

October 2021

A Crisis of Publicity: Many-to-Many Communication, Public Deliberation, and the Quest for the Last Big Secret

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Introduction

On December 26, 2007, a user in the official PlayStation Forums named Ascadia-PSU created a discussion thread titled “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC.” The thread, meant to discuss the critically acclaimed 2005 PlayStation video game *Shadow of the Colossus*, would remain active from 2007 to 2013 and grow to contain 5662 individual posts, or about 1831 pages when printed onto a PDF (one of the forum members even claims to have had it printed and bound). In the thread, users discussed the possibility of an undiscovered secret in the videogame, one hinted at by a series of meticulously hidden clues placed by game creator Fumito Ueda. For 6 years, users participated in the thread sharing theories, clips of gameplay, drawings, literary allusions, interviews by the creator, and anything else that could be considered evidence of the secret’s existence and possible location. As the thread grew, so did its influence: it began to be shared across message boards and even launched a number of YouTube careers as participants recorded videos of themselves searching through every pixel of the game’s vast world. The thread was recognized by the game creators with an acknowledgment in the credits of the 2018 remake of the game, and in 2019 it inspired a video retrospective that to this day has 3,732,687 views on YouTube. However, Ascadia-PSU and the Secret Seekers, as the participants of the thread came to be known, never found the game’s last big secret. There never was one to find.

How was the myth of a non-existent video game easter egg able to sustain six years of public deliberation? Because *Shadow of the Colossus* is a game that relies on vague narrative and player interpretation to convey its story and mythos, speculation had always been built into its design. A more specific reading of the forum thread, however, reveals the search for the last big secret was fueled by the perpetuation of a number of key myths and misconceptions that, despite public debate, are never proven wrong. At first glance, this might appear a failure of online public deliberation, a common occurrence at a time characterized by a crisis of misinformation. The ability of online publics to scrutinize evidence is part of a long-standing debate, held in government and private industry, over the amount of responsibility social media platforms have over the deliberation that occurs on their sites.¹ In this essay, however, I propose a more specific and productive reading of the Secret Seeker’s debate, one that highlights a problem in these contemporary

¹ Browning, Kellen. “Zuckerberg and Dorsey Face Harsh Questioning From Lawmakers.” *The New York Times*, November 17, 2020, sec. Technology.
<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2020/11/17/technology/twitter-facebook-hearings>.

discussions of online misinformation: that our popular understanding of public deliberation does not account for the way online publics are actually constituted.

The infrastructure that gives shape to the online public sphere, such as data surveillance technologies and suggestion algorithms, troubles our understanding of what it means for deliberation to be “public.” Online users, as they “share” their meals, their political beliefs, their pastimes and tastes, or simply click around the web, play an active role in skewing the online experiences of others, not only through their own social reach, but through the algorithms that tell media and advertisement companies what they should promote to others: “their choices, their investment, their actions determine what gets valued in the new mediascape.”² The audience that engages with any particular content online is actively constituted by the technologies that determine what the value of that content is for advertisement and who it is valuable for.³ Importantly, this value continually changes: how an audience engages with that content dictates how it will continue to appear to others. Online content, therefore, isn’t simply statically public. Instead, I refer to a content’s continually changing quality of “being” in public as its publicity.

I argue that instead of providing the grounds for a more effective collective scrutiny, the publicity of the “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC” worked against the participating users’ ability to scrutinize the misconceptions that drove the thread. Facing a continuously changing group of participants while constrained by the discussion thread format, forum users turned to deliberative practices that prioritized maintaining control of the thread over scrutinizing its discussion. Understanding when online deliberation fails to scrutinize misinformation is important because social media platforms actively outsource that responsibility to public discussion. Adapting rhetorical analysis to networked texts, I use this case study to understand how publicity relates to deliberative practices, drawing insight on the way misinformation proliferates online.

In what follows, I provide a brief account of how social media platforms respond to a crisis of misinformation by restating their commitment to the public exchange of ideas. I then show how this commitment runs contrary to the way publicity actually constitutes social media publics. Finally, I turn towards an analysis of the thread “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC” to understand how the thread’s publicity alters users’ deliberative practices in ways that hinder online

² Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in Networked Culture: With a New Afterword* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 38.

³ I use content here to refer to a range of online texts, from user profiles to news articles, individual posts, and anything that has its own web address and therefore value for advertisement.

public debate. Drawing on rhetorical theory and data science methods, I demonstrate how a changing publicity works against the productive scrutiny of ideas in situations of many-to-many communication online.

A Crisis of Misinformation and the Burden of Scrutiny

Social media platforms are born from the promise and chaos of the web, providing popular tools of “participation, expression, and social connection,” while turning those into profit-generating activities.⁴ To provide their service, these platforms need to set rules that moderate user interactions. Some of this moderation is overt, like prohibiting the circulation of pornography or violence on sites that don’t want it. But social media platforms do not only moderate overtly; they also shape user interactions by structuring content so that interested users might encounter it. Their business model relies on knowing what content is popular and for whom it is popular so that they can sell both ad space and the data that tells advertisers what ads to place.⁵ Data mining and suggestion algorithms are the technologies that grant platforms these capabilities: the former learns what ad space is valuable, and the latter makes sure there is an audience for it.⁶ This process is continuous, gathering data in real time and consequently reshaping what users might encounter on a platform.

Through this continuous process, a user’s everyday actions are also a form of promotion of their behavior, one that structures what being in public means for others. When a post or discussion is “public” in a social media platform, this is therefore never just a fixed state; it is a fluctuating quality that depends on the kind of users who engage with it and how.⁷ *Publicity* is the quality that constitutes and changes the public that encounters a particular text online.⁸ The way content’s publicity materializes is different in all social media platforms: while Facebook, for example, has a section for suggested pages and consistently adds promoted and

⁴ Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 5; Bruce Allen Bimber, *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011); Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).

⁵ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020), 63.

⁶ Alexander Galloway, “Does the Whatever Speak?” in *Race after the Internet*, ed. by Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012): 113

⁷ Devon Powers, “Notes on hype.” *International journal of communication* [Online] (2012): 857, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1441>.

⁸ Powers, “Notes on hype,” 857.

popular posts to users' "timelines," Instagram rearranges users' entire feed and replaces already seen posts with advertisements. Both are means by which social media platforms actively dictate how, where, and about what users can interact.

In *Custodians of the Internet*, Tarleton Gillespie explores how *all* social media platforms therefore need to manage the contradicting drives both to moderate content and to stand loudly for free speech. When content moderation online becomes a topic of public controversy, Gillespie argues, platforms "generally frame themselves as open, impartial, and non-interventionists" often because they believe so, and certainly "to avoid obligation and liability."⁹ Despite being protected from most liability under Section 230 of U.S. Telecommunications law, platforms rely on an image of proactive openness to draw and maintain users.¹⁰ They must shape that image discursively, through ad campaigns, web design, and most recently, by responding to the widespread circulation of misinformation on their sites. While overt moderation is often present in this discourse, the role social media platforms play in shaping publicity is not.

The spread of misinformation by social media users during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election brought to national attention the way social media giants like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit were complicit in that behavior. Similarly, the rapid spread of SARS-CoV-2 / COVID-19, and the parallel spread of contradicting discourses about the effectiveness of masks, treatments, and possible vaccines, gave cause to fears that shifting expectations of medical science in social media could have fatal, global consequences. While other instances of online public deliberation gone wrong have made it to the news before—for example, a Reddit community wrongfully accusing an innocent man of carrying out the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing—the threat of online misinformation has never been as popularly recognized as it is now.¹¹ This exigence has prompted major social media platforms to take a variety of approaches in addressing misinformation, throughout which the common thread was outsourcing the scrutiny of information to the public exchange of ideas.¹²

⁹ Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet*, 7.

¹⁰ 47 U.S. Code § 230 (Protection for private blocking and screening of offensive material), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/47/230>.

¹¹ Kang, Jay Caspian. "Should Reddit Be Blamed for the Spreading of a Smear?" *The New York Times*, July 25, 2013, sec. Magazine. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/28/magazine/should-reddit-be-blamed-for-the-spreading-of-a-smear.html>.

¹² Gerrit De Vynck et al., "Big Tech CEOs Face Lawmakers in House Hearing on Social Media's Role in Extremism, Misinformation," *Washington Post*, accessed March 27, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/03/25/facebook-google-twitter-house-hearing-live-updates/>.

In March of 2020 Twitter released new platform rules that state their “purpose is to serve the public conversation.”¹³ The restatement of their priority to protect free speech came, paradoxically, with increased moderation powers, including the ability for users to flag content that is believed to be “significantly altered.”¹⁴ Following suit on June 29th of the same year, Reddit released an update to their content policy, which included the removal of some polarizing, conspiratorial communities, the standardization of forum rules, and the expansion of moderator power across subreddits. The site further stated: “Debate and creativity are welcome, but spam and malicious attempts to interfere with other communities are not.”¹⁵ Not all platforms, however, appeared open to playing a more active role overtly moderating the subjects of user deliberation. While Facebook already had content standards in place to remove hate speech and harmful content, the site leadership decided not to interfere in any way when it comes to political ads, stating: “people should be able to hear from those who wish to lead them, warts and all, and [what] they say should be scrutinized and debated in public.”¹⁶ The discourse of social media companies underscores their role as providers only of a platform for public speech. In line with this point, they outsource even the labor of moderation to users, who are meant to interpret content guidelines and report the content (including other users) that does not comply with them. The identity of social media companies as platforms of free speech relies on the long-lasting trope that the more public an exchange of ideas is, the better its outcome.¹⁷ These companies, however, take no responsibility for how that public is brought together.

When social media platforms discursively negotiate their responsibility for the spread of misinformation, they do so by distancing themselves from their roles as mediators and placing the responsibility of scrutiny on public deliberation. They fail to reconcile, however, the ways these publics are actually constituted and how they continue to change over time. They also fail to acknowledge their agency in shaping those publics by controlling the publicity of online content. The relationship between

¹³ “The Twitter Rules,” Twitter, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules>.

¹⁴ Aubri Juhasz and Ari Shapiro, “Twitter Vows That As Disinformation Tactics Change, Its Policies Will Keep Pace,” *NPR*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/04/811686225/twitter-vows-that-as-disinformation-tactics-change-its-policies-will-keep-pace>

¹⁵ Spez, “Update to Our Content Policy” Reddit, June 29, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/announcements/comments/h3oht/update_to_our_content_policy/

¹⁶ Rob Leathern, “Expanded Transparency and More Controls for Political Ads,” *Facebook*, January 9, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/01/political-ads/>

¹⁷ Kock, Christian, and Lisa S. Villadsen. *Rhetorical Citizenship and Public Deliberation*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012.

publicity and deliberation deserves further exploration because it is completely missing from the way social media platforms portray the crisis of misinformation. To explore this relationship, I turn to “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC.”

A Colossal Task Made Simple

The deliberation in “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC” did not take place in one of the modern social media sites at the heart of the crisis of misinformation. Admittedly, the Official PlayStation Forums can’t compete with the likes of Facebook and Twitter in number of users or features. But the reason that “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC” can help us understand the relationship between deliberation and publicity in today’s public sphere is that user interaction in forums sites and contemporary social media sites is organized around the same feature: the discussion thread. A discussion thread originally refers to a single conversation in an internet forum or message board that is structured vertically, starting at the top with the conversation prompt and followed by subsequent user posts, usually in chronological order. While there is some variety between social media sites, the discussion thread is a ubiquitous form in the online public sphere and is recognizable in the user comments of Facebook posts, groups, and events, and in Twitter, Redditt, and 4chan threads. The discussion thread is where users can type their comments and responses to other’s posts, perhaps the common analogue to a conventional public forum. Simply put, the discussion thread is where online publics deliberate and, as my analysis will show, also what makes it hard for these publics to scrutinize information.

Understanding an online public, however, can prove difficult due to the volume of unique and often anonymous participants and the many ways they can engage with each other. While a textual analysis of “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC” can provide some insight on the development of the thread, it is limited in its chronological reading of 1831 pages of often unstructured argument. Even when dates and times of individual posts are present in the thread, constructing a mental image of the pace of deliberation is difficult at this scale. Equally difficult is keeping track of the thread’s many participants, some recurring and many others who join only to participate once. Understanding the thread’s publicity—how the participating users change and their numbers fluctuate—is crucial to the study of the development of the threads’ deliberation. Yet this is something that textual analysis alone cannot provide. To approach a text of this scope, data science methods can help better grasp the changing public of the thread across time and give direction to rhetorical analysis. Simply put, data science can provide insight on a thread’s

publicity, while rhetorical analysis allows us to understand the deliberation that occurs in relation to it.

This use of mixed methods expands on the way that rhetorical study can be adapted to networked texts. In *Networked Media, Networked Rhetorics*, Damien Pfister urges the field of rhetoric to account for the way public deliberation changes as network technologies make possible “many-to-many communication.”¹⁸ At the same time, he cautions that rhetorical theory is hard to adapt to the networked space because “it requires negotiating multiple unbound audiences at the same time.”¹⁹ Here, “many-to-many communication” doesn’t just refer to the size of an audience that the internet makes possible, it also refers to the opacity with which that audience is constituted. How do we know if users are really responding to one another?²⁰ Do users merely register opinions rather than participate in transformative exchanges?²¹ The opacity of online audiences makes it difficult to understand how audience members engage with one another.

This case study on the thread “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC” is particularly suited to explore methodological solutions to these disciplinary problems. The thread’s long life-span and continued activity allow for the study of changes in participants across time and of the way deliberation changes with them. Because the thread is closed and archived, it both has a static number of participants and is publicly accessible. Perhaps most importantly, the discussion in “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC” has little to do with issues of political polarization. Contemporary research on misinformation finds it difficult to untangle the way political polarization is articulated to online deliberation.²² While the discussion in “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC” is esoteric, it still reaches a large audience and has long lasting effects, making it an exemplar text for non-political many-to-many communication that struggles with misinformation. Using data science methods, I account for the opacity of the thread’s audience in order to use rhetorical analysis to understand its many-to-many communication. Disarticulating

¹⁸ Damien Smith Pfister, *Networked Media, Networked Rhetorics: Attention and Deliberation in the Early Blogosphere* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 187.

¹⁹ Pfister, *Networked Media, Networked Rhetorics*, 187.

²⁰ James Bohman, *Democracy across Borders: From Démos to Démoi* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 74.

²¹ Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics,” *Cultural Politics: An International Journal* 1, no. 1 (2005): 55.

²² Rosa Scardigno and Giuseppe Mininni, “The Rhetoric Side of Fake News: A New Weapon for Anti-Politics?,” *World Futures* 76, no. 2 (February 17, 2020): 81–101; Florian Toepfl and Eunike Piwoni, “Public Spheres in Interaction: Comment Sections of News Websites as Counterpublic Spaces,” *Journal of Communication* 65, no. 3 (June 2015): 465–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12156>.

deliberation from politics allows for a more specific rhetorical analysis that can then be expanded and applied to political communication as well.

In order to extract data from the thread, it is necessary to obtain a copy of it. On February 27, 2020, Sony shut down the Official PlayStation Forums, erasing two decades' worth of forum conversations. Users in the PlayStation forums were given a month's notice. With that time the user nomado168 converted the thread into an 1831-page PDF document, saved it, and uploaded it for dissemination to archive.org.²³ This transition, however, did some damage to the thread. Its Web2.0 interface and its html elements were jumbled into a collage of broken links, dislodged menus, and error icons. Nomado168 used the print function of their web-browser to archive the thread, a process that disregards the formatting of a site when fitting it unto a printable document. While the boxes that contain the individual messages are preserved in chronological order, they are regularly broken by the page breaks. Similarly, the user information that sits to the right of each post is sporadically split between pages, sometimes losing lines of information. Message 5360 is missing entirely. Still, the thread is legible and the text present is close to a perfect copy of its original.

²³ Nomad Colossus, "Shadow of the Colossus - Quest For The Last Big Secret PS 2 Forums FULL," The Internet Archive, October 31, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/shadow-of-the-colossus-quest-for-the-last-big-secret-ps-2-forums-full>.



Figure 1. A sample of the PDF version of “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC”.

With tools from the Python programming language, I wrote the code for a text processing program to translate the forum thread into a Data Frame, from which I can draw information about the thread as a whole.²⁴ This table offers some immediate information about the thread's lifespan. The vast majority of messages, 5390 from a total of 5662, occur within the first 3 years of the thread, from December 2007 to the end of 2010. The last three years of the thread's life serve mostly as a blog for the user *nomador68*, who periodically posts updates about his continued exploration of the game. Focusing on the most active 3 years of the thread, I aggregate the number of total posts, graph the frequency of posts per week, graph the number of posts by user, and finally graph each user's activity across the thread.

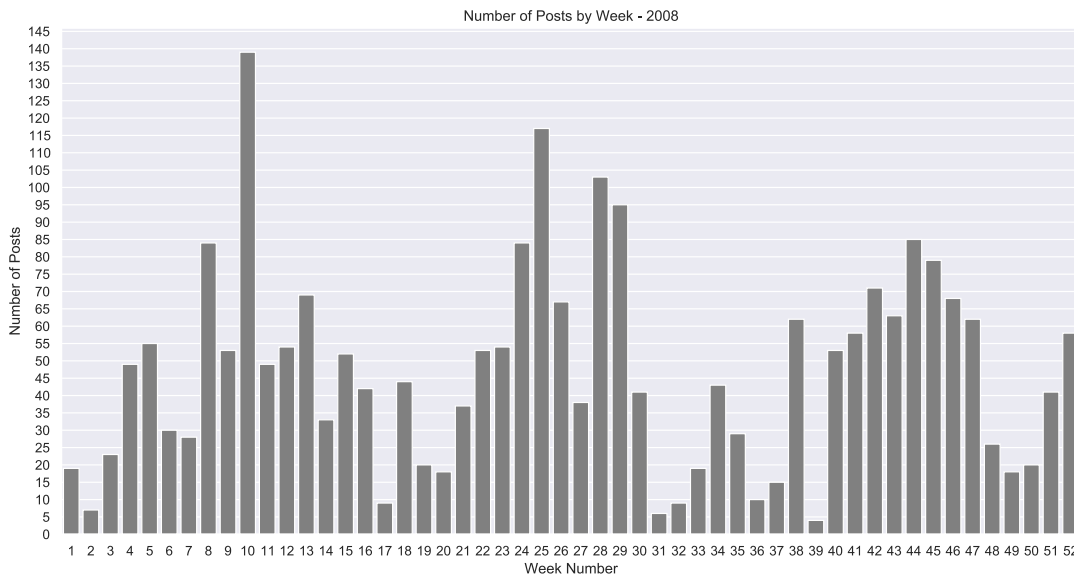


Figure 2. A bar graph depicting the number of posts per week in the year 2008 of “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC.”

²⁴ In order to process the text present in the thread, I converted the PDF file into a Microsoft Excel document so that the individual elements in the page would become individual cells. Saved as a “csv” file (comma separated values), the spreadsheet can now be read using text processing techniques within Python.

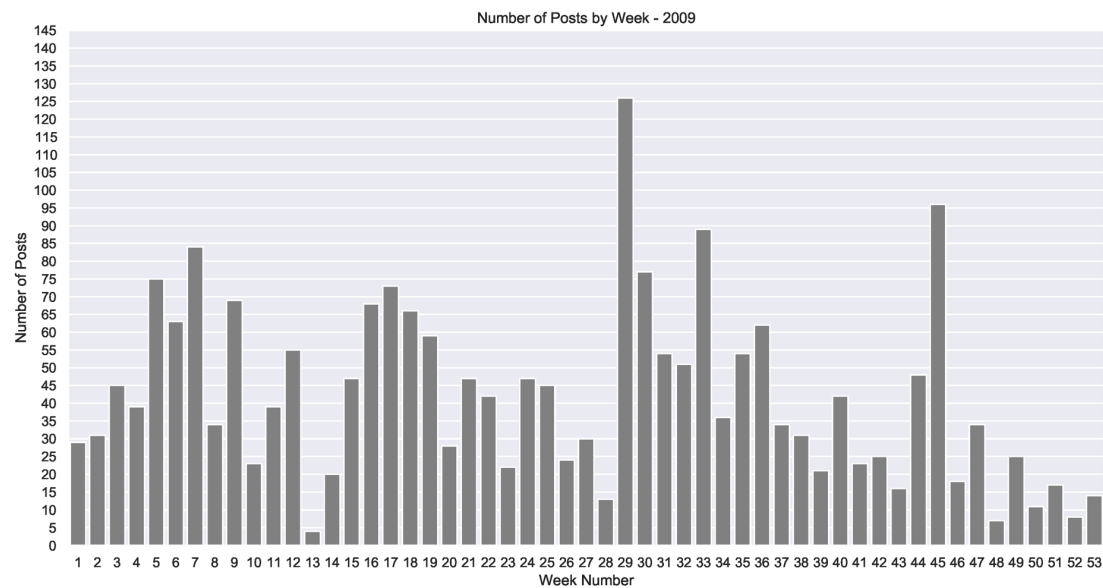


Figure 3. A bar graph depicting the number of posts per week in the year 2009 of “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC.”

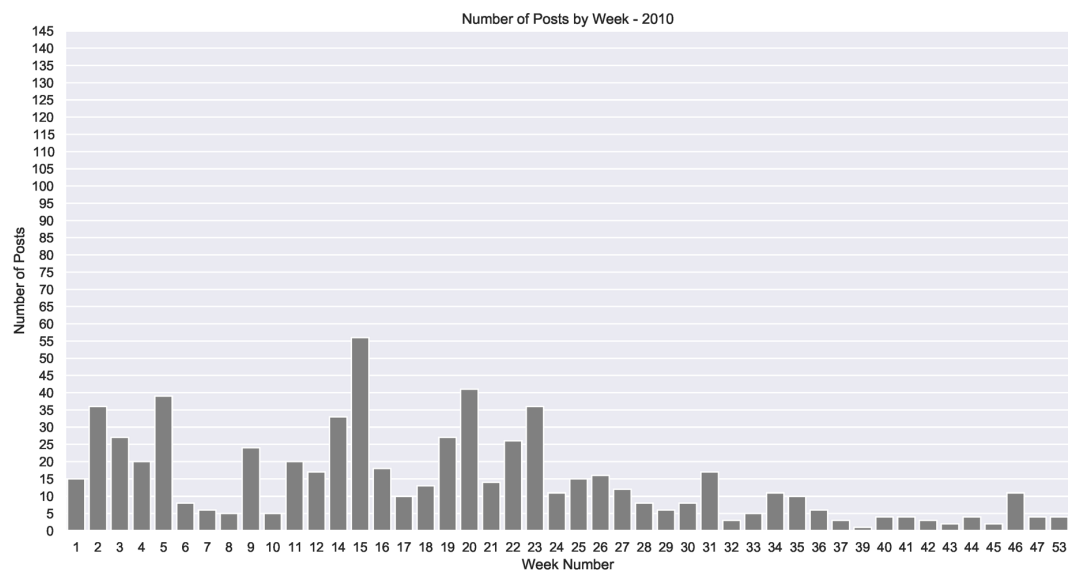


Figure 4. A bar graph depicting the number of posts per week in the year 2010 of “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC.” Week 53 only counts the number of days that fell in 2010.

Figures 2, 3, and 4 depict the frequency of posts per week during the thread’s first three years. The graphs show that the thread’s first year is its most active, and while the thread’s activity ebbs and flows, it slowly decreases across time. These graphs

also depict a clear pattern in the frequency of posts: for the most part there is a slow increase and decrease of activity between the thread's peaks and troughs. Sharp changes in activity do appear throughout the three years, but consistently the thread follows a seasonal pattern.

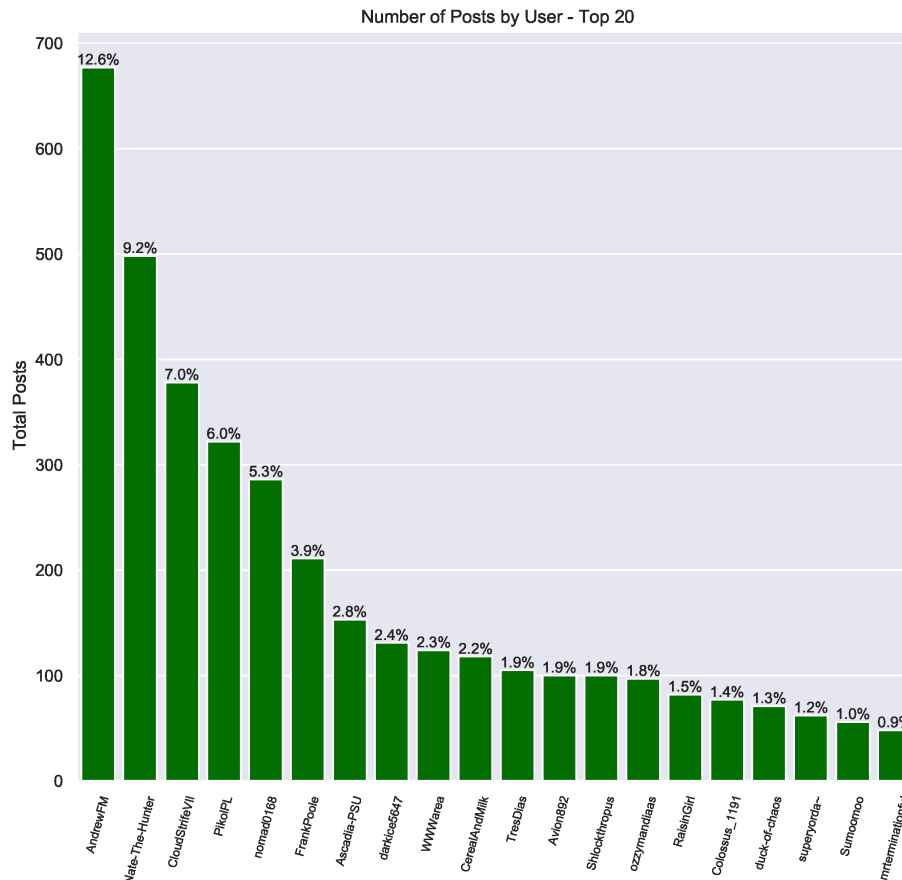


Figure 5. A bar graph depicting the total number of posts, and percentage of total posts, for the top 20 posters of “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC.”

This set of graphs serves to identify the moments of high and low activity in the thread, in this way helping guide a rhetorical analysis of the users' deliberation. Weeks 8, 10, 25, 28, 38, and 44 of 2008; 7, 17, 29, 33, and 45 of 2009; and weeks 5 and 15 of 2010 are moments of relatively high user activity. Weeks 2, 17, 31, and 39 of 2008; 13, 28, and 48 of 2009; and 8 and 32 of 2010 are moments of relatively low user activity. Being able to visualize this difference makes it easy to ask a number of structuring questions: What are users deliberating over at moments of increased user activity? What in these moments might cause the slow increase or decrease of activity that

follows these peaks and troughs? Of particular importance is the users' awareness of their publicity. Do users behave differently in moments of high and low thread activity? Do they reference these changes? And what is the result of those possible changes in deliberative behavior?

Figure 5 depicts the total number of posts per user across the entire thread and what percentage of the total posts that user comprises. The graph only shows the 20 users with the most posts, which in total comprise 64.6% of the entire thread's comments. 335 unique users participate in the thread during its most active 3 years. The fact that such a small number of users make up the majority of the thread can greatly change our understanding of the deliberation that occurs in it, but it is necessary to examine also how those users and their posts are distributed across the entire thread.

Figures 6, 7, and 8 plot each individual post in the thread across three years, categorizing each by author. The top 20 users identified in Figure 5 appear here colored in orange, while users who posted less than 1% appear in blue. These graphs offer a productive visualization of the thread, showing that only a small group of users participate consistently throughout. The other 315 users appear only sporadically, posting a couple of times or participating actively only during a small period of time. Also striking is the consistent influx of new users to the thread, forming a diagonal line from the upper left corner to the lower right of all figures. These graphs suggest that, across the entirety of "Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC," a continued dialogue is held between the top 20 posters and a constant barrage of users new to the thread.

Using data science methods to give shape to the public that constitutes "Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC" makes manageable the task of understanding deliberation under conditions of many-to-many communication. Visualizing the evolving shape of its public across time and delineating its moments of highest activity allows for a rhetorical analysis that is grounded in a specific audience. How does the group of top 20 posters engage with the ideas and comments of those new to the thread? How do new posters engage with the thread? Do they read the hundreds of pages of deliberation that predated them, or do they jump in without regard for what has already been discussed? Why do so few users remain active in the thread across its three years? These questions become available thanks to the foundations set by a data science methodology applied to many-to-many communication. I now turn to a rhetorical analysis of "Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC," followed by an in-depth look at the group of top posters and their reactions to the thread's changing public.

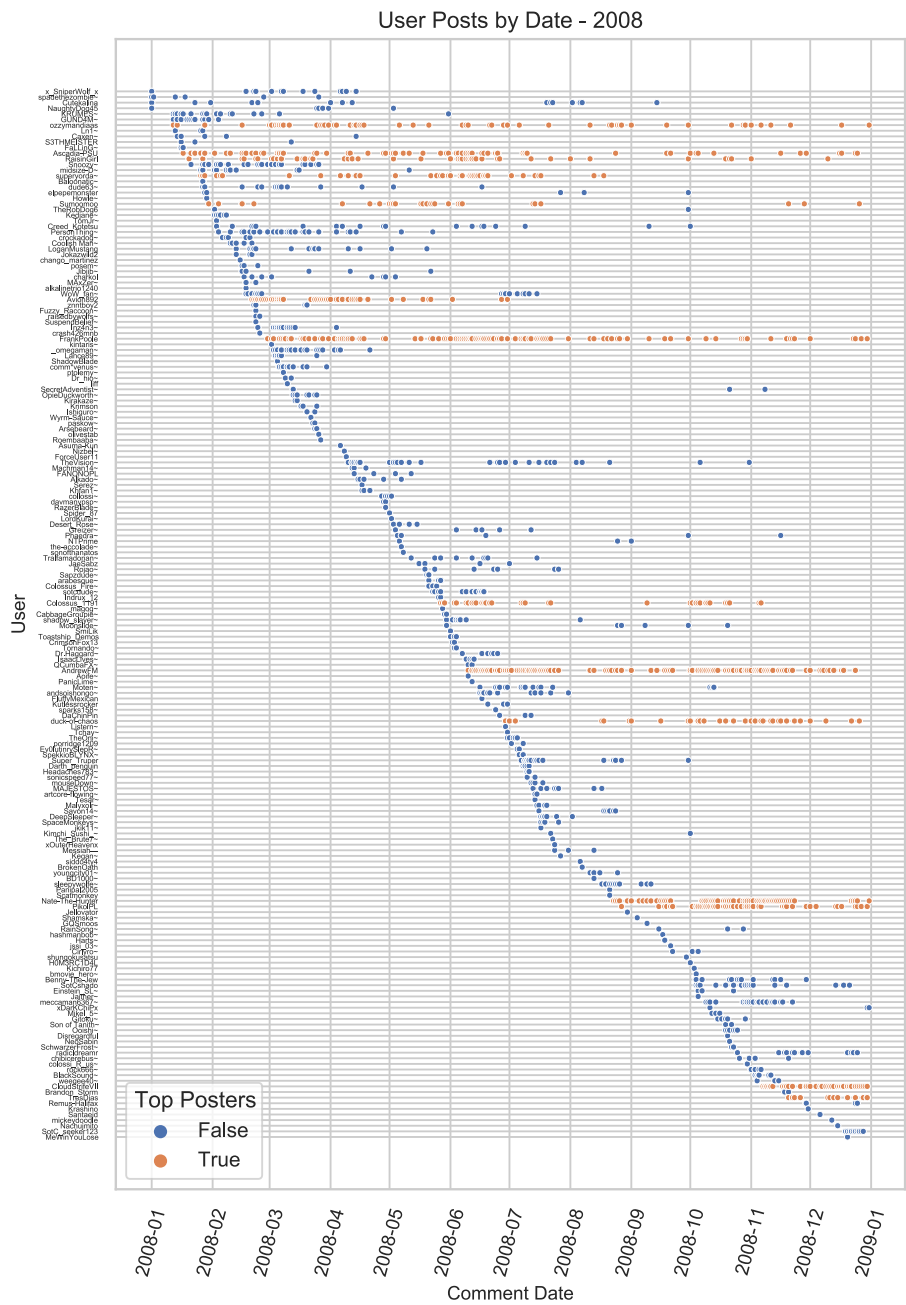


Figure 6. A scatter plot depicting all posts across time by all participating users during the year 2008 of “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC.”

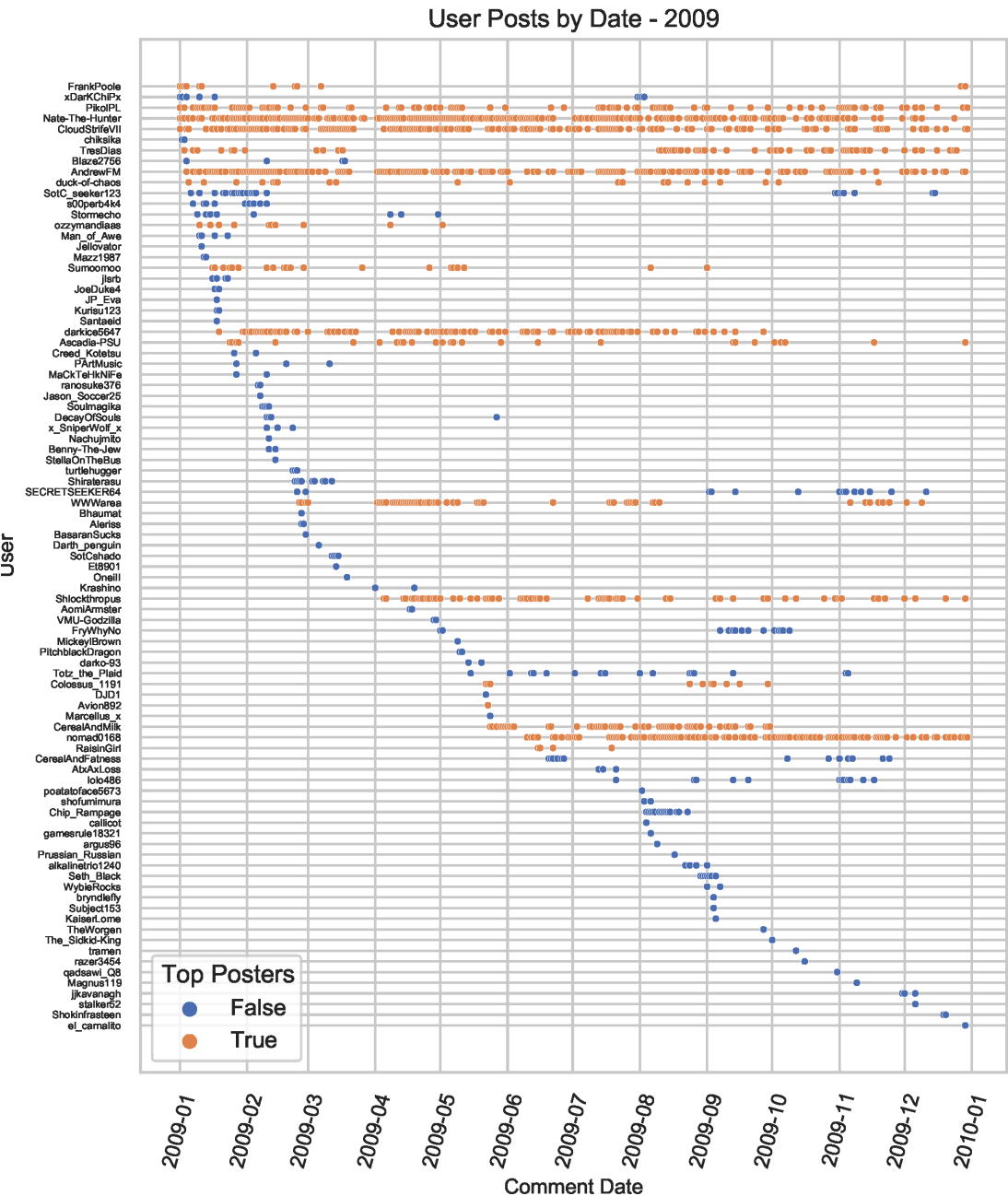


Figure 7. A scatter plot depicting all posts across time by all participating users during the year 2009 of “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC

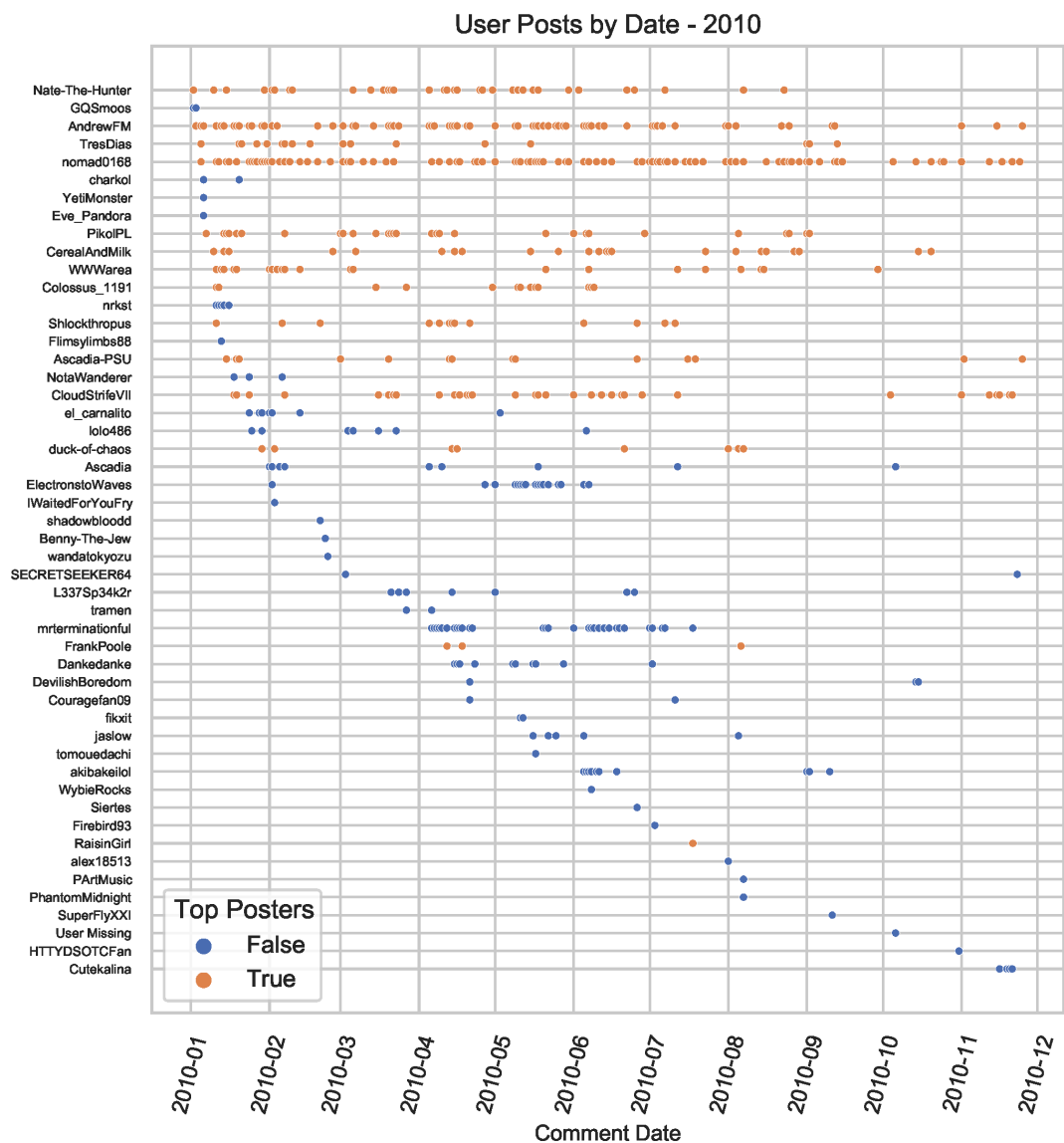


Figure 8. A scatter plot depicting all posts across time by all participating users during the year 2010 of “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC

The Secret Seekers and the Public

To understand how publicity relates to deliberation in the thread, I read through “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC” paying particular attention to the way that the group of top posters reacts to changes in the public participating in the

discussion. I also look for differences in the behavior of the group of top posters and the thread's less consistent participants, in particular at moments of high post frequency. Through this lens, it becomes evident that the group of top posters is aware of how a continuously changing public is a challenge to the search for the last big secret. Their behavior is shaped by this recognition: they step aside from the discussion and ruminate instead on the failings of their discussion and alternatives to the thread. Through the use of constitutive rhetoric, the thread's top posters develop a shared understanding of their role in the thread and are able to keep track of its developments, and importantly, comment on its publicity. It is in the differences between these groups' behaviors and the way that the top posters attempt to control the deliberation in response to a changing audience that the effects of publicity on deliberation become evident.

"Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC" opens with a post by PlayStation forum user Ascadia-PSU, and its opening lines are already an attempt to control the conversation that will follow: "This is not a general discussion thread. If you wish to chat, please confine it to the rest of the boards. Thank you."²⁵ This vague request does not begin to delineate what counts and does not count as "general discussion," but serves to establish that users should only post content that is related to the search for the last big secret in *Shadow of the Colossus*. Despite starting the thread, Ascadia-PSU has no administrative control over it and cannot decide who gets to participate or in what way. This opening remark therefore establishes a shared responsibility over the thread; it is up to all participants to stay on topic and decide what counts as a discussion about the eponymous secret. The thread is only one of many in the PlayStation Forums (an unlimited number really, since any user can begin their own thread), which means that users need to actively decide whether a post belongs in the thread, or if it is better suited for another one. To remove a post from the thread, it needs to break one of the forum rules, which are set by general forum administrators. Posting something off topic does not break the rules of the PlayStation Forums, so in order to control the content of the thread users would have to ignore those posts or ask that those users contribute to another thread in the forums. From the start, Ascadia-PSU understands that they lack control of the thread's publicity and that this might be a challenge for their quest.

Ascadia-PSU's original post continues: "I'm making this as an aid / reference to the hunt. Following is a recap of what we know so far."²⁶ Presented as established

²⁵ Ascadia-PSU, post to "Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC", The Official PlayStation Forums, December 26, 2007, 04:23 p.m., <https://archive.org/details/shadow-of-the-colossus-quest-for-the-last-big-secret-ps-2-forums-full>.

²⁶ Ascadia-PSU, December 26, 2007, 04:23 p.m.

fact from an effort that preceded this thread (albeit no links or direct references are included) Ascadia-PSU provides an interpretation of the game's opening monologue. Ascadia-PSU deciphers the tone and pacing of the mysterious voice that, in the early moments of *Shadow of the Colossus*, narrates the game-world's origin myth:

"Hundreds upon thousands of analyses could be drawn from the voice's tone alone, but the purpose of this thread lies elsewhere. Very few things in this monologue 'make sense' by our standards; as such, it is to be understood, if not expected, that the rigidly dedicated would pick the text apart, piece by piece. The seekers have done just that. While our interpretation is by no means complete, we have singled out two immensely important lines spoken in the first few seconds of the monologue. They are, 'That place... began from the resonance of intersecting points...' and, 'They are memories replaced by ens [sic] and naught and etched into stone.'"²⁷

No reasoning is given for why these two lines are selected from the monologue, but the post suggests that the logical conclusion is that players must find clues hidden in the numerous stone ruins across the game's world. The clues in these ruins would intersect somewhere in the game and reveal its final secret. Ascadia-PSU names this the "theory of intersecting points" and suggests that players who do not see these connections are surely not looking hard enough. This is the foundation upon which 1831 pages of deliberation are built.

In its entirety, the thread can be understood to have three distinct phases. Most of the misconceptions that drive the thread emerge during the first phase, as buzz about the quest begins to grow and users have a hard time testing the resulting long list of theories. During the second phase, new technologies allow for unprecedented exploration of the game world, and many of the most popular theories are disproven. Still, during the third phase, previously disproven theories and misconceptions continue to come back and fuel an apparently unending belief in the secret. My analysis shows how the encounter between the thread structure and a continually changing public makes it difficult for any information that enters the discussion to be fully disqualified as evidence. Lacking tools for consensus-making, it is hard for new users to know what has already been scrutinized.

During its first phase, the thread revolves around different theories for how a user could unlock the hypothetical secret. The user RaisinGirl makes drawings of how tiles in a ruin found by Ascadia-PSU match locations in the game world. Other users share screenshot of the map and draw lines originating from the four in-game

²⁷ Ascadia-PSU, December 26, 2007, 04:23 p.m.

locations to show where these intersect. Users begin to ask questions about what might be possible in the area: Does the sword reflect light in the shade of the structure? Can particular items be used in particular ways? Is it possible to reach the top of the structures shown in the tiles? Users disagree with each other, but whenever a theory does not work out, another one appears. The user ozzymandiaas references Fumito Ueda's previous game *Ico*, saying: "have you ever tried the ICO mace secret? it was very elaborate and somewhat random," lamenting that the game creators had leaked instructions on how to discover it.²⁸ Another user, GUND4M-, asks if others "Remember that interview with Viper? Where he [the game's director, Ueda] mentioned something [sic] about the cloth of desperation being used to reach something [sic] secret???"²⁹ Evidence from outside the game, like precedent in other games and developer interviews, begins to appear alongside new theories. The thread moves so fast, however, that even when users fail to offer any evidence (nobody ever did find Ueda's interview, for example) what they say is taken up by others.³⁰ One user claims that grabbing hold of one of the birds in the game can take you to its highest peak, and immediately thereafter flight becomes an obsession in the thread.³¹ A group of users would play the game constantly, sharing their first-hand account of their attempts to encounter the secret by following the suggestions of other users. Most, however, would not actively play the game, choosing instead to play sporadically or contribute based on their memories of having played it. While users remained hopeful, the secret was nowhere to be found.

The second phase begins around September 2008, when a user named PikolPL posts links to a series of YouTube videos showing a player performing feats thought impossible in the game. PikolPL had begun glitching the game by running it as a computer emulation, playing in ways no regular player would be expected to.³² At first, many in the thread complained this went against the spirit of "Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC" and proclaimed that discovering anything this way would be a shame.³³ Slowly however, more and more users hungry for any evidence that the secret existed began to encourage PikolPL on their unorthodox search. Passing through previously locked doors, reaching the highest peaks of the game's world, and pushing past the limits of its landscape, PikolPL begins to document every pixel in *Shadow of the Colossus*. Their posts become so popular that, following each of

²⁸ ozzymandiaas, December 31, 2007, 4:06 p.m.

²⁹ GUND4M-, January 12, 2008, 12:53 p.m.

³⁰ Colossus_1191, September 3, 2009, 08:07 a.m.

³¹ Inz4n3-, March 6, 2008, 04:21 p.m.

³² In this case, glitching refers to forcing errors in the game that might let players break its internal rules. PikolPL for example, get playable character to pass through walls.

³³ AndrewFM, September 1, 2008, 09:14 p.m.

them, the thread's traffic noticeably increases as re-energized users return to the search. In the next year and a half, however, it becomes evident to the veterans of the thread that no last secret exists in the game. As PikolPL discovers that most of the theorized secrets exists only as unused and unfinished content, probably cut due to the game's production constraints, it becomes hard for anyone paying attention to believe there is anything left for regular players to discover. It seemed then that the discussion thread had done its job, presenting to its user's evidence against the secret's existence. Discussion threads, however, are not designed to end discussions.

The third phase, beginning early in 2010, is different from the early days of the thread. Days can pass between new posts, and the number of active participants substantially decreases. While new users continue to appear in the thread to share theories or check in on the status of the search, long-participating users generally agree that there is no hidden secret. "We are just satisfying our curiosities about various things through measures obviously never intended – nor probably possible for everyone to reproduce – we've accepted that there's nothing left we were intended to find," writes user TresDias, reflecting on the eponymous quest.³⁴ Still, new participants do join to share their theories and attempts to find some form of secret. It is during this phase that it becomes most apparent there exists a wide chasm between the behavior of veteran users and those who only sporadically participate. Users not up to date with the thread, eager to participate and drawn by the allure of the quest, skip through hundreds of pages of deliberation to share their experiences in search of the secret. They skip them for good reason. By 2009, a user would have had to read through 249 forum pages, or 2490 individual posts if they wanted to make sure their contribution was not a repeat. By 2010, a user posting a question would have to read over 4730 posts to make sure an answer did not already exist. The ability of users to engage with each other and scrutinize the theories and evidence posted to the thread is undermined by the way publicity constitutes many-to-many communication. In the same way that textual analysis is limited by a chronological reading of the thread, there is no easy way for a user new to the thread to catch up with the quest and its long list of participants.

For those who needed no catching up, this problem did not go unnoticed. While figures 6,7 and 8 show that the thread has a consistent influx of new users throughout, they also show that there is a small group of users that remains consistent. These are the same top 20 posters depicted on Figure 5. Reading through the thread paying particular attention to these users reveals that they are aware that their engagement with the thread is more consistent than that of other users. More

³⁴ TresDias, November 22, 2010, 08:45 p.m.

importantly, it reveals that they understand how challenging it is to discuss the existence of the secret in the thread with a constantly changing public. This realization prompts the group to device communication strategies that might help control the deliberation, but ultimately, they are unable to do so. Despite this, following the group's formation and behavior offers a clear picture of the effects of publicity on deliberation.

Two months after the thread begins, a user named crokadog- laments a disproven theory, but ends their post on a hopeful note: "keep on scouring the land. I have full faith in you, the Secret Seekers."³⁵ The name he gives the participants of the thread is well received by some users, although most do not notice the post. Soon after, the name Secret Seekers begins to appear in the signature of user midsize-D-.³⁶ Ascadia-PSU follows by adding a Secret Seekers banner to their signature, after which other users begin to ask Ascadia-PSU for permission to join this apparently exclusive group. Ascadia-PSU replies to those seeking membership that everyone who participates in the forums is a Seeker, and the thread quickly moves past the title.³⁷ Because figures 6,7, and 8 show how quickly new users appear and leave the thread, it is possible that most users joining after the naming of the Secret Seekers simply are not aware of the title. The top 20 posters in the thread, however, keep the name in their signatures and use it to reference each other.

Consistent participation in the thread is not only helpful when keeping track of the discussion, but soon becomes a means by which users recognize each other. When the top posters on figure 5, those who remember the name Secret Seekers, begin to recognize each other in the thread, the way they engage with each other changes. While most users can not count on their posts being read or taken up by anyone, the Secret Seekers actively address their posts to one another, as well as consistently reply to them. This is most apparent when they hold on to important discoveries until they are sure other Seekers are looking at the thread and when they have tangential conversations about their personal lives.³⁸ By recognizing each other as constant participants of the thread, the Secret Seekers form a small, separate, and recognizable public with which they can have a continuous conversation.

These acts of direct address, not just posting theories but directly engaging with each other and even holding on to information until others are present, serve as

³⁵ crokadog-, February 09, 2008, 02:10 p.m.

³⁶ Midsize-D, February 09, 2008, 04:06 p.m.

³⁷ Ascadia-PSU, April 28, 2008, 04:55 a.m.

³⁸ Conversation begins with post by PikoIPL, October 10, 2008, 06:35 a.m.; Conversation begins with post by FrankPoole, October 14, 2008, 04:39 p.m.

acts of constitutive rhetoric.³⁹ While not advancing the search for the last secret, these posts serve to establish a separate public defined by consistent participation in the thread. In contrast to the unbound audience posting on the thread, the Secret Seekers serve as a constant in the deliberation, keeping track of the progress made in the search. How they recognize and react to the thread's publicity, and the role they play in moments of high activity in the thread, underscores exactly how a continuously changing public makes it difficult to scrutinize information in many-to-many communication.

Many-to-many Communication and a Crisis of Publicity

The Secret Seekers first realize they have a problem of publicity during the quick surge of activity in the thread depicted in figure 6 as weeks 7 to 10. The pace at which the thread was growing had begun to pick up, in part because the thread was featured in the PlayStation forum's home page.⁴⁰ The user GUND4M-, for example, is surprised that after not checking the thread for only 2 days they suddenly "got ten freaking pages to scroll through."⁴¹ The speed at which the thread was growing made it less likely that new contributors would read through old messages to avoid retreading old ground. This made the surge of contributions a growing barrier for the proper examinations of posts, forcing the Secret Seekers to take on the role of unofficial moderators.

Unable to properly deliberate due to the pace and lack of direction of new posts, the Secret Seekers begin a tangential discussion about ways to regain control of the deliberation in the thread. At first, users like RaisinGirl post reminders on how to use the thread's search bar to look for repeat ideas or questions, but these messages are quickly left behind in the thread. User ozzymandiaas contemplates beginning an entirely separate thread and posting a summary of the discussion so far to reset the conversation.⁴² RaisinGirl suggests making a blog-type website that can be updated with the latest theories, and user x_SniperWolf_x volunteers their services as a web designer.⁴³ Ascadia-PSU asks if they should start a sign-up list so that new contributors could be vetted for having actually played the game.⁴⁴ These proposals reveal what the Secret Seekers believe is hampering their search: that communicating with a constantly changing audience, about developments, precedent, or consensus, is

³⁹ Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Québécois," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (May 1987): 133, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638709383799>.

⁴⁰ Ascadia-PSU, March 6, 2008, 02:57 p.m.

⁴¹ GUND4M-, February 4, 2008, 08:40 p.m.

⁴² Ozzymandiaas, March 2, 2008, 03:58 p.m.

⁴³ x_SniperWolf_x, March 2, 2008, 05:48 p.m.

⁴⁴ Ascadia-PSU, April 28, 2008, 04:55 a.m.

incredibly difficult. But before any of these solutions materialize, the thread slows down on its own as users lose interest in the frustrating process of the search.

The same thing happens every time there is a similar surge of participants to the thread. From weeks 22 to 26, and again on weeks 28 and 29, links to the thread are shared on other videogame message boards which lead to a sharp surge in participants.⁴⁵ During this time, the Secret Seekers discuss the possibility of a wiki-based page where only a selected few could make official contributions.⁴⁶ In weeks 43 to 45, in the surge of users following PikolPL's glitch videos, the Secret Seekers discuss whether the evidence found by breaking the game should be legitimized.⁴⁷ All peaks of activity during the second year of the thread, weeks 7, 17, and 29 of 2009, follow PikolPL's discovery of unused assets in the game. Each of these findings further convince the Secret Seekers that there is no final secret to be found and that many of their theories simply pointed to unfinished parts of the game.⁴⁸ While these realizations exist as posts in the thread, they are quickly buried behind new posts and therefore go unnoticed by most other casual participants.

For the thread's two most active years, its publicity affects the deliberation of its users in a recognizable pattern. As new discoveries and shared links increase traffic to the thread, it becomes increasingly difficult for users to meaningfully engage with one another. When new posts accumulate and the thread grows, only those users who participate continuously can keep track of the deliberation. Having recognized each other, the group of top posters comes to understand that the continuously changing public of the thread makes it difficult to scrutinize any of the information shared. Myths that drove the thread in its early days, like an interview with the game's director and the theory of flight, come up continuously after being introduced, but no user can attest to their origin. Only after PikolPL has mapped out everything in the game are these misconceptions laid to rest. But even then, with the group of top posters convinced the search is over, it is surprisingly difficult to call off the quest for the last secret.

If a user were to find "Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC" during its third year, they would have reason to believe the existence of the secret was no settled matter. Despite the top posters agreeing that there is no secret left to find, PikolPL's continued posting of new videos gives the Secret Seekers reason to continue talking to each other in the thread. With traffic to the thread at its lowest, their conversations are seldom interrupted, but new users do continue to find the thread.

⁴⁵ mouseDown-, July 12, 2008, 12:51 p.m.

⁴⁶ Ascadia-PSU, June 04, 2008, 06:22 a.m.

⁴⁷ AndrewFM, November 1, 2008, 10:43 a.m.

⁴⁸ Nomado168, July 21, 2009, 07:15 a.m.

User L337Sp34k2r, having read only through the beginning pages of the thread and convinced that the theory of intersecting points is sound, encourages other participants: "And as for the search, it seems as if its over because someone thinks they found something. I think this search is up for a second wind."⁴⁹ The Secret Seekers sometimes take the time to reply to new users and explain what they found over the last three years, but there are always new users to convince. The thread's continued existence is enough to suggest to those that find it that the secret is still out there; to know any better, users would have to read through thousands of posts.

The reason the myth of a non-existent video game easter-egg sustains 6 years of public deliberation is that its public is continuously changing. At times when the thread draws an increased number of participants it becomes difficult for users to engage one another due to the volume of new posts. But even in times with average and low participation, the length of the thread, the design of the discussion thread, and its changing public, makes it difficult for the thread's audience to find common ground. Reaching a consensus is particularly hard in conditions of many-to-many communication, because it is never evident who one is reaching a consensus with. For this reason, the Secret Seekers continually fantasize about alternative formats for their quest, ones that limit the ability of users to participate. In their own understanding of the thread, their problem is a crisis of publicity. It is evident to them that publicity of "Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC" continually worked against its participants ability to scrutinize what was being shared and to convey the results of what did receive scrutiny.

Conclusion

Despite the difficulties "Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC" faced due to its publicity, the thread was successful in many ways. Members of the Secret Seekers have spoken fondly of their time exploring the game in other message boards.⁵⁰ PikoPL and nomado168 both were successful in maintaining an audience for their YouTube channel and blog respectively.⁵¹ Nomado168 had such a thorough understanding of *Shadow of the Colossus* that when Sony decided to remake the game for the latest

⁴⁹ L337Sp34k2r, May 1, 2010, 06:40 p.m.

⁵⁰ Ozzymandiaas, "R/TeamIco - Shadow of the Colossus "Quest for the Last Big Secret"," Reddit, April 2, 2013, accessed April 04, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/TeamIco/comments/1bjgu8/shadow_of_the_colossus_quest_for_the_last_big/.

⁵¹ Nomad Colossus, "Nomad's Blog," Nomad's Blog, April 17, 2011, accessed April 04, 2021, <http://nomads-sotc-blog.blogspot.com/>.

generation of video game consoles, he was hired as a consultant. In the credits of the 2018 game the developers personally thank nomado168, and with their gratitude they add a final message: “thanks to Nomad Colossus and the 79 steps to enlightenment.” This message immediately kickstarts another hunt for an easter egg, this time a real one put together by the developers from evidence brought up in “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC.” After years of exploration, the Seekers finally get their secret. For the small group invested enough to follow the thread meticulously for years, this was a successful experience.

Where “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC” is not successful is in constituting an environment conducive to the scrutiny of information for anyone else. Instead of providing a diversity of perspectives that might help catch and disprove misconceptions, the thread’s publicity provides a constantly changing audience with little knowledge of the deliberation that occurred before they encountered it. Because of this, the myth of Ueda’s interview, the ability to hold on to a bird and fly, and the stone ruins pointing to undiscovered structures all become part of the users’ understanding of the search, despite never being vetted. Once there, these ideas become almost impossible to purge from the discussion as new users continue to resurrect them.

These challenges to the search for the last big secret become apparent thanks to the identification of the Secret Seekers, the most consistent participants of the thread who together make up 64.4% of the thread’s content. The conversations held by this group of posters are not immediately evident because they are buried in the thread, packed between the many posts of the thread’s other participants. Using data science methods, however, I am able to notice their distinct behavior across the thread’s lifespan and pay particular attention to the way they interact with each other. The Secret Seeker’s consistency of participation allows them to see how quickly the rest of the participants of the thread change and how difficult it is to have control over their deliberation. The solutions they propose are all attempts to solve the same problem: that reaching a consensus with a continually changing audience is incredibly difficult. The challenges faced by the participants of “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC” to scrutinize the information in the thread and reach a final consensus on the secret are emblematic of a crisis of publicity in online deliberation.

Answering Damien Pfister’s call, my analysis of “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC” should also provide the field of rhetoric some methodological answers to the problems of engaging with “multiple unbound audiences.” As many-to-many communication becomes further entrenched in everyday life, the study of rhetoric needs to develop a means by which to understand and manage the opacity of its participants. In March of 2021, for example, Facebook’s own internal study found

that the vast majority of content promoting vaccine skepticism comes from the same 111 user accounts.⁵² Adapting data science methods, which are built to handle large amounts of often unstructured data, to the study of online publics can allow rhetoricians the scaffolding on which to build a rhetorical analysis. This task is of particular urgency, as the results of many-to-many communication continue to play a tangible role on national elections and global pandemics.

This essay does not propose that the specific behavior of the public constituted by “Quest for the last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC” is replicable in other threads. It does argue, however, that the publicity of the thread, its continually changing audience, had a noticeable and adverse impact on the participants ability to scrutinize information. This relationship between publicity and deliberation is the result of the way social media platforms constitute audiences for their content; despite the different ways that the suggestion algorithms that structure users’ experiences might be tuned, they all serve the purpose of driving constantly changing audiences to constantly changing content. In particular, when public deliberation is structured as a discussion thread, a rotating cast of millions of users can encounter information long after it has been disproven and yet have no means to recognize it as such. Here, the power to shape public opinion lies only on those users that are committed to their continued participation in the thread—arduous work, as the Secret Seekers have demonstrated. If, as Facebook has shown, 111 users can be the source of relentless misinformation about vaccines, then it is in the best interest of social media companies to find means by which to better distribute that power. Instead, when social media platforms publicly negotiate their role as providers and mediators of the online public sphere they outsource the responsibility of scrutinizing information to public deliberation. It is therefore crucial that we pay attention to the difference between how they describe their audiences and the ways those audiences are actually formed. It is in these differences that we can better understand a crisis of misinformation as a crisis of publicity.

⁵² Dwoskin, Elizabeth. n.d. “Massive Facebook Study on Users’ Doubt in Vaccines Finds a Small Group Appears to Play a Big Role in Pushing the Skepticism.” *Washington Post*. March 14, 2021. Accessed April 5, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/03/14/facebook-vaccine-hesitancy-qanon/>.

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