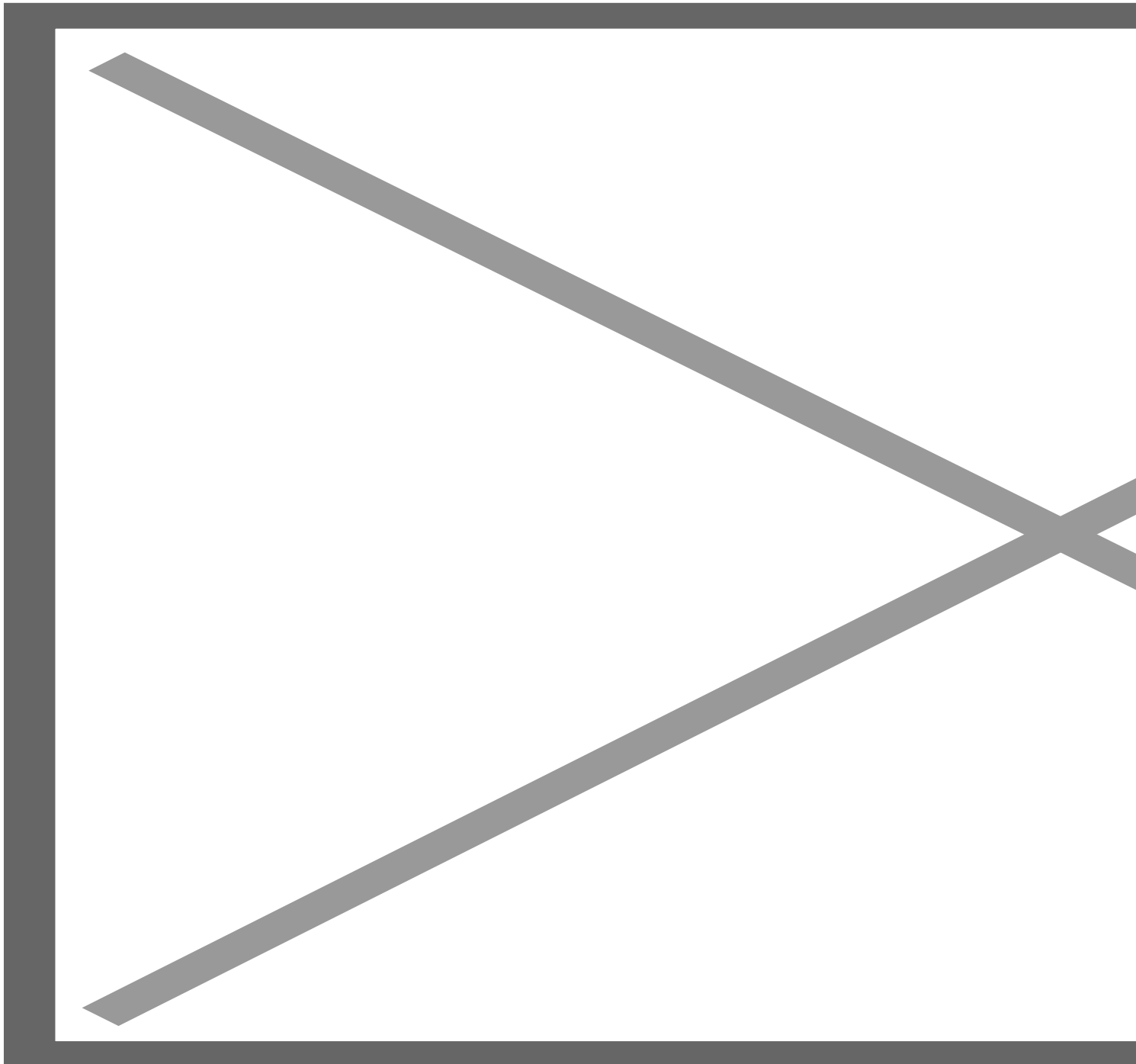


Entertainment in an Easter Egg Economy

From Taylor Swift to *Stranger Things*, pop culture fandom now includes sleuthing—for better or worse.

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Courtesy of Netflix

When Netflix's *Stranger Things* first debuted in the summer of 2016, I was captivated. A refreshingly earnest, Spielbergian spirit coursed through this story of a band of kids who bravely faced grief, trauma, mystery, and monstrous evil together. As a lover of various elements of pop culture, I loved the way these kids interpreted their reality through the lenses of stories, including *Dungeons & Dragons*, *X-Men*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. These characters' pop culture hermeneutics reminded me that stories can shape our understanding of reality when we engage them meaningfully *as stories* rather than products.

This reflection came to mind again when the show reached its much-anticipated conclusion this holiday season. In the weeks following the series finale, thousands of fans (perhaps disappointed with the show's end) collaborated to conjecture that the finale Netflix aired wasn't the *real* end. Theorists claimed that *Stranger Things* creators Matt and Ross Duffer had hidden clues throughout the show's final episodes that pointed toward a false ending. Noting minutiae such as inconsistencies in the writing, certain postures characters shared in common, cryptic social media postings, and more, fans were (and some continue to be) convinced that the town of Hawkins still holds more mysteries for us to uncover.

The only issue with "Conformity Gate" (as this theory was named) is that the Duffers thoroughly debunked the idea. "There's so much misinformation," Matt Duffer told *Variety*. "We would be here for hours trying to bat down the stuff that was not true. But at the end of the day, hopefully the work speaks for itself, and it is the show that Ross and I wanted to make."

What Duffer isn't saying here, however, is that the perpetuation of misinformation and conversation is great for business. As the saying goes, all publicity is good publicity. And in a highly saturated culture and entertainment market, whatever it takes to keep eyes and ears glued to your product a week or two longer is a win. So while the Duffers can bemoan the spreading of misinformation, their fans' extensive detective work also means longevity for them, just as it has for entertainment giants like Taylor Swift and Marvel.

These fandoms participate in two different sorts of pop culture detective work, and I think it's worth making a distinction between the two. One is what film and media scholar Jason Mittell has called "forensic fandom," an approach to narrative "that invites viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling." Here, we can think of TV series like *Lost* and *Severance*—intricate and complex stories filled with mystery that draw audiences deeper into the meaning-making process. In such instances, mystery and uncertainty are leveraged in a way that opens up imaginative collaboration.

However, there is another sort of sleuthing that is made possible by what marketers have called the Easter Egg Economy. In this economy, creators and industry executives capture and monetize audience attention through the use of coded breadcrumbs that lead a fanbase toward further consumption. For example, Taylor Swift has repeatedly used her social media posts, interviews, packaging materials, and music videos as vehicles for secret clues that something is just around the corner if you look closely. When you crack the code, you will be rewarded not only by belonging to the "in group," but also with the exciting knowledge that a new product will be available soon for your purchase.

Forensic fandom *can be* participatory, creating space for free and meaningful dialogue between the artist and the audience. However, at its most predatory, the Easter Egg Economy seeks to manipulate those participatory efforts for a profit. It's important that we recognize this, that we acknowledge the difference between engaging stories as opportunities for transformation rather than transaction.

Beyond discussing the machinations of business executives, however, I wonder how this mode of engagement affects our experiences with stories. What are we missing when we primarily treat stories like *Stranger Things* as codes to crack rather than conversations? And how does this inform our priorities, values, and identity?

J.R.R. Tolkien, whose *Lord of the Rings* series is explicitly referenced in the fantastical *Stranger Things*, talks about fantasy stories this way: “The peculiar quality of the ‘joy’ in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. It is not only a ‘consolation’ for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question, ‘Is it true?’” This, to me, registers as a much richer question than the questions the Easter Egg Economy affords.

Stories (and art broadly) are not consumables. Nor are they puzzles for us to master. Stories are relational encounters with truth and mystery and, indeed, joy. They help us envision new realities and process the harshest of life’s griefs. They challenge our presuppositions. At their best, they invite us to love our neighbors more fully. When we engage stories with our whole selves—our embodied, emotional, intellectual, spiritual selves—we open ourselves to more fully know and be known by others. Through story, we recognize our mutual responsibility as bearers of God’s image to participate in creation, not just consumption.

This applies just as much to our engagement with the stories of scripture as it does to the latest pop cultural phenomenon. If we approach the Bible as something to be solved, as information to be understood and mastered, as data to sift through and manipulate to our various ends, then we’ve missed out on the divine encounter these stories offer us. In our detective’s quest for certainty, we risk undermining the importance of honest, vulnerable, mysterious, and messy relationships to our lives. Qoheleth, the teacher of Ecclesiastes, puts it this way:

“I said to myself, ‘I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.’ And applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.” (Eccl. 1:16-18)

The Easter Egg Economy encourages a quest to acquire knowledge that, as the Teacher writes, is a “chasing after wind.” It’s an insatiable distraction that, if we’re not careful, can limit our capacity for creativity, imagination, and interrelatedness. Even if the driving force behind “Conformity Gate” was a disappointment with how the *Stranger Things* story unfolded, I think it’s better to grapple with disappointment and acknowledge the ways a story falls short of the “underlying reality or truth,” as Tolkien writes. When we do so honestly, we are free to continue the conversation by imagining and living into the mystery of a greater and truer story.