

LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT *HOMESTUCK*: THE ONLINE PRODUCTION OF PLACE

by

JENNIFER DIANE SHORT
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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the potential for the online production of place, specifically as it applies to the host site for the *Homestuck* web comic, *MS Paint Adventures*, and its attendant fandom. The proliferation of digital environments such as video games, web sites, and chat rooms has led to numerous opportunities for the study of online spaces and the numerous practices that take place within them. The lack of physical location in online spaces can, however, make it difficult to conceptualize of a web site as real, a problem that has often led researchers to develop new theories of space that do not rely on material places. This thesis was inspired by questions about the potential for the production of online place, and how and to what extent this operation can be studied through the application of a theory of place.

Applying Certeau's theory of place from *The Practice of Everyday Life* this thesis theorizes the operations through which Andrew Hussie created *MS Paint Adventures* as a habitable place. Hussie accomplishes this through the generation and maintenance of authority, the creation of stable and ordered elements, and the establishment of the "proper," the rules and reality that govern the site. In addition, I theorize about the space that *MS Paint Adventures* as a place attempts to create, a space where readers are encouraged and enabled to engage with the web comic *Homestuck* and with each other through meaningful online interaction, and about the ways in which the site can be, and is, inhabited. Ultimately, I explore the extent to which web sites, though lacking physical location, can be fairly and logically conceived of, and therefore examined as, habitable places.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	v
LIST OF TABLES	vi
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
An Overview of Space Theory and a Closer Examination of Certeau’s Theory	2
Space Theory and Digital Environments and the Problem of Online Place	6
A Definition of Place and the Ways in Which an Online Place Can Be Inhabited	17
Outline of Chapters	24
CHAPTER II: DESCRIPTION OF SITE AND RESEARCH METHODS	26
<i>MS Paint Adventures</i> : History and Layout	26
Homestuck and <i>MS Paint Adventures</i>	28
Choice of <i>MS Paint Adventures</i> as a Sample Site.....	30
Research Methods	35
Central Questions.....	41
CHAPTER III: MS PAINT ADVENTURES AS PLACE	42
An Examination of the Operation Hussie Performed to Create Place	43

Generation of Authority	44
Creation of Stable and Ordered Elements.....	48
Establishment of the "Proper"	55
The Space that Place Creates	62
CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION	68
Discussion and Implications	68
To What Extent Can We Fairly and Logically Apply Certeau's Theory of Place to an Online Environment?.....	69
What Useful Information Can be Gathered Through an Application of Certeau's Theory of Placemaking to Specific Web Sites in Terms of Placemaking and Habitation?.....	72
What We Can Discover, Through an Examination of the Traces of Practice on MS Paint Adventures, About the Operations That Made Possible the Creation of MS Paint Adventures as a Place?.....	75
What Are The Problems With or Limits of Applying a Place-Based Lens to the Study of Websites?	78
Avenues for Further Research	82
REFERENCES	84

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: <i>MS Paint Adventures</i> Home Page and Initial <i>Homestuck</i> Strip.....	29
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LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Section and Content Description of *MS Paint Adventures* 27

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Theories of place and space have long been used to study the production of space and its influences on social relations, from its beginnings as a focus on the physical world (Reynolds 54) to more recent uses for the study of culture and identity (Martinez 4). The study of online spaces has become increasingly relevant as more people turn to the Internet for research, education, entertainment, and social interaction. The Internet houses quite a variety of web sites, including blogs, social media sites, online newspapers and magazines, stores, media sites, and educational sites where people can “enter and interact with others (and with objects and tools) at a distance” (Gee 90). In recent years, researchers have worked to apply space theory to online spaces in order to study the production of and interactions in digital space in video games (Gee), 3-D environments (Saunders et al), and online writing repositories (Black).

A problem arises when attempting to apply theories of place and space to digital spaces, however. Digital environments do not have a physical, tangible presence outside of the technology (the servers) that houses them. Concepts of place and space are often dependent on physicality of the former and the activities and interactions within the latter. Place is considered to be the "local," physical surroundings, while space is considered the product of the human practices that take place within a place (Martinez 4). It is something that can be inhabited, that can be moved through (Certeau), communicated within (Martinez), and provides a place for social interaction. Is it fair, then, to treat a web site as a place?

This research will focus on the potential for the production of online place. Specifically, this study will examine the web site *MS Paint Adventures (MSPA)*, a site created and maintained

by Andrew Hussie, which houses the web comic *Homestuck*. I have chosen to study web sites as place because they are bounded locations. Facebook is composed of all of the profiles and events pages located within it. A food blog is made up of the text and graphics that the author uploads to it. In a way, web sites act as locations, buildings, or rooms, where people can meet to interact with each other.

In the following chapters I will use Certeau's theory of place to use *MS Paint Adventures* as case study for the potential of online place. I will investigate if we can fairly and logically conceive of *MS Paint Adventures* as place, and detail the sort of space that the place attempts to produce. I will also examine the ways in which users are able, and even encouraged, to inhabit *MS Paint Adventures* as a place.

An Overview of Space Theory and a Closer Examination of Certeau's Theory

The study of place and space was initially associated, as we might expect, with the study of diverse physical places and the relationships between them. Space theory came into vogue around the time of the emergence of interplanetary rocket technology and the space race (Elden 206). However our concept of space was far simpler than it is today, generally referring to the space as a container, rather than a product or process, and no differentiation yet existed between place and space. Various disciplines examined space through a different lens; sociologists studied the social activities that took place in a specific area, while historians concentrated on events. Still, space was viewed as a container, an indifferent physical area in which people acted (Elden 207).

The field of geography took great strides in evolving theories of space, as Reynolds

details in her book *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*. Geography is, at its core, a social science, the “study of people encountering the earth” (Reynolds 51). It is also, according to Reynolds, a “seeing” discipline, relying upon visual evidence. Indeed, geographers often use a spatial scale to demonstrate how the social production of space moves from the individual to ever larger locations (54): Individual -> Home -> Neighborhood -> City -> Region -> Nation -> World.

Feminist and critical geographers, who prefer the employment of methodologies that do not privilege the visual, challenged the reliance on visual clues. Some feminist geographers understood the visually focused lens through which geographers traditionally looked at space to be an outgrowth of the feminization of landscapes coupled with a masculine tendency to “acknowledge the pleasure of gazing upon the land” (Reynolds 59). Instead of a focus on the visual, feminist geographers sought to understand the relationship between bodies and spaces. Cultural geographers, on the other hand, examined how material things were used and appropriated and their meanings transformed through social practices (Reynolds 57).

Eventually, space was seen as a product, a concept that was soon complicated by the realization that space is a *social* product (Elden 210). Place and space were viewed separately; place as the location, and space as the result of the human activities that took place within it. Scholars like Lefebvre began to see space “both as a social product and a social producer in relation to the spatial practices” (Martinez 3). Space cannot be seen as a passive container; space in fact shapes and is shaped by its own production through limitations imposed by the place (borders, walls, physical objects) and the social relationships taking place within it.

The theory of place that I will be using comes from the work of Michel de Certeau. In his

book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau outlines his definitions of place and space, and the relationship between them. Rather than concentrating on space as a social product, Certeau is particularly interested in the everyday *processes* by which place and space are created, the ways in which people produce and consume products through reading, writing, dialog, walking, building, or imposing through violent or non-violent means.

Place, Certeau explains, is a stable configuration of elements, while space includes fluctuating variables and mobile elements, including the practices that constitute it (117). Place is the stable form. It has boundaries, and was created with a purpose in mind. Individuals or organizations with some sort of power in some way produce a place. The city is perhaps the most obvious example of a place, and it is one that Certeau spends a great deal of time exploring. Cities are the result of urban planning. Officials, politicians, and even architects have a hand in planning the look, layout, and functions of the different parts of a city. *Here* is a park. *There* is a sports complex. *Here* is room for a residential district. Vehicle traffic will move in *this way*. Foot traffic will have *these* paths available to them. *Here, here, and here* are planned bus stops. Those who design a city have plans for its "correct" use. And because the results of their designs are physical objects (streets, buildings), the designers of a city have a great deal of power regarding its use.

Certeau defines space as "practiced space," meaning that space is created when people move and act within a place (117). The place that is the street, the building, the planned and physically constructed urban landscape is only transformed into a space through the actions of the people who walk there.

Certeau studied the relationship between producers—the person/people who design a

place—and consumers—the person/people who use a place—through an application of the terms *strategy* and *tactics*. *Strategy* is employed by the producer(s), the one(s) in power, whether that be an individual or a group. It describes the ways in which a producer designs and creates a product with a specific intent for use by consumers (xix). Strategy attempts to create a place that is immune to the variable and subversive actions of its users (Certeau 36). It seeks to create a stable place where the producer has the advantage, and where his/their rules and authority are dominant.

Tactics, on the other hand, encompass the timely ways in which a consumer manipulates a product for their own purpose. A tactical practice is a calculated action, one that has no place of its own. Instead, tactics move through another's place, subverting it when the opportunity arises (xix). Many practices, though not all, are tactical in nature, and it is these that Certeau tends to focus on. Producers, through strategic design and creation of a product, produce both a power structure (a set of rules and consequences for breaking them) and a dominant discourse (a set of "proper" ways of thinking or acting) that consumers are expected to follow. When consumers subvert the power structure or dominant discourse at an opportune moment, tactics are at play.

But above all, Certeau was interested in studying *process*. He argues for the need to examine the ways in which, the processes by which, products are made, and also the *use* to which they are put by groups or individuals (xxii). Ultimately, Certeau is concerned with the ways in which the “weak” (the consumers/users) triumph over the “strong” (the producers) through clever use of their products. He is calling for the examination of the ways in which consumers overcome the dominant discourse imposed upon them (violently or not) by an authority (xiii). Certeau explains the concept of imposition by reminding us of how the Spanish

imposed sets of "laws, practices, and representations" on indigenous cultures, who then subverted these imposed laws and beliefs by transforming them into something that could be assimilated into their own belief systems (31). Certeau then claims that the same process of subversion and assimilation can be found, though to a lesser degree, in popular culture (32).

In the next section, I will explain how online place and space have been examined by researchers, why they found spatial theory useful for the study of digital spaces, and the problems inherent in studying the online production of place.

Space Theory and Digital Environments and the Problem of Online Place

Spatial lenses are used primarily for the study of social interaction, which often involves issues of race, class, power, culture, and accessibility (Certeau, Lefebvre, Reynolds). Researchers have often found place and space theory useful when users are trying to mimic physical reality, or "real life," as it were, in digital environments (Martinez, Saunders et al, Booth). Some researchers have also turned a spatial lens to chat rooms and web sites (Gee, Black). However, the lack of physical structures in online "spaces" often leads researchers to call for a new definition of space that can easily be applied to online spaces.

As mentioned above, place and space are often thought of in terms of physicality and interaction. This raises problems when attempting to apply traditional theories of place and space to an online environment. Place is often thought of as a physical location, with material borders, and space is a product of the interactions taking place within it. Online spaces are not "real" in the physical sense. Video games exist on a disc, and increasingly often as a digital download. Web sites exist on the servers that host them. We interact with digital spaces through physical

means, through computers and mobile devices. If the disk is snapped in two, the server destroyed, the computer broken, those digital spaces cease to exist. While this holds true for physical places as well (a house destroyed in a tornado no longer exists as that house), it can be difficult to conceive of a web site that is housed in the ether as "real." This in turn complicates the discussion of digital space. How can a researcher research a *space* created by interactions in a "place" that is not "real"? If web sites have no material presence, can they be examined through a lens that sees space as the interaction between the material location and the human activities that take place within in?

Digital environments, such as video games, web sites, or chat rooms, have become far more numerous in recent years, and people are moving many of their social interactions to those environments. Groups of players cooperate in video games in order to play the game and accomplish goals, friends and coworkers keep in touch with each other through social media sites, and fans of television and movies turn to forums and chat rooms as areas for discussion and commentary. Digital environments have virtual objects to interact with, as well, from 3-D rendered scenery in video games to text, graphics, and links on web sites, and users are interacting with these virtual objects, and with each other, in these environments. And each video game, app, and web site is designed and created by a producer with intentionality. Place (and perhaps space) theory could prove a useful way of studying how these virtual spaces are constructed, and how users inhabit and move through them.

The lack of physical place in online environments is still a problem that must be confronted, however, and researchers have attempted to do so. Rather than theorize about online place, many researchers of online space have instead admitted to the virtual quality of online

“places” before then proposing new theories of online space. Martinez bases her theory of space in part on the work of Lefebvre, who proposed the concept of space as a social product and social producer, and Bourdieu, who claimed, “we are inscribed in space due to the materiality of our own body,” meaning that we “determine and generate spaces in social frameworks” through embodied practices (9). Space, for Martinez, is “a social construction made up of human practices” (9). Martinez takes her definition of place from Krueger, who, in reaction to emerging methods of remote communication in the mid-1970’s, put forth the concept of place as a thing “defined by the common information available to both parties” and created by the act of communication (Krueger, qtd in Martinez 6). Early on, however, Martinez points out that physical place does not exist online, and “space is no longer related only to the physical place” (4). Digital spaces are virtual and metaphoric, and Cyberspace has no shape or size. It’s a new kind of space, she argues, one that can “exist simultaneously with our society’s physical and material life, overlapping with real space and time” (Martinez 4).

Martinez finds space theory a useful way to “theorize about culture and identity” (6), because it allows for an examination of human interaction. By theorizing a type of space that does not rely upon a physical place, Martinez is able to bring a spatial lens to online spaces. Space, and by extension Cyberspace, is a “social construction made up of human practices” (6). Cyberspace is not just a container for information, it is a product of its “contents.” It is a space of communication. It includes the physical structures, the ways in which we communicate digitally (the screen, the phone), the information found in Cyberspace, and the humans who “navigate and fuel it” (5). It is *created* as a space by “the activities developed within it” (Martinez 7). For

Martinez, this means "telecommuting, on-line education, virtual communities or universities" and any sort of digital communication. We inhabit Cyberspace by communicating within it.

However, Martinez points out that we also inhabit Cyberspace through "metaphoric occupation" (8), through using spatially-represented information (the "desktop" metaphor at play on the computer screen, the generation of 3D environments in virtual worlds such as Second Life). We try to make Cyberspace mimic real places in our attempts to find ways to inhabit it (Martinez 8). When Martinez points out that we seek to make Cyberspace mimic reality she is, perhaps inadvertently, speaking to the problem of applying a spatial lens to online space. Even with a modified theory of space that does not rely on physical place, "reality" is still contingent upon physical location to some degree, something that users of digital spaces unconsciously attempt to work around by seeking ways in which digital space can be made to feel and act more like physical place.

The problem of the lack of physical place in online space also plays a role in the spatial theory generated by Saunders et al, although they do not frame it as a problem. Like Martinez, Saunders et al admit that physical place does not exist in virtual worlds. Unlike Martinez, they do not focus on the physical infrastructure we use to interact with digital spaces. Saunders et al propose that online space is in the user's mind. While physical place does not exist online, perceptual and cognitive *space* do, and it is these spaces that they draw upon to develop a theory of virtual space and place called Virtual Space and Place Theory (VSP) in which they define virtual place as "the perception of bounded space imbued with meaning" (1093).

Their theory "incorporates spatial concepts that can be applied to create a 'place' for users in a virtual world" (1080). To develop VSP, Saunders et al apply two spatial concepts,

taken from Couclelis and Gale: *perceptual space*, which can be "seen and sensed at one place and one time" and *cognitive space*, which is the space that "must be mentally organized, stored, and recalled" (1081). In virtual worlds, they argue, boundaries are conceptual rather than physical, and perceptual space is used to create cognitive space. The things users see and interact with (perceptual space) in a virtual world allow them to build cognitive spaces within their own minds. Space is therefore constituted and organized through experience as people orient themselves in space.

Saunders et al are interested in the ways in which users react to and use settings in *Second Life*, a virtual setting that is in large part built by its users and driven by social and economic interactions between its users, who are digitally represented in the game by user-designed avatars. Their creation of VSP allows them to examine "social interactivity through avatars and the performance of activities using virtual objects," which, they claim, "may allow Second Life users to create a sense of place" (1080). To do this, they extend the concept of place-as-container by claiming that the boundaries of place are fluid, changing "as meanings are continually produced and reproduced through interaction" (1083).

Perhaps because Saunders et al are trying to examine interaction in a virtual world that visually mimics the physical world, VSP is dependent on perceived interaction with objects in a virtual world to create a sort of mentally-conceived space. Much of their theorizing depends upon the hypothesis that users more readily perceive of virtual worlds as places when they are able to interact, through their virtual avatars (which look and move like humans), with virtual objects that look like physical objects. Saunders et al create a theory of virtual space and place while claiming a need for some sort of visual reality, something for users to interact with that

mimics and acts like real objects. Saunders et al claim that “the closer the VW [virtual world] is to the physical world, the easier and the less cumbersome it is for the mind to see and accept that imagined reality” (Saunders 1981). According to Saunders et al users can find it difficult to conceive of virtual worlds as places or spaces without some form of resemblance to the physical world, meaning that, though they employ the concept of conceptual space, they still see a need for the physical to be present in some way for users to be able to conceive of something as a space.

Like Saunders et al, Gee is interested in, among other digital “spaces,” video games like *Age of Mythology*, *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, and *The Sims*, all of which require interaction with virtual objects and several of which have multiplayer options or other opportunities for social interaction (91). Gee turns to a space theory as an answer to the problems he sees as inherent in the trend of studying schools and workplaces (Gee is primarily interested in understanding how young people learn) as “communities,” particularly the concept of “communities of practice” put forth by Wenger, Lave, and Rogoff (87). The word “community” is problematic, Gee claims, because it implies a sense of belonging or membership in groups of people where belonging and membership may simply not exist. Instead, Gee proposes we begin with the concept of space, that we define a set of boundaries (whether physical or virtual), and then examine how and how much people are interacting within those boundaries. Gee does not want to limit his study to physical or geographical places, however. People, Gee claims, can enter a physical classroom just as they can “enter a virtual space like a web site or chat room” (89). A person can walk through the door into a classroom, or they can interact with people through non-physical means, such as a web site’s chat room, email, or even a combination of the

physical and non-physical (a business meeting where some of the members sit in a room while others attend via voice or video chat). Two people playing chess through email or physical mail “are interacting, at a distance, in a space created by email or the postal service” (90).

Gee needed a definition of space that could be equally applied to physical and non-physical spaces, and that allows for a discussion of borders and movement that does not rely on the physical. Rather than invoke the work of any specific spatial theorists, Gee theorizes his own definition of space. Instead of physical boundaries or objects, Gee defines space in terms of *content*, *generators*, and *portals*, which include what the space is “about” (content), what gives the space content (generators), and ways of entering and interacting with the space (portals) (Gee 92-94). Space is produced when these three characteristics are present and in use, meaning that space is constituted by content, generators, and portals, and once we identify these characteristics we can then examine how people interact with them and with other people. Gee applies his definition of space to physical and virtual spaces with equal facility; a classroom has content (curriculum), generators (textbooks, instructors) and portals (textbooks again), and video games have text and graphics as content, code and game discs as generators, and the game disc (again) and strategy guides as portals. By using his definition of space, Gee is able to examine the ways in which people interact with both virtual spaces and each other.

Gee does, however, take care to point out that he is not speaking of “just physical or geographical spaces” (89). That Gee feels it necessary point out that he is not speaking of only physical places indicates that Gee is still aware of the problem of online place. Even when re-defining space in his own terms (content, generators, portals), Gee realizes that his colleagues might have difficulty accepting an application of a spatial lens to an online space without an

acknowledgment that online spaces are not physical places, a problem that he confronted by developing an entirely new theory of space.

Black draws upon Gee's definition of space to examine language acquisition and literacy issues for English Language Learners on the web site FanFiction.net. Specifically, Black uses Gee's concept of "affinity spaces," which combines Gee's definition of space with other characteristics concerning power distribution, the roles of experts and novices, and knowledge acquisition (Black 391). Black finds both Gee's definition of space and his concept of affinity spaces as a way to focus on the "interplay between engagement, active participation, a sense of belonging, and the production of social space" (387).

Black also argues that, "while physical boundaries and material objects may shape and constrain our social worlds in certain regards, individual and collective actions may also play an active role in shaping the perceptual as well as the more tangible fields of our social landscape" (Black 384). Like Gee, Black feels the need, perhaps for the reader's benefit, to compare virtual space with physical space, to say that our actions can function in similar ways to physical boundaries and objects.

Booth mentions several concepts associated with place and space theory in his study of online fandom, though he does not directly theorize about or define online space, except to imply that it is created through the interactions between fans and connections that Social Network Sites (links between MySpace profiles, for example) make possible (147). Booth gives the links between MySpace profiles as an example of this. One MySpace user can "friend" another. This creates a link between their profiles, a "shared space between the two personas" (Booth 146). As more friends are added, a community begins to form.

Booth draws upon Certeau's theory of place and space, particularly the concepts of poaching, *perruque*, and strategy and tactics in order to clarify his own writing and show how researchers of the past used concepts that Booth considers to be too restrictive to apply to online spaces. Booth pays particular attention to the concepts that propose a strict binary: strategy/tactics and producer/consumer. Booth draws upon Certeau's concepts of strategy and tactics in order to delineate the roles of producer/author, who Booth claims uses strategy to create a text, and the consumer/fan, who, according to Booth, tactically draws from the text in order to create fan works (fiction, art, character profiles). He then goes on to challenge the binary of these concepts by arguing that the creation of fan works on social network sites blurs the lines between producer and consumer so far as to break them entirely (147). According to Booth, the Certeauan concepts of producer/consumer and strategy/tactics are no longer applicable to the study of interaction in digital spaces.

Booth is particularly interested identity roleplay that fans of a media text (books, television shows, films) take part in on MySpace. The specific practices he highlights are the writing of fan fiction and the creation of MySpace profiles where fans pretend to be characters from source media (Booth mainly draws upon television shows like *Gilmore Girls* and *Doctor Who* as examples). Booth uses Certeau's concepts of *perruque* (when a worker creates something of their own using tools that are not their own) and textual poaching (picking out bits of text for their own use) to describe the writing of fan fiction or creation of character profiles on social network sites.

Booth does find one of Certeau's concepts useful in his work. Booth refers to the way in which Certeau "conceptualizes the production of a text spatially" (156) to explain how readers

actively read a source text. Specifically, Booth refers to how Certeau uses the “metaphor of the city” (156) to show how fans navigate a source media. Booth explains that, just as cities have streets and sidewalks built with specific purpose that people travel (often taking paths not meant by the city designers), so do texts put forward ideas and ways of thinking (analogous to streets, sidewalks, and other pathways) that readers mentally traverse in ways not intended by the author by bringing their own memories and expectations to their reading of the text (156).

Readers, however, are not always content with following the paths laid out for them. Booth argues that fans of a media text use spaces like MySpace to rewrite and take on the identity of canon characters in that media text. Other fans then come together through this roleplay to reproduce their fan community in the space afforded them by MySpace. They are pretending to *be* the characters, and adding their own expectations and desires to it in order to create a persona that is based on, but different from, the original, official character from the source media. Other fans interact with this "fake" persona, allowing the profile-creator an opportunity to make the character react in whatever way they see fit. None of this happens in the actual show; just as “pedestrians cannot create a new path” (156) through the city, fans cannot change the source media. By recreating a favorite character online, however, fans are able to rewrite the actions, and occasionally the personality, of the character. By this process of rewriting, Booth argues, fans "rebuild the roads and repave sidewalks" of their media text (156), changing, if not the original text (or character), the at least their own perceptions of it. He does not, however, directly draw upon a definition or theory of space, instead picking the bits and pieces of Certeau's theory that allow him to explain both his own writing and the ways in which past fandom researchers have thought about fandoms and fan practices. The fact that Booth finds

certain of Certeau's concepts applicable to fan activity online hints that a more complete application of Certeau's space theory could be useful in the study of digital environments.

The lack of physical place in online spaces does, as I have explained, complicate the application of a spatial lens to web sites for many theorists, perhaps beyond rectification. It is, however, worth the attempt to examine the possibility of online production of place. Digital environments are created with a specific purpose in mind, and users of a site, if they choose to use a site at all, must either accede to the site's intended purpose or find a way to turn it to their own. Certeau's theory of space highlights the importance of examining how places and spaces are created and how people position themselves in relation to others and place. By developing theories of space that do not rely on physical location, researchers have been able to use a spatial lens to study online communication and culture (Martinez), interaction between people and virtual objects in virtual worlds (Saunders et al), online social interaction (Gee), and literacy and language acquisition (Black). Though he challenges the application of many of Certeau's concepts to the study of fan activity online, Booth does find those concepts (poaching, strategy/tactics, and producer/consumer) useful in articulating his own research. I see the use as well, for the study of the ways in which people move within a web site as well as the operations that create that site as a virtual, habitable place.

Even when using spatial or place-based theories that don't rely on it, the lack of physical place in digital spaces is there, implicit in the vocabulary used to describe them. "Cognitive" borders (Saunders et al), "metaphoric" space (Martinez), "virtual" worlds (Saunders et al), online "spaces" (Booth), and even "digital" environments all admit the lack of physical location in online spaces. Martinez brings in the physicality of our modes of access, while Saunders et al

pay very close attention to how interaction with virtual objects that look real improves users' ability to mentally construct a space. The problem with physical place and online space is present in Booth's work by the absence of a discussion of place. Booth chooses to draw upon particular concepts that he finds useful (strategy/tactics, producer/consumer/poaching), and that do not require him to engage Certeauan definitions of place and space. Gee posits (and Black draws from) a definition of space that does not require material borders or objects, yet both still feel it necessary to mention physical place in their work, Gee to say that he is not "simply" discussing physical places, and Black to say how our activities and interactions play a role that is similar to the one that physical objects or locations play. Even when seemingly pushed aside, the physical is a common thread when spatial or place-based lenses are applied to digital environments.

A Definition of Place and the Ways in Which an Online Place Can Be Inhabited

Given that the necessity of physical place is such a common concern for many theorists in talking about place and space, can we logically apply Certeau's definition of place to web sites, things that have no physical presence for users to move through and practice in? It might be easier to apply Gee's definition of space, or affinity spaces, to web sites, including *MS Paint Adventures*. I can certainly see the ways in which *MS Paint Adventures* fits Gee's definition of space in its content (text and graphics), generators (code and author), and portals (navigation links), and Gee's definition of space does not require the same kind of materiality implicit in Certeau's theory.

Gee, however, seems to be interested in studying to what extent people are interacting in a given space (89). He identifies the content, generators, and portals of several video games,

before examining how people interact within them. He does not, however, show a great interest in the processes by which digital spaces are created. Certeau's theories of place and space offers us a chance to examine the ways in which web sites are constructed while taking into account the ways in which producers design and arrange the elements of a site in order to dictate the "correct" (according to the producer) way of inhabiting the site. Certeau's theory also allows us to focus on how people use web sites, and how they move through and occasionally subvert the power structures put in place by producers.

Though it is implied, Certeau never explicitly stipulates a physical requirement for place. Physical place might make it easier for us to conceptualize a bordered location, but none of Certeau's major characteristics of place *must* rely on the physicality of place. Many do, however, rely on embodiment, on the use or experience of our bodies while we walk, shop, or read. Certeau focuses on process, and on articulating a product as a process. He is interested in the processes that create place, and how we inhabit it, not in the physical attributes of it. At one point, Certeau claims that "an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text" (Certeau 117). Moreover, he situates the written text as a place in ways that can also be applied to web sites.

Certeau discusses place at various points throughout *The Practice of Everyday Life*, and though he never give a definitive list of characteristics that determine place, his discussion of place can be summed up by a set of four characteristics.

First, place, according to Certeau, is the "order in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence" (117). In physical locations, structures are built out of wood and steel and concrete. Each element is in its place (Certeau 117), and together these

elements constitute a border defining the place and separating it from other places. *Here* is the city, and *there* the country. *That* area surrounded by a fence is the dog park, and it is separate from the community pool. The words of a novel are contained on *these* pages, and are bound within a cover. A web site consists of *these* pages, joined by navigation links and bound by code, appearance, and content (see Chapter III for more). A person can point to a building or a book and judge what sort of place it is (a grocery store, a science fiction novel), by reading signs, analyzing its appearance, or remembering information they got from a friend, map, or guide book. In similar ways, a web site user can point at the site pictured on the screen and identify it (a fashion blog, an online retailer) through reading the site's text, examining its graphics or color scheme, or remembering information gleaned from other web sites or people.

Second, place is where the law of the "proper" holds sway (Certeau 117), the rules which govern a place. These elements are often created through strategy, which "seeks to create the 'proper'" (Certeau 36) and encompasses the operations involved in the production of a place. On a web site, the "proper" can be established in a variety of ways. The site creator can limit the number of words that a user can include in comment posts, for example, or program the site to filter profanity so that text written by site users cannot contain language deemed inappropriate by the producer. Perhaps the most obvious way that that "proper" can be established on a web site, however, is through the posting of rules. These rules can govern conduct and language, and they can stipulate how a web site is to be used (only for the discussion of vegan cooking, for example).

Third, place is created by some authority. The planning and construction of a place happens at the behest of some individual or group with power, whether it is a city council,

federal organization, or the millionaire owner of a business or property. The elites in a society, culture, or organization impose a set of expectations or limitations (proper ways of thinking about, moving through, acting within) through the construction of place, while the “common people” use and/or subvert it (Certeau xxi). For digital spaces, the ultimate authority lies with the site designers. They stipulate a site’s appearance, content, and features. If a web site allows for users to contribute text (forums or a comment section, for example), then they are often policed by a set of administrators who have been given authority by the site’s owner(s) to delete posts or discipline users who act against the rules.

Finally, place creates its own space (Certeau 94). a space that visitors will use in a particular way or for a particular purpose. Each of the previous aspects that I discussed works towards the creation of a place’s space. Rules regulate participation, stable and ordered elements function as guides and limitations, and the producer(s) create and perpetuate their own authority. Through these operations, place is created, a place intended to be used through a specific set of practices, a “correct” way of moving through it. The paths and displays of a clothing store might be arranged to encourage slow movement and impulse purchases, while the stanchion placement and posted rules in a local Department of Motor Vehicles office might encourage efficient movement through and use of the office.

For web sites (and perhaps any place), this can be conceptualized through an examination of the site’s intended purpose. The purpose of a cooking blog might be to create a space where the author can share their expertise while allowing readers to share their own advice with others. Each aspect of the site would be designed in an attempt to create this space, from clearly labeled articles to an easy-to-use comment section.

But threading through all of these characteristics is one particularly important aspect of place: it is habitable. The concept of habitability can be seen in much of the research done on online spaces. Martinez considers Cyberspace to be habitable if human activity, in particular social interaction and communication, can occur there (4). Social media sites in particular are prime sites for social interaction and communication, and is often used for communication between friends, family, and coworkers. Booth bases much of his research on fandom and identity creation on the ways in which fans use social media sites, particularly MySpace, to communicate and interact with other fans. One important part of Gee's examination of space is the extent to which people interact with other users on and in relation to the site (95). So, one way that online places can be inhabited is through communication and/or social activity.

Physical movement or activity is another way that a place can be inhabited (Reynolds, Certeau). Certeau speaks much to the idea of walking the city. We inhabit a city when we move through it, creating our own path and experience. We choose to traverse particular streets, sidewalks, and paths while avoiding others. When a user visits a web site, they are limited by the paths (navigation links) afforded them by the site's producers. However, users can still choose what parts of the site to visit, or whether to continue visiting the site at all.

Virtual worlds (virtual, 3-D spaces that imitate the physical world) are habitable because people can interact with other people and virtual objects within them (Saunders et al 1079), and Black and Gee consider a space habitable because they allow for numerous activities to take place within them, including chatting, playing cooperative video games, writing, and discussion. Users can write themselves into a web site through comments and discussion, leaving evidence of their thoughts and feelings, and other users can then read and interact with these comments.

Another way that a place can be habitable, then, is if some sort of activity can take place within it.

Written texts are also habitable in ways that can be applied to web sites. Certeau claims that "readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write" (174). Though this is an analogy, it implies that movement is possible within a text. Readers bring memory, expectation, and improvisation to the text. The reader "poaches' on it, is transported into it" (Certeau xxi). The process of reading is the production of memory, as the reader's world "slips into the author's place" (Certeau xxi). For Certeau, this process makes a text habitable. In many ways a web site acts as a text. By "text" I mean alphabetic text as well as images and videos that form some type of communication. Many sites are primarily composed of text in the form of articles, posts, stories, pictures, or videos that users can read or view, and the user brings their own memories and expectations to the reading. At the same time, the user is generating new memory, and thus inhabiting the site.

For a place to be habitable, then, it must allow for movement and other everyday practices to take place within it. Certeau focuses on movement and the creation of memory (xxi) within a place, while other researchers look to the opportunity for interaction, whether with virtual objects or other people. Web sites allow for movement through navigation links (Gee's portals). By clicking on a hyperlink, a user can navigate between sections of a site. This is comparable to turning the pages of a physical book. Users of a web site bring their own experiences, memories, and expectations to their use of a site, and they create memory by interacting with a site (reading, watching video, clicking links) and with other people on the site.

But perhaps most telling is our apparent ability to believe that we can inhabit a digital places. We speak of web sites, of the memories and experiences they helped create, of the activities we performed on them, as though we were there: “this site made me laugh, you should go *there*; you can read the news *here*; I wasted a lot of time *on* this site.”

There are, then, many different ways to inhabit a place, and many of these ways of inhabiting can take place on web sites. For the purpose of this project, any of the following can be taken as evidence that a web site is inhabitable:

- If communication and/or social activity can take place there
- If some form of physicality (physical movement or embodied experience) is involved in navigating a site
- If a site allows for various activities to take place there
- If memory can be generated through interaction with the content of a site

Given that web sites are composed of stable and ordered elements, created by a producer with power, contain visual or implied rules for “proper” use, seek to create some sort of space, and are habitable, it should be possible to examine them through Certeau’s theory of place in order to learn more about how they are created as habitable places. *MS Paint Adventures* is a virtual place, rather than a physical one. The lack physical location does not, or perhaps does not have to, preclude us from examining it as a “real” place. *MS Paint Adventures* is an ordered thing that can be used or acted upon. The web site is itself a text, and the web comic hosted on it, *Homestuck*, is a narrative. Users read the narrative and use the site, creating memory. The ways in which Hussie created the site and its content, as I will detail in Chapter III, echo the processes

Certeau details in his discussion of the “city” as a place. I would like to see how an application of Certeau's theory of place can be useful in the study of *MS Paint Adventures*, to push Certeau's definition of place to its limit in an attempt to theorize the ways in which *MS Paint Adventures* becomes a habitable place. I will be using Certeau’s theories of placemaking to interrogate the distribution of power structures and dominant discourses through theorizing the operations used to construct place on *MS Paint Adventures*.

I will situate *MS Paint Adventures* as a place in Chapter III, so I will not spend much time on that here. However, the site itself has a complex layout and history, so some context and description of the site is required to avoid confusion in later chapters. To that end, the next chapter provides a general description of the site in terms of its author, purpose, layout, and history as well as a description of my research methods.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter I, the Introduction, provides a cursory history of place and space theories and how they have been applied to digital environments, along with a more detailed explanation of Certeau’s theory of place and space.

Chapter II describes *MS Paint Adventures* in terms of its history and site design, and gives an overview of my research methods for this project.

Chapter III, *MS Paint Adventures as Place*, examines *MS Paint Adventures* in order to theorize about the operation that Hussie enacted to create the site as a habitable place.

Chapter IV, the Conclusion and Discussion, provides a discussion of my research questions and their implications, and offers further avenues of research.

CHAPTER II: DESCRIPTION OF SITE AND RESEARCH METHODS

MS Paint Adventures: History and Layout

The Internet is comprised of an ever-increasing number of individual web sites. In order to examine the possibility for the online construction of place, I have chosen a specific web site as a sample text. The web site is called *MS Paint Adventures*, and it is host to several web comics as well as an active forums section.

MS Paint Adventures is a web site designed and maintained by Andrew Hussie. The site was created on June 3rd, 2007 to host Hussie's web comic series, *Jailbreak*. Currently, *MS Paint Adventures* hosts the web comic *Homestuck* as well as Hussie's previous three web comics, *Jailbreak*, *Bard Quest*, and *Problem Sleuth*, though the only currently running comic is *Homestuck*. *MS Paint Adventures* is usually updated several times a day with either comic or news updates.

The content of *MS Paint Adventures* is composed of the following pages, the links to which can be found along the top of each page on the site:

Table 1: Section and Content Description of *MS Paint Adventures*

Section	Contents
<i>MS Paint Adventures</i>	The central page is dedicated to the <i>Homestuck</i> web comic itself. The left side of the page lists links to the 50 most recent panels. Recent news and merchandise advertisements are located further down the page.
Archive	Contains links to all four of Hussie's web comics (<i>Homestuck</i> , <i>Problem Sleuth</i> , <i>Bard Quest</i> , and <i>Jailbreak</i>). From this page, the user can navigate to the <i>Map</i> , <i>Log</i> , and <i>Search</i> page for each comic, and the sound credits page for <i>Homestuck</i> .
New Reader?	Serves as an introduction to the site itself. Each web comic is summarized and linked, and Hussie gives some background on how each comic began and evolved.
Map, Log, and Search	Allow a user to navigate through the comics in various ways.
Shop	Links to the two online retailers that sell <i>MS Paint Adventures</i> merchandise, Topatoco and What Pumpkin. These two online retailers are not part of <i>MS Paint Adventures</i> .
Music	Links to each digital album of <i>Homestuck</i> music, and highlights the most recent album (all albums are housed on the music hosting site Bandcamp.com). The user can play the music directly from the website or purchase the album.
Forums	Houses the site's main forums. Active forums include <i>MS Paint Adventure</i> discussions, chat forums, and fan work posting and discussion. Users may view any thread they wish, but they must register on the site in order to post to or begin a thread.
Secrets	Contains links to Hussie's social media accounts (Twitter, Formspring, Blog), the <i>MS Paint Adventures</i> Wiki page, and the MSPA TV Tropes entry (all housed off-site), as well as links to "bonus content" (extra comic panels that Hussie drew and posted for donations) and FAQs, which are housed on <i>MS Paint Adventures</i> .
Credits	Links to the Sound Credits and Art Credits pages, which list outside contributors to <i>Homestuck</i> .

Homestuck and MS Paint Adventures

MS Paint Adventures hosts the web comic *Homestuck*, and, because most of the practices that take place on the site are related to the web comic, I will give some description of the comic and its history. *Homestuck*, is a story that spans multiple worlds, timelines, and even universes, so a thorough, concise summary is difficult. Some sort of summary is necessary, however, as many of the practices performed by both Hussie (as he creates *MS Paint Adventures* as a place) and the fans (who inhabit *MS Paint Adventures*).

At its most basic, *Homestuck* is a story about a group of human teenagers playing a highly immersive video game, *Sburb*. *Sburb* is so immersive, in fact, that when the comic characters begin playing it, the game actually transports the player to another world, called the "Medium," where most of the comic takes place. This Medium includes other instances of the game (that the characters are playing), some of them played by human characters (and other species) from completely separate universes. Along the way the four initial human characters meet and interact with a group of alien (extraterrestrial) players, called trolls. Hilarity and drama ensues, the plot gets incredibly complex, and the characters evolve in various ways.

Each *Homestuck* strip is a single image, rather than a series of panels. Some are animated gifs. Readers must occasionally play Flash-based mini games (as opposed to reading or viewing comic strips, where exposition takes place through the lens of RPG-like character interaction). Some strips are long animations, and these often include music. The dialog is given in the form of chat logs. The comic initially poked fun at old-school text parser games, where the player types commands for the character to follow. The navigation links leading to each successive strip are given as game commands, from the most common --->, symbolizing "hit the enter key," to

actual commands to a given character (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: MS Paint Adventures Home Page and Initial Homestuck Strip

The screenshot shows the MS Paint Adventures website interface. At the top, there is a banner with the text "what pumpkin" and "HOMESTUCK STUFF" next to several character avatars. Below the banner is the main title "MSPAIN T ADVENTURES" in a large, pixelated font. A navigation bar contains links for "MS PAINT ADVENTURES", "ARCHIVE", "NEW READER?", "MAP", "LOG", "SEARCH", "SHOP", "MUSIC", "FORUMS", "SECRETS", and "CREDITS".

The main content area is titled "Homestuck" and features a comic strip illustration. The illustration shows a young man with glasses standing in a room. On a table to the left is a cake and a rolled-up scroll. On the wall is a sign that says "SUBURB BETA" with a green house icon. Below the illustration is the following text:

A young man stands in his bedroom. It just so happens that today, the 13th of April, is this young man's birthday. Though it was thirteen years ago he was given life, it is only today he will be given a name!

What will the name of this young man be?

Below the text is a text input field with the placeholder text "> Enter name." and a "VIEW ALL PAGES" link. At the bottom of the page, there are links for "Save Game (?)", "Auto-Save! (?)", "Load Game", and "Delete Game Data".

"Homestuck." Hussie, Andrew. *MS Paint Adventures*. 4.2.0. *MS Paint Adventures*. Web. 5 July. 2014.

The *Homestuck* fandom is a prolific one, creating not only fan fiction, but also fan art and music as well, some of which Hussie has used in the comic itself. New fan art often appears within hours of an update and a deep well of popular (within the fandom as a whole) pieces of fan fiction have been written and circulated on various sites. *MS Paint Adventures* hosts forums that allow for the posting and discussion of these fan works, as well as discussion of the comic itself.

Choice of *MS Paint Adventures* as a Sample Site

For Certeau space cannot exist without place. Because the lack of a physical location of web sites is a persistent issue for the research of digital spaces, I am limiting the scope of this project to the possibility for the production of online place so that I can concentrate on the ways in which a web site can be created as a place that may be inhabited. The examination of *MS Paint Adventures* as a space would be an option for further research (see Chapter IV).

Moreover, using Certeau's theory of place allows me to examine how a strategically-constructed place (*MS Paint Adventures*) can define the actions of the users (fans) who inhabit it. The processes by which Andrew Hussie designed *MS Paint Adventures* set in place a dominant discourse that mediates, to some extent, all activities that take place on the site. In response, fans of the web comic *Homestuck* must operate within the constraints and affordances put in play by its design elements in order to interact with both the site's content and with other fans *about* the site's content.

I chose to apply Certeau's theories of place and placemaking to the web site *MS Paint Adventures* for a variety of reasons. It is the official site that houses the *Homestuck* web comic,

and was designed and created by *Homestuck*'s author, Andrew Hussie. *MS Paint Adventures* is the only site that hosts *Homestuck*, and therefore it is the site that readers must visit in order to read the comic. This limitation gives Hussie, who designs the content and functionality of the site, a certain amount of control over how fans are able to read and experience the narrative hosted on it (see Chapter III).

MS Paint Adventures is a single web site made up of multiple pages. By this I mean that *MS Paint Adventures* is not a single page composed of text and images; Hussie divided the site into smaller portions, each with a specific purpose (see Table 1). The multiple pages of *MS Paint Adventures* can be seen as analogous to the different rooms of an apartment, each of which has a purpose (bedroom, bathroom, kitchen). That these pages are all part of *MS Paint Adventures* is made obvious by the heading “*MS Paint Adventures*” located at the top of each page and the color scheme that unites them.

Each page of *MS Paint Adventures* is linked to the other pages on the site through navigation links located at the top of each page. Users can navigate between the parts of a site by clicking on the navigation links, in effect moving through parts of the site as a homeowner might move through the rooms of a house. But, though *MS Paint Adventures* is composed of multiple pages, it is still a single web site.

Using *MS Paint Adventures* as my sample site allows me to examine the creation of elements through which users can move (which is an important part of placemaking) and the ways in which users are able to move through the site (which is one way in which a place can be inhabited) (see Chapter III). Though *MS Paints Adventures* as a place aligns with the four

elements of habitability I listed in Chapter I, given the limitations of space and time here, I will focus my analysis on how users inhabit *MS Paint Adventures* through movement.

Using *MS Paint Adventures* as a sample site also makes my research more manageable. The Internet is made up of a vast number of sites which are highly varied in appearance, subject, and function. The combination of variety and number of sites makes it difficult to speak of the Internet in general as a place. A single web site is logistically a far more manageable place to examine than the Internet. Moreover, by examining a web site I can focus on a specific place and the specific ways in which that place is created and inhabited.

MS Paint Adventures, and the comics hosted on it, has a large and prolific fandom, and many fans maintain their own sites dedicated to or inspired by the comic, including tumblr sites, blogs, and fan sites that serve as host to fan fiction and art. Some fans might consider these fan-made sites to also be a vital part of their engagement with the web comic *Homestuck* and with other fans. A project involving an examination of how fan-made sites contribute to place (or space, since the creation of a site separate from the official site could certainly be considered a tactical practice) is a large project that is outside the scope of this research. *MS Paint Adventures*, though large, is a more manageable site for the study of placemaking.

One aspect of *MS Paint Adventures* that makes the site ideal for the study of the production of online place is the section of the site titled MSPA Forums. The MSPA Forums is the section of the site that is dedicated to discussion (of various types), and it is the only part of the site where fans can post comments or discussion. The Forums page is host to five main categories:

- *Administrative Forums*, containing the Forum FAQ and Events threads

- *MSPA*, hosting the official MSPA discussion and roleplay threads
- *Dinosaur Comics*, hosting the Dinosaur Comics discussion threads
- *Chat Forums*, hosting threads dedicated to general chat, media discussion, and the creative works (Artbound) threads
- *The Grand Forum Archives*, hosting old threads and the suggestion boxes from when *Homestuck* took reader suggestions.

Each category (analogous to individual apartment buildings within an apartment complex), contains several sections (analogous to the individual apartments), which themselves house hundreds of individual discussion threads (individual rooms in the apartments). The labels given to each category and section give the user an idea of what sorts of threads they will find in each, and each section also has a short explanation of what content is appropriate for it.

The MSPA Forums page is an ideal section for analysis because it is the part of the site where readers can publicly engage with both the web comic *Homestuck* and with other readers. At the time of this writing, the MSPA Forums boasts 29,780 individual threads and 4,630,483 posts. Of the 134,713 members, 1805 are considered to be “active” on the forums (“MSPA Forums”).

An analysis of forum posts can provide evidence of the ways in which users inhabit *MS Paint Adventures*. The fandom itself is prolific in its creation of fan works and has demonstrated a willingness to discuss the web comic often and openly on the forums, providing a great deal of evidence of the activities taking place on the site.

The MSPA Forums are home to a wide variety of threads, created by both readers and forum moderators. A reader can create a thread to discuss topics ranging from theories about the

events in *Homestuck* to a disagreement with a character's action to speculation on which character is the "best." Other threads topics include a critique of fan fiction or art, writing tips, or cosplay (dressing up as a character from *Homestuck*) tips. The forum that I chose to examine is the MSPA Discussion page. This page hosts threads dedicated to the discussion of *Homestuck*. Some fan-created topic threads in this section include: favorite MSPA quotes, *Homestuck* sheet music discussion, and headcanon discussion. Fan-created topics are subject to far less forum moderation than official topics, being subject only to the general forums rules banning harassment and piracy. I pay particular attention to the MSPA Discussion Thread, which is the official thread dedicated to the discussion of the most recent update to *Homestuck*, meaning that it is a heavily moderated thread, and therefore an excellent example of one of the ways in which Hussie creates the "proper" on *MS Paint Adventures*.

Rather than a single update thread, which would eventually become long and difficult to read through, the forum moderators create a new MSPA Discussion Thread whenever the old update thread is deemed to be "full," which is usually one hundred pages, each containing twenty-five threads, totaling approximately 2500 posts per thread. Each new MSPA Discussion Thread is given a name that is in some way related to the most current update.

I chose to concentrate on the MSPA Discussion threads for two reasons. First, the MSPA Discussion threads are heavily moderated and subject to a set of rules governing discussion topic, post length, and post format, which allows me to examine the ways in which the "proper" is created on the forums. Second, the posts on the MSPA Discussion Thread all relate to the web comic *Homestuck*, allowing me to find traces of the ways in which users are engaging with both the narrative and with each other. In other words, the MSPA Discussion threads are a source of

data on user practice and habitation. An examination of these threads can provide evidence of the ways in which users inhabit *MS Paint Adventures*.

Even limiting my analysis to MSPA Discussion Threads left me with several hundred to choose from. However, I have been a *Homestuck* fan and reader for over two years, and during that time I have often read the MSPA Discussion Threads. I am familiar with the kinds of discussion that takes place on the MSPA Discussions Threads, and that familiarity enabled me to efficiently search for and choose threads that were representative examples.

Research Methods

Examining online place production through Certeau's lens can help us to think about how users participate in social activity online in ways that are connected to place. While other researchers of digital spaces have used theories of place to examine literacy, race, and the formation of online community, I will be analyzing the operation that Andrew Hussie performed to create *MS Paint Adventures* as a habitable place, and what kind of space the web site attempts to create.

When I began my research, I expected to find traces of placemaking and habitation on *MS Paint Adventures*. As a long-time reader, I have observed, and experienced habitation on the forums, though I did not think of it as such before this project. I needed to present evidence of placemaking and habitation for this project outside of my own experiences, however, to make a stronger argument.

I based my definition of online place primarily on Certeau's work because I am interested in examining the processes by which place is generated online and the ways in which online

place is habitable (see Chapter I). If Hussie did, in fact, succeed in creating *MS Paint Adventures* as an online place, I would need to find and present evidence of the characteristics and operations that Certeau speaks to in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which include:

- **Generation of authority, or an "elite":** Places are created by (or by the will of) a producer or producers. Certeau is interested in ways in which the weak work within the power structures or dominant discourses set in place by the strong. I would need to be able to find evidence of the existence of an "elite" on *MS Paint Adventures*, and I would need to be able to understand and explain how that elite generates or maintains authority over the site.
- **Stable and ordered elements:** *MS Paint Adventures* would need to exhibit some sort of stability, and it would need to be composed of bordered elements that users could navigate through. These can include an arrangement of text and graphics that a user can read or watch, or the careful placement of navigation links that provide a user with ways of moving through the different pages of the site.
- **Establishment of the "proper":** The "proper" includes the rules and reality that govern a place. *MS Paint Adventures* must, as a place, show evidence of the ways in which its "elite" attempts to establish "proper" ways of thinking and acting on the site. An analysis of posted rules seemed to be the easiest way to find this evidence.
- **A space that space presumes:** Certeau claims that a place attempts to create its own space, a space where the producer has the advantage and where consumers

practice and inhabit in a certain way. (94). I would need to be able to theorize, through an examination of the evidence of the previous three characteristics, about what sort of space Hussie attempts to create through *MS Paints Adventures*. This could be summed up as the purpose of the site in relation to its users.

Because habitability is a crucial part of place, I also needed to show how each part of the operation that created *MS Paint Adventures* as a place included ways in which users can inhabit the site. In order to do that, I examined the site for traces of the characteristics that make it habitable. I determined, based on a synthesis of Certeau, Reynolds, Martinez, and Gee (see Chapter I), that a web site can be considered habitable if one or more of the following can take “place” there:

- communication and/or social activity
- some form of physicality (physical movement of our bodies) is involved in navigating a site
- a site allows for various social activities
- memory can be generated through interaction with the content of a site

Many practices that create place are invisible. The choices an author makes when designing a web site, the way a reader’s eyes move across the page—these are not always readily observable. Certeau reminds us, though, that some traces are visible, even if we don’t see the operation that made it possible (97). The trace can then be accepted as evidence of the practice. Through textual analysis, we can look for traces of practices, generally visible in the form of fan

works, forum posts, and site content. These traces are not the practices themselves. The practices happened when the text was written, and the text that remains "refer[s] to the absence of what has passed by," in the way that a inked route on a map shows the path that was walked (Certeau 97). But the traces show evidence that the practices take place. By studying a set of practices, gleaned through textual analysis, I can analyze the ways in which place is generated on *MS Paint Adventures*.

Some of these characteristics are easy to find: communication and social activity can take place on the forums, navigation links allow users to move through the site, and various activities (reading, posting comments) can take place on the site. I also looked for evidence of memory generation in the form of words or phrases related to memory ("I remember, this reminds me"). Additionally, I looked for instances of expressed affect through the use of words or phrases like "oh my gog (sic)," "hoping," or "loved (the update, this thing, this character's action)." As previously discussed, habitation includes emotional experiences as a crucial part of habitation (Certeau 174). I also looked for traces of movement and dwelling. In order to do this, I made note of posts that mention any part of *MS Paint Adventures* or *Homestuck* (mention of any part of the site other than the forums implies, at the very least, movement from that part of the site to the forums) and evidence of repeated visits in the form of the number times individual users have posted to the forums.

In order to examine the MSPA Discussion Thread for evidence of the ways in which users inhabit the site, I had to choose a sample thread. My criteria for example threads were fairly simple. *Homestuck* is currently on hiatus, and has been for nearly a year. In order to find a representative sample, I looked for threads that were created before the hiatus began (October 16,

2013). The threads created before the hiatus were more likely to show signs of engagement with the most recent update. As the hiatus continued, the MSPA Discussion Threads were repurposed for general *Homestuck* topics (still decided by the moderator who created the thread) and, while the ways in which the MSPA Discussion Threads have been repurposed would make for interesting research, it is beyond the scope of this particular project.

The thread I chose is titled “MSPA Discussion Thread: Soul-Rending Scenes on Hellmurder Island.” This thread was created to provide a place to discuss the updates on September 28, 2013, just a few weeks before *Homestuck*'s recent hiatus began.

I then looked for evidence of the following practices of placemaking:

- The ways in which Hussie establishes the “proper” on the forums, usually in the form of rules, which is one way of dictating the "proper" (Certeau 32). I coded these instances by looking for words that imply permission or limitation like "should," "must," "no," and "forbidden", and developed the following categories:
 - Rules dictating post length
 - Rules dictating post content (quality, appropriate topic)
 - Rules dictating post format

To a lesser degree, I looked for ways in which *MS Paint Adventures* was created to be habitable. In some ways this led to me finding evidence of habitation through memory-making, experience or emotion, engagement with *Homestuck* canon, engagement with other users, site navigation, and repeated visiting.

While I analyzed the MSPA Forums in search of evidence of the habitation practices of users, I examined the non-forum sections of *MS Paint Adventures* for evidence of the ways in which Hussie constructed the site as a habitable place. The evidence I examined includes the following:

- The text, graphics, and colors that comprise the site, and how these aspects might influence a reader This includes the following:
 - How graphic placement and color might shift a reader's focus to certain parts of the site (the web comic and merchandise advertisements)
 - How the choice of hosting Homestuck's first strip on MS Paint Adventure's main page might encourage new readers
- The placement of navigation links and how these might affect how a reader can navigate the site. This includes the following:
 - Where each navigation link leads to, how visible they are, and how their placement facilitates or limits movement through the site
 - Any past changes in the function or availability of navigation links, and how those changes affected a user's ability to move through the site

Textual analyses have their advantages. I was able to find evidence of the ways in which users of the site inhabited it without the need for an interview or observation, which can be difficult to arrange when studying online practices. I was also able to examine the text and graphics of *MS Paint Adventures* from the point of view of a reader, allowing me to theorize

(without prior knowledge of Hussie's intent) about how the text and graphics of the site might affect the reader.

My analysis has limitations, as well. The practices that leave behind public traces are certainly not the only ways in which users are able to inhabit *MS Paint Adventures*, and the operations that Hussie performed when designing and constructing the site could very well be more varied and nuanced than an analysis of the site suggests. Interviews or observation might have allowed me to build a more complete list of the ways in which Hussie creates and users inhabit *MS Paint Adventures*.

Central Questions

Ultimately, this study works toward answering the following questions:

- To what extent can we fairly and logically apply Certeau's theory of place to an online environment?
- What useful information can be gathered through an application of Certeau's theory of placemaking to specific web sites in terms of placemaking and habitation?
- By applying Certeau's theory of place, what can we discover, through an examination of the traces of practice on *MS Paint Adventures*, about the operations that made possible the creation of *MS Paint Adventures* as a place?
- What are the problems with or limits of applying a place-based lens to the study of websites?

CHAPTER III: MS PAINT ADVENTURES AS PLACE

As I explained in Chapter I, the lack of material places poses a problem to the application of Certeau's theory of place and space to online sites. Place is traditionally thought of in physical terms, as physical locations or objects that we can move through. Web sites have no physicality outside of the servers that house them, however. Some researchers have engaged this problem by putting forth new theories of space that do not rely on physical space, instead highlighting the use of physical technology (Martinez), theorizing a mental conception of space through a blending of perceptual and cognitive space (Saunders), or focusing instead on characteristics of content and access (Gee, Black).

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau spends a great deal of time theorizing about the definition of place and the operations that create it. First, a place consists of ordered elements, each beside the other, each in its own "proper" location (Certeau 117). These elements define a place and mark it as separate from other places. It is stable unless acted upon. Indeed, it is a thing that *can* be acted upon, or that allows for particular kinds of action and ways of moving to take place within or around it. Second, place is governed by the "proper," the rules and reality, set in place by the producer, that a consumer must either follow or subvert. Third, place is created by an authority, either a person or group, who design and create the place with some intent for its use. Fourth, a place seeks to create its own space, a space that people can inhabit by moving through it and interacting with others.

MS Paint Adventures as a place is in part complicated by the narrative it hosts, the web comic *Homestuck*. As I explained earlier (see Chapter I) Certeau's theory of place and space allows for a written text to be considered a place, a set of ordered elements (words and pages) that a reader navigates each time they read it. Narrative proposes, through its events and characters, a way of thinking, a proper set of thoughts and actions. *MS Paint Adventures*, which I hope to situate as a place, contains a narrative, which could also be examined as a place. Text has already been examined as a place by Certeau, however, and this project does not seek to do that work again. It is the web site that hosts *Homestuck* that I wish to examine as place. In the case of *MS Paint Adventures* and *Homestuck*, the production *MS Paint Adventures* as a place serves Hussie's intent by attempting to create a space where readers can engage with the story and each other about the story.

An Examination of the Operation Hussie Performed to Create Place

I have been able to observe on *MS Paint Adventures* several traces of practice that speak to the construction of a place according to Certeau's concept of place. I can, through an examination of the traces of Hussie's strategic practices on *MS Paint Adventures*, determine that in order to create *MS Paint Adventures* as a habitable place, Hussie performed the following threefold operation, which is similar to the operation that Certeau theorizes for the creation of the city-as-place (Certeau 94):

1. Generation of authority through some means
2. Creation of stable and ordered elements
3. Establishment of the "proper," the rules and reality that govern *MS Paint Adventures*

This threefold operation closely adheres to Certeau's concept of place, specifically stable, ordered elements coupled with power and intent on the part of the producer. This is not meant to be a definitive list or even order of steps. Many practices go into creating a web site, and I am only looking at those that I see visible evidence of. Some aspects of these sections overlap, and I will note the places where this happens.

For Certeau, place and space are closely linked. Space is produced through the practices that occur within a place. Though I do not discuss the ways in which space is generated through user practices in this project, I do speak to ways of inhabiting, which encompass some of the practices that can take place on a site. If a place cannot be inhabited, then it cannot be used, or practiced, and attempting to apply Certeau's theory of placemaking to it would be unproductive. Therefore, I also made note in each section of the ways in which users are able to inhabit the site. While I will be focusing on how MSPA works or is constructed as a place in the following sections, I will also weave in discussion of how these design elements make the place habitable

Generation of Authority

Place is a product created by those in power, the "elite." It is the result of a producer's attempt to strategically impose order, to create a place where their plans, ideals, and desires are at play, and where the producer(s) has the advantage (Certeau 36). Without an elite to strategically design and create a place, space cannot exist. In the case of *MS Paint Adventures*, Andrew Hussie acts as the elite. He is the creator of the web site and the author of the comics hosted on it, and this power allows him to strategically impose Homestuck's canon, which is the official storyline and lore (I will speak at length about canon in *Establishment of the "Proper"*),

on the readers. Ultimately, Hussie's authority stems from his dual positions of author and creator. He acts as the final authority, as can be seen in several traces of practice on the site.

Hussie has opted to share his role as producer several times throughout *Homestuck's* run, though he always retained his level of authority. Sharing authority is not an obvious way of generating it, but it is a way to give readers a sense of investment in the comic. An invested reader is often a loyal reader. It also assumes and reifies his authority: rather than simply allowing the space to come to be through collaboration from the onset, Hussie has created the site on his own and “invited” users to take part.

Homestuck was designed to mimic, to an extent, old text-parser video games, where the player typed commands into a prompt, and the in-game character followed those commands if the option was available. To accomplish this mimicry, each page, which was composed of a single frame, bore a title in the format of a game command, such as "Enter name" or "Examine room." For a time, fans were allowed to submit, to a specified forum thread, their ideas for what the currently featured character should do. Once these suggestions, submitted in the form of commands, such as "John: Equip fake arms," were posted to the correct forum, other fans debated the merit or humor of each suggestion. Based on the popularity of each entry, Hussie would choose the next action, the next part of the narrative, from the submissions. By taking part in the writing of the comic, users were able to generate memory and experience through use of the forums, and inhabit *MS Paint Adventures*. Users could also form a connection to the comic (a sense of ownership) and each other through written interaction and discussion of the submissions.

This system was eventually retired as the comic and the contributing fan base grew too

large for the system to be practical. While the system was in play, however, it was a very strategic move on Hussie's part. Certeau explains that strategy seeks to create a place where the producer(s) has the advantage, a place safe from the random or subversive use by consumers (Certeau 36). The early system of fan submissions did just that. Hussie encouraged fans to share his role as author, allowing them to feel a sense of ownership and investment in the story. Fans were able, even encouraged, to submit and discuss all of the plot ideas that they had, whether or not the character would actually be likely to perform the suggested action. Fans could attempt to enact their desires in a way that was of no danger to the integrity of the storyline itself, as the most unlikely ideas were often rejected by fellow fans, leaving Hussie with an acceptable pool of possible options to choose from. The original method of storytelling was not democratic, though it might appear to be. Though the suggestion pool was winnowed down through fan discussion on the forums, Hussie was the one who decided which suggestion to use. It was a decision informed by the wishes of the fans, yes, but ultimately, Hussie remained the producer with the final say, the most power.

I will take a moment here to note that the power structure on *MS Paint Adventures* is complicated by the forums, which are administered and moderated by individuals other than Hussie. The forum moderators generate content by creating official discussion threads, but Hussie dictates both their power and the rules they follow and enforce. Hussie decided how the forums would be divided and what sections it would include. He also set in place the rules (see *Establishment of the "Proper"*) that govern the forums, and flagged administrators' forum accounts with the permission, and the ability, to create threads and delete posts. Therefore, when I discuss producer intent and strategy throughout this chapter, I will be referring to Hussie.

Hussie has also generated authority in a far more straightforward way: he is the literal creator and maintainer of *MS Paint Adventures*. He designs and writes the code that makes up the site itself. A site's code is analogous to the underlying structure of a building. Much like the way that steel, concrete, and wood form the framework of a building, code forms the framework of a site. Coding is a way that Hussie non-violently imposes his will on readers. As most sites are designed with author-only access to the code, a user cannot make changes to this language even if they have knowledge of coding. In this way, the code provides stability to the site. It also allows users to inhabit the site by setting up ways of moving through the site itself: navigation links. These links allow users to move within the site, navigating from page to page (see *Creation of Stable and Ordered Elements*).

The use of code to create *MS Paint Adventures* is strategic in that it creates a place where Hussie has the advantage, where he can enact his intent easily. Indeed, in some ways Hussie has the *only* advantage, as his access to the site's code gives him the ability to change it at his whim. Fans might inhabit *MS Paint Adventures* by using the features built into the site, particularly the forums, but the structure and look of the site itself can only be changed by the site administrator, Hussie. Even forum posts can be (and are) deleted if either Hussie or his designated moderators conclude that the post is far enough outside the bounds of the forum rules to warrant removal. Through the underlying code that builds it, *MS Paint Adventures* allows readers to move through and engage the story, and encourages online interaction between fans. By coding *MS Paint Adventures*, Hussie put in place the elements that users can inhabit.

Much in the way that discourse is a “verbal trace left behind by history” (O’Farrell), the code (language) that makes up a web site is a trace of the practice of designing the site. This

structure, built from language, can also be made visible. A right-click on any individual page followed by selecting the option titled “View Page Source” reveals the code, allowing a user to examine the support structure that underlies the site. I am not proficient with the particular code used to create *MS Paint Adventures*, therefore I will not be examining the source code of the site directly. However, the layout, design, text, and features of the site, its *content*, may be used to examine the strategic moves that Hussie made when he created the stable and ordered elements that comprise *MS Paint Adventures*.

Creation of Stable and Ordered Elements

Certeau claims that a place is composed of "stable and ordered elements" (117). This implies a certain fixity, a stability of form. As I explained above, the arrangement of these elements defines the place and separates it from other places. This is related to Gee’s “content,” or what the place is “about.” Ordered elements signal to users where a place ends and what that place *is*, whether it be the pages of a book or the visual elements that allow a shopper to differentiate between major department stores. They also provide ways of moving through the place itself. For *MS Paint Adventures*, these elements are created by the underlying code (see *Generation of Authority*). The language used in a site’s code defines many aspects of the site, from its visual design to the affordances it allows for its users. The code also defines the parameters of the site, from design to layout to visual appearance. In the case of *MS Paint Adventures*, the code allows for each individual component of the site to be joined into a whole; each page, picture, and piece of text is included in the code that defines the entire site. Where the code ends, so does the site; *MS Paint Adventures* cannot exist beyond the border Hussie created

for it.

Many decisions Hussie made while creating the site were strategic in nature, an attempt to produce a specific product (a habitable web site) for a set of consumers (fans). Though Hussie regulates participation through the dissemination of rules (see *Establishment of the “Proper”*), it is through the organization of stable and ordered elements that Hussie creates a habitable place from which relations with the “exteriority,” the site’s users, can be managed (Certeau 36). Though the code is the language that Hussie uses to order the site according to his wishes, the appearance, text, and graphics of *MS Paint Adventures* are very visible traces of the practices used to create these stable and ordered elements. These practices entail strategic decisions, each made and enacted in order to create an ordered place where Hussie's goals are more likely to be met.

Many sites employ cohesive visual design elements that determine the overall aesthetic of a site. This can include graphics, backgrounds, and color schemes for both background and text. Visual design elements are strategically chosen to define both the site itself as well as individual sections within the site. They are part of the elements that define a place and distinguish it from other, outside places (Certeau 117). They can highlight some aspect of a site, setting the mood, as it were, or even advertising the content of the site itself. A bright color scheme might be used for a site selling party supplies, while a college web site might make use of the school’s official colors to encourage school spirit in the students and faculty who visit the site. Well-chosen visual design elements help to define a site as its own place: *this* is a party supply site, *that* is the website of a particular college.

Most of the individual pages included in *MS Paint Adventures* employ a fairly plain color

scheme, with a dark gray background and light gray or white text boxes. For the users of the site, this theme is recognizable as being an integral part of the site itself. It is a visual signal that the user is visiting the *MS Paint Adventures* site. It is, also, a muted color scheme, which allows Hussie to strategically highlight specific aspects of the site with his color choice. *Homestuck* strips and merchandise advertisements display some of the only non-neutral colors on the site, drawing the user's eye to them. Users are allowed, and encouraged, to inhabit *MS Paint Adventures* by "moving" in specific directions: towards the comic or towards the merchandise inspired by it.

Text and graphics tend to be consistent throughout that site. This can help the author to focus the site in an intended direction, which can in turn focus the actions or even thoughts of the users in a specific direction. In other words, the elements that a producer chooses, and the arrangement that a producer chooses to place them in, help the producer to manage relations with the consumers who move through it (Certeau 36).

A producer can also, through the arrangement of stable and ordered elements, enable or limit a user's ability to navigate, or move through, a site. For Certeau, the ability to move through a place is crucial to his definition of place; it is one way in which a place is habitable. He explains how people walk the city by either following paths laid out for them or forging new ones. Site navigation, through clicking on links, is one way of (metaphorically) moving through a site.

Though the producer of a site cannot always control *how* a user navigates (and thus inhabits) their site, they can still control the ways in which a user is *able* to navigate a site through the arrangement of the elements of a site. For example, a producer can place navigation

links at the bottom of the site, requiring the user to scroll through (and hopefully read/watch) the entirety of a site's content before they can move to another part of the site. A user can then choose to either engage with the content or scroll rapidly through it in order to reach the navigation links. Portals can be used to provide and "promote access to content and participation" (Black 390), or it can be used to limit access through the use of gateways like required registration and logins.

This is analogous to the choices made by the designer of a house or apartment. Door placement, room size, and the locations of plugs and switches all constrain a renter's creativity (Certeau xxi) in how they can inhabit the place. A user's ability to move through a place is limited by the strategic decisions the producer made when designing and creating the "portals" (windows, doors, and navigation links) that allow access to and movement within that place (Gee 94).

For the most part, Hussie's placement of portals seems to promote easy access to each section of the site. The links found along the top of the site's main page allow the user to navigate to any part of the site from any other, providing ease of access and encouraging users to fully explore the site. These links allow a user, by clicking the appropriate link, to move between sections of the site or through the narrative itself.

For nearly the entirety of *Homestuck's* run, readers navigated from one strip to the next by way of a link found just below each strip. This link takes the form of text adventure commands (Dirk: Unite) or a set of characters representing the "enter" key (—>). This arrangement allows the reader to progress easily and rapidly through the comic, which Hussie no doubt intended, as well as mimicking the look and function of the old text-parser video games

that *Homestuck* was first based on. However, Hussie has imposed a different form of navigation on the readers several times, each with the intent of deepening the reader's immersion in the current events of the comic.

The first major change spanned pages 5664 through 5981, running from May 16, 2011 through August 19, 2011. For a time, this author-imposed change fundamentally altered the way that users were allowed to navigate the web comic itself. Within the storyline of the comic, a scrapbook fell to the floor, scattering freeze-frame pictures of the characters in their then-current situations. The only way to advance the comic from that point was to pick from the set of pictures, each of which linked to a set of panels showing the actions of the pictured character. This multiple set of paths branching from a single point altered the way in which the reader viewed the content, allowing them to choose which characters to follow or exclude in their read. The events depicted in each of the picture links were occurring simultaneously, rather than in the linear fashion that many comics progress in. By providing portals to each concurrent storyline simultaneously, Hussie was able alter the reader's experience of reading to be more in-line with the current events of the narrative.

Another change was introduced on page 7395, titled "[!!!] A6I4," posted on November 25, 2012. In this animated strip, the character Caliborn repetitively hits a piece of machinery with a crowbar, damaging it. The web site itself visually reacts to this repetitive beating as though it, too were being smashed with the crowbar. The visual elements of the site shake with each hit, and the navigation links rattle around the page, eventually falling to the bottom in a (constantly moving) pile.

This arrangement changed how readers inhabited the site. Though the navigation links to

the rest of the site were still visible (if in a different, constantly changing place), none of them worked. Through Caliborn's actions, the site itself was broken. The non-functioning links took away choice of movement; readers could only reach other parts of the site by using their browser's "back" button to return to a previous page in the comic, or clicking the only method of navigation that Hussie still offered: the (bouncing) link to the next strip. This link bounced with each hit of Caliborn's crowbar, staying still enough to click for only one second at a time before bouncing to a different part of the page. The constant movement created a dissonance for readers, making navigation for difficult, and Caliborn's very presence abrasive.

Hussie chose to deliberately disrupt the "stable and ordered" elements that normally comprise *MS Paint Adventures*, managing the way in which we experienced and navigated the site, in order create a new, temporary order that suited Hussie's wishes. By moving the navigation links between strips—the portals—Hussie allowed the readers to experience the chaotic destruction of *MS Paint Adventures* itself by forcing them to search a jumbled site for the link to the next page, enforcing the current, if broken, state of the comic on the readers.

Another interesting navigation choice that Hussie made was to host the first *Homestuck* strip on the main page of *MS Paint Adventures*. This is an unusual choice, as many web comic artists host the most recent strip on the main page of their site. This hints at a particularly strategic decision on Hussie's part. *Homestuck* is a complicated comic, and a very long one. At the time of this writing, it numbered over five thousand individual strips and four hundred thousand words. No single strip is representative of *Homestuck* in its entirety, and any individual strip might contain either spoilers or characters and actions that will have no meaning to a new user. By choosing to program the first strip to appear on the *MS Paint Adventures* home page by

default, Hussie avoids the possibility of spoilers and confusion while at the same time inviting, even encouraging, first-time visitors to the site to begin reading the comic. This encouragement represents another form of management that Hussie attempts through the organization of the elements on *MS Paint Adventures*, in this case to attract new readers.

Other attempts at creating a place from where relations with readers can be managed are reflected in the choices Hussie made when designing the text and graphics that make up the readily visible part of the site's content. The text and graphics used on *MS Paint Adventures* are dedicated to the web comics that Hussie has produced. Every aspect of the site, with the exception of a few discussion threads on the Forums page, has some relation to at least one of his web comics, primarily the currently-running comic, *Homestuck*. Advertisements showcase *Homestuck* merchandise and link to the online retailers for *Homestuck*-related merchandise. The Map, Log, and Search pages allow users to search the comic. The artists, composers, and musicians listed on the Credits page have contributed art or music that has been used in *Homestuck*. Each thread on the Forums page, with the exception of a few officially sanctioned "off-topic" threads, is dedicated to some part of the comics hosted on the site, whether it be the *Homestuck* discussion thread or a thread allowing the posting of links to fan works inspired by the comics. Each element is in its place, a place determined by Hussie and enacted through his use of code. By fixing *Homestuck* as the focus of the text and graphics on the site, Hussie is able to create order and define the site itself. *MS Paint Adventures* is "about," as Gee might say, *Homestuck*.

Establishment of the "Proper"

Certeau's "proper" includes the rules and reality that govern a place (117). This can include any set of "rituals, representations, and laws" set by the producer, dictating the ways in which a user should inhabit or use a place. For *MS Paint Adventures*, this includes the rules, practices, and expectations that are imposed on the reader by Hussie's strategic decisions. To this I add the *canon* implicit in the narrative that Hussie is telling (*Homestuck*).

Jenkins defines *canon* as the "body of texts constituting [the] official narrative" (184), meaning that the content of any text, image, or video officially produced by the author of a text is considered canon for that text. For many fans, *canon* is a word used to reference anything official regarding the source media, in this case the web comic *Homestuck*. Canon includes any information seen or read in the source media (in this case the web comic *Homestuck*), or anything that is confirmed by the author outside of the source media. This includes, but is not limited to, character design, background story, elements of a character's culture (in the case of an alternate universe or alien species, and the events that take place in the source media's storyline. Because the author controls the form and content of canon, canon can be viewed as a part of the dominant discourse within which a user must act. As the author of *Homestuck*, Hussie decides every element of the narrative, from character design to dialogue to storyline. The narrative that Hussie produces sets many aspects of character actions, events, and lore. Any discussion or commentary regarding the comic, any piece of fan fiction, art, or music, must conform to at least some aspect of *Homestuck's* canon; without the inclusion of some aspect of canon, even if just to disagree with it, *Homestuck*-based discussion and fan works simply cannot exist.

Though *Homestuck's* canon forms a set of requirements for discussion of the comic,

Hussie has also been seen to create the "proper" of *MS Paint Adventures* through the creation of the sets of rules that govern its habitability. Indeed, the "proper" is perhaps more readily associated with the rules that govern a place (Certeau 117). For Certeau, all practices follow a logic, a proper way of thinking about or understanding something. In the case of the "proper," this logic is often imposed; the rules of "correct" or "grammatical" speech (39) and the rituals and laws imposed on Native Americans by the Spanish (32) are examples of this. On a web site, the "proper" is often communicated to the user through the use of language, creating a dominant discourse comprising the ways of thinking and acting that users are expected (by the producer) to follow. On *MS Paint Adventures*, this is most easily seen on the section of the site that hosts the forums.

The Forums page is host to several clearly-labeled categories: *Administrative Forums*, containing the Forum FAQ and Events threads; *MSPA*, hosting the official MSPA discussion and roleplay threads; *Dinosaur Comics*, hosting the Dinosaur Comics discussion threads; *Chat Forums*, hosting threads dedicated to general chat, media discussion, and the creative works (Artbound) threads; and *The Grand Forum Archives*, hosting old threads and the suggestion boxes from when *Homestuck* took reader suggestions. Each category contains several sections, which themselves house hundreds of individual discussion threads. The labels given to each category and section give the user an idea of what sorts of threads they will find in each, and each section also has a short explanation of what content is appropriate for it. If discursive practices operate according to a certain, imposed set of rules (O'Farrell), then by examining each category and the rules stated within them, we can take a guess as to the dominant discourse Hussie intended to create when he designed each section of the forums.

The forum section that I have drawn most of my examples from for this project is the section titled “MSPA Discussion,” and is housed under the MSPA category of the forums. MSPA is shorthand for *MS Paint Adventures*, and the MSPA Discussion section, according to the forum rules, is intended for any thread dedicated to a discussion of “the current MSPA comic series” (“Forum: MSPA Discussion”), which, at the time of writing, is *Homestuck*. A textual analysis of this section reveals several examples of the strategic practices that enabled the creation of a dominant discourse.

Just below the title of the MSPA Discussion Forum section we can read the words: “this forum is for discussion of the current MSPA comic series” (“Forum: MSPA Discussion”). By placing this rule near the section title, Hussie is communicating the rules that he intends to govern all threads and posts of this section of the forums, setting in place the beginnings of the dominant discourse that forum users must move within.

The producer-imposed rules of discourse on the forums are further made clear in the individual MSPA Discussion Threads. Housed within the MSPA Discussion Forum, the MSPA Discussion Thread has many variants, each dedicated to the discussion of the then-most-recent update to the web comic *Homestuck*. Each incarnation of the thread is begun with a single word—Discuss—followed by a set of rules:

- Posts should have valuable and pertinent content.
- Posts must be more than one sentence long and should be longer than one line.
- No reaction / stock images or videos.
- No “hello” or “goodbye” posts.
- Quirks such as allcaps remain forbidden.

- The Forum Rules still apply.

You have been warned. Remember, quality over quantity—but quantity doesn't hurt.

This is not a stream-of-consciousness IRC (Drillgorg, "MSPA Discussion Thread: Soul-Rending")

By including this set of rules at the beginning of each official discussion thread, the producer is making his intent known to everyone operating within that power structure. These rules are perhaps the most obvious trace of the ways in which Hussie establishes the "proper" that governs the site. A user who disobeys these rules is likely to be met with a warning, a deletion of the offending post, or a ban from further posting.

Through discourse, Hussie attempts to set up a reality for the MSPA Forums. Certeau states that the "credibility of a discourse is what first makes believers act in accord with it. It producers practitioners [...] it can accredit itself and make people believe it speaks in the name of the 'real'" (148). Language creates reality. Certeau speaks of the creation of reality through narrative, through the Church's teachings or through the news disseminated on television. We assign reality to a discourse that we see as credible (Certeau 186). The rules in place on the MSPA Discussion Thread attempt to strategically set up a dominant discourse, attempting to create a reality for the thread's users, a reality composed of a set of rules and values by which users should operate. By an examination of the rules, we can piece together the reality that Hussie is attempting to create on the MSPA Discussion Thread.

Three of the rules set forth expectations regarding the content and quality of the posts, while two regulate format. The sixth rule—"the Forum Rules still apply"—point the user to a standard set of forum rules speaking to the subjects of politeness, harassment, and piracy, and for

reasons of space will not be discussed here.

The rules “posts should have valuable and pertinent content,” “no reaction / stock images or videos” and “no ‘hello’ or ‘goodbye’ posts” set the rules for what is and is not appropriate for the current MSPA Discussion Thread. This is the first component of the reality that the rules attempt to create. Discussion is to be of “quality,” which implies a substantial addition to the discussion rather than a simple “I agree.” This both encourages and requires a certain level of participation; if a user wants to post to the MSPA Discussion Thread, they must engage with not only the source text (*Homestuck*), but also with the other fans who have posted to the same thread. Engagement, then, particularly meaningful engagement, is part of the reality constructed by the forum rules.

Reaction / stock images and video refer to images and video that show some sort of readily-identifiable emotion. A picture, video, or animated gif of an individual (usually a celebrity or film/TV character) expressing shock or confusion might be posted in lieu of a written explanation of the user’s own shock or confusion. Forbidding this practice indicates that emotional expression is not considered—by the producer—to be a valuable and discussion-furthering response unless it is in the user’s own words, again encouraging and enforcing a deeper engagement on the part of a would-be poster. A user must inhabit *MS Paint Adventures* with their *own* words, not an image or video of someone else. This rule might also be an attempt to address file size; if many users upload pictures or video to the forum, it can drastically increase load times for other users, particularly those with slow internet speeds. By banning large graphics and videos, the moderators make the MSPA Discussion Thread more easily accessible to more readers.

“Hello” and “goodbye” posts are just that: posts where a forum user either introduces themselves or explains why they are no longer going to be participating in the forums or reading the comic. While there is a dedicated “introduction” thread on the forums for these types of posts, the current discussion thread is not, according to the regulations set forth in the rules, an appropriate place for them. This rule encourages users to concentrate on the comic itself, rather than spending time welcoming new users (which can and does happen in the introduction thread). It also discourages users from posting only to say they are leaving; there can be no real interaction with a user who is no longer reading or posting to the forums.

Two of the rules set forth at the beginning of each MSPA Discussion Thread—“posts must be more than one sentence long and should be longer than one line” and “quirks such as allcaps remain forbidden” regulate the format of posts.

The length requirement is likely an attempt to reduce the chances of a post that does not further discussion, indicating the equating of post length with quality. A simple “yes” or “that’s a good observation,” while a valid comment, does not further the discussion in the ways that the producer intends.

The rule forbidding “quirks like allcaps” sets a standard that is based on an understanding of the comic that comes from reading a large percentage of it, a rule that is meant for those “in-the-know.” Much of the text in *Homestuck* is set in the form of chat logs. Each character has a particular typing “quirk” that both differentiates their text for the reader and helps to characterize them. All characters type in a different text color. One Character, Who Is Described As Speaking Very Deliberately, Capitalizes The First Letter Of Each Word She Types. And one character, who is often angry, does indeed TYPE IN ALL CAPITAL LETTERS. These typing quirks are a

part of the characters' identities, and some fans have taken to using a particular typing quirk of their own as an expression of their liking of or relating to a particular character. A new reader visiting the forums for the first time might take the rule forbidding "quirks such as allcaps" to refer to the perceived shouting and rudeness that many internet groups associate with typing in all capital letters. A long-time fan of the comic, however, will focus instead on the word "quirks" and understand the rule to mean that typing quirks of any kind are forbidden in this particular thread, though they are sanctioned in several other threads on the forum. By forbidding typing quirks in the MSPA Discussion Thread, the site's producer is heavily delineating the boundaries of the "proper," forcing a user to leave aside any characteristic or identity that they associate with those typing quirks. Again, a user must inhabit *MS Paint Adventures* as themselves, without borrowing the characteristics of a fictional character. This rule, combined with the previous, add a sense of the "appropriate" to the reality set up by the rules.

This set of rules helps the producer to dictate the ways in which users of the MSPA discussion thread are expected to interact with others on the forums. They attempt to set up a reality that is composed of appropriate, meaningful engagement with both the text and other readers. In other words, these rules help dictate the proper way to inhabit the forums (and the site). The meanings of appropriate and meaningful are vague; "posts should have valuable and pertinent content" does not clearly define exactly what constitutes a valuable or pertinent contribution to the discussion. However, by keeping discussion focused on the current update (the rule governing all posts in the MSPA Discussion section), posting comments of the required length, and following the formatting rules (no typing quirks), users seem able to engage with the text and each other in a meaningful way. By following these rules (see *The Space that Place*

Creates), users accept the reality set forth by the rules.

Through a strategic threefold operation, Hussie has been able to establish his authority as a producer, create a site that has stable and ordered elements, and generate a set of rules and reality which govern it. In the next section, I will theorize about the sort of space that *MS Paint Adventures* as a place attempts to create.

The Space that Place Creates

Place also attempts to create a space (Certeau 94), a space where the producer's intent is made manifest and fans move through and use in a "correct" way. Through the strategic generation of authority, creation of stable and ordered elements, and establishment of the "proper," Hussie creates *MS Paint Adventures* as a habitable place where users can communicate, interact, and navigate. Through Hussie's choices, the place *MS Paint Adventures* produces a space for coming together, and encouraging online interactions based on his ideas about how people should interact.

As expected from a site that hosts a web comic, *MS Paint Adventures* hosts quite a bit of content that can be read or watched or even played. The web comic *Homestuck* alone contains not only pictures and text, but also flash video, music, and games, all of which can be inhabited by a user by generation of memory through reading or viewing the content of the site. Hosting this content, it can be argued, is the main purpose of the site.

Homestuck is, as Hussie puts it, "made of pure internet" (Hussie), and many aspects of the narrative speaks to the internet as a medium or a culture. At the beginning of the story, very few of the characters have ever physically met, and at the time of this writing some have still

never been in the same physical location. Instead they interact online, through games and chat programs. Digital environments become the “place” where characters come together for a specific purpose, where they socialize and interact. In the comic, characters of differing ideologies, personalities, and social class are able to form (usually) positive relationships online. *Homestuck* normalizes online social interactions, proposing a theory of how “conversing this way diminishes some of the social barriers that real life interaction involves” (Hussie), allowing the formation of close friendships between individuals who have no physical contact. He is proposing a way of thinking, the idea that close relationships can happen in online space, perhaps even the idea that *we can dwell* there. *Homestuck* is engaging with and talking about the internet simultaneously.

The space that *MS Paint Adventures* as a place attempts to produce speaks to this concept. The site design allows for easy navigation and encourages new visitors to begin reading *Homestuck*, drawing in new readers that will, hopefully, engage with the comic and other fans through online interaction. The rules set in place on the MSPA Discussion Thread set up a dominant discourse through which a reality of appropriate and meaningful engagement is created for fans.

In my examination of the ways in which *MS Paint Adventures* is designed in order to be habitable, I came across evidence of habitation. As I am not conducting an examination of spatial practices, a thorough engagement with practices of habitation on *MS Paint Adventures* would be beyond the scope of this project. However, because the habitability of place is an important part of placemaking for Certeau, I want to gesture to a few of the traces of habitation that I found.

We can see the traces of habitation in the thread titled “MSPA Discussion Thread: Soul-Rending Scenes on Hellmurder Island,” (each incarnation of the MSPA Discussion Thread is

given a name that is in some way related to the update that it is connected to), which was created to provide a place to discuss the updates on September 28, 2013, just a few weeks before Homestuck's recent hiatus began.

Users of the MSPA Discussion Thread often post comments on their reactions to the update detailing their emotions, expectations, and the association that they have made between the current update and a past update. We can see evidence of repeated attempts to dwell in each post: to the left of each post is the user's forum name, profile picture, the date they joined (registered on) the forum, and the number of time they have posted to the forums. The first twenty-five posts in the thread titled "MSPA Discussion Thread: Soul-Rending Scenes on Hellmurder Island," were authored by nineteen individual users whose post counts ranged from thirty-five to over ten thousand, with the majority ranging between one and seven thousand separate posts over the history of their use of the forums (Drillgorg, "MSPA Discussion Thread: Soul-Rending"). This is clear evidence of repeated attempts at dwelling, where each separate post represents an attempt to inhabit the forums through written text.

I also found traces of habitation in the following three examples:

The following example shows the connections that a reader has made between the then-current update, where the character Dirk showcases his skill as a warrior, and a piece of canon lore revealed earlier in the comic:

Post 25: I am suddenly reminded that Dirk is associated with the same denizen as Caliborn (Yaldaboath, who is reserved for only the most "naturally skilled warriors") and perhaps we begin to see why (Drillgorg, "MSPA Discussion Thread: Soul-Rending").

This post conforms to the rules that govern the quality and format of posts on the MSPA Discussion Threads, showing a willingness to accept the reality that the rules imposes. The reader also displays knowledge of a set of information that is shared among all who have read the comic to this point. In this example, *MS Paint Adventures* is acting as a place for communication, making it a space that can be inhabited (Martinez 6), in that readers share a pool of knowledge gleaned from the site and their reading of it, and the forums offer a central place where they can communicate and discuss that knowledge. This post is also evidence of habitation through memory generation: the phrase "I am suddenly reminded of" speaks to the reader's memory of previous content, and the ability to synthesize that previous memory with the current update.

We can see *the MS Paint Adventures* acting as a place for communication again in the following two posts, in which a reader explains the confusion brought on by the expectations that the reader brought to the text. The reader is under the impression that the inhabitants (consorts) of some of the small in-comic planets resurrect after they are killed, meaning that no single species of consort could be made extinct without destroying the planet that they live on:

Post 1354: Don't consorts respawn? I keep thinking that's a thing that happens, specifically related to Eridan's consorts respawning on top of everything else. So you couldn't get rid of the consorts without getting rid of the planets. I'm probably wrong, though (Drillgorg, "MSPA Discussion Thread: Soul-Rending").

Another reader responded to this post in an attempt to clarify the confusion that the author of post 1354 expressed by giving them the answer:

Post 1359: Consorts do not respawn. (Witness the great salamander fire department

disaster of LOWAS, to which there is a permanent monument in the village.) That's the main reason why we know that Eridan's angels are not consorts. Plus it was outright stated that they were meant to be constructs that were part of the scenery (Drillgorg, "MSPA Discussion Thread: Soul-Rending").

This set of posts shows traces of several ways of inhabiting. Like the previous example, these posts show a sharing of knowledge and an act of communication taking place on *MS Paint Adventures*. Rather than sharing memory, however, the purpose of this communication was engagement, another practice of habitation. Post 1354 was an attempt to engage with other readers through a question, and another reader in turn engaged with the author of Post 1354 by providing an answer.

This next post relates a reader's surprise at the skill and destructive power (in the comic Dirk's title "Prince" is equivalent to the word "destroyer") of Dirk's attack:

Post 106: Well shit. This was really quite unexpected, and I was wondering when we'd see some epic Prince-ish powers from dirk (Drillgorg, "MSPA Discussion Thread: Soul-Rending").

This post shows engagement with *Homestuck* canon, in this case the background knowledge that Dirk's title, Prince, has a particular meaning (destroyer). The author pos post 106 is both displaying and sharing his knowledge of *Homestuck* lore. At the same time, however, the author is expressing emotion: surprise at an unexpected event.

Through site design and sets of rules, Hussie encourages a specific set of practices in *MS Paint Adventure's* users, a space where users read and engage in the comic and other fans in a productive way. Through commentary and discussion, fans are interacting with the content and

with other fans in relation to the content (Gee 94). By moving private practices into the public arena, users of *MS Paint Adventures* inhabit the space that *MS Paint Adventures* attempts to create.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the possibility of online production of place through the application of Certeau's theories of place to a specific web site, *MS Paint Adventures*. I interrogated the extent to which web sites, though they lack physicality, might be conceived of as places. Further, I also demonstrated how the site *MS Paint Adventures* is created as a habitable place through the strategic decisions of its producer, Andrew Hussie, and how that place creates its own space where fans can engage in the story and interact with other fans in a meaningful (according to Hussie's rules) way.

Discussion and Implications

This study set out to answer the following questions:

- To what extent can we fairly and logically apply Certeau's theory of place to an online environment?
- What useful information can be gathered through an application of Certeau's theory of placemaking to specific web sites in terms of placemaking and habitation?
- By applying Certeau's theory of place, what can we discover, through an examination of the traces of practice on *MS Paint Adventures*, about the operations that made possible the creation of *MS Paint Adventures* as a place?
- What are the problems with or limits of applying a place-based lens to the study of websites?

By using Certeau's theory of placemaking to examine web sites, we can examine the ways in which web sites are created as places by their producer(s). We can analyze the strategic decisions that went into creating the site. We can also observe the creation of dominant discourse by a site's producer, and how that discourse, coupled with site design, attempts to create a space in which users operate according to a producer's intent. Though I have engaged these questions throughout, in what follows I expand my discussion of the questions to offer implications and contributions to the field.

To What Extent Can We Fairly and Logically Apply Certeau's Theory of Place to an Online Environment?

We can find many aspects of Certeau's concept of place on web sites. All web sites have a producer or group of producers who are the source from which the concept and (at a minimum) basic design of a site come. The producer, acting as the "elite," designs the web site with a set of affordances, aesthetics, and proper ways of use in mind. Through a series of operations, the producer creates a web site that can then be inhabited by users.

The author of a blog, for example, must decide what sort of posts they will produce, and if they will allow comments on their posts. The employee in charge of designing or commissioning a web site for an online retailer must decide, perhaps with the aid of a team, how the web site can be used, including the search functions embedded on the site and the possible methods of payment available to shoppers.

Each of these choices informs the operations that go into creating the site. Some site authors write and maintain the code that makes up the site themselves, giving them a freedom of

design limited only by their own knowledge and skill. The employee commissioning a site for an online retailer might hire a professional web designer and spend a great deal of time discussing each aspect of the site, much in the way that a fast food corporation might hire a contractor to help design and build a new restaurant. A blog author might choose a theme, either designed by someone else or created by the author herself, based on aesthetics, graphic and text placement, and included functionality (comments, tag lists, arrangement of pages).

Here is where the distributed nature of power complicates the study of online placemaking: the blog author who chooses a pre-made theme is not solely in charge of how her blog looks or functions. She may not be able to find (or afford, as not all pre-made themes are free), a theme that perfectly reflects her concepts for both aesthetics and functionality. She must make do with the themes available to her, or else commission or learn to create her own. The employee in charge of commissioning a web site for her company must work with the skill set of the designer she hires, and some desired function may simply not be possible or wise (picturing hundreds of products on a single page might cause prohibitively slow loading times for prospective customers and would likely be discouraged by the designer). Also, though the employee is acting as the producer for the site, she is still bound by the wishes of the heads of the company and by the brand name, logo, and color scheme already associated with the company.

So there is a lessening of power, in these examples, which can make the study of the ways in which an elite produces an online place more complicated for some sites than for others. Complication does not, however, make such a study impossible. Though Booth argues that Certeau's binaries of strategy/tactics and producer/consumer are sometimes complicated to the point of breakdown in online spaces (147), he does still find those concepts useful for defining

the activities taking place in online spaces. And, complicated or not, we can still find evidence on web sites, as we saw with *MS Paint Adventures*, of the operations involved in making a habitable place: the creation of stable and ordered elements, the generation of authority, the establishment of the "proper," and the creation of its own space.

The sites created through these operations are habitable. They are places where communication and social interaction can, and increasingly do, take place (Martinez). The increase in online social activity and communication has been so marked that researchers have begun examining how the amount of time we spend in online communication might be affecting our facility with face-to-face communication. For some users, social media sites have become a primary means of interacting with friends, family or coworkers, particularly those who live some distance away. Many universities, and some primary schools, offer classes that take place entirely online. This means that many of the activities that we study in a physical setting, such as social interaction, learning, and memory-making, now also take place in a virtual setting.

The lack of physical location can, of course, complicate the study of these activities for some. Virtual classrooms have no desks, chairs, or podiums, meaning that the arrangement of physical objects (how desk arrangement affects learning, how the movement of an instructor during a lecture affects student behavior) does not translate directly to virtual classrooms. Likewise, unless video or images are somehow involved, body language does not play a significant role in online social interaction, and even race, class, and gender can be obscured to a degree in digital spaces.

This means that the habitation of place by physical movement through and interaction with physical places and objects takes on a lesser, or perhaps different, meaning in virtual places.

We can click on navigation links using a mouse or touch screen, but while this will cause our devices to display a different site, we have not travelled to a different physical location..

For some, this lack of physical location might be what invalidates the study of online placemaking. The physical is still involved in online place, however. We must make a physical movement to click a navigation link, whether we move the mouse or touch a particular part of the screen. The location of navigation links and arrangement of text or graphics can affect how we are able to move through a site. Our eyes move across the page when we read a text or view an image. We might obscure our race, class, or gender from those we interact with online, but our interaction can still be informed by how those issues affect us (Gajjala and Altman). The language we use, the issues we choose to engage, and even our ability to articulate ourselves through language online are all potentially affected by our background.

Though we cannot study the physical as it relates to digital place in the same way as we can with physical place, issues of the material and the physical still affect the ways in which we inhabit a site, and the application of place or space theory can help us to better understand the ways in which place is generated online. Once we can do that, we can look to the implications of place or space theory to the field of rhetoric and composition.

What Useful Information Can be Gathered Through an Application of Certeau's Theory of Placemaking to Specific Web Sites in Terms of Placemaking and Habitation?

We can gather quite a bit of useful information about the ways in which place can be generated online through an application of Certeau's theory of placemaking to specific web sites. For Certeau, place is stable (94). It is made up of elements that are put in place by the elite, those

with some sort of power. The placement of groceries in a store and the layout of an apartment are all examples of elements that exist in their proper place, as determined by the elite, or those in power. The placement of these elements affects how consumer can move through and interact with the place. Place is also governed by the "proper," a way of thinking, speaking, or acting that is imposed upon the user by the producer. The producer attempts to enact their intent through the operations through which they generate place.

In short, a producer (or producers) generate place through a series of operations that enable the producer to enact or impose a "correct" way of inhabiting a place upon consumers. Studying the production of physical place can tell us a lot about the ways in which power functions within a place. We can identify the factors that affect the ways in which a consumer is able to inhabit a place. We can examine the ways in which proper behavior or ways of moving are encouraged or enforced through the placement of physical objects or signs. We can research the hows and whys of a place's creation, the exigence that triggered its construction and the kind of space that it attempts to create. We can study the dynamic between producers and consumers in relation to a specific place.

We can glean similar information through an application of Certeau's theory of placemaking to web sites. We can study how the arrangement of text and graphics might affect the ways in which a user behaves on a site. We can analyze any rules in place on a site, and through that analysis determine, in part, the sort of space that the site attempts to create. We can study how the placement and availability of navigation links affect (or attempt to affect) the ways in which a user can navigate the site. Because web sites are made up to text and images, we can examine how a producer rhetorically creates a site for a specific purpose, and how language

can act as a facilitator of communication or a barrier to entry. Through the study of online placemaking, we can better understand the ways in which web sites are constructed and how this construction affects the producer/consumer dynamic, and we can also begin to theorize about the ways in which users inhabit online spaces. For the field of rhetoric and composition, an understanding of place generation and habitation could be applied to writing, reading, and learning (Reynolds 3). Reynolds argues that "writers or learners need strategies for entering unfamiliar areas or ways to recognize the politics of space enacted in various places" (3).

Users of web sites must navigate the elements, authority, and discourse dictated to them by the site's producer. They must be able to figure out, through reading and analysis of the site, what is and is not permissible on a site as well as how they can engage with the content of a site. Further, if they wish to engage with either the content of a site or with other site users, they must be able to determine how to do so effectively, often through some sort of discourse. They must learn how to and decide how they will inhabit a site.

Inhabitation of a site can prove difficult for a variety of reasons. A user might not possess enough knowledge of the language to understand the text on a site. They might not have consistent access to the tools (Internet connection or computing device) they would need to be able to fully inhabit the site. Or they might not have enough knowledge of the site's topic or content to feel comfortable with engaging with the site or other users.

On a web site interaction often requires some form of participation in (or through) discourse. Theories of place or space can allow us to examine "the ways in which writers feel alienated from certain discourses or institutional practices, or why new forms of reading and writing are so difficult" (Reynolds 6). Places "do not need to be particularly inviting to outsiders"

(Reynolds 142), and neither do texts, web sites, or virtual classrooms. Students sometimes feel like an outsider when engaging with unfamiliar texts or discourse (164). Reynolds claims that studying writing as a spatial practice, that examining the ways in which the physical interacts with our memories and experiences can help us to better understand how a reader or writer approaches and inhabits a text, or whether they decide to inhabit a text at all.

The application of theories of place (and perhaps space) to digital places (which are, or at least function as, texts) can help us to understand why users might feel like outsiders when encountering online place (and, by extension, text or discourse), and how they judge which online places they are willing or able to inhabit. The information gathered from such studies can inform the pedagogical choices we make when designing virtual spaces intended for learning (digital classrooms, class-authored blogs), and can also help us to develop better ways of helping students engage with an unfamiliar text or discourse.

What We Can Discover, Through an Examination of the Traces of Practice on MS Paint Adventures, About the Operations That Made Possible the Creation of MS Paint Adventures as a Place?

I examined *MS Paint Adventures* for evidence of placemaking. I analyzed the color palette of the site, as well as the placement of text and graphics, in order to determine how these elements might affect how a user thinks about or engages with the site. I also studied the placement and availability of navigation links on *MS Paint Adventures*, as well as the instances where Hussie changed the functionality of those links, to determine the ways in which Hussie attempts to control how a user can navigate the site. In addition, I analyzed the rules governing

the MSPA Discussion Thread in order to understand one of the ways in which Hussie creates the "proper" on *MS Paint Adventures*.

Through these examinations of the traces of practice on *MS Paint Adventures* I was able to determine that Hussie creates *MS Paint Adventures* as a place through a threefold operation similar to the operation that Certeau theorizes for the creation of the city-as-place (Certeau 94):

1. Generation of authority through his dual roles of author and creator of the web site *MS Paint Adventures*

2. Creation of stable and ordered elements through the coding of each aspect of *MS Paint Adventures*, including color scheme, placement of text and graphics, and placement of navigation links

3. Establishment of a "proper," through dissemination of canon and rules, that encourages readers to engage with the site and other readers through meaningful discussion of the content of *MS Paint Adventures*

Each of these operations help to make *MS Paint Adventures* a habitable place where users can move, create memory, and engage with the site and with other users on the site. We can see how Hussie created *MS Paint Adventures* as a bordered, habitable web site. While users have a certain amount of choice in how they move through or use the site, they must still operate within its structure and "proper." How can I, as a user, write myself into *MS Paint Adventures*? What rules regarding language, format, and appropriateness must my posts follow or risk deletion? These questions are at play on other web sites as well, and by applying a theory of place to those sites, we can better understand how users approach new digital texts.

Reynolds calls for composition scholars to examine how physical structure affects the

ways in which we read, write, and learn, and how theories of place and space can be applied to composition. She argues that, when readers approach a text, they "get a sense of the terrain" and determine "if there are signs that are familiar or if there are any features that are recognizable" (Reynolds 163). In order to inhabit a place, users must be able piece together their knowledge of the familiar and unfamiliar to identify and "learn about boundaries and borders, when they may cross them without penalty" (Reynolds 3). In other words, the ways in which we approach and inhabit text are similar to the ways in which we approach and inhabit place (assessment of borders, figuring out rules of behaviors and discourse). Therefore, theories of place and space should in some way be applicable to a study of the ways in which we approach and inhabit text.

There is room to apply place or space theory to digital environments. We have seen how *MS Paint Adventures* is a place, how it is bordered and governed by the "proper." It is a place, and in order to inhabit it, users must be able to figure out how they might do so. We can perform similar analysis on other web sites. By studying of the ways in which digital place affects the practices a user is able to (or feels they are allowed to) perform on the site, we can better understand the ways in which users learn to inhabit a site. This understanding can, in turn lead to a better understanding of the (digital) reading and writing practices of students, and how we might design digital places like virtual classrooms to better facilitate student reading, writing, and learning.

What Are The Problems With or Limits of Applying a Place-Based Lens to the Study of Websites?

Place creates its own space through arrangement of elements and dictation of the "proper." But users of a place also create space through their practices. For Certeau, place and space are intimately connected. Though I limited this project to the potential for the production of online place, this project is intended to be the first step in the application of a spatial lens to web sites. Therefore, I will discuss limitations and advantages in terms of place, but also in terms of space.

A placemaking framework does have its limits. As I discussed before, the lack of physical location has the potential to pose a real problem to the application of theories of place or space to web sites for some researchers. Researchers will need to, and in some cases have (see Chapter I), develop/ed different ways of understanding how physicality works with/in online environments if they wish to apply concepts of place and space to web sites, and many researchers have chosen to do this by redefining or generating new theories of space that do not directly rely upon physical location. I have instead chosen to argue that physical location is not necessary for place, and that embodied activity and virtual movement are ways in which we can inhabit a virtual place.

Not all web sites are ideal for the application of place and space theory. Online place can be inhabited in a variety of ways, including memory generation, navigation, communication, and social interaction. Some web sites lack forums or comment sections, and therefore do not allow communication or social interaction between users. These sites can still be inhabited through memory generation, reading, and navigation, but these factors can be difficult to study without

direct observation. We can still research and observe, through an analysis of the site, the ways in which the web site might act as a place. However, with no evidence of the ways in which users inhabit the site, it can be difficult to do more than a surface-level analysis of the ways in which a web site is produced as a place.

It might also be difficult to apply a place or space framework to sites that users do not visit often, or where they do not engage often with other users. *MS Paint Adventures* was an ideal sample site partially because of the level of activity on the forums. While some users have only posted a few times, others post frequently. This allows a sense of connection to develop. Users are able to recognize other users by their forum handle, and can engage with not only their current comments, but with remembered previous comments as well.

Not all sites, even among sites that allow for comments and discussion, are conducive to the sense of connection that *MS Paint Adventures* allows. A news site that allows for user comments on its articles, such as CNN.com, might prove difficult to examine through the concept of placemaking because there is no central location for commentary and interaction. Users can comment on each article individually, but once an article is archived it is difficult to find unless a user searches for it. The discussion on older articles effectively becomes defunct as the article itself ceases to become readily available to the public. The lack of a central archive of discussion can make ways of inhabiting logistically more difficult to trace, but it can also make it more difficult to find traces of habitual or frequent interaction between users.

The fact that place and space theory cannot be easily applied to every web site hints at one of this framework's advantages. A better understanding of how placemaking works online can highlight the ways in which web sites function differently. *MS Paint Adventures* functions

differently from news sites like CNN.com. They were not created by the same "elite," or for the same purpose. By analyzing the reasons why certain web sites are difficult to study as place or space, we can glean information about how power dynamics and discourse work in digital spaces.

The application of Certeau's theory of placemaking to *MS Paint Adventures* was productive in that it allowed me to analyze the ways in which Hussie created *MS Paint Adventures* and how the product (the place) of those operation affects the ways in which fans can inhabit the site the site. I was able to examine how the site is bordered by code and visual design elements, and how those elements can affect the ways in which a user perceives or navigates *MS Paint Adventures*. By analyzing the rules posted to the MSPA Discussion Thread, I was able to understand and explain how Hussie dictates the "correct" manner of engagement on the forums. I was also able to identify some of the ways in which users inhabit the site.

Digital spaces are becoming increasingly more prevalent in our "modern, highly networked" world (Black 393). Users continually turn to social media sites as places of communication and interaction with friends and family. Television networks are beginning to understand the importance of maintaining a social media presence on Twitter and Facebook, whether through official network news posts or through the creation of social media accounts for the characters on their television shows. Webcomic artist Jeph Jacques maintains a twitter account for each of the main characters in *Questionable Content*, though the conversations are rarely important to the plot. Hasbro ran a web page full of themed mini games and information in preparation for the season two finale of their cartoon *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. J. K. Rowling's website *Pottermore* is still providing fans a way of experiencing the world of Harry

Potter years after the end of the series. Many newspaper companies are offering articles on their web sites, and some have even moved entirely away from paper editions. Blogs are increasingly common, and some instructors even set up blogs for use in class discussion.

Martinez points out that space theory is a way to study cultural production, something that is happening online. Internet-based language variants have developed, such as lolspeak (a variant where words are often purposefully misspelled) and leetspeak (an alternate alphabet for the English language in which numbers are substituted for the letters they resemble). Fans (both young and adult) of the cartoon *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* have created, primarily through online planning and advertising, charity organizations based on the show's message of love and tolerance. Some users create online personas, distinct from their own, through which they inhabit social media sites. The application of a placemaking lens can help us to understand how culture is being produced and enacted online.

My study suggests that place (and perhaps space) theory is most productive on sites that users habitually visit, and where they have the opportunity to repeatedly engage with other users. Sites that incorporate chat rooms, forums, and comment sections allow users the chance to write themselves into the site, and to form connections with other users through discussion. Perpetual online communities with a central, persistent area for user interaction offer excellent opportunities to study both placemaking and the ways in which users can, and do, inhabit a web site. Some web sites, like *MS Paint Adventures*, are complex in both construction and the practices of both producers and users. An application of theories of place and space can help us to examine such complex sites and perhaps more easily conceptualize the power dynamics or structures at play.

This study was conducted using a textual analysis of the *MS Paint Adventures* web site. Special attention was paid to the public forums, as they hold the most public traces of the practices taking place on the site. This method/ology has one major limitation that should be noted: examining the site exclusively through textual analysis precludes the use of interview or survey, both of which could allow for a more thorough examination of users' individual practices.

Avenues for Further Research

The most obvious avenue for further research is the examination of *MS Paint Adventures* as a (practiced) space through a study of the processes by which fans move through and occasionally subvert the rules, reality, and authority at play on the site.

Though this research focused on a web site that houses a web comic and its fandom, many web sites can be examined in terms of placemaking and habitability. Any web site that has a forum or comment section can be examined through this lens using textual analysis, and more detailed research may be possible through interviews with producers and users. Many, though not all, news sites provide a comment section at the end of each new article where users can post their reactions. Most blogs have a comment feature built into the site itself which visitors to the site can use. Many sites, such as writing or art archives (fanfiction.net, deviantART) are designed with collaboration and commentary in mind. Each site is built with intent and populated with content created or commissioned by a higher power.

And while many sites allow commentary and interaction, users must move within the framework imposed upon them by the site designers and administrators, and even the authors of

the articles themselves. Certeau's theory of place and space allows us to focus on the issues of power that come into play on web sites and provides a theoretical framework that can help us to identify and understand these issues. Some sites offer us a more complicated set of power relationships to examine. Sites, such as deviantART, which exist to provide a place for artists to post their work, have several layers of producer/consumer power structures. The creator and administrators of the site create the framework (the code) for the site, but the artists, who are themselves users of the site, take the role of author by posting their own work to the site, thereby imposing their intent on the users who then view and comment on their work. This complication is outside the scope of this project, but is worth further study.

Also outside of the scope of this project is the complication that arises when fans of a source media create their own sites dedicated to the source media. Many fans of the web comic *Homestuck*, for instance, maintain tumblrs filled with *Homestuck*-related art, and many more fans visit one or more *Homestuck* tumblrs daily. For some fans, the tumblr pages they visit might be considered part of their individual conception of the space that is "*Homestuck*."

In spite of the limitations of textual analysis, this study has shown how Certeau's theory of place can be applied to web sites, using *MS Paint Adventures* as a specific example. Applying Certeau's theory of placemaking to the *MS Paint Adventures* site has allowed the research to examine the ways in which Hussie has created a place through generation of authority, creation of stable and ordered elements, and establishment of the "proper," and how that place creates a space where online engagement and interaction is encouraged.

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