalty. Gillan (2011) is still quite celebratory in what that means for audiences, i.e. that there are spaces to congregate, that there is talk online which in her eyes is evidence of audience interaction. But what she fails to discuss is how this interaction has increasingly become focused on keeping audiences talking rather than offering a space for audiences to suggest ideas—the case of Joss Whedon listening to audiences online and expanding the universe was a blip; there is now increasing emphasis on harnessing audience interaction for marketing purposes (Andrejevic 2008). Whilst in some cases, such as the website Television without Pity which Andrejevic (2008) discusses, this does give the audience the space to intersect and reframe programs or games in creative and subversive ways, in the case of the CSI Facebook game it seems to close down meanings. Here, there is practically no space to interact: the player hunts for the treasure alone and can only engage with others by sharing their promotion, the fact that they have a cup of coffee waiting etc. on their timeline. Thus, there are surprisingly few opportunities to interact with others

within the social media website. Instead, this particular extension of the brand should be understood in line with what Lury (2004) describes as a specific variation of the brand which reinforces key elements of it.

Other variations of the CSI brand, however, seem more open. As Allan (2007) shows, the novels present quite a bit of an extension in relation to character development, which in the television series remains minimal. While the novels do not provide all that much revelation—they are still primarily interested in murder cases and their solution—they do offer character insight via omniscient narration. The graphic novel, too, Allan argues, presents a little extension in relation to character development by means of visual innuendo. Finally examining the video game, Allan indicates that the video game seems to close down character development. Drawing on Juul (2005), he indicates that this is largely because character development is connected to a revelation of emotion, and emotions cannot be put into predictable rules in a way that video game programming requires. Allan nevertheless argues that the video game offers a sense of interactivity which mirrors the guessing along of the television viewer and the investigative processes of the CSI team themselves. The video game allows for wrong clues to be followed and the wrong people to be interviewed, meaning that there are rules programmed into the game that complicate the investigation plot and hence lead to (some) semiotic uncertainty. Because of the limitations of the Facebook game in terms of data memory and space, such following of wrong clues is severely limited even if the wrong people are interviewed as suspects. However, this is not an option, but automatically built into the Facebook game: as soon as the three pieces of evidence are processed, the game automatically takes you to the next interview. Thus, the player has little involvement in working out what clues actually mean or where they lead to—this is provided automatically by the game—rather the player is focused on finding the evidence at the crime scene. In addition, the game does not facilitate talk about narrative in the same way as television. Whilst much of our broadcast consumption is still live which means we are watching at the same time as others, and video games are often played together in small groups of friends (BARB 2014), the Facebook game is played individually, with very little chance that friends play at the same level. Thus, even talk about the game becomes focused on how to keep turning tiles for longer by getting more energy (as is evidenced by talk on different internet forums). As a result, however, there is also less space for the audience to intersect: talk about a text's story allows for the individual to be confronted by different interpretations, opening up the understanding of the text and introducing further semiotic uncertainty. Here, this is closed down to talk about the text's mechanics.

But there are other aspects of the game that indicate that instead of opening up, the game seems to close down the potential for semiotic and

hermeneutic uncertainty which goes beyond the program and connects to the medium. Social networking is closely linked to notions of identity, as several authors have highlighted (Boyd 2007, Mendelson and Papcharissi 2010 etc.). Hogan (2010) suggests that there are two elements to this: on the one hand we can interact with other actors in real time when using social media (e.g. chatting, instant messaging etc.). In this case, we are actors performing an identity. But largely, our identity is formed by us curating elements of our lives as our identity: we post status updates, pictures etc. In this case we form our identity via artefacts. This, then, can work as a starting point for social interaction. In addition, and contrary to earlier belief (Turkle 1997, Jenkins 2008), social media harness offline networks and transfer them to online ones. In other words, the offline network is the primary network, not the other way around. The key function of social media for these networks is what Ellison et al. (2007) describe as “bridging social capital” which means it is a light-touch social capital, rather than a deeper, meaningful one (which they, however, found also features on Facebook). It is the same as keeping in touch with people or catching up quickly. One of the descriptions used “keeping tabs on acquaintances” is perhaps clearest in regards to the depth of social engagement.

How does the above connect to CSI: Crime City? First of all, Facebook allows us to express our identity as fans, if we so wish. By liking, uploading a picture or posting a video or even just commenting on a program, we curate an element of our identity that can spark further engagement with others, including comments and potentially chats. Crucially, this is with people that we already know and bridges the gap of displacement or temporal absence. Thus, we can use television—as in real life—as a means to communicate and connect with people we know and build relationships whilst expressing both our affective and semiotic experiences of a program. But this does not happen in this case: as my own attempts for feedback indicated, the automatic Facebook updates that are created are usually ignored by other members of the audience because they bear the recognisable mark of marketing and advertising. As a result, rather than bridging any gaps, playing *Crime City* actually seems to isolate us from our social networks.

The critical responses to the game then (largely taken from the *Talk CSI* forum) indicate a sense of frustration with the game. Several respondents indicated that “clicking squares isn’t very exciting,” and that by having to wait to recharge the energy, they felt that they lost the understanding of the crime narrative. As one poster put it succinctly: “My main problem with the game is that I spend so much time doing other things waiting for energy to regen that by the time I get through the case I’ve forgotten what the thing was about in the first place.” This suggests that the crime narrative, which is normally central to the enjoyment of this player, gets lost as a result of the particular format of the game. This is in line with other Facebook games

which similarly limit narrative to such things as world building “rather than any kind of linear or branched storyline” (Evans 2015, 567). Instead the process of searching and processing is perceived as “boring” and “repetitive” (Daniels 2012). The players do like the similarities and “cuteness” of the characters to the actors who play them, indicating that the extension of character into the game is perceived as a real pay off. But mostly the game receives praise when it is compared to other Facebook treasure hunt games which are perceived as even more boring and repetitive. The discussion on the *Talk CSI* forum also makes evident that there are real attempts by the community to undercut the game in terms of helping each other by sharing Facebook details so the other players can be added as friends and work equipment and coffees (and thus energy) can be shared. That such undercutting is necessary is to do with the specific economics behind games such as *CSI: Crime City*: as Evans (2015) highlights, these kind of games exploit gamer impatience by reducing the amount of energy available, forcing players to either wait or spend money to get energy boosts. The undercutting of such monetization by the fans indicates attempts to subvert the power of the media companies, but does not help to create a greater semiotic uncertainty for the game.

Conclusions: *CSI: Crime City* and the Populist

Crime City, then, can be understood as a case of failed populism, though not all extensions of *CSI* need to be classed as such. Rather, the Facebook game fails, because it reduces the equivalence chain (“more *CSI*” means more of all the different cultural demands listed above) to a too simplistic form (“more forensic methodology with a bit of visuals and familiar faces thrown in”). If *CSI* was popular because it allows for a number of experiences and pleasures, then *Crime City* picks up on this popularity, but redefines it for the specific needs of the organizations that control the franchise. Within the populist imagination of crime, the methodology of investigation is foregrounded to the detriment of other pleasures. But this also suggests that because these organizations have specific needs (usually to make money), they need to exploit popular interest by channelling it in a particular way. This means, extensions such as the Facebook game which operates also within the limitations of the specific economics of Facebook games (Evans 2015) are not driven by opening up semiotic uncertainties and hence facilitate talk, which causes significant problems to the populist project. This means that although the opportunity for the threeway flow of communication exists—where producers communicate with audiences via the extension, and audiences communicate with each other about the extension and feed their talk back to producers—it cannot be taken up because such a model of communication would require a greater emphasis on narrative in particular

and other aspects of the series, which in the case of the Facebook game cannot be offered because of the limitations of games within the social media website. Such a threeway flow of communication would involve (first) the creation of a semiotically and hermeneutically open artefact which could then (second) be curated by a user of Facebook (such as a status update about an element of the investigation plot rather than a status update about the successfulness of the investigation process). This would require a status update about what is happening (which would open up the semiotic world), rather than about the promotion of the avatar (which creates a measurable, quantifiable artefact). The semiotically open artefact could then invite comment and feedback which could flow back (third) into the game experience (as a hermeneutic horizon).

But there is something much more fundamental going on here, that needs to be addressed and that the emphasis on brand extensions alone cannot actually unravel. For this we have to return to Laclau's concept of the populist. If the group is only constituted in the process of creating an equivalence chain out of a series of different cultural demands, then the brand extensions (which as discussed above are central to the articulation of the empty signifier "more CSI") also create a specific kind of group: those invested enough to engage with such extensions, in other words, fans. Rather than identifying audiences as viewers or consumers of a programme, audiences, then, are addressed as a group who want more and who are emotionally invested, as well as increasingly becoming experts (Hills 2002). There are three implications to this: first, it mainstreams fandom. As Hills (2006) highlights the difference between consumers of commercial content and "authentic" fans is in part constructed. Nevertheless, as his case of fans of *Lord of the Rings* (Peter Jackson, 2001, 2002, 2003) makes evident, there is a significant struggle involved by "authentic" fans to rescue their object of interest from the commercial machine. Hills, however, still operates with an opposition between fans and normal consumers. My point, however, is that the industry increasingly tries to break down that boundary and address us all as fans. This, as the discussion here makes evident, is an outcome of the new economic model (Lury 2004, Johnson 2007, 2012). Second, it highlights the mutual interdependence between the media institutions and the audience they address as fans: media institutions need to be able to draw on an equivalence chain to articulate the populist. While the power lies with the media institutions who are able to articulate the empty signifier, they would nevertheless be powerless without being able to draw on the heterogeneous cultural demands arising from "the fans." And third, it highlights that the terms of engagement have changed. If we are addressed as fans, then we are much more emotionally invested in a programme than if we are viewers. Laclau indicates this by emphasizing the role of affect in the process of populist reason (2005, 115). This has, of course, been much discussed before:

the role of the creation of “buzz” (Fernando 2004). Of course this “buzz” is not simply constructed through the marketing, but harnesses some real and existing cultural needs of the audience. But what the focus on Laclau allows us to see is that such a buzz can only remain successful as long as it draws and combines the heterogeneous demands and that it will ultimately fail if it becomes too one dimensional—as the case of the Facebook game indicates. Most of all, however, Laclau’s concept of the populist allows us to emphasize the complex process of negotiation that exists between media organizations and viewers in which brand extensions both create a unified group and hence define the media organization’s dependence on the group, as well as creating a hegemony that rarely manages to honour the disparate needs and demands from which the brand extensions arose in the first place.

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