

# **Understanding Through the Ostrakon**

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## Introduction

The final area of the online video game *Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker* (2021) hosts the conclusion of the game's central plot that began over a decade ago in the original *Final Fantasy XIV* (2010). The player and their adventuring party find themselves at the edge of the universe amongst floating islands which are host to fragments of long-lost civilizations from across the stars. Progressing through the area enlists the protagonists in developing a cursory understanding of how each civilization met its end and providing its remaining people with a measure of hope for the future, allowing them to move forward.

While the term seems to be omitted from any of the dialogue in this area, and is never directly addressed, the in-game map labels each of these islands as an *ostrakon* followed by a number in Greek (ex. Ostrakon Deka-Okto). Not only in the English localization either, the Japanese version of the game spells it out phonetically (オストラコン・デカオクト). Curious about the choice in naming convention, I looked up the word ostrakon. Borrowed from Greek, it describes a potsherd or small piece of stone which is reused for the inscription of a message. The abstracted use of the ostrakon in the game refers to the aforementioned floating islands, each host to some small remnants of a different civilization as an ostrakon. Left alone they are but sherds of the worlds they were once a part of. Our protagonists voyage across these lands, and, by interacting with their residents who had resigned to their fate long ago, negotiate their way through them. Suffusing each with new meaning as they weave together the residents' stories and the culmination of their decade long character arcs; they mobilize the residents to their aid. Each sherd that is inscribed in this way completing the ostrakon and paving the path to the next.

The labelling of these islands by the processes which allow the protagonists to circulate struck me as having potential in helping understand spaces where meanings have proliferated and contexts are uncertain—such as online. Where understanding what someone is trying to communicate through the use a term or a meme, for example, may require a knowledge of how and in what contexts they have developed their own understanding. In recognition of this initial spark of inspiration, and to differentiate the ostrakon from the more commonly used *ostrakon* in archaeology, referring to a type of find one may encounter during an excavation, I employ here the less common English spelling with a K.

The ostrakon (plural: ostraka) I am proposing consists of two intertwined parts: the sherd and the inscription. The sherd represents what is being taken from elsewhere; a fragment shattered from a specific cultural context. Its form, the jagged edges, its curves, and tint, rendering it unique and identifiable to those familiar with its unshattered origin. The inscription is that which is added to the sherd after the fragmentation—meaning and affect that comes to bear the recognizable form of the sherd to those who internalize it. Combined, the ostrakon is a sign of overlapping meanings.

I think of the ostrakon as a heuristic device easing the navigation of polysemic signs as they are mobilized in disparate communities. A device that allows us to examine multiple interpretations without designating any as somehow ‘pure’—that allows us to look at how they circulate through communities, rather than disparities between them. The application of ostraka aims to maintain the agency of the individuals within it as central to our understanding of signs, as opposed to deterministic approaches or the signs as agentic themselves. Reconciling the influence of signs on individuals through how they are felt and the choices made in interpreting

them as outlined in the ostrakon's processes. It is a tool to ease navigation, the legibility of ambiguity as the ostrakon is circulated by individuals, not one of hierarchization.

This use of the ostrakon is not entirely new. Historically, before being accepted as a general archaeological term, the ostrakon was a way for Athenians to share commentary on and resolve conflicts within their community. Alex Gottesman's "Ostracism as a Lieu de Savoir" examines the role of the ostrakon in the specific case of its use in the Classical Athenian practice of ostracism from which we get both terms. The Athenian *ekklesia* (popular assembly) voted on whether or not to hold an ostracism and, if successful, they would conduct it two months later (Gottesman, 72). At an ostracism the people would gather once more to vote anonymously on who would be expelled—ostracized. A vote that, with two months to discuss and prepare, was conducted by the reading and counting of ostraca at an assembly.

Some of the ostraca would be simple, hastily written, only a sherd with the name of who the author wanted ostracized. Others would editorialize, calling the subject names or fashioning their ostrakon from the sherds of a piece originally meant to praise the individual they are voting to expel—a cup or vase inscribed with their name (76). All would be counted and read publicly before the assembly. On this last kind Gottesman adds, "It is more likely that this ostrakon, no less than the others, were made in order to provoke a reaction, to foster discussion or debate, and not just to register a vote" (76). The ostrakon of Classical Athens Gottesman argues was not only a means of defining the boundaries of their community through expulsion, but a constructive means of fostering consensus and common knowledge amongst the people of the city. As we shall see, the ostrakon replicates many of these functions here in its abstracted form.

In the first chapter I will carve out my own understanding of the ostrakon through comparison with existing semiotics and communications theory to derive its structure. The

second chapter outlines the dynamics at play in ostraka that transform it from a theoretical structure to a potential analytical tool. In the third and fourth chapters, I will attempt to apply the then established structure and dynamics of the ostrakon in two cases: Pepe the Frog and video game remakes. Each of these testing the feasibility of a different approach—the former mobilizing the ostrakon to eek out some coherence from the diverse uses of the cartoon character Pepe the Frog, and the latter using ostraka as a mediation between original games and their remakes.

## Building the Ostrakon

Ahead of an exploration of the role I intend for the ostrakon properly, we must develop an understanding of its structure. First as a sign-like triad, then as a part of a semiological chain, and finally as embedded within the communities that share in its meaning. I say its structure because this chapter is predominantly a description of the component parts, the processes they help us understand which also comprise the ostrakon will be addressed afterward. Structure, as well, as this chapter builds the ostrakon progressively in relation to existing semiotic and linguistic theories piece by piece.

Fundamentally, I construct the ostrakon through semiotics. We could imagine it as a sign akin to Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signifier/signified/sign. In this simplified triad the shape of the sherd would signify the inscription—carrying no meaning on its own. The signified inscription would be the concept being conveyed. Finally, the ostrakon would be the sign composed of this arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. De Saussure emphasizes the arbitrary connection in his work on linguistics as a word and its meaning are related not by any inherent quality but by the practice of associating them. Likewise, the ostrakon is legible only for those who have a familiarity with its 'language' or, by witnessing its use, can develop a contextual understanding.

Yet, our signifier is not barren. Carrying with it some residual elements of its past, the sherd is more than a signifier finding a new signified in the inscription.

De Saussure's examination of language posits that words and their meanings shift in relation to one another, and it is the loosening bonds between the signifier and signified that, over

time, allows for new words and meanings to emerge (75). Conversely, the sherd's fragmentation is a violent, jagged division from its original context; but a division which does not itself impact its point of origin. More akin to a loanword than any linguistic evolution or semantic drift.

Perhaps closest to the ostrakon in semiotics is Roland Barthes' myth. In *Mythologies* Barthes expands on de Saussure's foundational work on semiotics through the addition of a second-order semiological system (113). Employing the self-same triad as de Saussure of the signifier/signified/sign, Barthes argues that there is a second overlapping triad deriving its signifier from the sign of the first. For clarity's sake I will use the Barthes terms for the second triad here in italics: the sign is the titular *myth* (he refers to it as signification, but I think this clearer for our purposes), the signifier is *form*, and the signified is *concept* (115).

I would be hard pressed to go in depth on the topic of mythologies—thankfully we need only a cursory overview to draw out some of Barthes' ideas. Once again extracting from each of this (second) triad in turn, we begin with the *form*, whose superficial similarities with the sherd almost left me abandoning the ostrakon over concerns it is only a rehashing of *myth*.

*Form* takes the sign of the first order and, "... empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains" (116). Barthes goes on to emphasize that it is impoverished in that it does not discard the signified entirely, rather, paradoxically emptying itself to be filled with the *concept* while taking root in the signified to be called on as needed. The presence of the signified, "is tamed, put at a distance, made almost transparent, it recedes a little, it becomes the accomplice of a concept which comes to it fully armed..." (117). Similarly, the ostrakon, in extracting the sherd, creates a distance between the ostrakon and the sherd's origin, emptying it of its signified while maintaining some residue of it that *can* be read or recognized. 'Transparent' is an apt word choice; the inscription overwrites the signified of the sherd, but that



signified is still legible on the sherd for those who are familiar with the arbitrary relationship connecting it, or as a part of the inscription.

Barthes' *concept*, "is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function" (118). Absorbing what remains of the signified after the *form* impoverishes it, it is filled again by the reader. Filled by the condensation of experiences and knowledge the reader brings to it. Unlike de Saussure's triad where one must have a knowledge of the link between the signifier and the signified, Barthes seems to be arguing here that the reader of *myth* effectively generates their own associations connecting the *form* to the *concept*. Not to such a degree as to render the *concept* purely subjective however, focusing particularly on broader associations arising out of one's historical context, their education, and linguistic habits so that the meaning in *myth* may reasonably be shared with many others with a proximity to the same contexts. Our signified, the inscription, on the other hand occupies a space somewhere between these two in that it retains the requirement that the reader have some degree of understanding regarding the association with the sherd without the rigidity that would accompany something like a linguistic definition of a word.

This last point is most clear in comparison to our final piece from Barthes on the *concept*, "A signified can have several signifiers: this is indeed the case in linguistics and psycho-analysis. It is also the case in the mythical concept: it has at its disposal an unlimited mass of signifiers: I can find a thousand Latin sentences to actualize for me the agreement of the predicate, I can find a thousand images which signify to me French imperialism." (118). The generative role of Barthes' reader in filling the *concept* allows an infinite number of signifiers to lead the reader to the same idea. The ostrakon stands out from myth in that there is one signifier, the sherd, whose form could signify a combination of any number of meanings including what it signified pre-

fragmentation. Our reader is interpretive rather than generative. Furthermore, I would argue that the use cases of the ostrakon almost necessitate that there are at most a very limited number of signifiers that, from the perspective of the reader, could signify the same thing. An argument I will expand on when we return to the pivotal role of the reader in the ostrakon below.

Wrapping up this triad heavy section with *myth* will be brief—we do not need the depth of what Barthes crafted with his *Mythologies* having extracted the most important aspects above. All that remains for us is how *myth* distorts and naturalizes the *concept*. The ambiguity between the *concept* and the signified in *myth*, through the innocent readers eyes, makes the connection between the two seem like a natural relationship, “he does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one.” (130). Innocent in that while the interpretation may be motivated on some level, the reader can not consciously evoke *myth*. This distortion or naturalization does not structurally contribute to the ostrakon, but as we will see in exploring its processes, it is a relevant one.

The difference in scale applies to ostraka too. In *myth*, the scales of the *form* and the *concept* can vary greatly compared to De Saussure’s linguistic approach. “For instance, a whole book may be the signifier of a single concept; and conversely, a minute form (a word, a gesture, even incidental, so long as it is noticed) can serve as signifier to a concept filled with a very rich history” (Barthes 119).

Structurally we can think of the ostrakon loosely along the lines we have gone over as sherd/signifier, inscription/signified, and ostrakon/sign. The sherd maintaining some residue of its past signified that can be called on by the knowledgeable reader or incorporated in drawing the inscription. Each inscription is a specific meaning which subsumes the sherd’s signified, having the potential to naturalize it. Ostraka themselves are the association of a fragmented sign turned

sherd that is then associated with an inscription. This leaves us with two important questions. What does the process of selecting a sherd, the act of fragmentation, entail? And how does the reading of an ostrakon collapse the potential meanings of a sherd in a manner different from the general learned associations of de Saussure and Barthes?

The former of these two acts will be elaborated in the following chapter. To understand the latter, I first turned to Stuart Hall's classic "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse". Hall advances the model of encoding/decoding for understanding media, which emphasizes the production and reception of a message (a television broadcast in his case). The various social and technical contexts at each end of this encoding/decoding were responsible, he argues, for the degree of (mis)understanding in the resulting communications exchange (48). We can liken these contexts to knowledge of de Saussure's arbitrary connections, or the associations made possible in myth by virtue of one's historical context we have just explored. When the encoding and decoding are done between aligning codes/contexts, the viewer performs a dominant reading (57). Discrepancies between the two lead them to instead conduct a negotiated or oppositional version (57-58).

Reading ostraka is a process of decoding; yet the degree to which the decoding can be considered dominant, negotiated, or oppositional in relation to some hegemonic code does not apply. There is after all no one point of encoding we can evaluate it against. The origin of the sherd keeps its signified at a distance while opening it to a multitude of inscriptions that could be called upon by its form. Decoding ostraka entails an unconscious selection between readings when the encoding itself is obscured. Measuring discrepancies between the reading, the perceived inscription, and a dominant encoding is only possible given a specific context: a community. Power differentials between the encoding and decoding must be argued on a case-by-case basis

for ostraka—we are no longer solely examining the institution of mass media, and need to leave room for when both these moments in the act of communication are conducted by marginalized people, or simply peers. The only time we can consider an encoding ‘primary’ is in the study of a specific group partially defined by that understanding of the sherd, in which a reading is dominant *in that group*.

De Saussure, returning briefly to his sign in linguistics, illustrates that given the arbitrary nature of the association between a signifier and signified, language (as a collection of such associations), never exists outside of its social fact (77). Sure, we can speak of how an individual feels or interprets a stimulus, but for it to constitute an act of communication requires another. The sign requires a shared meaning for it to actually be considered operational. Any definition or meaning associated with a sign is bound to the community which shares that meaning.

Continuing this thought with the inscription of the ostrakon in mind as the signified, as the meaning, this logically leads us to conclude that its polysemic nature can not be ascribed to the ostrakon as a structure alone. Each meaning must have a community in which it is operational. A community that speaks the same language sharing a definition. A religious community agreeing on the role of a ritual in social life. A portion of *Twilight* fans identifying Edward Cullen as the superior romantic interest for Bella Swan. A group chat where the peak of comedy is videos of cats failing to land an overambitious leap. The scale and stakes are entirely variable. I propose the inscription be thought of at this community-based level.

Looking at the level of the individual, readings may differ; especially when one is forced to negotiate identification with multiple communities with disparate inscriptions for the same sherd. I caution against considering the inscription on the basis of the individual as to maintain

the relationship between them and their communities in thinking of the ostrakon. The individual's understanding of the inscription is a key mobilizing element in the chapter that follows.

As we move from the structure to the processes at play in ostraka, allow me a review of what we have established so far. The structure of the ostrakon is better understood in semiotic terms. Composed of a sherd, a shape whose contours are easily recognizable, all but emptied of meaning, which in turn represents an inscription, legible only by virtue of the reader's knowledge of its association with the contours of the sherd. There can be many inscriptions for any given sherd, each with its own community that maintains it as their dominant reading. All this combines to form the structure of an ostrakon. Next, I explore the processes that mobilize it: the fragmentation of a source which produces a sherd, and the role of an inscription in its respective community and to that community's members.

## Mobilizing Ostraka

Having outlined the ostrakon as an abstract semiological structure, we may now turn to establishing its nature as it is mobilized by its processes. I will identify three with the caveats up front this time: fragmentation, inscribing, and stitching. The fragmentation is the process which creates the sherd; an act of disentanglement that can be real or imagined. Real if we are in and capable of studying such a moment, but more likely imagined as it may be difficult to pinpoint or observe the process in action. The inscribing denotes the adoption of an ostrakon by a community. Stitching is the individualized act of reading and collapsing the meaning of the sherd. Despite the division into distinct acts, as we shall see, all three overlap and flow into each other—the categorization is largely rhetorical.

Segmented, fragmentation is comprised of perceiving a signifier and positioning it. The sum of these foremost amounts to an act of translation. Translation from pot to sherd. A translation which loses much to entropy. We could think of translation from one medium to another, as in adapting a book to a film or, as we will explore in detail later, a remake of a piece of media that translates it across time. Acts of translation still, these (in addition to being more legible to the monolingual reader) highlight the disparity between semiotic systems. Going from a novel to a film involves developing sounds and images out of the text—signifiers urgently in need of a signified.

The turn to translation is thanks to Douglas Robinson's book *Translation and the Problem of Sway*, which I first encountered years ago, leaving me feeling one of those absences that drove me to the ostrakon in the first place. In it, Robinson revisits an earlier essay of his linking

proprioception to translation theory (116). Proprioception being the bodily sense that keeps track of where the body is; how we can feel the position of our limbs absent other senses. For Robinson, proprioception conveys the familiarity that a translation must have in its target language, the sense of belonging or being integral, that measures the “success” of a translator’s work (116). It is a feeling between strangeness and familiarity, like a phantom limb, whose incorporation imbues the text with a feeling of reality, of “one’s ownness” (*Phantom Limb*). “The advantage of thinking about “appropriation” along these lines is that it shifts our conceptual center of gravity from the intrinsic “properties” of texts to the reader’s active construction of meaning” (*Phantom Limb*).

I can only imagine perceiving a sign in fragmentation as stumbling upon the sense of strange familiarity that Robinson is aiming for. A signifier that is *felt* before it is filled. Earlier when discussing the *concept*, I mentioned that the ostrakon may almost necessitate a limited selection of signifiers that could carry a meaning from the reader’s perspective. It is this proprioceptive qualification that limits us. Perception/selection of the sherd from the source is a self-interpellation manifest by the recognition of the phantom limb. In the aftermath of recognition, we ascribe it with meaning—positioning it, and naturalizing it by incorporating it within ourselves.

Positioning, as the second half of fragmentation, directs us to consider the meaning attributed to the sherd-as-phantom. Practically, I think an understanding of the finer details of the assignment of meaning to the sherd in this moment would confuse the ostrakon as a heuristic device more than it would benefit it. Charles Sanders Peirce’s interpretant is the best fit for this gap, but one that would require the explanation of another semiotic triad, each composed of an additional trichotomy. Umberto Eco’s interpretation of Peirce’s interpretant is sufficient for us,

which I paraphrase in De Saussure's terms for clarity here: when dealing with the signified the interpretant acts in the background as an unnoticed mediation that permits one to understand the signifier, when looking at the interpretant the signifier remains an abstract hypothesis legitimizing the use of a signifier (1460). We may think of it as an approximation of the feeling of the abstract relations between signifier and signified.

This positioning, as the interactive moment of fragmentation, also encapsulates the impoverishing of the sherd's source meaning borrowed from Barthes earlier. Transforming it from belonging to its source to a detached sign whose interpretant guides the fragmenter to a meaning. Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs define a process of entextualization as, "rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit—a *text*—that can be lifted out of its interactional setting" as to render it decontextualizable, all while retaining the potential for it to carry residual elements of its history (73). Entextualization and proprioception entwine to rip the sherd from its origin and decontextualize it.

On the point of context, Bauman and Briggs take issue with its general application; the term is simultaneously too broad and too specific. As they illustrate, engaging with context obscures the researcher's judgement of what it includes, maintains an illusion of context or the communicative act as existing independently of each other, and masks the agency of participants in negotiating the context and communication (68). They argue for a shift to contextualization as, "an active process of negotiation in which participants reflexively examine the discourse as it is emerging, embedding assessments of its structure and significance in the speech itself" which I urge us to reference instead (69).

Contextualization as a negotiation has the extra benefit of helping frame fragmentation as a personal choice even as I speak of the influence of proprioception or the interpretant in almost



deterministic terms. Feelings, communities, contexts, whatever factors we consider as influencing the processes I describe here are not controlling the individual as they conduct them. Addressing this concern with regards to use of the interpretant, Douglas Robinson suggests “*sway or guidance*” as a distinction which retains one’s more or less conscious ability to choose—choose to be swayed or guided, not controlled (*Sway* 31-32).

Entextualized, felt, decontextualized, and yearning for meaning, the sherd must be stabilized through the adoption of an inscription by a group. Expanding from De Saussure’s ‘community of speakers’, I intend groups as a broad social category whose scale and structure can vary greatly. Groups are social, and may condensate around a shared activity, space, belief, etcetera. Speaking specifically to social media environments, though applying more generally, Sirpa Leppänen outlines, “how their social and normative structures are jointly negotiated and enforced by the participants themselves” (114). Leppänen’s outline seemingly limits us to non-hierarchical social groups—an excellent baseline, but one that would limit potential applications. Yet, the proprioceptive element remains with us, and I would be hard pressed to argue that such could be incited in an entirely asymmetrical power structure. Leave it here for the moment, we will return to the issue in the stitching.

Sherd in hand, it is brought to a group. Shared in that community, the group collectively negotiates and reinforces an inscription by resolving the interpretant with their own contextualization. A reciprocity in the group with the sherd-bearer is required, especially their feeling of proprioception with the sherd and that of the sway of the interpretant. Appealing to shared experiences or knowledge, the sherd is inclined to being inscribed with that which the group has no signifier for. Otherwise, failing to meet some quorum of reciprocity in the group, it

could just as easily be discarded or adapted. In the latter case, we may want to pursue the possibility of a re-fragmentation.

The process of inscribing can be thought of as a collective navigation of the sherd's liminal state. An experimental phase before the sherd has a fixed inscription which invites participants to share speculative meanings with one another. Victor W. Turner expands on this liminality in their research on rites of passage, outlining it as a stage in which, "the subjects of the ritual are somewhere in between: they have left their old status but have not yet attained their new one. In this liminal state, the behavioral rules of their old status no longer apply but neither do the rules of their future status. As a result, unusual ritual behavior is common" (177). 'Ritual' may be a bit formal for most groups we would examine, we may instead consider that the "behavior associated with this state is often what we readily identify as *play*" (Stevens 186). This play in the liminal state—the circulation of the sherd—is one that allows participants to maintain and experiment with multiple inscriptions. Engaging with a Nbembu rite, Turner describes a process of knowledge being impressed on the subject in this liminality, "as a seal impresses wax" with characteristics of the subject's new state marking not only a new knowledge, but a change in being in the community (181). After being inscribed, the sherd likewise maintains an impression of meaning and status within the community, an inscription.

To counteract the formality of that account of inscribing, I would like to add there is also the possibility of it serving a primarily phatic purpose such that it would range, "from what Malinowski described as 'communion'—ritually expressing membership of a particular community—to 'communication' *within* the communities we described as held together by 'ambient affiliation'. 'Meaning' in its traditional sense needs to give way here to a more general notion of 'function'" (Varis and Blommaert 41). What matters to the process is that a shared

meaning/function congeals in the group so that the sherd, to them, is representative of the inscription. Indistinguishable even.

Conversely, the inscription, as shared by the group becomes representative of that group. The claiming of the inscription marks the group as the one with that inscription of the sherd. It becomes part of the norms and shared identity of the people within it. This sense of shared identity leads us to our third and final process: stitching.

“As in any social environment, participants in social media need to reflexively conceptualize and performatively construct themselves, and navigate as particular kinds of personae in relation to their surroundings” (Leppänen 114). Stitching is a process of an individual’s identification and recontextualization. The previous processes of fragmentation and inscribing are only possible due to the individuals participating in them as a part of their personal stitching. Through which the individual contextualizes their identity, actions, and group affiliations. It is a personal, internal process, for the result of the stitching—the performance of identification—is better described as an influence on the inscribing or sustainment of an inscription as it enters a social setting, though the two necessarily overlap.

I am not claiming that the ostrakon and this process of stitching covers the totality of identity. Only stressing that agency in the ostrakon is found in the individual. Their feelings, contextualizations, identifications, and affiliations construct a non-exclusive sketch of their processes of negotiating sway. It is a question of how one navigates ostraka. Affiliation and participation in a group rarely requires total acceptance or internalization of its inscriptions. A choice must be made on some level however as to the degree of their performance in any given context. Choice that carries with it a risk of exclusion from a group, self-directed or imposed.

Stitching is a convergence of ostraka. An individual's experience of a sherd may carry with it multiple inscriptions they can call on depending on the contextualization. The weight of each can be of great import: a phatic inscription in one context may lose its appeal to an individual who knows of an inscription they consider abhorrent. It could just as well be that they decide the affiliations afforded to them by the phatic inscription are more important to them than any other. Encountering a new inscription could equally be, "*actively and meaningfully alien*" in what Douglas Robinson refers to as the "*proprioception of the body politic*" (Sway 119-120). An understanding of touch as something, the affectionate touch of a lover, the invasive touch of a stranger, which Robinson theorizes as a kind of external proprioception (119).

This choice, and the value placed on each possibility, reconnects us to the issue of hierarchical social groups in the inscribing. An inscription imposed from above, in addition to likely skipping important aspects of inscribing, could coerce the individual into stitching it into their contextualized performance. The resulting stitching is not likely to evoke any sense of proprioception in the individual, or positive identifications. In other, non-coerced contextualizations, the performance not being necessary, the stitching may involve active distancing from that inscription. The imposed inscription is more akin to the knowledge of any other inscription to which one has no affiliation; it can be performed, but it is not felt.

Tracing our steps backwards, the individual is constantly engaged in processes of identification and contextualization with ostraka through stitching. Continuing these processes alongside others in groups, they create, maintain, and discard these ostraka (or their component parts) through collective negotiations and play: inscribing. Navigating the sways in their own contextualizations and identifications, they may encounter a self-recognition of an absence in them in the sherd through the process of fragmentation.

With an overview of the ostrakon's structure and a conception of the processes mobilizing it in hand, the next two chapters will trial the theory.

## Polysemic Pepe and the Meme

Originally created by Matt Furie in 2005 as a cartoon character in the Myspace based zine “Playtime”, Pepe the Frog (Pepe for short) garnered a claim to fame not through the webcomic “Playtime” would become, but through the characters prominence in online cultures. Most well known among these are 4chan, the alt-right movement, and the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement in Hong Kong. In my own experiences, I have commonly found images of Pepe in memes posted on Reddit and in emote form in several Discord servers and Twitch.tv channels.

Pepe has been used to convey a wide breadth of meanings: “love, peace and frustration towards the government” (Chan 289), “explicitly racist and anti-Semitic associations” (Milligan 21), or simply, “how satisfying it feels to pee” (Pelletier-Gagnon and Diniz 10). Much of the variety is created by clothing Pepe in recognizable ways, placing his character in different contexts, or through the addition of captions.

There has been a plethora of studies on Pepe. The majority of these seem to struggle with attempting to understand how a silly online meme rose to such prominence. A recurring theme in them is a difficulty in addressing how memes function as a unique object of study. One avenue is analyzing Pepe as exceptionally suited to replication as is the case with Sean Milligan, whose doctoral dissertation turns to visual rhetoric and zaniness to understand Pepe’s resonance with and appropriation by the alt-right (15). Or with Laura Glitsos and James Hall who read into the character’s visual representation, his ‘frogness’, as a defining element allowing Pepe to emerge, “from a complex range of intertextual connections that constitute Internet culture” (382). Both

work to account for the permeability of Pepe, what was it about this meme in particular that rendered it capable of functioning as a sign in different contexts and with different meanings.

In the framework of the ostrakon, these dives would center on the sherd. That likeness of Pepe that is recognizable in all their cases. His ‘frogness’ or zaniness, as each is described by these authors, would be the residual history carried through its entextualization. Their readings of this residue touches on the sense of proprioception and the interpretant as well. Categorical shifts that I do not think would substantially change either of these studies in this regard. The abstract attributes of Pepe as an object of study works.

That said, I think the processes of the ostrakon would do them well in following up on their interpretations of the characteristics. Glitsos and Hall catalogue different versions of Pepe before deploying Julia Kristeva’s intertextuality and Jacques Derrida’s *différance* to explain how Pepe emerges from internet culture, generating conflicting and contradictory signification systems (390-391). Having touched on most of the fragmentation in their earlier analysis, inscribing and stitching would instead have them turn to incorporating that analysis into how groups and individuals select from and affiliate through these various inscriptions. Pepe’s affordances for his users rather than his consequences on them.

Sean Milligan conducted an extensive overview of the history of Pepe: his iterations, their appeals, and how he was used in different communicative practices. The depth of Milligan’s work is impressive, and adding more on top of it may be a bit much. Reading it through the ostrakon, the fragmentation and inscribing are already legible. There is potential in stitching being incorporated as a mobilizing agent to probe why, Milligan having already covered what and how, but it feels better suited to a follow up than an application within the study itself.

Others look to the frog as emblematic of how memes function more generally, concerned with how they elude simple definitions and discrete meaning. Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon and Axel Pérez Trujillo Diniz use Pepe as a case study to illustrate their spatial approach where the frog, “and other memes can be interpreted as “cyberplaces” defined as computer environments that display the ideological polemics between netizens as they struggle to build a sense of community” (4). Caspar Chan similarly uses Pepe in their investigation of how memes can be appropriated from other contexts; re-contextualized and identified with (289). These two articles, compared to those focused on Pepe’s appeal, center their arguments instead on the structure and function of memes as explicative of the frog’s polysemic proliferation.

Taking issue with the general conception of memes in academia, I will broadly address the concept before returning to these two. Coined by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* in 1976 as, “a unit of cultural transmission”, the meme is analogous to a gene in that its primary function is self-replication, the meaning has shifted considerably since then (249). Today it seems inextricable from online culture, and far from small gene-like scale in which Dawkins first conceived it—a single meme can convey a whole set of complex ideas.

What I have seen involving the study of memes seems to me to employ a kind of internet exceptionalism wherein the technology that facilitates the circulation of media is seen as generating an entirely new sort of media object. Yet Pepe remains an image. An image that can be remade and remixed much like any other. The term obfuscates more than it elucidates, especially given the prevalence of its colloquial use, which I maintain communicates more effectively than the academic one.

I would like to think the ostrakon can fill the gap here, with the ‘meme’ elements added on. Taking the meme as an ostrakon could interpret the rather distinct green frog that is Pepe as a



sherd. We can add inscriptions as meanings and associations applied to the sherd that are then themselves represented in the new depictions of the frog. Or, leaning into the exceptionally rapid circulation and remixing which apparently warrants the use of meme in the first place, we could frame it as a recursive refragmentation. Alternatively, the rapidity could destabilize the dynamics between stitching and inscribing, resulting in a feedback loop of constant play as it remains in a liminal state. To me, any of these seem a more enticing avenue for research than the continued effort to justify the meme as a theoretical object that masks individual agency while fetishizing internet culture at large.

Back to Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon and Axel Pérez Trujillo Diniz who, “consider the contours of Pepe the Frog” to specify their site of inquiry as a particular image meme (7-8). We are aligned on this front, apart from distinguishing it as a meme in analysis. Aligned as well in that they use the contour to explore the “myriads of interpretations provided by netizens” applied to it (13). Where we part ways in our methodologies is in their use of a spatial analysis to, “read the meme as an intersection point of different creative and ideological vectors”. (13). This links back to the processes of inscribing and stitching, yet their analysis is distinct in its injection of power as a key dynamic. “The fierce competition over the semantic control of the image of Pepe destabilizes the content of the meme itself” (13). Illustrating the sherd as being a site of active competition—that competition being generative of its polysemy, focuses far too much on the object, and the dominance of one inscription on it, as the conflict between groups.

This view of Pepe as a competition of conquest and capture culminates in the stakes of the conflict as they define them being the legitimacy of the communities disputing it (7). Their spatial imagining of what amounts to these inscriptions competing for meaning by capturing space in a zero-sum game brings to my mind an image of wartime maps of the front lines.

Turning instead to the inscribing and stitching of Pepe transforms this perspective entirely. The stakes are much smaller. Groups collectively negotiate and enforce a unity of meaning in the inscription as a proprioception of the body politic. Individuals stitch together their social performances in ongoing processes of contextualization and identification within these groups and in relation to their sways and those of other inscriptions. We can scarcely conceive of a map now, the question of how one can come to dominate the front line replaced with the question of how individuals are contextualizing the inscriptions, and the impacts of this contextualization on their identifications and performances.

Viewed from this perspective, the extreme variance of inscriptions seen with Pepe is no longer an attempt to enforce a sherd down upon one, and only one, inscription. Quite the opposite, as individuals re-evaluate their stitching, they may call in to question the continued alignment of the inscription with their identifications and within the groups they participate in. From below and within rather than above and exterior.

Pelletier-Gagnon and Diniz's study was focused on the active attempts by some to, "turn the character into a toxic figure that "normies" would no longer be able to use freely" (10). While I question their accepting that framing, it does trouble the above. How can we reconcile this active hostility to other inscriptions in the ostrakon? The proprioception of the body politic, and the feelings arising out of it could help understand reactions to such toxic inscriptions but does little to help understand the hostility itself. We could speculate as to the importance of the inscription to a group's identity, and that group to its participants being so significant in their processes of identification that they try to police affiliation with the group, not only of its members but those outside as well. Maybe the hostility itself can not be well understood through the ostrakon alone and we should look to power dynamics, or other theories, which could fill in

the gaps. Still, I believe that Pelletier-Gagnon and Diniz's study, in accepting the perspective of those actively hostile to other inscriptions, justifies that exceptional hostile position. It could make sense for a case study, but not as a case for determining a general understanding of meme dynamics.

The fourth study on Pepe that I have referenced, by Ka Yin Caspar Chan, illustrates a lot of the same efforts I have been striving for in writing this one. Applying the ostrakon offers no substantial shifts unless we wanted to expand the scope of the research beyond Hong Kong where it could help contextualize it. Following my reading of Chan's explanation of how the meme of Pepe was appropriated by Hong Kongers' in a series of entextualization, identification, and appropriation I found myself revising the processes of ostrakon (303).

Re-imagining these studies through the lens of ostraka can be a bit unwieldy at times. Restricting a given analysis to a portion of the ostrakon, whether processes or the structure, can align the work with an emphasis on relation and agency which could be helpful. Apart from as a replacement for the meme, I found some overlaps with these studies. Notably that in all of them, the process of fragmentation overlaps with attempts to understand Pepe's appeal, to which I think my application of Robinson's proprioception, if not fragmentation as a whole, could be of use. Inscribing and stitching contrasted with the methodologies of Glitsos and Hall as well as of Pelletier-Gagnon and Diniz. For these, the use of these two processes would hopefully shift them away from their 'memetic determinism' and conflict-oriented approaches. However, as we saw with the latter, avoiding 'memes as conflict' does not preclude us from the question of how to address conflict in memes.

## Video Games Remakes

Having started with a video game it feels appropriate to return to them to trial the application ostraka in a more abstracted way than I have done with Pepe the Frog. Previously we only had one sherd with an abundance of sites and inscriptions. Now I want to explore the feasibility of ostraka in understanding a translation of video games across temporal and technical contexts.

Remakes and remasters are used, at times, interchangeably in video games discourse. Remastering tends towards describing changes to the graphics or sound with minimal impact, if any, elsewhere in the rereleased titled. Whereas remakes tend towards drastic changes to how the game plays through changes such as different control schemes, new features or game modes, entirely new segments of the story, and so on. There are also reboots which imply more drastic changes. Moving forward, I am going to use remake to loosely describe all three for simplicities sake. Discrete definitions could otherwise get confusing quickly. We have only to look at a title like *The Last of Us Part II Remastered* to see why; it boasts increased texture resolution and faster load times right alongside an entirely new gameplay mode that reimagines the original character and story driven title as a game of surviving randomized combat scenarios.

What makes the video game remake, for me, a compelling object for applying ostraka is extent of changes that are often seen these remakes that is rare in other mass media. I have yet to encounter a film or song that has been remade that substantially changes how one interacts with or otherwise experiences it. For video game remakes, this is almost expected. Contention over those expectations prominently featuring in the discourses around them.

A recent case of a remake, *Final Fantasy VII* was originally released on the PlayStation in 1997. It is a role-playing game in which players take control of a character to lead him through the game's story. There is a lot of dialogue in the form of text appearing on the screen, as well as turn-based battles and lots of moving a 3D model of the character through static 2D images of places viewed from a fixed-camera angle. The remake, aptly titled *Final Fantasy VII Remake* came out on the PlayStation 4 in 2020. There are a host of changes to combat, the added ability to look in any direction, dialogue voiced by a large cast of actors, and many more. The extent of these may best be represented in the length of the game; the remake averages out to being a few hours shorter, 32.5 hours to reach the end of the story compared to the 36 hours of the original (How Long to Beat). But the remake is a trilogy, and the 32.5 hours only contains the narrative up to the conclusion of the first act of the original game.

I will try and avoid expounding on games studies here to keep to the matter at hand. Likewise, why these remakes are done in the first place is quite intuitive and has been explored elsewhere. Most of the reasons are economic, but can also include the inaccessibility of the original, fulfilling goals or plans that were not feasible before, nostalgia, and publicity to name a few (Kempainen 20-22). These non-economic reasons are dominant with regards to remakes by fans, where monetizing their labour increases their risk of legal action from copyright holders. One such fan remake is explored by Jacob Geller in a video essay simultaneously contrasting the approaches of video game remakes to what we would consider art restoration ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uJuTKyM4rQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uJuTKyM4rQ)).

Refocusing our attention on the act of translation across temporal and technological contexts, our first site is that of the developer. Sitting down to conduct the work of translation, they have before them the original work, paratexts (the manual, documents from the

development, concept art, etcetera), and their own experiences and interpretations of them. With this ‘mise en place’ they begin the undertaking of creating a video game remake. ‘Developer’ standing in for what is more often a massive team, or a fan producing it themselves. Allow me to extricate them from the economics and labour that accompanies the act, positioning them instead as individuals working on a translation. This is an imagined process of fragmentation.

This imaginary developer must proceed by extracting what gives the game its identity. What is it that identifies the remake as a remake rather than a new game? Here we encounter a collection of sherds: the original game itself accompanied by different recognizable elements. The perception of sherds swaying the developer towards their inclusion in the remake. The story, an iconic item, an image of a character in a scene, a percussive beat. Relating these sherds to the prospect of the game to be produced, they are repositioned, entextualized. Each sherd carries the feeling and form but is no longer the exact representation it was before.

For a real development team, I would now turn to their inscribing. Our imagined lone developer with an unreleased remake is unfortunately unfit for the journey. In place of a community to inscribe, we can work backwards through the developer’s stitching. Navigating their own identification and contextualizations in relation to the affinity and reception of their audience: an unrealized community. They are unable to inscribe in isolation, but they can perform a kind of liminal play of their own in the development of the game as if participating in advance. Real development teams face a similar kind of issue; media are not usually published alongside how to interpret them, nor would that be effective.

Logan Brown outlines a similar process, temporalization, which “is any labor that goes into aligning an older game’s historical source context with a newer market context” (339). More than that, Brown uses temporalization for the sort of translation I am describing, focused as it is

on the adaptation of the game from one set of technologies, cultural practices, and other contexts to another set across time. Their theorization of temporalization is much more concerned with the strategical and business elements that I am avoiding. Still, their taxonomy of seven temporalizational “channels” (elements of a game that may be changed in translation) is useful for understanding the decisions in the above (345). These channels are: environmental, diegetic, extradiegetic, narrative, interfacial, paratextual, and cultural (345). Each needs to be negotiated by the developer in the process of remaking.

For me, the most engaging component of the application of ostraka here, is in how this process necessitates fragmentation. Even if one was to attempt a very direct translation in which the game is remade to have the same effect on new players as the original, it is not possible over any significant period. A contemporary player, unfamiliar with the game, loading up the original *Final Fantasy VII* for the first time is bound to be struck by how old it is. The graphical fidelity dating it, when the original player would have seen it inversed, perhaps impressed by cutting edge renderings. Control schemes or game mechanics that were common or new at the time may feel clunky or overdone for today’s player. Even for those revisiting a nostalgic title, elements may strike them in entirely new ways through their current contextualizations. On top of that, revisiting invites comparison with the original and a “form of critical engagement with the past framed by personal and collective memory” (Sloan 36). For a developer to hope of recapturing the affect of the original, they must try to identify its sherds and in positioning them, attempt to evoke in their audience the same proprioceptive qualities of the original. An understanding of the inscriptions of the first, of the groups tied to them, is then an essential element of their mise en place.

Ostraka as is in this application frame our case such that we do not have a direct conflict over meaning. They provide a structure that clearly distinguishes the inscribing of the developer/translator and the player/reader. Each has their own contextualizations and can perceive entirely different sherds in the game.

It offers us many more paths of inquiry as well. Further fragmentations of the same work as fans circulate their fanart or other works inspired by the game. An examination of how multiple sherds can come to be stitched by an individual as collectively communicating the 'Final Fantasy VII-ness' of the remake. An analysis of a message board where players discuss fan theories and interpretations as a site where multiple inscriptions overlap for the first time.



## Conclusion

This brief exploration of the ostrakon as a heuristic device establishes it as a structure mobilized by its processes. Fragmentation produces a sherd, which is inscribed with an inscription, and summarily contextualized by individuals. For rhetorical purposes these elements have been described as discrete—although they necessarily flow into one another. The processes I have outlined are personal feelings and choices as they are negotiated in and through social settings. Even if, as in the case of the lone developer, this social setting is largely imagined. The ostraka emerging out of these personal and social flows may be collective, but only due to the degree of consensus reached by that collective's participants.

Framing it in this way helps us navigate polysemic signs in contemporary culture. With so many groups one can participate in and engage in identification with, attempts to delimit context for how ideas are coalesced and shared at a collective scale are effective only as shorthand. The ostrakon helps us work through these groups as negotiated by their participants, who are actively contextualizing meaning across multiple groups. This shifts us away from conflict-oriented approaches as we examined with Pepe, towards a 'conflicted' approach. In this approach groups can have an internal equilibrium of meaning, the inscription, while individuals fluctuate in their stitching as they contextualize the sherd—de/stabilizing the inscription in turn.

There are many pieces of this device which could use further theorization. Inscribing and stitching could incorporate a more expansive review of the social as well as processes of identification and performance. Fragmentation may benefit through the integration of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *remediation*. Further, re-fragmentation poses a compelling line of

inquiry; perhaps as an ‘oppositional stitching’ of sorts. Ties to linguistic studies could be made as well to reinforce how these processes lead to meanings shifting over time.

In writing this paper, I have intentionally left room for modularity in the ostrakon. I do not mean it as a comprehensive theory, only a guiding tool. It is not difficult to come up with cases that do not map neatly on to the skeleton laid out here; the active hostility we saw with Pepe, and the imagined community of the lone developer are two examples of this. Yet in both those cases, I have demonstrated that employing the ostrakon leads us to developing different questions in our approach. Questions that have the potential to yield new and interesting answers by complicating ostraka with the theories needed to respond to them.

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