12-2011

The Digital Folklore Project: Tracking the Oral Tradition on the World Wide Web.

Jasen Bacon
East Tennessee State University

The Digital Folklore Project:
Tracking the Oral Tradition on the World Wide Web

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

---

by

Jasen Bacon

December 2011

Dr. Theresa Lloyd, Chair

Dr. Kevin O'Donnell

Dr. Ted Olson

Keywords: Folklore, Internet, E-Mail, Forward, Folk Web

ABSTRACT

The Digital Folklore Project:

Tracking the Oral Tradition on the World Wide Web

by

Jasen Bacon

I collected forty-two e-mail forwards over the course of four months, and from those I formulated a framework that adapts existing theory in collection and study of real-world folklore to the emerging folk communities that exist on the internet. Through this analysis I prove that the same genres of folklore that is routinely collected by folklorists have been adapted to fit the digital environment of the internet. I then use the framework that I lay out to perform a study of the e-mails themselves.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with my analysis of a small corpus of digital folklore that was collected in the form of e-mail forwards sent to my own e-mail in-box over the course of four months. Before I can get into the analysis of the forwards themselves, I will discuss the difference between digital and real-world folklore genres. After that explanation, I will begin to discuss the philosophy of e-mail, which is a natural place to find folklore genres. Then I will discuss how I collected the e-mails themselves and perform an analysis of the group as well as an in-depth case study of seven of the e-mails. The analyses will all draw upon the foundations laid forth in the chapters that precede them by showing how I apply my theory of digital folklore analysis.

The first issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1888 opened with the idea that the journal was established for "the collection of the fast-vanishing remains of Folk-Lore in America" (Newell 3). While the academic discipline of folklore has moved beyond this original definition of preserving the fast-vanishing remains and towards the study and acknowledgment of emerging and persistent folk groups, in addition to those that are in decline or vanishing, folklore has just begun to admit that it is deficient in the study of the internet (Blank, "Folklore" 2). This tardiness is lamentable, mostly because the field of study that was originally established to preserve the last vestiges of groups on the decline completely missed many digital communities that no longer exist.

Recently, anthropologists and ethnographers have turned their notebooks towards examining the digital cultures that exist in live virtual worlds, such as Tom Boellstorff did with his 2008 book *Coming of Age in Second Life* or Bonnie Nardi's 2010 book *My Life as a Night Elf*

Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft. These glimpses of digital folk communities have helped turn other folklorists onto the possibility of finding traditional folk communities in cyberspace, but I believe that we are too late to preserve the cultures that came before these. For example, the era of prominence for the bulletin board system, which functioned like a modern web forum but with the addition of games and file sharing, as a digital community disappeared when companies such as America Online (AOL) and CompuServe created similar content and packaged it with basic internet access in the mid-1990s. Since the bulletin boards were usually privately run by people who had the money and the extra phone line to allow other people to dial into their computers, most of the data are forever lost as the original bulletin board owners upgraded their computers and formatted, recycled, or destroyed their old hard drives that contained the board's software and posts. AOL and CompuServe also began offering less and less of the same service as various groups, pages, and forums began to appear in much larger quantities on the internet. Bulletin board systems and Usenet are still around, but they are usually only visited by the most diehard of adherents, which could be an interesting ethnographic study in itself.

With the vast array of discourse groups forming digital folk cultures within the World Wide Web, despite those lost opportunities, it seems natural that folklorists should branch out from traditional venues and explore these new folk cultures, if not to view the unique groups that exist only online then to augment the study of a field-based group with their digital counterparts. While there has been a steady trickle of internet based fieldwork started, I feel that the reason that we are not seeing more done is that the concept of fieldwork becomes skewed when the field can be visited in the folklorist's home or office. The paradigm shift from notebook and audio recorder to screen captures and chat loggers is a long one and probably not very comfortable for

many. The facts remain that if folklorists do not begin to look on the internet for digital folklore, then our field will quickly be left behind because other branches of the humanities and social sciences, like the anthropologists and ethnographers mentioned above, have been conducting internet research for many years. New discourse cultures appear and disappear everyday as more and more people get access to the internet.

In order study the new electronic folk we must learn to adapt the skills and techniques of folklore and transfer them to this new medium. Transfer simply means taking something previously learned about reasoning, theory, or practice in one field and applying that method to a new field. Transference requires the researcher to learn the new field of study through the use of the skills they already possess. When a researcher approaches the two fields and notes the similar structures, then those similarities form the basis for the application of leaned skills to the new environment (Gee 126).

Starting September of 2009 and continuing through December of the same year I actively solicited e-mail forwards from my family, colleagues, and complete strangers in order to see exactly what is still being passed around. From what I collected I set forth analyzing the small collection against many larger corpora of forwards. What I found is that while some of the items are completely new in origin, like those about President Obama who was sworn in in 2009, many had been around for years and could have had their origins on the BBS services, AOL, CompuServe, or any of the other early digital connection services. This discovery allowed for a fantastic study in the perpetuation and variation in how stories are shared on the internet.

What I discovered during the collection and analysis is that the e-mail forwards carry digital types of structures and genres that folklorists have been studying in the real-world for decades. Once a researcher learns to see the digital analogs for traditional folklore then the

classification and study of digital folklore becomes a natural transmogrification for the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 2

SCHOLARSHIP ON DIGITAL FOLKLORE AND THE FOLK WEB

This chapter builds a working definition of digital folklore as it is practiced over the internet. Without a foundation in how folk groups form and how they share folklore, then the discussion of the folklore that I received in the e-mail project is lacking. The working definition of digital folklore leads to a description of how people use the internet and the poetics of internet use. The definitions and poetics are the core philosophy that I use to study digital folklore, starting with the e-mail forwards on which this project is based.

Characteristics of Digital Folklore

In order to get a functioning definition of what is and is not digital folklore we must first agree upon a working definition of what folklore is and is not. This has proven itself to be a hot topic without throwing the internet into the mix, but a few definitions exist that, when synthesized, work in defining digital folklore as well.

Alan Dundes gives a very broad definition of what constitutes a folk group when he calls it "any group of people whatsoever that share at least one common factor" (Dundes 6). Furthermore, Jan Brunvand gives five criteria for "true" folklore: "(1) its content is oral (usually verbal), or custom-related or material; (2) it is traditional in form and transmission; (3) it exists in different versions; (4) it is usually anonymous; (5) it tends to become formularized" *(Study 7).* When combining these thoughts, we can say that folk artifacts are created when they anonymously come from a group that shares a common factor transmitted in a traditional informal manner for that group. These artifacts can be considered true folklore, digital or real-world, when these artifacts begin to show variation while keeping the established formula.

These passages give a wonderful starting point for working with digital folklore. Brunvand's definition given is one of the few encountered in most folklore texts that allows for folklore to be more than the oral transmission. Dundes understands that not all communication is oral, and therefore folklore can be transmitted by whatever means of traditional communication is employed by the group being studied. Dundes went on to say "technology isn't stamping out folklore; rather it is becoming a vital factor in the transmission of folklore and it is providing an exciting source of inspiration for the generation of new folklore" (17).

Armed with this knowledge, a researcher can see that discovering and decoding digital folklore works in the same fashion as studying any real-world group. When the researcher can observe the transmission of a piece of folklore, s/he understand that the group is a folk group. When the researcher can observe that a piece of folklore resembles a previously created work, then s/he can deduce that the folklore has been perpetuated; then the researcher can tell that the transmission has not only happened but it became formalized.

Unlike working in the physical world, the digital groups give the folklorist an advantage because their conversations and other exchanges are quite often preserved. If a folklorist doing fieldwork misses a joke from a master teller, then that particular moment is lost forever. The master teller may tell the joke again, but the exact performance will be different. If a person in a digital group pens a joke and forwards it to members of the group, then the folklorist has a chance to not only find the original performance piece but to also track and examine subtle variations on the piece as people modify it as they pass it.

Digital folk groups have their preferred methods of communication that, once discovered, determine what kinds of digital folklore a researcher can expect to discover within the group. The most common communication types between internet users are e-mail, chat rooms (where

people type text into a scrolling window showing what others have typed), instant messaging (which is like a personal chat room for two people), social networking interactions (which can include e-mails and chat), and forum postings (which allow users to post their thoughts and comments onto a website for others to discuss and comment on). As digital video has become more clear and cheaper to produce over the past few years, there has been a rise of digital folk groups who communicate through video posts on sites such as youtube.com, and this form will probably become more common as the technology becomes cheaper. All of these forms are possible sources of material when looking for digital folklore. Once a group has established the methods that it will employ to communicate, then it begins the process of formalizing and traditionalizing these formats. This is the point at which the first folklore of the group usually begins to form.

The quick and easy availability of information that the internet puts at people's ready reach also makes it very easy to find people who share similar interests around which to form a community. When the people within these communities find each other, the process of learning the customs of the group begins. Groups that meet electronically develop in different patterns, but most usually begin to produce their own digital folklore types, appropriate from other discourse groups and modified types for usage within the community, or even create new vernacular. For example, I use the internet group that congregates on reddit.com, a group that calls itself "redditors." Redditors know the letters "til" mean "today I learned" and will be followed by a rather obscure piece of information. Groups create kinesiological forms, such as particular emoticons (combinations of keyboard symbols such as the traditional smiley face =) like reddit.com's flipping table ((ノ°□°)ノ ┻┻), which is used to express outrage; web usage superstitions and methods; and digital "material" objects such as photoshopped images, ASCII

and other types of digital arts. Each of the types of traditional folklore is represented in this paper and each one is explored in depth in order to understand the appropriation of the oral transmission to an ever changing digital print medium.

Once the communication forms have been traditionalized within the digital groups, we begin to search out the types of folklore that the digital folk have begun creating. This can be accomplished by means as simple as examining the grammar and syntax employed by a group to finding the patterns that the group has established as its own personal customary typing or exploring the types of image files that the group posts and exchanges searching for trends and communality.

Patterns do emerge, and with digital folk groups they tend to emerge and become perpetuated at very rapid speeds. They can also be abandoned just as quickly as the group replaces the older forms with newer created ones. Folklorist Monica Foote studies the rapid rise of a type of digital folk art that she detailed in her article "Userpics: Cyber Folk Art in the 21st Century." Her work chronicles the creation of the "OMG racecar bling bling" icons that spawned numerous copies in the space of less than an hour and continue to be perpetuated on the livejournal.com website on which they originated.

Another area that is of specific interest to folklorists who wish to begin studying digital groups is the concept of the meme. Originally conceived by Richard Dawkins as the genes of cultural interaction, a meme is defined as "an element of a culture or system of behavior that may be considered to be passed from one individual to another by nongenetic means, especially imitation" (Pigliucci 23). Memetics is a useful tool in the study of digital folklore because one characteristic of digital folklore, especially digital material objects, is that they become "viral," or are passed around by a large number of users until their contents are close to common

knowledge for most discourse groups on the internet. Livejournal.com, reddit.com, and the other imageboards are the most common creation points for these meme pictures, and a new meme can develop, spread, and sometimes even fall out of use within the span of hours or days. Only some of the more adaptable memes will achieve viral status and remain in use for long periods of time. Memes such as “staredad” and “socially awkward penguin” are two examples that have a certain level of adaptability to most situations that has allowed them to remain in use for years.

While the concept of the meme as a valid subject of scientific study is currently being debated, it does not change the fact that the concept of the meme has spread throughout the internet. The meme has become such a common occurrence that entire websites have been created just to track and label the memes that appear, most of which do so purely by anonymous submission, which puts them squarely in the folk web. Memetics and folklore are so closely related that folklorist Foote has said that “all folklore is made up of memes, but not all memes are folklore” (31). I believe Foote here is referring more to Dawkin's original theory of memes being an understandable element of a cultural group that is capable of classification, and now how the internet communities interpret memes as images with a certain type of phrase typed on them.

The meme is important to digital folklore because it is rare to find any group of digital natives that do not know at least the concept of what a meme is, and most can usually name several of their favorite memes. A single meme can lend itself to versions of itself that fall into various different categories of digital folklore, as the perpetuators of the meme find new ways of expressing the same cultural elements in new forms.

Categories of Digital Folklore

There are three very broad categories that folklorists tend to group the various pieces of collected and studied folklore into: vernacular, customary, and material. These categories appear as the first criterion given by Brunvand (*Study* 7), and they occasionally blend together in traditional study. This is true for digital folklore as well.

The Digital Vernacular

The digital vernacular contains many of the same types of folklore found within the oral tradition. I am choosing to stick with the term vernacular over oral or verbal throughout this paper because of the mostly non-audible nature of communication on the internet.

Folk tales, urban legends, and jokes comprise the largest part of the digital vernacular, and these stories and jokes are transmitted in many different ways. One of the most commonly seen forms of the digital vernacular is e-mail that gets forwarded to a chain of recipients who often then send it on to a new set of recipients. The forwarded stories spread out to various other discourse groups in this way because people tend to give their various e-mail addresses to many different people who may belong to discourse groups the original recipient does not. These forwards become a nearly omnipresent fact of the internet. The digital vernacular is also found quite often being passed on in social networking sites as well as online forums. Since Facebook has become the most visited site on the internet, one can only assume that it will also become the place where the digital vernacular will become most common.

One of the most commonly encountered digital vernaculars is the urban legend. The internet has sped up and formalized the exchange of urban legends to the point that Jan Brunvand has stated that “the electronic transmission of urban rumors and legends has become

their chief means of circulation, supplementing the traditional sharing of such folklore via word of mouth or print" (*Be Afraid* 237). There are websites established, most notably www.snopes.com, that exist purely to find, catalog, and give reference to the types of urban legends that exist on the internet. Snopes does its best to give a scholarly breakdown of all urban legends it publishes with references to where the site obtained the information used to debunk or verify the urban legend.

Within the digital vernacular, the stories should be approached from both an emic and etic point of view. Viewing the digital vernacular emically not only allows the researcher to observe how the story affects the particular group being studied, but also since the stories are digital artifacts, the stories can also be viewed in the manner of all internet users because all digital folk groups belong to the meta-group of internet users according to Dundes's definition. An examination at the meta level would force the researcher to understand how this particular artifact affects a user's use of the internet, rather than how it affects the user's roles within the digital folk groups. Emic research within a digital folk group requires the usual level of knowledge and participation as emic study in traditional fieldwork, but in a digital environment it is also necessary to understand the memes that the group perpetuates.

Etic research into digital folk narratives concerns itself with looking at the artifact even from an exterior standpoint of the group that is perpetuating the artifact, examining the artifact from the point of view of the non digital world. If the artifacts are examined from a non-digital perspective, then the researcher would have to understand how this would affect the real-world dealings of the group. This could entail things from understanding the folk or occupational groups that would have a vested interest in the motifs of the piece to checking if the story contains elements that by nature must be experienced in the real-world. A classic example of this

is the chain e-mail that warns people not to smell perfume offered in parking lots because it is ether and the perpetrators will kidnap you if you do. Many variations of that narrative have spread throughout the internet (Brunvand *Afraid* 245-247), but the basic story pertains to the e-mail recipient's participation in shopping rituals and perfume wearing for it to have any meaning. An example of etic research based around this chain letter would be to poll the people in a parking lot outside a place that sells perfume to find out how many have heard, and how many of those believe, in this urban legend.

The Digital Customary

Of the three main types of folklore, the customary gives the most difficulty in definition. Martha Sims defines it as "patterned, repeated behavior in which a person's participation indicates involved membership" (Sims 16). The traditional definition would include everything from playing with a dreidel to the secret handshakes used to identify members of a fraternal lodge.

The digital customary is quite different from the customary types of folklore that are traditionally encountered in standard fieldwork. In the text-based environments that make up the bulk of the folk web, the customary is the symbols that are designed for the purpose of showing emotions and simulating the types of non-verbal exchanges that people experience while in traditional oral environments. Items such as emoticons, or smileys, have emerged for the person typing to insert their feelings into text strings.

Quite often these gestures are very obvious to discern, like the common smiley face emoticon :), but some are more difficult. For example, the type of digital gesture that is commonly known as the "dancing Kirby," named after a bubble shaped character from the Kirby

series of video games by Nintendo, look like this: (>'-')> <('-'<). The general appearance almost gives an easily discernible face with the center three characters '-', but people unfamiliar with the Kirby character can become easily confused with the less-than and greater-than signs that represent Kirby's hand-less cartoon arms, and it also takes a rather large stretch of the imagination to see those fifteen characters as a single dancing cartoon. Yet a folk group that aligns itself around the Kirby video games would easily recognize this character and use it as a means of showing knowledge of the group and its practices.

The digital customary also contains internet-related superstitions, very commonly encountered in the form of chain letters or typing rituals. The internet superstitions closely follow superstitions that are documented by real-world folklorists by the classic 1961 definition by Dundes: "Superstitions are traditional expressions of one or more conditions and one or more results with some of the conditions signs and others causes. The formula for superstitions may be stated simply as 'If A, then B,' with an optional 'unless C'" (Structural 424). Internet superstitions most often fall into two categories, both of which require passing on the urban legend or story. The first type can be thought of as an evolution of the "don't step on the crack" superstitions in that they state that if the reader does not do something, such as forward the story on, etc. then something bad will happen to the reader or somebody they know. The second type is a type of survey that encourages the person to add their answers and send it on, hoping it comes back so they can check their answers with others in the group.

Material Digital Artifacts

For purposes of this classification system, material artifacts are defined as files that are able to be saved to a computer. These include Powerpoint slide shows, pictures, and cartoons.

Often these files are created with, or modified by, captions or other various symbols or images that allow people to identify them as being from or for a particular discourse group. Digital material artifacts must often be scrutinized closer than the digital vernacular or customary to ensure that they follow the criteria for "true" folklore. The distinction between an image that is digital material folklore and one that is not is not always as easy as the copyright symbol, but it can be. Many times the researcher would have to examine the properties tags that are coded into the file that are not visible to people who just view the image or slide show by right- or control-clicking on the image and looking at the properties tab. This takes a little more computer skill than simply viewing the file.

All material digital artifacts must also be in an easily accessible format that can be opened on virtually any computer. There are many different file extensions for each type of file, but there are a few that have been in general usage for so long that they are considered universal. For images and pictures, this would be in the standard .bmp, .jpg, or .gif formats, which can be viewed with any web browser; .txt or .rtf for ASCII art because they do not add anything to the text and can be viewed with a web browser; PowerPoint presentations by default are .pps which is an extension from Microsoft, but there are many freeware programs that will allows a user to view the .pps file in addition to websites, such as slideshare.net, that allow users to upload and view the slide shows for free.

The oldest type of digital material artifact is the ASCII art. ASCII is the American Standard Code for Information Interchange and was developed in 1963 (Brandel). ASCII is the basis for all of the text based systems that followed and the numeric assignments for characters has not changed since its implementation. Users can now implement ASCII into their work by holding down the ALT key and typing a number on the numerical keypad then releasing the ALT

key. For example, ALT-1 produces this smiley face: ☺. ASCII art was developed before computers were able to display graphics. People would take the time to figure out how to show images using only the symbols that the computer could print. It could be simple, like the sleeping cat in figure 1 (page 19), or very complex image that comes close to photo-realistic. There are now websites that a user can upload their pictures to, and it will produce ASCII art representations of them. Most of what is currently being distributed is software created, but traditionally created ASCII arts will be encountered on occasion. Some of the more simplistic versions could almost be considered digital gestures if the methods for creating them are learned and passed on among the group. For example, the cat in figure A was created by somebody with

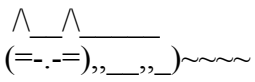

Figure 1: Sleeping Cat

the knowledge of the ASCII codes for the symbols that comprise the cat. It was then saved in a file and distributed to a group. The act of creating the cat was a digital gesture for the creator, but became a digital material artifact to the many people it was sent to. If somebody learned the sequence of symbols for creating the cat, it would fall back into being a digital gesture for the new creator.

The memes that are perpetuated in digital material artifacts usually become formularized very quickly. The quickest to formularize are the image macros that take an image, many examples simply have a person or animal's head on a polychromatic background, and typing a short sentence on the image. For example, there is a trend in taking a picture of a cat and then writing text with misspelled words on it. This sensation is known as lolcats and is one of the

oldest of the internet memes. Knowyourmeme.com places the origins of the lolcat in advertisements from the 1970s that show a cat hanging from a wire with the caption "hang in there." The lolcat has spawned numerous sub-memes and has been the subject of newspaper articles (images of which are now circulated as a lolcat image) and mentioned in various television shows in addition to being a common e-mail forward.

Related to the image macro pictures that circulate, people also take images from websites, often from professional cartoonists, and circulate them amongst the digital folk group. Sometimes the images are modified, other times they are simply distributed in their original format. Images that circulate in this fashion are a direct descendant of the xeroxlore images that circulate amongst office workers.

Defining a Digital Folk Group

> As electronic communications spanned the landscape and defied time, the cultural barriers of nature declined in importance. Boundaries were more abstract, consisting of invisible connections among subgroups of a massive whole. The connections could overlap, and they could vary in the time they took up: they could be ethnic, religious, regional, and occupational. *Community*, with its connotation of flexibility and its association with communication and the concept of communality in an individualistic modern life, became a keyword of scholarship. (Bronner *American* 106, emphasis in original).

Simon Bronner penned those words in 1986, nearly a decade before the internet came online, but thirteen years after people had begun to communicate with e-mail. The emphasis he gives on community being the core component of any group who communicate through electronic means is central to the process of creating digital folklore. The abstract boundaries that

Bronner spoke of in that quote are even more abstract now. With the internet usage in today's society, people may understand that the people around them are also online, but they have no idea what kind of discourse groups that they belong to on the internet. It is quite possible with the anonymity of the internet that people could chat online and converse in real life and never know they were interacting with the same person.

Because digital communities vary in terms of the origins of people that join them, no matter if these people who join them choose to reveal their actual physical and social descriptors, we come to the conclusion that these communities are motivated purely by the discourse that they share.

In order to understand how the communities can even be considered "folk" communities rather than elite, we must first understand the differing levels of interaction and control that are possible within the current framework of the internet. Twenty-three years after Bonner penned the opening quote from this section, he explains the differences in another article when he says:

> users recognize a fundamental difference between sites identified as official or corporate, which control content and broadcast information to a passive viewing audience, and those that allow posting, "live" chat, and free exchange. For many users, the latter constitutes the folk universe of cyberspace, in contrast with its elite realm (Digitizing 23).

Bronner refers to the places on the internet where the user has some control over his or her surroundings as the folk universe, but in order to fully understand the previous quote in context, we must first define the terms that Bronner is using, and to do so we must understand the history of the web. Once this highly abbreviated history of the web has brought us to the present, then this work focuses solely on websites that fall into what will henceforth be termed the folk web, which Bronner referred to as "the folk universe of cyberspace."

In the first few years of the internet, in the late 1990s, websites were fully controlled by their owners and people who logged onto the website could view the information and materials but could not do anything with them other than save them to their own computers for their own personal use. Years later, after the dot-com bust of 2001, the technology that drives the internet changed as producers began to notice that the consumers wanted to have active participation in the content on the web pages they view the most. This led directly to what has become known as Web 2.0.

Web 2.0 is a philosophy of internet design that allows for people to participate in websites they visit (O'Reilly). Some of the key points in Web 2.0 for anybody studying digital folklore are the ability to participate in conversations being held on the sites and the adding of keywords to web sites and their contents so that other people will be able to find the site on the internet easier. Tagging of information existed before 2001, but Web 2.0 allowed the *user* of the website to add tags, where before those tags were placed by the *creator* of the website. What Bronner describes in his chapter are the frameworks that O'Reilly states constitute Web 2.0. But not everything that falls within Web 2.0 can be considered a part of the folk web.

The more control a user has over the content of the web page, the closer to being classified into the folk web it becomes. For example, most websites for news organizations allow users to comment on the article itself, but the users have no control over what the article says or what types of articles get written and posted. These sites are still considered part of the elite web even though they allow the community to enter into the discussion. That being said, some of the comments could contain folk *objects* if they contain common lines from the digital vernacular, emoticons, or folk pictures. They could also contribute to the folk web through the practice of "tagging."

The adding of keywords, or tags, is colloquially known as folksonomy and forms the basis for web events, such as people finding the book that they are looking for on Amazon.com or finding a picture of something very specific on flickr.com. Folksonomy is defined by Thomas Vander Wal, the man who claims to have coined the term in 2004, as "people using their own vocabulary and adding explicit meaning, which may come from inferred understanding of the information/object. People are not so much categorizing, as providing a means to connect items (placing hooks) to provide their meaning in their own understanding." (Wal). While the term folksonomy has been adopted by researchers such as Bronner (*Digitizing* 29), many websites, notably Amazon.com, continue to use the term "tag" because the term conjures the concept of placing specialized identity tags on specific pictures or sites on the internet that can then be searched to find other items of similar content or design. Thus the folksomony of tagging itself becomes a piece of digital folklore, as it allows people to help other people to find things that they enjoy or further create a feeling of a community through shared aesthetics.

Tagging is a very common practice in Web 2.0 and many websites, especially blogs, offer what is known as a "tag cloud," which is seen as either a list of words or a group of words in a semi-round shape somewhere on the website. These tag clouds have some words printed larger than others and those larger words are representative of a higher frequency of tagging on the site. Thus a user can quickly glance at a tag cloud and gain a basic insight into what the website covers.

In the sites classified in the elite web, the users may be able to switch the "skin" or background graphics of the web page to a more aesthetically pleasing view, or perhaps change the scope of the website to only show information local to the users (a popular feature on weather.com the official website of The Weather Channel), but they would not be able to directly

affect the content of the page. In sites on the folk web, users are allowed to change what the website says, or otherwise shape the conversation.

Certain sites within the elite web can have aspects that lead to their interaction on the folk web. Take, for example, www.mlb.com, the home page for Major League Baseball (Official). The site sits clearly in the elite web as it is a corporate controlled entity that shows only the information that the corporation wishes to post, yet every news article that the company places on its site contains buttons just under the article title that, when clicked, allow the user of the site to share the article with various social media services, or to send to people through e-mail. This particular elite site is allowing an easy route for its articles to become part of the folk web by making it easy for a user to re-post the articles on services like Facebook and Twitter that are parts of the folk web.

Facebook and Twitter are two of the most popular of the "social networking" sites on the internet, with Facebook being the most visited site on the internet. In the week ending February 26, 2011, Facebook got thirty percent more visits than the number two site, Google (Top 20). Although Twitter did not appear on the top twenty list there were 600 "tweets," or short messages of only one hundred and forty characters or fewer, sent over Twitter every second in February of 2010 (Weil). The popularity of these two sites is based upon the idea that people can control the content and shape the way the internet looks for them and the rest of the world. These sites fit fully into the concept of the folk web as they are becoming a primary transmitter of digital folklore and have even spawned personalized variations of several types of digital semantics and vernaculars. These sites are also of particular importance to my research into e-mail forwards because they allow for an internal exchange of e-mail with other users of the services.

The Poetics of the In-Box

This section is designed to give some of the philosophy behind what researchers have determined as average e-mail usage. It will weave its way around many philosophical ideas in order to return to the Digital Folklore Project and show how the various types of e-mail forwards were acquired and how the forwards were used for the purposes of this paper.

A study conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in May 2010 found that seventy-nine percent of all Americans use the internet. Most of the users are urban and suburban, but sixty-seven percent of rural responders to the poll are online (Who's Online). This study shows that two-thirds of the people who were originally classified as "the folk" at the foundation of the American Folklore Society in 1888 are on the internet. That number alone should be of interest to folklorists. This poll also reported that seventy-eight percent of all internet users say they use the internet every day. With such a large user base sharing a common language and similar experiences, it is natural that folk groups arise.

This leads directly to the group of people who are classified as being "digitally native." Most digital natives are under the age of thirty and have had access to the internet for most, if not all, of their lives. They are usually intimately familiar with the framework and usage of the medium. For the digital natives, sending an e-mail is just as familiar, possibly even more familiar, than writing a letter with a pen on paper, putting the letter in an envelope with a stamp, and sending the letter through the postal service.

The large number of the country's internet users has a direct bearing on the type of folklore that this paper studies, because ninety-four percent of all internet users have e-mail accounts, and sixty-two percent send or receive e-mail everyday (Online Activities, Daily). With that many people sending and receiving e-mails on a daily basis, it is no wonder that the

traditional folklore types of real-world folklore would find their way to become digitized and be exchanged within this very large discourse group. The creation and spread of folklore is a natural part of community relations, and any community will create its own folklore.

Bronner seems to think that the philosophy of the internet is one of scatology and latrinalia ("Digitizing" 56-61). I will admit some sites, like the a few of the more infamous image boards, would definitely hold up that belief, but I believe that this analogy does not apply to e-mail at all. Instead, what e-mail does for us is more akin to a feeling of home that carries with it the same sensations of safety and protection. Inside this e-mail home is some of the user's most private documents, which can include bank and other monetary information as well as personal effects and pictures of family.

This sense of home and safety can be invoked by the fact that the users have to pick a name for their e-mail. This name then becomes how they present themselves to the internet at large. This e-mail address/name is essentially their internet identity, because a lot of sites that require people to register to use, like Facebook, require that the user sign up with an e-mail address. Without at least owning an e-mail address the rest of the internet becomes much more difficult to use.

This concept of the e-mail in-box as home would then lend itself to Gaston Bachelard's theories of the poetics of space. If we think of the in-box as the home, everything else on the internet would be "outside" through a process that Bachelard describes as "the surrealistic action of a pure image" (227). And even though Bachelard was describing *Où boivent les loups* by Tristan Tzara, it feels as if he was describing the internet when he talks about the object's "sublimation that is entirely rid of the organic or psychic weights from which one wanted to be free" (227).

Thus, with the e-mail in-box, one is able to “withdraw into oneself, and condense oneself in the being of a repose, which is the asset one has most easily 'at hand'” as Bachelard says of the home (226). The in-box is the place where we are most ourselves because we have labeled the in-box with the name that we choose to present ourselves with to the rest of the internet, both electronically and in the real-world when we give people our e-mail address. In this way we can say we inhabit our in-boxes without being able to actually live in them, and the concept of space being inhabited is what theorist Chris Cullens says Bachelard meant by the term “felicitous space” (206).

The in-box is especially felicitous “because it is in this space, according to Bachelard, that 'the imagination,' securely sheltered and granted the solitude for reverie, takes root” (206). And the users' imagination is what they are housing in the in-box, as the in-box can only be inhabited in the imagination. Through the imagination everything online can become malleable to the point of being able to switch gender roles (Marhsall 493). This creation of the postmodern self (Marshall 497) allows people to become whoever they desire, which creates the appeal for multiple e-mail addresses, each pertaining to multiple selves. Each of these creates a kind of performance that can be set within a particular role or be taken to complete anonymity in order to explore aspects of the users' personality that they cannot explore in the real-world because of cultural, religious, or social reasons (Thomas 674).

When we begin the dissemination of our e-mail addresses to real-world people, we begin to blur the lines between people and the personal digital view they have of themselves. E-mail communication is one of the most popular forms of electronic communication, even though it is slowly being overshadowed by newer types, so it is usually the first type of electronic contact that people share with others. Through this contact we come back to Bachelard's inside and

outside as here the in-box not only serves as the buffer to the much greater internet at large, but also to the real-world. The e-mail in-box becomes a liminal space between the real-world and the internet that has the ability to allow people to reshape their concept of self. The identity that the user creates for his or her in-box becomes key to the types of e-mail that the person will send and receive. Businesses would like to think that a person who has a particular e-mail account for his or her business would be less likely to send and receive internet jokes and chain letters than somebody who set one up for entertainment purposes, while it is entirely possible that one person would have both types of e-mail addresses and more, and equally possible that the two would overlap in usage.

This analysis of the philosophy of what an e-mail in-box could mean is important because what users do with their e-mail accounts, including who they give their e-mail address to, determines the types of e-mails they would receive and therefore it could impact the types of digital folklore they receive in their in-box. A business e-mail account is more likely to receive office humor or variations on office xeroxlore than one that is used to communicate with relatives. The office account would also be less likely to receive some of the more politically charged e-mails that circulate among people with similarly declared political leanings as many companies have policies in their code of business conduct that disallow the use of company equipment for political reasons.

What we have, in the end, is that the electronic persona constructed shapes not only how people present themselves to the various groups and websites on the internet but also how they allow those groups to communicate back. This in turn dictates the types of folklore that they get to be exposed to. For example, my primary e-mail address is baconjl@goldmail.etsu.edu, I use this address for nearly all correspondence with co-workers and researchers. I also have an

alternate e-mail address that I use for setting up web-based video game log-ins. My primary e-mail address usually receives more business oriented e-mails, while my games account gets lots of spam and forwards that are centered around new games, new events in games, and so on. These two are in addition to my personal account that I give to family and friends and the digital.folklore@gmail.com account that I use for conducting internet research. Luckily my smart phone can keep all of the accounts easily accessible and separate for me. I have presented myself to the internet in four different ways and the e-mails that I receive in each are almost never the same.

This presentation of self matters in research when a potential researchers of e-mail folklore sets out to gather e-mails for a study, as they will usually find themselves receiving items that already fit in with how they present themselves, both to the internet communities that they use their e-mail address with and the people who know them in real life. This is emphasized by a news writer named Russell Frank who asked people who read his column in his local newspaper to send him any jokes they had received that deal with news events (Frank 98). Frank is using his newspaper column to solicit e-mails from newspaper readers, who more than likely read the news they are lampooning in the newspaper in the first place. The idea of sending jokes about the news to a newspaper writer would imply that any e-mails that Frank would receive would definitely be about news topics, since this particular e-mail address identity was tied to news. This statement is further proved by Frank who notes receiving forty-six e-mailed jokes, half of which fits his own definition of news related folklore (Frank 98).

Of the forty-two e-mails I received I would count all as having some aspect of digital folklore as I have described it in this chapter. Once I describe how I went about collecting my

pieces in the next chapter, then I describe exactly what types, and in what kind of quantity,of digital folklore that this chapter has described were collected.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY OF COLLECTION

The previous chapter about the categories of digital artifacts exists to lay the groundwork for my research. The three main digital genres and most of the supporting examples are directly related to the types of lore that I received during my four months of collecting e-mail forwards. I collected forwards that fall into each of the three main genres. I choose the e-mail forwards as a means to collect what I did because I know from my years of internet usage, which began at about the same time as the internet was opened up to public use in the 1990s, that they are a rather ubiquitous presence.

Since ninety-four percent of all internet users have at least one e-mail account (Online Activities, Total), and the vast majority of users check their e-mail on a daily basis, e-mail users form the largest group that could be considered a discourse group of internet users. This many people using e-mail and all sharing similar usage experiences allows for the easy formation of folk customs to emerge in their usage patterns. Once the users are found, the rapport that a traditional fieldworker must establish must be created. This can be a daunting task online because the people may not ever actually see the researcher, but I chose to take a very easy path for digital research: that of anonymity.

Just as Frank established his personal identity through his e-mail address and used it to receive the types of e-mail he expected to receive, I took the experiment in a different angle and attempted to create a truly anonymous and open e-mail address in order to collect digital folklore. The address was digital.folklore@gmail.com and it received over forty forwarded e-

mails over the course of four months, most of which I would consider true digital folk artifacts, and a large number of the forwards came from people I have never met.

After setting the address up I created a Facebook page for the project (http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Digital-Folklore-Project/185149824950) knowing that Facebook was the largest and fastest growing social network at the time. The word of mouth spread the project further than I had expected, and the Facebook profile that I set up in order to advertise it even attracted interested parties from as far away as Bucharest, Romania, and as famous as Trevor J. Blank, who edited the book *Folklore and the Internet*.

From the Facebook page I actively solicited for e-mail forwards three times, with the last e-mail that I received coming in almost exactly one month after the last request. Just like Frank, I asked for e-mails and they came. I had forty-nine Facebook followers and collected forty-three e-mails. I did not receive an e-mail from each follower, and one follower even posted that he was not "cool" enough to receive forwards. I can only assume, since I am not sure who the people are who sent me many of these messages, that the digital "word-of-mouth" advertising worked and the people had no idea who they were forwarding their messages to.

After I posted these three Facebook solicitations, which went to a varied combination of people I do and do not know, I just waited for the e-mails to come in. Once they stopped I then began reading and sorting the e-mails. I actually received a number of forwards that came from cell phones text messages, but I am not counting those in this study as I have chosen to study e-mail specifically, and after my research began I became very interested in using these to explore how people use their e-mail in-boxes.

Technology for Recording and Saving Digital Folklore

Obviously the written word is the traditional communication form of the internet, so it would be in the written text found on the internet that the earliest, most persistent, and most common types of digital folklore can be found. This itself can be tricky to catch and record. In the real-world folklorists run into the problem of not being able to find a trace of a story or joke they knew they had heard before but not adequately recorded, or perhaps that the one person who still knew the folk techniques for building traditional cabins is no longer with us, this can become very frustrating the folklorist as s/he may have missed their chance to record something meaningful. On the internet there is a similar problem of encountering a particular website, forum post, or image that when the same website or whatever is visited later the original content has been changed or "updated." There is a serious chance of never being able to find that particular piece of study again. For example, when I was doing my research on Snopes.com for the analysis of the forward entitled "Top This One for a Speeding Ticket," the page existed. I did not feel that Snopes would remove the artice, but when I revisited the site three months later the article was gone. Web pages must deal with a limited amount of computer storage for their pages, and older material is routinely removed to allow new content to be put online. If I had taken my own advice and made a screen grab I would have had a record to refer to, but it is now lost to me. real-world folklorists enter the field armed with audio recorders and camcorders to catch these original performances as well as cameras and notebooks to help with the documentation of the events. Similar technologies exist for documenting and preserving digital folklore.

When doing my research into how digital folk groups were using the digital artifacts I employed a number of techniques in order to save what I needed. The digital vernacular and customary types of folklore were saved by simple copy and paste techniques. Digital material

artifacts were saved by simply saving a copy of the file. Pictures are the easiest to save and it is as simple as right-clicking, or control-click on a Mac, and choosing the “Save Picture As...” menu option. Entire web pages, including the pictures on them, were archived from a number of different web browsers, I keep current copies of all of the major web browsers on my machine just to see if there are differences in how they render web pages. Pieces of ASCII art can were copied and pasted into notepad, TextEdit, or other “plain text” software depending on which operating system I was using at the time. It is not a good idea to use a word processor to save ASCII art because word processors add a layer of coding into the text that can lead to the ASCII becoming out of alignment and the picture lost as a consequence.

There were times when I found that I would want to capture a picture of their screen in order to show how the group oriented the artifacts or how several artifacts work with each other. This is called making a screen grab and it is rather easy to do. Windows users are supplied with Microsoft's Snipping Tool that can be found in the start menu, and Mac users can simply hold down the Command and Shift keys while hitting the number 4. Both of these will turn the cursor into a little cross-hair that can then be used to draw a box around what the researcher wants to save.

When saving these digital artifacts I tried to make sure to add in some notes to it just like copying fieldwork notes into a journal, making sure to note where an artifact was found, the environment from which it is saved from (e-mail, website, blog, forum post, etc.), and information on how to find the site in the future. These notes were then used to help decipher the variations of the artifacts that are found. All of these techniques were employed at various stages, with varying degrees of success.

In-Box Traditions

In order for any e-mail to be considered a folk artifact it must arrive in a traditionally folk way. The vast majority, I would estimate over ninety percent (This number is purely conjecture and not based on any scientific data yet collected), of all folk artifacts that are sent via e-mail are "forwards." A forward is something that one person receives and then sends it on to other people, usually more than one person at a time. The forward is easily recognizable in the in-box because all of the major e-mail providers place a marker at the beginning of the subject line. These markers are usually Fw:, Fwd:, or a similar combination of letters that mark it as being forwarded. The one exception to this would be the very first recipient who would see a normal subject title, but at this point it would not be considered folklore because it has not moved on and spawned variations of itself.

Most of the major e-mail providers make forwarding something received quite easy. Yahoo! Mail, which in the week ending February 26th, 2011, was the fourth most visited site on the internet (Top 20), has a button at the top of the e-mail for forwarding the message. Microsoft Live Hotmail and Google's Gmail both have a click-able link at the bottom of the message as well as the ability to forward the e-mail in a drop menu accessed by clicking on a downward facing arrow in the top right of the e-mail message. From this quick analysis, Yahoo best understands the popularity of the forward and has made it a prime feature. Hotmail and Gmail seem to assume that the user would read to the bottom of the mail before forwarding but still provide an easy method for forwarding the message on from the top. Those three services comprise a very commanding majority of all e-mail addresses in existence, and the ease that they give to forwarding messages shows exactly how common and traditional this type of communication has become.

The remaining true folk artifacts that are transmitted via e-mail fall into the category of the digital customary. These can be sent by themselves or mixed into a regular e-mail. Quite often a digital superstition is added to an e-mail to make it a chain letter. Physical chain letters have a long history in the folklore of several continents (Dundes 422). With the advent of extremely fast and free delivery of electronic mail it is only natural that the old form becomes adapted to the new technology. Blank defines the e-mail chain letter as "any form of communication that demands recirculation of its contents and threatens the possibility of missed opportunities, injury, or ill-fate for loved ones or the receiver if they refuse to comply" ("Examining" 15). As previously stated, many of the forwarded digital folklore e-mails contain elements of chain letters, including two that I analyze in the next chapter, even though one is clearly a parody.

CHAPTER 4

CASE STUDIES IN DIGITAL FOLKLORE

This chapter puts the theory and methodology of the previous chapters to use in the study of e-mail forwards that were sent to digital.folklore@gmail.com. Through a careful analysis I determine if each of these are in fact digital folk artifacts, classify them, and work on the analysis of what each piece means to the culture of internet users. Since these forwards came in anonymously, no real-world cultural or folk group can be readily attached to them, so I refer to the cultural group simply as "forwarders" as they fit Dundes's qualifications for a folk group that I detailed in chapter two. All forwarders share an interest in passing on e-mail forwards and that interest is the catalyst that would let the forwarders know who would be more receptive to receiving forwards, as well as who they can expect to receive forwards from.

Statistical Analysis of Collection

I collected a total of forty-two e-mails during the collection. Of the forty-two there were twenty-six instances each of customary and material digital folk objects and thirty-seven instances of digital vernacular. This means 61.9% of all forwards I collected contained customary and material, which is just slightly less than two-thirds, while 88% contained vernacular. From this I can deduce that the vernacular is still the primary means of the transmission of digital folk culture but the customary and material are employed by a majority. The next paragraphs breaks down the three categories from the largest number of instances collected to the fewest.

Of the vernacular that I collected ten, or 27% of the total vernacular, contained urban legends that I define as stories that are told as true. Nine of the forwards, or 24.3%, contained jokes. Seven, or 18.9%, contained stories that were not told as true. There was a total of five

instances each (13.5% of the total vernacular each) of Christian prayers and anti-Obama propaganda, and a single instance of a learning list. These numbers prove that 40.4% of the total forwards carry stories of some kind, which means that storytelling is a major part of the establishment of digital folk groups.

Within the customary there were twelve forwards, which comprise 46.1% of the total customary, that ask the reader to forward the message again. Four of the messages (15.3%) state that God will bless the user if the message is forwarded, and four more ask that when the message is forwarded that the original sender be included, a phenomena that I call circular forwarding. Another four break the forth wall in order to give a sense of the writer of the forward is speaking directly to the reader. There was a single instance (3.8%) that implores the reader to forward the message to avoid a disaster, and another single instance that states the reader *will* forward it, giving no other option.

The vast majority of the material folk objects in the collection are pictures that were collected to accent the vernacular. A total of sixteen of the twenty-six forwards, or 61.6%, contained picture files to accent the vernacular. Five of the twenty-six, 19.2%, contained no words and were just forwarded collection of pictures, and I consider these five to be the most akin to digital versions of xeroxlore. Three, 11.5%, of the objects were Powerpoint presentations and there was one each, 3.8% each, of .pdf documents and .wmv movie files. This breakdown proves that pictures are a very dominant way of transmitting folk culture on the internet.

If you take the thirty-seven forwards that contain a form of vernacular and add in the five forwards that contain groups of xeroxlore style pictures you get forty-two, which is exactly the number of e-mails that I collected during this project. From this I can assume that while vernacular is necessary to transmit culture, after all the oral tradition is the original source and

transmission of real-world folklore, there are times on the internet when the sharing of pictures serves as a valid means of digital folklore exchange. I did not go in depth on any of the xeroxlore collections as there are many other sources that deal with the subject in much more detail that I can cover here. Instead, I focused on a few of the e-mails that I received that show other forms of digital folk exchange.

Seven Percent

Two times I received an e-mail with the subject line of "7%" and one of which added the line "a must read." One of the e-mails contains a list that is supposed to be a woman's forty-five lessons learned in her ninety years of life, the other is a moral tale about how the only difference in souls that wind up in Heaven and Hell is that the people in Heaven have learned to work together, while those in Hell have not. These two e-mails have almost nothing in common except the ending lines:

> *Its estimated 93% won't forward this. If you are one of the 7% who will, forward this with the title '7%'. [sic]*
>
> *I'm in the 7%.*

These e-mails are coming up with an arbitrary number to entice the reader to pass the message on. By playing on the fact that the forwarders thought the message was appropriate for the reader they have placed themselves into a small minority of people who would pass the message on. This is a fabrication because one study done in 2005 found that thirty-six percent of people surveyed would pass on e-mail forwards (Kibby 786). I could not find any evidence that seven percent of people would pass on an e-mail forward, but from a psychoanalytic standpoint I can see where this would come from.

The seemingly random percentile actually has its roots in the sacredness of the number seven, which can be traced back to ancient Babylonia. The Babylonians, Jews, Persians, and

Greeks, after Pythagoras, all held the number seven as sacred because of the seven day phases of the moon (Chrysanthis 81-82). The process of the moon changing from full to half, half to new, new to half, and half back to full each take seven days. The ancient tradition of this cyclical magical number lends itself well to the cycle of e-mail forwarding. The fact that e-mail forwards have a circular forwarding customary, like I described at the beginning of this chapter, further emphasizes the cyclical phase of the moon as a metaphor for forwarders.

Top This for a Speeding Ticket, an Urban Legend

This is the full text of an e-mail that was sent to digital.folklore@gmail.com anonymously on December 3, 2009. It originally bore the title "Fwd: Top This One for a Speeding Ticket." I have preserved the story as best as possible when transcribing it into this work. The text itself is identical to the text I received, I only changed the format and font for readability. This piece had no digital material artifacts with it. Instead what was forwarded was simply the text as follows.

> *Two California Highway Patrol Officers were conducting speeding enforcement on I-15, just north of the Marine Corps Air Station at Miramar . One of the officers was using a hand held radar device to check speeding vehicles approaching the crest of a hill. The officers were suddenly surprised when the radar gun began reading 300! miles per hour. The officer attempted to reset the radar gun, but it would not reset and then turned off.*
>
> *Just then a deafening roar over the treetops revealed that the radar had in fact locked on to a USMC F/A-18 Hornet (Northrop Grumman aircraft) which was engaged in a low flying exercise near the location.*
>
> *Back at the CHP Headquarters the Patrol Captain fired off a complaint to the*

USMC Base Commander. The reply came back in true USMC style:

Thank you for your letter. We can now complete the file on this incident.

You may be interested to know that the tactical computer in the Hornet had detected the presence of, and subsequently locked on to your hostile radar equipment and automatically sent a jamming signal back to it, which is why it shut down.

Furthermore, an Air-to-Ground missile aboard the fully armed aircraft had also automatically locked on to your equipment location.

Fortunately, the Marine Pilot flying the Hornet recognized the situation for what it was, quickly responded to the missile system alert status and was able to override the automated defense system before the missile was launched to destroy the hostile radar position.

The pilot also suggests you cover your mouths when cussing at them, since the video systems on these jets are very high tech.

Sergeant Johnson, the officer holding the radar gun, should get his dentist to check his left rear molar. It appears the filling is loose. Also, the snap is broken on his holster.

Thank you for your concern.

Semper Fi

This tale has been circulating the internet since at least 1995 (Mikkelson); I received a copy of it on December 3, 2009. A Google search, done in February of 2011, for "radar gun fighter jet" wields over 50,000 results, with the majority of the links on the first three pages leading to variations of the story. A quick survey of the websites that host versions of the text of this urban legend show a wide variety of users from the popular Discovery Channel show

Mythbusters, complete with a plea for the Mythbusters to test the urban legend (ryanjsmall), to a United States Marine web forum that has responses that plays up the superiority of the Marine pilot and the response letter sent to the police (jetdawgg). The changes made to the story, namely ryanjsmall leaving out the letter from the Marine base, still fall within the same base formula (police on empty road, radar gun showing a very high speed, the plane almost firing its weapons and/or jamming the police radar). There are dozens more sites that have versions of this urban legend on them, but I choose these two sites because emically these two examples from the web offer wonderful insight to the spread and perpetuation of this urban legend.

Most users either understand that the story is a fabrication, or somebody is quick to point it out to them. Ryanjsmall's post to the Mythbusters asking for elements of the urban legend to be tested show that people believe that there are parts to this urban legend that can happen in the real-world. The following discussion on ryanjsmall's version centers around proving that the urban legend itself is not true, and one member even goes so far as to call it debunked in several countries.

The Marines, as evidenced in jetdawgg's posts, enjoy the story as a means of empowerment through the actions of the Marine pilot in their version of the urban legend who then move the discussion to military aircraft. One person on the Marine's board posted that snopes.com debunked this urban legend, but knowing the tale itself to be false did not stop the Marines from having their conversation about military technology. A similar account about a British police duo and a NATO plane leaves out the snarky remarks from the military base yet keeps the rest of the story intact (pugugly{p}).

Both of these groups are using nearly the exact same version of the urban legend that I received in my in-box. From an emic view this urban legend has moved beyond the realm of the

simple e-mail user to more specialized groups, such as the Marines, that I can only study etically. This transference of a single story to multiple discourse groups with limited, but existent, variants are among the key factors in labeling this a true digital folk artifact. None of the storytellers involved placed any sort of name with it, leaving it anonymous, thus justifying this urban legend as a true folk artifact by fulfilling all five main requirements for folklore as set forth by Brunvand (*Study* 14).

Knowing that this is a true folk artifact allows us to study it in different ways. Etically this piece can serve a number of functions. It can be seen as a piece of encouragement that our military has such sophisticated technology that it is able to destroy even a small radar source that it perceives as a threat. Without knowing who sent this e-mail forward, I can go no further in determining the discourse groups that it could circulate in. In the meta group of internet users this piece could be used in its many variations of military aircraft from any country of origin as either a joke on the police or a show of support or awe for the military.

The idea that the camera on a plane moving at over three hundred miles per hour is sensitive enough to tell that the sergeant in the urban legend needs to have his filling checked is quite unlikely, possibly why pugugly{p}'s British account left it out. While the overall story can lead to a feeling of security knowing that the United States has such great technology, one might also worry about exactly how that super sensitive camera could be employed.

From a purely etic standpoint I use this piece for a glance into how different digital folk groups handle the same information. This understanding could be used as a lead into the group in order to better acquaint myself with their customs, beliefs, values, and memes if I ever persue a more detailed study of one of these digital folk groups. From this entry point I could work in a traditional manner to gain a rapport with the group and eventually learn the emic value of the

urban legend to the group. This type of lead-in would probably not come from just discussing this e-mail with the folk group in question, but it does provide a starting point.

The Gay Flight Attendant, A Joke

This is the full text of an e-mail that was sent to digital.folklore@gmail.com anonymously on October 10, 2009. It originally bore the title "Fw: True Story." I have preserved the story as best as possible when transcribing it into this work. The text itself is identical to the text I received, I only changed the format and font for readability. This piece was also transmitted without any digital material artifacts. These two forwards help to prove that the vernacular is the prime method for communicating digital culture.

My flight was being served by an obviously gay flight attendant, who seemed to put everyone in a good mood as he served us food and drinks.

As the plane prepared to descend, he came swishing down the aisle and told us that "Captain Marvey has asked me to announce that he'll be landing the big scary plane shortly, so lovely people, if you could just put your trays up, that would be super."

On his trip back up the aisle, he noticed this well-dressed and rather Arabic looking woman hadn't moved a muscle. "Perhaps you didn't hear me over those big brute engines but I asked you to raise your trazy-poo, so the main man can pitty-pat us on the ground."

She calmly turned her head and said, "In my country, I am called a Princess and I take orders from no one."

To which (I swear) the flight attendant replied, without missing a beat, "Well, sweet-cheeks, in my country, I'm called a Queen, so I out-rank you. Tray-up, Bitch."

Jokes are one of the most beloved of all folklore types, and this extends to digital folklore as well. One of the most often researched areas in jokelore done in the real-world concerns the performance of the joke teller. This is not an option in digital folklore because unless the original creator uses emoticons or other digital gestures there is no way of telling the original emotional intent of the joke. Even if the original creator used those gestures, they could easily be faked in order to give a false emotional imprint to the joke. Instead of looking at performance, digital folklorists should concern themselves with the content and reception of a joke.

This joke has been archived on many internet sites, but for the purpose of reception I will look closely at two of these. One is a forum that is dedicated to online jokes and humor, called experienceproject.com, and the other is a forum that is run for and by homosexuals called realjock.com. The two forums represent the two obvious folk groups that would circulate a joke about a homosexual, and their reactions and comments while they parallel in the response to the humor of the story but diverge in the discussion of the sexuality and actions of the flight attendant.

The version of this joke posted to the "I Love Jokes and Riddles" section of experienceproject.com had garnered fourteen responses when I looked at the page on February ninth of 2011, all of which except the last express laughter (kinkyflower). This particular folk group take the joke simply as a joke, enjoying it for the twist at the end and the ability of the flight attendant to think quickly on his feet.

The homosexual forum took the conversation in a completely different direction than the joke forum. While there were posts that expressed laughter over the joke, there was also a discussion of the perks of having a gay flight attendant, and several posts that express fantasies about gay flight attendants that they had met. The gay forum abounded with stories of other gay

flight attendants and the special treatment that they gave to the people posting the stories. The posters on the forum also pointed out that this was the script of a short sketch comedy skit staring gay celebrity Ru Paul that aired in 1995. This skit could serve as the origin of the urban legend that has been circulated as a forward.

This joke also serves as a wonderful way to read digital customary performance into an e-mail. There is one time in the story in which the fourth was is directly broken using the text "I swear" in parenthesis, this same line exists in all three variations on the web that I mention above as well. This emphasis breaks the reader's attention from the story and places it on the teller. This gives a bit of personality to the cold light of the computer screen and allows the story to sink in better because it has made itself more appealing.

This piece also served as a stark contrast to the rest of the collection because it was the only forward received with homosexual content.

The Center of the Bible

What follows in this appendix is the text that came off of a PowerPoint presentation that I received as an e-mail forward anonymously on December 3, 2009. It originally bore the title "Fw: Fw: The Center of the Bible (must see)AMAZING," I have preserved the story as best as possible when transcribing it into this work. The text itself is identical to the text I received, I only changed the format and font for readability.

Each slide contained text that was placed on top of a photograph. Unfortunately, due to copyright law I am unable to copy the images here. Since I received this anonymously, I am unable to discern who is the original copyright owner, if there is one, and therefore I am not putting myself in the position of a possible copyright infringement. Instead, I attempt to give a

short description of the photographs from each slide in brackets before I transcribe the text that was on the slide. I continue to use this method for the rest of the pieces that contain images.

[Two people holding hands on a very small desert island.]

This is pretty strange how it worked out this way. Even if you are not religious, you should read this.

[A road leading into the sunset, everything is a shade of red.]

Q: What is the shortest chapter in the Bible? A: Psalm 117

[A night scene in the desert with a meteor shower, bright crescent moon and a bright star.]

Q: What is the longest chapter in the Bible? A: Psalm 119

[A picture of a lake at dawn. It must be winter because the trees have no leaves.]

Q: Which chapter is in the centre of the Bible? A: Psalm 118

[A landscape picture of several snow covered pastures with sunbeams coming through clouds.]

Facts: There are 594 chapters before Psalms 118. There are 594 chapters after Psalms 118. Add these numbers up and you get 1188.

Q: What is the centre verse in the Bible? A: Psalm 118:8

[A picture of the ocean at sunset with palm trees in the foreground. Everything is shaded orange.]

Does this verse say something significant about God's perfect will for our lives?

The next time someone says they would like to find God's perfect will for their lives and that they want to be in the centre of His will, just send them to the centre of His Word!

[Sunset behind mountains with a river meandering through pine trees in the foreground.]

Psalms 118:8 (NKJV)"It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man."

Now isn't that odd how this worked out… or was God in the centre of it?

Before sending this, I said a prayer for you.

Have you got a minute — 60 seconds for God?

All you do is simply say a small prayer for the person who sent you this to you.

[Sunset behind ocean waves. Everything is shaded red.]

"Father God, bless my friend in whatever it is that you know he or she may be needing this day! May their life be full of your peace, prosperity, and power as they seek to have a closer relationship with You. Amen."

[Aerial photo of Niagra falls at night.]

Then send it on to 10 other people. Within hours, 10 people have prayed for you, and you caused many people pray to God for other people.

Then sit back and watch the power of God at work in your life for doing the thing that you know He loves.

[Another picture of Niagra Falls.]

When things get tough, always remember... faith doesn't get you around trouble,it gets you through it !"When you relinquish the desire to control your future, you obtain happiness."

[Picture of a beach taken from high on a mountain. The mountain slope can be discerned from the picture.]

May God bless you!

[A beautiful waterfall.]

This narrative came into digital.folklore@gmail.com as a PowerPoint presentation, which qualifies it as a digital material object, but some quick research shows that the wording circulated for years as a traditional text forward. The person who took the text of this forward and placed it on top of pictures of sunsets and waterfalls used nearly the identical text that was collected by snopes.com in 2001. However, the creator of the PowerPoint added in a chain letter element to the end to add a customary folkloric element.

Instead of a threat of harm or ill will that is often present in a chain letter, this digital customary has a threat of a missed prayer opportunity. The text states that if it is passed on to ten people those ten people will pray for you. This is an interesting variation of the digital customary act and one that I listed as both a prayer and a blessing in the statistics in the beginning of this chapter. It offers the hope of an intangible reward if it is passed on. In circles of Christian believers this emphasis on the efficacy of prayer would further reinforce their sense of belonging to the community of other Christians.

Reinforcing community traditions through adding a digital customary action to an older digital vernacular story in order to create a material digital artifact is a unique mixture that I have not encountered before. Assuming that this file was made by a Christian who wished to add a layer of faith to the text from an e-mail forward that he or she had received created this amazing mixture of digital folk forms, which becomes a more interesting piece of study than Snopes.com's attack against the faulty math of the original story.

The nature images that were chosen for the background also seem to be chosen in order to appeal to the Christian faithful. By presenting words designed to remind and reinforce their faith over images of intense natural beauty, a faithful reader would be subliminally reminded of

the power and majesty of their God. The images of beauty and the sublime were carefully chosen to make an emotional response within the reader in order for the digital customary act to be more compelling. Little effects like this are what make some e-mail forwards stand out more than others.

One thing that really stood out to me as well is the spelling of "centre." As I was transcribing the short presentation I noticed that the spelling was the traditional British version of the word, meaning that this particular piece probably originated outside the United States. The spelling alone shows that this forward has made its way around the English reading world to my in-box. Even somethings as simple as the spelling of a word can show us how connected the internet has made the world.

A Response to Forwards, A Purely Internet Phenomena

This is the full text of an e-mail that was sent to digital.folklore@gmail.com anonymously on November 16, 2009. It originally bore the title "Fwd: Fw: SO funny!" I have preserved the jokes while transcribing it into this work, yet there are images that I cannot transcribe. The text itself is identical to the text I received, I only changed the format and fonts for readability. The images were all of the "clip-art" type that are publicly distributed, and therefore I would not consider any of the images to be digital folk artifacts. I describe the images as they appear in the original forward by placing a verbal description in brackets.

I just want to thank all of you for your educational e-mails over the past year. I am totally screwed up now and have little chance of recovery.

[Cartoon woman in blue dancing while holding flowers.]

I no longer open a public bathroom door without using a paper towel or have them put lemon slices in my ice water without worrying about the bacteria on the lemon

peel.

I can't use the remote in a hotel room because I don't know what the last person was doing while flipping through the adult movie channels.

[Man's hand holding a t.v. remote.]

I can't sit down on the hotel bedspread because I can only imagine what has happened on it since it was last washed.

I have trouble shaking hands with someone who has been driving because the number one pastime while driving alone is picking ones nose (although cell phone usage may be taking the number one spot).

[Two cartoon hands shaking.]

Eating a little snack sends me on a guilt trip because I can only imagine how many gallons of Trans fats I have consumed over the years.

[Drawing of a slice of chocolate cake with chocolate icing.]

I can't touch any woman's purse for fear she has placed it on the floor of a public bathroom.

I MUST SEND MY SPECIAL THANKS to whoever sent me the one about poop in the glue on envelopes because I now have to use a wet sponge with every envelope that needs sealing.

[An envelope with a smiley face.]

ALSO, now I have to scrub the top of every can I open for the same reason.

[A photograph of a can of Hunt's Tomato Paste, and a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer.]

I no longer have any savings because I gave it to a sick girl (Penny Brown) who is about to die in the hospital for the 1,387,258th time.

I no longer have any money at all, but that will change once I receive the $15,000 that Bill Gates/Microsoft and AOL are sending me for participating in their special e-mail program.

I no longer worry about my soul because I have 363,214 angels looking out for me, and St. Theresa's Novena has granted my every wish.

[A cartoon angel with animated, slowly flapping wings.]

I no longer eat KFC because their chickens are actually horrible mutant freaks with no eyes or feathers.

[A dancing roasted whole chicken.]

I no longer use cancer-causing deodorants even though I smell like a water buffalo on a hot day.

THANKS TO YOU I have learned that my prayers only get answered if I forward an e-mail to seven of my friends and make a wish within five minutes.

BECAUSE OF YOUR CONCERN, I no longer drink Coca Cola because it can remove toilet stains.

[A photograph of three bottles of a generic brand cola.]

I no longer can buy gasoline without taking someone along to watch the car so a serial killer won't crawl in my back seat when I'm pumping gas.

[A cartoon of a man pumping gas into a green car.]

I no longer drink Pepsi or Dr. Pepper since the people who make these products are atheists who refuse to put 'Under God' on their cans.

[A cartoonish drawing of a soda machine.]

I no longer use Saran Wrap in the microwave because it causes cancer.

[A picture of Glad Freezer Bags.]

AND THANKS FOR LETTING ME KNOW I can't boil a cup of water in the microwave anymore because it will blow up in my face... Disfiguring me for life.

I no longer check the coin return on pay phones because I could be pricked with a needle infected with AIDS.

I no longer go to shopping malls because someone will drug me with a perfume sample and rob me.

I no longer receive packages from UPS or Fed Ex since they are actually Al Qaeda in disguise.

I no longer shop at Target since they are French and don't support our American troops or the Salvation Army.

I no longer answer the phone because someone will ask me to dial a number for which I will get a phone bill with calls to Jamaica, Uganda, Singapore and Uzbekistan. [A drawing of a red telephone with only nine buttons.]

I no longer buy expensive cookies from Neiman Marcus since I now have their recipe.

THANKS TO YOU I can't use anyone's toilet but mine because a big brown African spider is lurking under the seat to cause me instant death when it bites my butt. [A drawing of a toilet.]

AND THANKS TO YOUR GREAT ADVICE I can't ever pick up $5.00 dropped in the parking lot because it probably was placed there by a sex molester waiting underneath my car to grab my leg.

I can no longer drive my car because I can't buy gas from certain gas companies!

[A drawing of a cartoon dog sleeping in front of a gas pump.]

I can't do any gardening because I'm afraid I'll get bitten by the brown recluse and my hand will fall off.

[A drawing of a cartoon flea.]

If you don't send this e-mail to at least 144,000 people in the next 70 minutes, a large dove with diarrhea will land on your head at 5:00 p.m. tomorrow afternoon and the fleas from 12 camels will infest your back, causing you to grow a hairy hump. I know this will occur because it actually happened to a friend of my next door neighbor's ex-mother-in-law's second husband's cousin's beautician...

[A drawing of a cartoon frog sitting on the words "Have a Great Day!"]

Oh, by the way.....

A German scientist from Argentina, after a lengthy study, has discovered that people with insufficient brain activity read their e-mail with their hand on the mouse.

Don't bother taking it off now, it's too late.

This piece could not exist without e-mail forwards. Every line in this forward is a parody of another e-mail forward. The pieces in question can be found in various sites on the internet, and many of the stories parodied were collected in Brunvand's book of urban legends *Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid* that features a chapter devoted entirely to e-mail forwards. Specifically, chapter nine of *Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid* contains variation on the killer in the backseat, needle in the coin return, perfume attack, icky envelope, and the KFC chicken urban legend's mentioned in this particular forward (241-253).

Brunvand collected a much different variant of the envelope than the one listed in the forward. The forward lists the envelopes having feces in the glue, while in the one collected in

Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid says that people who lick the envelope get a paper cut on their tongue, into which roach eggs from the glue gets lodged. Eventually a large mass grows in the licker's tongue which is the roach that feeds from the tongue tissue (251). Both of these present very disgusting possibilities.

This list of humorous anecdotes that respond to other e-mail forwards show that the forwards themselves have become memes. As I discussed in chapter two, the memes are fundamental building blocks of a culture, and this forward is, at its essence, a collection and redistribution of forwarded memes. Each of these short lines is a reference to a forwarded meme, and the overall effect of this forward is to perpetuate the memes of the group of forwarders in order to either prove membership, or introduce new memes to the newer forwarders.

The first twenty-nine entries evoke the core of twenty-nine different memes that circulate as e-mail forwards. While the author of this particular forward only gives one sentence in each of these twenty-nine entries, what is given is enough for anybody who has read one of the parodied e-mails to remember and understand the point to which the parody is referring.

These anecdotes carry a very interesting emic role in the study of the e-mail forward. First, they assume that the person receiving the forward is not only in the meta group of e-mail users but also in the digital folk group of people who read and forward these types of urban legends. Members of the group who read and pass on e-mail forwards would probably know more of the anecdotes, and from there they could probably figure out the stories that go with the rest.

Consequently, looking up Penny Brown on snopes.com gives a long perpetuated missing girl hoax, not a sick child. This little parenthetical inside another reference would only be caught by those who have read a lot of forwards or other collections of urban legends, and therefore

would be an inside joke. This could easily be overlooked for anybody who just casually reads e-mail forwards and urban legends.

While the majority of the anecdotes in this forward are ironic gestures stating the sender's thoughts on what the forwards have warned about, a few of the statements take the concept a little further and debunk the urban legends they are referring to. The anecdote that states “I no longer have any savings because I gave it to a sick girl (Penny Brown) who is about to die in the hospital for the 1,387,258th time” proves that the forward is intend for a parody effect, and it also describes the extent to which e-mail forwards are sent. Obviously a girl can not die more than once, let alone over a million times, but the forwarder could have received many different copies and variations on this theme. This line then becomes an expression of frustration at receiving all of these forwards.

This frustration could occur because it is not the type of motif that the forwarder enjoys receiving as a forward, or it could symbolize frustration in the number of any forwards received. Etically this could show that the forwarder has grown tired of the wasted space in his or her e-mail in-box and wishes for less clutter. Similar to “spring cleaning” rites in popular American culture, this could express that the forwarder is wishing to receive fewer e-mails of this nature as an attempt is made to clean his or her digital home.

This forward also expresses frustration by mocking a very common type of digital folk customary: the chain letter. The chain letter anecdote of this forward contains all of the elements that are required by the definition in Chapter three in that it demands that the message be passed on and it gives repercussions for not doing so. This one is obviously impossible for most e-mail users to carry out, because most people do not have the e-mail addresses of one hundred forty-four thousand people, but the likelihood of fleas from twelve camels investing your back,

causing you to grow a hairy hump is very slim. This could pose an actual threat to soldiers stationed in the middle east or to anybody who works in a zoo, but most people do not live in close enough proximity to camels for the repercussions presented in this forward posing any type of threat.

The chain letter usually contains testimonials that are designed to force the reader into a false sense of security. This usually comes from the anonymous person claiming to be some sort of authority on whatever is being discussed. In this forward the authority that we get for the repercussions of breaking the chain letter come from the forwarder's “friend of my next door neighbor's ex-mother-in-law's second husband's cousin's beautician.” The extent of removal of affinity that the forwarder goes through in order to prove the lack of authority presented in most chain letters shows that this forwarder has completely quit believing in the validity of the urban legends that arrive in their in-box, and they seem to be encouraging the same level of antipathy in the people that this forward is passed to.

The chain letter parody is immediately followed by another joke that makes fun of common e-mail forwards, one that I call the the catch prank. These are variations of catch pranks that exist in the real-world such as the common playground prank of telling somebody that if his/her hand is bigger than the face then she/he will get cancer, upon which the prankster smashes the victim's palm into his or her nose when they put a hand up to check. The hook employed in this e-mail that marks it as this particular type of prank is that a lot of internet users use their mouse wheel to scroll the text in the e-mail, this making it very likely that readers would have their hands on their mouses when they get to the bottom of the e-mail.

Looking at this e-mail emically leads the researcher to conclude that this is passed around in a group of people that enjoys these types of narratives. The fact that the original e-mail had the

subject line “Fwd: Fw: SO funny!” shows that the group that this circulates through understand the humor and irony presented. Emically this would not only show frustration from receiving a forward that the reader has either read before or did not want to read but also enjoyment of these types of forwards. The group that circulates these types of memes would most likely be well aware of the status of the parodied urban legends, hence the humor found in passing this forward.

This particular e-mail forward is also this budding digital folklorist's prize because it gave me a large variety of avenues to explore. Several of the anecdotes were unfamiliar to me before I began, and I had to search for some of the key terms in the anecdote in order to further explore some of the more common themes and motifs that are circulated in e-mail forwards. This research lead to new areas of study and opened up new interests in digital folklore. I found the exploration of the stories I had not heard before to be a wonderfully entertaining distraction from the rest of my research, and it took me several hours to get myself back on track, but I did learn, and later write in this thesis, about Penny Brown.

This parody piece also shows the depth of internet culture and how it relates to people's real-world interactions. Only two of the twenty-seven do not have a direct real-world correlation (the angel and the e-mail program). Everything else is proving that while people communicate extensively through e-mail, they have lives beyond their computers. When these forwarders go into the world they will be constantly reminded of the forwards that they have read as they see things referenced by the e-mails, and they will probably be thinking of what could become the next forward. This observation is not limited to the parody piece. All of the pieces I discussed have a basis in the physical world. This point simply illustrates that forwarders may enjoy their digital discourse, but they still have lives beyond the internet. The discourse group of forwarders are less likely to exist solely within that particular group than real-world discourse groups

because the internet offers them no central meeting point or face to face interaction. The forwarders may swap stories and pass on jokes, but they will require a real-world framework for what they experience.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

There is a long existent, and still thriving, culture of e-mail forwarders on the internet. The number and variants of forwards they pass on seems endless when looking at places that archive such forwards, and this study barely scratches at the surface of what can be found and studied. Through my exploration in this small corpus of forwards I have found a few truths. First, no matter how many people on the internet work to make sure that people understand that most of what is forwarded is false, people continue to forward these e-mails. Second, while looking at the web sites, such as snopes.com, that archive e-mail forwards I learned I have not seen very many different types, which means that studies of this nature could go on forever. Even though the depths have barely been plumbed by this short study, there are also many other ways that this study can go.

The statistics generated from the forwards that I collect prove that the digital vernacular, a direct descendant of the oral tradition, is still the primary means of communication and transmission of digital folk culture on the internet. Pictures and images are an omnipresent part of digital folk culture as well as the digital folk "meet" in flat screens loaded with imagery. There are many customs that forwarders use in order to assimilate new members and ensure the participation of existent members. The forwarders themselves are a very diverse group who would belong to many different types of discourse groups in the real-world.

What this work has done is show that what people are doing on the internet, as far as the exchange of folk culture goes, is identical to what people have been doing face to face for as long as there has been an oral culture. Culture will always adapt to whatever it needs to in order

to survive and perpetuate itself, and when given a new technology as influential as the internet culture will incorperate it in order to fit its ever changing needs.

What people do with this new technology also goes far beyond merely adapting previous folklore genres to the new environment. What people do with the internet is find and create new types of discourse groups that can only exist within the digital aether of the internet. People have adapted the ages-old methods of culture and society to this new landscape to create groups that only exist on-line, and there are many people who converse daily with people who have never, and probably will never, meet face to face. The internet has empowered people to create a new type of culture that mimics those founded around traditional folk oral cultures in a way that they may never communicate orally with other members of the group.

The theory and practice laid forth in this short work are the basic tools required to find, document, and study the various types of digital folklore that currently exist on the internet. In no way do I claim that what I have presented is an absolutely comprehensive guide to the practice, but it does cover more than enough than is required for the start of a digital fieldwork endeavor, whether an e-mail study such as this one, or a study of a web forum, social network, imageboard, or other type of digital folk group.

WORKS CITED

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. New York: Orion, 1964. Print.

Blank, Trevor J. "Examining the Transmission of Urban Legends: Making the Case for Folklore Fieldwork on the Internet." *Folklore Forum*. 37.1 (2007): 15-26. Web.

Blank, Trevor J. ed. *Folklore and the Internet*. Logan, Utah: Utah State UP, 2009. Print.

Brandel, Mary. "1963: The Debut of ASCII." *CNN.com*. Cable News Network. Web. Feb. 27, 2011.

Bronner, Simon J. *American Folklore Studies, An Intellectual History*. Lawrence, Kansas: Kansas UP, 1986. Print.

---. "Digitizing and Virtualizing Folklore." Blank 21-66. Print.

Brunvand, Jan. *Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid. The Book of Scary Urban Legends*. New York: Norton, 2004. Print.

---. *The Study of American Folklore, 3rd ed.* New York: Norton, 1986. Print.

Coiro, Julie, Michele Knobel, Colin Lankshear, and Donald J. Leu. *Handbook of Research on New Literacies*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Cullens, Chris. "Gimme Shelter: At Home with the Millennium." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. 11.2 (1999): 204-227. Web.

Chrysanthis, Kypros. "The Magic Numbers Three, Seven and Seventy-Two in Cypriote Folk-Medicine." *Folklore*. 57.2 (1946): 79-83. Web.

Dundes, Alan. *Interpreting Folklore*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1980. Print.

---, Simon Bronner ed. *The Meaning of Folklore: The Analytic Essays of Alan Dundes*. Logan, Utah: Utah State UP, 2007. Print.

---. "Structural Typology in Folklore." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*. 42.3 (Autumn 1986): 417-426. Web.

Foote, Monica. "Userpicks: Cyber Folk Art in the Early 21st Century." *Folklore Forum*. 37.1 (2007): 27-38. Web.

Frank, Russell. "The Forward as Folklore: Studying E-Mailed Humor." Blank 98-122. Print.

"Gay Flight Attendant." *realjock.com*. Gay Forums – All Things Gay, Jan. 22, 2008. Web. March 3, 2011.

Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.

Jetdawgg. "Top This One For a Speeding Ticket." *Leatherneck.com*. Marine Corps Community for Marine Veterans, Aug. 11, 2009. Web. March 3, 2011.

Kibby, Marjorie D. "Email Forwarders: Folklore in the Age of the Internet." *New Media and Society*. 7.6 (2005): 770-790. Web.

kinkyflower. "The Gay Flight Attendant." *Experienceproject.com.* I Love Jokes and Riddles Story Experience, June 16, 2009. Web. March 3, 2011.

Marshall, Jonathan Paul. "Gender in Online Communication." Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, and Leu 491-519. Print.

Mikkelson, Barbara and David Mikkelson. "Rumor Has It: snopes.com" *snopes.com*. Urban Legends Reference Pages. Web. Feb. 28, 2011.

"National and Local Weather Forecast, Hurricane, Radar and Report." *weather.com*. The Weather Channel, n.d. Web. Feb. 27, 2011.

Newell, William Wells. "On the Field and Work of a Journal of American Folk-Lore." *The Journal of American Folklore* 1.1 (1888): 3-7. Web.

"The Official Site of Major League Baseball." *mlb.com*. Major League Baseball, n.d. Web. Feb. 27, 2011.

"Online Activities, Daily." *pewinternet.com*. The Pew Internet and American Life Project, May 2010. Web. Feb. 23, 2011.

"Online Activities, Total." *pewinternet.com*. The Pew Internet and American Life Project, May 2010. Web. Feb. 23, 2011.

O'Reilly, Tim. "What is Web 2.0?" *oreilly.com*, O'Reilly Media, Sept. 30, 2005. Web. Feb. 23, 2011.

Pigliucci, Massimo. "The trouble with memetics." *Skeptical Inquirer* 31.5 (2007): 23-24. Web.

pugugly{p}. "Tornado 'Zaps' Police Radar Gun." honestjohn.co.uk. Honest John. Web. August 11, 2011.

Ryanjsmall. "Police Officers Close Call." *Discovery.com*. Mythbusters Message Boards, May 5, 2008. Web. March 3, 2011.

Sims, Martha. *Living Folklore*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2005. Web.

Thomas, Angela. "Community, Culture, and Citizenship in Cyberspace." Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, and Leu 671-697).

"Top 20 Sites and Engines." *hitwise.com*. Experian Hitwise, Feb. 26, 2011. Web. March 1, 2011.

Wal, Thomas Vander. "Folksonomy." *vanderwal.net*. Thomas Vander Wal. Feb. 2, 2007. Web.

Weil, Kevin. "Twitter Blog: Measuring Tweets." *Twitter.com*. Twitter. Feb. 22, 2010. Web. March 1, 2011. http://blog.twitter.com/2010/02/measuring-tweets.html

"Who's Online – Internet Demographics." *pewinternet.com*. The Pew Internet and American Life Project, May 2010. Web. Feb. 23, 2011.

APPENDIX

LIST OF FORWARDS COLLECTED

Fwd: Hows this for spreading the wealth???	01/21/10
Fwd: A Memory from 1987 (This is bone chilling!!!)	01/21/10
Fwd: MISS THIS GUY YET?	01/19/10
Fwd: 5 Surgeons	01/19/10
Fwd: Old Farmer's Advice	01/15/10
Fwd: One of the best stories I have ever heard!! Take a break and read this!!	01/15/10
Fwd: One Liners	01/15/10
Fwd: Christmas Wishes	12/25/09
Fw: This is so true please read it to the end	12/15/09
Fwd: Who are you?	12/07/09
Fwd: Top This One For A Speeding Ticket	12/03/09
Fwd: CARTOONS?	12/03/09
is this what u want?	12/02/09
(no subject)	12/02/09
Fwd: FW: 7% A Must Read!	12/02/09
Fwd: Slide 1	12/02/09
Fwd: FW: The Bucket List	12/02/09
Fwd: Fw: awesome pics	12/02/09
Fw: How pumpkin pies are made	11/20/09
Fw: Healthy Reminder	11/17/09
Fwd: FW: SO funny!	11/16/09
Fwd:	11/05/09
Fwd: Why can't He be our President?	11/05/09
Fw: Fw: The Center of the Bible (must see)AMAZING	10/30/09
Fw: No running in the house! - enjoy!	10/23/09
Fw: Life is Too Short	10/21/09
Fw: Navy Petty Officer - Mike Monsoor	10/20/09
Fw: Chicken Dinners	10/15/09
Fw: Three Sensitive Rednecks	10/15/09
FW: True Story	10/15/09
FW: 1907 Photo says it all! this is the way it is and should remain.	10/15/09
FW: A Warning to all Americans	10/15/09
Fw: A FUNNY CLEAN JOKE - BUT NOT PC	10/15/09
Fw: Virgins awaiting Muslims	10/15/09
Fw: - This was actually forwarded at least ten times before it came to me. Forwarded …	10/12/09
Fw: Susie - Forwarded Message	10/09/09
Fw: GENERATION 'Y'	10/01/09
Fw: Tennessee Football	09/28/09
Fw: There, I fixed it	09/28/09
Fw: Good Morning	09/24/09
Fw: 11 Most Expensive Catastrophes in Modern History	09/19/09
Fw: 7%	09/19/09
Fw: half boy half man - Here's a forward for you. My mother is notorious for sending this stuff. Forwarded …	09/17/09

VITA

JASEN BACON

Personal Data: Date of Birth: January 15, 1978

Place of Birth: Johnson City, Tennessee

Marital Status: Married

Education: M.A., English, East Tennessee State University, December 2011

B.A., English, East Tennessee State University, August 2009

Professional Experience:

Adjunct Professor, 2011

Department of Literature and Languages

East Tennessee State University

Teaching Assistant, 2010-2011

Department of Literature and Languages

East Tennessee State University

Graduate Assistant, 2009-2011

Department of Literature and Languages

East Tennessee State University

Retail Manager, 2004-2006

Zaxby's

Assistant Foreman, 2006-2009

Quad City Builders and Developers

Editor in Chief, 2010-2011

Mockingbird Student Literary Journal

Dean's List, East Tennessee State University, Spring 2007

Activities: Literati Literary Society

President, 2008-2010

Vice President, 2007-2008

Founding Member, 2007

Writing and Communication Center

Tutor 1996-1997, 2009-2011

Conference Papers Given:

"2 + 2 = *Nineteen Eighty-Four* an Exploration of the Origins and Inspiration of George Orwell's Dystopian Future." Southern Appalachian Student Conference On Literature, Johnson City, TN Sept. 25, 2010

"Making a Master-Thief." Third Annual Graduate and Undergraduate Student Conference on Literature, Rhetoric, and Composition, Chattanooga, TN April 2, 2011.