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“One for the Horror Fans” vs. “An Insult to
the Horror Genre”: Negotiating Reading Strategies in IMDb
Reviews of *The Cabin in the Woods*

Researching Online Horror Audiences

[1] The general plot synopsis for *The Cabin in the Woods* (Goddard, 2012) on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) reads: “Five friends go for a break at a remote cabin in the woods, where they get more than they bargained for. Together, they must discover the truth behind *The Cabin in the Woods*.” The film is categorized by genre on the site as “Horror / Mystery / Thriller” and the tagline (“You Think You Know The Story”) and accompanying poster—a black and white image of a cabin dissected in three horizontal portions, rotated like sections of a Rubik’s cube—are broad and mysterious.

[2] Plot synopses, posters, taglines, and genres help audiences determine whether or not they should watch a film. The promotional materials for *The Cabin in the Woods* shroud the film in mystery, which makes it difficult for audiences to determine if they will enjoy the film. Upon seeing the film, it becomes clear that the description only refers to a portion of the film: the traditional horror film plot in which twenty-something characters are systematically attacked and killed while partying at a remote cabin. There is no explicit reference in the promotional materials of a scientific facility hidden underground charged with the sacrifice of five character types to appease ancient gods. As a result, many members of the film’s audience are unaware of a significant portion of the plot when they begin to watch. How do audiences negotiate this uncertainty, and what is their response?

[3] This article analyzes IMDb reviews¹ of *The Cabin in the Woods* in order to explore two interrelated issues: what kinds of reading strategies do audiences² adopt to negotiate their understanding of the film, and how do film audiences use an online forum like IMDb to read and write about the film? Using a framework developed by Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore, I identify the reviews section of IMDb as a cultural public sphere that encourages users to adopt the dual role of audience member and reviewer. For *The Cabin in the Woods*, this entails articulating specific viewing strategies used to evaluate the perceived success of the film. This paper seeks to investigate how IMDb reviews contribute to the discursive

environment in which particular stylistic and narrative approaches are validated by the audience as essential elements for identifying and reading genre films. Online reviews are markedly different from other sources used in reception studies because they are unsolicited; these reviewers have elected to contribute their thoughts on *The Cabin in the Woods* of their own volition (unlike a formally solicited survey or focus group with pre-determined questions). While these elective responses are not necessarily reflective of how all audiences of the film respond to its complicated narrative, the 850 reviews on IMDb represent the largest collection of audience reviews on the internet. This repository of rich information therefore has the capacity to contribute to the dialogue around the film, including the methods by which everyday filmgoers understand and engage with the film and, more broadly, the horror genre in a publicly accessible forum. While this study can be used to inform the broader scholarship of reception studies, it should be particularly useful for exploring how audiences interpret and discuss a complex narrative such as *The Cabin in the Woods*, a film that refuses to adhere to the traditional conventions of its genre.

[4] There are infinite online opportunities for audiences to review films. IMDb has been chosen for this study because it is one of the most well-known online resources for information on specific films, cast members and production personnel, and because of the high number of reviews of *The Cabin in the Woods*. In their work on online feedback forums, Randu Jurca and Boi Faltings report that “The internet has made it possible for online feedback forums . . . to become an important channel for Word-of-mouth” (1, emphasis original). In this capacity, IMDb functions in much the same way as other online fan communities (including blogs and wikis), which serve as a cultural public sphere:

a) the discussants are anonymous, writing under nicknames or pseudonyms . . . they seldom reveal their precise social status, and, even if they do, their status does not matter within this particular discursive space; b) the [text] is criticized and problematized . . . ; c) anyone with internet access may join the party provided they obey the general rules of discourse. (Larsen 163)

A key distinction, however, is that unlike fan communities, IMDb reviewers are not contributing to an online community. In the user review guidelines page of the website, reviewers are explicitly told not to “review on other reviews,” which suggests that reviews are intended as standalone contributions (“User Reviews Guidelines”). There is also no capacity for readers to respond to reviews besides rating usefulness using “yes” or “no” buttons.

[5] At the time of writing, *The Cabin in the Woods* has been rated by 180, 319 IMDb users. The film has an average rating of 7.1 out of 10. This suggests a mostly favourable reception, but many of the user ratings do not provide qualitative data that can be analyzed.³ In order to gain insight on how the film has been evaluated by audiences, we must focus on the 850 reviews of the film. Of the reviews posted at the time of data collection, the sample analyzed here is comprised of 100 reviews. This includes reviews taken from the period surrounding the film's initial release in theatres April 13, 2012, as well as the film's release on DVD and Blu-ray on September 18, 2012. The decision to divide the sample in two was made in an effort to include both early film adopters and those who waited until the film was available in a variety of ancillary formats. This is especially important given the involvement of Joss Whedon, who has a sizable fan following that were anticipating the film's delayed release, as well as the fact that the film debuted first in the United States before being rolled out in international markets.

[6] The initial 50 reviews are all dated from the time of the film's theatrical release in the United States, as well as the time period immediately preceding its release when *The Cabin in the Woods* was screened at a variety of film festivals. The second group of reviews covers the time period from September 18 to September 29. Both groups are predominantly comprised of American reviews (n=55). There is a greater degree of diversity of reviewers amongst the second group, especially in non-UK European countries. This second group is also more critical of the film, with an average rating of 5.49/10 (compared to 6.51 in the first group). In addition to capturing a broad range of responses from both initial cinema audiences and DVD/BluRay viewers, the reviews have been coded to identify different kinds of responses to the film, including emotional responses, pleasures and displeasures, evaluations of specific filmic devices, interpretations of the film's ending, perceptions of its placement within the horror genre, and its intended audience.

[7] These questions are integral because *The Cabin in the Woods* is a self-aware horror film that is interested in more than scares and gore. The film is an obvious (meta)commentary on the genre, a point that is heavily acknowledged in the rapturous professional reviews for the film (at the time of this paper's publication the film sits at 92% fresh on Rotten Tomatoes). Professional reviews acknowledge inter-textual references and self-reflexive plot elements, but these are professional reviewers who have developed strategies for reading films and have the capacity and vocabulary to expand on their viewing experiences in writing. In examining IMDb reviews for the film, there is evidence of a variety of reading and writing strategies, as well as a discrepancy as to what constitutes a successful horror film.⁴

[8] *The Cabin in the Woods* anticipates audience familiarity with its seemingly recycled plot and references to other horror films (particularly in the third act when a variety of iconic monsters are seen). In IMDb reviews, the degree of familiarity and understanding of the film's intentions heavily influences reviewers' perceptions of the film's success. Isabel Pinedo explains that "Narrative pleasure derives from the intelligibility of the genre, from appreciating the deployment of generic conventions to discern the logic to the madness and from innovations that violate audience expectations" (110, emphasis added). To this point, she identifies that "The competent audience acquires knowledge that conditions expectations about the genre. The genre, in turn, arouses, disappoints, and redirects these expectations" (110, emphasis added). Upon reviewing the 100 reviews, three categories of reviewers have been identified based on reviewers' competency in reading and writing about the film, as well as their level of satisfaction with the film: 1) Competent/Satisfied reviewers, 2) Competent/Disappointed reviewers, and, finally, 3) Violator reviewers. By deconstructing the sample into three groups, it becomes possible to examine how IMDb reviews respond to *The Cabin in the Woods*' specific textual properties, the reading strategies they adopt, and how they use IMDb to write about the film.

[9] Reviewers in the first and the second group have a degree of familiarity with the horror genre and display an awareness of *The Cabin in the Woods*' narrative techniques. Both groups acknowledge the film's genre hybridity, its use of humor and the inclusion of self-reflexive and intertextual references. Reviews from both groups also rationalize their emotional response—be it positive or negative—often using filmic comparisons and personal preferences to elaborate on the film's success or failure. This tendency adheres to the site's recommendation on "what to include" in a review: the "best" reviews include "not only whether you liked or disliked a movie . . . but also why" suggesting that the best reviews qualify their responses to readers ("User").

[10] The Competent/Satisfied group is primarily comprised of reviewers who rate the film higher than the average score of 7.1. These reviews are frequently modeled on established conventions of professional film reviews, techniques that Kalviknes Bore identifies in her work on IMDb reviews of the romantic comedy film *(500) Days Of Summer* (Webb, 2009). Techniques may include "demonstrat[ing] an understanding of . . . narrative structures and [genre] conventions" as well as a "formal writing style that presents value judgements as objective and largely avoids any mention of personal responses" (Kalviknes Bore 149). Doing so allows these reviewers to present themselves as "experts" (Kalviknes Bore 149).

[11] In their reviews, Competent/Satisfied reviewers demonstrate that they have acquired “a taste for the destructuring tendency of [the] contemporary horror film, and a willingness not to resist it. Consequently, the genre audience greets a new horror film with the expectation of being surprised by a clever overturning of convention” (Pinedo, 88). Competent/Disappointed reviewers adopt many of the same reading strategies, but do not agree that the film is successful or they do not see its self-reflexive/intertextual nature as innovative. nitramd2000,⁵ for example, rates the film a 6/10, stating “i [sic] get it! the concept, the whole story within the story, the horror movie clichés, the play and pretty much minor parody of 80’s horror/slasher movies (most notably Friday the 13th). that [sic] being what it was i [sic] was perfectly fine with it.”⁶ Likewise reviewer WildestDreams acknowledges that he or she understands “the point,” but finds the film “insulting on so many levels.” Competent/Disappointed reviewers comprise the smallest group in the sample and many rate *The Cabin in the Woods* firmly in the middle of the ten point scale, such as innocuous (who rates the film 5/10): “It’s sort of interesting in parts, but you can only plug so many homages into a single film without it feeling like it’s just patched together from other people’s films. I can’t think of a single original scene or plot point in the whole movie.”

[12] Violator reviewers, on the other hand, interpret *The Cabin in the Woods* as a violation of their expectations. These reviews are more likely to employ the words “stereotype” and “cliché,” which initially suggests that there is an awareness of the genre’s narrative structures and conventions. Due to a lack of elaboration, however, Violator reviews often do not contain enough information for readers to fully understand their argument. Of the three groups, Violator reviews are nearly uniform in their low rating of the film (often 1s, 2s and 3s), but unlike reviews from the other groups, Violators have difficulty maintaining an emotional detachment. As a result, their reviews are more likely to abandon the pretense of objectivity. Kalviknes Bore identifies a similar phenomenon in her study of romantic comedies, noting that some reviews adopt a personal writing style with a focus on “subjective emotional responses,” including “emotive language, block capitals and multiple exclamation marks . . . to indicate the strength of such responses” (151). The inclusion of emotional responses without objectivity and a corresponding lack of information contextualizing those responses are the defining traits of Violator reviewers.

[13] With the three groups of IMDb reviewers identified, the remainder of this article will focus on the primary distinctions between the groups using a survey of the content of the reviews. In particular I will focus on horror conventions, narrative and the film’s third act, humor and, finally, intelligence, authorship, and ratings. Collectively these categories illustrate how everyday film audiences read and write about their screening experiences.

Postmodern Horror Genre Conventions, Self-reflexivity and Intertextuality

[14] *The Cabin in the Woods* belongs to the slasher subgenre. The conventions of this subgenre are outlined in Carol J. Clover's seminal work *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, which identifies characteristics such as the Final Girl, the structure and dynamics of the teen victim group, the qualities of the killer, and technical aspects such as the voyeuristic point of view gaze with which the victims are fetishized. Slasher films rose to prominence in the late seventies with the release of John Carpenter's low budget blockbuster, *Halloween* (1978). For several years the slasher subgenre flourished, but by the late eighties the market was saturated, audience demand decreased, and the genre went into decline (Wee 44-45). It was not until the mid-nineties that slashers were revived with the release of *Scream*, which became a \$103 million (The Numbers) word-of-mouth hit courtesy of its tongue-in-cheek, self-aware tone. The revitalization of the subgenre in the nineties was accompanied by a new awareness of the subgenre's conventions, including self-reflexive attitudes and "copious inter-textual references to earlier horror landmarks" (Syder 78) that catered explicitly to audiences "who believe very sincerely that they're smarter than the movies that they see" (Strauss, qtd. in Wee 45).

[15] These genre-savvy audience members are more willing to grant "a degree of license" (Pinedo 88) to innovative, risk-taking films. Take reviewer [Daniel Hollis](#):

What really makes *Cabin* stand out amongst the long stream of consistent horror movies is how it manipulates and twists the traditional conventions of a teen slasher horror movie . . . the story takes all the conventions of [sic] which we've grown accustomed to; the slow build-up, the unnecessary sex scene, the stupid decisions the protagonists make which cause you to shout at the screen due to their choices and throws it all on it's [sic] head creating a tongue in cheek comical look at how horror movies have become.

[16] As demonstrated by [Daniel Hollis](#)' review, a recurring element in reviews from all three groups is a judgment of the state and quality of the contemporary horror genre. [cadillac20](#) describes the output of the horror genre for the past several years as "pretty mediocre," [baron_genitalstrassen](#) declares the last twenty years have been "absloute [sic] garbage," while [Andre Carlson](#) believes that "the last 10 years have been consistently awful."

[17] The tendency to comment on the current state of the horror genre is more predominant in Competent/Satisfied reviewers, who are more likely to use their awareness of the genre to historically situate *The Cabin in the Woods*. [TdSmth5](#), for example, opens the review by contextualizing the environment in which the film was released: “The horror genre tends to play it too safe. There’s the slasher era, the torture porn era, and now we’re suffering through the awful lost footage era.” Reviews from the Competent/Satisfied group frequently position *The Cabin in the Woods* as the exception to the “mediocre, absolute garbage” of other recent horror subgenres while comparing and contrasting the film to one of the genre’s most popular recent texts: *Scream*.

[18] In the sample of 100 reviews of *The Cabin in the Woods*, *Scream* is mentioned 14 separate times—the most of any film aside from *The Evil Dead* (Raimi, 1981). Nearly all of these references are from reviewers in the Competent/Satisfied group. Six of these references are casual comparisons with little to no elaboration; the other eight expressly describe *Scream* as an influential text that has had a major impact on the genre. Reviews that feature a significant use of *Scream* describe it using phrases such as “shaking up the genre” ([cadillac20](#)), “original, inventive, and down right [sic] badass” ([KidDrehmann](#)), and “takes the horror genre and tries to re-invent it by doing something completely different” ([djp2000](#)). One review contrasts the metatextual approach of *Scream* with *The Cabin in the Woods*, explaining:

While SCREAM deconstructs the horror genre through the dialogue from its characters, CABIN takes a more subtle approach, as if the filmmakers were winking to the audience. CABIN deconstructs the horror genre and then builds it back up, forming a completely different creature. It assumes the audience is intelligent and has some fun in the process. While SCREAM ridicules the sad state of the horror genre, CABIN celebrates it. ([moviewizguy](#))

[19] These reviews reinforce Syder’s definition of contemporary horror films: “films [that] draw attention to their own textual construction and the rules and conventions through which they operate” (84). Drawing attention to its own textual construction readily applies to a text like *The Cabin in the Woods* because of the way it incorporates other horror texts into the narrative in an intertextual manner, as well as its audience’s awareness of those texts.

[20] There is a near 100% correlation between reviews with significant intertextual references to *Scream* and reviews which award high ratings for *The Cabin in the Woods*. These reviews tend to use superlative words such as “best,” “outstanding,” “fresh take,” and

"classic." On average these reviews rate *The Cabin in the Woods* 8.86/10 (significantly higher than the average IMDb score of 7.1). For some Competent/Satisfied reviewers, the conflation of *Scream* with *The Cabin in the Woods* is closely aligned with the belief that the latter will make a significant cultural contribution to the genre. The historical aspect of this comparison is important for understanding the Competent/Satisfied reviewer's mentality. Although *The Cabin in the Woods* did not reproduce *Scream*'s financial success (according to *The Numbers*, the Whedon/Goddard collaboration grossed \$71 million worldwide), there is a belief among Competent/Satisfied reviewers that *The Cabin in the Woods* will be as historically significant as *Scream*. Reviewer [MJalazo](#) writes, "I do not exaggerate when I say that this film [*The Cabin in the Woods*] will revolutionize the horror genre and go down in history as the most impactful film of its kind," while [moviewizguy](#) believes that "CABIN is not only a great film, it is an important one."

[21] This is contrasted by Competent/Disappointed reviewers, who use the comparison with *Scream* to suggest that *The Cabin in the Woods* is less successful than its aesthetic predecessor. As [waqas5050](#) writes, *The Cabin in the Woods* "Makes you appreciate *Scream* which masterfully dissected the modern horror movie and remained scary and funny at the same time." References to *Scream* also distinguish the first two groups from Violator reviewers. In a survey of Violator reviews, the 1996 film goes completely unmentioned. This may suggest that Violators are less familiar with the history of the horror genre and/or recent texts of significance.

[22] Across all three groups, there are also frequent mentions of *The Evil Dead*. References to this film are logical since the two share a number of characteristics, most predominantly the setting which gives *The Cabin in the Woods* its title. Following *The Evil Dead*, other texts that are frequently mentioned include: *Tucker & Dale vs Evil* (Craig, 2010) with four mentions, *Friday the Thirteenth* (Cunningham, 1980)-three, another Raimi feature, *Drag Me To Hell* (2009)-three, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974) with two. Several non-horror texts are also frequently cited, including *The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998) and *Scooby Doo*⁷ with four each.

[23] References to other films are most frequently used to highlight a likeminded tone (horror comedy), location (isolated cabin), plot device (surveillance) or character type (teens, zombies). In many cases a review will contain multiple references, for example [gregeichelberger](#)'s description of *The Cabin in the Woods* as "It's 'The Truman Show' meets 'Friday the 13th' meets 'The Evil Dead,' which [sic] just a little 'Ghostbusters' added to the concoction" or [pturner 1010](#)'s plot description summary as "So far, so *Evil Dead*, Wrong

Turn and Cabin Fever.” These comparisons provide insight into the writing strategies of IMDb reviewers: there is an implicit assumption on the reviewers’ part that readers are familiar with the named texts and will understand casual references to other films (John DeSando, describing *The Cabin in the Woods*’ tongue in cheek humour, simply writes “think *Scream*”).

[24] The greatest distinguishing factor for the use of intertextual references in IMDb reviews is not membership in one of the three groups, but rather the timing of the review. Although there are slightly higher numbers of references in Competent/Satisfied and Competent/Disappointed reviews, there is a greater tendency to include references to other films in reviews posted at the time of the film’s initial theatrical release. This may have been adopted as a writing strategy to help contextualize the viewing experience for readers who have not yet screened the film. In comparison, reviews posted following the film’s release on DVD and BluRay (often written by reviewers of the Violators group) use film references as a means of communicating individual horror preferences. One significant intertextual reference of note is *Scooby Doo*. Although there is a connection to the mystery solving teens and Whedon and Goddard’s work on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Scooby Doo* references in reviews for *The Cabin in the Woods* are primarily used in a derogatory fashion by Violator reviewers to imply that *The Cabin in the Woods* is a childish, juvenile and/or facile text.

Narrative Strategies and the Third Act

[25] The use of *Scooby Doo* in Violator reviews is part of a recurring theme surrounding issues of narrative comprehension and perceived violations of generic conventions. Several Violator reviewers struggle to make sense of the film’s complicated narrative (Sanjay Vyas: “Who set these people up? What’s the reason for the profiles? Who runs these operations? Who watches the show? What is at stake [as the lab scientist mentions]?”). Expressions of confusion are often accompanied by emotional comments (Mike Kreski writes: “the plot didn’t make any sense at all, [sic] it was just stupid, like the whole film”). Still others believe that the film’s use of generic tropes is stereotypical, clichéd or derivative. kaikai9, for example, acknowledges the inter-textual elements in a 2/10 review: “Think of every horror movie you have seen, mix it up and you have this movie. It is time for a little more originality and much less grabbing for previous movie straws and sucking on them as if they are your own.” kaikai9 does not identify the inter-textual references as pastiche, unlike Competent/Disappointed reviewer innocuous, whose

disappointment in the originality of Whedon and Goddard's script does not preclude the perceived rationale for referencing key horror texts.

[26] The level of dissatisfaction among Violators increases dramatically when the third act of the film is considered. The key distinction between the three groups is highlighted in their perceived understanding and appreciation for the film's explanation and subsequent open-ended, world-ending resolution. Violator reviewers frequently comment negatively on the film's final act and the explanation for the events of the film. Several of these reviews (often those reviews with a rating of one, the lowest available on IMDb) include comments expressing disbelief, anger, and incomprehension: "The twist still does not account for major plot lines and leaves the audience dozing off" ([Shankru Spam Begone](#)); "And the 'twist'? So ridiculous that no one will ever figure it out in several lifetimes. And after it's revealed you'll wish they hadn't bothered" ([violentjkd](#)); "All the demons/monsters at the end just didn't make sense" ([kellya217](#)); "The 'twist' which has nothing to do with the entire movie until the very end and is shamelessly explained by a new character in the last 5 minutes" ([joesloper](#)). These reviewers do not comment on the references to sacrifice embedded throughout the film,⁸ which may indicate that these elements were overlooked while viewing the film.

[27] This disdain for the film's conclusion is contrasted by the other two groups. Competent/Satisfied reviewers discuss the final act in terms of its transgressive behaviour ([Nicholas Casaletto](#): "something to twist the genre on its head, for the better"; [Rare Addict](#): "It's the climax, though, wherein the horror film genre is turned completely upside down, that the movie elevates to a whole new level. Simply put, crap hits the fan"). Competent/Disappointed reviewers, meanwhile, comment on the ending's failure to build on the film's premise. [adrongardner](#) writes "The ending especially is pretty flat. The rest of the film builds so much to it and it feels like Goddard and Whedon forgot that in referencing so much other material, they really need to write something good of their own." [saternbaby](#) critiques the finale as "uninspired Lovecraftian bit of nihilistic nonsense played out in such a sophomoric manner that it is impossible to find any social commentary beneath the weight of bombastic artifice." Therein lies the distinction: Violator reviewers voice their confusion over the film's ending; Competent/Disappointed reviewers believe they understand Whedon and Goddard's intentions and simply do not enjoy the chosen approach.

Parody, Pastiche, and Humor

[28] Another theme among *Violator* reviews is the negative correlation of the film's parodic elements in relation to its success as a "horror" film. Despite the film's categorization on IMDb as a "Horror/Mystery/Thriller," there is a great deal of humor in *The Cabin in the Woods*, much of it in the third act, which, as discussed, is one of the most disagreeable aspects of the film for *Violator* reviewers. Film theorist Jeffrey Sconce, writing about a similarly self-referential text, Wes Craven's *New Nightmare* (Craven, 1994), believes that ". . . self-consciousness . . . serves as an ironic commentary on the film's presumed viewership, a commentary that allows teens in on the joke" (112). Although *The Cabin in the Woods* was not marketed exclusively at teen audiences in the same way as the Freddy Krueger films were, the ironic commentary embedded in the cacophony of monsters unleashed in the third act is certainly evident. The presence of villains from *The Evil Dead*, *Hellraiser* (Barker, 1987), *The Strangers* (Bertino, 2008), and other films is what Frederic Jameson refers to as "cannibalization" (qtd. in Pinedo 112) or pastiche. The use of these techniques is not a new development for the genre, although there has been an intensification in the use of pastiche in horror films in the last thirty years, especially with regard to "the prominence of graphic violence to produce gory humour" (Pinedo 112). Both John McCarty and Philip Brophy have written about this phenomenon and its use in making the horrific humorous (and vice versa).

[29] For IMDb reviewers, this blending of genres is divisive. Once again, there is an alignment between Competent/Satisfied and Competent/Disappointed reviewers in their reading of *The Cabin in the Woods*' humour to satirize the conventions of the genre. Competent/Satisfied reviewers respond most positively (Rare Addict: "The bulk of *Cabin* serves as both a parody and an homage to classic horror movie tropes, with the sharp, witty writing of Joss Whedon and director Drew Goddard carrying the day"). This aspect of the film, more than any other, separates Competent/Disappointed reviewers from Competent/Satisfied. If one of the biggest selling features of the film for Competent/Satisfied reviewers is the intertextual jokes about other horror films, the wit and humor is far more polarizing for Competent/Disappointed reviewers: "I kept waiting for another meta-level of irony and satire to emerge. Perhaps the control room is funded by Hollywood, and this is how all the lame horror movies really get made? No such luck" (rabbitmoon).

[30] Along with the recognition of the generic tropes embodied by the five twenty-something protagonists (an element that the film explicitly references in its conclusion), the comedic nature of the film is one of the elements that *Violators* are most likely to acknowledge in their reviews. The success of the film's comedic moments is among the least

elaborated on components in Violator reviews; although humour is routinely raised as an unsuccessful component of the film, there is a lack of description that subsequently makes these reviews highly individualized and limits their accessibility to readers. Consider this extended passage by [Mike Keski](#):

2. Satire? Well it failed at that too, [sic] Tucker & Dale vs Evil was satire, this was perhaps trying at it at some points, but it was muddled with actual attempts at horror.

3. Comedy? All attempts of humor failed in my eyes, except for perhaps one joke, i [sic] did however laugh, but only because of how stupid it was, kinda like when a friend makes a terrible joke, but you laugh because it was so dumb [sic].

There is no explanation for why [MikeKeski](#) believes that the humour is stupid, or how he distinguishes comedy and satire, or why the comedic elements are “muddled” by the “actual attempts at horror.” The resulting review is so personal that it is inaccessible because readers do not have enough information to determine whether they agree with [Mike Keski](#)’s arguments. In this way several Violator reviewers limit the accessibility of their IMDb reviews to other readers.

Intelligence, Authorship, and Ratings

[31] The final theme that will be explored is the correlation between reviewers’ perception of the film’s intelligence and its correlation to issues of both authorship and IMDb ratings. In the 100 reviews sampled, there is a significant overlap between those reviewers who describe the film as intelligent or smart and those who identify themselves as fans of Joss Whedon. There are also a correspondingly large number of reviewers who describe the film as dumb or stupid and those who believe that the rating system on IMDb is broken or unreliable.

[32] Competent/Satisfied reviewers are much more apt to comment on the “intelligence” or “smartness” of the film. Comments such as “It is so incredibly smart and so deliciously clever” ([Terrell Howell](#)), and “It’s actually pretty brilliant how the film shows all its cards right off the bat” ([Al The Strange](#)) are typical of reviews from this group. Often these comments include references to co-writer Joss Whedon (and, to a lesser extent, Drew Goddard⁹). In addition to describing Whedon as a “God” ([Jack’Harding](#)) and describing themselves as “fans” ([listofnames](#), [emdoub](#)), Competent/Satisfied reviewers espouse “love” ([katyorr](#), [JakeJarvi](#)) for his “brilliant” work ([The Upcoming](#)) as well as heightened

expectations for the finished product ([jaguar313](#): "If anyone knows how to have fun with pop culture horror conventions, it's Joss Whedon"; [Rameshwar IN](#): "When I knew Joss Whedon was behind the movie, I had to watch it"). There is a higher proportion of these accolades in the first batch of reviews (n=7 compared to n=4 in DVD/BluRay reviews), which suggests that Whedon's popularity may have resulted in an early rush to see the long-delayed film and write an IMDb review espousing its worth. The attribution of authorship to Whedon must be considered when evaluating the content of these reviews, as Competent/Satisfied reviewers may be predisposed to appreciate the film due to their awareness of the self-reflexive and intertextual nature of Whedon's other work.

[33] In comparison, the tone of the references to Whedon in Competent/Disappointed reviews is more subdued and objective ([politically incorrect204](#) explicitly opens with "I will preface with the statement that I am not a Whedon fanboy"). In this capacity Whedon's name is used to reference an awareness of his previous works, which like the statements by Competent/Satisfied reviewers may be a formal technique to demonstrate an expert status to readers in order to increase the indications of reliability of the review's content.

[34] Few of the Violator reviewers mention either Whedon or Goddard. This group is significantly more likely, however, to make reference to ratings of the film on IMDb. Common refrains include "I'll NEVER believe IMDb Reviews Again" ([zack_wall](#)) and "This is the first time IMDb has given me such a horribly incorrect recommendation" ([Mike Keshi](#)). There is also a greater propensity for hyperbole, labeling *The Cabin in the Woods* the "worst" film or the "biggest disappointment." At times this derision is aimed directly at other IMDb users: "this is the first movie that sickened me so much i had to sign up to comment on what can only be described as an abortion. The fact that it got 7.4 out of 10 shows me how retarded the common movie watcher is" ([John Considine](#)). [chernobylpants](#) likewise makes a broad generalization about those who enjoy the film, dismissively stating, "I guess the positive reviews must be from teenagers." Theorist Jeffrey Sconce, in his piece on audience interpretations of slasher films and art horror films, has identified this reading strategy as a common refrain: "To say one film is 'good' horror and the other is not, or even to say that one film is horror and the other is not, presents a situation where a critic occupying a certain social and cultural position passes judgment on the viewing experiences and values of other social groups" (119). In this capacity Violator reviewers are much more inclined than Competent/Satisfied and Competent/Disappointed reviewers to dismiss the opinion of those who do not share their tastes.

[35] The majority of the 100 reviews include some form of recommendation for readers. Violator reviewers offer ominous warnings ([zippyandzany](#): "If you decided to rent it anyway don't blame me [sic] I tried to warn you"), while Competent/Satisfied reviewers are more likely to encourage fellow genre fans to seek the film out ([JakeJarvi](#): "This is a horror-lovers [sic] movie, it's a movie-lovers [sic] movie, it's a hell of a good time for people who just want to sit back and have a great ride"). Of the three groups, Competent/Disappointed reviewers maintain the greatest sense of objectivity in their reviews ([Richard-485-79397](#): "Everyone has their biases but giving this film a 'one' suggests not only a strong bias but an agenda, as well. Reviewers who give this film a 'one' have shown an inability to apply any objectivity in reviewing this work and should be ignored, entirely. Perhaps the same should be said for those giving it a ten").

[36] These comments reflect the diversity of film reviewers who use IMDb to voice their opinions and recommendations to other site users. Although Jahna Otterbacher admits that we know little about how IMDb users select which reviews to read (425), the usability of the site allows readers to select reviews based on a range of clickable options such as "Chronological," "Prolific Authors," "Loved It" and "Hated It" (the default is set to "Best," which is comprised primarily of Competent/Satisfied reviewers). Otterbacher suggests that readers may adopt three potential strategies: 1) reviews that articulate "views similar to their own," 2) reviews deemed "credible" based on an investigation of the reviewer's profile, and 3) the use of utility rankings (425).

[37] If this is true, IMDb offers members of each group an opportunity to connect with their peers in an accessible, open forum. As this evaluation of the reviews for *The Cabin in the Woods* demonstrates, there are a variety of reading and writing strategies that reviewers can (and do) adopt to communicate their views. Despite the diversity of opinions regarding the film's perceived success as a horror film, there are common themes that nearly all amateur reviewers use. These themes include an analysis of generic conventions, comparisons to other like-minded or preferred films, and, occasionally, the role of the author.

[38] There are distinctions, however. Reviewers I have categorized as Competent/Satisfied and Competent/Disappointed are more likely to adopt the stylistic techniques of what Kalviknes Bore calls "professional film reviews" (149) and members from both groups attempt to rationalize their emotional response—be it positive or negative—in an objective manner. In comparison, Violator reviewers are more inclined to write reviews with "subjective emotional responses" (Kalviknes Bore, 151) that often fail to elaborate on

arguments in a manner that allows readers to understand the personalized nature of the content.

[39] While it would be unwise to suggest that these results are broadly applicable for all film reviews on IMDb, they are consistent with the 850 reviews of *The Cabin in the Woods*. Much like *Scream* in the mid-nineties, *The Cabin in the Woods* makes significant use of self-reflexive and intertextual references to engage its audience. Failure to recognize these elements is much more likely to result in a lower rating on IMDb, while familiarity with the genre and its history is much more likely to result in a higher rating. There is significant work left to be done on the ways that users of the site select and use these reviews, but there is little doubt that IMDb has a valuable role to play in the study of how audiences contribute to critical reception of films, how different reviewers negotiate specific criteria for evaluating (genre) films, and how reviewers adopt the dual role of audience member and reviewer. These reviews are significant not only because they elaborate on the reading and writing strategies that everyday film audiences adopt, but also because of the ways they communicate these strategies in an unsolicited forum. Unlike the data that is collected by surveys and focus groups, these reviewers have discretion over the content they choose to highlight in their reviews. In the case of *The Cabin in the Woods*, this constitutes viewing strategies for understanding and discussing an unconventional horror film that features the significant use of self-reflexive and intertextual references. As this study has demonstrated, examining how audiences negotiate and communicate their reading strategies is vital for theorists seeking to understand the form and structure of critical, non-professional audience reception of horror films in the twenty-first century.

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Notes

¹ For the purposes of this paper, reviews refer to the written responses listed as "User Reviews" under the Quick Links section on the film's landing page. These written responses include the user's name, geographical location, a maximum of 1000 words and a minimum of 10 lines of text. Users also "vote" on the film's quality on a 10-point scale, where 1 is awful and 10 is excellent.

² Due to the anonymous structure of IMDb, little information is known about the users of the site. Individuals who contribute a review are required to provide a username and the majority include a geographical location, but other qualifiers such as gender, age, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation are unknown.

³ The 180, 313 ratings collected (as of November 23, 2013) is a summation of both the IMDb users who rated the film out of 10 without contributing a review and those users (850) who voted on the film's quality in their review. Thus the 7.1 rating is primarily composed of users (179, 463) who did not qualitatively elaborate on the criteria employed they used to rate the film.

⁴ There is a significant body of academic work that explores the audience appeal of the horror genre (see Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror*, Freeland's *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* and articles by Tamborini, Sparks, Zuckerman, and Lawrence, and Palmgreen in Weaver III and Tamborini's *Horror Films: Current Research on Audience Preferences and Reactions*).

⁵ For the sake of clarity, IMDb reviewer usernames are underlined.

⁶ All reviews are quoted from IMDb. Only the most egregious errors are marked with "[sic]."

⁷ It is unclear if reviewers are referring to the animated *Scooby Doo* or the live action feature film by Gosnell (2002).

⁸ References to sacrifice and the end of the world include the opening credits, Marty's (Fran Kranz's) belief that "society needs to crumble," Mordecai's (Tim De Zarn's) religious proclamations about lambs and slaughter, the painting Holden (Jesse Williams) discovers in his room, and the religious symbolism of the blood offerings Hadley (Bradley Whitford) makes after each murder.

⁹ Interestingly, in the majority of these cases, director Drew Goddard is overlooked or given brief mention (often in conjunction with his role as the writer of 2008's *Cloverfield*). In general there are significantly fewer references to Goddard and none mention Goddard without also mentioning Whedon.