Erika Kendal

Let’s Talk Over Some *Coco*: Culturally-infused Concepts of Death and Dying in Children Fantasy Narratives from *Coco* to *Kena: Bridge of Spirits*.

 This project explores the portrayal of death and dying in Fantasy narratives that target children as a primary demographic, such as in *Coco, Over the Garden Wall, Soul, Limbo*, and *Kena: Bridge of Spirits*. These narratives are shifting the discussions of death and dying, and subsequently of how children internalize death and dying, toward a culturally-inclusive re-envisioning of death and dying as a normal part of one’s lifeworld, which is counter to the traditional and typified anesthetized version of death in American children’s narratives. Traditional American children’s narratives that discuss death do so as a directed lesson, such as various episodes of *Mister’s Rogers, Sesame Street, and Rugrats*; death and dying is not part of those shows world-building or of the culture of those shows; rather, death is a subject to be discussed and wrapped up by show’s end. Currently, culturally-infused inclusions of death in children’s narratives, such as in the first list of narratives above, intrinsically tie the story to the main character’s experience of death and dying as a means to which, they better understand life, thereby culturally shifting children’s conceptualization of death and dying from the culturally acceptable standard of suppression to an open dialogue of death and dying. This cultural shift’s importance is highlighted by ratings systems that ignore death as a qualifier for a rating. TV Ratings (for TV shows), the MPAA (for films) and the ERB (for video games) have gradations of ratings concerning ​Adult themes and levels of violence, but all are conspicuously absent of gradations concerning any discussion of death; all of which reveals a gap in American culture of discussing death and dying with children.

Jenna Stevenson

Translator, Traitor: Translational Injustices in The Three-Body Problem and other Emerging Chinese Science Fiction

 Chinese science-fiction narratives (such as Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem*) takes a distinctly separate approach from traditional Western science-fiction media despite the issues that occur in Chinese Sci-Fi with translational injustices, censorship, and information wall-building. Translating Chinese Sci-Fi presents a unique issue when put into context of Emily Apter’s theories on “translational injustice.” Apter’s theories on translational injustice focuses on identifying untranslatable or mistranslated words, phrases, and sentiments that manipulate the original intent of the message. Translators of Chinese science fiction such as prominent translator Ken Liu have a more involved role in the writing and editing process due to censorship guidelines place on the sci-fi genre from the Chinese government. Tropes common in Western sci-fi media (tyrannical governments, corrupt technologies and human-caused Doomsdays), such as in the movies *Wall-E* directed by Andrew Stanton and books *Axiom’s End* by Lindsey Ellis, cannot be emulated by Chinese sci-fi writers. Translators of Chinese sci-fi must find a balance between preserving the story and avoiding translational injustices while maintaining the subtlety of any theme that was banned by Chinese censorship. To uphold banned themes, but not to reveal them, translators may inadvertently commit many translational injustices out of necessity, possibly altering core aspects of the story. Understanding the translation process and the inherent issues with translations in Mandarin-Chinese sci-fi enables Western-based readers to more readily understand Chinese literature: *The Three-Body Problem* series by Liu Cixin, Folding Beijing by Hao Jinfang, and Liu Cixin’s collection of short stories titled *The Wandering Earth*. Understanding translational injustices and Chinese censorship laws can also aid Western readers of the genre to understand the issues that arise concerning potentially sensitive political topics or themes of the source material.

Amira McKaige and Luke Leonard

“Remade in my Image” Counter-stereotypic Genders in Scifi and Fantasy

 In globally distributed sci-fi and fantasy, such as the MCU and Harry Potter, modern counter-stereotypic gendered antagonists, such as Hela and Bellatrix, transgress gendered social norms in their rebellion or antiestablishment actions; however, they inadvertently solidify stereotypic social norms, which poses a problem in developing countries that recently are employing the concept of counter-stereotypes. Recently, a discussion among psychologists, such as Allen and Friedman (2016) and McKimmie et al. (2016), concerns how counter-stereotypes can be both advantageous and disadvantageous. Counter-stereotypes are new to developing worlds, where some of the largest film franchises have reached. In Thor: Ragnarok, Hela seeks to rule Asgard and destroys the Asgardian army to achieve this. This act is typically performed, especially to many developing countries, as male, displaying her capability to act counter-stereotypically. When Thor and Loki seek to destroy Asgard by releasing Surtur, Hela fights to defend her Asgard and sacrifices herself in the process. This gendered sacrifice resembles a mother sacrificing herself for her child, reiterating stereotypic norms rather than maintaining counter-stereotypes. In the Harry Potter series, Bellatrix Lestrange’s emotional depravity is rivaled only by the Dark Lord. She behaves counter-stereotypically by torturing and killing with no moral restrain or remorse. This is an incredibly powerful move for a female character, which makes her a fan favorite for displaying that a woman can be equally as evil as a man. Yet, in the follow-up series, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, she has engaged in amorous activities with the Dark Lord and produced a child by him, with the willingness and desire to produce an offspring stereotypically female. Bellatrix and Hela are portrayed as counter-stereotypic villains who achieve villain status by violation of social norms. Yet, in their violation of these norms, they fail to fully transgress gendered norms.

Matt Hudson

FunKo POPed the Nerd Culture: How Contemporary Nerd Culture Uses Obscure Characters to Maintain Their Status

 FunKo POP! figurines cover nearly every mainstream popular culture character; however, some are obscure tertiary characters, and individualized fandom (those who want to stay in the margins of popular culture) use these obscure tertiary characters to find that marginalized space they once enjoyed. Many obscure tertiary characters have already been subsumed by the wider popular acceptance of them, from Boba Fett to TR8R and from Agent Coulson to Felicity Smoak. These characters started out in their respective narratives as tertiary characters, as enigmas, such as what Barthes refers to as element within a story that is not explained and therefore creates an enigma throughout the story. The unintentional enigma, as I explained in previous research, refers to an enigma that was written into a narrative without larger intentions. However, today’s push/pull for expansions to popular franchises (in MCU such as *Ant Man*, DCEU such as *Legends of Tomorrow*, and Star Wars such as *Mandalorian*) exposes these former enigmas and thrusts them into mainstream fandom. Some fans have responded to this over-popularization by focusing on obscure, often esoteric, characters in an attempt to keep the enigmas, enigmatic, and thus alive. As the wider popular culture embraces other, more obscure characters (such as MoonKnight), the lines will continually be redrawn between fans seeking to stay on the margin and franchises popularizing obscure characters.

Dr. Jones

It’s Dangerous to Go Alone, Take Someone with You: The Rise of Squad Mechanics and Simulated Social Trust in *Mass Effect: Andromeda* and *The Outer Worlds*

 The successful sci-fi video game adventures of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* and *The Outer Worlds* have reinvigorated interest in squad mechanics (which are not multi-player, but single-player alongside other player-chosen NPCs). Squad mechanics provide constant companionship for single-players, creating a more social environment to game play. What was once a mainstay of male-centered individualism of the sole Romantic hero figure (Think *Blade Runner*) has evolved into an eclectic multi-racial, multi-species, squad (Think *Star Trek NG*), where interdependence improves the enjoyment of the narrative and directly relates to success of game objectives. Considering this change in desired game mechanics in light of longitudinal studies of the significant decline in social trust, we make a series of assertions as to why players have embraced these squad-mechanic games utilizing a vector of generational concerns, the zeitgeist of Covid-19 years, and the rise of “nerd/Fandom culture” derived from academic treatments of various game mechanics, player “testimonials” on bulletin boards and social media, and the discussions within popular-media gaming sources. We propose a new schema of four sub-types of video games to focus further discussions of squad-mechanics based on the level of integration of a creed in relationship to main characters: 1. single-character with no creed (e.g. *Pac-man*, *DOOM*; i.e., PC merely needs to go forth and gobble or shoot), 2. Single character within narrative creeds (e.g. *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*; i.e., others’ creeds are background to the PC’s personal goals), 3. Single character with communal creed base support (e.g. Division 2, *Watchdogs 2*; i.e., PC’s and a group’s creeds align, but PC goes alone), and 4. Single character with joint communal creed and concurrent support (e.g. *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, *The Outer Worlds*; i.e., PC and group’s creeds align and PC selects optional NPCs as companions).

Artis Gunn

#Selfie #Loveme: Impression Management in *Westworld*, *Humans*, and the Novel *Passing*

 The TV shows, *Humans* and *Westworld* have plots hinging on AI androids passing themselves off as humans, but this “passing off” has real-world precedent, as seen in the novel *Passing* by Nella Larsen. In *Passing*, Larsen uses the concept of “passing” with the characters Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield. These light-skinned African American women pose as Caucasian to reap the associated benefits. The idea of “passing” focuses on societal perceptions and advancement. Larsen’s concept of “passing” remains relevant within today’s society with the rise of social media platforms, such as Instagram, which gained 13.9 million downloads since its release in 6 October 2010. Individuals use Instagram to create societal perceptions of themselves through uploading photographs for advancement. The total number of likes, reactions, and comments on posts allows individuals to measure their societal value. The show *Orville* imagines a society controlled through online activity, similarly to how the Chinese government currently monitors the online social activity of citizens posting pro and anti-government propaganda to determine their societal value.

Makayla Johnson

“Monika Deleted My Title” : The Immersive ARGs and RPGs That Redefine Fantasy Horror Entertainment

 Interactive RPGs (such as *Doki Doki Literature Club*) and ARGs (such as *Local58*) provide an immersive experience that redefines the future of Fantasy Horror entertainment. Interactive RPGs create a fictional world that requires real-life virtual interaction to proceed with the storyline. An ARG, or alternate reality game, tells a story through a lens of hyperreality, either by relying completely on real-world interaction or by projecting the story onto a real-world platform. Players engaging with an ARG may be provided with some piece of a story and then sent on a virtual scavenger hunt to uncover the remaining pieces, playing the game like a virtual “escape room.” In other cases, an ARG provides readers with an entire story on a real-world platform, blurring the line between reality and obvious fiction. The simulacra created by simultaneous realism and fiction is what defines an ARG and has been an important trait for Fantasy Horror franchises that have grown a cult following such as Blaire Witch Project. Just as modern literature has transitioned from monoglossia to heteroglossia language, and a similar shift occurred where player/s and game creators co-create a storyline in video games, ARGs are evolving the heteroglossia. In the case of ARG, any division between hyperreality and reality fuses into a seamless experience. This seamless entertainment experience changes the conversation around the fantasy horror paradox of threat simulation and benign masochism. The immersive nature of interactive RPGs and ARGs, combined with Digital Natives’ relationship with social media and entertainment, raise questions about the future of Fantasy Horror as a genre and whether or not we can expect to see a shift towards more altered reality content.

Robert Allen

Sunsets and Palm Silhouettes: The Semiotics of Setting in Pirate Fiction

 The most enduring pirate narratives, such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, Joseph Conrad’s *Victory*, J.M. Berrie’s *Peter Pan*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Offshore Pirate*, operate over a strikingly similar foundation: an enchanting island that provokes a sense of possibility in the mind of the reader. From a semiotic perspective, such a setting presents a network of closely connected symbols that create a type of distant-and-deserted identity, which invites a new level of social and physical freedom. To more clearly comprehend this setting’s appeal, a reader may unpack four component symbols: the perception of remoteness, the prevalence of open horizons, the insistence of tropical heat, and the absence of human construction. Sex and violence may sell in the immediate moment, but the thrills inspired by either quality die a quick and complete death. The mystique of the distant-and-deserted island, however, imbued with the promise of a life less restricted by the expectations of civilization, evokes a type of romance that lands and lingers with readers, allowing these select pirate narratives to reverberate and remain relevant across multiple generations.

Ann Burton

I Kissed Purity Culture Goodbye: Western Purity Culture and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, The *Testaments*, and Hulu’s Serial *Pure*

 Margaret Atwood’s novels *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments* reflects the real world Purity Culture movement of the 20th and 21st century. By promoting abstinence-only sex education and the strict ideology of remaining “pure” until marriage, Purity Culture teaches harmful beliefs of gatekeeping, promotes extreme personal constraint in the name of obedience, and perpetuates myths of perfect marriages. Joshua Harris’s 1997 book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* presented the blueprint for Purity Culture. Additionally, Purity Culture uses concepts that frame humans as consumable goods, causing psychological trauma to individuals. Degrading metaphors from chewed-up gum and Cheez-It’s to a rose whose petals have been plucked highlight the vitiated body in which a person who has engaged in pre-marital sex must present their future spouse with upon Biblical marriage. In the 1990s and early 2000s some pop culture narratives espoused the Purity Myth agenda, such as in Gilmore Girls and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Recently, narratives have begun to examine, question, and sometimes reject the teachings of Purity Culture through science fiction and fantasy narratives such as Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and *Pure*, as well as Amazon’s *The Boys*. While some popular culture narratives are pushing back against Purity Culture, some academics are as well, such as Casey Ryan Kelly’s “Abstinence Cinema: Virginity and the Rhetoric of Sexual Purity in Contemporary Film.”