The popular childrens’ cartoon television show *Adventure Time* is an important site to pay attention and analyse. This show is bizarre and interesting, but it is not immediately recognizable as a rich cultural artifact if you aren’t familiar with the show. It follows teenage Finn and his magical dog Jake in the post-apocalyptic but fantastical world of Ooo. They explore dungeons, save princesses, and slay monsters. This might sound like a weak artifact for analysis, but it is in fact much richer than first meets the eye. In the childish and imaginative world of Ooo characters navigate their world like anybody else would, just with some extra magic and fantasy along the way. In their collective and individual story arcs, these characters reveal and wrestle with profound problems that are not your average themes for a children’s show. *Adventure Time* achieves this dual level of sophistication unlike any other show and as such is an important artifact to most closely look at. In the following paper, I will examine the context surrounding the television show *Adventure Time* in general. Next I will outline a brief history of the show, and how its production affects its reception. Then I will expand on what people are saying about the artifact already in both popular and academic circles, then lastly I will use this contextual information to inform the focus of my upcoming research into this topic.

*Adventure Time* is an incredibly unique and complex television show, and as such it can be difficult to nail it down. In *Entertainment Weekly*, critic Darren Franich writes that “the show is a hybrid sci-fi/fantasy/horror/musical/fairy tale, with echoes of Calvin and Hobbes, Hayao Miyazaki, Final Fantasy, Richard Linklater, Where the Wild Things Are, and the music video you made with your high school garage band,” (Franich, 54). With its crossing and blending
barriers of genre and its multiple levels of appeal, this kind of description is likely as succinct as one can get. Created by Pendleton Ward with Frederator Production Studios and distributed through Cartoon Network, *Adventure Time* enjoyed 10 seasons from 2010 to 2018, during which the show won multiple accolades, including 7 Primetime Emmy Awards, and garnered an enormous and diverse fanbase. (imdb) At its prime, the series was one of Cartoon Network’s most popular programs, and by its 6th season it drew in an average of “two to three million viewers per week,” (Jane, 234).

The show’s following, however, extends far beyond the scope of the television program alone. Fans of the show are able to interact with the *Adventure Time* universe on a variety of different platforms thanks to the cult-like following that the show invited. In an interview with *The Los Angeles Times*, Frederator founder Fred Seibert recalls, “by the time we went on the air, we already had 500 pieces of fan art,” (Lloyd). And the variety of content for *Adventure Time* is not limited to fan-generated content. In fact, in 2013, “after three years on the air, *Adventure Time* is no longer just a television program. It’s spawned a comic-book series, a graphic novel spin-off, an action figure line, an iPhone app and several video games.” (Feeney) But what is the cause for this almost overly positive reception? Why do audiences like *Adventure Time* so much? Before exploring this question based on people’s reactions to the show, I will start with a brief history of the show and its inception and production.

*Adventure Time* was first conceived “as ‘a doodle’ in Valencia at Cal Arts, where Pen Ward is a student alongside future key collaborators Adam Muto and Pat McHale,” (Lloyd). Here, Ward made his first of many pitches to production companies, trying to turn his ‘doodle’ into a reality. Ward thinks back to this, telling Lloyd in an interview that “Nickelodeon was
taking pitches from Cal Arts students. [But] they didn’t like it--my drawings were baaaaaaad in school,” (Lloyd). It wasn’t until much later that “Ward took his rejected [minute-long short], turned it into ‘a larger thing’ and pitched it again” successfully to Random! Cartoons, a series of short cartoons produced by Nickelodeon with Frederator Production Studios, “designed to field new talent and potential series,” (Lloyd). Ward developed a pilot short, but Frederator’s Fred Seibert initially was hesitant, and found it difficult to find Adventure Time a home before eventually getting “permission from Nickelodeon to put the pilot online, where it [became] a viral sensation,” (Lloyd). Despite its initial viral success online, Frederator had difficulty finding a distributor that wanted to take the project on. After tirelessly pitching the show again and again, Seibert finally “went to Cartoon Network and said, ‘Look, just ask your teenage kids, one of them has seen this [viral online short]. If they haven’t I’ll stop bothering you.’ And sure enough one had,” (Lloyd). This account helps illustrate just how infectiously viral the show was right from the beginning. Once picked up by Cartoon Network, the show took off and quickly “the series [grew] in viewership and influence.” Then mid-way through the fifth season, Ward “steps down as showrunner while continuing to work on the series and Adam Muto takes over,” (Lloyd). The show, however, despite its team changes, maintained a loyal following over its ten years. In 2016, it was announced that the show would conclude with their tenth season in 2018, and on September 3, 2018, the series finale aired, bringing an end to primetime Adventure Time. (imdb)

Throughout the span of its life, Adventure Time has been compared to a variety of other television shows, and juxtaposed against these other artifacts, Adventure Time’s secret ingredients begin to come to light. Franich, a film and television critic, explains how “at its best
the animated series--much like Buffy the Vampire Slayer or Watchmen--reanimates old genre
tropes and discovers fascinating new depths,” (Franich, 54). On imdb, contributor saintbeacon
writes: “Much like Samurai Jack, this show is very immersing and has a style all its own. Also
like Samurai Jack, the show takes place in a strange world, where almost anything can happen, or
any kind of character can show up, and it will still feel believable and consistent,” (imdb). Tom
Kenny, the voice of Ice King on the show, went so far as to say that Adventure Time “is this
generation’s ‘Yellow Submarine,’” (Kenny quoted in Lloyd). In these reactions, Adventure Time
is compared favorably to other programs that have been praised as works of art that stretch the
limits of their genre with creative ingenuity.

The next aspect of Adventure Time that becomes apparent when talked about in
juxtaposition to other shows is its unique polyvocal appeal to both younger and older audiences.
Scholarly critic Jennifer Luxton asserts that “where shows like ‘Family Guy’ and ‘American
Dad’ fail to create sentiment, ‘Adventure Time’ jumps in with infantile innocence and the right
amount of twisted humor to lure in even the most discretionary man-child,” (Luxton). A less
refined but nonetheless useful critique, found in the imdb reviews of the show, reflects this
complicated duality. Contributor he_is_sparticus writes that “the humour is very mature but
unlike other shows of that nature, for example Ren & Stimpy, it’s still completely for children.
That’s where the magic lies. When watching you become a kid again, immersing you in the
imagination all of us shared as a youngster,” (imdb comment he_is_sparticus).

It is evident, looking at the two above reviews, that Adventure Time explores polyvocality
in ways that are truly remarkable. On the surface, the program, unlike some other examples like
Family Guy or The Simpsons, is entirely geared towards children. Luxton notes that despite its
often mature themes, “the program is aired during Cartoon Network’s regular primetime programing instead of its grown-up oriented Adult Swim,” illustrating that the show’s primary demographic is indeed children. (Luxton) Jeremy Shada, the voice actor of protagonist Finn, explains in an interview that “Finn ages, which was a really cool thing, because you have an audience of kids that can grow up with the show as Finn grows in real time,” (Lloyd).

But despite its ostensible audience, the show attracts adults and children alike. Imdb contributor Th3Cure writes that they would “recommend this show for humans 1-200,” (imdb). Time reporter Nolan Feeney writes that “the audience runs the gamut from little kids to college co-eds; 30-something guys to teenagers in the Middle East watching through scrambled Internet. The fanbase itself has become a phenomenon of its own,” (Feeney). Perhaps more candidly, NPR journalist Neda Ulaby writes: Count plenty of grown-ups among the millions of fans of Adventure Time...Some are surely Emmy voters...Others are very possibly stoners. Still others are intellectuals,” (Ulaby). Handlen expands on this polyvocal appeal, articulating that Adventure Time “fits beautifully in that gray area between kid and adult entertainment in a way that manages to satisfy both a desire for sophisticated (i.e., weird) writing and plain old silliness,” (Handlen).

Even the most skeptical adults are often surprised by how much they enjoy the show. Imdb contributor he_is_sparticus writes how even as an adult, they “very rarely find anything on TV or in film that makes [them] laugh as frequently and unexpectedly as [Adventure Time],” (imdb). yandow_2005 writes that “he got caught up in [Adventure Time] while my daughters were watching it in the other room.” He explains: “I don’t generally watch television, much less cartoons...This is one cartoon I do not mind letting my children watch,” (imdb). In an interview
with Ewalt for *Forbes*, Ward explains that “the show is for kids more than anyone else, but most of the time we (the writers and storyboard artists) are just trying to crack ourselves up and trying not to worry about much other than that,” (Ewalt). It is clear that the adult sensibilities of the creators (perhaps unconsciously) affects the larger appeal of the show to multiple audiences.

Going deeper into what is so appealing about the show, I now turn to general reviews on the content of the show itself. Imdb contributor Th3Cure states simply, “Adventure Time is a strange animal,” and FilmFreak94 writes that Adventure Time is one of the most surreal kid’s shows to come out of Cartoon Network for a long time,” (imdb). “Author and critic Lev Grossman, in an interview with Ulaby for NPR, remarks that “it’s rich and complicated the way Balzac’s work is, which is a funny thing to say about a cartoon,” (Ulaby). Imdb contributor poke_a_polk writes that this undeniable magnetism can be attributed “to wonderful voice acting, clever dialog and most of all, unusually mature themes. Not in a risqué sense, but...it doesn’t rely on cookie cutter stories and it’s comfortable leaving some endings ambiguous,” (imdb). This sentiment leads me to an aspect of the show often talked about by professional and amateur critics alike—the show’s capacity to be used as a deeper teaching tool and not just a source of mindless entertainment.

Imdb contributor yandow_2005 writes that he has actually “considered using [Adventure Time] to teach adults scientific concepts they have a very hard time grasping,” (imdb). Although this may not be the kind of teaching opportunity that most fans would talk about, it illustrates the myriad ways that *Adventure Time* can be, and is being, used as a teaching tool, from complicated to everyday problems. On imdb Th3Cure proposes that “even though Finn is the only human in the show, everyone in the show makes human mistakes,” (imdb). The show also regularly
addresses complicated and uncomfortable philosophical questions in its one-of-a-kind narrative. Luxton explains this about one element of the narrative setting, the backstory of the post-apocalyptic Ooo. She writes that the “Mushroom War, as it’s known, supposedly wiped out the human race and gave rise to the candy creatures and other mutated species. While not explicitly emphasized, this recurring allegory for our actual potential to destroy each other highlights the show’s capability to go beyond fantasy and serve as a satire of reality,” (Luxton).

Furthermore, the ostensibly ‘childish’ characters on the program are often given complicated and thought-provoking story arcs. Franich writes, for example, that “characters who seemed like parodies have developed rich, engrossing interior lives. Nominal antagonist Ice King...has become a tragic figure with an apocalyptic origin worthy of a Ray Bradbury short story,” (Franich, 54). Similarly, Ulaby writes about the “socially maladapted Earl of Lemongrab as an example.” She writes that despite him being “an unlikable character, his story is movingly explored and raises questions nearly every kid has wondered about: Why do I seem weird to other people? Why do I seem weird to myself?” (Ulaby)

The use of complex characters to express life lessons is illustrated most prominently with the narrative of the Ice King. Voice actor for the character Marceline, Olivia Olson recalls:

A son and father came up to me at a convention. The kid tells me his dad has Alzheimer’s and the story arc between Marceline and the Ice King and the song “I Remember You” specifically helped him understand what his dad was going through. By the end, we’re all crying and hugging and talking about how this crazy show about wizard quests and fart jokes is helping this family stay together. (Lloyd)
This notion of the Ice King standing as a proxy for understanding Alzheimer’s is also reflected in Lev Grossman’s account with the show. He writes of the Ice King’s story: “there is this rather moving tension, and he doesn’t remember who he used to be, but other people do...It’s very affecting. My dad has been going through having Alzheimer’s, and he’s forgotten so much about who he used to be. And I look at him and think this cartoon is about my father dying,” (Ulaby). These of course are only one interpretation of the many possible for Ice King’s story arc, but it demonstrates how audiences are recognizing and talking about deeper meanings as life lessons hidden within these complex characters.

The program has also been analysed and praised for its radical representations of sexuality and gender. In her article, Jane offers “a textual analysis of...Adventure Time as an (unlikely) exemplar of a commercially successful children’s television program which depicts gender in a radically subversive and arguably liberatory manner.” (Jane, 231) Characters like the penguin Gunter, the robot BMO, and Lumpy Space Princess seem to defy gender altogether, and characters like Jake, Princess Bubblegum, and Flame Princess demonstrate gender representations that radically stray from the heteronormative. Additionally, the slash fiction originated, and eventually actualized canonically romance between Princess Bubblegum and Marceline is a frequent topic of praise. Their relationship began as an already subversive homosocial relationship, and by the end of the series they begin a fully open public relationship with each other. (Bradley)

It is clear that the conversations surrounding Adventure Time are myriad and complex. Emerging from this collective context, certain questions arise that can be explored. Dual-audiencing or polyvocality is a particular point of interest, and the question of how that is
achieved and how this affects the social implications of the show will be a central point of focus in my coming research. Additionally, diverse audiences, as well as producers/contributors, of the program recognize the capacity that the show has for tackling larger issues and using the show as a teaching tool for everyday problems. This recognition will guide the inquiry of what readings people take from certain texts and subtexts in the show, and how people use these as teaching tools in their lives.
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