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Digital Immersion Paper

Digital culture can be expressed in many forms but there is one common denominator: the internet. The power of the internet gives life to all online activity. Social media, streaming, online gaming and other online interactions are becoming norms as our society progresses technologically. For my digital immersion, I decided to binge watch *Prison Break* on Hulu. I was already watching *Prison Break*, before this binge, at around two episodes a week. Binge watching television, through streaming services like Netflix and Hulu, has become increasingly popular with teenagers and young adults because of its easy accessibility across multiple devices and its use as an alternative to cable television. I decided to watch it using the Hulu app on my Xbox rather than using my laptop or cellphone. In the five hours, I was immersed in binge watching television, several social and individual behaviors caught my attention such as how the binge maintained my attention and the frustrations a faulty internet connection can cause. Because of my immersion, I'm able to analyze my experience and how it reflects on both my personal agency and the cultural environments of today's digital age.

Before starting the five-hour binge of *Prison Break*, preparations were made to make the viewing environment more enjoyable such as having food available and a comfortable seating arrangement. I tried to think ahead and avoid as many interruptions as possible such as snack breaks and cellphone use. After I felt comfortable with my surroundings, I began the show.

Prison Break is suspense filled drama with a run time of approximately forty-three minutes (not including commercial breaks) an episode. I began on season two, episode one. The television series begins with its intro and a quick recap of the show before going into its first commercial break. The first commercial break is timed at sixty seconds before returning to the

show. *Prison Break* is one of those shows that keeps the viewer engaged and on their toes with the series of twists in every episode. During the first episode, I was able to limit my cellphone use because they show itself had my attention. Fifteen minutes into the episode, the second commercial break took ninety seconds as opposed to sixty seconds in the first break. Ten minutes later, the third commercial break runs for ninety seconds. Another ten minutes later, the fourth commercial break ran for sixty seconds and resumed the show. At the end of the episode, a menu screen loads with the next episode in queue and recommended titles. The episode in queue will automatically play after ten seconds if no buttons are pressed on the Xbox controller. *Prison Break* is known for ending their episodes with dramatic cliffhangers that leaves viewers anxious for the next episode and the continuation of the story. I found myself in that position and decided to skip the ten second wait and start the episode myself. For the second episode, commercial breaks aired at approximately the same time as the first episode and their lengths corresponded with the first episode as well. During the second episode, I received several texts messages and responded during the commercial breaks so that I wouldn't miss any of the show. By the end of the second episode, I was hooked on the binge. Once again, I sped up the queue and started the episode ahead of time. Episode three began and I was fully engaged in the show, feeling all of the dramatic endings and suspenseful plot. Again, the commercials aired around the same time as the last episodes with the same commercial length. I chose to ignore my text messages during the commercial breaks and decided to search online for more history on the actors in the show instead.

Halfway through the third episode my roommate entered the room and started talking about his day. The luxury of online streaming on platforms like Hulu and Netflix is that you can pause the stream whenever you'd like. *Prison Break* had me hooked already and although I did

not want to pause the show, I paused it and listened to my roommate talk for the next five minutes. I continued the episode and after five minutes of suspense, my roommate pulled up a chair and joined me for the remainder of the immersion. At the end of the episode, I streamlined the queue and began the next episode as soon as the last seen cut out. The first commercial of the fourth episode followed the timing of the previous three. Two minutes after the commercial break, some buffering and quality issues began. Four minutes later, during an important dialogue, the internet connection failed. I immediately let out a loud “what?!” A screen stating “Internet connection lost. Please try again later” appeared for a minute before fading back to the main menu. My frustration started to build when the main menu didn’t let me continue with the show. After roughly five minutes of “trying again,” the show started and picked up a minute before the internet connection was lost. My frustration continued to build when the internet connection failed once again. Luckily, the connection issue resolved itself in seconds and resumed the episode automatically with no interruptions. The fifth and last episode I binged for this immersion continued to build my frustrations with the internet connection and tested my patients. The fifth episode started with terrible video quality and buffered several times before the first commercial. When *Prison Break* cut to its commercial break, the internet connection failed. Only this time it would be ten minutes before the internet connection was restored. All I wanted to do was get back into the show and continue watching. This was the last time I lost internet connection, but the stream remained in low quality for the rest of the episode. Once the fifth episode was over, I checked my phone and was surprised to see how many notifications I had ignored during my binge. Although I was done with my immersion of binge-watching television, I wanted to keep watching the next episode. I had been hooked on been watching *Prison Break*.

Digital immersion would not possible without the use of computers and the internet. The internet has become an integral part of daily life. In her book, *Virtual Ethnography*, Hine (2000) writes that “the internet can be understood not only as a cultural artefact – a thing in the world – but also as a culture – an important aspect of the world itself.” The internet has become a culture outside of the physical realm that hosts endless possibilities of discovery and curiosity as well as entertainment and comfort. My generation was raised right alongside the internet. It has become a part of our environment and affects what we do and when we do it. “From the perspective of media ecology, media – such as the internet and its various incarnations and platforms – are such environments: symbolic structures within which we are situated and through which we engage” (Lindgren, 19). This was evident in my digital immersion. While I tried to control my environment outside of the internet by making myself as comfortable and relaxed as possible, the internet, as an environment, was out of my control. The internet connection failures affected my mood drastically and limited what I could do in that moment. Furthermore, the internet, as an environment, is vast and engaging. Hulu’s use of the internet allows for people to be stream their programing, but like the internet, it also hosts a vast library of engaging material. The internet’s ability to make affect people’s lives and how they maneuver through it makes it a cultural phenomenon that has shaped today’s society become what it is.

Streaming platforms have made it a lot easier to engage in bingeing but it bingeing media is not a new activity. New adaptions of old activities are brought back with a layer of technology. Remediation describes how digital media continuously absorbs and repurposes other forms of media (Lindgren, 21). Streaming television is an example as you watch syndicated television that might be outdated to you like *Seinfeld* or *Friends*. The visual quality may be the original, but it has been repurposed to appeal to the same demographic it once appealed to as well as its old

viewers. Shows that were successful on cable television, like *Prison Break*, are typically successful on streaming platforms for their original success but also the ability to watch episodes back to back, whenever you please, via the internet.

Binge watching *Prison Break* allowed me to reflect on the internet as its own cultural environment that, like any other environment, can only be controlled so much. While there are many ways for you to digitally immerse yourself, the commonality among the digital culture is the internet. The internet ultimately affects society. The power the internet possess over our everyday lives will dictate the future in which we become more immersed with digital culture than we are now.

Works Cited

Hine, Christine. *Virtual Ethnography*. Sage, 2000.

Lindgren, Simon. *Digital Media and Society*. SAGE Publications Ltd, 2017.