

Transformative Works and Cultures, special issue, Performance and performativity in fandom, No. 18 (March 15, 2015)

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Editorial

Performance and performativity in fandom

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Editorial overview of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, No. 18, special issue, "Performance and Performativity in Fandom."

[0.2] *Keywords*—Behavior; Practice

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1. Introduction

[1.1] In this special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, we bring a performative lens to bear on the role of fans in the contemporary media landscape. Performance is an integral part of fandom and fannish experiences, especially today when the digital landscape makes fandom more visible and more approachable than at any other time in the past. Fans are constantly negotiating their own performances, both online and off. Performances can be visible and overt—the performance of cosplay, for example—and these are often seized upon by popular culture and standing as "true" (or, at least, the most explicit) fannish performances. However, fannish performance, as the articles in this issue suggest, often goes beneath the surface, affecting fan and text, creators and audience.

[1.2] What is a performance as it relates to fandom? The mingling of performance studies and fan studies seems reasonable, even inevitable. Like fan studies, performance studies draws on an interdisciplinary synthesis of topics and methodologies—social sciences, feminist studies, gender studies, history, psychoanalysis, queer theory, semiotics, ethnology, cybernetics, area studies, media and popular culture theory, and cultural studies (Schechner 2013, 3). A traditional approach to studying performance theory might argue, as per performance researcher

Richard Schechner (2013), that "performances are actions"—that is, they are artificial enactments permeated by meaning (2). Everything we do in life, including the broad routines we enact in sports, games, rituals, or storytelling, as well as the more implicit or everyday life enactments of our roles as family member, social support, or professional scholar, could be considered a performance. As we tell our students, we are not the same people standing in front of the classroom that we are when we're at home celebrating Christmas dinner with our family (nor are we the same when we're at the karaoke bar or pub). Fandom, looked at through this lens, appears to be more a part of one's behavior—an identity enacted through certain rituals. We might see these as the rituals of consumption, viewership, collecting, conspicuous consumption, or even overt emotional display (squeee!).

[1.3] As we hope the articles in this issue reveal—and as we drill down into the relationship between fandom and performance—we want to problematize this notion of fandom as a particular behavior and instead note the characteristics of *being* that permeate a fannish identity. Schechner ([1977] 2003) highlights a paradox of performance: "Performance is an illusion of an illusion and, as such, might be considered more 'truthful,' more 'real' than ordinary experience" (xix). Perhaps performing fandom is actually no different than being a fan. The artificiality of the media experience reveals the fannish nature of contemporary media reception.

[1.4] This special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* explores the nature of performances within fandom, from the overt to the implicit. Special attention is paid to the complications digital technology and new media bring to the fannish landscape. In the digital space, everything fans post, create, or share could be considered a type of performance. We hope that by concentrating on a performance paradigm in fan studies, this issue opens new avenues of research for future scholars.

2. Theory and Praxis

[2.1] Dawn Opel's study on a social media community dedicated to women's leisure reading and literary fandom opens the Theory section and this special issue. Opel explores a Facebook group for female fans of 19th-century British literature and filmic adaptations and analyzes their circulatory practice of sharing self-representational images ("selfies") of themselves engaged in the act of reading. Featured within these images are not representations of actual members of the community but rather fictional constructions, with members displaying recurring characteristics, such as wearing neo-Victorian dress and displaying exaggerated features. Opel's study argues that these images by literary fans cumulate as a communal act of identity construction and can be understood as a postfeminist performance. Within this, the study concludes that these performances demonstrate a double movement within postfeminist culture:

to circulate empowering discourses that also provide a context and landscape for conventional gender norms reinforcement.

[2.2] Bethan Jones examines fan performance from another perspective—through the landscape of fannish tattooing and scarred identity, and how this practice can demonstrate affective investments in a text. Jones explores the processes through which fannish tattoos can physically mark people as fans of a particular text and can project issues around performativity—such as meanings surrounding what is selected from the text (such as obscure images and text) as a marked representation by a fan. Drawing on Émile Durkheim's concept of the totem, Jones explores sacred experience and the meaningful choices made within it that act as markers, arguing that fannish tattoos can be approached as similar forms of performance and identity.

[2.3] Darlene Rose Hampton's article applies theoretical models of performance to the fannish practice of composing slash fan fiction within LiveJournal communities. Hampton explores not only how fan practices can be understood as a form of performance but also what exactly is being performed and how those performances interconnect with the individual fan's personal narrative, the text itself, and the communal interactions. Taking a coauthored Harry Potter slash novel, *Harry Potter and the Bound Prince*, published on LiveJournal, as a case study, Hampton analyzes the form and content of slash fiction, arguing that fan behavior and practices can be an excellent opportunity for individual and collective performances by media fans that work to negotiate hegemonic norms of sexuality and gender.

[2.4] Ellen Kirkpatrick's article examines performance through the lens of cosplay and the superhero genre. Through textual analyses and by consulting a wide range of secondary sources to explore the interconnections between the costume practice and genre, Kirkpatrick identifies three integral concepts: authenticity, context, and transformation. This conceptual trio, Kirkpatrick argues, allows for a fresher examination of cosplay, with the mechanics and landscapes of cosplay performance being reconceptualized and reconfigured. Kirkpatrick argues that cosplay can be viewed as a practice performed inside, in between, and outside fandom—a behavior that can authentically occur anywhere and at any time, not just within the confines of convention halls or cosplay parties. This study demonstrates that cosplay can be fruitfully approached as an ongoing process of intersecting behaviors rather than a confined and limited fan practice.

[2.5] In the Praxis section, Christine Schreyer studies learners and speakers of Na'vi, a language created for the 2009 film *Avatar*. This study is particularly valuable because of the scant amount of academic work that has been focused on fandom surrounding created or constructed languages, as well as the tendency for individuals who perform or speak these languages to be marginalized as extreme, obsessed, or

both. Schreyer conducts a survey of Na'vi speakers and learners, finding that these diverse individuals have developed a strong sense of community through learning the language together online. In addition, the study uncovered the gift economy of the Na'vi community, with fans sharing skills, knowledge, and time to develop dictionaries, grammars, workbooks, and radio programs. Schreyer argues that is their knowledge and shared quest for learning this language that works to hold and maintain the group, even through *Avatar* may have brought them together. Created language communities can be viewed as alternative digital fandoms, and they offer new insight into the emerging and complicated digital world of fan cultures.

[2.6] Jessica Elizabeth Johnston explores Doctor Who-themed weddings and how they connect to performances of fandom. Examining a mass wedding in London, where 50 couples decided to marry, renew vows, and engage in civil partnership all around a Doctor Who theme, Johnston analyzes the processes through which fans construct, define, and maintain their identity during these wedding performances. The study argues that these processes involve ascribing important meanings to objects present during the wedding and the communication of the couple's fan narrative in a selective manner that suits a diverse audience. Johnson demonstrates through this case study that that fan identity and performance are not subversive of the mainstream but rather are influenced by traditional spaces and rituals.

[2.7] Alexander Swanson's article heralds a shift of focus onto the horror film genre and examines audience reaction movie trailers, which often feature green night-vision video footage of a cinema audience reacting to the film being promoted. As Swanson discusses, these trailers are dominated by expressions of high anticipation and close-up shots of facial expressions and screaming from the audience, featuring no footage or clips from the film being advertised. These paratexts attempt to sell, emphasize, and legitimize the social and communal elements of the experience of watching films in the movie theater while simultaneously attempting to foster higher levels of fan investment and performance in both online and physical spaces. Swanson shows how the power and performance of the spectator is emphasized by these trailers and how they work in an effort to call together and rally the horror fan community within both movie theaters and online spheres.

[2.8] Ruth A. Deller's article on Sims fandom focuses more centrally on online interactions, examining the use of Simblr, a space on Tumblr for Sims fans, and the ways in which SimSecret, a LiveJournal site, attempts to regulate and shame behavior on this social networking platform. Within this space, and through interviews, content analysis, and surveys, Deller analyzes norms of fan performance apparent within practices such as tagging and interactivity, as well as how fans' policing of this behavior and public shaming manifests itself, especially through discourses of pleasure

and gender, as well as what is deemed inappropriate or excessive. Within Simblr, the performance of playing the Sims game is seemingly less vital than demonstrating the ability and awareness to perform according to the norms and values of the community.

[2.9] Nicolle Lamerichs's article on cosplay music videos as a remediation of fan convention culture gets at the heart of fan performance in the digital age. Through a media studies lens, Lamerichs focuses on the way that the remediation—the representation of one medium in another medium—of a fan's costumed performance creates its own unique performance in the video realm. Through a textual reading of multiple fan videos and a comparison among cosplay videos at fan conventions, fan-made music videos, and machinima (that is, animated films using video game engines), Lamerichs argues that cosplay videos are a unique textual form that serves not only to present and represent the dynamic fannish cosplay culture but also to document the role of cosplay in fan communities generally, helping fans and nonfans visualize fandom itself.

3. Symposium, Interview, and Review

[3.1] Reflecting the dynamic environment of fannish performances, and the multiple ways that these performances can be enacted today, the Symposium section reveals a diverse and vibrant approach to fan communities. Rafael Bienia refocuses our attention not on the performance of fans in LARP communities but on the role of objects within LARP activities. Shelby Fawn Mongan offers a unique perspective on how cosplay has both affected and been affected by her personal growth. Abby Waysdorff's look at football fandom is the first of three pieces that examine the crucial role that place has in discussions of fan performance; her analysis of sports brings much-needed comparative work between sports and media fandom to light. Brendan Riley's examination of popular zombie walks, where individuals dress up and perform as zombies in public, offers another take on the way our everyday interpretation of place—specifically the public sphere—becomes mutable, given fannish performances. Finally, Abigail De Kosnik provides a summary and analysis of the connections between performance studies and new media studies, with a particular focus on the role of fandom in both.

[3.2] The two interviews in this special issue bring to light two different interpretations of performance within the spectre of fandom and fan studies. Paul Booth and Lucy Bennett interview Kurt Lancaster on the changing dynamics of fannish performances over the past decade. Lancaster is one of the first fan researchers to explore performance, and his book *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* is a landmark exploration of a performance studies view of fandom. In this interview, we talk about how the performance studies paradigm, which Lancaster applied to *Babylon 5* fans and

the role-play games they played in the early days of the 21st century, can be usefully updated to the digital age. We also explore how performance itself has become integral to fan audiences.

[3.3] Cameron Salisbury talks with Joy DeLyria and Kris Hambrick, the cofounders of Hello Earth Productions, a grassroots, community-based theater company that produces outdoor, fan-inspired plays like *Outdoor Trek* (live staged adaptations of episodes from the original series of *Star Trek* [1966–69]). Salisbury asks DeLyria and Hambrick about the process of recasting an iconic fan text like *Star Trek*, the community of the audience that helps develop an interactive fan experience, and the role of fandom in transforming *Star Trek* fandom into a theatrical endeavor. *Outdoor Trek* is a formalized performance, but it also has the aura of fan fiction—both "Shakespeare in the Park and a fandom remix of a beloved story" (¶4.5).

[3.4] The two book reviews that conclude the issue ask us to view fandom across borders and generations. Nele Noppe's review of Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Izumi Tsuji's edited collection *Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World* takes a global perspective, including Japanese and American authors and fans. *Otaku* themselves represent a type of fannish performance, albeit one that often comes with various assumptions and stereotypes built in. And Francesca Coppa reviews Cynthia W. Walker's *Work/Text: Investigating "The Man from U.N.C.L.E."* Walker reveals that *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* was an early transmedia franchise that presaged the type of complex television popular in both fandom and fan studies analyses today. Walker's analysis stems from Barthes's concepts of work and text; she provides a reading of televisual textuality that, Coppa notes, "decenter[s] the idea of individual televisual authorship" (¶5), thus promoting the performance of the text as central to the fandom. In this sense, then, the review brings the issue of performance full circle—from fan to text and back again.

4. Acknowledgments

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Theory

Self-representation in literary fandom: Women's leisure reader selfies as postfeminist performance

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[0.1] *Abstract*—In social media communities dedicated to women's leisure reading and literary fandom, images of women engaged in the act of reading circulate prominently. These images—created and uploaded to fan sites by the fans themselves—have recurring characteristics: the woman often holds a leather-bound book, wears romanticized, neo-Victorian dress, and has exaggeratedly feminine, sexualized features. These representations are not of actual members of the community but rather fictive, collected, circulated, and commented upon in a communal act of identity construction. This gendered visual representation of the literate self provides a performance of a double movement in postfeminist culture: a broadcasting of discourses that is empowering (participatory digital cultural production around literature) and yet promotes a cultural context for reinforcement of conventional gender norms. To demonstrate this double movement, I utilize a case study of these self-representational fan images, collected over a year on a Facebook group page for fans of 19th-century British literature and filmic adaptations. These images and their circulation are then analyzed via a two-pronged double movement theoretical framework. First, feminist media scholarship helps explain the empowering aspects of the new media creation of the reader selfie. Second, gender performance uncovers how these repeated sexualized images of women readers reentrench conventional, hyperfeminine, and sexualized gender roles. Double movement takes place in contemporary women leisure readers' lives, and the media-led postfeminist cultural movement offers a depoliticized, self-indulgent path toward youth and beauty at the expense of institutional or social change.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Gender; Literature; Postfeminist culture

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1. Introduction

[1.1] It is difficult to miss the contemporary popular fascination with the selfie, or self-representational photograph uploaded to social media platforms. Popular media swarmed around the phenomenon after Oxford Dictionaries chose "selfie" as its 2013 Word of the Year (Baron 2013). While the selfie has become a ubiquitous and rather

obviously recognizable image on social media and in popular culture, its formal entry in *Oxford Dictionaries Online* is "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website" (cited in Brumfield 2013). Selfies are snapped and uploaded for any reason, at any time, showing any range of bodily representations (an arm, a face, etc.), and appear in untold hundreds of millions on social media networks, phones, and Web sites. For example, there are 57 million hashtagged selfies—meaning that a photograph has been "tagged" with the #selfie label to describe and organize it—on the social media application Instagram alone (Brumfield 2013). As Dennis Baron (2013) observed, "Self-portraiture is nothing new. Artists have always represented themselves, so selfies are nothing new...now, everyone's an artist." As a result of the combination of the accessibility of mobile phones (that facilitate the shooting of the selfie) and the participatory culture of social media and the Internet (that facilitates the selfie's publication), selfies have proliferated in online spaces and communities.

[1.2] As an acafan both participating and observing in a Facebook fan community devoted to the leisure reading of 19th-century British fiction (and viewing and making fan productions), I began to notice after a year of participation in this community a prominent circulation of self-portraiture around the act of reading; specifically, the act of women reading. However, instead of a photograph of the self, it is a photograph or a drawing of this community's representative self (which I call a reader selfie), coupled with a reading-related quote from a famous author (figure 1). This representative self—visually represented as a sexualized, traditionally feminine young white woman—is an individual female literary fan engaged in reading, while the accompanying comments section next to this image offers a space for the communally negotiated self to emerge through discussion and consensus.



Figure 1. Representative reader selfie. Posted August 28, 2013, to the Facebook page "Heathcliff, Mr. Darcy, Rochester: The Literary Heroes" (<http://facebook.com/TheLiteraryHeroes>). [View larger image.]

[1.3] The reader selfie presents a complex space for exploration of fan self-representation. Unlike a photographic representation of a fan engaged in her fandom in a communal public space, such as at a convention (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992), the reader selfie offers a site to first display how female literary fans choose to construct

their appearance in the private act of their fandom (that is, reading), and then creates a public site for communal discussion of that representation. While the image is fictive and idealized, the accompanying fan discussion is not: it is a space to circulate both the individual readerly identity and common values of the fan community.

[1.4] In this essay, I first review the scholarship around women's fan communities to place the object of this study within the historical and theoretical treatment of women's fan productions. Then, I turn to the case study itself, conducting an analysis of the recurring characteristics of the "reader selfie" to situate this gendered visual representation of the literate self in postfeminist culture, or a culture that "resituates [women] as consumers of pills, paint, potions, cosmetic surgery, fashion, and convenience foods" to assure women that they can "have it all" (Gamble 1999, 51). The rhetoric of "having it all" is particularly resonant with women leisure readers, so conflicted about taking time to read when work both outside and inside the home looms, along with the pressure to do it all. This "reader selfie" case study is a performance of what Angela McRobbie (2007) has defined as "double movement" in postfeminist culture: a broadcasting of discourses that is empowering (promoting the ability to do and "have it all") and yet promotes a cultural context for reinforcement of conventional gender norms. For the first prong of double movement, feminist media scholarship such as that of McRobbie (2007) and Negra (2008) helps to explain the empowering aspects of the media-driven postfeminist culture and the new media creation of the reader selfie, while for the second prong, Judith Butler's theory of gender performance uncovers how these repeated sexualized images of women readers reentrench conventional, heteronormative gender roles. By bringing together these frameworks, I present the woman reader selfie in literary fan communities as a rich example of postfeminist performance that circulates discourses of cultural identity negotiation through "double movement." From this transdisciplinary analysis, the ramifications of the complicated postfeminist subjectivity may be felt, a subjectivity celebrating choice and freedom for contemporary women, yet simultaneously reflecting a recurring vision of self-imposed constraint that closes its eyes to the political, social, and economic concerns of politically and socially focused feminist movements.

2. Case study methodology

[2.1] The object of the case study that is the focus of this essay is the Facebook fan community "Heathcliff, Mr. Darcy, Rochester—The Literary Heroes," a fan page created on October 23, 2012, with an "About" description that reads: "All your favorite Literary Heroes from Mr. Darcy to Rochester at one place!" While the subject of the fan page has expanded over time to include other romantic narratives, from Victorian literature to filmic adaptations to contemporary film, the recurrent subject is the work of the

authors of the characters listed in the title: Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters. The most recurrent type of post by the creators on the page contains a quote from a novel or film with a corresponding image of its romantic leads from cover art or a filmic adaptation. The page currently has 30,669 "likes" and has grown steadily in its number of "likes" since its inception, from 2,000 on March 14, 2003, to 20,113 on July 29, 2013, to 25,000 on December 8, 2013.

[2.2] As a fan, I had been following this page since early 2013, but sought and obtained IRB approval to review the fan page as an object of study in July 2013. From that point onward, I screen captured and took field notes on every posted image of a woman reading with a corresponding quote (what I call the woman reader selfie). While the frequency of the reader selfie postings vary, I observed (on average) one posting of a woman reader selfie by the page creators per week. The current size of the case study is 82 screen shot reader selfies, with the last image utilized for this case study captured in April 2014. (The fan page also contains a few similar images of man reader selfies, and the comments indicate that these are created by and for women. These images merit further study but are outside of the scope of this essay focusing on women's self-representation.)

[2.3] The fan community on this fan page is nearly exclusively women (there will occasionally be a comment made by a man, but this is rare), and the profile pictures, names, and languages spoken on the fan page indicate that the fan community has a wide age range (from self-proclaimed teens to middle-aged mothers) and geographic range (from the United States and Britain to Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East). Common characteristics of all community members are a knowledge and appreciation of late Georgian and Victorian literature and filmic adaptations, and an appreciation for leisure reading and romantic narratives. Pursuant to this case study's IRB protocol, I have redacted the names of individual women fans from the images shown in the essay.

3. Review of literature: Situating the reader selfie within the pleasures of fan writing

[3.1] Before considering what the reader selfie means in and for postfeminist culture, it is useful to consider what it *is* in its primary context of female fan writing. Jenkins (2000) explains that fan writing is a predominantly female phenomena, as "the compulsion to expand speculations about characters and story events beyond textual boundaries draws heavily upon the types of interpretative strategies more common to the feminine than to the masculine" (476–77). Fan writing is in line with traditional women's literary culture, such as "privately circulated letters and diaries and collective writing projects" (477, citing Kramarae 1981; Smith-Rosenberg 1985). Fan writing

fulfills the need to discuss issues central to the lives of women from any era, such as "religion, gender roles, sexuality, family, and professional ambition" (Jenkins 2000, 478).

[3.2] The reader selfie functions in the same manner. Referring back to figure 1, the reader selfie represents fan writing with a focus on intertextuality. The creator (here, the fan page's creator as well) locates and uploads an image of a woman reading, then titles the image with a quote by Frances Hodgson Burnett, a British Victorian-era playwright and author. The quote describes a feeling of anger when being disturbed from the act of reading. Meanwhile, in the image, the woman reader is engaged in the act of reading, and while the book's title and contents are unclear, the book itself resembles a paperback novel. The three comments that appear are from members of the fan community: one identifies with the quote herself, one fan recounts how she read only short stories when she had small children, "or they might never have gotten fed," and one connects her daughter's reading of *The Lord of the Rings* to the sentiment of anger when interrupted. It is of interest how the primary focus of the text is the reading experience, not the subject matter of the book literally in hand. Despite this fan site being dedicated to literary fandom, the creator of the fan site and its fans are interested in sharing the experience of reading (a solitary act), and the pleasures from this experience, communally. This is a type of both fan writing and oral interaction between women "to explore their own narrative concerns" (Jenkins 2000, 477): the concern being how to make meaning around the practice of their fandom (leisure reading) in the context of a contemporary woman's life.

[3.3] In women's literary fandom, the choice to read in the fans' everyday lives is a privileged narrative concern, even over the subject of their fandom: British literature and its adaptations. As the comments to figure 1 suggest, the reader selfie opens up space to discuss gender roles, family, and motherhood, yet this discussion still lies within the context of the fandom. When women suggest that they, too, have felt anger at being interrupted from a book (as the 236 "likes" and the comments reflect), why would this be? What concerns might lie behind this anger? As the second comment indicates, a mother's obligation to feed her young children limited her time reading, so she read short stories to make space for her fandom. The act of posting a comment such as this in the fan community serves as a 21st-century interaction between women much in the same vein as Smith-Rosenberg (1985) explores 19th-century letter exchange as a means to connect women across distance and through shared concerns about marriage and gender roles. Women in the literary fan community on Facebook are utilizing the reader selfie as a space to talk to one another about the material conditions of their own lives.

[3.4] An important aspect of leisure reading as a fan practice is pleasure. Much like the community of women romance novel readers studied in Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984), the women readers of 19th-century British literature here are carving out space in their own lives for an embodied experience of relaxation and comfort. John Fiske (2010) draws upon Bourdieu and Barthes to theorize a kind of "evasive" *jouissance*, or enjoyment, that is experienced by Radway's romance readers:

[3.5] The act of reading is evasive: she loses herself in the book in an evasion of the ideology of femininity which disciplines women to find themselves only in relation to other people, particularly within the family. This loss is characteristic of *jouissance* and enables her to avoid the forces that subjugate her, which in turn produces a sense of empowerment and an energy otherwise repressed. These evasive pleasures are not text-specific: any book will produce them provided it can take her out of the social self. It is the act of reading rather than the specific text that is the producer of this form of evasive pleasure. (45) ([note 1](#))

[3.6] Still drawing from Barthes, Fiske argues that *jouissance* works synergistically with another kind of pleasure, *plaisir*, which "involves the recognition, confirmation, and negotiation of social identity, but this does not mean that it is necessarily a conformist, reactionary pleasure (though it may be)" (2010, 44). Taken together, Fiske believes that these compose the "pleasures of micropolitics...producing meanings that are both relevant and functional" (46). While not radical, the pleasures of micropolitics help manage the day-to-day, and make meaning in ways that do not seek to overthrow the (patriarchal) order but, instead, progressively challenge it.

[3.7] Applying Fiske to the reader selfie allows us to see these texts as fan-produced space for the pleasures of micropolitics to be examined closely. In the reader selfie shown in figure 2, a young woman in an urban setting sits in her window seat in her pajamas, reading. The text overlay reads "Real life? Can't. I'm booked." The reader selfie garnered 135 shares and 327 likes, with many fans posting comments in agreement (many with emoticons) with the image and text. We do not know what the "real life" of the woman in the picture consists of with any certainty, but the fans of the site find resonance in this ambiguity, knowing that their "real lives" in whatever composition are an obstruction to the enjoyment of the act of reading. The *jouissance* is the evasive act of reading in the window seat, the loss of self into fantasy and out of the "real," which is, presumably, work in either the private or public sphere. The *plaisir* lies in the enjoyment of knowing that other women share the same framework of social identity (the external pressures of work, family, etc.) and circulate both an accepting and a subversive response to it through the reader selfie. The fan comments echo this. When a fan writes "wish it was true" with sentiments of sadness, the desire

that a woman could reject "real life" and just read is expressed as a wish unfulfilled: the women in the community know the societal rules by which they must abide. However, the reader selfie circulates the communal empathy for the individual woman leisure reader, as well as the celebration of the time spent in opposition to the demands on the lives of the community members. Even if the image reflects a visual representation of traditional femininity, the space of private reading and reflection is the challenge to the patriarchal order.



Figure 2. Smitten's book blog reader selfie. Posted September 21, 2013, to the Facebook page "Heathcliff, Mr. Darcy, Rochester: The Literary Heroes" (<http://facebook.com/TheLiteraryHeroes>). [View larger image.]

4. The woman reader selfie and double movement: Postfeminist performance

[4.1] Before moving into an analysis of the performance of gender that is the reader selfie vis-à-vis postfeminist culture, it is helpful to gain an understanding of the complexities that underlie defining postfeminist culture itself. First, what exactly is postfeminist culture "post-ing"? Diane Negra (2008) offers this commentary:

[4.2] By caricaturing, distorting, and (often willfully) misunderstanding the political and social goals of feminism, postfeminism trades on a notion of feminism as rigid, serious, antisex and antiromance, difficult and extremist. In contrast, postfeminism offers the pleasure and comfort of (re)claiming an identity uncomplicated by gender politics, postmodernism, or institutional critique. This widely applied and highly contradictory term performs as if it is commonsensical and presents itself as pleasingly moderated in contrast to a "shrill" feminism. Crucially, postfeminism often functions as a means of registering and superficially resolving the persistence of "choice" dilemmas for American women. (2)

[4.3] By eschewing the political and systemic critique inherent in feminism, postfeminist culture instead offers consumption as a remedy; it "entails an emphatic

individualism, but this...tends to confuse self-interest with individuality and elevates consumption as a strategy for healing those dissatisfactions that might alternatively be understood in terms of social ills and discontents" (Tasker and Negra 2007, 2). This privileging of consumption and individuality over systemic inequities has concrete manifestations in postfeminist culture in that "taste and lifestyle preference are much more important elements of identity than ethnicity, class, or regional ties could ever be" (Gilroy 2006, 112).

[4.4] What postfeminist culture reflects is that feminism is "taken into account" but, as Angela McRobbie (2007) argues, in order to take feminism into account, "it has to be understood as having already passed away" (28). In the "post," McRobbie theorizes that a "double movement" takes place for women: feminism is "taken into account" because freedom, equality, and empowerment for women are celebrated in postfeminist culture, but in this act, traditional notions of gender and gendered relations are simultaneously reentrenched (cited in Banet-Weiser 2012, 61). McRobbie articulates this through what she terms the "post-feminist masquerade": the rhetoric of freedom for a woman to make her own choices collides with a reinscription of white femininity as a societal norm (McRobbie 2007, 86).

[4.5] The reader selfie in "The Literary Heroes" fan community constructs a space in which McRobbie's theory of "double movement" is repetitively performed, reaffirmed, and spread. While all of the reader selfies collected contain several traits inherent in postfeminist culture, figure 3 most obviously connects the dots. The caption, "I buy books like some women buy shoes," celebrates first the individuality inherent in choosing to purchase a consumer good that is perhaps more unique than the familiar trope of a women who loves to buy shoes. At the same time, connecting the two consumer goods (books and shoes) evokes a pleasurable connection between the two that is reflected in the first comment: "I buy both." The image itself invokes a familiar trope, that of a blond-haired, blue-eyed woman, thus creating the "double movement" as reentrenchment of traditional femininity is performed in this reader selfie. Additionally, the woman's hairstyle (the contemporary, fashionable bangs, with a hint of a beret in the frame) and her eye makeup (eyeliner, mascara) nod toward an acceptance of the "positive embrace of consumer-led beauty culture and the new freedom to disassociate from the 'burdens' of feminism" (Tasker and Negra 2007, 3).



Figure 3. *Buying books/shoes reader selfie. Posted September 23, 2013, to the Facebook page "Heathcliff, Mr. Darcy, Rochester: The Literary Heroes" (<http://facebook.com/TheLiteraryHeroes>). [View larger image.]*

[4.6] The fan comments to this reader selfie offer additional evidence in support of the fans' acceptance of postfeminist culture in their own lives. The very first comment, "I buy both," cuts to the chase: it is her choice to consume whatever she likes, and so the distinction made in the caption (any allusion that traditional women's choices are being subverted by book-buying) is undone. While there is some degree of self-awareness in the post "Did you buy blonde hair too???", it is not "liked" and engaged with, and comments below continue to reflect agreement with the reader selfie as a whole (as do the 590 likes and 311 shares). The community rallies around the image by liking and sharing, and banters with one another in the comments, ensuring that this reader selfie circulates a sense of identity in the community until the next reader selfie is constructed and circulated.

[4.7] Beyond white femininity, postfeminist culture also holds reverence for preservation of youth, and of young (white, feminine) women as its symbol. As previously mentioned, consumer-driven beauty culture helps to drive this focus on youth, but so does the symbol that Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) terms the "can-do girl": an empowered young woman who has the capacity to interact and self-brand in digitally mediated spaces. As she writes, "cultural ideals of selfhood are richly supported in online social network sites, which are increasingly spaces to ask and answer the question: Who am I?" (57). A critical component of self-branding, then, is the feedback that social networking spaces offer (as in the comments section of the reader selfie). While Banet-Weiser focuses on young women engaged in uploading videos of themselves on YouTube, the reader selfie also offers an indication of the can-do girl, but in an interestingly paradoxical manner. The can-do girl in this fan community participates in self-branding in participatory culture through the construction and circulation of a digital text that contains an image of predigital culture: the analog book. It is the juxtaposition of the technological savviness of the textual production of the reader selfie and its nostalgic, romanticized treatment of the book that constructs its essential postfeminist cultural performance—a can-do girl who chooses through her tastes and lifestyle preferences a unique subject (reading in analog form), but also chooses to broadcast this choice in a technologically savvy manner.

[4.8] Without the framework of the can-do girl, the reader selfie in figure 4 would be difficult to assess. This reader selfie perfectly captures the paradox described previously: in a digital fan text (the reader selfie), the captioned quote by Robert Downs, "My lifelong love affair with books and reading continues unaffected by

automation, computers, and all other forms of the twentieth-century gadgetry," appears to be in complete contradiction with the textual production and circulation going on in this fan community. In a space where fan texts such as the reader selfie exist alongside posts of image macros, memes, and fan vids, how might this choice to advocate analog reading practices be reconciled? While the can-do girl is involved in the technological creation of the self in the reader selfie, the "double movement" at hand in the images themselves shows a reenactment of a nostalgic, traditionally youthful and feminine woman trope, with that woman making a lifestyle choice that involves (as here) the space to read with the consumer good of the analog book. As the comment in figure 4 offers: "I love my Kindle but I still love a proper book." In the choice to consume the analog book, the postfeminist woman reader is espousing a lifestyle choice that is as much as part of her identity construction as providing feedback in a digital space, or also owning and utilizing a Kindle. It reveals a can-do girl's mentality that the capacity to read on a Kindle is acceptable, but so is a young woman who chooses to read only in analog and display that choice in a digital space. The performative visual of the young woman reading in an analog space is particularly a postfeminist ideation, given that women fans in the space are both in fact reading and producing texts in digital formats and that they are not all necessarily young, as the comment from the mother with a teenaged daughter in figure 1 illustrates. The ideation of youth is further evidenced by the appearance of many young adult titles as the books in the reader selfies (in figure 3, for example, Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*), despite the fact that this is a fan community dedicated to 19th-century British fiction. All of these taken together may seem cognitively dissonant, but it is the very nature of youth-driven performance of postfeminist cultural choice rhetoric.



Figure 4. Proper book selfie. Posted October 12, 2013, to the Facebook page "Heathcliff, Mr. Darcy, Rochester: The Literary Heroes" (<http://facebook.com/TheLiteraryHeroes>). [View larger image.]

[4.9] This focus on youthfulness in postfeminist culture (the "girl" in can-do girl) leads into what Tasker and Negra (2007) call "a distinct preoccupation with the temporal—

women's lives are regularly conceived of as timestarved, women themselves are overworked, rushed, harassed, subject to their 'biological clocks,' etc. to such a degree that female adulthood is defined as a state of chronic temporal crisis" (10). Negra (2008) argues that a "minimization of [women's] ambition" and an acceptance of traditional femininity (captured through consumer cosmetics and procedures) are proffered in postfeminist culture as a means to combat this temporal crisis (48). Because leisure reading as an activity is pleasure seeking and outside of the world of either public or private sphere "work" (as the discussion of Fiske and enjoyment above demonstrates), it is an especially illuminating space for consideration of the temporal crisis endemic to postfeminist culture.

[4.10] The choice to engage in leisure reading invokes the tensions that exist for women in this literary fan community in postfeminist culture. Many of the reader selfies—either in the selfie itself or in the comments—exhibit a sense of guilt on the part of the woman reader for choosing to take part in this activity at all, often at the expense of domestic or professional duties ("real life" as in figure 2). In figure 5, the caption reads: "Shall I cook, clean or do the grocery shopping? Ok, reading it is!" The first comment reads, "Let the kids fend for themselves!" This reader selfie shows the time-starved nature of postfeminist culture, and also a representation of how "double movement" serves to both reinforce notions of choice (the woman choosing to read) while simultaneously upholding traditional gender norms (woman as caregiver with full responsibility for domestic order). The reader selfie in figure 5 may be read through the lens of Fiske's pleasures of micropolitics to illuminate its evasive and potentially subversive nature: it is challenging the requirement that the woman perform all of these duties, and instead opts out through engagement in a pleasure-seeking activity. (The choice of analog book may further indicate an opting out of what is perceived as a frenzied, technologically fast-paced culture.) Yet at the same time, this reader selfie shows how postfeminist culture is setting the rules for engagement: the expectation is clearly shown to be that of full responsibility in the domestic sphere, and in a certain manner of gendered performance that is traditionally feminine. The illustration shows a woman wearing makeup, with a low-cut shirt, thin and youthful, negotiating the temporal crisis. As McRobbie (2007) argues, "Choice is surely, within lifestyle culture, a modality of constraint. The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices. By these means, new lines and demarcations are drawn between those subjects who are judged responsive to the regime of personal responsibility and those who fail miserably" (36). The reader selfie presents a performance of a woman attempting to decide which side of the postfeminist cultural line to find herself, what the ramifications might be, and if there might be other women who would reinforce her decision, right or wrong.



Figure 5. Domestic selfie. Posted October 31, 2013 to the Facebook page "Heathcliff, Mr. Darcy, Rochester: The Literary Heroes" (<http://facebook.com/TheLiteraryHeroes>). [View larger image.]

[4.11] This recurrent visual representation of traditional femininity in the reader selfie is integral to its fulfilling the second prong of McRobbie's double movement: the reenactment and retrenchment of regressive, heteronormative gender roles. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) provides further guidance as to how double movement takes place in the reader selfie. Butler conceives of the body as "a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself" (1990, 8). To construct gender, acts of performance must be clearly and continuously repeated, and "this repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimization" (140).

[4.12] The reader selfie is uniquely positioned to perform gender recurrently. Its form is easily spreadable and appropriated from fan to fan, through the "share" feature of social media platforms (here, Facebook). The creation and circulation of a reader selfie is a literate practice, or a "socially recognized way of generating, communicating, and negotiating meaningful content as members of Discourses" (Knobel and Lankshear 2008, 255). In this way, a reader selfie acts as an encoded text that is easily replicable and spreadable, like an Internet meme (Davison 2012, 123). Members of the discourse community in which the reader selfie circulates can recognize immediately not only what the reader selfie is, but what it means, and will engage in repeated participatory action with these texts by creating new reader selfies, as well as commenting, sharing, and liking preexisting ones—these are the socially recognized ways of communicating and negotiating this meaningful content.

[4.13] The gender performance in the reader selfie is constructed through a set of easily identifiable, traditionally feminine tropes. The women represented in figures 6 and 7 both have long hair, and are thin, youthful, and sexualized, baring a noticeable amount of skin. They are both dressed hyperfemininely. The image in figure 6 is a woman nostalgically and delicately dressed in a dress or corset and bloomers with

ballet toe shoes cast off nearby, as if to suggest a state of undress. The woman pictured in figure 7 is in a slightly updated version of relative undress, with a button-down shirt and knee socks, shown in bed. Knee socks appear in both images, which suggest a girlish sexiness. While the women pictured in figures 1 to 7 are not exactly alike, the easily identifiable tropes of hyperfemininity, such as long hair, polished nails, delicate and frilly clothing, and long bare arms and legs, appear with repetition across these reader selfies. The sheer number of likes, shares, and affirmations in the comments sections (such as "Amen!" in figure 6) indicates that the members of this fan community recognize, reexperience, and repeat this image of constructed gender identity.



Figure 6. Ballerina reader selfie. Posted September 15, 2013, to the Facebook page "Heathcliff, Mr. Darcy, Rochester: The Literary Heroes" (<http://facebook.com/TheLiteraryHeroes>). [View larger image.]



Figure 7. Knee sock selfie. Posted June 19, 2013, to the Facebook page "Heathcliff, Mr. Darcy, Rochester: The Literary Heroes" (<http://facebook.com/TheLiteraryHeroes>). [View larger image.]

[4.14] Butler (1990) argues that "the effect of gender is produced through stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (140). The body in the reader selfie is highly stylized in such a way as to construct a gendered identity for the female leisure reader that is repeatedly reenacted as hyperfeminine and youthful. While many might say that this construction is attributable to the nature of the fandom studied (British 19th century literature), the connection of the Victorian aesthetic to the neo-Victorian attributes of white, middle

class postfeminist culture are also part of this "conception of gender as a constituted social temporality" (Butler 1990, 141). Both serve to reenact and reentrench a vision of a gender norm that is both white *and* affluent and sexualized and heteronormative (submissive, hyperfeminine and partially undressed), which, taken together, fulfill the second prong of McRobbie's double movement, and serve to constrain women in postfeminist culture by circulating these idealized attributes.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] Through the case study analyzed in this essay, the complexities of identity construction and negotiation in postfeminist culture are revealed in the inherent double movement in woman reader selfies in literary fandom. The reader selfie is a fan-produced text for the purposes of addressing the narrative concerns of the women readers in the literary fan community, designed to circulate issues of identity negotiation unique to this women's community focused on leisure reading and making the time for it. The reader selfie itself is representation of Angela McRobbie's double movement: a performance of gender that both takes feminism "into account" and celebrates the libratory practices of the tech savvy can-do girl, yet circulates and reentrenches traditional femininity—the sexualized, youthful performance revealed through Butler's gender performance. Both prongs of double movement shown here are characteristic of postfeminist culture. For a striking takeaway, I urge you to compare any of the reader selfies in this essay to the cover art for Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984); the former, youthfully feminine and sexy, while the latter is a portrait of a middle-aged, average-looking mom, reading in her living room among her children's toys (figure 8). While Radway studied predominantly middle-aged, stay-at-home mothers reading romance novels in the early 1980s, and this study focuses on women reading 19th-century British fiction and discussing literature and adaptations in an online fan community, the women themselves may not look altogether different. We can discern to some degree that the women on "The Literary Heroes" page are of diverse ages and geographic locales, but what we can see more clearly is what they wish to represent themselves to be: the women in the reader selfies.

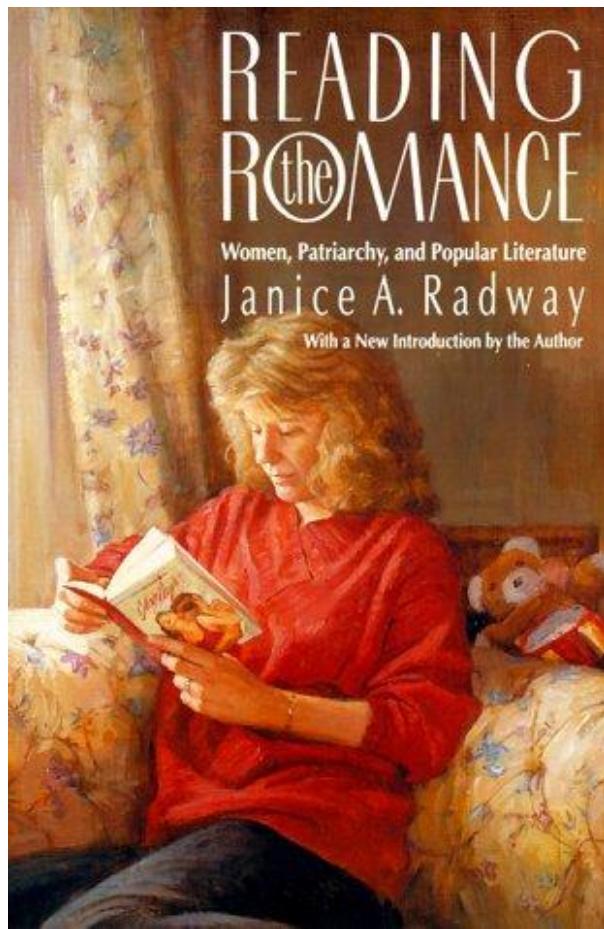


Figure 8. Cover of Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984). [[View larger image](#).]

[5.2] Postfeminist culture of the 21st century has acted to move contemporary women leisure readers from the Radway illustration (assuming Radway's readers would have condoned this representation) to the postfeminist gendered performance of the reader selfie. As leisure reading has moved from a private, individuated experience to the digitally mediated, communal realm of the can-do girl, so arrives the mark of the double movement inherent in postfeminist culture, in which women literary fans must live and negotiate. The reader selfie offers a glimpse into that complicated dance between freedom and constraint, and what that dance obfuscates: a larger system of power differentials in political, social, and economic spheres. In the example of the reader selfie in postfeminist culture, systemic forces of oppression remain hidden beneath consumption and the self.

6. Acknowledgment

[6.1] I extend sincere thanks to Suzanne Scott, who offered valuable feedback on drafts of this essay.

7. Note

1. The evasive act of reading for pleasure described by Fiske and enacted in the reader selfie differentiates this practice from other kinds of literary fandoms, such as those discussed in Roberta Pearson's (2007) work on Sherlockians. She indicates a perceived divide—also discussed by Henry Jenkins (2000)—between the high emotion of fans in low culture fandoms and the rationality inherent in high culture fandoms such as Sherlock Holmes literary fandom (109). Here I focus on this particular case study of literary fandom as more akin to the former and leave the debate for further study.

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Theory

Fannish tattooing and sacred identity

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Pleasure is an important motivation for fans to adopt texts. Fannish tattoos function to demonstrate affective investments in a text; they are also a performance of fandom and an example of sacred fan identity. Like engaging in cosplay or wearing clothing that features logos, fannish tattoos mark people as fans of a text. Furthermore, the more obscure the logo or fannish reference, the more performative the tattoo. Fannish tattoos help to construct a sacred fan identity. The sacred experience (as theorized by Émile Durkheim and his concept of the totem) is imbued with meaning through choices that set it aside from the mundane. Within the context of fannish tattoos, fan affect gains similar significance.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Émile Durkheim; Identity; Performance; Totem

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Awareness of fannish tattoos seems to have become increasingly common in more mainstream circles recently: Buzzfeed regularly posts lists of tattoos inspired by film, television, music, and books (see <http://www.buzzfeed.com/laraparker/magical-harry-potter-tattoos>; <http://www.buzzfeed.com/laraparker/incredible-tattoos-inspired-by-the-fault-in-our-stars>; <http://www.buzzfeed.com/kmallikarjuna/disney-villain-tattoos-to-die-for>), Inked Magazine ran a feature on geeky tattoos which included *Star Wars*, *Batman*, and the Penguin publishing company (<http://www.inkedmag.com/glorious-geek-tattoos/>) and the BBC Web site has recently reported on Brazilian soccer fans copying their idols' tattoos (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-28019011>). In a similar way, the fannish practice of cosplay has begun to receive more mainstream and academic attention, but unlike cosplay, academic work on fan tattoos is lacking. Given the resurgence of interest in the emotional connections that fans have to texts and the role that affect plays (Sandvoss 2013; wordplay 2014; Chin and Morimoto 2013), this is surprising.

[1.2] The act of tattooing is, as Daniel Rosenblatt notes, an act of expression: "individuals seek to express and reclaim themselves through the act of getting a tattoo; the design of the tattoo should ideally reflect some aspect of the self that is otherwise without public expression or is repressed by our society" (1997, 310). Although society at large is becoming more aware of fandom, fans, particularly those of specific genres or celebrities, are still treated with something approaching disdain by many critics (Jones 2012). While it may be a mistake to argue that fans are repressed, nonetheless some forms of fandom are more accepted than others—wearing full team kit to watch a favorite football team play sports, for example, is considered the norm in many countries, while attending a comic convention in full cosplay is considered strange—despite similar affective relationships with the two fannish texts. Craig Norris and Jason Bainbridge note in their study of cosplayers that the wearing of "T-shirts or caps with logos such as the Autobot or Decepticon insignias from the *Transformers*... [is] connected to a more general *otaku* experience, marking out people as fans of a certain manga/anime property" (2009). I would suggest, however, that the fan tattoo is an expression of the fannish self that exists at a deeper level than simply clothes or accessories can demonstrate. Discussing his *Star Trek* tattoo, Andy Balkus writes:

[1.3] I got this because Star Trek has been my moral compass since early childhood. Both *The Original Series* and *The Next Generation* spoke to me and really shaped my outlook on life. It lead me into a life of public service, including The Marine Corps and law enforcement. Sure, they got a little preachy from time to time (thanks Wesley Crusher) but it's way simpler and a lot more forgiving than any established religion.

(<http://www.geekytattoos.com/star-trektostng-combadge-mashup/>)

[1.4] The fannish tattoo is thus imbued with more meaning, a more affective relationship, than wearing an item of *Star Trek* clothing would be, and I would suggest that this can be analyzed in relation to Émile Durkheim's concept of the totem and sacred identity. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim analyzes the totemism of Australian tribes in order to understand the essential features of religion. He records that sacred totem animals or plants individual to each clan are represented by stylized images drawn on stones and wooden objects and that these images are emblems of the clan in much the same way that a flag is an emblem of a country or a logo is an emblem of a sports team. He further argues, however, that members of clans with sacred totems are also sacred as they possess some of the same essence as the totem. Thus when a member of the Kangaroo clan describes himself it is not as a member of the Kangaroo clan but as a kangaroo. Durkheim writes that "identity in name is presumed to entail an identity in nature...For the primitive, the name is not simply a word, a mere combination of sounds; it is part of the being and, indeed, an essential part. When a member of the Kangaroo clan calls himself a kangaroo, he is in

a sense an animal of that species" (1995, 134). Using Grossberg's notion of affect as being "closely tied to what we often describe as the feeling of life" (1992, 56) I would suggest that the Kangaroo clan's relationship to their totem can be described as an affective one, and in a similar way I would argue that members of fandom describe themselves as being part of a community represented by a totemic emblem of that fandom. *Doctor Who* fans, for example, refer to themselves as Whovians (their emblem or totem would, of course, be the TARDIS); fans of *The X-Files* refer to themselves as Philes (and adopt the series' distinctive X as their totem). In a similar way to the tribes that Durkheim studied, fans can become part of communities or clans which are not familial but nevertheless can represent a civic family and can find meaning from within the clan and their affective relationship to its totem.

[1.5] I do not wish to conflate fandom and religion here or suggest that fandom replaces religion. As Mark Duffett writes, Durkheim's work "rests on a distinction between the sacred and the profane that seems inappropriate when applied to commercial music or other forms of popular culture" (2013, 150). However in fandom, as with religion, the social experience is foregrounded. Michael Serazio notes that sports players "unknowingly indulge in this mythology [that the team (god) is us (society)] when they dote upon the vacuous old sports cliché: 'We couldn't have won this without the fans'" (2013, 306), and a community feeling is foregrounded in events like football games, concerts, and conventions. My interest in Durkheim here, however, is not in his concept of *communitas* as applied to fandom. Rather, I examine his concept of the totem in relation to fannish tattoos and examine how these can relate to a sacred fannish identity. I begin by analyzing Durkheim's concept of the totem and the sacred and examine the ways in which this can apply to fandom. I then draw on fans' accounts of their own fannish tattoos and assess these through a Durkheimian lens. Finally I analyze fannish tattoos as performances of fandom and relate this to the performances of totemism that Durkheim observed in Australian tribes. I argue that Durkheim's concept of the collective totem can be applied to fan tattoos through the fannish text being analyzed as a totem and fandom as a symbolic community. I further suggest that the role that narrative plays in fandom and individuals' fannish histories is recorded and replicated through the fannish tattoo, which evokes both a personal, individual biography as well as a collective fannish memory.

2. Methodology

[2.1] This article draws on quotes from a number of fans who have fan-related tattoos and have sent photographs and narratives of these to the Web site GeekyTattoos.com. The site, launched in 2008, is a collection of geeky tattoos (a broadly defined category, as the site's tags demonstrate. The word *geeky*

encompasses anime and manga, science, computers, gaming, Internet memes, books, and TV, among others) curated from other sources online and through submissions received by fans who are aware of the site. There are 46 separate categories on the site, including generic categories, such as gaming, computers, and science, and specific categories including *Star Wars*, paleontology, *Doctor Who*, and *World of Warcraft*. The site's most popular tags are displayed on the right hand side of each page and include *Star Wars*, Super Mario Brothers, and *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (all of which are categories in their own right) as well as *Battlestar Galactica*, *Pokemon*, and *Star Trek* (which do not exist as separate categories).

[2.2] The quotes used in this article were taken solely from user-submitted narratives of fan tattoos. The site contains a disclaimer that by submitting a picture, individuals acknowledge that they are the owner of the photo and have full permission to distribute it; they also grant the site a nonexclusive copyright license to publish and distribute the photo: "In short you're telling us it's ok to post and distribute your photo" (<http://www.geekytattoos.com/about/#idc-container>). Individual posts on publicly accessible Internet pages are considered to be within the public domain, but James E. Porter (1998) argues that precedents for treating any and all Internet writing with integrity in research situations must be established and that it is methodologically valuable to treat every post as writing and every poster as a writer. The site contains no way to contact the owner of the photograph, but I treat their submission to the site following the site's submission guidelines as permission to quote from their narratives.

3. Ritual, totemism, and the sacred

[3.1] A Durkheimian approach to fandom has been utilized by several scholars who have analyzed the rituals and practices inherent in fannish engagements with texts and celebrities (Rojek 2001; Löbert 2012; Serazio 2013; Duffett 2013). Durkheim's interest in religion was in its roots as the genesis of the social system rather than in its metaphysical truth. Religion worked when social groups shared a set of beliefs that separated what was sacred from what was profane, and religion was above all about community. Anja Löbert, in her analysis of Cliff Richard fans, notes the importance that Durkheim places on rites, which order and reproduce the sacred and profane. She argues that the pop concert can be seen as a rite, with the performer constituting the object of ritual as "he fulfils all the conditions required to do justice to the belief system of his fans" (2012, 131). Furthermore, the concert becomes a primary interaction ritual and is a sacred place, existing in a different place from the profane life before or after the concert. Chris Rojek (2001, 56) also locates the concert as a site for "collective effervescence," a state of popular excitement, frenzy, or ecstasy, for which Durkheim proposed that religious ceremony provided an outlet. Marci D. Cottingham also draws on Durkheim's concept of the sacred in her argument for group

symbols as sacred objects, citing Steelers fans' Terrible Towel as one example: "Fans do not use the towel for any utilitarian purpose; rather it is a prop to be waved during games and may be displayed as a decorative item on walls in homes, offices and public places. Opponents have been known to step on a Terrible Towel, or use it as an ordinary towel...in an effort to gloat or taunt players and fans" (2012, 177).

[3.2] Durkheim's concept of the totem has similarly been adopted for use in fan studies. In his article discussing Elvis fans, Mark Duffett writes that "star performers do seem to have a totemic function in generating fan engagements. The moments of effervescence they stimulate are visible at concerts and these events in turn create new fans" (2012, 2). Indeed, musicians have been referred to as totemic objects by several writers (Martin 1979; Riley 2005; Till 2010), but Duffett points out that applying Durkheim to fandom can be problematic, not least because the totem decides what is sacred and what is profane (2012, 3). He argues that an alternative way by which we can frame fandom is to use a neo-Durkheimian approach, which replaces the sacred/profane dichotomy "with a *continuum* between: being distant with the star and being intimate with them" (2013, 3). What Duffett does here, however, is to read Durkheim's totem as the contemporary star. Durkheim does refer to an individual totem, but this is distinct from the collective totem of the tribe. In this paper I want to return to the concept of the collective totem, albeit with a variation on the concepts of sacred and profane which Durkheim uses. In this respect I draw on Kenneth Thompson's reconceptualization of the sacred and the profane, in which he suggests that these concepts should be seen as an ongoing dialectical relationship:

[3.3] The "sacred" is that which is socially transcendent and gives a sense of fundamental identity based on likeness (kinship), constructed and sustained by difference or opposition over and against: (1) the alien Other (which may be another culture that threatens takeover or some other danger to the maintenance of its identity); (2) the mundane/profane i.e. the world of everyday routine, particularly economic activity and its rationality. (1998, 101)

[3.4] In relation to fandom, the sacred stands for an affective relationship, a fannish engagement with the text and with other fans, which stands in opposition to the mundane world existing outside of the fannish space. I have noted elsewhere (Jones 2014a) that this notion of community is at work in the construction of the sacred fan identity. Brendan Richardson, in his study of football fandom, notes that fans will utilize any available resource to maintain the sacredness of their fan experience: "In the case of members of the 'Real Reds' Liverpool fan community, co-production that relies excessively on consumption of official merchandise is regarded as far less

meaningful than co-production that utilises alternative consumption objects, such as home made banners, as part of the process of production" (2011).

[3.5] This sacred experience is an experience imbued with meaning through the choices and distinctions that set it aside from the mundane. In terms of affect it is "what gives 'color,' 'tone' or texture to our experiences" (Grossberg 1992, 56). Fandom, doing the same, thus becomes a symbolic community, sustaining a sense of total identity as a fan rather than the multifaceted and shifting identity necessitated by the mundane world (employee, mother, cook, parent, billpayer, etc.). Indeed, as Jack Krauser notes of his EvE Online tattoo:

[3.6] These 2 symbols, are in my game race and clan symbols, Minmater (top) and Sebestior (bottom). The Minmator one I got at EvE fanfest last year, they had a booth for people who wanted EvE related tattoos right at the event...I really liked the symbol and for me it means not just my love for the game, my in game character, my badass race, but also the week I spent in Iceland with the thousands of other EvE fanatics, which was the most crazy and fun time ever. I've never met so many cool new people in a short period of time, all brought together by this devotion to a niche game.

(<http://www.geekytattoos.com/eve-online-tattoo/>)

[3.7] Parallels, then, can be drawn with the fannish text as totem. Durkheim notes that the totem is generally an animal or plant, although some tribes use inanimate objects such as the moon or sun while others use part of an animal, such as the tail of a kangaroo. In general, however, the totem is a species or variety, collective and impersonal (as opposed to the individual and personal totem which Duffett draws on in his work on Elvis fans). Writing about the collective totem Durkheim says:

[3.8] Every clan has a totem that belongs to it alone; two different clans of the same tribe cannot have the same one. Indeed, one is part of a clan only by virtue of having a certain name. So all who bear this name are member of it in the same right; however scattered across the tribal territory they may be, they all have the same kin relations with one another. (1995, 100)

[3.9] In fannish terms, then, the tribe is the fandom at large (e.g., football fandom, science fiction fandom, pop fandom); the clan is the specific fandom (e.g., Philes, Whovians, Chelsea fans); and the totem is the object of fandom, symbolized by an emblem (e.g., the Wales rugby team symbolized by the three feathers; *Star Wars* symbolized by a light saber. Members of a clan (fandom) are thus linked together by their totem (the text and its visual representation) regardless of where they are in the world. Moreover the totem acts as a coat of arms for a specific tribe, and, as Henry Rowe Schoolcraft notes of North American tribes, "the Totem is employed as the

evidence of the identity of the family and of the clan. The totem is in fact a device corresponding to the heraldic bearings of civilized nations, which each person is authorized to bear as the evidence of his family identity" (1853, 420). The totem is displayed on weapons, houses, clothes, and burial sites, but is also inscribed on the body—a mode of representation that Durkheim argues is by far the most important. He names several tribes in which, during certain religious festivals, officiants wear costumes that represent the body of the animal that acts as the clan's totem. There are, of course, comparisons to be drawn here with cosplay, in which fans dress up as characters from favored texts (Lamerichs 2011; Winge 2006). Of particular interest to me, however, is the ways in which members of tribes mark their bodies permanently with reminders of the totem. Among the Yerkla tribe, gashes that leave scars are inflicted on young men during their initiation, and the number and form of these correspond to the tribe's totem. A similar relationship between scarification and the water totem exists among the Dieri tribe, and the custom of tattooing the totem on the body is widespread among the Indians of the Northwest. Durkheim considers tattooing to play a considerable role in totemism and notes, as with sacred forms in general, that tattooing does not die out in modern society. Rather, it has continually been used by adherents to different religions, pilgrims, college students, soldiers in the same barracks, sailors in the same boat, and prisoners in the same jail:

[3.10] Tattooing is the most direct and expressive means by which the communion of minds can be affirmed. The best way of testifying to oneself and others that one is part of the same group is to place the same distinctive mark on the body. Proof that such is indeed the *raison d'être* of the totemic image is that, as I have shown, it does not try to copy the appearance of the thing it is considered to represent. It is made of lines and points that are given an entirely conventional meaning. The purpose of the image is not to represent or evoke a particular object but to testify that a certain number of individuals share the same moral life. (1995, 234).

[3.11] The behavior that Durkheim noted in Australian tribes clearly evidences the role that the totem played in tribal and community life, but Durkheim also argues that the written sign held a more central place in the clan's life than did the spoken one (1995, 235). This recording of narrative ties the individual irrefutably to the clan and its totem and in that respect functions in a similar way to what Paul Sweetman argues is the ability of the tattoo to narrate connections to specific periods (2000, 68). Indeed, narrative also plays a large role in the creating and inking of fannish tattoos, as Rachel Newbury demonstrates:

[3.12] I got these four tattoos a few weeks apart as a graduation present to myself for finishing my Graduate studies in Library Science. I have always

been a HUGE fan of Douglas Adams and the "Don't Panic" mantra fits my personality, I love that a number is the Answer to Life, the Universe and Everything plus I get a kick out of peoples [sic] reactions to it.

[3.13] I grew up reading "Alice in Wonderland" and have wanted a Cheshire tattoo for a while and was so thrilled when Tim Burton's adaption contained what for me was the best version of the cat. "We're All Mad Here" is a favorite Cheshire quote and I always say that the best people are a little crazy. (<http://www.geekytattoos.com/hitchhiking-with-alice-in-wonderland/>)

[3.14] For Rachel, then, the totemic texts are *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and *Alice in Wonderland*, each of which speaks to her individual experiences and her affective relationship to the texts in a specific way. Following the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* tag on GeekyTattoos.com, however, reveals a further 14 posts detailing various *Hitchhiker's Guide* tattoos. Prominent among these are the number 42 and the phrase "Don't panic," both of which are emblematic of the series and are easily recognized by other fans. It is this recognition, as well as the notion of a collective clan identity, which is important in analyzing fannish tattoos. As I have written elsewhere, Bryan S. Turner argues that modern society erodes the traditional social processes in which tattoos were embedded and thus allows tattoos to become optional and playful. He suggests that "tattoos and body piercings are no longer functional, but indicate the social construction of traditional patterns of sociability in the modern world" (2000, 41). In this respect, the sacred totem that Durkheim analyzes as embodiment of the clan becomes a sacred, playful totem symbolic of a fannish community but in which membership is voluntary and marking optional. Fannish tattoos thus are "part of a personal and interior biography" (Turner 2000, 42), but they are also a feature of a collective fannish memory, recognizable to members of that collective clan.

4. Performing fandom through fan tattoos

[4.1] It is this concept of recognition that I wish to turn to now to analyze the ways in which fans can perform their fannish identity through their tattoos. I have already mentioned cosplay as a means by which fans express their fandom, identifying as fans of a particular text through dressing as that character. Bainbridge and Norris also, however, note that the wearing of clothing featuring logos such as the team emblem from *Gatchaman* or the NERV symbol from *Neon Genesis Evangelion* marks the wearer out as a member of fandom through a play with identity: others have to be able to recognize the design in order to recognize the property and thus recognize the fan (2009) ([note 1](#)). Carole Turbin notes that clothing is more closely tied to personal identity and self-presentation than any other material object: "dress is not a simple cultural expression of society or individuals but a form of visual and tactile

communication linked to the body, self, and communication, it is paradoxical and double-edged, both public and private, individual and social. Dress adorns the surface and at the same time masks and/or reveals (sometimes unwittingly) the inner psyche" (2003, 45). If dress, particularly fannish dress, reveals to the observer elements of the inner psyche, then surely tattoos, particularly fannish ones, must do so to a larger degree. Describing his *Neverending Story* tattoo, Bastion writes:

[4.2] this tattoo has especial significance for me, on a few levels. For one, I've always loved The Neverending Story; I watched it endlessly as a child, and go back to it from time to time even now, as an adult of 28 years. It resonates deeply with me, with the message to never let go of your childlike wonder, your imagination, your creativity, and your belief in the fantastic. Our dreams enrich and beautify our reality; if we lose sight of our dreams, life is dull and grey and without meaning. The Auryn is also a symbol of guidance and protection. (<http://www.geekytattoos.com/guess-what-tattoo-bastian-got/>)

[4.3] In getting the tattoo then, the fan reveals two layers to other fans of *The Neverending Story*: the intentional reference to the film and the symbol of guidance and protection for which the Auryn stands. To an extent, then, the ideals that Bastion takes from the film are available for all to see and for fans of the text to read into. The tattoo thus becomes both a public and a private presentation.

[4.4] In a similar way to Turbin's argument that dress is an ideal venue for exploring the connections between public and private presentation (2003), so too are tattoos an outward expression of private meaning, made significant to the observer only when the meaning or importance of the tattoo is read through cultural or subcultural understanding. Compare this to Kim Hewitt's analysis of tattoos: "the message of a public tattoo is not only its content but its existence as a display of public identity. Symbols of identity that are used to construct identity in the eyes of others carry meanings far beyond their physical existence" (1997, 83). The performative element of the fannish tattoo thus comes in its recognition and decoding by an observer who has the same subcultural tools as does the owner of the tattoo. Tattoos, however, are unlike dress in that they cannot be removed: they are permanent reminders of a fannish connection and an affective relationship with a text. Erving Goffman's (1959) concept of the everyday performance is useful here. Goffman developed the idea of dramaturgy to describe the ways in which individuals create and display themselves. He saw the world as a stage where people take on different roles according to the situation that they are placed in and the audience they interact with in those situations. According to Goffman, people's presentations of themselves can be separated into front stage, which is performed or presented to others intentionally,

and back stage, which is kept hidden. In tattooing oneself, however, there is a possibility for the front stage and back stage to become merged. The tattoo is permanently on the skin, unable to be removed as a piece of clothing would be (although it can, of course, be covered up). There is thus an element of performance in choosing what to tattoo, how, and where. If affect, as Grossberg notes "defines the strength of our investment in particular experiences, practices, identities, meanings, and pleasures" (1992, 57), then getting a tattoo to demonstrate the strength of that investment requires significant thought as to what the tattoo should be. This is particularly the case in fan communities where having the right kind of tattoo as a mark of subcultural capital is important. The tattoo becomes a calculated symbol tied into what the fan wishes to portray to the everyday world and/or to their fan community. But many of the ideas, concepts, and symbols that go into a tattoo are what Goffman would consider back stage—the things that are kept hidden but that are simultaneously on show. These can include aspects of the fannish objects that only other fans might recognize, demonstrating the subcultural capital of the owner. It could also acknowledge the owner's affective relationship to the text, their history in fandom, or what a particular aspect of a text means to them. Both Brandon and Shane Highley demonstrate these aspects of front and back stage in discussing their fannish tattoos. Brandon writes:

[4.5] Some of my earliest memories involve sitting down at my Grandparents house, hooking up my Aunt's Nintendo, and doing battle with an array of creatures as Link in "The Legend of Zelda"—in effort to recapture my childhood, it seemed only fitting that I pay homage to the series that kept me entertained and my imagination captivated for years. And after saving Hyrule for the 1,000th time, I figured it was only appropriate that I assume my role as the "Hero of Time."

(<http://www.geekytattoos.com/really-awesome-subject-that-i-forgot-to-put-in-the-last-e-mail-so-youre-getting-another-one/>)

[4.6] His tattoo thus identifies him as a *Legend of Zelda* fan while also serving as a reminder of his family and childhood. However, there are further links to his fannish identity given the tattoo's function as a celebration of a specific moment—saving Hyrule for the 1,000th time. This celebratory aspect of specific fannish achievements is echoed by Shane Highley: "I got the shotgun spree tattoo from Halo 3 because it was zombie weekend on Halo and I said if I got over 20 or so shotgun spree medals I'd get the tattoo, I got way more than 20" (<http://www.geekytattoos.com/halo-and-scott-pilgrim-on-one-man/>). Both tattoos thus function as performance of fandom in everyday life, containing both elements that are intended for audience consumption and back stage aspects that reflect more emotional connections to Brandon and Shane's lives.

[4.7] As Matthew Guschwan notes, however, fans' declarations of identity take shape within the spaces of fandom: "The individual fan or performer is held accountable to the standards of fandom that develop within the fan community. A fan's authenticity may only be ratified by other fans. One of the underlying functions of a performance-based fan culture, if not the essential function, is to create the context in which fandom and its manifestations are accepted, understood, and encouraged, as well as disciplined and critiqued" (2011, 1994). Fannish tattoos, as I have written previously, can therefore have a gatekeeping function, separating true fans from those who simply like or are aware of a text. Discussing her Charles Darwin tattoo, Aubrie writes:

[4.8] The only real back story here is I am a huge science nerd and I am a hard-ass for the facts of evolution. The extra benefit to having this tattoo is it's kind of a quick way to weed out the idiots (like the people who don't know who he is, or the people who after seeing it say, "well what about creationism?"). The coolest thing about this tattoo is that when I met Richard Dawkins he said it was amazing, and that J. Craig Venter now has a picture of me and my tattoo on his phone. Highlight of my life. Also, during the holidays we draw things on him, such as Santa hats or laurel crowns.
(<http://www.geekytattoos.com/you-got-some-darwin-on-your-armwin-there/>)

[4.9] Not only does the tattoo function as a way to weed out people who are not aware of (or are not fans of) Darwin, it also functions to provide Aubrie with a certain amount of cultural (or subcultural) capital (Bourdieu 1984; Thornton 1995). Not only does Richard Dawkins admire the tattoo, but J. Craig Venter (regarded as one of the leading scientists of the 21st century for his contribution to genomic research) has a photograph of it. In fannish circles, where subcultural capital can be an important indicator of fannish status and fulfill a gatekeeping function, this tattoo functions as a clear performance of both fannish identity and fannish standing. Steve, who submitted a photograph of his Green Lantern tattoo (see <http://www.geekytattoos.com/in-brightest-day-in-blackest-night/>), also demonstrates the performative aspect of the fannish tattoo. He provides very little background to the tattoo, but accompanying the picture is an editorial note: "For the uninitiated, here's some more info on the Emotional Spectrum. (It's a Green Lantern thing)" (<http://www.geekytattoos.com/in-brightest-day-in-blackest-night/>). This tattooing of less recognizable icons further plays with identity and performance. To the fan, the Green Lantern tattoo is obvious, both as a fannish tattoo and as relating to the Green Lantern. To the uninitiated, however, it is unrecognizable as a fannish tattoo. As I have noted elsewhere, "This play with identity through the choice of tattoo further functions as an in-joke of sorts, or, perhaps more accurately, a form of gate-keeping" (Jones 2014a)—to the

uninitiated it is a tattoo of some logos, possibly related to a computer game; to the fan it demonstrates the owner's position within fandom.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] In this article I have returned to Durkheim's concept of the totem and sacred identity which have been used in fan studies, but have used them in different ways to analyze fan tattoos and their relationship to fandom at large, as well as their affective relationship to the source. For Durkheim, the totem is representative of the clan and its members and functions not only to distinguish the sacred from the profane but also to ensure a community among the civic family which makes up the clan: "The clan's totem is also that of each clan member...It is common for a clan not to reside in the same place, but to have members in different places. Even so, the clan's unity is felt, though it has no geographical basis" (1995, 100–101). I have argued that in fandom, the clan becomes a specific fandom, and the totem is the text and its visual representation. In terms of community, fandom functions across geographic boundaries, its members bound by the fannish object rather than by nationality, religion, or culture. Furthermore, for Durkheim the most elementary form of individual appropriation of collective symbolism is the tattoo. Its object, as I have already discussed, is to "bear witness to the fact that a certain number of individuals participate in the same moral life" (Thompson 1998, 99)—a description that is as applicable to fandom as it is to Australian tribal clans. The "collective emblem's engraving on the individual as a tattoo" is thus important not only because the tattoo is "such a dramatic sign of group membership [but] also because it is so permanent, acting both as a lifelong commitment to an identity and as a lifelong reminder of it." I suggest that the affective relationship that a fan has with a fannish object plays a large part in the decision to tattoo a reminder of that fannish text onto the body, but the tattoo also serves to mark its owner out—to a greater or lesser extent—as a fan of that text.

[5.2] Sweetman suggests that tattoos that serve as connections to specific periods "might be argued to commit the tattooee to a particular narrative...tattoos could tell a story [but] the extent to which others would be able to read this text would depend on their ability to 'piece it all together'" (2000, 68). In other words, the ability to read a fannish tattoo depends on the amount of subcultural capital that the reader has. The role of subcultural capital in fannish tattooing, particularly when combined with the role of gender in geek communities and the concept of the fake geek girl, would be a fruitful area for further research. The decision to ink a specific aspect of a fannish text onto a body irrevocably commits that fan to a particular narrative: the narrative of themselves as a fan and the narrative of the text itself. Moreover, tattoos demonstrate fannish affect which "operates within and, at the same time, produces maps which

direct our investments in and into the world" (Grossberg 1992, 57). As Margo DeMello writes,

[5.3] Tattoos are fundamentally a means of expressing identity, both personal and collective. Tattoos inscribe a person's relationship to society, to others, and to him or herself, and they do so in a manner that is visible not only to the wearer but to others as well. Except when worn in private areas, tattoos are meant to be read by others. For this reasons tattoos as identity markers are not merely private expressions of the need to 'write oneself,' but they express the need for others to read them in a certain way as well. (1991, 107)

[5.4] Of course, the one thing I have not touched upon in this article, focusing as I have on the totemic nature of fandom and tattoos, is that fannish tattoos are inherently bound up with concerns around capitalism and consumerism (an area in which further research could be undertaken). Tattoos function to perform fandom in similar (though not the same) ways as items of fannish clothing do. Of course, as part of the body rather than simply an accessory to it, tattoos cannot be considered in quite the same way as official and unofficial merchandise. They are representative of an individual's affective relationship with the text, and while fannish tattoos are bought, the money spent on them goes to members of another subculture—the tattoo community—rather than to corporations, licence holders, or fans who undertake free labor to generate further profits for these (Jones 2014b). Indeed, Sweetman, referring to tattoos as corporeal artifacts, argues that they escape the flow of commodification and cannot be interpreted simply as superficial accessories—rather, they can be considered as a form of "anti-fashion," sharing certain affinities with subcultural uniforms (2000, 66). Furthermore, I would suggest that in locating fandom in tattooing, we should look to fans' own voices as a primary tool for discussing their relationship to consumerism. Matt Hills argues that we must consider affect as "capable of 'creating culture' as well as being caught up in it" (2002, 93), and I would suggest that fannish tattoos are a prime example of creating a culture. Consider Charlotte's description of her *Star Wars* tattoo:

[5.5] I had been going through a particularly difficult time in my final year at University, suffering from anxiety, exhaustion and acute stress. I was concerned about my mental health and after coming to terms with several issues, I decided to stop waiting for things to change and be more proactive. I got this tattoo as a reminder of my strength and abilities. To give me the push I need on those days when I feel like giving up. It has become a personal mantra.

[5.6] I had my tattooist (Mick Miller at Headingley Tattoo Studio) draw it up using the Star Wars font, and had it tattooed in reverse on the left side of my chest. I had it in reverse because it is for me, and me only. When I look in the mirror, I can read it perfectly—but others struggle to read it in reverse and it has become a pretty good conversation starter.

(<http://www.geekytattoos.com/do-or-do-not-tattoo/>)

[5.7] The element of the text prioritized here is Charlotte's relationship to the meaning that she found within it. The tattoo ("Do or do not, there is no try") speaks to her as a direct result of her own experiences and her reading of the *Star Wars* films. Furthermore, its placement (in reverse so that it is only readable when viewed in a mirror) speaks to the performance of fannish tattoos not only to the observer but to the tattooed fan as well. Returning to Durkheim then, the totem symbolizes not only the clan but also the individual's place within it. Fannish tattoos as totems remind their wearers of their fannish clan and the reason why they are a member of that fandom.

6. Note

1. There is also a discussion to be had here about fans who get the wrong sort of tattoo, either because their interpretation of the text is wrong (for example, Scully/Doggett shippers in *The X-Files* fandom are regarded as anomalies who are reading the text incorrectly) or because their tattoo possesses the wrong sort of subcultural capital—for example, a tattoo of Robert Pattinson as Edward Cullen rather than a line from the novel that only a dedicated fan, not casual viewer, would understand. As Awesome Barb, in a blog post discussing tragic *Twilight* tattoos writes, "I'm a Twilight fan, but I can't imagine sporting something so everlasting when it's turned into a cornerstone of pop culture (I'd want something a little more obscure I suppose)" (<http://www.chicagonow.com/thats-awesome/2010/06/30-tragically-awesome-twilight-tattoos/>). Henry Jenkins's (1992) reading the right way has scope here as a means of analyzing these tattoos as explicit markers of fans who are focusing on aspects of the fannish object that may not quite fit into what the rest of the community deems acceptable.

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Praxis

Bound princes and monogamy warnings: *Harry Potter*, slash, and queer performance in LiveJournal communities

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Media fans often refer to their texts, practices, productions, and selves as works in progress—unfinished, in-between, and transformative. This article applies theoretical models of performance to the fannish practice of crafting slash fan fiction within LiveJournal communities. By examining the content and form of the fiction itself, its mode of production, and fannish interactions, this paper discusses fan practices as opportunities for media fans to engage in individual and collective performances that negotiate hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality. These negotiations often illustrate a disconnect between social conditioning and female desire in heteronormative and patriarchal culture, and demonstrate the utility of theories of performance in studying individual and collective fannish engagement with texts as a means of intervening in the world.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fan fiction; Media fandom; Textual analysis

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Slash fan fiction, the practice of writing homoerotic fiction inspired by existing narratives, has been discussed in relation to cultural discourses that construct gender and sexuality since the earliest scholarship on fan works, communities, and practices (Jenkins 1992; Penley 1992; Camille Bacon-Smith 1992; Russ 1985). However, it is only fairly recently that we are beginning to have an explicit discussion about how the practices and cultures of fandom engage with queer identities, practices, and politics—characterizing slash fandom as queer space and emphasizing the construction of a range of sexual identities through its practices that undermine the gay/straight binary (Busse 2006; Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007; Lackner, Lucas, and Reid 2006). This turn toward the queer in fan scholarship coincides with work examining fan practices through the lens of performance (Hills 2002; Lancaster 2001). After all, as Francesca Coppa (2006) pointed out, even engaging in a textual practice like fan fiction is more

like directing a theatrical production than authoring a text, as these stories "direct bodies in space" using fans' shared knowledge of a canon text's "sets and wardrobes, of the actors' bodies, smiles, and movements" (225).

[1.2] This dual scholarly focus on both queerness and performance in fan scholarship is especially fitted to our current socio-historical moment, as articulations and representations of both fandom and queerness are increasingly visible and increasingly being performed in public online spaces alongside other aspects of identity. In this context, the goal of this study is to extend these scholarly threads out and weave them together to examine not only how fan practices can be read as performance, but also what is being performed and how those performances unfold at the level of the individual fan's personal narrative, the work of fiction itself, and the interactions that produce the community.

[1.3] Work done by Rebecca Black (2008) on adolescent fan fiction demonstrates how fan writers perform aspects of their identities, such as literacy skills and religious identity, in communities; different works and different communities provide unique performance opportunities. In the case of slash fandom, I argue that what is often being performed is articulations of and with queerness. Taking a coauthored Harry Potter slash novel entitled *Harry Potter and the Bound Prince* (BP) published on the social networking site LiveJournal (LJ) as a case study, this article demonstrates how theories of performance can help us understand some of the concrete ways that online slash fandom performs queerness through personal narrative, the deployment of repeated scenarios, and community rituals that govern fic production and reception.

2. Theory

[2.1] Fan fiction manifests through the limitations, possibilities, and tensions that exist between a canon text as read through a synthesis of dominant cultural codes and through the subjective desires and embodied experiences of fans (Willis 2006, 153); what is produced is often a negotiation of ideological dissonance between these two readings. Although it is more common to discuss these textual productions as negotiated readings, using a performative lens not only helps us account for fan fiction's intense focus on embodiment, use of repetition, and collaborative nature (Coppa 2006), but also helps us engage with fandom's liveness, ephemerality, and the characterization of individual fans, fan works, and fan communities as fluid works in progress.

[2.2] Because of these characteristics of fandom, Diana Taylor's (2003) model of the cultural archive and the repertoire provides a useful way of thinking about the relationship between canon and fan text. The archive refers to materials that are

assumed to be enduring, such as literal texts, buildings, or documents that, arguably, work as a cultural canon. Existing alongside the archive, the repertoire refers to the ephemeral, embodied, fleeting, and fluid, such as spoken language, ritual, and various genres of performance—which Taylor characterizes as connoting an embodied "process, a praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission and a means of intervening in the world" (15–19). Simply put, the archive houses knowledge reducible to texts, while the repertoire is the space where embodied knowledge is produced and circulated in transformative ways (20–21). The work of fans is also very process-oriented, and the knowledge fandom produces is embodied and ephemeral—shifting alongside changes in canon, with individual and collective fannish desires, and evolving modes of transmission and communication.

[2.3] Reading fan practices as categories of performance within the cultural repertoire aligns our method of analysis with fandom's valuing of embodied knowledge and lived experience and its ephemerality. Fandom's use of the same characters in repeated tropes—such as first-time, hurt/comfort, or friends-to-lovers—does, at least in literary terms, make it easy to discuss fan fiction produced through generic conventions and formulas. Yet, I argue that this perspective renders trope use as static, and doesn't take into account the ways in which each repetition performs the unique desires, experiences, and gendered subjectivities of individual fans—both writers and readers. Reading fan practices as "reactivated scenarios," which Taylor defines as "meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes" gives us a useful way to examine the relationship between fan texts and individual subjectivity (25).

[2.4] Scenarios appear in both the archive and repertoire; the repeated performances of scenarios that proliferate in the repertoire negotiate their originals in the archive in the same way fan texts negotiate the canon text. Scenarios, as Taylor describes them, are "sketches or outlines" of theatrical plots with all the inherent trappings: setting, actors, costumes, props; but they also include cultural milieu and embodied behaviors that are not reducible to language, such as gestures, movement, and tone. Scenarios that are consistently repeated in culture reactivate and "work on" things that have been worked on before. The scenario "structures our understanding. It also haunts our present, a form of hauntology that resuscitates and reactivates old dramas. We've seen it all before. The framework allows for occlusions—by positioning our perspective, it promotes certain views while helping to disappear others" (25).

[2.5] Understanding of gendered identities is also structured through repeated scenarios, deploying what Richard Schechner calls "restored" or "twice-behaved" behaviors, which are performed "completely independent of the causal systems (personal, social, political, technological) that brought them into existence."

[2.6] These behaviors have a life of their own. The original "truth" or "source" of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted—even while this truth or source is apparently being honored and observed. How the strip of behavior was made, found, or developed may be unknown or concealed; elaborated; distorted by myth and tradition. (Schechner 1985, 35)

[2.7] As poststructuralist feminist theory has demonstrated, the "truth" of gender has long been debated, lost, and contradicted; yet it is still performed and transmitted in ways that are remarkably consistent from generation to generation in a range of cultural contexts, largely through the citation of its repetition (Butler 1991). Slash fandom engages in queer performance when it restages scenarios in ways that undermine this consistency.

[2.8] Although the term *queer* is often used to indicate non-normative sexualities, gender expressions, and political affiliation (and I will also use it in this sense when applicable), my overarching use of queer as it applies to slash fandom is more expansive, based on its usage by Sarah Ahmed (2006) to refer to something that is "oblique or offline" (161). In laying out a theory of queer phenomenology, Ahmed discusses how sexual orientation unfolds through "lines" of directionality established by familial and social love that require subjects to "tend toward" some objects and not others, noting that, "bodies become straight by tending toward straight objects, such that they acquire their 'direction' and even their tendencies as an effect of this 'tending toward'" (86). The objects that bodies are straightened through are described by Ahmed as "heterosexual objects" within the conventional family home, the cultural backdrop in which bodies are formed (87). This cultural backdrop that Ahmed describes could just as easily be termed part of Taylor's archive, and includes categories of popular media.

[2.9] The practices that constitute online slash fandom—the production of transformative works, the reading and discussing of those works in online communities through the creation of fannish personas—can perform queerness by directing desire and bodies in space (Coppa 2006) in ways that are similarly offline, orienting them along angles that are oblique to the established lines of directionality that produce the range of "legitimate" interpretations of a narrative text. Source texts guide readers toward specific meanings through directional lines. These lines—drawn through genre expectations, cultural milieu, characterization, relationships, settings, and points of view—orient us within the space of the text; they direct the range of possible meanings and establish boundaries for acceptable interpretation. Slash twists the direction of the lines being drawn between characters, reorienting the reader along a different set of angles; this, effectively queers the source text, even if the individual

text/writer does not include non-normative sexual practices or engage directly in queer politics.

[2.10] Although queerness is performed in slash fandom in multiple ways, the length of this article limits its focus to two: how slash-specific scenarios such as hurt/comfort and first-time queer canon texts, and how fans' construction of online personas and the interactions between those personas in slash communities legitimize and transmit queer interests and desires. In synthesis, I argue these practices provide fans with opportunities to perform an array of identities and behaviors that are off-line or oblique to straight orientations in a space that is relatively queer-friendly.

3. Methods

[3.1] The overarching method employed in this study is close analysis of the performance of slash fans as social actors on LJ, at the levels of individual personal narrative, text production and content, and community reception. The performance of queerness through slash is evident not only in the repeated scenarios staged within the fic's narrative, but also in fans' performances of their roles as slash fans of Harry Potter, as users of LJ, and in their adherence to the practices and conventions of slash fandom—that is, the rules and expectations for posting content, commenting etiquette, and so on. Following the model put forth in Rebecca Black's (2008) work demonstrating how adolescent fan fiction in online spaces serves as a means for authors to perform specific aspects of their identity, I examine fannish performance on multiple levels: the authors' personal narrative as produced through profiles and posts, the story's metadata (summary, notes, header, warnings, ratings, etc.), the use of the repeated scenarios within the narrative itself, and the performance of community norms in the reception of serialized fiction on LJ.

[3.2] All of the content for analysis comes from the individual LJ (public) journal of user SP, which is the site of their profile, the fic's posting, and all of its attached comments ([note 1](#)). As a social networking site, the default privacy setting for LJ journals is public. Users can designate journals as private (self only), public, and friends-only (readers must have an LJ account and be friended by the journal to access its content). All of the fiction, profile information, and conversations cited in this close analysis are gleaned from public threads. I am characterizing "public" as locations that are accessible without having to use a login and password.

[3.3] Although these spaces are public, the positioning of LJ as a journal associates its content with the private, the personal, and the intimate. The content posted on fannish journals and in LJ communities is directed to a specific audience—fellow fans who share similar interests and who seek similar fannish experiences. In other words,

what is posted is meant for the community itself and it produces meanings that are specific to the fannish context. Taken out of context, these discussions can be misread and fans do assume a certain level of privacy on LJ pages, regardless of the public nature of the network. Keeping this mind, I have taken steps to protect the identities of those who have participated in discussions related to *Harry Potter and the Bound Prince* by referring to commenters in generic terms—for example, as reader 1 and reader 2—and not including direct links to posts or comments ([note 2](#)).

[3.4] I chose *Harry Potter and the Bound Prince* from the 56 works posted on SP's journal for three reasons. First of all, the fic is quite popular within the Harry/Draco fandom; it has a total of 1,092 comments on LJ alone and is also cross-posted on several other fan fiction archives, and it won multiple awards within the Harry Potter fandom between 2007 and 2009. Second, the story was produced through live role-play between its two coauthors; this results in a dialogic format that is especially rich for analysis of both individual performances of gender identity and a collective performance of queerness. Finally, the fic and its reception are fairly typical in terms of the narrative's use of repeated scenarios and readers' adherence to rituals that govern reception of serial fiction.

4. *Harry Potter and the Bound Prince*

[4.1] *Harry Potter and the Bound Prince* was developed through role-playing over instant messenger software through a process SP describes as follows: "Most of it is written using a cooperative style of writing that uses YIM or AIM based 'role playing' and then a great deal of negotiation and editing to make it fiction" ([note 3](#)). This process of negotiation involves transcribing the role-playing logs, stripping bits of unrelated conversation, researching, and rewriting to orient around plot. The completed story itself is the written, revised, and beta'd (edited by fellow fans) transcript of those role-play sessions in 37 chapters, which were released in serialized form between January and February 2007; it was posted on the public journal of SP, and archived on a page containing links to all 56 of SP's individual and coauthored fics with all of the comments included.

[4.2] Thus, the story is first constituted through live performance with each of the authors playing the characters. SP takes on the role of Draco, and the coauthor plays Harry. The plot unfolds spontaneously as each player reacts to the other's ideas and actions over the course of the role-playing. This live performance is then transcribed into an explicitly textual form and posted on SP's journal in serial format. Since role-playing is not generally how slash fiction develops, it is tempting to assume that this particular story's performative characteristics—the dual point of view and dialogic format—are solely the result of its rather unusual production process. However, the

story's performance extends beyond the original interaction between the authors—to the manner in which it is posted on LJ, the evolving content of the story itself, and its reception within the community.

[4.3] The novel is posted on SP's page in ways that conform to expectations of the LJ community; its posting is a kind of social performance as it adheres to community norms. Although specific requirements vary, there are guidelines for posting stories that are generally consistent across fandoms and communities. For example, each story must be prefaced by a header, which usually includes: the fandom (generally the source text that inspired the production), a listing of who was involved in the production, a rating (which is usually based on criteria familiar to us from other cultural rating systems such as the MPAA, with sexual content and violence leading to more restrictive ratings), genre, character pairing, content warnings (to help fans avoid triggers and choose stories based on their own interests), length, and completion status. The header for *Harry Potter and the Bound Prince* reads as follows:

[4.4] Fandom: Harry Potter

Rating: Adult

Genre: Romance, Drama, Angst, Smut

Pairing: Draco/Harry (others implied as backstory).

Length: 135,000 Words (37 Chapters)—COMPLETE

Warnings (Mark to Read): Language, Explicit M/M Sex, Anal, Oral, Rimming, Dom/Sub, Dubious Consent, Monogamy, Jealousy, Humiliation, Pain, Violence, Blood and Character Death (H/D live).

[4.5] Nearly every section of the heading demonstrates that the story is a queering of the canon text. Whereas Rowling's series is young adult, BP is adult; the novels in the Harry Potter series are generally classified as fantasy or adventure, while BP is listed first as a romance, followed by drama, angst, and smut (a term used to indicate a large amount of sexual content). The romantic pairing is a queer one, both in the sense that it is a same-sex couple who are heterosexual in the canon text and in that these two characters are written as enemies. The warning also includes explicit sexual behaviors that perform a range of deviance in regards to cultural norms. Essentially, the header tells us how the fic has reoriented the source text—drawing different lines between characters, and removing the restrictions produced by the source text's young adult rating.

[4.6] Yet what is most interesting about the heading in the context of queer performance is how the warning section includes both queer sexual practices and heteronormative ones—in particular, monogamy—an inclusion discussed by the author and their readers in the comments to the first chapter, "Hex Me or Kiss Me":

[4.7] Reader 1: I have read this several times and am mad-crushing on the sequel! And can I just say how wonderful it is that monogamy is one of your warnings???

[4.8] SP: That is wonderful to hear! *blushes* The monogamy warning is funny for me. I am polyamorous, but found if I didn't warn people in my poly fiction, they got upset. But it felt wrong to warn about one and not the other. Hence the monogamy warning. I don't see Draco as naturally monogamous. It is Harry's need for control that makes him so in this story. (LJ discussion, 2007)

[4.9] Here SP performs a queering of heteronormativity—both by claiming a poly identity and by warning poly readers that the central characters are monogamous. This undermines the normative status of heterosexuality by calling attention to it and pointing out the hypocrisy of elevating one model of relationships above another. This assertion of the legitimacy of both monogamous and polyamorous relationships performs a queering of heteronormative discourse.

[4.10] SP's performance of queerness is also integrated into their LJ profile—which, like any other social media profile, is constructed for a very specific audience and with the goal of performing a very specific persona. In this case, the persona that is performed is intentionally and explicitly queer. SP communicates an interest in non-normative sexual behaviors: bisexuality, queer, sex, slash, BDSM, and polyamory (LJ profile created 2006), followed by listings of other communities and journals on LJ that revolve around these interests. This persona is reinforced through a FAQ response to repeated queries about the origins of their screen name (which contains the word "pervert"), in which SP states, "I like the idea of reclaiming the word 'pervert' as 'a person whose sexuality deviates from the norm'" (LJ, May 26, 2007). Here, SP engages in a performance that intentionally queers discourses that construct normative sexual expressions by taking on a deviant identity as the defining characteristic of their LJ performance.

[4.11] This performance of queerness is extended throughout SP's performance of their Draco in BP—which queers the canon text through its premise and its restaging of romantic scenarios to rework norms governing gendered and sexual behaviors; the novel takes this particular scene from the canon text as its point of departure:

[4.12] Harry realized, with a shock so huge it seemed to root him to the spot, Malfoy was crying—actually crying—tears streaming down his pale face into the grimy basin. Malfoy gasped and gulped and then, with a great shudder, looked up into cracked mirror and saw Harry staring at him over his shoulder. (Rowling 2005, 529)

[4.13] This moment from the sixth installment of Rowling's series is a scenario that we see reenacted in countless versions of the heroic story—one in which the hero stumbles upon his enemy in a vulnerable state. As Harry stops and watches Draco crying, we know what is going to happen because we have seen it all before: the enemy will lash out at the hero in order to disguise his weakness and forestall any growing empathy on the part of the hero—or those who identify with him (readers). A fight will follow, which the hero will win (often reluctantly).

[4.14] This scenario's framework is structured around the lines of directionality (to use Ahmed's terminology) that orient readers within the ideology of both heteronormative adolescent literature and the classic heroic epic. The series constructs its protagonist, Harry, as a prototypical hero type: the young, white, straight boy who must grow into his potential, overcome great odds and defeat the ultimate evil. His heroism "depends upon an alpha-male model of masculinity that systemically marginalizes most other characters, especially in relation to gender and sexual orientation difference" (Pugh and Wallace 2006, 261). Not only are periphery characters marginalized as the hero arc expands, but the Harry Potter source text contains no explicitly queer characters or any overt mention of non-heteronormative relationships. The ideology of adolescent literature is similarly restrictive, demonstrating "a strong imperative toward pedagogy—inculcating 'correct' attitudes about sexuality to an audience deemed in need of education" (Tosenberger 2008, 188).

[4.15] Thus, what happens next in this scenario is not at all surprising: Upon discovering Harry Potter looking at him in the cracked mirror, Draco Malfoy draws his wand and fires off a hex that misses Harry by inches. Various spells are deployed and blocked until our hero desperately casts a spell he has never used before, not knowing what the effect will be—a spell that leaves the other boy "shaking uncontrollably in a pool of his own blood" (Rowling 2005, 531). This series of events conforms to norms that produce hegemonic masculinity; caught in a moment of emotional vulnerability by a male enemy, the "correct" masculine response is violence, since to be vulnerable in front of a rival reveals weakness and emasculation. This response is the one that the text's lines of directionality point us toward and it is the one we are conditioned to expect.

[4.16] BP is one of several slash fan fiction works that restage this particular scenario to reorient the canon text around their own desires and concerns, and each version constitutes a unique performance that unfolds on the basis of the ideological subject position of the authors and readers (note 4). SP sets the stage for their performative scenario in the fic's summary:

[4.17] In *HBP*, there is a pivotal moment where things could have gone very differently for Harry and Draco. In the bathroom sixth year, Draco is upset that Harry has caught him crying and throws a hex. It escalates and ends in blood, with Harry nearly killing Draco by accident. In this story, instead, unvoiced attraction to Harry motivates Draco to take a chance and kiss him. Once sparked, their mutual desire and exploration becomes the driving force in the alternative ending to the series. (LJ, January 7, 2007)

[4.18] Diana Taylor's formula for analyzing performances of scenarios requires us to first take into account the physical location, the embodiment of the social actors, the deployment of formulaic structures, and the forms of transmission (Taylor 2003, 23). In formulaic slash, the staging of a scenario like the bathroom scene often manifests through the hurt/comfort trope, in which the vulnerability of one character serves as a way to help the two lovers recognize their unacknowledged love/attraction for each other, paving the way for the consummation (the first-time scenario). Traced back to early Kirk/Spock slash in zine culture, the hurt/comfort trope is most common in buddy slash stories where the action of the plot transforms two friends into lovers. Generally, this involves one of the two being injured in the context of an adventure or crisis, thus providing an opportunity for comfort in the form of touching and nurturing (Lamb and Veith 1986, 107). Yet each repetition of the hurt/comfort scenario is unique and rooted in the embodied knowledge and lived experience of the author. Once it is transmitted to the fan community, it continues to evolve after it is posted, based on feedback from fellow fans in comments; a fic's seriality can contribute to its liveness as readers take on the role of audience.

[4.19] BP, for example, must reconfigure the trope in this restaging because the existing relationship between Harry and Draco is that of enemies, not friends; it lacks the same level of trust seen in a buddy relationship, so it requires a reversal. In BP, the moment of touch is not offered by the would-be comforter (Harry); instead, it is issued as a challenge by the vulnerable party (Draco), for Harry to react to. Yet it is still very much a hurt/comfort scenario, as it is Harry's witnessing of Draco's hurt and vulnerable state that makes the eventual shift in their relationship possible.

[4.20] The setting of the scenario's action is a bathroom—a space used for accommodating the more private needs of the body: its cleansing and the elimination of waste. In a range of popular media, bathrooms are also used as a site for central

characters to hide, overcome emotions, or prepare for anxiety-producing experiences. Of course the setting includes more than the physical space; no space is without history and cultural context. This particular bathroom appears in the Harry Potter canon at multiple points, most significantly as the opening to the Chamber of Secrets, through which a giant basilisk is summoned to murder students, and as a private place for the hero and his companions to brew illicit potions. This particular bathroom is also haunted—by the ghost of a young woman, known as Moaning Myrtle, who was murdered while using the space as refuge from bullies.

[4.21] Myrtle's bathroom also includes the history of the ongoing confrontational relationship between the two boys—members of competing school houses with different values, affiliations with different social classes, and on opposite sides in an ongoing battle being waged between the forces of good, of which Harry is the champion, and the forces of evil, for which Draco is being forced to play a part on threat of death. In BP, however, this space also includes Draco's unvoiced attraction to Harry—something that is not acknowledged in the canon but is instrumental in the slash restaging. This attraction is what drives the scenario's transformation as it leads Draco, as played by SP, to deviate from his gendered script, bringing Harry along for the ride in much the same way SP's profile and comments engage with fellow fans.

[4.22] Although the scenario is altered in a very significant way, Draco and Harry are still recognizable as the same characters from the canon scenario; this is evident in how SP and Author 2 embody and direct them in their restaging. Draco is still haughty, competitive and driven by a need for approval; Harry is still struggling with unresolved anger and ambivalence about his heroic mission. In both versions of the scenario, Harry is hesitant, reactionary, and defensive. The difference is that here, each is initiating and reacting to embodied intimacy rather than violence. The following conversation between Harry and Draco in the opening scene is a choreographed dance in which each carefully skirts Draco's display of vulnerability and their true motives for being in the bathroom (Draco's confessing his fear and desperation to Myrtle and Harry's following Draco to confirm he is up to no good):

[4.23] "So, Potter," Draco sneered, "why have you been following me?"

[4.24] Harry's eyes shot to Draco for a second, but shot back just as quick. "I haven't been following you," he said, trying to work some disgust into his voice.

[4.25] "Sure, you haven't..." Draco drawled. "You just happen to be wherever I am these days." He stepped behind Harry, putting himself between him and the door. (LJ, January 7, 2007)

[4.26] Harry continues his denials and Draco pushes harder, calling him "Harry" instead of his usual "Potter" and suggesting that he fancies him. Harry finds this sudden familiarity confusing; he hurls angry denials and a homophobic slur. As Harry tries to move past him, Draco blocks his attempts with his body. Harry becomes increasingly confused and angry, but also experiences a "funny feeling" in his stomach. The angrier Harry gets, the more aggressive Draco becomes, until he pushes Harry against the wall and kisses him; Harry pushes him away, calls him "mental," and stalks out of the bathroom.

[4.27] Draco is explicitly deviating from the script that generally governs his interactions with Harry—changing modes of address, teasing, initiating physical closeness in ways that unsettle Harry and force him to view their relationship in a new way. New lines of directionality have been drawn, and he must reorient himself to the realigned space. This queers the relationship between the two characters and performs a queering of the canon text by rendering it at an oblique angle—one that examines the story as if its potential for engagement with queerness were actualized.

[4.28] The premise of BP is a restaging of a common narrative scenario in a way that performs a queering of masculinity; by exchanging a hex for a kiss, it transforms the violence of that moment into an opportunity for emotional and embodied intimacy. Although Draco's kiss is initially rejected, this moment exposes a crack in the source text that, much like the mirror in which the boys' gazes meet, reflects a different narrative space, with lines that point in new directions. These lines point directly toward the next scenario I want to examine closely, Harry and Draco's first time.

[4.29] This scenario uses another repeated trope in *Harry Potter* fan fiction: the use of the Room of Requirement as a location. This room, for those unfamiliar with the Harry Potter universe, is a room in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry that magically becomes whatever space is required, attendant with all of the necessary supplies—whether that be mounds of pillows to soften the falls of young wizards practicing defensive magic in secret or the home of a cupboard used to smuggle dark wizards into Hogwarts. Like Myrtle's bathroom, the Room of Requirement is a space that houses a range of illicit activity and objects, and it figures into the history of Hogwarts at various points in the canon narrative, playing a central role in the survival of the young wizards to help to overcome the Dark Lord at the end of the series. The Room of Requirement is often the site of sexual encounters between characters in fan fiction, where it provides a comfortable bed and copious amounts of lubricant and tissue.

[4.30] Typical of the first-time scenario, this scene sets up one partner who initiates and another who is more reticent. Although it is Harry who seeks out Draco in the Room of Requirement, it is, ostensibly, for the reason of learning what nefarious deeds

he is up to—not to initiate a sexual encounter. Once the two are in the same room, Harry is constructed as the more introverted one—responding to Draco's challenge to kiss him with the kind of reluctance, embarrassment, and anxiety that embody what we might characterize as a typically constructed heteronormative response to the notion of queer sexuality. When Draco asks him what he is afraid of, Harry is compelled to assert his masculinity and sexuality to perform the category of normal:

[4.31] Harry narrowed his eyes. "It's not that I'm afraid of you," he said. "I just can't. I'm not gay for one thing," he said, the blush on his face now creeping across his neck and chest.

[4.32] Draco responds by also refusing the label of homosexuality. When Harry asks, with some confusion, why he would want to kiss him if he is not gay, Draco replies:

[4.33] "Is everything black and white with you?" Draco asked in exasperation, putting his cup down and standing. He walked around the table, gesturing as he spoke. "Straight or gay? Good or evil? Reality is a complex place, and people even more so. Isn't there room in your head for all of the other possibilities?"

[4.34] This bit of dialogue performs not only a revised Draco who is emotionally vulnerable, sexually attracted to Harry, and willing to communicate his own complex notion of morality—but again performs the persona of SP as crafted in their profile information and discussions with readers: someone who explicitly identifies with sexual identities and behaviors deemed deviant by hegemonic norms. Draco is seeking to get Harry to think critically about what constitutes deviant in the same way that SP is seeking to communicate with readers ([note 5](#)).

[4.35] This scene's insistence on gray areas in both the novel's notion of good and evil and binary constructs of sexuality performs an explicit queering of the canon text that mirrors SP's performance of queerness on their profile. SP's Draco repeatedly challenges these same binaries throughout the rest of the text, elevating a more nuanced and flexible view of the world—which Draco transmits to Harry and his fellow good-aligned wizards, repeatedly undermining this notion of everything being "black and white" and "good or evil." This results in a virtual performance of a queer identity that successfully "meshes" (Booth 2010) the author's real and fannish personas with *their* Draco Malfoy, a performance that is then transmitted to the community through SP's interactions with fellow fans and readers-as-audience through comments on their LJ journal in each successive chapter.

[4.36] The first-time scenario chapter has a total of 47 comments, including responses from SP and Author 2. This system of comments and responses performs yet another repeated scenario within fandom itself. The comment-response scenario is

enacted on other fannish distribution sites and communities such as FanFiction.net (FFN) and the Organization for Transformative Works' Archive of Our Own (AO3) when a writer posts an update to a fic that is a work in progress (WIP). Although individual conversations vary, in general, authors acknowledge reader comments, respond to questions and criticisms, thank readers for their feedback, and solicit more comments. Commenters offer thanks for the update, note their emotional/sexual reactions—often pointing toward specific sections that brought them to tears or turned them on; comments address the quality of the writing, quote favorite phrases, and admire and critique stylistic choices.

[4.37] This scenario plays out in multiple locations. As the communication is digital, both readers and commenters can participate from any number of locations—wherever they have access to the network: home, work, a Wi-Fi hot spot—the possibilities are endless. Yet the conversations take place in the digital space of LJ, which, as discussed earlier, is a space that interweaves the fannish and the personal—providing a stage for the production and performance of personas that mesh real and online personas with characters and roles within fannish communities (author, beta, commenter, etc.). The fact that this space is *not* physical is significant, as it determines the form of transmission: disembodied text in an Internet community. Since bodies are technically not present, physical interactions must be embodied through text. We see this in comments when symbols, punctuation, spacing, and capital letters are used to reproduce rhythms of speech, mimic sounds, and express physical reactions. Thus, we get comments such as these (all posted as comments to LJ in 2007):

[4.38] wow.wow.wow.

holy-fucking-wow.

hot damn.

fuck—that was *so incredibly fucking hot*

holy *shit*

adores you both like crazy

[4.39] That was so hot, I almost came when they did.

[4.40] *guh..:melts*

[4.41] SP responds to these comments affirmatively, thanking readers and noting how glad they are that the story is being enjoyed and producing these kinds of reactions—at one point even comparing readers' reactive comments to feedback given during a sexual encounter: "Every little bit of encouragement helps. Kind of like yelling

'yes' during sex to encourage the person to keep doing what you like!" (LJ, January 11, 2007).

[4.42] The social actors that embody the actions enacted in the commenting scenario are fans' LJ personas. These personas, as Kristina Busse (2006) points out, are constructed through multiple contexts: the serial narrative created on the user's personal journal through their profiles, interests and posts (personal narrative, fics, icons, responses to comments, etc.); their mentions by others in interlinked posts and journals; and their comments on the posts and journals of other users. A fan often performs much differently as a commenter than they do on their own journal; and what other fans say about a fan impacts that fan's persona as well, which is constantly shifting and evolving—a "work in progress" (219–220).

[4.43] The formulaic scenario of comment-response is enacted by multiple LJ personas, following scripts that adhere to fannish conventions governing appropriate fannish interactions. When deviations from these scripts (such as rudeness, anonymous hateful comments, homophobic remarks, etc.) occur, they are dealt with swiftly—usually by the original poster (OP), who is often backed up by other readers. Take, for example, this exchange between SP and a commenter who disparages BP for containing too much sex:

[4.44] Anonymous: Uh, there IS supposed to be a plot in here somewhere, right? Or is this just chapter after chapter of fucking? I mean, there's nothing inherently wrong about chapter after chapter of fucking. It's just that I thought somewhere in here there would be a plot, much like what would happen if J.K. wrote HBP differently...as, I may mention, it is advertized [sic] as such in the header text... This DID get an award of some kind. Makes me wonder if it wasn't just a popularity contest instead. Think I might stop reading here, giving this a definite thumbs-down. (LJ, October 13, 2007)

[4.45] SP responds in kind:

[4.46] It is not usually my policy to reply to rudely-worded anonymous comments. Yet, I have decided to reply here to save the annoyance of other such folks in the future. First, the story is clearly labeled as "smut" and contains quite a lot of graphic sex scenes. I think, overall, that is about half the story. If these offend or bore you, please go elsewhere. No sense wasting your time or bothering us with complaints about the amount of sex in the story. (LJ, October 13, 2007)

[4.47] In this comment, the reader has performed multiple violations of the conventions of fandom; they inserted unconstructive criticism, used a rude tone, and demonstrated that they did not make appropriate use of the fic's header and warnings in making their decision of whether or not to read the story. In addition, they made these comments anonymously to avoid any consequences this comment might have on the reception of their LJ persona. SP's response, as director, performs their control over the scenario on the journal and stands as a warning for others who might deviate from the script in a similar way. Criticism is welcome in the comment-response scenario so long as it is respectful and constructive.

[4.48] So how do the performances of the commenters engage with the production's queering of the canon and SP's performance of a queered identity? In a space where women are constructing narratives for each other that are reoriented around queer desires, does that make the performances of these readers queer? The answer to this question is not, as SP's Draco might put it, black and white. Fans who participate in slash's shared sexual fantasies in spaces like LJ come from a variety of different backgrounds, identities, and experiences (Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007). Early scholarship on slash fandom often assumed that a majority of slash writers and readers were straight, white women; today, the increased visibility and voices of fans of color and fans that identify as lesbian, bi, trans, or queer renders this assumption illegitimate (Hellekson and Busse 2014, 80) ([note 6](#)).

[4.49] Fannish performances are personal, individual, and part of the production of a constantly evolving self—of which sexuality is only one part. As Kristina Busse notes, "Slashers perform their identities in many ways, and the concept of queerness itself is clearly complex and not wholly containable in a straight/gay binary, or even a continuum including a variety of sexualities and expressions thereof" (208). Whereas some fans may be using slash fandom as a way of engaging with issues of queer politics and practices in ways that (however subtly) seek to transform, others may simply be playing with queerness in a space relatively safe from consequences in the real world; some fans may be exploiting queer desires in ways that can even be read as homophobic, while others are explicitly doing activist work. The conversations following the first-time scenario in BP do not perform queerness as explicitly as SP does in their profile and journal narratives. However, the comments—in expressing embodied pleasures derived from both the sexual content of the fic and its central theme of questioning binaries—do demonstrate that this space within LJ is one where fans can make room for "all the possibilities."

5. Conclusion

[5.1] This study set out to synthesize scholarly discussions of slash fandom as both queer space/practice and identity performance, extending existing research by looking not only at how fan practices can be read as performance, but also what is being performed, how the performances unfold, and why they are significant. Reading the case study of SP and *Harry Potter and the Bound Prince* through the lens of both queer theory and performance demonstrates how an individual fan's personal narrative, the work of fiction itself, and the interactions that produce the community can be read as multi-layered and collaborative performances that engage with queerness in a variety of ways. But why performance? What do we gain by examining these articulations of queerness as performance, other than a new set of conceptual terms? Why discuss repeated tropes as performative scenarios or examine the relationship between canon/fanon through the lens of Taylor's archive and repertoire?

[5.2] First and foremost, when we examine fan fiction only as a text, we focus our analysis on the words on the page or screen and we read it as if it were an enduring and static cultural object. Essentially, we are limiting our analysis to the perspective and values associated with the archive. Yet fan works, including but not exclusively fan fiction, that are largely produced, distributed, and consumed on and through digital technologies and networks are neither enduring nor static; they are ephemeral—here today, impossible to track down through a Google search tomorrow. They are fluid in terms of both location and content, the consummate "work in progress." Works can be removed from one archive and moved to another; they can be revised, deleted, or locked from public view—often based specifically on reader feedback. We see this in BP, as interactions between SP and their audience provide inspiration and alter the direction of the narrative in tangible ways. In online fan communities, readers are also live audiences; when fan fiction is released in serial format, creators get a consistent stream of feedback that mirrors that given to a performer on a stage.

[5.3] In addition to taking into account the ephemerality and liveness inherent in online fandom, performance addresses the radically personalized nature of fan works—both as produced by individuals and as received by fans in communities. In spaces like LJ, the personal and the fannish are enmeshed. Each fan-writer has their own version of the characters, whose bodies they direct in ways specific to their lived experience and ideological subject positions. SP performs an explicitly queer personal narrative through their LJ persona, which is constructed through profile information, journal posts, and interactions with readers on their LJ page. SP also performs a queered identity through their portrayal of Draco Malfoy as a dually queer character that readers are given access to through the novel's dialogic structure. SP's Draco is heavily invested in undermining binary constructions of not only sexuality and romance but also good and evil; combined with SP's LJ persona, the result is a rich and multi-layered performance of queerness that is received in a variety of ways

reliant upon readers' individual experiences and how those experiences are performed via their own LJ personas.

[5.4] When scholarly discussions of fan fiction are limited to a textual or literary context, it is often dismissed for the very characteristics that would make it valuable in genres of performance: repetition with difference, collaboration, and embodiment (Coppa 2006). Within fan communities, variations of repeated scenarios are evaluated like different stage productions of the same play—how SP's Draco is similar or different in comparison to other versions, how the story relates to the canon, its unique twist on the hurt/comfort scenario, and (as we know from the comments) its ability to produce strong embodied reactions (emotional, sexual, etc.).

[5.5] Common fan fiction scenarios such as hurt/comfort and first-time perform cultural work that has been worked on before—be that negotiating discursive linkages between masculinity and violence, or appropriate expressions of intimacy between individuals of the same sex. In SP's novel, each scenario performs an explicit and formal queering of the canon text by drawing oblique lines of directionality. This opens up the narrative in ways that encourage—even proselytize—multiplicity by transforming moments of animosity and violence into opportunities for emotional and sexual intimacy. The result is a queering of gender norms, heteronormativity, and the very clear black and white distinctions of morality that serve as the foundation for the Harry Potter epic.

[5.6] It is also significant that the novel's origins in collaborative role-play are not derided as unoriginal by the fan community as they might be in a literary context where the singular author is lauded as the source of creativity; instead, they are a point of discussion in a conversation about different ways to produce fiction. The novel's use of graphic sex as a means of constructing narrative is celebrated and praised by fans in comments and discussed by the authors in terms of creative choices and narratology. The novel's intense focus on bodies and the intense reactions it provokes in each chapter's comments are also markers of its quality. These characteristics are not only lauded and valued in genres of performance, they are critical sites of analysis in performance studies.

[5.7] Essentially, the lens of performance can help us reorient our approach toward the centrality of embodiment to transformative fandom in general—particularly the practices of those constructed as cultural others. Although this article specifically addresses how repeated slash scenarios address the embodied concerns and desires of those othered by virtue of their gender expression or sexual orientation, additional research could examine how fans deploy various scenarios and tropes beyond the hurt/comfort and first-time (such as race-swaps, alternate universes, crossovers,

omegaverse, mpreg, etc.) to perform other aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity, or class in transformative ways.

[5.8] Fans span a wide range of ideological subject positions, so performances—including those that constitute slash—can both reinforce and undermine hegemonic discourses. Thus, it is important not to slip into the trap of categorizing the archive and the repertoire (or canon/fantext) as oppositional binaries. Fan performances can be (and often are) regressive, traditional, and aligned with repressive discourse. The tools of performance studies, such as the analysis of fannish repetition as performative scenarios, are incredibly valuable in this context because they refocus the methodological lens—shedding light on how the practices of fandom that unfold within the repertoire function to value and elevate embodied truth over language, and experience over ideology; as a critical frame, performance studies provides insight into the embodied knowledge produced by fannish repetition and collaboration, legitimizes it as valuable, and allows us take it seriously without assuming an innate progressiveness.

6. Notes

1. I refer the dominant author of the fic as SP, an abbreviation of their LJ screen name.
2. I secured permission from one of the fic's two authors (SP) to quote from anything posted publicly and to cite profile information. The fic's coauthor is no longer an active user of LJ under the pseudonym attached to the story; that profile has been deleted and purged. As such, I was unable to contact the coauthor to secure permission for quotes. I simply refer to this person as "Author 2," and I focus the bulk of my analysis on the performance of SP, whose journal the story is posted on and who engages more directly with readers.
3. YIM refers to Yahoo Instant Messenger and AIM to AOL Instant Messenger. The quotation is from an LJ post seeking coauthors on May 19, 2008.
4. This particular scenario is one that has been reworked several times by slash writers in the H/D pairing, as many fans found it incredibly troubling in its adherence to norms of hegemonic masculinity and its elision of what slash fans experience as a sexual tension between the two characters. Although an exact number of stories that rework this particular scene would be difficult to measure across fan archives, the search terms "Draco/Harry fic, AU bathroom scene" turn up nearly 100,000 hits on a Google search, and comments on BP refer to this reworking as a very common trope. Specific examples include: "Two Sides of the Same Coin" by KatySummers, "Fix You Baby" by

maybegasoline, and "Apology" by Naadi. Each of these fics reworks the scene to end in emotional and/or physical intimacies or in apologies that lead to such intimacies.

5. Because Author 2's LJ profile has been purged, there isn't a basis for examining how their performance of Harry reflects their individual fannish persona. However, the comments from Author 2 that are posted alongside the fic's chapters generally consist of them echoing SP's responses and deferring to SP's interpretation of the scenes. In the coauthoring of the fic, the limited available evidence seems to indicate that SP is the dominant one of the pair, the one who directs the role-play's transformation into fiction.

6. An informal poll conducted by SP via SP's LJ page on July 30, 2010, demonstrates the diverse demographic of their readership. Of the 273 respondents, the range of gender and sexual self-identifications are intriguing. Although these results demonstrate that slash is still largely practiced by those who identify as female, the sexuality of the readership is much more fluid. The gender results: 3.6 percent male, 91.1 percent female, 0.7 percent trans (FTM), 2.8 percent gender queer, and 1.8 percent androgynous. As for sexual orientation, 54 percent identified as straight or heterosexual, 30.8 percent as bi/omnisexual/pansexual, 4.8 percent gay/lesbian, 8 percent asexual, and 2.4 percent other (unspecified).

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Praxis

Toward new horizons: Cosplay (re)imagined through the superhero genre, authenticity, and transformation

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[0.1] *Abstract*—I identify and explore connections between cosplay and costuming practices characterizing the superhero genre. Utilizing the concepts of authenticity, context, and transformation, I open a dialogue between these cultural texts and interrogate and rearticulate the spaces and surfaces of cosplay. I work with cosplay as a simultaneous performance—as source character and as member of the cosplaying community. Analysis permits the presentation of three interconnected assertions. First, cosplay is readable as an embodied reception of the unstable modes of identity worked within the superhero genre. Second, cosplay, although conventionally sited and treated within fandom, is also performed within spaces away from organized fandom, notably on screens (industry costuming) and streets (copycats or real-life superheroes). Cosplay can thus be reconceptualized as a spectrum of intersecting behaviors rather than as a limited fan practice. Third, the idea of transformation does not adequately reflect the actuality of performing as a source character. I assert and demonstrate instead that cosplay exemplifies a moment of what I have termed embodied translation, where cosplayers transfer the source character from a limitless fictional landscape to their delimited physical one. Such creative consideration complicates and troubles our current understandings of cosplay and commences the project of reconceptualizing this most complicated and manifold practice.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Costuming; Embodied translation; Fandom

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[0.3] *Costume*: Custom, use, wont, fashion, guise, habit, manner...The mode or fashion of personal attire and dress (including the way of wearing the hair, style of clothing and personal adornment) belonging to a particular nation, class, or period.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

1. Introduction

[1.1] Identity play within fandom is not just a material matter. Cosplay is only one of many ways in which fans engage with and enact identity; others include fan fiction (Coppa 2006), role-playing games (Lancaster 2001), or digital spaces (Booth 2008, 2010). Although using different materials—the page, the screen, and the body—these seemingly diverse sites of fan engagement do intersect, especially around identity and the agency of fans through many practices: rewriting extant characters and texts and, interrelatedly, inserting themselves within texts; negotiating dual or multiple identity performances and, relatedly, inhabiting the spaces between the fictional and the real; and, through collaboration, creating, maintaining, and developing fan communities. It is also worth emphasizing that fan practices are not performed in discrete isolation: a cosplayer may simultaneously cosplay, write fan fiction, produce videos, and digitally role-play the same character. Fandoms are not quiet, disconnected places but are fluid and dynamic spaces, filled with interchange, where borders and outlines dissolve and reappear through the passing and the telling. So, although this discussion focuses upon ideas of embodied identity play, I hope to transcend that discussion and speak to other fan practices engaged in performing identity, in whatever forms.

[1.2] Identity and its play are super complicated within the superhero genre, and generalizations do not come easily. Identity, once ascribed, is not treated as sacrosanct but rather as something dynamic and always subject to change. Genre protagonists are not created the same and are not, as the universalizing marker "superhero" suggests, members of a monolithic or homogenous group. Well-worn patterns of identity shape these archetypal characterizations and through repetition secure an idea of them, a familiarity, within the popular consciousness (Bongco 2000; Coogan 2007). Yet within such rigidity, there is fluidity, a strong sense that things are not set in stone. Identity play within the genre is characterized by diversity and plurality. Chief among the various modes of identity worked within the superhero genre is the cycling, transiting, alter/hero pairing (e.g., Bruce Wayne/Batman, Virgil Hawkins/Static). Although common, this mode, with its stress on alter identities, does not characterize all genre protagonists or all modes of super identity, but a brief account will serve to provide a sense of the intricacy of super identity.

[1.3] Popular and easy considerations of the alter/hero pairing imagine it in terms of simple duality ([note 1](#)): a characterization within which at least two identities distinctly cohabit one character; when one aspect is present the other is absent (e.g., Bruce Banner/Hulk, Peter Parker/Spider-Man). The alter ego is often, although not always, the originating aspect, the one accommodating, overrun, and transformed by the emergence of the super aspect. With exceptions (e.g., Wonder Woman, Superman), the originating character is a regular citizen from whom a new masked identity emerges, such as Captain Marvel from Billy Batson or Static from Virgil Hawkins. Crucially, both aspects hold authenticity; within specific contexts, both are accepted

and considered as real and true. Bruce Wayne, in all his poses, is not diminished by the existence of Batman and vice versa. An alter ego is not necessarily a secret identity; it may be exposed through self-declaration or through accidental or deliberate revelation. Ironman/Tony Stark and the Fantastic Four team are just a few characters living their transiting identities publicly. Established protagonists may also have several historical alter egos associated with them, and entirely separate protagonists may even share the same alter ego ([note 2](#)). On top of already complex identity play, these figures are always open to further, albeit episodic, transformation. Within Superman, for instance, identity plays out interminably within the Kal-El/Superman/Clark Kent dynamic, but during his long tenure he has also been the subject of many other fantastical transformations including becoming "monstrously obese, insect headed, a Frankenstein's monster, a lion-faced outcast" (Morrison 2012, 70). Yet despite all this mutability and border crossing, superheroes are created within a highly regulatory framework (Coogan 2007; Reynolds 1992). But even this framework can be ultimately collapsed, for superheroes do not really have to appear costumed, have superpowers, have secret/dual identities, be orphans, or have origins or even noble intentions. Few genres are as seemingly marked by binary oppositions, bounded with traversable borders, and regulated by pliable rules.

[1.4] Our experiences in identity also reflect the inadequacy of binary identity, suggesting instead modes much closer to the fluid, nonbinary models worked within the superhero genre. Binary systems are inherently unequal, marked by violent hierarchy (Derrida 1981), a relationship of the privileged and the suppressed. Implicated within the imbalance of power relations within these binarisms is the marking of the inferior position as specific, visible, and seen against the unmarked, invisible, and unseen superior position. Of further concern is the normalizing or naturalizing of the superior as the general, the normal, or the benchmark, if you will (Derrida 1981; Hall 1996; Chabram-Dernersesian 2006). Contemporary identity theory offers other ways of handling the contentious and problematic concept of identity (Barth 1966; Goffman 1969; Crenshaw 1991; Bukatman 1993; Halberstam and Livingston 1995; Bhabha 1995; Hall 1996; Ahmed 1999; Anzaldúa 1999; Butler 1999; Bauman 2000, 2004). Many actualize and employ concepts such as intersectionality, difference, liquid modernity, posthumanism, and passing in order to both reveal the inadequacies of the concept of identity and to attempt to theorize ways out or through it. They allow us to begin reimagining identity and therefore begin reimagining ourselves in ways that perhaps more adequately or satisfactorily reflect our experiences in subjectivity. As we shall see, the superhero genre and cosplay performance also offer other ways of conceiving, representing, and living in identity, ways not regulated through systems, structures, and binaries but instead welcoming of ambiguity and plurality ([note 3](#)).

[1.5] The diversity of modes of identity within the superhero genre is matched only by the diversity of costuming practices. Dress is a powerful signifier of identity, purpose, and function; connections between dress identity and power relations are long established and long exploited ([note 4](#)). But it is not solely visual; it is also the milieu in which the dressed body appears. Reading identity is not only dependent upon how a body appears but also upon where and by whom it is read. Costuming is a visual means of transforming one's reading in identity, a way of being other, another way of being. It takes center stage in the performance of identity and has a broad repertoire, from the material to the digital. It plays its part in fandoms, reenactments, films, games, and the gambits of real-life superheroes, a term that refers to the increasingly popular cultural practice of citizens not only imitating the costuming practices of superheroes but also emulating their crime-fighting behavior. It also comes into play in the modes of dress that characterize our daily existence, from the ceremonial use of uniforms (e.g., military, clergy) to their daywear counterparts (e.g., business suits, office wear) or even the uniform dress practices of certain subcultural groups (e.g., skinheads, punks). As both concept and practice, it defies easy description; it is fluid and dynamic and functions idiosyncratically, and as with the superhero genre, it is often hard to know where it begins and ends.

[1.6] The superhero genre and cosplay are knowable by their costuming practices and identity play ([note 5](#)). Within the superhero genre, as with cosplay, dress sets out intent and sets up expectation (Reynolds 1992) ([note 6](#)). The donning of any costume—changing from one mode of dress to another, from one subject position to another—is a momentous move, visualized. It affects everything. Here I take these defining preoccupations as a starting point. Documenting the ways in which superhero genre costuming practices speak to and echo around cosplay culture and performance leads this discussion outward to consideration of other, related forms of costuming and identity play, suggesting them all as participating in the same conversation. Such work generates an opportunity to creatively reconsider our current understandings of the conditions of cosplay, moving from limited fan practice toward an intersectional understanding sited within a dynamic continuum of identity play as a performed dialogue rather than monologue.

[1.7] I undertook a series of textual analyses and consulted a wide range of secondary sources, including recent research on cosplay (Lunning 2012; Lamerichs 2011, 2013; Bainbridge and Norris 2013); Web sites and fan sites such as iFanboy (<http://ifanboy.com/>), Cosplay.com (<http://cosplay.com/>), and YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/>); and documentaries such as *Superheroes* (2011), *Cosplay: A Way to Escape* (2012), and *Heroes of Cosplay* (2013). I also read other works engaging different modes of role-play and identity within fandom (Lancaster 2001; Sandvoss 2005; Coppa 2006; Booth 2008, 2010) in order to broaden my

understanding of the myriad ways in which fans enact identity play. I chose such a combined methodology to correspond with my purposes here, sources that would help me not with elucidating the experiences of cosplayers but instead with identifying and then interrogating the general understanding of the practices, the ways, of cosplay. I felt that as this type of general information was already readily available within secondary sources, which often provided accounts of primary research (e.g., questionnaires, ethnographies), such sources would provide appropriate and reliable details upon which to base my understanding of the central, popularly held tenets of cosplay. Such sources form the basis of my account of the accepted character of cosplay.

2. On embodied reception, authenticity, and transformation

[2.1] Here I treat cosplay as an embodied reception of the identity play and costuming practices worked within the superhero genre; for instance, just as conventionally cast superheroes simultaneously perform (at least) two characters, so too do cosplayers, as source character and as cosplayer. Interestingly, although dealing with a differently phrased fan practice, this simultaneity of performance calls to mind Cassandra Amesley's idea of "double viewing" (1989 quoted in Jenkins 1992, 67), a strategy allowing observers to simultaneously contend with both the fiction (the characters as constructed by an author) and the reality (the characters as people with stories of their own). The recognition of the simultaneity of the performance of cosplay, of the real and the fictional, the cosplayer and the source character, is both novel and significant. By engaging cosplay thus and through the associated concepts of authenticity and transformation, I interrogate the simultaneity of the mimetic and diegetic qualities permeating cosplay.

[2.2] Concerns around authenticity and transformation characterize much scholarly work undertaken on cosplay (Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Cheung 2012; Lamerichs 2011). I also utilize these concepts but perhaps for slightly different ends, not to establish or reinforce the idea of stable definitions of cosplay or cosplayers but to undermine them. Although discourses on authenticity characterize many debates and stem from many conceptual frameworks (e.g., existentialism, poststructuralism), there is a shared acknowledgment that authenticity is an unstable concept, one whose meaning is hard to fix. For my purposes here, however, I work with the popularly conceived understanding of authenticity as evoking notions of realness, truth, and identity. Through authenticity, I explore and query ideas of real cosplay and real cosplayers. I reveal the plurality of cosplay performance and in so doing illustrate ideas of realness and legitimacy as subjective, mutable, and unfixed.

[2.3] Transformation is another word and concept closely associated with cosplay and with the superhero genre, but it too proves hard to pin down. Transformation is not necessarily unbounded and is often enacted within limits (e.g., physical, psychical, contextual), and I, uniquely, work here with the idea and consequences of delimited transformations. While cosplay is routinely interpreted as transformative, as a means through which subjects can experiment and play with identity and subjectivity (Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Cheung 2012), it should be remembered that not all cosplayers seek such an experience—some wish only to publicly declare their connection with a specific fan object. Within this discussion, however, I treat cosplay as transformative, as it is most often interpreted (Lamerichs 2011; Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Cheung 2012; Lunning 2012; Bainbridge and Norris 2013), as an act through which participants can safely experiment and play with identity and subjectivity. I point to the elements necessary to secure a transformative performance, involving matters of costume acquisition, rehearsal, and self-belief. I conclude that because of corporeal limitations, these elements do not effect transformation but rather what I term embodied translation, that through these processes both cosplayer and character become lost and recreated in translation. I am interested here in exploring the discursive ways in which cosplay performance and culture are currently realized through these concepts and further in testing the source and nature of these discursively imposed limits. In short, I am interested in contesting the realness, the authenticity, of the ideas and transformative spaces encircling cosplay and cosplayers.

[2.4] While research on fans and fandom is burgeoning, work focusing upon cosplay remains something of a rarity. As Nicolle Lamerichs (2013) notes, it is more often mentioned as an example of fan practice rather than engaged directly as a cultural practice deserving dedicated research. Of work that is undertaken, theoretical attention still focuses upon a relatively limited range of themes (e.g., characterizing it within fandom, exploring performance and identity, and uncovering motivations), and upon mediums dominant within the cosplay scene (e.g., anime, manga, *tokusatsu*), leading to something of a preoccupation with why people cosplay and why they draw predominantly from these mediums (Winge 2006; Lamerichs 2011, 2013; Bainbridge and Norris 2013). By working beyond the boundaries within which cosplay is currently critically engaged, I creatively redress the relative lack of dedicated formal attention paid to cosplay.

[2.5] In seeking to rearticulate cosplay as something more than the material, more than the singular dressing-up practices of fans, I distinctively interrogate the ways of cosplay, by focusing upon how participants cosplay, considering the mechanics, the surfaces, and spaces, and upon how they affect their double performance as cosplayer and as source character rather than why. Reading the costuming practices and identity play present within the superhero genre and cosplay as in dialogue can facilitate a

more nuanced understanding of the processes and practices of costuming identity; identifying the patterns and rhythms in each will illuminate all. In the following discussion, I use the costuming practices and identity play of the superhero genre as lenses through which to test our current assumptions of cosplay, of what it looks like and where it can be seen. The analysis aims to generate both an expansive understanding of how such practices and play are being responded to and a more shaded critique of cosplay.

[2.6] In the opening segment, I highlight moments of repetition and intersection within the costuming practices and identity play characterizing the superhero genre and cosplay; both field an idea of identity as plural, mutable, and performed. Critically engaging the idea of costumes and cosplay as transformative enables a reconceptualization of the effects of cosplay upon the cosplayer, one capable of not only transforming the cosplayer, but also—by transferring them onto the delimited bodies of cosplayers—the modes of identity present within the superhero genre. Theorizing fictional depictions of identity alongside material examples reveals them as differently phrased expressions of the same concerns and ideas.

[2.7] Transformation also informs the subsequent segment, although not with regard to cosplayers but to cosplay itself; that is, with the transformation of our idea and current understanding of what cosplay is and what it can be. Through the concept of authenticity, I test the definitional limits of cosplay and the performance of fan identity by interrogating our ideas of real cosplay and real cosplayers. To do so I consider ideas of cosplay away from the safety ([note 7](#)) of the convention hall, its cultural heartland, and out onto the screen and street, toward the realm of industry costuming and real-life superheroes. Treating cosplay thus permits a unique exploration and testing of its boundaries within entirely different contexts and to entirely different, unpredictable audiences. Such querying allows me to demonstrate the ways in which the tenets of accepted (authentic) cosplay are present within other popular forms of costuming and role-play. This explication sets the stage for future thinking on the nature of cosplay and its relation with identity and with role-play. Opening such a dialogue allows the suggestion of cosplay as a continuum of intersecting behaviors rather than as limited fan practice and ultimately allows a reconceptualization and transformation of our understanding of the ways of cosplay. However, in order to consider cosplay as performance that can perhaps travel, it is necessary to first identify what today popularly constitutes authentic cosplay performance.

[2.8] Putting on a costume, whether on a page, a screen, or a body, visualizes a subject's desire to change their locus, to cross a border, and it is always a meaningful move. It affects all. In fictional worlds, we have no special name for this practice—characters simply just suit up—but in the real world we call it cosplay.

3. On cosplay

[3.1] Recognizing that cosplay is not easily defined, I seek to evoke rather than define this practice.

[3.2] Cosplay is routinely presumed, described, and understood as authentically operating only within the bounds of fandom. It commonly describes a set of fan-based practices where participants dress up as original characters or characters from extant media texts ([note 8](#)). Cosplay is only one of many ways in which fans respond to media texts: some write fan fic, some perform and produce fan films or vids, and some create fan art. Fandom should not, however, be considered an assortment of distinct branches; there is a great deal of intersection between fandoms and fan practice. As with other fan practices, cosplayers are cultural consumers and producers; using the text as a starting point, they extend meanings of the text and of themselves (Hills 2002). While fans draw upon many mediums and surfaces to produce fan material, such as the page and the screen, the body is the surface of choice for cosplayers. In fact, I would even go so far as to propose that cosplayers, rather uniquely, materially participate in several fan practices simultaneously: they may write and perform skits at conventions or pose and perform for photographs, they often create, design, and manufacture their costumes, and they rewrite and perform their chosen character upon their own bodies.

[3.3] Cosplay culture refers to the broader range of cultural activities performed by cosplayers, for instance, digital or interpersonal (face-to-face) community participation, spectating, or knowledge sharing. It is a diverse global activity with a long established history (Winge 2006; Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Cheung 2012; Lamerichs 2013). However, as an expansive practice it is subject to definitional complexity and fluidity. Cosplay is a social activity and one of degrees, where some participants are highly implicated and others less so. It can be a moment of embodied reception when cosplayers enact and perform fictional characters, but it is not necessarily an act of fannish practice nor indicative that the cosplayer is a self-declared member of a character's fandom (Lamerichs 2011). The process of acquiring a costume is also idiosyncratic; costumes may be personally, innovatively, and devotedly crafted and handmade, or commissioned, or shop bought (mass produced), or involve elements of body modification such as tattoos, colored contact lenses, or dental prosthetics. Most costumes are ultimately created through a combination of all elements, as evidenced in *Cosplay: A Way to Escape* (2012). Changing the visuality of the body through costuming allows a different reading in identity, be that alter ego to superhero/villain or cosplayer to source character. Participants in cosplay, however, not only enact their source character but also become realized as members of the cosplaying community, visibly claiming their cosplayer identity.

[3.4] Cosplay is not monolithic or homogenous, and participants come to it from many directions. Not all superhero genre cosplayers are readers or fans of superhero comics and may in fact only know these characters through films, cartoons, games, and other informal sources of popular cultural knowledge ([note 9](#)). Cosplayers use the visuality of their bodies to revise and refashion their position in culture and identity. Similar to the alter ego device within the superhero genre, cosplay performance provides participants with another way of reading visually and thus another mode of being. A culture of revision and plurality not only marks identity and costuming within the superhero genre but also within fandom and cosplay. Just as fans are not limited to one fan object, cosplayers too are not bound to one tribe (Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Cheung 2012; Brown 1997). They are nomadic (Jenkins 1992, 36), and their participation within fandoms is simultaneous and dynamic (Hills 2002). As Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Cheung (2012) note, "The image and identity of an individual is never stagnant...cosplayers move frequently and fluidly between different characters and tribes according to their changing interests and passions" (320) ([note 10](#)).

[3.5] Context also plays a key role within cosplay performance and within the superhero genre ([note 11](#)). Cosplayers will often travel to conventions—change their context and location—in order to perform their cosplay. As cosplayers mainly perform for fellow cosplayers, the cosplay audience is, for the moment, niche ([note 12](#)). The convention hall or similar space is by far the most popular venue for performing and spectating cosplay. Sharing photos online at dedicated Web sites or through personal social networks provides another popular avenue. Cosplayers who post photos of their various cosplays on their personal social networks such as Facebook and Tumblr often create a back catalog, or at conventions they may even perform several characters during their convention attendance. Convention Web sites often feature photographs of cosplay performed during the event, such as at Comic-Con and WonderCon. Thus, spectators can observe and recognize the same cosplayer perform different characters or revisions of self. As with the superhero genre and its penchant for core character revision, cosplayers too revise themselves; ebbing and flowing through performances, they are simultaneously same (originating subject) and different (cosplayed character).

[3.6] Observing the popularly accepted tenets of cosplay as they connect with the superhero genre sets the scene for the forthcoming analysis, which, as discussed above, is directed through the concepts of authenticity and transformation.

4. Transforming bodies: Costuming in the superhero genre and cosplay

[4.1] The origin of costuming superhero genre protagonists remains something of a mystery, with many accounts offered ([note 13](#)). Whatever the original and real motivations were, it remains to this day a defining and unavoidable feature of its creation and proves a constant source of pleasure and frustration. Costuming within this genre is not simply visual disguise; it is also the context in which the dressed body appears. Creators use modes of dress to signal how they wish a character to read in a particular moment (Reynolds 1992). The removal of a costume is as important as its donning. As with cosplay, the mechanics behind costume changes are largely unseen and inexplicable, but they are always made and always timely ([note 14](#)). Although costuming is unique to each character (often reflecting their origins) it is, however, a universalizing practice, and within the genre, all protagonists must, in whatever fashion—outlandish or daywear—appear costumed if they are to perform or read in the desired way ([note 15](#)).

[4.2] The process of acquiring costumes within the superhero genre is often similar to that within cosplay culture, but not for all protagonists. Innate super characters, such as Thor, come ready costumed, whereas engendered super characters—those who become super through design (intent) or by accident—such as Spider-Man, must design their own. Origin stories often detail the costuming process but some remain teasingly unaccounted for, such as Hulk's purple shorts. Spider-Man's origin story, in Marvel's *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (1962), holds particular thematic relevance.

[4.3] Peter Parker did not originally design and manufacture his Spider-Man costume in order to fight crime but rather for public performance, or as Peter himself describes it, showmanship (figure 1). As well as revealing the costuming process of Peter Parker/Spider-Man, these panels offer, I suggest, a window into the domestic world of the cosplayer. Peter Parker easily reads as a dedicated cosplayer, one busily creating a costume and anticipating the admiration and acceptance from a peer group when they appear wearing it. In demonstrating that wearing a costume is much more than changing modes of dress, these panels reveal Peter privately getting used to his body costumed, used to how it looks and moves, and practicing performing his newly dressed and named identity, Spider-Man. These panels show readers that Spider-Man is not simply Peter Parker in costume but Peter Parker transformed, through practice and play, into Spider-Man. Peter has to learn a different way of being, of moving, in his newly costumed body. For Peter, transformation is not just about gaining a superpower but about teaching his body how to authentically and visually perform that ability.



Figure 1. Peter Parker learns to become Spider-Man. From *Amazing Fantasy* #15.
[\[View larger image.\]](#)

[4.4] The idea of costuming as something more than just putting on a costume is further revealed through two distinct yet similar uses of the word *idiot*, one referring to industry costuming and one to cosplay. Of his filmic performance as Batman, Christian Bale stated he felt like an idiot when he was "just standing in the Batsuit and being a guy" (Murray 2005). Bale realized that merely being in the suit would not be enough to allow him to perform Batman; he would have to learn how to inhabit the suit. Similarly, Andrea, a participant ethnographer and a first-time cosplayer, states of her first cosplay performance "All of a sudden, I felt like an idiot...like a ballet dancer but one who knew nothing about the basic positions and movements" (Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Cheung 2012, 7). Andrea also realized that she could not perform without knowing the moves of her character, that it was not enough to simply be in the costume. Such examples demonstrate that performing in costume, in any mode of costuming be it genre, industry, or cosplay, requires the subject to learn how to fully and materially inhabit the costume.

[4.5] Dedicated cosplayers also rehearse with similar aims before cosplaying publicly, learning and perfecting their performance of the visuality and the body language of the source character. In all cases rehearsal can be understood to help mitigate feelings of "epidermic self-awareness" (Eco, quoted in Entwistle 2002, 133), referring to a

heightened, possibly uncomfortable awareness or self-consciousness of oneself as a dressed body, a self-consciousness which could hamper performance. Private rehearsal works to secure a more natural, confident performance, which in turn contributes to securing the desired reading as authentic. For dedicated cosplayers, cosplay is not just about dressing up but also about transformation and translation. It is a complex process involving the transference of the source character from the page and the imagination onto the body. Cosplayers endeavor to transform the visuality of their body into the visuality of a fictional and usually fantastical other. This cannot be a literal transformation; their material reality ultimately limits and bounds their transformation.

[4.6] Spider-Man, for instance, is a clear source of inspiration for the real-life superhero known as the Vigilante Spider. The Vigilante Spider will never be able to materially replicate Spider-Man (although he may not wish to do so) ([note 16](#)). It may be better to conceive of this practice as translation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines translation as an art, a means "of turning from one language into another [and] to bear, convey, or remove from one person, place or condition to another." Translation itself is a fluid meaning-making process, one troublesome to concepts of authenticity, truth, and constancy. Translation is not static and assured; it is a movement of meaning across boundaries, where meaning can slip and change as it echoes through differing minds, mouths, and bodies. Translators are empowered during translation, as they create their meaning, but it is a boundless process with meaning endlessly open to translation.

[4.7] Cosplayers are, throughout their costuming preparations and rehearsals, in a dialogue with their source character, not only learning how to read its body language (including poses, expressions, and movements) but also how to speak and to perform it. Cosplay performance sees the transference of this newly acquired language onto their unique material visuality as an instance of embodied translation. Locked in as translators, cosplayers cannot become first language speakers; cosplay will always be their second tongue. Embodied translation is, I argue, a complex process and uniquely enacted within the frame and bounds of the material body of the cosplayer. Thus, in translating established characters, cosplayers are implicated in a process of re-creation; they produce simultaneously both a new character and a revised version of the original ([note 17](#)).

[4.8] This practice is also present within the superhero genre where super characters are routinely recreated by transplanting them into new bodies and subjectivities. The introduction of Ben Reilly (the second Spider-Man) into the Spider-Man continuity in Marvel's *Sensational Spider-Man #0* (1996) provides a ready example. Ben Reilly operates variously in this mythos: as a new character pairing (Ben Reilly/Spider-Man),

as a new yet related characterization (Ben Reilly/Scarlet Spider) and as a revised and sometime stand-in or copycat of the Peter Parker original. Relevantly, Ben Reilly's Spider-Man costume sees him as recognizable as the original Spider-Man; it is not, however, an exact replica and is unique to his characterization. Spider-Man as performed or translated through the body of Ben Reilly is different to that of Spider-Man as performed by Peter Parker.

[4.9] Through embodied translation, cosplayers convey source characters from a textual realm into a material one. Consequently, in so doing they subject super or fantastical characters to the laws and limitations of the real world, of real bodies, where there can be no super speed, no spider-sense, no flaming, and certainly no flying. Cosplay can never fully realize these characters; it can only ever be embodied translation. That cosplayers still perform these unperformable characters demonstrates the intention of this mode of cosplay as more than wish fulfillment. Cosplayers embody the cold reality that superbeings cannot exist in reality, an idea commonly experimented with in the comics superhero genre. Through their performances, cosplayers take the super out of the superhero and demonstrate that superbeings can only really exist within fictional worlds.

5. Transcending boundaries: Cosplay rearticulated

[5.1] Authenticity is an intricate concept, shot through with indeterminacy and subjectivity. It evokes many troublesome ideas, not least truth and realness but also power—how does the power to define the authentic circulate? It also concerns identity and ideas of acceptance and belonging, and in terms of cosplay, an authentic reading can secure acceptance as both cosplayer and source character. Matters of authenticity are important within fandoms and their study, not only as a way of distinguishing between fans and nonfans but also as a means of regulating communities (i.e., determining who is a real fan) (McCudden 2011; Williams 2006; Campbell 2006). Authenticity is well recognized as an unstable concept and perennially subject to change and renegotiation (McCudden 2011). The idea of a real or authentic fan is problematic not least because fan experiences are not homogenized—one fan's experience and performance cannot be the same as another's—but also because definitions of authenticity, of what makes something real, are subject to change. Within this section, I work to complicate and decenter the academy's ideas of what currently constitutes real cosplay and real cosplayers.

[5.2] In first considering how the costuming practices of the superhero genre appear off the page, it is useful to imagine cosplay as a continuum of dressing-up behaviors, traceable, I suggest, throughout history. Consider, for instance, alongside our modern understanding of cosplay the tales of the shape-shifting and costuming practices of the

ancient gods visiting Earth dressed in the guise of mortals or the ancient real-life costuming practices of religious adherents dressing as their favorite gods (Knowles, quoted in Atchison 2012, 13). It is further possible to suggest that in recent times cosplay has even gone digital and is now regularly performed within virtual or online spaces. Evidencing this are the general role-playing games, such as *Batman: Arkham City* (2011) and *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance* (2006) but perhaps demonstrating it particularly well is the more recent multiplayer game *Gotham City Imposters* (2012). Players within this game choose to join Team Batman or Team Joker, but instead of becoming Batman or Joker, players cosplay them, so each game character looks different to the others and to their source character, reflecting real-life cosplay. Twitter also sees members cosplay as fictional characters, such as Tony Stark (Iron Man) or Bruce Banner (Hulk), often dressing up their Twitter accounts with images of the characters in question as the avatars (Booth 2008, 2010).

[5.3] Moving now to consider specific cases, I open by looking at costuming within superhero films, or, more specifically, at industry costuming. Costuming within this context is, I assert, open to a reading as a mode of cosplay; it is conceivably the case that some of these performances constitute cosplay. Both are, on the surface at least, decidedly similar practices. Superhero films feature costumed actors, often (but not always) superhero fans, who are performing as genre protagonists, reenacting origin stories and select narratives from the superhero genre. Samuel L. Jackson and Nicolas Cage are just two notable actors known for their love of superhero comics and for appearing in superhero films (e.g., Cage as Ghost Rider and Jackson as Nick Fury in the recent spate of Marvel films). It is not impossible to imagine that in accepting roles within superhero films such (self-acknowledged) fan/actors are expressing their love of and for these characters and texts and their affiliated fandoms. Even if actors declare that they were unaware of or not fans of superhero comics before they chose to undertake the role, as both Christian Bale as Bruce Wayne/Batman (Murray 2005) and Heath Ledger as Joker (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPTf-sOImtI>) did of their performances within Christopher Nolan's rendering of the Batman mythos (although both Ledger and Bale read the comics and immersed themselves in the Batman mythos to prepare for their performances), it may still be cosplay. Even recreational cosplayers are not required to know or like their chosen characters (Lamerichs 2011). Even when considering ideas around work and economics, this industry costuming may still be considered cosplay, for many within cosplay culture are career cosplayers and receive payment for their performances. Yet for all this shared positionality, defining acts of cosplay may just come down to a matter of self-belief. Such actors, even fan actors, may not believe they are performing cosplay and so do not describe their performances as such; they may believe that their performance is different and so do not seek or receive admittance into cosplay culture. Yet, as seen within cosplay culture, if such actors chose to declare their performances as cosplay, they would be

welcomed into the cosplay fold and their authenticity within such duly determined. Authenticity, as with cosplay culture and performance, is not fixed, reliable, and true but something that can be lost and found, given and taken away. Real cosplayers look precisely as they mean to look; believing and being believable, they can be anything and anywhere.

[5.4] Taking the idea of cosplay and authenticity a little further away again from the page and the screen is the copycat or real-life superhero mode ([note 18](#)). Copycats or real-life superheroes are citizens moved to practice social activism or vigilantism by imitating the costuming practices of fictional superheroes, often emulating their crime-fighting behavior ([note 19](#)). They lift from the page and take to the streets. A specific superhero character inspires some, while others develop their own persona through an amalgam of superhero genre tropes. Superhero copycats, although pejoratively deemed mere mimics, do lift a great deal from the conventions used to create their fictional counterparts. Both are motivated to fight injustice within their communities and use various devices to achieve their goals (e.g., secret identities, costumes). Interestingly, in fictionalizing a copycat's experiences, it is possible that they would stand as an example of an authentic costumed hero. Copycatting is a global activity ([note 20](#)). Copycats also in limited cases have the opportunity to be much more than mere simulacra ([note 21](#)). It is possible for someone with enough personal wealth and time to develop a comparable skill set to those held by costumed heroes like Batman. In fact, Bruce Wayne was once just a strongly motivated civilian with a lot of time and money. Yet the reception of copycats is mixed. To some, they are failed and poor imitations. However, to others, they are real heroes working for good within their communities and serving as positive role models, as the HBO documentary *Superheroes* (2011) demonstrates. Such ambiguous readings further reveal authenticity as constructed, mutable, and simultaneous.

[5.5] Copycat behavior appears within the superhero genre itself. Although not routine, it is not unknown for villains or heroes to don the costume of another character. Villains may do so to cause chaos and undermine reputations. Heroes may do so to help protect secret identities by allowing the copycatted character to appear in two places at once (e.g., Peter Parker and Ben Reilly). Genre civilians may also perform copycatting. Originating within the comics superhero genre, *The Dark Knight* (2008) recreates and indicates its civilian variety. In one scene, Bruce Wayne recounts his previous evening's work and tells his butler, Alfred Pennyworth, that he encountered more copycats. It is the use of the word *more* that suggests that copycats are an increasing presence on Gotham's streets as they are on ours. The idea of authenticity is also touched upon with both Batman and his nemesis, Joker, punishing and berating civilians for dressing up and trying to act like the true Batman. One copycat asks the authentic Batman what the difference is between them; Batman

replies that he is not wearing hockey pads. Although perhaps flippant and for effect, this quip reaffirms Batman's established belief in the power and role of costuming and performance in enabling his authentic performance. Batman does not refer to any other defining characteristics, such as his motivations and skill set, just their difference in costume.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] Scholarly articles focusing on cosplay typically open with or include a definition of cosplay (as *kosupure*, a neologism formed of the words *costume* and *play*) and a description including the words *dressing up*, *fans*, *fandoms*, and *conventions* (Winge 2006; Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Cheung 2012; Lamerichs 2011). While cosplay is and certainly does involve all these things, as I demonstrate, the definitional limits can perhaps be stretched a little more. Cosplayers are not limited to performing in one way, on one stage, and at one time.

[6.2] The dynamic interplay and dialoguing between cosplay and the superhero genre powerfully evokes embodied reception. I worked with cosplay as performance through two main phases, as performing as source character and as community member. Through two key concepts—authenticity and transformation—I suggested and demonstrated cosplay as a practice performed inside, in between, and outside fandom. This testing of limits and boundaries saw two key assertions arising from my analysis.

[6.3] First, cosplay can happen, authentically, anywhere and at any time—it is not limited to convention halls or cosplay parties and gatherings. The idea that cosplay connects simply with fandom has been ruptured, and from this reconceptualization new understandings of cosplay can emerge. Cosplay is better realized as a continuum of intersecting behaviors rather than a limited fan practice. Such a conclusion pushes and extends considerations of cosplay beyond the realms of fandom and in so doing also extends the boundaries of fandom.

[6.4] Second, transformation cannot conceptually reflect the actuality of performing as a source character. In analyzing the mechanics of cosplay—those numerous individual practices that come together to effect the final performance—I concluded that cosplayers experience something more akin to embodied translation than transformation. This idea of embodied translation foregrounds the role of the material body in cosplay performance and complicates ideas of performance authenticity and what is meant by the authentic.

[6.5] Analysis demonstrated costuming and belonging as shared preoccupations within cosplay and the superhero genre. Through my discussion, I established that not

only do they speak to each other on such matters but they also speak to us, visually and viscerally, of the critical role of the unstable visuality of the body in identity performance. In this article, I sought to creatively extend work undertaken on the superhero genre and on cosplay, particularly in terms of becoming and belonging. Such deliberations framed my examination of the identity play, transforming visualities, and costuming practices present within both the superhero genre and cosplay. My adoption of such an original approach has permitted the discovery of potent moments of intersection of and dialoguing around costuming and becoming.

[6.6] Here I have sought to start a conversation about the nature of the performance of cosplay and fandom. I have only been able to touch upon and tease out the potential offered by engaging and juxtaposing such practices, texts, concepts, and themes, and these are most certainly not the only intersections. There is much scope for future research around these parameters. For instance, it would be interesting to explore the alter ego device within the superhero genre alongside performing as a source character; both practices offer participants another way of reading visually and thus another mode of being. It would also be interesting to consider ideas of cosplayers and super beings as performing, simultaneously, the same and different. Such critical attention would develop and extend our understanding of the connections, influences, and consequences of costuming identity.

[6.7] Working to complicate and trouble established definitions and ideas is a powerful means of discovering new ways of looking or new vantage points, and it is hoped that the assertions I have demonstrated will have a positive and progressive impact upon the critical treatment of cosplay in the future.

7. Notes

1. Theorizations are also framed around other simple oppositions or duality: between the superhero and their affiliated archenemies (e.g., Batman/Joker, Professor X/Magneto), or the opposition within an individual (e.g., good/bad, sane/insane).
2. Examples of established protagonists having several historical alter egos include The Flash as Jay Garrick (1940), Barry Allen (1956), or Wally West (1986). An example of a separate protagonist sharing the same alter ego is Kevin Sydney, the alter ego of both Changeling and Morph.
3. Its representation and acceptance of other ways of being is evidenced, for example, within the routine slippage of names. Genre protagonists commonly refer to costumed subjectivities by their civilian names and vice versa, such as Batman and Superman in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller 1986) and Green Arrow in *Identity Crisis* (Meltzer 2004). In the latter, Green Arrow narrates an entire scene, referring to the

other characters by their civilian names even though they are shown costumed. This routine slippage illustrates a high degree of comfort and acceptance of mutable, nonunitary identity within this community and its readership.

4. The power to determine, suggest, or prohibit how people dress is a clear visual demonstration of sociocultural power and authority (state, religious, economic), evidenced most dramatically and extensively during the European colonization period, notably through Africa, the Americas, the Indian subcontinent, and the Asia-Pacific region. Relatedly, dress can as easily visualize resistance and rebellion as it can conformity, acquiescence, and compliance.
5. Costuming is only one axis through which identity play is effected within cosplay and the superhero genre. Notable others include context (i.e., the changing setting for performances) and naming practices (i.e., changing names in line with performances).
6. In addition, see Bongco (2000) who connects superhero genre codes, conventions, and their repetition (including costuming) to setting and satisfying reader expectations.
7. Safety within fandom is a complicated concept operating on many levels. In one sense, it refers to the idea of conventions as safe spaces for cosplayers, where they can perform to receptive and supportive audiences, without fear of ridicule; that is the safety of community, of belonging. However, within convention spaces and their surrounds it is not enough that cosplayers feel safe within their community to perform their cosplay, but that they can do so without wider fears or threats of harm, whether physical or emotional. Recent events, such as those occurring at 2014 San Diego Comic-Con, have shone a light on the harassment culture and dangers of performing cosplay publicly, particularly for women and girls, but these are not new dangers. Ideas and issues of safety and danger thread through cosplay culture and performance and should be assertively addressed within all spheres, including cosplay culture, fandom, and the academy.
8. This definition may be disputed; some cosplay is not based on specific characters but rather on genres, such as Lolita cosplay and real-life superhero cosplay.
9. However, even when expressed via different media, the tenets of the superhero genre remain the same. This ensures that cosplayers unfamiliar with the comics medium are still aware of the fluid identity modes and costuming practices of the superhero genre.
10. With exceptions, it is possible to imagine instances where a cosplayer performs only one favored character, one with whom they feel a particularly deep, personal connection.

11. The curious practice of presenting protagonists as costumed and yet unmasked (e.g., Superman, Icon) demonstrates the power of context in reading identity (Reynolds 1992). Such costuming practice should render each aspect of the characterization as recognizable to the other (i.e., that Clark Kent is Superman, Augustus Freeman IV is Icon), but it does not. Superman, for instance, fresh facedly performs his heroics and yet remains doggedly unrecognized by his peers as Kent. Both are facially recognizable as the other, even with their nominal visual differences (the glasses and the curl), yet only a few make the connection.

12. Increasing mainstream curiosity around cosplay has, however, increased its visibility and knowability within the popular consciousness, such as through documentaries like *Cosplay: A Way to Escape* (2012) or *Heroes of Cosplay* (2013), and so although still niche, the cosplay audience has lately become more expansive.

13. Reasons include, in its earliest days, as serving as a means of easily distinguishing it from its competitors and as a tool to help juvenile readers distinguish the super characters from the not so super, the good guys from the bad, and so on.

14. With rare exceptions, readers only see the outcome of the change, for instance from costumed hero to civilian, as an appearance or disappearance. Characters within the narrative also, in the main, do not see these moments, and may be unaware of a change even occurring.

15. Costuming is a similarly universalizing practice within cosplay, in that all cosplayers must appear, to some degree, costumed in order to read successfully as cosplayer and/or source character.

16. The Vigilante Spider is described at the Real Life Super Hero Project (<http://reallifesuperheroes.com/2011/01/04/the-vigilante-spider/>). The Vigilante Spider's costume and name reveal the influence of the fictional Spider-Man. The vigilante suit relates to a costume option available within *The Amazing Spider-Man* game.

17. Bearing in mind the debate over identifying fans as consumers and producers (Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002), this discussion thus considers cosplayers as textual producers, as "co-creators" or "co-authors" (Real, quoted in Hills 2002, 187).

18. Some may challenge this as cosplay—taking, for instance, a similar position as in the earlier example of the Lolita genre—but this is a definitional matter around ascribing labels of authentic or inauthentic to cosplay, a matter I am seeking to undermine by demonstrating the shared qualities of each of these practices, whether industry or copycats.

19. There are Web sites, such as Real Life Superheroes (<http://reallifesuperheroes.com/>), offering networking opportunities, tutorials, and forums. There are also documentary films and shorts revealing the motivations and passions of participants within the copycatting co-culture, such as HBO's *Superheroes* (2011) and Thrash Lab's *The Subculture of Real Life Superheroes* (2012). In line with genre conventions, activity such as this raises the question: When will the archvillains arrive on the streets? A number of films have explored the idea of the copycat superhero, such as *Defendor* (2009), *Kick-Ass* (2010), and *Super* (2010).

20. The following are popularly cited: Angle Grinder based in the United Kingdom; Captain Jackson and the Xtreme Justice League (XJL) in the United States; Thanatos in Canada; and Superbarrio Gómez in Mexico. Captain Jackson even has his own Web site (<http://www.captainjackson.org/captainjackson/>) which features photographs and updates of his crime-fighting activities. Interestingly, Captain Jackson is also the subject of copycatting with anonymous individuals posing as him online. Photographer Peter Tangen, through his Real Life Super Hero Project (<http://reallifesuperheroes.com/>), visually documents the global co- or subculture of copycatting by posting photographs and biographies.

21. This is possible but only when copycatting those costumed heroes whose characters are essentially human but who physically train their bodies and technology and personal wealth as their power sources.

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Praxis

The digital fandom of Na'vi speakers

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Few academic studies have focused on the fans of created or constructed languages. One reason behind this may be the popular impression, intensified by the media, that speakers of these languages are obsessed fans or fanatics. In this essay, I use data from a survey conducted in summer 2011 to determine who is learning to speak Na'vi (a language constructed for the alien race in the 2009 film *Avatar*), how they are learning the language, and why they are learning the language. I also address the questions of how important community is to fandoms, as well as whether virtual fandoms constitute communities. Na'vi speakers are a digital fandom as well as a speech community, and Na'vi speakers are developing shared social norms and culture via their use of the Na'vi language.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Avatar; Community; Fans

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Speakers of media-driven created languages, such as the language of Klingon created for the Star Trek movies and television series and the Na'vi language created for the movie *Avatar* (2009), have often been seen as over-the-top fans or fanatics. However, as members of a created-language community ([note 1](#)), the interactions that bind these members together are based around the discursive practices of a particular fandom, the fandom specifically of the language from a particular movie or television series. To those not in the know, fan activities are often "seen as excessive, bordering on deranged behaviour" (Jenson 1992, 9), and fans are often characterized into two types: "the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd" (Jenson 1992, 9). The stereotype of an obsessed individual is particularly true of created-language speakers, where cosplay is often combined with language learning. As Okrent writes regarding Klingon speakers:

[1.2] The difficulty of the language keeps it from being just another part of the costume. The ones who end up sticking with it are in it for the language

—and the cachet, the respect, that comes (from however small a group) with showing you can master it. Anyone can wear a rubber forehead, but the [Klingon] language certification pins must be earned. (2009, 271)

[1.3] It is this commitment that has caused some to deem Klingon fans (and others with similar levels of devotion, such as Na'vi speakers) as fanatics ([note 2](#)). Jenson has argued, however, that "the fandom-as-pathology model implies that there is a thin line between 'normal' and excessive fandom. This line is crossed when distinctions between reality and fantasy break down" (1992, 18). She has also stated that "there is very little literature that explores fandom as a normal, everyday, cultural or social phenomenon" (13). Fandom research has evolved since the publication of Jenson's (1992) work, however, and crucial works in the field include Henry Jenkins's key books *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Cultures* (1992), *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Intersect* (2006a), and *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Cultures* (2006b). Fandom research has also expanded to include research on a variety of themes, which Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007) outline as follows: fandom is beautiful (1), fans in the mainstream (4), fan cultures and social hierarchy (5), and fandoms and modernity (7). They conclude their introduction with the following statement:

[1.4] Fandom is ever expanding into "regular" consumption, and...to study fans is to study many of the key structuring mechanisms by which contemporary culture and society work; thus, the future of reception and audience studies requires thoughtful and innovative study of fans in all their forms, identities, media, and spaces. (16)

[1.5] Even within the world of fan studies, little attention has been paid to the speakers of created languages, who are often marginalized as the extreme fans or fanatics of a wider fan community. However, fan language speakers can offer a variety of insight into a wide range of issues, such as how new languages work and what this might tell us about the origins of language; how dialects develop; how people learn languages; and what endangered language communities, as well as second language learners in general, might learn from the techniques these fan communities employ. Additionally, because fans are learning languages that were not originally intended for daily conversation, they continually illustrate perseverance; they often learn these fan languages in isolation, removed from other speakers. This perseverance is also a quality that other minority communities, such as indigenous communities that are working to revitalize their endangered languages, can model to continue what Wyman has termed "linguistic survivance" or "the use of [language]...to creatively express, adapt, and maintain identities under difficult or hostile circumstances" (2012, 2). Because fan speakers are often stereotyped as fanatics, they too have had to work to

maintain their fan identity, sometimes in the face of ridicule not only from outsiders but also from other fans.

[1.6] As more fandoms develop online, attention must be paid to how fandoms develop, operate, and form social norms (i.e., culture) in these new digital locales. As Whitehead and Wesch write, online "'native populations'—the freaks, the geeks, the weirdos, techies, and net-addicts—like the savages at the margins of an earlier colonial order, defy simple inclusion into the frameworks of the state and its ethnographies" (2012, 9). However, like other minority groups, they do form imagined communities despite the fact that they may not be imagined nations. Similarly, Roberta Pearson suggests that "the digital revolution has had a profound impact upon fandom, empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production" (2010, 84).

[1.7] Pearson (2010, 93) continues by asking, "How important is community to fandom, and how should that community be defined?" Throughout her article, Person fluctuates between defining community as a group of people and defining community as a sense of something shared. Here I focus on community as a group of individuals who share common interests, pursuits, and/or ideologies. Linguists classify individuals who "participate in interactions based on social and cultural norms and values that are regulated, represented, and recreated through discursive practices" (Morgan 2001, 31) as a speech community. The speakers of Na'vi can be classified as a speech community because they are developing social norms and values about the way Na'vi is spoken.

[1.8] Pearson (2010, 93) also asks, "Does virtual fandom actually constitute a community?" She suggests that to answer this question, academics will need to draw on perspectives from sociology and anthropology—disciplines that focus on group dynamics and the cultures that develop within them. Therefore, this article examines the online virtual fan community of Na'vi speakers via an anthropological lens to further expand our understanding of digital fandoms. In particular, I describe Na'vi speakers' conceptions of their own community, which are multiple and contradictory, to provide a new example of online fandoms, and the communities and their cultures that can develop in these spaces. Using data from an online survey I conducted in the summer of 2011, I provide discussion here about the development of the Na'vi-speaking community, but first I provide background on the history of created languages and fan languages in particular.

2. A history of fan languages

[2.1] To provide a history of fan languages, one must first consider the general history of created languages, as well as the types of created languages ([note 3](#)). To begin, created languages can be categorized either by how they are developed or by their intended purpose. When describing how a language is created, it can be termed either an *a posteriori* language, which has linguistic structures that are based on existing languages, or it can be called an *a priori* language, which is a language developed from scratch. The majority of popular fan languages fall into this latter category. Created languages are often additionally categorized into two different types on the basis of their intended purpose. For instance, some created languages are known as auxiliary languages, or languages that can be used to aid in communication across diverse communities. One well-known auxiliary language is Esperanto, which was developed in 1897 by L. L. Zamenhof. Zamenhof hoped that Esperanto would be taken up around the world as a universal language that would encourage a more peaceful society (Okrent 2009). Another type of created language is an artlang, a language created for artistic purposes. Artlangs often become the languages of fan communities because they are often associated with larger artistic works such as novels, movies, television shows, and video games. As Okrent writes about the Klingon language, it "is the solution to an artistic problem, not a linguistic one" (282).

[2.2] J. R. R. Tolkien is one of the best-known artlang creators; his novels of Middle-earth were written in association with his development of the languages commonly, and collectively, known as Elvish (Weiner and Marshall 2011). Weiner and Marshall (2011, 107) note the following about Tolkien as a conlanger: "If there are two purposes for invented language—communicative and art—Tolkien is (so far) the master of the art form. He has very few competitors in the field of language invention (or they are very secretive) and it is hard to imagine that his vast web of language and legend could be bettered."

[2.3] It is true that for Tolkien's generation the activity of language invention was a "secret vice," as he labeled his own lecture on the topic ([1931] 1983), stressing the pleasure he received from the development of the languages. In recent years, however, conlanging has come out of the closet. Conlangers seeking community developed the conlang e-mail mailing list in the 1990s, and the Language Creation Society followed suit in 2007 (Peterson 2014). Perhaps this is because, as Tolkien writes in "A Secret Vice," "Individualistic as are the makers, seeking personal expression and satisfaction, they are artists and incomplete without an audience" ([1931] 1983, 202). Who better, then, to appreciate the art of language creation than other conlangers, as well as the fans of an invented world?

[2.4] One of the best-known and most widely spoken fan languages is Klingon. Klingon, as it is spoken today, was created in 1984 by linguist Marc Okrand, and it has

gained notoriety for the numerous ways that Klingon has been used since then: translations of *Hamlet*, a Dutch opera, performances of *A Christmas Carol*, and many more (Schreyer 2011). Okrand et al. (2011) comment on the motives of individuals learning Klingon. Contrary to Okrent (2009), they argue that Klingon's invention was practical, but that Klingon speakers "are in a sense artistic, speaking or writing at least a bit of Klingon figures significantly in some fan performance of *Star Trek*, a sort of living fan fiction" (2011, 130). Another type of living fan fiction can be seen in the practices of Doctor Who fans who, in lieu of an official BBC version of the Gallifreyan language, have developed "a rich variety of Gallifreyan alphabets, fonts, dictionaries, tutorials, and other resources" (Vultee 2013, 117). Vultee (2013) argues that social media in particular have helped the online creative community of Gallifreyan writers to develop and expand. In sum, many members of fan language groups are using the languages of their favorite characters and imagined worlds as a performative of their identity, not only as fans of the larger creative work but also as fans of the language itself. Here I argue that this is the case for Na'vi.

3. Methodology

[3.1] When I began this research, I wanted to discover who the speakers of Na'vi were and why they were learning this particular created language. At the beginning of my research with Na'vi speakers, I was not necessarily concerned with applied outcomes but was rather driven by curiosity about this developing community. From media stories, I knew that many people from around the world were learning the Na'vi language, which was created by the linguist Paul Frommer for the movie *Avatar*, but there was very little information about who the speakers actually were beyond the conception that they must be fans, if not fanatics, of *Avatar*. My survey, therefore, was designed to discover who Na'vi speakers are (age, gender, education levels, nationalities, and so on) as well as why people learn Na'vi, how they learn it, and how they think it will develop and change over time (table 1) ([note 4](#)).

Table 1. Na'vi survey questions

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your educational level?
4. What is your nationality?
5. Have you ever studied linguistics or related subjects?
6. Do you consider yourself an *Avatar* fan?
7. How long have you been learning Na'vi?
8. What would you consider your proficiency level to be?
9. What methods have you used for learning Na'vi? (Examples: the <http://www.learnnavi.org> Web site, YouTube videos)
10. Why do you study Na'vi?

11. Do you feel that there is a Na'vi culture and if so, are you a part of it? Please explain.
12. What would you describe as the most important aspects of the development of the Na'vi language?
13. In which way do you think Na'vi has been influenced/changed by the fact that the language now is used for human communication?
14. Do you think most people learn to write Na'vi before they learn how to speak it? Why or why not? In what way do you think this has influenced the language?
15. Do you think that any Na'vi speakers or the www.learnnavi.org Web sites have influenced Paul Frommer, the creator of Na'vi, in coining new words or developing new grammar? Please give examples.
16. Do you think the Na'vi language, as known today, has all the vocabulary and all the grammar that is necessary for extensive human communication in all fields of life? Please give examples.
17. Do you think Na'vi will need more speakers to survive as a language?
18. How do you think Na'vi can attract more speakers?
19. How do you think Na'vi will develop in the future?
20. Do you have any other comments on the development of the Na'vi language?

[3.2] Because most learning appeared to be occurring via the Learn Na'vi Web site (<http://learnnavi.org/>), an online approach to the research seemed best to reach Na'vi speakers around the world. As soon as I posted a link to the survey on the Learn Na'vi forums, Na'vi speakers expressed interest in my project and provided suggestions on how to make sure all of their members' voices could accurately be heard. In particular, the community members gave me advice on age limits (for example, many of them were younger than 19 years of age, so my survey's age ranges needed to be adjusted). Additionally, some of the members did not speak English, so my survey needed to be translated into other languages, which they offered to do for free. I immediately began to see how welcoming and generous the Na'vi speaker community could be. Hellekson (2009) has written about the online fan gift culture, and in this article I provide more details on fandom gift culture, both from outside the typical fan fiction setting and from within the online fandom of Na'vi speakers.

[3.3] Here I describe who Na'vi speakers are based on their responses to the survey. I summarize how individuals are learning Na'vi online, as well as why they are learning Na'vi. I illustrate how Na'vi speakers are included in two types of fandoms: (1) fans of the Na'vi language and (2) fans of the movie *Avatar*. Because Na'vi speakers often state that one of their reasons for learning the language is the welcoming community of other speakers, I describe Na'vi speakers' ideas about who they are and whether they consider themselves a community, a culture, or both. In focusing on community dynamics, I aim to address Pearson's (2010) questions about whether virtual fandoms constitute communities.

[3.4] The Na'vi speaker survey was based on a similar study of advanced Klingon speakers, conducted in 2004 by Yens Wahlgren, a Swedish linguistics student ([note 5](#)).

Twenty questions comprised the Na'vi survey (table 1), which was originally advertised on the Learn Na'vi Web site, as well as other *Avatar* fan sites, and in e-mail mailing lists related to linguistics. I discuss the answers to questions 1 through 11, which address who Na'vi speakers are and the possibility of a Na'vi community and culture. As previously mentioned, the survey was originally provided only in English. However, because of extensive interest from members of the Learn Na'vi community and concerns that community members who were not fluent in English would not be able to participate, volunteers eventually translated the survey into seven other languages (German, Russian, Ukrainian, Hungarian, French, Italian, and Na'vi itself). Concerns that numerous members of the Na'vi community were under the age of 19 and would not be allowed to participate prompted an amendment to the original ethics application so younger individuals could participate. In total, 293 individuals from 38 different countries in seven different languages participated in the survey ([note 6](#)).

4. Who are Na'vi speakers?

[4.1] In the online survey questionnaire form, I provided open-ended question boxes for the Na'vi speakers to fill in rather than giving them boxes to check. I wanted to give the Na'vi speakers a chance to share their voices because they had often been stereotyped as fanatics in media stories. This often provided me with more data than I was expecting, but I think it also gave me more insight into the true diversity of who Na'vi speakers actually are.

[4.2] *Question 1: Age ranges.* The youngest Na'vi speaker respondent was 10 years old, while the oldest was 81—which is quite a large difference. However, the majority of participants (62 percent) were between the ages of 15 and 24, with 100 respondents in the 15- to 19-year age range and 77 in the 20- to 24-year age range.

[4.3] *Question 2: Gender.* A total of 72 percent of respondents were male, 26 percent were female, and 2 percent replied that their genders were other, such as gender queer, transgender, or gender other. This was one question where the open-ended question boxes allowed for Na'vi speaker diversity to be captured. In fact, one respondent commented, "Thank you for making this a free-response area!" ([note 7](#)). In general, Na'vi speakers are three times as likely to be male as female or other.

[4.4] *Question 3: Education levels.* Not surprisingly, because many of the participants were between the ages of 15 and 24, the education levels of the Na'vi speakers varied considerably. The majority of participants (74 percent) were either still in high school (98 individuals) or had completed some university or college education (113 individuals). However, of the older participants, 24 individuals had pursued some level of graduate study, and four individuals had completed doctorates.

[4.5] *Question 4. Nationalities.* Participants were from 38 different countries, and within those countries, there were a wide range of ethnic identities. Table 2 lists the complete number of respondents and the countries they identified when asked, "What is your nationality?" It should be noted that the "other (i.e., ethnicity)" number listed includes people who answered with ethnic labels, such as Latino, rather than a country name for nationality. It is not surprising that Germany, Russia, France, Italy, and Hungary were among the countries with the highest numbers of participants listed because a version of the survey was available in the main national languages of all of these countries.

Table 2. *Nationalities of Na'vi speakers*

Nationality	No. of Responses
American	90
German	34
Russian	24
French	16
English/British	15
Italian	11
Hungarian	8
Australian	7
Canadian	7
Swedish	5
Czech	4
Ukrainian	4
Brazilian	3
Chinese	3
New Zealander	3
Polish	3

Belarusian	2
Belgian	2
Danish	2
Dutch	2
Finnish	2
South African	2
Austrian	1
Croatian	1
Indonesian	1
Irish	1
Israeli	1
Jamaican	1
Lithuanian	1
Malaysian	1
Nepalese	1
Norwegian	1
Pakistani	1
Scottish	1
Slovakian	1
Swiss	1
Taiwanese	1
Welsh	1
Other (i.e., ethnicity)	22

[4.6] *Question 5: Expertise in linguistics.* The Klingon study that this research was based on found that "most of the informants have studied linguistics or languages" (Wahlgren 2004, 17), and therefore I wondered if this would be true for speakers of Na'vi as well. I hypothesized that it was likely that most speakers would know something about linguistics or would have previously learned other languages. This was true for some individuals (28 percent and 20 percent, respectively), but the majority of participants (52 percent) had no knowledge of linguistics and had never learned a language other than their mother tongue.

[4.7] *Question 6: Fan status.* I wondered whether individuals learning Na'vi were fans of the movie *Avatar*, since Wahlgren's (2004) study showed that individuals who were learning the Klingon language were not necessarily fans of Star Trek. Wahlgren recorded an interview with Lawrence Shoen, director of the Klingon Language Institute, in which Shoen states:

[4.8] You have people who are *Star Trek* fans, trekkers or trekkies, and within that group you have people who are Klingons...members of both groups are drawn to the language...particularly among the Klingon fan[s], they are role-playing, they have a Klingon persona, the[y] use make-up, uniforms, so they want some of the language to complete their character if you will. And sometimes they get hooked on the language. The other group could care less [about] the *Star Trek*, they have no real interest in *Star Trek*, they come to the language because of the language. These are the people that probably already studied Esperanto or Tolkien's Eldarin languages or dozens of other naturally occurring languages. (Shoen, quoted in Wahlgren 2004, 16)

[4.9] Therefore, a question in my Na'vi survey asked, "Do you consider yourself a fan of *Avatar*?" The answers were as follows: (1) fan (89 percent), (2) not a fan (8 percent), and (3) no answer (3 percent) ([note 8](#)). In my original analysis of this category, I wondered whether level of fandom could be determined on the basis of how people responded in the positive. For example, some individuals simply wrote "yes" in answer to this question, while others responded in all capital letters ("YES"), or included exclamation points ("YES!!!"), or answered with "totally," "absolutely," or "of course." However, without further clarification from the participants, it is difficult to comment conclusively on how many individuals are fans as opposed to huge fans, or whether *Avatar* fandom affected individuals' participation in the Na'vi speaking community ([note 9](#)). While this question examined who was a fan of the movie *Avatar*, I will discuss the concept of Na'vi language fandom in more detail below ([note 10](#)).

[4.10] *Question 7: Length of time studying.* This research study was conducted in June and July 2011, and at that time, Na'vi had been available as a subject of study

for a maximum of 18 months. Some participants had begun learning Na'vi as soon as the *Avatar* movie came out, while others were still newly discovering that there was a Na'vi language and a Na'vi speech community. The question in this section asked, "How long have you been learning Na'vi?" This was a difficult question to assess quantitatively because some people began when the movie was first released, but they also commented that they weren't able to dedicate as much time to it as they would have liked or that they practiced and studied sporadically. Therefore, the numbers in this section indicate only when people began studying the Na'vi language, but cannot comment on intensity of studying during that length of time. In sum, 41 percent of participants had been studying Na'vi for between 13 and 18 months, 22 percent between 7 and 12 months, and 37 percent for 6 months or less. In comparing proficiency rates, fan status, and length of time studying, I was able to determine that some of the biggest fans of the movie *Avatar* were also those who had been studying the longest and who had reached the highest levels of proficiency in the Na'vi language. These are the individuals who seem to be the founding members of the Learn Na'vi community.

[4.11] *Question 8: Proficiency levels.* I was curious about the proficiency level of Na'vi speakers. Wahlgren (2004) specifically interviewed only advanced speakers of Klingon. However, because Na'vi had only been available for 18 months at the time of my survey, I wanted to include all speakers of Na'vi; I was unsure how many proficient or advanced speakers existed in 2011. The majority of respondents (45 percent) self-identified as very low-level or beginner speakers. However, 30 percent of respondents identified themselves as either intermediate (19 percent) or advanced (11 percent). Surprisingly, 3 percent of respondents stated that they did not know any of the Na'vi language. Often this was because such respondents were such new members of the Learn Na'vi community that they hadn't learned any of the language—but they still considered themselves to be part of the community. In this community, as well as other online communities, interested individuals tend to lurk before trying to learn Na'vi or posting for the first time. In fact, when asked about whether or not there is a Na'vi culture, one respondent stated, "I tend to lurk, so [I'm] not visibly part of it." The moderators of the Learn Na'vi forum are sensitive to lurking, however, and the forum page greets new visitors and encourages them to join the Na'vi community, stating "Kaltxi, Guest! Why don't you join our community?"

[4.12] To summarize, according to my survey results, average Na'vi speakers are generally between 15 and 24 years of age, are male, are attending either high school or university, are from the United States, have no previous knowledge of the field of linguistics, are fans of the movie *Avatar*, have been studying Na'vi for between 13 and 18 months, and are beginner speakers of the language ([note 11](#)). However, my study also showed the complex diversity of the Na'vi speaker community, including

variations in age, gender, nationality, proficiency levels, and length of time studying the language. Because there is a range of diversity in this community, it can be seen to model the population demographics of natural language communities, but with an emphasis on American male youth as the largest population section. The focus on youth in particular is interesting for the connections created language communities may have with endangered language communities, because teaching youth their indigenous heritage languages is often a focus of language revitalization efforts (Wyman, McCarty, and Nicholas 2014). Because the Na'vi speaking community is diverse, the impact of the large number of youth community members, who may have more technological skills than others in their community as potential "digital natives" (Prensky 2001), could also be important for examining how this digital fandom is developing. In the next section, therefore, I move on from who Na'vi speakers are to how and why they are learning Na'vi, and what this means in terms of digital fandoms.

5. Online communities and Na'vi digital fandom

[5.1] The responses to the next two questions in the survey address how people are learning Na'vi and why they are interested in learning the language. Both of these sections are tied to the role of online communities and digital fandoms for language learning.

[5.2] *Question 9: How do respondents learn?* I was particularly interested in investigating how Na'vi speakers were learning the language because, as I have noted previously (Schreyer 2011), created language communities, such as the community of Na'vi speakers, could be role models for endangered language communities—those communities, often indigenous or minority communities, that are losing their ancestral languages. Some created language communities, particularly those involved in fandoms, have excelled at acquisition language planning; they have been able to acquire speakers quite quickly even though the languages are no one's mother tongue. Because participants were learning Na'vi through a variety of methods, answers to this section were often multilayered. Here is an example answer from one of the participants to the question, "What methods have you used for learning Na'vi?"

[5.3] Mostly the learnnavi.org website, including one and a half sessions in Project NgayNume and an unofficial email conversation group. I have also watched YouTube videos and listened to fan-created Na'vi songs, both downloaded and on Tirea Radio. I very much like the Na'vi–English dictionary at <http://eanaeltu.learnnavi.org/dicts/NaviDictionary.pdf> [<http://eanaeltu.learnnavi.org/dicts/NaviDictionary.pdf>] and the reference grammar (it's amazing!)

[5.4] Online language learning was key for many, and the online methods of language learning that had more than five responses are outlined in table 3. Respondents tended to list many different ways they had learned Na'vi in their answers, but the Learn Na'vi Web site was mentioned the most often (196 times). As a result, I also recorded the pieces of the Learn Na'vi Web site that people mentioned most frequently as tools for their language learning (table 4). The answer that is most tied to the digital fandom of the Na'vi speech community is the Forum Interactions section, which had 52 responses.

Table 3. *Online methods of learning Na'vi*

Method of Learning	No. of Responses
LearnNavi.org (http://learnnavi.org/)	196
YouTube	40
Na'viteri.org (Naviteri.org) (Paul Frommer's blog)	23
WikiMedia	19
Avatar Italia (Italian Avatar Web sites)	7
Tirea Radio (Na'vi radio Web sites)	5
Tree of Voices (language learning Web sites)	5
LearnNavi.ru (Russian LearnNavi Web sites)	5

Table 4. *Learn Na'vi tools*

Methods and Tools from LearnNavi.org	No. of Responses
Dictionaries	70
Forum Interactions	52
Na'vi in a Nutshell (practical grammar)	42
NgayNume/TeamSpeak	25
The Reference Grammar	22
Fan-made workbook	21

[5.5] Participants learned Na'vi in other ways as well: spoken conversations (in person at meet-ups, and over Skype) (30 responses); watching the movie *Avatar* (21 responses); using flashcards (17 responses); written conversations (e-mail or chat) (16 responses); self-directed study (13 responses); translating stories, songs, and so on (13 responses); using audio recordings (11 responses); and using the Learn Na'vi app (6 responses). In conclusion, the wide range of methods shows how innovative the Na'vi speakers have been with their language learning; it is this innovation that speakers of endangered languages may be able to model in their language learning efforts.

[5.6] *Question 10: Why are people learning Na'vi?* As mentioned earlier, the obvious assumption people tend to have when thinking about why anyone would learn Na'vi is that they must be *Avatar* fanatics. Certainly this is how the media tends to portray Na'vi learners. However, the answers I received to the question "Why do you study Na'vi?" received a diverse set of responses that indicates the diverse set of people who are included in the Na'vi speech community. The top seven reported motivations for studying Na'vi are listed in table 5.

Table 5. Motivations for learning Na'vi

Motivation for Learning	No. of Responses
The fascinating or "cool" factor	118
Part of being a fan of the movie <i>Avatar</i>	93
Part of my linguistic affinities*	77
For fun/hobby	65
Because of how Na'vi sounds	40
Because of the welcoming community	34
To have a learning challenge	20

*This includes previous or new exposure/interest in the study of linguistics or language learning, as well as general interest in created languages (including other conlangs).

[5.7] It is particularly interesting to note that the number 1 cited reason for learning Na'vi is not that people are fans of the movie (the number 2 reason) but that the

language itself is "fascinating" or "cool." This community is first and foremost a Na'vi language fan-based community and secondarily an *Avatar* fan-based community. In addition, a number of respondents mentioned the welcoming community of speakers as a factor in their language learning motivations. Because much of this interaction occurs online, this factor has significance in the world of digital communities and digital fandoms, and helps to address the question of whether or not online groups are communities (Pearson 2010).

[5.8] What follow are a few quotations from respondents to illustrate in more detail why people are learning Na'vi, and in particular the importance of community to Na'vi speakers.

[5.9] I was deeply impressed by the movie. I wanted to do something that would bring me nearer to Pandora. When I "found" the language, I started learning it, the community was great and I found a lot of new friends with whom I feel connected, even though I never saw most of them in person. So, I started learning because of being a fan and am still learning because the community keeps me at it. Also the language sounds ingenious and it's not that difficult, really, so that you get results quickly ;):)

[5.10] I don't learn the language just because it's fun to talk with others in it but also to keep the connection to the movie and the Na'vi—with this language you feel a bit closer to Pandora. Other than that the LearnNa'vi-community is just incredible. In comparison with other communities, I noticed most of all that they treat each other much more tolerant here.

[5.11] First of all I love the movie very much so it's naturally interesting for me to learn the language of that beautiful world. Also, the language has some beautiful concepts in it. Also, the grammar is quite weird sometimes and this makes the language challenging and interesting. The words have a nice sound. In addition, the people in the forum are supportive and fun to talk with and it helps you learn and want to keep learning.

[5.12] Because I love languages, and studying them is like a hobby for me. I also found so many friends and people with similar interests on the learnnavi-forums, and it was that community that made me stay and truly learn this language.

[5.13] These comments illustrate that the community is one aspect that truly keeps individuals continuing to learn the language. Outsiders to created language communities and/or fan studies often ask, "Can a group of speakers of a fake language truly be considered a community?" In fact, created language researchers

often ask the question themselves in their writing so that they are able to answer it and therefore establish that, yes, created language communities do exist. For example, Okrand et al. write, "Can the group of Klingon users surveyed be considered a sociolinguistic group?...We can conclude that if there is a Klingon speech community, it is very small indeed" (2011, 131). Okrent (2009) writes of Esperanto speakers, "Can the thing that Esperantists share with each other really be called a culture?" (116) before she asserts, "The Esperantists worked to create a community and a culture" (117). The Na'vi speakers have also developed this sense of community through their shared language practices, aided by digital technologies. As Booth writes, "Fans use digital technology not only to create, to change, to appropriate, to poach, or to write, but also to share, to experience together, to become alive with community" (2010, 39).

[5.14] Next, I turn to the divergent perspectives the Na'vi speakers themselves have on what exactly constitutes their community, whether or not that community has a culture, and how digital technologies play a role in both.

6. Na'vi culture or community?

[6.1] As can be seen through the comments of the Na'vi learners I quote here, as well as from the descriptions of how people learn the Na'vi language, it is clear that much of the interaction between Na'vi speakers is happening online. In fact, in his book *A Dictionary of Made-up Languages*, Rogers writes the following of Na'vi: "Being a language born during the Internet age, Na'vi has better online representation than most other made-up languages" (2011, 155). Na'vi speakers, like many others, are adapting to the world we live in where online worlds are growing and developing every day.

[6.2] To understand whether Na'vi speakers thought that they shared customs, beliefs, communicative practices—in other words, culture—the survey asked, "Do you feel that there is a Na'vi culture and, if so, are you a part of it?" The answers, not surprisingly, were multiple and contradictory. One individual's response seems to cover many of the key issues, so I include it as an example to build on:

[6.3] There is the (1) theoretical (fictional) culture of the Na'vi in the film... There is also a (2) pragmatic culture within the community based on members' communication styles, decorum, spirit of mutual support, etc...this is a human culture that I feel aspires to extract out of and maintain the best in people. It seems to be that a part of this "community culture" must be influenced somehow or other by the "wholesome" Na'vi ideals that are presented in the film. This "culture of good people" is very appealing to me

and I am very much a part of that. Finally, there are those who (3) enjoy pretending to be Na'vi (*the cos-play contingent*). While, I also find these folks pleasant and interesting and am pleased to have them as friends, I do not personally relate to their core interests or motivations. I will never paint my own body blue or don a tail or assume a fictitious Na'vi persona.

[6.4] From this response, we can see that this respondent thinks that there are at least three types of Na'vi culture: the "fictional culture," the "community culture," and the "cosplay contingent." Although all three are considered in the answer, other respondents had definitive views on only one of these three or even alternatives to these three. I next describe each of these response groupings.

7. Fictional culture

[7.1] The fictional culture is the culture of the Na'vi people created for the movie *Avatar*. People who replied that the Na'vi culture was the one seen in the film did not think that they could be a part of the culture because it does not exist in real life. One individual responded, "No [there is no Na'vi culture]. It's a film." Another said, "The only Na'vi culture there is currently is the virtual Na'vi culture that is on this virtual planet called Pandora." Others were sad that they could not be Na'vi as seen in the film, such as a respondent who said, "I am defining Na'vi culture as the culture of the creatures in the film. I am a human being, not a Na'vi (sadly)" ([note 12](#)).

[7.2] However, more respondents thought that the ideals and customs of the Na'vi people in the film—their connection to nature and respect for their ecosystem—is something that Na'vi speakers on earth are trying to emulate. Therefore, they thought that the fictional Na'vi culture is also becoming real to some extent. As one individual stated, "Yes, there is a Na'vi culture (both in the film itself and outside it)...It's a beautiful culture and one that is needed in our world today." Another participant explained this in more detail:

[7.3] There are, I would say, two Na'vi cultures. There is the fictional culture of the movie, which, of course, I am not a part of, and then there is the new, greater awareness of nature, making meoauniaeae (the balance of all things within nature) a bigger part of one's daily life...I am definitely a part of that "Na'vi culture."

[7.4] Last, one respondent thought that the fictional and real ways of being in the world could be blended: "I think that the 'Na'vi culture' is a way of thinking/feeling/living/ that follows the way of the Na'vi in the movie to better our connection with and behavior on earth as humans." Other participants responded to

this question with more of a focus on the community of speakers with whom they were involved.

8. Community and/or culture?

[8.1] Some people seemed comfortable describing a culture of the Na'vi speech community, but others thought a culture (the social customs and beliefs of the group) had not yet developed sufficiently to be fully labeled as such. One respondent wrote, "I would consider there to be a 'community,' existing in its infancy, but not something necessarily so coherent as to be identified as a 'culture.'" Another replied, "There's certainly a Na'vi speakers-and-learners community, and that community has some shared characteristics and experiences, but I wouldn't go so far as to describe it as a 'culture.'" However, others strongly argued that there was a culture associated with the community. One individual wrote:

[8.2] Absolutely there is a Na'vi culture, and it is incredibly welcoming... There is a social structure (different titles for different levels), there is even a place for people to ask for help or advice with personal issues...they have meetings, group trips, and are even thinking about starting a physical community.

[8.3] Social customs, including differences in communicative competence (for example, whom do you address, and with which title?), are included here, and this response describes the community's interpersonal relations. However, this is not yet a physical community but instead a digital one. Other responses focus on the online community and culture as well, particularly the interactions that occur on the Learn Na'vi forums. I list several responses that indicate the prominence of the Learn Na'vi Web site as the central digital locale for this community:

[8.4] If any "Na'vi culture" existed it would be those on Learnnavi itself.

[8.5] I do feel that there is certainly a "language culture" per se that has developed on Learn Na'vi through the interactions of Learnnavi members.

[8.6] The closest thing to a Na'vi culture would probably be the forums at learnnavi.org.

[8.7] In sum, the majority of individuals agreed there is a Na'vi community, and possibly a Na'vi culture, and that both are primarily online. To return to Okrent's comments about Esperanto, she argues that speakers of Esperanto have developed both a community and a culture: "Yes, they did this somewhat artificially and self-consciously, but it did work (forced tradition + time = real tradition), and it turned out

that many people who may not have been inspired to learn a language to *use* it for something would learn a language in order to *participate* in something" (2009, 117).

[8.9] It is the digital tools of social media, such as the Learn Na'vi forums, that have made it easier to participate in the Na'vi speech community.

9. Participating in the Na'vi speech community

[9.1] Use versus participation, as Okrent (2009) writes for Esperanto, is relevant to the second part of the original survey question, "Do you feel that there is a Na'vi culture and, if so, are you a part of it?" For the people who answered that they did not feel as if they were a part of the community or culture, the ability to communicate in the Na'vi language was the main exclusion criterion. One respondent said, "No, [I don't feel like I'm a part of it] because I'm not fluent in [Na'vi]." Quite a few individuals had similar comments:

[9.2] I am definitely part of the conlanging culture, but I probably haven't spent enough time immersed in the language to be part of the nascent true Na'vi community yet.

[9.3] I am not a part of it due to too small investment in learning the language and visiting the Na'vi-related websites.

[9.4] There definitely is a Na'vi culture but I'm not an active enough learner to be a part of it.

[9.5] Those who can speak Na'vi "fluently" seem to have a sense of community.

[9.6] The reliance on communicative ability as a defining feature of the Na'vi language community illustrates that to some extent Na'vi community members, as well as those who strive to be community members, see communication as one of the key features to the "imagined community." Anderson's original work in imagined communities stressed the importance of a shared national language "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1983, 6). Shared language is key for this newly formed imagined community as well—the online digital Na'vi language fandom. Thus, is there a Na'vi community and/or culture? The simple answer is that there are many ([note 13](#)). To expand this, the majority of respondents agreed that there is a Na'vi community. This community is also a speech community because the community is based around a language and different ways of speaking. As Rogers writes, "Over time, we bond with

others who share our language—to the point where we will consider those who speak a different shared language as outsiders. We identify ourselves by our language" (2011, v). Debate still exists as to whether culture has developed within this community, but most survey respondents agreed that whatever the community is, it is found online at the Learn Na'vi forum.

10. Conclusions

[10.1] What can this study add to the range of research projects on digital ethnographies and digital fandoms? Pearson, in her 2010 article on digital fandoms, questioned (1) whether fandoms need a sense of community and (2) whether virtual fandoms constitute a community. She suggested that anthropological perspectives might help find answers to these points of contention. My survey of Na'vi speakers helps answer these questions by addressing who the speakers are (they are diverse, like many real-world communities) and how they have developed as a community (by learning the language online). I used anthropological perspectives to conduct the survey because I participated in the online community and engaged the Na'vi community members in how best to conduct the research. The survey asked people why they were learning Na'vi and found that, contrary to popular belief, it is a fandom of both the movie and, more importantly, of the language. I say "more importantly" here because respondents most often cited the fact that the language was "fascinating" or "cool" as their reason for learning the language.

[10.2] The welcoming nature of the community is also important, and my research showed that gift culture exists in the Na'vi community as it does in other fandoms. Relating Mauss's ideas of the gift to online fan communities, Hellekson writes that "fan communities as they are currently comprised, require gift exchanges" (2009, 114). Many of these gifts are what Erika Pearson calls "effort gifts" (2007) or what Hellekson calls "gifts of time and skill" (2009, 115). Hellekson writes that these and other online gifts in fandoms are exchanged "with the goal of creating and maintaining social solidarity" (116). This is true within the Na'vi community as well, where fans have shared their own knowledge, skills, and time to develop dictionaries in numerous languages, practical and academic reference grammars, workbooks, and radio programs, to name only a few. The gift culture of the Na'vi community also enabled me to more successfully conduct my research, as I was provided the gifts of advice and translation efforts for both the survey itself and the answers to the surveys. Digital fan gift culture mimics the gifts that are often exchanged during other traditional forms of ethnographic fieldwork (Dobrin 2006). Booth also includes the production of materials in his definition of a fan community or fandom. For him, a fandom is "a loose knit, but allied group of people who all produce or create original documents based on extant media objects" (2010, 40). In this case, while Na'vi

speakers are producing documents to help each other learn the language, they are also producing language—a different product of the community.

[10.3] In the introduction to the edited volume *Human No More: Digital Subjectivities, Unhuman Subjects, and the End of Anthropology*, Whitehead and Wesch describe how anthropologists need to rethink fieldwork in the digital age. Reflecting on the works in the book, they ask, "How do ethnographic practices and the ethnographer evolve in the online context? How are they revolutionized? What constitutes the field?" (2012, 7). My survey of Na'vi speakers is therefore an example of revised digital ethnographic practices. Whitehead and Wesch also discuss community formation: "As humans become more digitally connected, we must recognize that the sociality that emerges from such connections might not always be immediately analogous to traditional social formations" (2012, 9).

[10.4] The Na'vi community is a digitally mediated fandom, but in 2011, its members could not agree on how they should be viewed. Were they members of a community, did they have a culture, and what were the defining inclusion criteria? Many answered that knowledge of the Na'vi language, the main focus of the fandom, was what held the group together even though the movie *Avatar* might have brought them online in the first place. Created language communities are alternative digital fandoms and so provide a new lens into the developing complex digital world as well as a new type of fandom to consider.

[10.5] Created language communities, as new speech communities, can also be examined for clues to a wide range of linguistic and anthropological questions. For instance, because created language communities are new speech communities, researchers could examine how social norms develop and what this might tell us about how the social norms and cultural values of natural languages originated. Because the Na'vi speech community is spread out across the globe and communicates mostly online via writing, they may also be an interesting case study of how spoken dialectical variation develops over time because the first language of the speakers may influence their pronunciation of Na'vi. Finally, as I have mentioned throughout, researchers and community members who are interested in language revitalization of minority languages can look to created language communities as models of innovation in language learning techniques and how to develop linguistic survivance or to persevere in the face of difficulty.

[10.6] As producers of pop culture media, such as movies and television series, continue to embrace created languages as being important to world building and context ([note 14](#)), we may see more digital language fandoms develop. It will be interesting to compare these new groups to the Na'vi speech community (one of the earliest online-dependent fan language communities) and even to the Klingon speech

community (which developed before the existence of the Internet, but whose members have been online since the Klingon Language Institute [<http://www.kli.org/>] was begun in 1992). Digital fandoms are changing and developing, and language fandoms are just one type that will evolve as humans continue to expand their digital practices in alternative digital locales.

11. Notes

1. Within this paper I use the term *created languages*, but the terms *constructed languages* (or *conlangs*) and *invented languages* are also in use.
2. For an example of a mockumentary on *Avatar* fanaticism, including Na'vi language learning, see <http://www.wired.com/2010/02/avatar-navi-wannabes/>. Some articles that characterize Na'vi speaking individuals as fanatics are the following:
<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/2946833/Avatar-fan-speaks-film-lingo-Navi.html#ixzz15ZMuVxbH>; <http://www.news.com.au/breaking-news/aussies-learning-avatar-language/story-e6frfku0-1225824773014>, which states that the Learn Na'vi Web site is another "bizarre *Avatar* spin-off"; and
<http://www.newser.com/story/84278/thousands-of-avatar-fans-learning-navi.html>, which labels Na'vi learners as "obsessive *Avatar* fans."
3. For a history of created languages, see Adams (2011) and Okrent (2009).
4. A preliminary analysis of this data is posted online (<http://www.christineschreyer.ca/Research.html>).
5. Judith Hendriks-Hermans also conducted a sociolinguistic survey of Klingon speakers in 1999, where she asked respondents to provide "personal information,... their relationship to Klingon, and...their attitudes toward the language" (Okrand et al. 2011, 129).
6. The survey was available in eight languages in total—English, Na'vi, Hungarian, German, Italian, French, Russian, and Ukrainian—but no one responded in Ukrainian.
7. All quotes from participants appear as originally written. I have not corrected spelling, punctuation, or grammar.
8. Interestingly, in the Russian surveys, 35 percent of individuals responded that they were not fans of the movie *Avatar* despite having a strong interest in the Na'vi language. In personal communications since the survey has been completed, it has come to my attention that the subtitles in the Russian release of the movie *Avatar* were not clear, and many Russian speakers began to learn Na'vi to better understand the movie's details.

9. In the preliminary analysis of the data found online, there is a breakdown of "fan" (63 percent) and "huge fan" (26 percent), based on style of response.
10. For more information on types of *Avatar* fans and audience members, see Michelle, Davis, and Vladica (2012) and Loshitzky (2012).
11. After the analysis of my Na'vi survey results, I hired an undergraduate research assistant, Elizabeth Cadieux, to analyze the data provided in a section of the Learn Na'vi forum called "Na'vi of the Week" (NoW). In this section, Learn Na'vi community members answered a set series of questions about who they were and why they were learning Na'vi. The results of Cadieux's analysis showed that the NoW data generally matched the survey data I received in the categories of age, gender, education, nationality, and fan status.
12. Both Loshitzky (2012) and Michelle, Davis, and Vladica (2012) in their articles on *Avatar* fans describe how moviegoers were saddened when they finished viewing the movie because they cannot go to the planet of Pandora; some of my respondents also commented on this.
13. Other responses for types of Na'vi culture that survey participants thought existed included the culture of the massive multiplayer online game of *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003) as well as the Na'vi culture as a subculture that is tied to the Internet, and finally, that Na'vi culture is a "nerdy" culture.
14. Linguist David Peterson created languages for the television series *Game of Thrones* (2011–), *Defiance* (2013–), and *Star-Crossed* (2014), as well as the move *Thor: The Dark World* (2013). I was hired to create the Kryptonian language for the movie *Man of Steel* (2013).

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Praxis

Doctor Who–themed weddings and the performance of fandom

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the science fiction/fantasy TV series *Doctor Who* (1963–1986, 1996, 2005–), 50 couples chose to marry, renew vows, and engage in civil partnerships during a mass Doctor Who–themed wedding in London. By using Doctor Who fandom as a case study, I explore how fans are able to construct, define, and maintain their identity in wedding culture by the meaning they ascribe to objects present in the wedding performance. By using the concept of weddings as performance narratives, I describe how fans are able to tell the story of their experience and identification with fandom, but because not everyone identifies with fandom, fans must communicate this narrative in a highly selective manner, choosing details that both satisfy their identities as fans and make sense to a diverse audience of fans and nonfans alike. In doing so, fans are negotiating this identity within the heteronormative structure of wedding culture. The presence of the wedding ceremony reveals that fan identity and performance, despite seeming subversive to mainstream, are actually influenced and shaped by these traditional spaces and rituals.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Heteronormativity; Identity; Narrative; Objects; Tradition

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1. Introduction

[1.1] On November 24, 2013, 50 fans of *Doctor Who* (1963–1986, 1996, 2005–) congregated at London's Bloomsbury Ballroom to take part in "one of the biggest sci-fi themed weddings in Britain" (Sharp 2013). Couples from as far away as the United States and Canada traveled to engage in this mass-mediated ceremony that encouraged them to dress up in TARDIS-patterned wedding gowns, homemade Cyberman costumes, and suits inspired by various incarnations of the Doctor (figure 1). According to the *Daily Mail*, experience company Special Events coordinated the mass Doctor Who–themed wedding to coincide with the show's 50th-anniversary festivities that also included the worldwide premiere of the hour-and-a-half-long episode, "The Day of the Doctor" (2013). With the event's price tag of £2,000 (not taking into account the cost of travel and hotel arrangements), the participants were

given a commemorative ring, complimentary Doctor Who-themed tattoos, prizes for best costume, a five-tier TARDIS cake iced with all 50 couples' names, fish finger and custard cupcakes, and a mediated ceremony led by a minister wearing Gallifreyan robes. The company's Web site, which had been developed for fans to sign up and be selected among the 50 to be in the mass ceremony, also included the chosen couples' profiles and stories about how they met and were joined in their love for Doctor Who (<https://web.archive.org/web/20141218193141/http://whovianwedding.com/>). Additionally, Special Events opened the festivities up to the public at £10 a ticket, most likely as a way to ensure a larger audience of fans and to increase community building and consumer loyalty with Doctor Who during this momentous occasion in its fandom.



Figure 1. Doctor Who fans dressed as their favorite characters come together to be married in one large ceremony in London. Photograph by Tolga Akmen, November 24, 2013. [[View larger image.](#)]

[1.2] While some might argue that such mass themed weddings are rare occurrences (note 1), individual fandom-themed weddings have become an increasingly popular spectacle on the Internet. This display not only exists on Pinterest where users have dedicated entire boards to collecting images of fandom-inspired weddings but also on fan Web sites (such as When Geeks Wed and Offbeat Bride, as well as numerous Wordpress blogs) entirely devoted to cataloguing the themed weddings of fans and retelling their stories of wedded bliss. Reality shows about brides and weddings have also been a consistent part of television programming, and while most do not depict fan weddings, some have shown people with fannish inclinations planning their nuptials. In an episode of BBC3's *Don't Tell the Bride* (2007–15), one couple incorporated elements of Harry Potter in their ceremony by having a Dumbledore look-alike drive the bride to the park where the couple said their vows. Even with this in mind, little research has actually been done on the presence of fandom in wedding culture. From large-scale events to more intimate ceremonies, examining the choice of fans to perform in themed weddings can shed further light on how they construct, define, and maintain their identity in a public space where not everyone might be a

fan. In the case of the Don't Tell the Bride couple, the groom's affiliation with Harry Potter fandom inspired him to include fandom elements into the ceremony. The bride, on the other hand, noted how much she hated the idea of a themed wedding but came around to it because her soon-to-be-husband "really proved himself with what he did" (Collinson 2014). Even in the presence of nonfans, fandom can reveal further meaning behind a couple's identity. The performance of fandom, particularly in weddings, seems to be a place where we can further study how fans communicate the complexities of their identities in heteronormative spaces.

[1.3] Because this topic can extend to many different fandom-themed (and even multifandom-themed) weddings, I would like to primarily focus on the Doctor Who fandom because of its appearance in both individual themed weddings and its most recent venture into mass weddings captured by the media in order to discuss the various ways in which fans perform. Using scholarship on fan performance, identity, and fan consumption practices, I will first examine how Doctor Who fans consume and utilize products in the wedding industry to aid in their performance of fandom. The meaning assigned to the pop culture capital incorporated into their performance plays a large role in shaping and maintaining fan identity in the normalizing, consumer-driven industry dominant within wedding culture. Secondly, early scholarship on fandom as an empowering tool to subvert the mainstream will explain as well as complicate how we see fans negotiate traditional Western customs with their own personal, subcultural desires in the wedding ceremony. Finally, how Doctor Who fans display images of themed weddings on the Internet and take part in large spectacles like the mass Doctor Who wedding will provide perspective on how fans use their identity and familiarity with online fan communities to further define themselves in typically nonfandom spaces.

[1.4] Studying Doctor Who's presence in wedding culture also works in light of its flexible themes and styles that have allowed fans to adopt as many or as few fandom-related elements in their wedding as they would like. From TARDIS cake toppers to something as subtle as a blue garter, fans have found that Doctor Who provides many thematic and aesthetically pleasing elements to incorporate into their weddings. As one fan put it on the Portland Wedding Coordinator blog:

[1.5] Ultimately, *Doctor Who* is a romantic, idealistic show that is more about the magic of positive thought than straight-up technical sci-fi. The time travel trope makes it easy for any fan to find a motif, subtle or overt, that works for their wedding. What better way to show your love than to promise one's beloved "All of time and space"? ("Portland Wedding Coordinator Loves" 2013)

[1.6] In adopting various themes and items inspired by Doctor Who, fans are choosing how to perform this identity to the rest of their wedding guests (who may or may not be fans) as well as to critical fans on the Internet with whom they might share photos of their special day. But do these fannish items in the ceremony need to carry meaning strictly for the fans, or does this meaning also have to extend to nonfans as well? Because the focus of wedding ceremonies can go beyond the couple and attempt to show the joining of two families, it seems important to consider how these other communities might affect the way a couple might present themselves as fans. Doctor Who has gained popularity beyond the United Kingdom (indicated by the worldwide broadcast of the 50th-anniversary episode), but specific details and memories from the show's tenure might be lost on individuals who do not watch Doctor Who or even new fans who have yet to explore the show's vast canon. As a result, fandom carries certain limitations and considerations for fans of themed weddings who may want their guests to understand and enjoy the meaningful elements in their ceremony but who might encounter complications in doing so. The choices that fans must make when performing their identity in these social spaces become crucial to the construction of their identity as fans, allowing them to become closer to the text as a result of meticulously picking out which themes and symbols from fandom resonate the most with who they are as a couple. However, the construction of that identity in wedding culture faces complications because of how the ceremony also serves to satisfy the people close to the couple being married. Through investigating the performance of fandom in wedding culture, we can better grasp how fan identity is negotiated and even shaped within these controlling heteronormative settings and communities.

2. Performing all of time and space

[2.1] The performance demonstrated in wedding ceremonies depends heavily on how individuals choose to represent their identity and interests to others. Several scholars in fan studies have recognized this but in the more general context of fans performing for other audiences. Cornel Sandvoss has noted that "performance implies the existence of an audience for fan consumption and a process of interaction between performer and spectators" (2005, 45). Rebecca Black and Steven Thorne have also recognized that "identity work is not something that is done alone" because performances attain social significance when recognized or rejected by other people (2011, 257). Within these interactions the performer realizes the expectations of the spectator for the performance and manipulates his or her behavior or actions to account for these expectations. If we solely rely on this logic, the construction of a fan's identity through performance relies on the reaction of others. The same might be said when fans perform their identity in the context of a wedding ceremony. For

instance, the presence of guests not associated with fandom might compel the couple to adhere more strictly to tradition than they would like. However, something else happens here in the construction of that identity.

[2.2] Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz elucidates how the performers construct their identity in a wedding ritual, asserting that rituals often serve as "a vehicle" for expressing one's identity because "each bride and groom is given an opportunity to create and then display (or perform) in public their own story (or narrative)" (2002, 129). Essentially, the couple demonstrates "where they have come from, who they are now, and who they wish to be in the future" (129). Leeds-Hurwitz further argues that it is "the use of symbols in performance that makes them meaningful; active participation in a performance gives it significance, not the mere fact that a ritual presents specific messages in a specific form" (2002, 102). The act of performing the object of fandom becomes an important part in the construction of identity because fan performances are in fact "performances of symbols and images representing texts" (Sandvoss 2005, 51). Although the presence of guests outside fandom might influence the way in which a couple performs their fan identities in the ceremony, the inclusion of certain symbolic objects from a particular fandom assigns deeper meaning to the construction of their identities because it conveys how fans will still incorporate personal interests despite their guests' expectations for a traditional ritual.

[2.3] Though labeling a themed wedding as a form of cosplay, or costume play, might be a stretch, certain politics behind cosplay's performativity can be applied to the development of fan expression of symbolic objects in rituals. Fan scholar Nicolle Lamerichs describes cosplay as something that "motivates fans to closely interpret existing texts, perform them, and extend them with their own narratives and ideas" (2011, ¶1.2). The costume becomes a "cultural product that can be admired at a convention, and therefore spectators also play a role in guaranteeing authenticity" (¶2.2). Fans who construct costumes modeled after a favorite character often do so in the context of a convention or some other fan-related event. When that context shifts to a wedding—a typically nonfandom space—the fan might no longer have an audience who will understand the implications behind these symbols. This might then imply that everyone involved in the ceremony should be a part of the bride or groom's fandom in order to guarantee authenticity and significance to the couple's fan identities. While some couples might encourage or instruct their guests to dress according to the wedding theme, most do not require this. This can often compel couples to become more discerning when deciding how they want to interpret their fannish desires to their guests. In turn, the selectivity that goes into incorporating fandom into a wedding creates more intimacy with the source material.

[2.4] It is in this moment of creating intimacy that fans revisit significant memories associated with the object of fandom, allowing them to maintain their sense of selves despite acting as consumers within the wedding industry. Where scholars of the Frankfurt School have contended that individuals become passive consumers when indulging in the deadening experience of mass culture, fan theorists have indicated that the collection and presentation of objects related to fandom can be an edifying experience for the fan ([note 2](#)). John Fiske champions this sentiment when he says that "the reverence, even adoration, fans feel for their object of fandom sits surprisingly easily with the contradictory feeling that they also 'possess' that object, it is *their* popular culture capital" (1992, 40). This popular culture capital provides fans with the "social privilege and distinction" needed to feel in control of their experiences as fans and as collectors of fan objects but also works to identify their "level of fandom" (Geraghty 2014, 181). In a themed wedding, fans might work to harvest as many unique objects of fandom as they can so that other fans might recognize them as true or hardcore fans. Even so, this is not the only way in which fans are able to create a closer relationship with the text. Scholars like Lincoln Geraghty and Henry Jenkins have recognized that through collecting items, fans experience nostalgia, creating "personal histories" that have "become embodied in the collected objects of popular culture" (Geraghty 2014, 4). Memories associated with the object of fandom make pop culture capital meaningful to fans and contribute to what Matt Hills has described as "the lived experience of fandom" (2002, 35). Fans not only develop these memories because of fandom but also because of the events happening in their lives at the time. While fandom-themed weddings might indicate the level of fan a person might be, it also does not completely explain how such weddings can still be meaningful to the couple themselves. The nostalgia that fans feel towards an object of fandom represents not just their experience as fans but also their experience as people who are influenced by their social and cultural surroundings, making it possible to maintain their fan identity in the traditional constructs of the wedding ritual.

[2.5] To better illustrate this, I would like to examine one particular couple featured on the fandom wedding Web site When Geeks Wed who chose to have both a Doctor Who-themed wedding and a themed engagement photo shoot. For Laurie and Justin (figure 2), tradition still had a strong hold over how they wanted to conduct their wedding ceremony. The two chose to be married in a church while dressed in the white gown and black tux traditional of Western wedding customs, yet the use of the color blue in their decorations (a color symbolic of the blue police box that the Doctor travels in) and the TARDIS wedding cake (figure 3) were prominent features defining the couple's identification with the Doctor Who fandom. Closer inspection of more subtle motifs reveals that the bride's bouquet contained small, silver-colored rose and angel wing charms (figure 4) to represent companion Rose Tyler and the Weeping Angels, a race of monsters from the show. While these charms provided a small yet

significant addition of Doctor Who into the couple's mostly traditional wedding, they also recalled certain memories for the couple, something that manifested itself in their engagement photo shoot showing the bride and groom dressed up as Rose Tyler and the Doctor (figure 5). Through this personal, shared experience in the couple's history, these Doctor Who elements gained significance by "socially constructing a situation in which the participants experience symbolic meanings" thereby showing how the rituals "gain their rhetorical force" (Leeds-Hurwitz 2002, 102). These subtle additions to the wedding ritual unearth memories not just about the couple's experience with Doctor Who (about which When Geeks Wed does not go into great detail), but also other memories about their time together that most likely involved Doctor Who to such a degree that it seemed obvious for them to incorporate elements of the show into their ceremony. Some of their attendees might not be aware of Doctor Who and its fandom, but they can at least recognize the significance of the couple's relationship and the shared passion they have towards fandom.



Figure 2. Despite adopting a *Doctor Who* theme for their wedding, the couple still retained traditional elements by posing for a photo in a church. Photograph by Davey Morgan. [[View larger image](#).]



Figure 3. Laurie and Justin cut into a cake in the shape of the TARDIS. Photograph by Davey Morgan. [[View larger image](#).]



 Davey Morgan
photography

Figure 4. Laurie shows off her bouquet depicting rose and angel wing charms, signifying companion Rose Tyler and the Weeping Angels. Photograph by Davey Morgan. [[View larger image.](#)]



 Davey Morgan
photography

Figure 5. The couple cosplay as the Doctor and Rose Tyler during their engagement photo shoot. Photograph by Davey Morgan. [[View larger image.](#)]

[2.6] For fans in everyday life, the acts of performing and producing objects contribute to the autonomy of the individual and ultimately stand as a source of

stability and security in their identity (Sandvoss 2005, 47). Even more, fan performance takes on similarities with common social interactions, where the "world is constituted as event, as a performance" because the "objects, events, and people which constitute the world are made to perform for those watching or gazing" (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, 78). A wedding ceremony is one of many performances, a lived-out fantasy for people to don elaborate costumes and recite words in a meaningful display for guests. But in doing so, the wedding couple must determine how best to enact this performance based upon the scrutiny of their audience. For couples to then elect to have a fandom-inspired wedding and act out particular objects and themes from fandom further suggests that "fandom is not an articulation of needs and drives, but is itself constitutive of the self" (Sandvoss 2005, 48). Since people perform for others all the time in daily interactions, the self becomes a symbolic object that represents personal pleasures. Yet performance does more than just relay personal pleasures; it also compels the person to "incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole" (Goffman 1959, 125). Acting out one's fandom, whether in the context of a wedding ceremony or some other social event, certainly expresses an individual's interests. Yet the selectivity behind expressing these interests, often motivated by social pressures and expectations, further demonstrates that the fan wants others to perceive the symbolic objects that make up their identity in a socially acceptable way.

3. Something borrowed, something TARDIS blue

[3.1] Though some fans may feel restricted in how to perform their fandom interests in a wedding ceremony because of traditional obligations, others see fandom as a way to better express an identity not largely accepted by the mainstream. The idea of fandom empowering those marginalized by gender, race, class, and age had been popularized by the first wave of fan studies in the early 1990s (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992; Penley 1991; Tulloch 1990). At the time, this was partly because of fans' inability to significantly influence the texts they were consuming on television, in comic books, and in movie theaters. Since then, fan scholars have shifted away from this mindset, asserting instead that "fan audiences are now wooed and championed by the culture industries" and that we are entering an age where fans become the producers (Gray, Harrington, and Sandvoss 2007, 4). Digital marketplaces like Etsy and Redbubble allow fans to create products not sold in larger markets, ranging from fandom-inspired necklaces and iPhone cases to custom wedding invitations and engagement ring boxes (figure 6). Though independent sellers exist to provide fans with the materials they need to subvert the mainstream, fandom-themed weddings are still considered traditional.



Figure 6. This Doctor Who-inspired engagement ring box, featuring an LED light, is one of the many fandom-themed wedding accessories found on Etsy. [[View larger image](#).]

[3.2] While adding a model of the TARDIS to the top of a five-tier wedding cake might not be a common sight, simply incorporating fandom elements into a wedding does little to actually subvert tradition. What these fannish alterations seem to provide are entryways for fans to comfortably perform the many facets of their identities, some of which might oppose tradition. By taking on the role as the other, the individual manages to "enhance the process of identity communication and interpretation. The other, in turn, grants symbolic recognition of the identity performance" (Altheide 2011, 8). When fans alter certain aspects of the wedding ceremony, their identity certainly becomes easier to recognize. It opens up further conversation on why people might have a fandom-themed wedding and allows fans to display parts of their identity that are significant in their opposition to heteronormative society. With this in mind, the intersection of fan identity and gender, sexual, and racial minorities can sometimes illustrate how and why fans feel an affinity toward texts that speak to issues of social and cultural oppression. Yet when a wedding couple chooses to incorporate fandom into the ceremony, they are not necessarily making a statement about subverting tradition. They are customizing their fan experience to make a traditional wedding more personal and more enjoyable for their unique identity. Fiske further situates fandom's significance in this event, saying that "on the one hand it is an intensification of popular culture which is formed outside and often against official culture, on the other it expropriates and reworks certain values and characteristics of that official culture to which it is exposed" (1992, 34). Fans may produce and change various aspects of a wedding ceremony to fit their own desires. They may even do so because they feel that their marginalized identities do not quite fit in mainstream wedding culture. However, they still do these things within the confines of society's cultural norms.

[3.3] While some may wish to not be affiliated with the institution of wedding culture, there are still some traditional aspects about fandom-themed weddings that actually uphold cultural conventions. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington convey how fans can be characterized as people who are not a "counterforce to

existing social hierarchies and structures" but who actually maintain these "cultural systems of classification" (2007, 9). In most Doctor Who-themed weddings, couples described how they still maintained elements traditional to their culture or had difficulty persuading their wedding guests to dress according to their theme. Even the couples that pulled off their Doctor Who-themed wedding without much grumble from their guests still adhered to a socially acceptable ritual structure. Returning to what Leeds-Hurwitz has to say about weddings, it becomes apparent that "although everyone is unique, and each ritual is different from every other example of even the same ritual, people are more comfortable if some elements repeat from variant to variant of a form" (2002, 62). If a couple deviated too much from tradition, the wedding ceremony might not be socially recognized in that couple's culture. Even so, the reflection of these cultural norms within fan alterations provides context for the couple's unique performance narrative, and in some ways adds further meaning behind their identity.

[3.4] For Clara and Justin (figure 7) featured on the fandom wedding Web site Offbeat Bride, the rejection of certain traditional elements was important to how they wanted to represent their Doctor Who-inspired wedding that also combined elements from *Legend of Zelda*, The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, and various other fandoms. Though not fandom-related, they also opted to weld their own wedding rings rather than purchase them and even included a reading from the Rush song "Ghost of a Chance" during the exchanging of their vows. In describing how they planned their wedding, Clara said:

[3.5] We wanted our wedding to be as personal as we could make it. We tossed out anything we didn't feel connected to, like the garter toss, the first dance, and clinking glasses. Instead, we looked at each facet and tried to figure out how to make it represent one of our geek interests. ("Clara and Justin's" 2013)



Figure 7. While Justin dons a suit similar to that of the Eighth Doctor's, Clara chooses a unique dress that fits her personal taste. Photograph by J. F. Hannigan. [[View larger](#)

image.]

[3.6] Though Clara and her husband left out old-fashioned customs in their wedding in order to accommodate their own personal interests, they still retained a traditional structure in how they officiated the ceremony. They still chose to photograph the first look, otherwise known as the first moment that the bride and groom see each other dressed up for the wedding. They even chose to have a flower girl and ring bearer walk down the aisle with them as many other couples do. Because Clara and Justin retained some of these traditional elements, we cannot confidently say that their fandom-themed wedding completely subverted tradition. Instead, we should ask how these fannish alterations provided significant meaning to their ceremony that might not have been the same if they had chosen a more traditional path. We can best explore this through another couple on Offbeat Bride, Emily and Greg (figure 8). Like Clara and Justin, Emily and Greg retained a traditional structure to their wedding that included a ceremony in a Catholic church and formal wedding attire (except for the Converse shoes they wore—a subtle nod to David Tennant's Tenth Doctor—their wedding does not heavily imply that there is a Doctor Who influence). Despite being held in a church, the couple made a point to request the Catholic-lite service that allowed them to include an Apache blessing at the end of their vow exchange. During the reception, they enforced a no clinking glass rule, a tradition where guests bang their silverware against their glasses until the couple stops what they are doing and kiss. Instead, the couple encouraged storytelling, allowing Emily to explain how her and Greg's values influenced their wedding:

[3.7] Our wedding toast started off with my commentary on how love, regardless of gender, sex, and preferences, should be accepted, and how traditional this wedding was despite the fact that I am happily bisexual and Pagan, and Greg is a reformed Catholic and "heteroflexible." We are also polyamorous. ("Emily and Greg's" 2013)



Figure 8. *Other than the Converse shoes Emily and Greg wore in tribute to the Tenth Doctor, their wedding was mostly traditional. [View larger image.]*

[3.8] For both couples, Doctor Who and other fandom interests provided a framework in which their unconventional attitudes or identities could exist. Additionally, it seems important to acknowledge that some couples who choose to have a fandom-themed wedding often do not fit into the heteronormative mold that wedding culture promotes. By putting on such a wedding, a couple can craft a performance narrative that can articulate preferences often marginalized in society (e.g., Emily's bisexuality). Other times a couple might just reject certain elements of tradition for reasons personal to their own experiences, like Clara and Justin who did not want to include the garter toss or clinking glasses. Either way, these couples managed to use both fandom and tradition to voice identities and ideals that had been previously silenced in society, illustrating how fans' experiences in fandom and in traditional structures influence the performance of their identity.

[3.9] Adopting certain fannish details in place of more traditional wedding elements also allows fans to further establish their social status as discerning consumers. According to Fiske, "Some fans, whose economic status allows them to discriminate between the authentic and the mass-produced...approximate much more closely to the official cultural capitalist, and their collections can be more readily turned into economic capital" (1992, 45). Fans may adopt certain elements of Doctor Who that resonate with their marginalized interests, but the fact that they are able to freely do so suggests that they do not necessarily gain status by simply subverting tradition. Their ability to dictate and tailor their performance narrative to their preferences indicates that fans, like everyone else, define their social status by operating within a socioeconomic structure. Depending on class and economic mobility, some fans have more freedom than others in what kinds of fannish elements to adopt in a wedding ceremony. This can be seen in the level of quality and detail that often goes into the ceremonies, as well as how some couples lack the proper resources or budget to have the perfect fandom-themed wedding. With this in mind, fan practice parallels Bourdieu's sociological theory of consumption (1984). Class positions, like social capital, education capital, and cultural capital, are interrelated but not identical (Sandvoss 2005). As consumers in the wedding industry, fans continue to maintain these social hierarchies and exercise, to certain extents, the privilege of being discerning customers seeking to gain cultural capital. Yet according to Sarah Thornton, such fan practices might best be classified as "subcultural capital" which is "embodied in the form of being 'in the know'" (1996, 11). The actions that some fans take in purchasing wedding items made by other fans or even creating these items themselves add to the valuable experience of fandom because they ensure their active participation and status as devoted fans. While the meaningful objects that fans procure and integrate into their ceremonies can relay their social and economic status, these objects also illustrate how a fan's performance narrative gains cultural value

among other fans, something which takes on further meaning when participation moves online.

4. Doctor Who gets married online

[4.1] Even more so now than before, wedding culture's online presence has simultaneously further embedded social expectations into people's consciousness and revealed how slight deviations from tradition can be possible. With the popularity of social media, fans performing in themed weddings are also performing their unique ritual for a larger audience, an audience that can appreciate the dynamics of an unconventional ceremony. Through this "highly mediated ritual," as cultural theorist S. Elizabeth Bird calls it, the wedding provides:

[4.2] scripts, imagery, and symbols that are often detached from the real personal lives of the people involved. The wedding speaks to the nature of a mobile, consumer-oriented society in which striving for unique identity is paramount, rather than the solidification of local family and ethnic identity. (2010, 94–95)

[4.3] As couples upload photos of their fandom-themed weddings, they are not only sharing a love for a particular fandom but also indulging in a shared experience that contributes partly to the pleasure of fan identity. Likewise, the economic context highlighted by Bird provides a significant perspective on how fan identity and the performance narrative are formed and maintained online. Access to more pictures, articles, and products for purchasing allows fans to pull from a greater pool of inspiration for their own fandom-inspired weddings. As such, fans become sensitive consumers in selecting various designs and items to incorporate in a ceremony and possess greater control over the formation of their own unique fan identity. This occurrence has been noted by Fiske, who asserts that fans are the most discriminating consumers and producers, and the "cultural capital they produce is the most highly developed and visible of them all" (1992, 48). The flexibility and exposure afforded to fans online offer more opportunities to personalize the fan community experience and produce a sense of camaraderie in hosting a fandom-themed wedding.

[4.4] The presence of an online audience can contribute to both the openness of fan expression in other social settings as well as to consumer discrimination among more critical fans. Both work powerfully in the construction of fan identity, but the latter can sometimes place greater pressure on fans who feel that their wedding must live up to the parade of other quality fandom-inspired weddings seen on the Internet. First, the presence of this mediated nature can contribute to Hills's "lived experience of fandom" because fans feel like they are performing for an audience of online fans who will

appreciate their wedding perhaps more than their live audience of family and friends, some of whom may not understand the fandom references in the ceremony. It is through media and performance that fans use what Paul Booth and Peter Kelley describe as "augmented notions of the 'self' to address and publicly explore personal identity at a deep level" (2013, 64). By posting wedding photos online, fans can reflect further on this identity and how it situates itself between the fan community and other social arenas. The fandom-inspired wedding then becomes one of the few times that a couple can perform their personal fantasies and have them be recognized in a social and cultural context. Additionally, the reflexive and pervasive nature of reviewing photos of the wedding online solidifies and affirms this event as existing in both fandom and wedding culture. When we see images of fandom exist in a setting with which it is not normally associated, we begin to normalize fandom in that setting and to create a more open environment in which fan identity can be performed.

[4.5] Second, though the Internet may provide an open space in which fans can share these memories and feel a social connection to others, there still exists a level of judgment in the fan community and in mainstream culture on how fans go about representing their interests in a wedding ceremony. This occurrence seems to fall back on the accumulation of pop culture capital, where the discriminatory collection of objects (artworks, books, records, memorabilia, ephemera) can often delineate fan identity (Fiske 1992, 43). Some alternative wedding sites like Rock N Roll Bride illustrate attempts to achieve the perfect fandom-inspired wedding. In one article on constructing a mock Doctor Who wedding photo shoot, the writer describes the hunt for the perfect venue (something Victorian or futuristic) and the selection of an appropriate number of themes from the show. Other Doctor Who-themed weddings seen on the Internet, noted by the photographer, were either "really pretty, floral and sparkly, or a little too much like a cheesy costume party" (Forsyth 2013). The article also contained a fan video (figure 9) simulating two individuals meeting at a Doctor Who TARDIS display, falling in love over the course of six months, becoming engaged where they first met, and then arriving at the wedding ceremony location where they act out being attacked by a Dalek. While the video does not claim to be the epitome of what a Doctor Who-themed wedding should be, it does detail in the credits how Doctor Who fans found professional companies to contribute to the hair, makeup, floral arrangements, invitation stationary, confectionary, wardrobe, and props, illustrating the selectivity of pop culture capital and a framework by which other Doctor Who-themed weddings might be judged.



Figure 9. A still from a fan video shows a couple encountering a Dalek attack at their wedding ceremony.[\[View larger image.\]](#)

[4.6] With the pressure that some fans might receive from other fans over the Internet to capture the perfect fandom-inspired wedding, the performance narrative that develops as a result unveils significant community building in the fandom that attaches further meaning to the products that fans produce and consume. Regarding the fans who participated in the mass Doctor Who wedding, the Web site that promoted the wedding also contained the profiles for all 50 couples. These profiles provided details about how the couples met and why Doctor Who became a large part of their lives. For one couple, Jennifer and Klehlyn, multiple fandoms dominated their interests, but Doctor Who was the single fandom where "binge-watching entire seasons on Netflix [had] been a regular bonding activity for them" ("Our Couples" 2013). Through sharing their stories online where other fans could read them, these couples were able to profess their fan identity in an official way. By performing their fan identities online, featured alongside other couples ready to participate in the mass wedding, these fans strengthened their sense of community and devotion to the Doctor Who fandom. The couples' performance narratives in this mediated context provided "new levels of insight and [an] experience [that] refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty" (Perryman 2008, 26). The uniqueness of bringing together wedding culture with a significant moment in the Doctor Who fandom further exemplifies the accessibility of the Doctor Who franchise to its fans and how capitalist economies have begun to recognize shows like it to be financial powerhouses. As a result, businesses begin to cater to these fans, a practice that will continue to increase as fan production moves more and more online. From large events like the mass wedding to smaller online venues, amid growing media attention, the Doctor Who fan community is choosing to make a spectacle out of performance narratives, effectively making that spectacle an experience central to being a fan and participating in fandom.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] The presence of fandom in wedding culture provides a new way of understanding how and why individuals choose to express their unique qualities and experiences as fans. The process of creating and incorporating wedding objects into themed weddings makes it possible for fans to experience further affiliation with fandom as well as trigger memories that fans have with a particular text. The memories experienced by fans, from newcomers to diehard enthusiasts, come out of what the fans were feeling and doing at that time in their lives when they were engaging and participating with the text. Because of this, fans are able to blend the various memories they have of fandom into a meaningful performance narrative that extends beyond fandom and into other corners that make up their lives. It becomes possible then for fans to maintain their identity in a wedding ceremony because that identity encases their lives both inside and outside of fandom. We primarily see this displayed in individual fandom-themed weddings where fans do not take extreme measures to completely subvert tradition. For most, these weddings appear almost entirely traditional with the exception of a few changes to incorporate fannish objects and themes. The mass Doctor Who-themed wedding remains the exception where fans adopt more elaborate displays because of the increased expectation and attention they receive from other fans in person and online. As mentioned before, performances are based upon how the performers modify their behavior to suit the expectations of their audience. Because of this, the fans are influenced by both their experience in fandom and the traditional constructs that make up wedding culture. Fans' decisions to perform this identity in a wedding ceremony shows that fan identity encompasses more than just fandom. It also encompasses the negotiation they make when displaying this identity in heteronormative spaces.

[5.2] Because little has been written on fandom-themed weddings, additional research might expand upon the economies of fandom within wedding culture. Fans' consumption preferences and practices occur in a number of different ways in wedding culture. Fans may purchase commodities made by other fans or by capitalist markets, or they may even create these items themselves. However, risks still reside in how particular franchises choose to acknowledge and permit the production and activity of their fans as their presence continues to grow online. Cease-and-desist letters and copyright lawsuits have been known to interfere with fan labor products. As the acceptance of fandom weddings increases, it may prove interesting to explore how the wedding industry could affect the independent fan market and the construction of identity and performance in fan affiliation. For now it seems that some fandoms like Doctor Who are dedicated to celebrating the fan community through both commercial and independent efforts as well as presenting those participants with the materials needed to identify as fans and to integrate this persona into their everyday lives. It then seems important to understand how performance not only constructs fan identity but also maintains its value in a capitalist industry that threatens to diminish it.

6. Acknowledgments

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7. Notes

1. Although Special Events had put on a Klingon-inspired wedding for Star Trek fans before Doctor Who, mass themed weddings do not frequently occur.
 2. While associated with the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin's 1931 essay "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting" offers an understanding of our relationship to the power of memory in collecting and owning objects.
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Praxis

Audience reaction movie trailers and the Paranormal Activity franchise

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This article addresses the concept and growing practice of audience reaction movie trailers, specifically for films in the horror genre. Popularized by the Paranormal Activity series of films, these trailers primarily utilize green night-vision video footage of a movie theater audience reacting to the film being advertised, yet also consist of webcam recordings of screaming fans, documentary-style B-roll footage of audiences filing into preview screenings with high levels of anticipation, and close-up shots of spectator facial expressions, accompanied by no footage whatsoever from the film being advertised. In analyzing these audience-centric promotional paratexts, my aim is to reveal them as attempting to sell and legitimize the experiential, communal, and social qualities of the theatrical movie viewing experience while at the same time calling for increased fan investment in both physical and online spaces. Through the analysis of audience reaction trailers, this article hopes to both join and engender conversations about horror fan participation, the nature of anticipatory texts as manipulative, and the current state of horror gimmickry in the form of the promotional paratext.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Anticipatory texts; Fan participation; Gimmicks; Horror

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Popularized over the past five years by the Paranormal Activity series of found footage horror films (produced by Paramount, Jason Blum's Blumhouse Productions, and series creator Oren Peli), audience reaction movie trailers have become a key marketing tool for horror producers and filmmakers looking to generate viral buzz and get bodies into theater seats. They have grown from an aesthetic oddity to an increasingly pervasive genre of promotional paratext, used for films as diverse as the tech obsessed, low budget Paranormal franchise, the spooky Hammer period piece *The Woman in Black* (Watkins, 2012), and the Brad Pitt-led zombie actioner *World War Z* (Forster, 2013). We can define these particular audience reaction trailers as promotional cinematic paratexts ([note 1](#)) that primarily feature shots of an engrossed

theatrical audience watching the film being advertised, typically at a special advance screening in a major market city like Los Angeles or New York. Created with digital video and made as much for Web exhibition and viral dissemination as they are for actual movie theaters, such paratexts are trailers for the social media and ever-evolving media convergence age; these texts break down our notions of what constitutes a trailer and stress the participatory power (and, of course, the potential purchasing power) of the mass audience. Audience reaction trailers are also typically part of larger marketing campaigns to bring the film to the audiences' home cities first (with calls to "Want It!" or "Demand It" appearing at the end of the trailers). This interactive, participatory feature is often located on the film's official Web site (which is usually featured quite prominently at the end of the trailer as well), or facilitated by social media sites like Facebook. With a focus on the social and a push to make legitimate the theatergoing experience, audience reaction trailers place heavy emphasis on the spectator and the notion of inclusion, often favoring the recorded reactions of audience members and hype about fan voting practices over actual footage from the film itself, save for a few brief, glitched-out flashes of mysterious and/or horrific imagery to get the blood pumping and raise the interest level.

[1.2] These trailers also buy into and exploit "the myth of initial terror" (Gunning 2004, 863) that supposedly ran through early cinema audiences, who, as oft-told legend has it, fled theaters in horror from such projected sights as locomotives approaching the camera (and, as imagined, possessing enough force to rupture the screen and harm the audience). That the images on screen could be palpable, tangible, and real are fears touched upon—however playfully—by the *Paranormal Activity* series of audience reaction trailers. This myth conjuring and blurring of spectatorial reality and diegetic cinematic space also taps into a simultaneous fear of and desire for the unknown. As Benson-Allott explains in *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens*:

[1.3] *Paranormal Activity*'s marketing ploy emphasizes the horror of low-resolution digital video...Through editing and digital compositing, the trailer seamlessly blends murky green reaction shots with nocturnal footage from the actual movie, obscuring the line between text and paratext for *Paranormal Activity*. In other words audience reactions in the trailer actually enforce the realism of the movie itself...The audiences' reactions seem so patently at odds with the minimalist clips of sheets billowing, doors closing on their own, and off-screen thumps and thuds that their fear enhances the mystery of the movie. Indeed, they seem to be responses to the medium itself. (Benson-Allott 2013, 188–189)

[1.4] That the space of the movie theater can be defamiliarized and made to be mysterious or unknown is important—it makes the concept of going to the movies exciting, intriguing, and entirely different from the perhaps more familiar, everyday spaces of the home theater or mobile viewing experience. The *Paranormal Activity* films are not just mysterious; their blurring of lines between reality and artifice transforms the everyday act of watching a screen into a moment of difference, oddity, incoherence, and chance. The trailers work to sell this point, and in doing so, also further the narrative and promotional claims that *Paranormal Activity* is more than just a movie: it is found footage; it is reality.

[1.5] I propose then that the audience reaction trailer as utilized to promote horror films is significant for two unique yet intersecting reasons. First, movie trailers of the horror genre have a history of addressing the audience and a penchant for self-awareness and metatextuality in regards to the viewing experience and the physiological aspects of horror reception (a framework that will be established in this piece through a brief analysis of the historical precedent for gimmick and spectacle set, in part, by the American horror films of the 1950s—particularly the work of William Castle). I see the marketing teams and production studios behind these ghoulish paratexts as in tune with horror fans' interests, desires, and shared genre knowledge. With industry and audience in sync, we encounter a complex web of potential pros and cons: on one hand, the needs of an experience-seeking audience and of a genre-specific fan base are being addressed and quite often met with gusto. Befitting of a great deal of popular discourse, Richard Whittaker of the *Austin Chronicle* labeled series producer Jason Blum (who also produced horror hits such as *Sinister* [2012] and *Insidious* [2010]) as "the modern William G. Castle: Master of the crowd-pleasing horror" (Whittaker 2014). On the other hand, such crowd-pleasing gestures are inherently exploitative, often making use of unpaid fan labor via social media to saturate the market with gimmicky, Hollywood-approved frights. Both sides of the situation must be recognized and understood as legitimate, and I feel that a negotiation between the two can be found in the understanding of not only Castle-era production and marketing practices, but also in their analysis and theorization within recent scholarly work. I hope that applying such academic work to the current trends in audience reaction paratexts will open up the possibilities of engaging with current marketing texts and concepts moving forward. Second, the aesthetic design and ultimate implementation of the trailers is key—here, I understand the audience as implicated as being both a part of the film being advertised (as their bodies are primarily being used to sell the film in these instances, and not the bodies of stars) and as a key factor in the advertising process via social media. These trailers seem to insist that the *Paranormal Activity* films simply won't be as fun or engaging if you don't see them in a theatrical setting, and that they also won't exist (outside of home video

at a much later and less preferable date) if you don't join in the voting process and help bring them to your local theater.

[1.6] This article analyzes and works through the audience reaction trailers and associated direct marketing tactics created for the *Paranormal Activity* series of films (with five in the franchise) as a means to address broader questions of audience participation, horror gimmickry, and the state of film advertising in the form of the trailer. A series with a total worldwide gross of just over \$800 million (astounding, considering the collective series budget of just over \$18 million), the *Paranormal Activity* franchise has clearly been successful from a marketing standpoint, and in doing so has provided a template for ad campaigns that are delightfully schlocky, engaging, sharable, and in line with modern horror fans' desire for spectacle, meta-awareness, inclusion, and physiological arousal. Though I use this article as a space to draw connections between past and present practices of horror marketing (to make sense of the audience reaction trailer as a paratext rooted in genre and industry history), and as a way to point to current industry and audience conditions as engendering the popularity and legitimacy of these types of ad campaigns, I also want to question the role that the audience reaction trailer plays in opening up possibilities for spectator involvement and the creation of unified horror fan communities. It has yet to be seen if audience reaction trailers, social media voting campaigns, and Webcam gimmickry produce more than just fan labor, free advertising, and high profits (thus exploiting the ever-evolving gift economies of fandoms). However, as mobile technology becomes more pervasive in the theater space (not to mention incorporated into marketing campaigns), and as marketing for the *Paranormal Activity* series works to legitimize and champion not just the theatrical or home video experience, but the very presence and necessity of fan bodies inhabiting those spaces, I would argue that the inclusion of audience reactions in horror marketing leaves open more potential for participation and collaboration than it forecloses.

[1.7] While the ultimate merits and outcomes of fan participation are certainly debatable, audience reaction trailers and their associated social media campaigns nonetheless position spectators as active, necessary components of a film's financial success, cultural uptake, and emotional impact. To say that spectators are considered and sought after by and within industry discourse and practices is not to say the barriers between consumer and producer are officially broken. There is indeed an economic benefit to media producers here that far exceeds that accrued by fans. However, the barriers are—to varying degrees—increasingly blurred, and such uncertainty and overlap within a constantly evolving media landscape leaves more room for contestation and negotiation than it does top-down, unforgivingly exploitative dominance.

2. Audience reactions

[2.1] Found footage horror films like the Paranormal Activity franchise are visually simplistic; washed-out, grainy tones, minimal atmospherics, and long, static shots constitute the majority of these films' running times, only to be punctuated by spooky gimmicks and body-shaking jump scares at cleverly planned moments. With this in mind, it makes sense that such films would be so well-suited for the audience reaction trailer treatment; in placing visual emphasis on the spectators, marketers can avoid having to include the boring bits (a trailer would lose any semblance of rhythm if it lingered on dead-silent, stagnant bedrooms, kitchens, and swimming pools the way the Paranormal Activity films do), and they can also work around revealing any of the shocks and surprises the film may have in store for its audience. The very nature of movie trailers as anticipatory texts makes the near-exclusion of narrative information or key visual moments palatable; as Lisa Kernan points out, trailers "need no resolution. For all the weightiness of their narrational pronouncements and the booming sound effects of their cataclysmic imagery, they are breathless, liminal and ephemeral" (2004, 8–9).

[2.2] Rather than showing a character get dragged away by a demonic force, or inviting audiences to watch in horror as major plot points get visually teased out, these green-tinged, night-vision reaction shots—which include shrieks, blood-curdling screams, nervous laughter, collective awe, and a great deal of silence saturated by tension—give us all the details we need via decontextualized narrative audio, audience facial expressions, and ear-piercing yelps, as can be found in an "Experience It" TV spot for the first Paranormal Activity film (video 1).

Paranormal Activity - Trailer

Video 1. Audience reaction trailer for the first film in the *Paranormal Activity* franchise.

[2.3] Often combined with or supplemented by more traditional theater lobby interviews, or by the growing trend of fan reaction shots—captured via webcam—that record spectators watching a version of the film trailer online from the comfort of their own homes, these trailers leave a great deal to the imagination. They urge you to experience it for yourself, and in doing so, audience reaction trailers aim to encourage the trailer-viewing audience desire to become the idealized, theatergoing audience as seen on screen.

[2.4] The use of terms such as "event," "experience," and "only in cinemas" are expected in trailers that emphasize the audience, and thus the experiential qualities of cinema viewed en masse. However, they bring to mind a nagging question: can these feelings not be had with a small group of friends in a living room or a den? Can the film not be experienced alone? Though a late-night DVD or streaming video-viewing of the latest found-footage horror flick—screened from the comfort of one's own home—may not exactly be worthy of the bold title of "event," these arguably more intimate processes of spectatorship can still engender communal bonding, intense, immediate physical responses, and lingering arousal (Staiger 2005). However, one factor of the in-home or mobile viewing experience that seems to support marketers' tenuous claims of movie-house superiority is the lack of control over both the film being screened and the viewing environment. While watching a film at home, I can pause to use the bathroom, skip past the lackluster or visually uninteresting bits to the biggest scares or goriest kills ([note 2](#)), leave the room for a brief moment to grab a snack, or stop the film altogether if I find it to be too frightening, unbearably shaky (as ill-conceived found footage is notorious for being), or just flat-out tiresome. Audience reaction trailers position the audience as captured, possessed, entranced, and beholden to the glow of the screen. Naturally, this is a representation of an ideal audience—a spooky fiction carved out of what were most likely much lengthier passages of digital video recordings that conceivably showed audience members fidgeting, looking disinterested, talking to a friend, using their mobile device, sleeping, or even leaving the auditorium. However, these trailers work to bypass such complex notions of attention and body language, favoring a simplified and alluring performance of entrancement that firmly ties the concept of event to the already present concept of horror as spectacle and as a genre particular to jolting the audience between active and passive attention (Hanich 2010, 54).

[2.5] Wavering between equally emotive bodily performances of creeping tension and vocal fright, the imagined, potential audience (which is also advertised as being a real audience at a high-profile preview screening) is shown within the diegesis of the first

(and subsequent) *Paranormal Activity* audience reaction trailer as being a crucial part of the cinematic experience in multiple respects. The audience members are an engaged and thoroughly entertained group; they are desired spectators, an audience that the marketers want us to crave being a part of. These ads are purposefully designed to make us see our potential selves in the bodies and actions onscreen. These bodies are ideal, appearing on screen completely devoted to the cinematic experience, performing their spectatorship and fandom in a manner that comes across as energetic, satisfied, and ultimately (and perhaps most importantly) communal—public enough to be approachable (and thus repeatable), and intimate enough to still be regarded as a unique interaction that one can (supposedly) only find in a sold-out movie theater. The members of the audience on-screen are living, screaming props; as presented within the context of the trailer, they are tools of a marketing campaign that works to accentuate, legitimize, and make legible the tensions, scares, and successes of the film being sold. They also make a readily apparent argument that the film will not be as satisfying if viewed alone or on a smaller screen.

3. Historical context

[3.1] The reactions, thoughts, and desires of the audience have been overtly factored into and expressed through specific cinematic marketing campaigns for decades, and marketing campaigns for horror films have for years fashioned direct address and usage of the theatrical audience into spooky, rousing gimmickry intended to get spectators into seats. A horror cinema of exploitation and spectacle was born out of the 1950s, with giant monster chillers and other assorted creature-features populating local cinemas and drive-in theaters. Such films possessed a gimmick obsession, utilizing techniques like 3-D, Smell-O-Vision, and Percepto (for films such as William Castle's *The Tingler* (1959), whose audience-addressing trailer can be seen below) to mobilize adjacent senses and create an enhanced sense of spectacle.

The Tingler Trailer

Video 2. William Castle's *The Tingler* (1959) implicates the audience in its scares.

[3.2] As Kevin Heffernan points out, the rise of such techniques and technologies were driven in part by economic concerns:

[3.3] Because of demographic changes in the film audience as well as perceptions within the industry that its own advertising and promotional techniques were behind the times, the 1950s saw the growth of ad campaigns, exploitable titles, and poster art that preceded the casting or even scripting of the films. These efforts were the result both of the industry's desperation to recapture a dwindling audience staying at home in increasing numbers and of the need to draw a more downscale but still lucrative audience of juveniles and adolescents. (Heffernan 2004, 64–65)

[3.4] Keith M. Johnston also points out that "Hollywood's attitude toward new technology in the 1950s was invariably reactive. They saw technology as a new (or at least improved) audience lure, coaxing people back into movie theaters and away from new pursuits—the rival technology of television, the move to the suburbs, and the expansion of leisure activities" (2009, 28). Alluding to the economic boost, crowd-drawing power and sexual energy brought forth by the monster mashes of the 1950s, David J. Skal quotes a manager of a prominent drive-in theater in San Francisco, California:

[3.5] Thank God for the horror pictures...They've saved us. Before this kick we were thinking of shutting down two nights a week; now, with all the monster stuff, the place starts filling up at three o'clock. The kids go for it. The girls yell and hang on to the boys and sometimes you've really got to keep an eye on those cars. (Skal 1993, 261)

[3.6] As evidenced by *The Tingler* trailer, marketing was, as it is still, a key component of alerting spectators about the arrival and wonder of new cinematic technologies. As Johnston points out, these technologies of the 1950s "were weapons that attempted to turn the cinema screen itself into a site of difference...each process emphasizing new experiential qualities of size, depth, smell, hearing or touch. In order to display the unique attributes of each technology, and to educate and excite audiences over the latest screen 'improvement' the studios relied on their favorite method for differentiating competitive products: the film trailer" (2009, 28). The trailer for the Warner Bros. cult horror favorite, 1953's *House of Wax* (another Vincent Price vehicle), is a prime, though near-comical, example of how far studios would go to push their 3-D technology and the notion of theatrical experience on the audience. A completely text-based trailer devoid of any film footage, the ad seen below promises "1001 high tension thrills in vivid WarnerColor," that "come off the screen—right at you!" and that the "third dimension" is the way the film was "meant to be seen."

House of Wax (1953) - Trailer #1

Video 3. Warner Bros. *House of Wax* (1953) marketing campaign focused heavily on new 3-D and color technology to market an experience, rather than letting the film alone sell itself.

[3.7] The Paranormal Activity series of audience reaction trailers both continues and reconfigures this differentiating process by making claim to the supposed social and physiological benefits of a live audience and a theatrical setting. Here, the site of difference is found on not just the diegetic screen, but primarily in the audience, with each spectatorial body being a locus for the advertisement of experience (scares, screams, tension, and laughter) that can arguably only be had in the theatrical setting. Rather than hawking some new technological advancement or unique way of consuming cinema (such as the 3-D of both the 1950s and today), an active

spectatorial experience is promised here as the upgrade from home viewing and the lure of digital, mobile platforms. For an audience (particularly younger viewers) exposed to an increasingly fragmented range of media options (DVD, Blu-Ray, mobile devices, Web-based content), going to the movies (especially when it is a packed house) may indeed be understood and sold as a new, different, and enticing experience.

4. The activity in the aisles continues

[4.1] Here, we can draw strong connections between the gimmick obsession of the 1950s and its prominence in the 2000s and 2010s in the form of audience reaction trailers. It seems quite evident that the tactic of using audience reactions in ads strongly attempts to validate the moviegoing experience, gain audience attention, and boost box office receipts. This is an era of both declining and fluctuating ticket sales, where the ever-contentious threats of both piracy and, more generally, free content are always looming, and competition (or collaboration) with other screen media abounds. Therefore, the current climate is one in which it makes sense for these audience reaction trailers to come to the fore and find their footing. According to a 2012 study by Bonnie Wilcox:

[4.2] With declining DVD sales, studios look to make back all of their money and more during theatrical runs. But with movie theater attendance down to its lowest in 16 years, many studios are trying to cut back on budgets (The Numbers, 2012). Although blockbuster box office receipts are always desirable, some are re-focusing their efforts to secure large profit margins. Low-budget movies have much to gain. By determining the most effective methods to increase attendance and profits, studios will be able to have more successes and reduce the fear of losing money on a project, keeping them in business and the entertainment industry alive. (Wilcox 2012, 1)

[4.3] The effective methods in the case of the Paranormal Activity franchise rest in their locating of both desire and participatory power in the audience. In attempting to legitimize and salvage the moviegoing tradition (as preferred mode of cinematic storytelling, institution of sociocultural importance, and viable economic practice), the audience reaction trailers place the authority of creating and initiating the in-theater experience in the hands of the audience. The idea of audiences using social media sites like Facebook to ask for and demand the film can be understood as the marketing-driven production of (and user-generated display of) audience reactions online, where buzz can spread virally. Once again, the marketers of the Paranormal Activity series are not necessarily engaging social media users with content from the

film being advertised, but are instead prompting users to create excited chatter about a film they have never seen. The promotion of the theatrical event, of something experiential promised in the audience reaction trailers, is furthered by the social media campaign. As argued by the campaign, the film then must be seen—not just because it is scary or unique, but because it is a social event, with the theater acting as a place to be seen, and the social media sphere a space to proclaim the user's future attendance and performance as spectator.

[4.4] These heightened levels of spectatorial performativity and experience, as encouraged through marketing and the specific paratext of the audience reaction trailer, are also quite interestingly tied to audience engagement with the found footage genre itself. As Benson-Allott suggests:

[4.5] Faux footage spectators experience themselves as objects (specifically cameras) within its diegesis rather than detached observers of its story...These movies put the viewer in touch with her position in the motion picture apparatus, with her role as an object in a machine of meaning...The (fictional) primary filmmaker may have been recording footage about a supernatural event, but the secondary filmmakers can use it to make another point about cinema, especially about the role of the spectator in contemporary movie culture. (Benson-Allott 2013, 193)

[4.6] The trailers indicate that the spectator is needed as both a body in the movie theater and in front of the computer/mobile screen. They champion the theatrical experience as the ultimate event, while positioning the audience members in the diegesis as ideal and model viewers—spectators who paid for their tickets and are excited to be mass consumers. Essentially, they are primed and willing to be a crucial part of the motion picture apparatus. Of course, attendance at the early midnight preview screenings could not occur without potential spectators demanding the film first through social media; through a series of clicks, likes and shares, fans create their own test markets, emphasize the communal sway of fandoms, and enable Paramount and Blumhouse to reap the lucrative benefits of low-budget marketing and old-fashioned word of mouth.

5. Random selections and embodied interactions

[5.1] In a recent interview with *Ad Age* about the first *Paranormal Activity* movie, Amy Powell, Paramount's executive VP of interactive marketing strategy and production stated: "Rather than having a wide release or product-launch strategy, why not invert the funnel, democratize the process and let consumers tell you where to go first?...Winning over your fans and letting them feel included in the process is

instrumental in the marketing of any film, it's just a matter of how far you take that notion" (Hampp 2010) ([note 3](#)). Though Powell is indeed right in stating that a typical wide theatrical release of *Paranormal Activity* was not a part of Paramount's initial strategy, the studio did however conduct a highly organized series of coordinated, simultaneous preview screenings and assorted free midnight screenings to both test the film in major theatrical markets and foster fan excitement (especially via Web and social media platforms). Writing for Tor.com (a science fiction and fantasy news/publishing site with a heavy emphasis on fandoms) around the release of the first *Paranormal Activity* film, Mike Sargent informed readers of the site that Paramount had offered (as it did across the Internet) "Tor.com readers five pairs of tickets to [a] special preview screening in New York City" and that all readers had to do to win was "leave a comment on this post (once—duplicates won't count) and we will randomly select the 5 lucky people...Additionally we have 25 pairs of first-come first-served pairs of passes. Those names will also be chosen at random from your comments" (Sargent 2009).

[5.2] This randomness and selectivity was (and remains) quite pervasive throughout these marketing campaigns. Searching back to 2009 on *Paranormal Activity*'s Facebook page reveals a video post of the first audience reaction trailer, uploaded three days before the film was set to screen in select cities on September 25, 2009. The video's description provides a link to the Eventful page (<http://movies.eventful.com/competitions/paranormalactivity2010>) for fans to demand the film if they do not see it listed as screening in their area ([note 4](#)). The comments from potential audience members are mainly ones of intense excitement, anticipation, and even jealousy and mild confusion (over why the film was not playing in the commenter's specific town or city). From this page, Facebook users then had extra incentive to share the trailer (and other assorted media) on their own pages and with friends; the video is not just spread around virally because, as many commenters put it, the movie looks cool, but because it is part of a nationwide contest to win an exclusive, inclusive experience.

[5.3] This inclusionary act is shown in the trailers as both promoting and producing an emotional, reactionary, and near-circus-like atmosphere in the theater. This is not merely intended to be a byproduct of a singular, limited encounter with the film trailer and the accompanying audience; rather, the trailers promise that the creation of such an atmosphere is the intended goal of the entire movie being advertised. Quite importantly for Paramount, Blumhouse, and other studios that emulate the tactics of the audience reaction trailer, the cinematic experience here is presented as an event, a happening with the potential for surprise, shock, and the shaking of habitual practices of vocal silence and bodily stillness that audiences are so frequently asked to adhere to within the very same cycle of previews, ads, and warnings that typically

precede a feature film. Such screenings could also be the site for what Matt Hills might call embodied interactions amongst fans, which he sees as "the key to generating and sustaining high levels of subcultural capital, since the fan can say 'I was there' or they can relay to other fans—the relevant beholders for this fan status—their experiences" of not just seeing the film in a theater, but especially of being one of the lucky fans who was able to successfully demand and get privileged access to the film (via social media and Eventful) at a midnight screening (2010, 89).

[5.4] The more current trailers pertinent to this article can be understood as both the progeny of Castle's carnivalesque hokum, and as responses to economic unease, with direct audience involvement and immersion (a tenuous concept, though one that is incessantly hawked by marketers and studios) remaining key components of the ever-changing sites of horror movie marketing, distribution, exhibition, and consumption. Audiences (or, real spectators mediatized and recontextualized as ideal and highly desirable audience members) are here being made a part of the promotional narratives of the films being advertised, given an elevated, participatory status as essential to not only the monetary success of the films, but to the full realization of the gratifications and use-values being advertised, and are being used to sell not just a movie, but a collective, physiological, emotional, and memorable experience. As Lisa Kernan states in her analysis of the power of trailers:

[5.5] The physical effects of spectacle and attractions on audiences are assumed across genres to be desired as part of the movie-going experience, and such trailers promote spectacle by rhetorically implying that the boundary between the screen and the audience might be crossed through spectatorship. (Kernan 2004, 22)

[5.6] That boundary is implied as being crossed here, and as being desired by the audience; the testing and perceived rupturing of the boundary between spatial/temporal reality and the artifice of the screen space is perhaps most evident in the recent UK trailer for *Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones*.



under siege by unseen forces. Linking the trope of demonic possession with a broader conception of ownership and the possession of commodities, the films are marked by out-of-control consumerism, reflected by the audience's own desire to consume the franchise itself. (Heller-Nicholas 2014, 130)

6. Audience reactions: Theater-only and B-roll footage

[6.1] If demonic possession arises out of extreme consumerism (as it perhaps does for both the imagined victims in the films and the imagined audience in the UK reaction trailer), the message of the ad campaigns seems to align the audience with the unfortunate people that populate the Paranormal Activity universe. Rather than viewing spectators as potential victims—a terrifying and potentially nasty discourse to engage in—I contend that such warped mirroring only furthers the sense of spectatorial communion and collective emotion experienced during not only the Paranormal Activity films, but during in-theater horrors in general. The very point of the ads is confirmed here: we want to see other people scared out of their wits; that is part of the roller coaster ride of horror.

[6.2] The metaphor of the roller coaster is not limited to a single kind of experience. Rather, there is an experiential duality present: that of being a theatrical audience that is frightened and potentially moved by the audience reaction trailer (just as those bodies witnessed within the diegetic space of the trailer are), and that of also being drawn to the prospect of being frightened again as a spectator attending the film being advertised. Just as we have a desire to see others frightened, we also desire to be those who are frightened. The pleasure of watching these trailers is not just in seeing other spectators lose their composure in a darkened theater, but in the promise of being able to lose yourself in the communal horror and transgress the typical rules of the theatrical space. The audience reaction trailer then gives us multiple previews: of the feature film soon to arrive in theaters and the potential reactions we may have in the theater (as performed on screen and within the very theater the trailer is being screened in).

[6.3] This sense of the collective is emphasized and stripped to its core in a series of online-exclusive audience reaction paratexts not intended for traditional trailer consumption. In these clips, which appear to be released and archived exclusively online on sites such as YouTube, IMDB, Bloody Disgusting, and Trailer Addict, the viewer is presented with nothing but seemingly raw night-vision footage of audiences watching the film being advertised. Do enough searching through a trailer database like Trailer Addict, and you'll also come across videos labeled as B-roll footage from select advanced screenings of the films, with seemingly unpolished shots of audience members lining up outside of the theater, looking excited, getting amped up, buying



return to Kernan's ideas of trailers as anticipatory texts; here, she offers the following about the unseen elements of movie trailers, which can be useful in understanding the potential power that the total absence of actual movie preview footage (or, as with the B-roll footage, any notion of a film being screened at all) can have over the Web-based audience:

[6.7] Trailers offer figurations of felicitous spaces so as to make audiences wish to be there or, conversely, horrific or suspenseful spaces to create audience desire to experience the "safe" fear and terror of the movies. The restriction of trailers to a few minutes of carefully selected and edited shots and scenes endows what we do see, from faces to car crashes, with a kind of pregnancy or underdeterminacy that allows audiences to create an imaginary (as-yet-unseen) film out of these fragments—we desire not the real film but the film we want to see. This filling-in of trailer enigmas with an idealized film thus heightens trailers' promotional value, as well as the visibility of the production industry's assumptions about what its hypothetical audience desires. (Kernan 2004, 13)

7. Conclusion

[7.1] This call to give the audience a rousing experience like no other is indeed a gimmick. The amplification of audience anticipation, coupled with the direct fan engagement and encouragement of participation via social media is also a gimmick. It's schlocky, hokey, and very transparent in its intentions. These are indeed manipulative tactics, highly beneficial to advertisers and cognizant of fandom's desires, purchasing power, and deeply rooted gift economy (Hyde 1999)—though one could argue that the trailers themselves are not texts that make use of fan-made creations, and are instead simply providing a visual representation of actual, consensual practices of theatrical spectatorship. Regardless, there needs to be further exploration and research into these tactics as they evolve ([note 5](#)), and a more rich understanding needs to be developed of how these reaction texts imagine audiences, and what they are doing to actual spectators in the moment of media engagement.

[7.2] Admittedly, there is also something oddly alluring about being desired and sought out throughout the marketing process; the audience is not just being advertised to but is being advertised as something wanted, valued, and necessary. Through these audience reaction trailers and their subsequent viral, social campaigns, spectators are made even more fully aware of their power and ability to alter the look, scope and reach of the cinematic marketplace. Granted, Paramount executive Amy Powell's aforementioned focus on fan desires and participation is in many ways typical of self-reflexive industry discourse, and needs to be read with caution. Though her

words may indeed represent a genuine interest in audience desire and a fondness for horror cinema, Caldwell necessarily reminds us that though "[interviews] with and statements by producers and craftspeople in film can be conceptually rich, theoretically suggestive, and culturally revealing," "we should never lose sight of the fact that such statements are almost always offered from some perspective of self interest, promotion, and spin" (Caldwell 2008). I agree wholeheartedly, and it perhaps goes without saying that simultaneous recognition of such industrial self-interest and enjoyment of the products of that marketing spin makes for a complex relationship with media texts as both fan and academic.

[7.3] Adding further to such complexity, there is also perhaps the linked idea that you are not simply buying a ticket to support the studios, filmmakers, or even the theater itself. In attending a screening of a *Paranormal Activity* film, you are supporting fellow spectators as well; you are physically and monetarily contributing to the fan community. In an essay on fan labor for *Spreadable Media*, Abigail De Kosnik argues that "fan productions help to sustain awareness of, and interest in, mass-media texts over time by continually supplying fresh commentary, videos, news, stories, and art, thereby fighting off the texts' obsolescence" (De Kosnik 2012). Furthering this point, I would argue that fan productions and labor also sustain awareness and heighten the visibility of fan communities—whether or not those communities support low-budget, rarely seen, video on demand splatter-fests, or profit-reaping, multiplex-haunting genre fare (and speaking from experience, I can attest to the fact that loyal horror fans often dip their toes into both niche and populist territory). Demanding a film on Facebook, rallying friends to go to a midnight screening, using your Webcam to upload video of yourself screaming at jolting, spooky trailers—all of these practices contribute not just to the promotion of a media text (in this case, the *Paranormal Activity* films), but also to the revelation and continued affirmation that fan communities are pervasive, widespread, varied, and highly active.

[7.4] The rewards (and requirements) of such fan practices are fascinating. These trailers are selling you the promise of an experience that only you—the fan—can fulfill. You cannot have what is being advertised unless you perform the type of good spectatorship witnessed within the trailer. At the same time, it is crucial to take into consideration that being hyper-aware of the spectator's role as a marketing tool could garner progressively negative or even indifferent responses from audiences, especially as these reaction trailers grow increasingly conventional and expected. How studios and filmmakers use trailers to engage, inform, and entertain spectators, as well as the ways genre and marketing history are drawn upon to create new cinematic and theatrical experiences, must be taken seriously within film and media studies.

[7.5] Johnston states that "trailers are revelatory texts that add to the overall picture of film history," and that "analysis should treat the trailer text as a unique short film, rather than a lesser (abbreviated) form of the feature film" (2009, 3). Such statements ring quite true when considering the types of trailers analyzed in this piece, since they often feature little or no footage from the actual film itself (therefore being beyond abbreviated). They instead attempt to capture and articulate the experiential qualities of the *Paranormal Activity* films—their atmosphere, essence, anticipatory dread, visual aesthetic, and desired physiological and emotional effects. These trailers have a feel and narrative all their own, telling stories of groups of people bravely gathered in theaters to encounter supposedly real (and possibly cursed) footage of the most horrific and disturbing.

[7.6] Giving in to the spectacle and mini-narratives of these campaigns is immensely pleasurable and often highly entertaining and, from personal experience, has led to some of the most engaging, uproarious, carefree and stimulating nights I've had at the mainstream cinema over the past five years. As scholar and fan, I'm presented with conflicted feelings about my own enjoyment and indulgence in these texts, but it's this very polarized position that alerts me to the importance of devoting further study to these specific issues surrounding horror marketing and audience experience. Such open-endedness points to the positive potentiality of horror (or other genre) marketing that utilizes audience reactions and depends on bodies to be in the theatrical space for prime engagement to take place. I have a hope that both audience reaction trailers and the social networking campaigns attached to them can "serve as an attempt to revive the more social aspects of horror movie consumption for a digital age—and thereby establish a genuine sense of subcultural belonging and connection," even as they somewhat troublingly position audiences as "being 'in sync' with the marketing ploys of industrial managers" (Tompkins 2013, 247). The horror fan community is here not just represented via an ad campaign; it is called upon and urged to assemble (both in the setting of the movie theater and the social media realm), opening up possibilities of contact, conversation, and the development of a forum where what horror fans—in this case, those of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise—truly want can move from the click of a virtual button to what they willingly engage with on screen.

8. Acknowledgments

[8.1] Thanks to Paul Booth for encouraging this work be taken beyond a conference presentation, my friends and colleagues at IU Bloomington for engaging with my ideas on horror and marketing, and to Katie Joy for supporting me and screaming with delight at every *Paranormal Activity* film.

9. Notes

1. In a 2010 interview with Henry Jenkins, Jonathan Gray states that with a film trailer, the audience is "getting a pre-view of the film's basic components, and it's thus being constructed as a meaningful entity for them. When the film finally comes along, it doesn't begin with a fresh slate; rather, its viewers have a history with it" (Jenkins 2010). I would also argue that audience reaction trailers do something similar with the spectator's relationship to themselves and fellow theatergoers; these trailers prime the viewer to have a very specific, communal, intense experience. Fan/audience performance of fright, nervousness, laughter, and so forth is here partially predetermined and prelearned via the audience reaction trailers.
2. A prime early example of this level of control would be the "Jump to a Nightmare" supplemental feature on *The Nightmare on Elm Street Collection* DVD boxed set, released in 1999. This feature allowed viewers to do as promised in the title: shift effortlessly to the most scary, surreal, and gruesome scenes without having to deal with major plot points, scenes of dialogue, or potentially nonfrightening moments. The DVD for *Final Destination 3* also includes a similar "death-only" feature.
3. Paramount certainly made attempts at taking the inclusionary aspect far, by acknowledging fan contributions to the campaign and success of the first *Paranormal Activity* film. The same *Ad Age* piece said that Paramount and Eventful rewarded the movie's fans in the DVD release by giving them the opportunity to have their name listed in the ending credits. Paramount gave the 1 million demanders a 24-hour window to reply with the permission to include their name on the DVD, expecting perhaps 500 fans to respond within the short time frame. Instead, 170,000 replied—a nearly 20 percent response rate. "It suddenly became a problem of adding names," Powell said. "We had to have 10 names go by every tenth of a second—but it was great they could feel included in the process" (Hampp 2010). Great, perhaps, though it can't be helped but acknowledge the extreme, comical brevity of those fan credits.
4. The scope of the free/midnight/advance screenings is important to note, especially as much of the audience reaction and B-roll footage is culled from these events. From the *Tor.com* piece: "Additionally, for the first time ever, fans around the country will get a chance to see the movie at the same time. *Paranormal Activity* will hold concurrent midnight screenings in seven additional markets in the U.S., including Los Angeles (ArcLight Hollywood), New York (Landmark Sunshine Theater), San Francisco (The Castro), Chicago (The Music Box), Boston (The Coolidge), Atlanta (The Plaza) and Seattle (Neptune). The film will receive midnight 'sneaks' starting September 25 at midnight in the following cities and theater: Austin (Alamo Draft House); Seattle (Neptune); Ann Arbor, Michigan (State); Durham, North Carolina (Southpoint 16);

Baton Rouge, Louisiana (RAVE Mall of Louisiana 15); Boulder, Colorado (Cinemark 16); Columbus, Ohio (Studio 35); Orlando, Florida (AMC Universal Cineplex); Madison, Wisconsin (Marcus Eastgate 16); Santa Cruz, California (Del Mar 3); State College, Pennsylvania (Premiere College 9); Tucson, Arizona (El Con); and Lincoln, Nebraska (Ross Media Center). Additional midnight sneaks will follow on September 26, and October 1, 2 and 3."

5. The use of so-called smartphone 4-D technology seems to be the next step in furthering the rupture between fantasy and reality, as well as the next step in giving audiences a sense of control, interactivity, and immersion in the cinematic event (or at least using that sensory, participatory experience as a marketing ploy). For further reading on how this technology is being used for the new *Ringu* sequel in Japan, *Sadako 3D 2* (and to envision how a series like *Paranormal Activity* might make use of such gimmickry), this article is a good starting point:

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/behind-screen/latest-film-japanese-ring-horror-578574>.

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Praxis

Simblr famous and SimSecret infamous: Performance, community norms, and shaming among fans of *The Sims*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This essay explores the way fandom is performed on Tumblr by fans of the games series *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000), as well as how the LiveJournal site SimSecret attempts to regulate and shame Tumblr behavior. Through interviews and surveys with fans and through content analysis, I examine the way in which Tumblr lends itself to particular performance norms in terms of its aesthetics, content tagging, and interactivity. I explore how fans also call out other fans for behaviors they do not approve of and how some of this shaming is connected to wider discourses surrounding the pleasures of fans, particularly teenaged female fans, often deemed to be excessive, inappropriate, or overly dramatic.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fan community; LiveJournal; Performance; Social media; Tumblr

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1. Introduction

[1.1] In the summer of 2009, I was midway through my PhD and hit the point many will be familiar with of hating everything about my project and doing anything else to avoid working on it. I may not have written much of my thesis that summer, but I did manage to play through several generations of a legacy on my new copy of *The Sims 3*. I discovered the legacy challenge (whereby players play a sim family through 10 generations of offspring) by accident when searching for game play tips and thought it sounded fun. As others were doing, I began to blog about my legacy sims, quickly moving my story away from the slide show style-presentation format used on the official Electronic Arts (EA) forum to a WordPress blog. I thought little of how I blogged or who was reading it until one day I got a comment on one of my blog posts, advising me to take screenshots with the walls up ([note 1](#)) as otherwise potential readers might stop reading.

[1.2] This experience was my introduction to the way in which members of the Sims fan communities attempt to govern one another's performance in terms of play and sharing styles through a mode of aesthetic policing. This leads to fans developing systems of aesthetic and behavioral norms in order to attract and maintain a following within the communities. There are various blog posts, forum posts, and similar texts that offer players guidance on how to take a good sim photo, including how to improve the lighting of the game, how to angle the camera, and how to pose sims. In addition, there is a wealth of user-generated content or custom content (CC), as the Sims community calls it, designed to improve the way that sims look.

[1.3] The Sims fandom is long-standing ([note 2](#)), and as with other fandoms (Zubernis and Larsen 2012; Deller 2014a; Booth 2010), Sims fans engage in a variety of practices, including game modding, storytelling, photo sharing, file sharing, and discussing game play (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins and Cassell 2008; Sihvonen 2011; Gee and Hayes 2010) across a wide range of platforms, including blogs, forums, wikis, photo sharing sites, file-sharing and torrent sites, and every form of social media. These spaces are not mutually exclusive but overlap at many points in terms of membership and cross-references.

[1.4] I will be focusing specifically on how fan performance is enacted on Tumblr and on how fans attempt to regulate or govern this performance through both establishing norms and offering comment on other users' behavior, often via processes of shaming or calling out. Tumblr was chosen as a site of research because of its popularity with different fandoms (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014; Renwick 2013; Bury et al. 2013; Thomas 2013) and the large number of Sims-related Tumblrs—which many users refer to as Simblrs ([note 3](#))—on the platform. In addition, the way in which community norms develop on Tumblr and within its fandoms despite the lack of specific codes of conduct or welcome posts to tell fans how they should behave (as one might expect in a forum, for example) makes it an interesting example of how fan practices and norms develop and operate.

[1.5] In terms of exploring the way in which fandom is performed within the Simblr community, I am interested not only in the norms demonstrated on the blogs themselves but also in how fans attempt to control and comment on Simblr performance outside of the platform—particularly with an emphasis on the LiveJournal community page SimSecret. SimSecret was chosen as it is one of the most popular and long-standing Sims sites to offer commentary on fan community practices—several Tumblrs and blogs have been set up with a similar remit but have rarely gained enough traction to survive. That LiveJournal is used as a platform to monitor Tumblr and other activity fascinated me as it could be seen as a predecessor of Tumblr in many ways as a site for fan-oriented content—many of the key features associated with Tumblr fandoms, such as animated GIFs, discussions of shipping and OTPs, and notions of flailing, were present on LiveJournal years before Tumblr became the fandom platform du jour. Indeed, one commenter saw a distinct generational shift between users of the two platforms, noting that "historically, as well,

much of the original development of sims community norms has taken place on both a variety of sims forums and LJ, so sometimes there's almost a parental view of what is happening on tumblr" (SimSecret comment August 30, 2014).

[1.6] The LiveJournal and Tumblr Sims communities are not mutually exclusive, however, and while LJ users position Simblr users as other to themselves, there are also many overlaps between the two sites' users (and, indeed, the users of other platforms including forums, WordPress, Blogger, YouTube, Twitter, Twitch, Facebook, and Instagram). One commenter claimed that many "simsecrets regarding tumblr generally aren't criticisms from outside the tumblr community, they are criticisms from within the tumblr community" (SimSecret comment August 29, 2014).

[1.7] SimSecret (<http://simsecret.livejournal.com/>) operates as a secrets blog similar to PostSecret (<http://www.postsecret.com/> and Fandom!Secrets (<http://fandomsecrets.dreamwidth.org/>); fans submit anonymous secrets weekly in the form of JPEG images. The number of secrets each week varies greatly, but an average would be 30 to 40 in a weekly post. Secrets posts are open for comments, including from anonymous users, and generate several hundred comments a week. Secrets may discuss posters' own personal secrets or their feelings toward the games but are mostly a form of metacommentary on the community, offering praise or criticism for other users and their practices. Such metacommentary on fandom has long been a feature of LiveJournal communities (Busker 2008), and SimSecret operates similarly to communities such as Fandom Wank (http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/) or Fail Fandom Anon (<http://fail-fandomanon.dreamwidth.org/>), in its attempts to regulate fannish behaviors through offering commentary on how fandom is performed and through shaming unacceptable practices.

[1.8] Fandom practices being commented on and shamed is nothing new, of course. Fans and fandom scholars alike are well aware of the way in which fannish practices, particularly those of young and female fans, are often ridiculed by those outside of the community (Jensen 1992; Jones 2014). However, my focus here is not on external monitoring of the fandom but on monitoring that comes from within the Sims fan community. SimSecret's mode of anonymous commentary echoes the likes of other in-fandom anon memes (Zubernis and Larsen 2012) in creating drama and wank through calling out other fans for behaviors that mark their fannish performance as unacceptable.

[1.9] The type of Simblr performance being monitored and/or shamed can largely be summarized as falling into one of three categories: Tumblr performance (adoption of platform norms, functions, and conventions), aesthetic performance (particularly regarding the appearance of sims and sim photography) and fan activity performance (e.g., the nature and content of fan posts, discussions, and interactivity). I will be exploring the way in which each of these modes of performance is enacted, regulated, and shamed.

2. Methodology and approach

[2.1] This research is based on survey data from almost 1,500 Sims players about their use of the Internet, around 50 follow-up interviews conducted by Tumblr, Skype, and e-mail, and netnographic study of the Sims community across different platforms, although I primarily use examples from Tumblr and LiveJournal. The research was conducted between June 2012 and May 2014 (note 4). Users have been given pseudonyms, and identifying features such as site names have, where possible, been blocked out.

[2.2] Survey participants were 84 percent female, 14 percent male, 2 percent other (including genderqueer, genderfluid, trans*/transgender, male to female, both, and androgynous), and 2 percent who did not disclose gender. The oldest participant was 69 years old, and the youngest claimed to be 6 (participants were asked to supply a date of birth rather than select an age category). The largest age groups represented were 11–19 (47 percent) and 20–29 (35 percent), followed by 30–39 (12 percent), 40–49 (6.5 percent), 50–59 (3.5 percent), and 60–69 (1 percent) (note 5). All participants in the follow-up studies were women aged from 18 to 50 years old, although fans in other demographic groups were offered the opportunity to participate. Fifty-seven nationalities were represented, but by far the largest user base (50 percent) was from the United States—possibly a consequence of using English-language platforms, many of which originated in the United States, to distribute the call for participants, and of the US-centric nature of the Sims games themselves. A wide range of ethnicities were represented, although Caucasian or white dominated (note 6).

[2.3] I followed over 200 Simblrs from my Tumblr dashboards (selected both from survey responses and randomly when suggested by the Tumblr dashboard) and regularly searched tags via Tumblr's search engine including sims, sims3, sims2, sims1, sims4, simblr, simstagram, ts2, ts3, ts4, and ts1. In addition, in May 2014, I conducted a content analysis of a sample of 50 Simblrs, sourced by means of the sims search tag on Tumblr and sorted by most popular. All had been updated within 24 hours of the search. This analysis involved determining how many of these adhered to particular conventions, either those found in other Tumblr fandoms, such as animated GIFs, reblogging, and ask me anything, or those specific to the Sims fandom, including using particular tags, offering downloads, and sharing gameplay. The analysis also involved identifying how many conformed to particular aesthetic norms, such as photo editing or using unusual camera angles. Of these Simblrs, 37 were focused on *The Sims 3* and 4 on *The Sims 2*. Eight contained content from more than one game in the franchise. Forty of the 50 were exclusively Sims-focused, with the rest containing content relating to other fandoms (most notably *Orange Is the New Black*, Disney, *Doctor Who*, *Skyrim*, and Lady Gaga), gameplay in other games, celebrity gossip, or personal content.

3. Tumblr as a site of fan activity

[3.1] Although Tumblr was launched in 2007, its user base has grown substantially in recent years, with 2010 seeing the platform attract 4.5 million posts a day. The previous year this was 650,000 new posts a day (Siegler 2010) and at the time of writing (May 2014) this figure was close to 91 million new posts a day (Tumblr 2014) (<https://www.tumblr.com/about>).

[3.2] Tumblr does not give users a how-to guide and allows them to create content in a range of ways such as links, text posts, and images. However, as with other social media platforms (Halavais 2014; Burgess 2014), several user-generated conventions have emerged. There are guides on the Web instructing users on how to become Tumblr famous that detail the etiquette expected of users, including reblogging rather than reposting (i.e., attributing content to its original source); tagging content in a way that makes searching for it meaningful; posting regularly; following other popular users; using images more than text; and creating more original content than reblogging content ("How to Be Tumblr Famous," n.d.; King-Slutzky 2013; Moreau, n.d.). These conventions also include using particular slang and terminology (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014; Orsini 2012; Peffer 2012) with the Oxford Dictionary's blog even devoting a post to Tumblr language, claiming that understanding this language is crucial to being part of the community: "Their community of users employs a special set of terminology to describe various actions and features on the site, common memes, and community members. Tumblr speak is often hyperbolic in nature and usually associated with fandoms...learning the language of Tumblr is essential in order to navigate the platform and have fun" (Hernandez 2013).

[3.3] What is interesting about many of these guides to Tumblr is their connection between the platform and fandoms, highlighting fan lingo such as OTP (One True Pairing) and shipping (favoring particular relationships) as part of the platform's lexicon, even though, of course, this kind of fan lingo predates and is not exclusive to Tumblr. Fan practices on Tumblr vary but can include activities like sharing photos or stills, fan fiction, animated GIFs, memes, quizzes, analysis, and commentary or jokes (Thomas 2013; Renwick 2013). The boundaries of fandom on Tumblr, if there are any, are loose and informal, as Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter note in their study of Tumblr TV fandoms:

[3.4] We learned that "belonging" to a fandom was a fuzzy concept. Unlike Facebook, Tumblr users do not get accepted to groups. Instead, they are part of the fandom when they feel they are. Participation entailed following posts with hashtags associated with a TV show, following posts by users who posted about a show, or posting about a show, regardless of whether others read the posts. (2014, 4)

[3.5] However, the fuzzy concept of belonging to Tumblr or to a fandom is still accompanied by a range of norms, such as those mentioned above, that have arisen through community practice. The ease of use of Tumblr's dashboard allows easy sharing within and across communities, which can then lead to particular approaches, be they humorous, aesthetic, or linguistic, spreading between communities in much the same way in which online memes and jokes do (Shifman 2013; Davison 2012).

[3.6] There are several reasons why Tumblr may have become such an active site of fan activity. Kayley Thomas notes that its emphasis on the visual and its ability to act as a site of intertextual play enable it to operate as a democratic space that can break down fan hierarchies "by exhibiting engagement with multiple sources and providing coherent meaning for other viewers, even when those viewers might not immediately understand the intertextual nature of the posts" (2013, ¶2.3). This intertextuality not only can lead fans to discover people with shared interests, but it can also introduce them to new fandoms (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014, 5). Tumblr users often find that their introduction to the technology comes through following others and adopting their conventions (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014). As fans primarily find one another through tags rather than through the linear and more formal threads of a message board or forum, Tumblr allows for fluidity of engagement and a community with no clear boundaries to define membership.

[3.7] The simplicity of the Tumblr interface means that users can post, reblog, and like content with ease, something my own users cited as a key advantage of the platform, with descriptions such as "quick" and "easy" most often provided along with "community" and "people" (figure 1). For instance, one respondent describes "the convenience of being able to quickly post several photos at once" (Respondent 1263) and another says "You can 'like' something without having to pause to think of what to say in a comment. It's a quick, gentler way of interacting" (Respondent 1209).



Figure 2. Secret post about incorrect tagging (April 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

[4.3] While tagging forms a key part of frustration for other Tumblr users, some fans note that the complainants could take responsibility themselves for what appears in their feed: "It also annoys me to see the same god damn thing down my dash. But Xkit has this nifty Plugin called Show originals, so...yeah" (SimSecret comment May 9, 2014).

[4.4] Some of the complaints about tagging are to do with users expecting a trigger warning tag for certain types of content in order that they can block such content from their dashboard; a trigger warning is a mechanism to warn users of content so they can avoid it if it triggers certain responses. This is particularly the case when it comes to images of adult content which they feel should be tagged #NSFW (not safe for work) (figure 3): "Other users think Tumblr is a place where they can post their 'ART' (NSFW, naked people I mean). So I think these posts should never be on Tumblr" (Respondent 1516).

Dear Simblrs,
[crappy paint secret is crappy. Lo Siento.]

I think sims porn is stupid and weird but
 hey, it's your site so put what you want on
 it.

PLEASE tag it NSFW or something similar
 though! This way users like me who don't
 dig it can hide it from our feeds.

Seriously. Untagged simdick is a huge pet peeve of mine. Also, think of the children. <<Joke

Figure 3. Secret requesting NSFW tags (April 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

[4.5] Many scholars have noted the shaming that occurs—usually from those outside of the fan communities in question—around fans' sexual desires, particularly the desires of female fans (Jensen 1992; Jones and Harman 2013; Bennett 2010; Jenkins 1992; Driscoll 2006; Busse 2013). While fandom operates as a space in which sexual desires and fantasies can be expressed—in the case of Sims fans, through activities like fiction, game mods, poses, and photography—this space is not always safe, and it can be one where fans are perceived as being attacked by one of their own for the way in which they express these desires. This kind of in-fandom shaming of desire has largely been studied in relation to debates over slash fiction and fan shipping of particular pairings (Jones 2014; Zubernis and Larsen 2012; Busker 2013) where some—often female—fans' sexual preferences have been criticized or belittled by others within the community.

[4.6] The relationship between fandom, sexual desire, and fan-created content is complicated, and there has been much fan debate over whether or not certain subjects, such as rape, incest, underage sex, male pregnancy, and violence, are appropriate subject material for fan creations (Winters 2012; Åström 2010; Jones and Harman 2013). A significant proportion of SimSecret metacommentary is concerned with regulating the ways in which sex, gender, and sexuality are performed within the Sims fan communities, from calling out homophobia, misogyny, or cissexism or arguing whether or not game-mod penises look realistic to concerns over sim pedophilia, particularly relating to male fans/creators (figure 4).

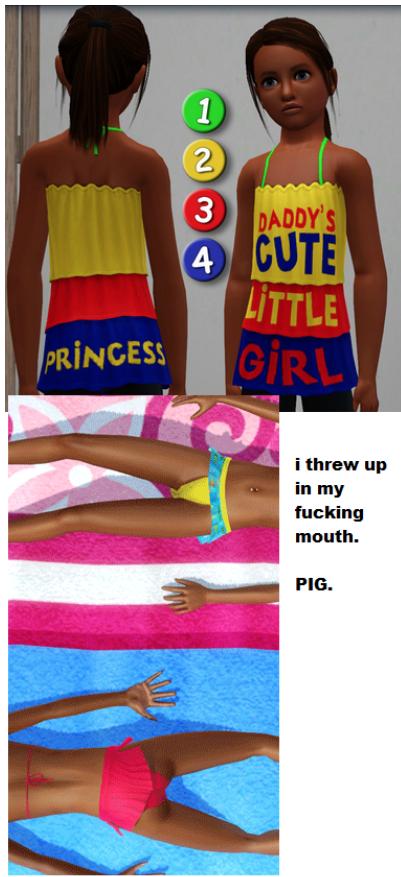


Figure 4. Secret regarding "Sims pedophilia" (February 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

[4.7] One common theme is the role of rape narratives within Sims stories, including Tumblr but also stories hosted on other sites, including LiveJournal and WordPress. The role of rape within fan fiction is something that is often contested, as it can be used in many ways: as a vehicle to explore characters overcoming adversity, as an opportunity for hurt/heal narratives, as a backstory or explanation for character behavior, or as something sexually stimulating (Chan 2010; Winters 2012). For SimSecret users, a frequent accusation is that rape is used as a plot device and as such is trivialized by Sims story writers (figure 5), as illustrated in the following comments:

[4.8] Name one person, one story who did it compassionately and didn't victim blame or something equally vile. As a rape survivor, I feel it has no place in a story about sims, because people on simblr who write about rape are using it as a means for attention—in my experience. I have not seen one person write it any other way. (SimSecret comment May 2, 2014)

[4.9] I am also a survivor, and never have I ever seen someone write about rape, on simblr, in a way that I felt was empowering or inspiring. I have only seen it used as like you said a way for attention, a plot twist. I have only seen it written about poorly and in such a disturbing way. (SimSecret comment May 2, 2014)

[4.10] What is wrong with writing about rape to get attention? People write about murder, abuse, suicide, mental illness, maiming, kidnapping, etc. for attention. Not everyone is a good writer and does it well, but does that really mean they shouldn't attempt to write it? Victim blaming is vile and should be addressed, but it is a real response that happens and even if it wasn't, terrible things happen in fiction all the time. As a rape survivor I don't mind reading sims stories with rape or other difficult topics, even poorly done. (SimSecret comment May 2, 2014)

[4.11] I wouldn't mind seeing a well written story if it was compassionate, or well written, or even empowering. As of right now? I don't believe it has a place in a story with sims, at least on Tumblr. It's my opinion. (SimSecret comment May 2, 2014)



The thing that bothers me the most about the Simblr community is the way a lot of simmers write about rape in their legacies/stories. They either sexualize it to make it look okay, use it as a ploy to explain why a character is mean, or it fits perfectly within the ideas of rape culture. It seems like they are writing their own definition of what they truly think rape is, and I wish they would just educate themselves more on the issue. It's a sick/sad reality, not a way to spice up your story.

Figure 5. Secret regarding rape narratives (April 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

[4.12] The merits (or otherwise) of trigger warnings, tags, and authors' notes (Herzog 2012) are a continued source of debate on SimSecret, which uses trigger warnings itself at the start of posts to highlight controversial content. These may be things one might expect to find trigger warnings for, such as NSFW content, rape, or eating disorders, but it can also include humorous tags such as references to repetitious content and fan wank that fans may want to avoid because it is boring or annoying. When one user posted the following secret (figure 6) referencing the tags they had blocked from Tumblr, it sparked heated debate over the merits of particular tags and trigger warnings:

x windsor legacy	x toxoxicrose
x lunar lakes	x kiki
x sl	x jewelsnsims
x secondlife	x gxj1bf oversize t
x second life	x beverlyoriginals
x tera	x hannibal
x namathessimmer	x #food
x teen wolf	x tolkien
x teenwolf	x #fanclub
x awildbc	x face top accessories + slk
x stand out!	x lemonkixxy
x #tw weird butts	x
x bigbangsimory	add I should lighten up... nah
x #alittlepixelofprocrastinatio	

Figure 6. Secret about blocked Tumblr tags (April 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

[4.13] I really want to be able to take this one seriously but blacklisting for food is such oversensitive hugbox nonsense. Food is not a "trigger." (SimSecret comment April 11, 2014)

[4.14] Again, for people with/recovering from eating disorders, it is. (SimSecret comment April 11, 2014)

[4.15] This trigger mentality can eat my whole ass (#trigger warning eating mention!!) (SimSecret comment April 11, 2014)

[4.16] You are an asshole. Some people have weird triggers. This was their personal blacklist. (SimSecret comment April 11, 2014)

[4.17] Oooor maybe they're tired of seeing every single meal that chronic facebook/instagram/tumblr users are always posting? Not EVERYTHING is a trigger. (SimSecret comment April 11, 2014)

[4.18] OP [original poster] of the secret. I don't have any of that stuff, I just got tired of getting hungry from tumblr because I follow a theme maker who posts normal stuff + food. It was just annoying to get up all the time to snack, when I really just wanted to sim. I'm surprised, out of the whole list, this is what strikes you about my blacklist. Maybe y'all need to lighten up, not me. (SimSecret comment April 11, 2014)

[4.19] In these exchanges we see several examples of community negotiations over why users may wish to blog tags and over whose job it is to regulate content in the first place—Tumblr doesn't require users to tag posts, yet it is a common complaint when posts aren't tagged in the ways in which readers want them to be. However, these exchanges also hint at other sources of division within the community, and that is over what can be deemed a legitimate source of offense and whether or not tags and trigger warnings are an appropriate mechanism for managing such material. This debate is not exclusive to the Simblr community, of course, and is impossible to go into here at length (for more on the trigger warning debate, see Shaw 2012; Sterne 2014; Jarvie 2014). However, common debates about perceived oversensitivity are common alongside debates about inclusion and intersectionality, such as secrets relating to racism, cultural appropriation such as white sims wearing dreadlocks, sexism, homophobia, cissexism, and so on.

[4.20] In such debates, Tumblr users are accused of being SJWs (social justice warriors), a pejorative term used to describe users who are obsessed with social justice—the term is effectively a social media version of the old political correctness gone mad narratives—or pearl clutchers, the type who take offence at any little thing (figure 7):

[4.21] Go back to Tumblr and clutch your pearls about how triggered you are about this problematic shit. (SimSecret comment May 8, 2014)

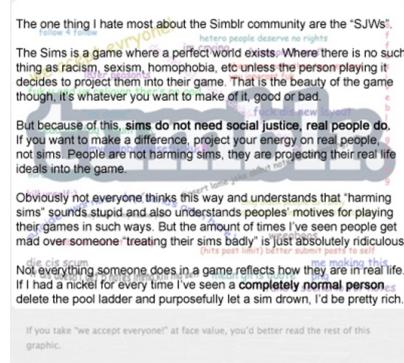


Figure 7. Secret about Tumblr SJWs (March 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

[4.22] SJWs are seen to relish opportunities to create drama out of anything they may see as problematic (figures 8 and 9):



Figure 8. Secret about potential drama on Tumblr caused by cultural appropriation (May 2014). [[View larger image](#).]



Figure 9. Secret confirming that drama occurred (May 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

[4.23] The way in which Tumblr is conceived of here is not exclusive to the Sims community. For example, Reddit has several subreddits dedicated to Tumblr users, such as TumblrInAction (<http://www.reddit.com/r/TumblrInAction>) (figure 10) which has the stated aim "to make fun of Tumblr SJWs." Tumblr has also been conceived of, graphically, as a teenaged girl—a meme that dates back to the Operation Overlord trolling war between Tumblr and 4Chan (<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/4chumblr>). The idea of Tumblr as a teenaged girl often contributes to the derogatory comments made about its users—on SimSecret, it is frequently assumed that the SJWs and the authors of fiction featuring rape are teenagers who will one day grow up and know better. This denigration of teenaged female Internet users should come as no surprise to those of us who have followed the way in which teenaged girls' interests and activities have frequently been derided, often from within the fan communities of which they are a part (Busse 2013; Pinkowitz 2011; Felschow 2010).



Figure 10. TumblrInAction sidebar (April 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

[4.24] While the Simblr user base is by no means solely composed of teenaged girls, much of the criticism of Simblr on SimSecret does criticize those known or assumed to fall within this demographic, particularly when there is perceived to be drama between users, as shown in this comment: "You all need to fuck off tumblr, [name], [name] and whoever else is involved in this stupid drama created by 14 yr old girls with nothing better to do. I have them all ignored and blocked. Jesus you're all so fucking annoying, grow the fuck up" (SimSecret comment July 5, 2014).

[4.25] This section has demonstrated that despite having in place no formal guidelines for user practice, Tumblr/Simblr performance is scrutinized by fellow members of the community, and where users are found to be performing badly, because of using or misusing tags and trigger warnings, causing drama, acting like an SJW or pearl clutch, or failing to self-regulate through turning off anonymous commentary or unfollowing other users (figure 11) their aberrance can lead to public shaming by other fans.



Figure 11. Secret criticizing Tumblr users (February 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

5. The aesthetics of Simblr

[5.1] Simblrs may contain a range of content from downloadable mods, sims, houses, and custom content to stories, gameplay shots, animated GIFs, and personal blog posts. However, the majority of posts are image based, usually of sims, lots, or scenery from the games. Figure 12 shows the typical results of a search using the sims tag. The most common form of photography in the blogs that I analyzed (35 out of 50) were sim model-style shots—shots focused on a sim (or occasionally groups and couples) with the emphasis not on gameplay or interactions but on the sim's appearance—often enhanced by means of modified sliders that allow players to create sims with more facial variation than the original games allow or by the use of user-created custom content such as hairstyles, clothing, replacement skins, or makeup. In addition, a further eight blogs used sims in poses that could only be created using mods to stage sims and not with in-game actions, for storytelling rather than modeling purposes.

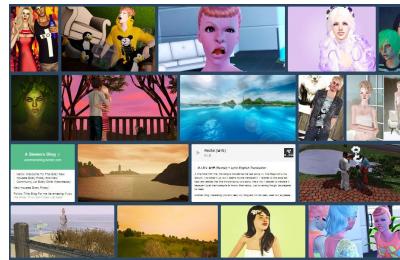


Figure 12. Tumblr search results for "sims" (May 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

[5.2] Given the emphasis on the way that sims look, it is perhaps inevitable that SimSecret often features secrets insulting sim appearance. These may be praising a user for the look of their sims—these secrets usually feature sims created using custom content and sliders and displayed using photo editing software—but more often they come in the form of complaining about popular Simblrs all adopting a similar look for their creations (figure 13), sims perceived as ugly or freakish (figure 14), or sims and sim photographers who are not good enough to become popular. For instance, figure 15 refers to a Simblr user's creations not being acceptable for Simicide Girls (<http://simicidegirls.tumblr.com/>), a group Tumblr dedicated to showcasing sims with an aesthetic similar to Suicide Girls (<https://suicidegirls.com/>). Sim-related body shaming—sims that are perceived as too fat, too thin, or in some way deformed—also occurs from time to time within the community. Almost all aesthetic policing of sims relates to adult or young adult sims rather than to other life stages, the exception being criticisms of makeup or clothing deemed to be too adult being used on toddler or child sims.

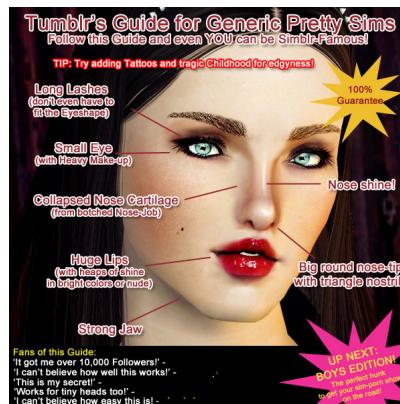


Figure 13. Secret about Simblr aesthetics (April 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

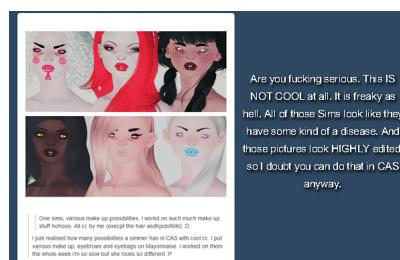


Figure 14. Secret about freaky sims and overediting (April 2014). [[View larger image](#).]



Figure 15. Secret about alleged Simicide Girls wannabes (May 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

[5.3] Photo editing plays a huge role in the content of Simblr ([note 7](#)); it is a common practice to use filters or effects such as sharpening, desaturation, or adjusting curves to make photos more aesthetically pleasing. Common effects applied to these photographs replicate those found on sites such as PhotoBucket and Instagram and applied to photographs and GIFs in other fandom content on Tumblr and LiveJournal. Of the 50 blogs I studied, 28 used obvious photo editing (i.e., achieving effects that would not be possible using the game alone, even with lighting mods), although it is possible that others also used more subtle forms. Simblr user Astra explained how her approach to picture editing had changed over time:

[5.4] At first I did not edit at all. Over time, I started creating god awful edits on gimp and patting myself on the back thinking they were masterpieces. Now, inspired by a PG challenge that someone I follow was playing that used soft colored tones, I downloaded an action off deviantart and use it on my pictures. When it comes to special screenshots such as photoshoots or introductions, I like to use a gradient on the background and heighten the picture's vibrancy and saturation, color is important to me when it comes to being satisfied with an edit. (Astra, interview, May 2014)

[5.5] The aesthetics of Tumblr do not go unquestioned, however, as SimSecret posts frequently criticize Simblr users for using effects too strongly or for making aesthetic choices, such as splitting a picture, something 9 out of 50 Simblrs in my sample did, that were seen as unnecessary (figures 16–18).



Figure 16. Secret about oversaturation (May 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

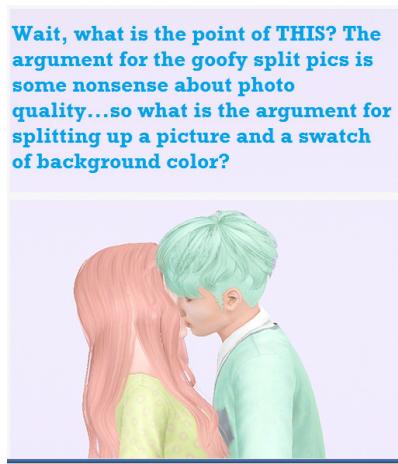


Figure 17. Secret about split pictures (March 2014). [[View larger image](#).]



Figure 18. Secret about lack of contrast (April 2014). [View larger image.]

[5.6] Although there is nothing to strictly enforce a particular aesthetic, users may well adopt practices that they see others employing in order to conform, in much the same way that my early blogging attempts met with criticism over my game visuals. None of the Simblrs I observed had obvious walls-down shots, and only three had the headline effects (speech bubbles and plumbob icons) option on; showing these effects is also regarded as poor photography within the Sims community. Another common choice was to take or crop photos from an unusual angle, something adopted by 17 of the 50 Simblrs.

[5.7] Simblrs also, to some extent, use other trends that are common among Tumblr users, such as Selfie Sunday posts or animated GIFs. In my sample, five users posted Selfie Sunday posts, and 17 posted animated GIFs. Interestingly, only two users posted animated GIFs from the Sims series—the rest used GIFs depicting other celebrities or characters, although these tended to be reaction GIFs to activities such as the game crashing or having free time to play.

6. Good and bad inter/activity on Simblr

[6.1] I have looked so far at the way Simblr operates in terms of both functional and aesthetic norms. I now want to consider the interactive forms of fan performance that contribute to whether or not one is a successful Simblr by community standards. The speed of being able to simply like something was appreciated by some users, as was the ease with which reblogging from other users could help people's audience grow with very little work on their part in comparison to blogging or other activities:

[6.2] On Tumblr, I could just post a small group of photos together with a couple paragraphs, or even just a clever comment, and that was enough. Other Tumblr users could give feedback directly on that one little part of my story by reblogging, favoriting, or commenting that post. The reblogging led to more followers, so each post worked as an advertisement for my Simblr, and I didn't have to go to several forums and post about my updates, because it got around well enough just within the Simblr community. (CS, interview, October 2013)

[6.3] For others, however, one of the key frustrations was the way in which Tumblr only encourages certain kinds of limited interactivity, predominantly liking and reblogging. Comments are limited to a primary account only, so if you have both a Simblr and a personal Tumblr, you can't effectively switch between the two, and there is a word restriction in place. One respondent "would like to be able to reply to posts more easily and reply to COMMENTS as well, in the same post...a HIGHER CHARACTER LIMIT because I am wordy and always run out of space" (Respondent 1299) while another says "I like commenting a lot, and so not being able to comment on all posts can be frustrating. Also, if you DO have comments enabled, to respond to any comments someone has posted on your post, you have to start a NEW post" (Respondent 1319).

[6.4] Perhaps because of the limitations on commenting, many Simblrs have an ask-me-anything box where readers can submit questions, sometimes anonymously, which will then be answered on the blog. In addition, users can opt to receive private messages, although they can't read their own sent items, which can cause frustrations (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014). However, the ability for anons to send private messages on Tumblr leads to some Simblr users experiencing unwanted negative attention:

[6.5] I never really interact enough to annoy anyone to the point of sending them on a rant in my ask box. However, I have had some situations where unintentionally I would say something or participate in something and people would not like my opinion or would feel that I am an unfair person and then I would very much so get hate mail. (Astra, interview, May 2014)

[6.6] Nasty anons turned me off Tumblr for a while and now I'm not as excited about it. (Respondent 1439)

[6.7] The notion of receiving abuse from anons is not limited to within Tumblr, of course. As we have seen, SimSecret is a site of much anonymous commentary on Simblr users and practices. Very rarely are secret makers called out for this, except in instances where their secret makes them seem entitled (such as begging for custom content) or seeking attention (such as posts complaining about numbers of followers) (figure 19).

I hate the fact that I never got more than 15 notes (and I even have 1000+ followers and do good CC) in my posts and I see simblrs doing horrible editions and getting 30/50 notes.

What I'm doing wrong???

Figure 19. Secret asking why they are not liked (April 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

[6.8] The notion of popularity within the community is a divisive one. If people don't update regularly enough, whatever enough may mean, they are criticized for this and told that they don't deserve their following (figures 20 and 21). As within other fan communities (Booth 2010; Veale 2013), followings within Sims fandom are often earned through activity; therefore, there is a sense among some users that status within the community has to be earned and sustained through regular posting, interaction, responding to questions, and thanking fans. Although there isn't sufficient space to discuss fan gifting in this paper, a common practice is for followers to be offered gifts when a Simblr is celebrating hitting a follower milestone (e.g., custom content or downloads).



Figure 20. Secret criticizing someone for not updating (May 2014). [[View larger image](#).]



Figure 21. Secret claiming that someone does not deserve their followers (April 2014). [[View larger image](#).]

[6.9] In this manner, the relationship between Simblrs and their followers becomes that of a commodity exchange—one may earn followers and thus become a big name fan through performing successfully in the community through picture taking, tagging, reblogging, and other activities, but to maintain this following, the expectation is that you will both post on a regular basis and adopt an appropriately interactive mode of performance whereby you are seen to respond to the desires, questions, and comments of your audience. Audiences are also thanked for the gift of their loyalty by means of free gifts when Simblr authors reach follower milestones, an inducement to not only stay loyal but also seek new followers for the authors through reblogging, sharing, and favoriting content in order that others may discover it and become followers too.

[6.10] Another way to become unpopular within the Simblr community is to create a blog in which Sims-related content has to share space with personal news and other fandoms. While some users have adopted the practice of tagging such posts personal, non-sims, or saviorhide, these are not practices adopted by all (in my sample, 18 blogs contained such content, and 11 used tags to identify it). Although Tumblr can be seen as an intertextual playground where users can share a variety of content (Thomas 2013; Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014), it seems that many of these fans prefer to read and write Sims-specific Tumblrs—several operate multiple Tumblrs to separate personal content from content relating to fandoms—or at least for people to use tags. This creates the image of a community of shared interest, then, but perhaps not one where members choose to know one

another outside of the shared fan experience. It is notable that the undesirable non-Sims posts are often characterized as being teenaged again or of having a sense of drama:

[6.11] If I follow your Tumblr for your Sims stuff and I don't know you from Adam, I don't care about your Algebra teacher or the fight you had with your boyfriend last week. More commonly, I don't care about non-Sims games you might play. (Respondent 1234)

[6.12] I don't like the teenage drama. I wish they would tag their posts about Loki or Tom Hiddleston, or their endless ASK ME IF I HAD SEX or WHAT DO YOU THINK OF ME posts so I don't have to look at them. (Respondent 1114)

[6.13] To perform successfully on Simblr, then, fans not only must adopt Tumblr-related norms and aesthetic norms relating to gameplay and photo sharing but also must behave as a member of a participatory and interactive community. Users are reminded of the importance of the poster/follower relationship and the need to attend to this appropriately through frequent posting and responding to questions. In addition, followers may be thanked for loyalty through gifting when an author reaches a milestone. Users are also reminded that Simblr is a Sims-related space and therefore posts relating to other fandoms or to one's personal life should be tagged as such in order that it doesn't spoil the experience for followers whose only interest is in the game or games (note 8).

7. Conclusion

[7.1] In this article I have discussed the ways in which fandom is performed on Simblr—Sims-related Tumblrs. I have also considered the way in which this performance is scrutinized and commented on both within Simblr and outside it via the LiveJournal site SimSecret. I have shown how users perform aesthetic and behavioral policing as they attempt to enforce norms of practice, often through anonymous public shaming of users in the hope that this will change behaviors.

[7.2] That fan practices should receive scrutiny is, of course, no surprise. Much has been written on the ways in which fans are scrutinized and develop norms to self-regulate (Baym 2000; Crawford and Rutter 2007; Jones 2014). What is particularly interesting here, however, is the way in which one fan space (in this case, one operating on LiveJournal) is used to comment on, judge, and attempt to control another through a public form of shaming. Rosenblatt notes that shaming is often

[7.3] an external, aggressive action—a (generally public) appeal to the shame of another. Shaming may have many motivations, including a desire to impose norms on another, to trigger someone else's shame, or to inflict reputation-based punishment. Regardless of the motivation, shaming appeals to community norms and attempts to impose them on someone else. (2012, 13)

[7.4] However, in the context of Simblr, SimSecret, and shaming, the notion of there being imposable community norms is hugely problematic. Indeed, the shaming that occurs via SimSecret is not only about imposing norms but is also concerned with questioning the validity or relevance of perceived norms such as whether or not particular aesthetic trends have any merit. Shaming in the context of the Sims often seems to be related to age, with teenagers—and teenaged girls in particular—receiving the harshest criticisms.

[7.5] What is unclear, however, is what effect—if any—these practices of shaming have and how successful attempts by users to regulate each other's performance are. It is difficult to tell how many Simblr users read SimSecret, let alone how many are shamed into changing their performance style. It is probable that performance norms are regulated more through observing the practice of others—learning how to edit and crop photos, how to interact with other users, and how to tag from one's fellow fans (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014)—than through public attempts at calling out fans whose behavior is somehow shameful. If this is the case, then perhaps the acts of shaming are merely another form of performance—this time to a crowd who will debate the drama or wank caused in the comments and perform the outrage expected of them.

[7.6] For Sims players, then, playing the game itself is rarely enough to warrant one's place in the Simblr community. While gameplay discussion and story writing occur, these often take second place to one's ability to make sims, locations, and lots aesthetically pleasing and to one's ability to maintain and reciprocate one's following appropriately through frequent updating and interacting with others. Simblr operates as a highly performative space, but one where the performance of playing the game is perhaps less important than the ability to perform according to the community's norms.

8. Notes

1. There are three ways you can view your sim household: with walls down, so you can see the sims moving around and interacting with each other and objects in whatever room they are in; with walls up, so you can always see the walls in rooms along with wallpaper, paintings, and other objects; or partial walls which has a combination of rooms with walls up and walls down.

2. *The Sims* was released in 2000, the latest in the franchise of popular Sim games produced by Maxis (e.g., *Sim City*, *Sim Tower*), *The Sims 2* in 2004, *The Sims 3* in 2009, and *The Sims 4* in 2014. Sims games have also been produced for tablets,

consoles, mobiles, and social media.

3. Simblr is one example of how players simmify social media—other examples include using the terms simstagram or simsta on Instagram or creating Sims-specific profiles on Twitter and Facebook (which may be used as if the user was a Sim character, but are more often used by users to promote their Sims content away from their real accounts and the prying eyes of family and friends). I use the term in this paper to distinguish Sims-oriented Tumblrrs from any other form of Tumblr. Although it is commonly used, it should be noted that not every Simblr uses the term in its tags or descriptions. When asked, just over two-thirds of my respondents who used Tumblr used the term.

4. The survey and interview research was concerned with a wide range of aspects of online Sims fandom, not exclusively Tumblr.

5. The remaining users either put dates outside of these ranges, including dates in the future, or did not specify an age.

6. It is difficult to provide clear statistics relating to ethnicity and race as this was an optional question, and users could write whatever they chose. Thus many identified here with nationality (e.g., Canadian, British) rather than any other form of ethnicity, as well as users offering a diverse range of other answers (including one who self-described as "a big ol' pot of mixed up!").

7. This is true of posts relating to *The Sims 2* and *The Sims 3*. However, posts relating to *The Sims 1* tend to be unprocessed and often used for humor because of its retro and lo-fi quality (Deller 2014c). Images from *The Sims 4* were also unprocessed; as the game was not yet released, these were stills released by Electronic Arts that users circulated to either build excitement for the game or to express cynicism toward it (Deller 2014b).

8. A frequent complaint about the tagging system (figure 2) is from users who only follow one particular game, such as *The Sims 2* or *The Sims 3*, and therefore don't want to see posts relating to the other Sims games in their dashboard.

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Praxis

The remediation of the fan convention: Understanding the emerging genre of cosplay music videos

Nicolle Lamerichs

[0.1] *Abstract*—Through cosplay (costume play), fans perform existing fictional characters in self-created costumes, thereby enriching and extending popular narratives. Cosplay is an understudied form of appropriation that transforms and actualizes an existing story or game in close connection to the fan community and the fan's own identity. Although the costume can be experienced firsthand at convention sites, it is also remediated in photography, thereby extending its potential audience and performative possibilities. In the rich emerging genre of cosplay music videos, commonly shot and produced at convention sites, fans juxtapose different cosplayers and texts. Informed by work on other fan videos, such as machinima, I propose a reading of a selected corpus of videos to analyze the dynamics of costume culture as it transcends the convention grounds.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Dress-up; Performance; Play; Transmediality

Lamerichs, Nicolle. 2015. "The Remediation of the Fan Convention: Understanding the Emerging Genre of Cosplay Music Videos." In "Performance and Performativity in Fandom," edited by Lucy Bennett and Paul J. Booth, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0606>.

1. Introduction

[1.1] Dressing up as fictional characters, or cosplay—a portmanteau of "costume" and "play"—has amply flourished in game culture during the past couple of decades. Through cosplay, fans perform existing fictional characters in costumes that are generally self-created. The costumes are debuted at fan conventions such as DragonCon, London Expo, or Comic-Con International. These conventions are large meetings of fans that vary from several hundreds to half a million visitors who attend to socialize, shop, enjoy panels, meet celebrities, play games, or watch videos together. At these venues, fans can also participate in cosplay competitions or enjoy creative workshops. Cosplay celebrates popular culture but also extends and deepens its narrative content. While fictional dress up started in science fiction fandom in the 1970s, today it is commonly associated with the popular culture of Japan that heavily influenced the cosplay scene. Cosplay is a visible activity in media fandom that is predominantly performed at the fan convention ground. It is popular across cultures and even within emerging economies such as Brazil and Taiwan. Though this practice

is often associated with the fandom of Japanese popular culture, it should be noted that many players draw extensively from Western comics, science fiction, and fantasy series.

[1.2] The performance of cosplay is a unique one that fans and media professionals have mediated in documentaries, news articles, blogs, artistic videos, and photography. In the summer of 2013, the reality show *Heroes of Cosplay* (2013–) premiered on the SyFy channel. The show followed a cast of various cosplayers—fans who dressed up as their favorite fictional characters—as they prepared for large festivals and events. While the show can be praised for representing an often overlooked subculture, it was also heavily criticized for its style and intent. The cast frequently shamed and ridiculed the costumers that were not part of their team or who did not share an interest in competitive play. Luckily, the show also validated the hobby by portraying its cast members at home, painstakingly shopping for the right fabrics, and crafting their outfits. At these moments, the creativity and competences of the individual fans emerged quite clearly. For example, while cosplayer Jesse is exceptionally skilled in forging armor; Becky's interested in acting out a character just right.

[1.3] Whereas *Heroes of Cosplay* emphasized the sportsmanship of cosplay, another discourse on cosplay can be found in fandom itself: a discourse that emphasizes fiction, camaraderie, and the art of costume design. In this article, I turn to cosplay music videos (CMVs): an emerging genre through which fans document and extend the cosplay performance. Today, the ludic culture of cosplay is increasingly moving away from the convention space to new online environments and creative practices, such as music videos, tutorials on prominent websites (e.g., Cosplay.com), and video blogs about craftsmanship, such as Kamui Cosplay (<http://www.kamuicosplay.com>). Whereas fictional dress up is intimately associated with modeling and photography, we now see a development of different uses and mediations of the costume.

[1.4] Cosplay is a scarcely studied form of appropriation that transforms and actualizes an existing story or game in close connection to the fan community and the fan's own identity (Lamerichs 2011; Okabe 2012). In this article, I argue that cosplay cannot solely be understood in relation to the convention space; rather, it needs to be charted across media as a transmedial process, related to well-known stories and franchises (Jenkins 2006). While the costume can be experienced first-hand at convention sites, it is also remediated—in photography, as an example—thereby extending its potential audience and performative possibilities. CMVs have increasingly become a means to extend and share the cosplay performance. These rich videos are commonly produced at convention sites, are created by and for fans, and juxtapose

different cosplayers and texts. These videos grant insights into this object-oriented fan activity and the remediation of fan performances.

[1.5] Informed by work on other fan videos, including fan-made music videos (Russo and Coppa 2012; Turk and Johnson 2012) and "machinima" (Lowood and Nitsche 2011), I propose a reading of a selected corpus of videos. Thus, this study analyzes the dynamics of costume culture as it transcends the convention grounds. I analyze three CMVs cinematographically, with attention to their shots and editing techniques. Moreover, I take into account their song choice and lyrics, and how these create the cinematic structure of the fan video in relation to the shots. I argue that CMVs cannot readily be understood through a framework similar to that used in analyzing other fan videos. While CMVs rely on iconic characters and texts, their purpose is to document the culture of cosplay and visualize fandom itself.

2. Cosplay music videos

[2.1] As fan-created videos, CMVs provide not only rich insights into the culture of cosplay, but also demonstrate the wider cultural importance of remix. Coppa and Russo point out that the "remix culture" of fan videos is not merely a subcultural phenomenon anymore; it is an overall tendency of users, as a result of technological changes: "The threshold of storage, processing capacity, and bandwidth we crossed in the 2000s, exemplified by the YouTube era of virtually infinite video, has catapulted remix into mainstream consciousness." On YouTube, where many of these videos are uploaded, there is a particularly rich participatory culture around vidding and user-generated content (Burgess and Green 2009). Users interact through comments, favorites, and playlists.

[2.2] CMVs provide insights in the remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999) of the cosplay performance. While cosplay already relies on existing fictional texts and characters, a fan video translates these processes of reenactment in a medium-specific way. The performance may be set at the fan convention, but a film maker and editor restructure these practices, montage them to specific music, and make particular choices on what is shown and how. This often creates new stories, not only pertaining the fictional source text, but also to fandom and fan identity itself. The format of CMVs is quite specific. Most prominently, they often include the spectator as cosplayers daringly look into the camera. This aspect also categorizes them as high-concept videos that are self-reflexive. The cosplayers imitate their characters—they pose and act as them—but through intense editing and clever shots, a unique video emerges. While some videos are very much narratives, such as the work of FaxenCosplay, others are edited to the lyrics by association, or befit the styles of popular music videos or Internet genres, such as lip dubs.

[2.3] While the stylistics of CMVs may differ per video, they have several commonalities. First, they often emphasize different aspects of the costume through long tracking shots while the cosplayers pose in front of the camera. Second, the videos are usually shot at the fan convention and are also a means of preserving the performances and making them accessible to a wider audience. Commonly, a CMV foregrounds the costume and character over the narrative. In this sense, they also differ from other types of fan videos that rely more on interpretations and repertoires of fandom, and the reexperience of particular texts from popular culture (Turk and Johnson 2012). Nonetheless, some CMVs are also fan works in their own right that focus less on the fan practice and more on a detailed character study. Such videos may go deeper into the text and can be more aligned with other types of fan videos. An example of this is "Teeth" (2012; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h516dDOnQDo>), produced by the cosplay duo FaxenCosplay, a romantic homage to two characters from *Black Butler* (2006–). In this video, many scenes serve to illustrate the complicated, one-sided romance between Ciel and Sebastian, and ultimately narrate a fan desire to see this slash potential fulfilled.

[2.4] Self-reflexive inclusion of the fan audience and dialogue with other popular content also differentiates CMVs from art videos on cosplay, such as "Cosplayers" by Cao Fei (2004). In this video artwork, cosplayers attend to their daily business as they prepare their outfits and finally play in them together in the urban domain of China. They do not look at the camera, which increases their isolation. Through the cinematography, the idea is evoked that they are escavists without a sense of presence in the real world, having succumbed to the dream world they built together. Fei's cosplayers, ultimately, are depicted as loners and estrange the viewer from their practices. CMVs, however, emphasize the presence of the cosplayers that dare the spectator at all times. The videos are heavily structured by the gaze of the (female) subjects, which is often directed at the viewer. This creates a very specific ideology in which the subject is embedded in a particular power structure and there to be looked at (Mulvey 1975). In CMVs, the gaze does not function as a colonizing device per se, but supports their parody. Being part of a self-reflexive video, the filmed subjects guide the viewer and return the gaze playfully. They particularly invite him or her to admire the convention space and its outfits. These videos show a glimpse of a culture that is self-expressive, daring, and liberating.

3. Methodology

[3.1] I have tackled the topic of the cosplayer through various angles, often supported by traditional fieldwork and qualitative methods. This paper builds on my work on cosplay as a performative phenomenon that shapes the player's identity (Lamerichs 2011). In this paper, I chart how the practice of fan costuming can be

mediated to spectators that are not directly included in the space of play (e.g., the convention space). I thus emphasize the visual culture of the costume and its mediation at different online and off-line sites through small-scale ethnography and close-reading.

[3.2] The transmediality of cosplay is foregrounded in the methodology that, rather than adopting a player-centered approach, construes a cultural reading that involves both participants and spectators (e.g., photographers, fans, media professionals, or outsiders such as parents). By focusing on online retail sites and CMVs, I hope to direct attention to the costumed performance and the transmediality of play. My approach in analyzing these videos on YouTube was observatory rather than participatory. Moreover, I took the medium-specificity of the platform into account—the comment sections, favorites, and the specific cultural context of this social medium. YouTube, after all, is a community of interest that has grown to have its own cultural conventions, norms, and genres (Pauwels and Hellriegel 2009). This medium cannot be analyzed without its unique participatory culture and emerging video expressions (Burgess and Green 2009).

[3.3] In this article, I do not explore the comments on the videos in depth, but rather analyze the form and content of the CMV genre. The videos were found on YouTube through the key words "CMV," "cosplay," and "cosplay music video." I received roughly 210,000 results on YouTube, which also included some videos that did not quite fit the label. I watched a corpus of 30 popular videos, based on the number of views. I selected three videos from this set through a maximum variation sampling—a purposeful selection aimed at heterogeneity. I was careful to sample video artists with unique styles and different national backgrounds. However, the most popular videos were generally Anglo-American, which my cases reflect. This should be no surprise, as some of the biggest fan conventions are held in the United States and the United Kingdom, whereas other locations, such as continental Europe, host local conventions in different language cultures. Videos based on prominent fan events draw the largest spectatorships because they are watched by audiences interested in the conventions themselves.

[3.4] The selected videos are "Cosplay Fever Lip Dub: Raise Your Glass" (Cosplay Fever, 2011), "London Comic-Con—MCM Expo-Cosplay Music Video" (Sneaky Zebra, 2012), and "Katsucon 2012 2–3" (Acksonnl, 2012). All videos were shot predominantly during fan events. These videos are each approximately three minutes long. The first video, by Cosplay Fever, was produced by a team that has been known for publishing cosplay photograph books since 2010. They shot the video at London Comic-Con (2011), and its popularity is extensive, as evidenced by 1,308,979 views as of June 25, 2014. The second video had 641,523 views as of June 25, 2014, and was uploaded

by Sneaky Zebra. This is a team of two film makers from the UK who specialize, as their profile on YouTube states, in "awesome, geeky and fun videos," which include CMVs and fan parodies. The third video is by Acksonnl, a fan vidder who made his video in collaboration with the cosplayer Yaya Han. This video had 586,511 views as of June 25, 2014.

[3.5] I asked the users who had uploaded the videos for permission to analyze their work, as these art works straddle the border between the private and public. This is also in line with the code of conduct of the Organization of Transformative Works, as well as the editorial guidelines of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, which both recommend asking fans for permission to cite and analyze their material to protect the informants and their creative works.

4. "Raise Your Glass"

[4.1] The colorful music video "Cosplay Fever Lip Dub: Raise Your Glass" by Cosplay Fever (2011) is a montage to the famous song "Raise Your Glass" by Pink (2010). Its qualification as a lip dub refers to a popular genre of music video. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2012) define it as "a form of high-concept music video featuring intricate lip-syncing and choreography" (47). Lip dubs are commonly filmed in a single unedited shot that travels through different situations within a building or space. Vimeo employee Jake Lodwick coined the term to describe his music video from 2006, but examples of earlier lip dubs can be found. However, the genre only went viral in 2009 when the lip dubs of a Canadian university and *The Today Show* to the song *I Gotta Feeling* spread widely, then appraised and imitated. By now, videos in this genre have also been shot at fan conventions to detail the different situations and performances in cosplay. Four media layers particularly characterize the video's representation of cosplay: narrativity, cinematography, female subjectivity, and lyrics.

Cosplay Fever - Raise Your Glass



Video 1. "Cosplay Fever Lip Dub: Raise Your Glass," by Cosplay Fever (2011), set to "Raise Your Glass" by Pink.

[4.2] While fan videos commonly introduce the convention setting early, this fan video offers a framed narrative in which the song is embedded. It starts with a black-and-white, silent *Alice in Wonderland*-inspired opening in which Alice is taking a walk and finds a glass labeled "drink me" (figure 1). So she does, then closes her eyes to enjoy the beverage. The scene becomes colored while Alice's face is replaced by that of Dr. Mrs. The Monarch from *Venture Bros.* (2003–). She opens her eyes and lowers the glass, realizing that she has been spiraled straight into a unique Wonderland—the fan convention. The narrative is then abandoned in favor of a filmic collage of different cosplayers. We sometimes see Alice in a shot with them (figure 2). The glass also reoccurs as a motif throughout the video. Jack Sparrow and Deadpool, among others, cheerfully raise it towards the camera to invite the spectator. The Alice motif also leads to closure at the end of the video when we see her again on the street. The real world is now colored and bright, which highlights the positive influence of the convention space.



Figure 1. Screen capture from the vid "Cosplay Fever Lip Dub: Raise Your Glass" by Cosplay Fever (2011) showing Alice raising a glass that has "drink me" written on it.

[[View larger image](#).]

[4.3] While lip dubs are commonly filmed in one shot, this video has been montaged from several scenes. It thereby emphasizes space less but still produces a lively atmosphere. The video is filled with small jokes that respond to the lyrics. Its literal interpretations include a cosplayer of the Joker playbacking to "why so serious?" and a Panty cosplayer from *Panty and Stocking with Garterbelt* (2010) being dragged out of the camera to the words "panty snatcher." The emphasis is on a diverse cast of characters that emerge at the convention floor. In terms of cinematography, the upbeat tempo and editing of the CMV stand out as well as its incorporation of close shots. The video pays attention to the cosplayers' faces and expressions rather than lengthy poses as they sing to the camera. Thereby it creates a vibrant, jubilant atmosphere.

[4.4] In terms of gender representation, the video primarily depicts women. This is not striking, as Anglo-American cosplay cultures tend to draw more female participants. Interestingly, these women do not shy away from highlighting their sexual confidence and allure. Similar gendered videos include "Call Me Maybe—Otakuthon 2012" by Cyorii (2012; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bagk9nAL7-4>) and "A Girl Worth Fighting For" by RealTDragon (2012; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4DqvrOWEYo>), inspired by a song from Disney's *Mulan* (1998). These women cannot readily be understood as subject to patriarchal structures; rather, they comment upon them. They explore and add to their sexuality playfully within the space of fandom. The sexual and hyperfeminine partly construct cosplay, but function on the level of the ironic and the parody rather than the serious or kink.

[4.5] Finally, this video cannot be understood without the specific song that was chosen: "Raise Your Glass." This song was used in 2.16 "Original Song" of *Glee* (2009–) as an anthem for those that are different or queer. The lyrics "So raise your glass if you are wrong / In all the right ways / All my underdogs" draw attention to the deviant aspects of fandom, its potential marginalization, and an element of fan pride. "Raise Your Glass" celebrates fandom through its campy aspects and wonderment, and asks its viewers to join the party.

[4.6] The CMV by Cosplay Fever demonstrates that film making can be a powerful tool for fans. Vidding is not merely a narrative tool here to rework a fan text; it also serves the purpose of sharing a particular fan culture itself. In the video, this culture is revealed to be a particular gendered domain, where parody functions as a tool to perform identities. The video serves to validate fan culture and opens it to outsiders.



Figure 2. Screen capture from the vid "Cosplay Fever Lip Dub: Raise Your Glass" by Cosplay Fever (2011) showing Alice in the foreground with cosplayers behind her.
[[View larger image](#).]

5. "London Comic-Con–MCM Expo–Cosplay Music Video"

[5.1] The "London Comic-Con–MCM Expo–Cosplay Music Video" by Sneaky Zebra (2012) is edited to Tim McMorris's "On Top of the World." The video stands out in its cinematography on two levels: first, the camera and editing techniques, and second, the integration of space. First, the camera tilts around the subjects who are steadily posing at one place. Its style includes long tracking shots that follow the cosplayers' swift poses. The emphasis is on the subject in an enclosed space at all times, where movement is limited and suggested by the camera work and timing rather than by what the individual cosplayers do. The stylistic montage is achieved through the editing technique known as time remapping, which mixes fast forwards with slow motions. This technique increases the suggestion of movement, thus complementing the cosplayers' gestures.

Cosplay Music Videos - London Comic Con - MCM Expo - Cosplay..



Video 2. "London Comic-Con—MCM Expo—Cosplay Music Video" by Sneaky Zebra (2012), set to Tim McMorris's "On Top of the World."

[5.2] The filmic space of "On Top of the World" is a combination of convention ground imagery and urban spaces. The video is shot not only on the convention ground, but also partly in London (figure 3), as a scene of the Tower Bridge shows. Still, during initial viewings of the video this may not stand out. The emphasis is always on the cosplayers, who look straight at the camera and dare the spectator (figure 4). They are central in the framing and never out of the picture. Even when the shots take place at touristic hallmarks, the video highlights the movement of the cosplayers while the background functions as entourage. For instance, there are no environmental shots of London to position the players.



Figure 3. Screen capture from vid "London Comic-Con—MCM Expo—Cosplay Music Video" by Sneaky Zebra (2012) showing cosplayers in front of the London landmark of the Palace of Westminster. [[View larger image](#).]



Figure 4. Screen capture from vid "London Comic-Con—MCM Expo—Cosplay Music Video" by Sneaky Zebra (2012) showing cosplayers staring straight at the camera, as if daring the spectator. [[View larger image](#).]

[5.3] Though many CMVs have elements of lip dub, this compilation does not. It is, however, edited to befit the rhythm of the song at all times and particularly follows the guitar line at several shots, thereby cleverly integrating the choreography and music. As in the previous video, the poses and actions of cosplayers strongly correspond to

the lyrics. To name but one example, at the lyrics "kicked them all out the door" Lara Croft seemingly kicks a fallen cosplayer and aims her gun at him. The video strongly incorporates viral videos of that year and includes several references to, for instance, "Gangnam Style" by Psy (2012). The recognizable dance of Psy is performed by a crowd of players and the famous elevator scene from the video clip is mimicked by another Lara Croft cosplayer with a girl lying below her. While the original shot of "Gangnam Style" is played out seriously and with stern facial expressions, these girls smile and act charmingly in their parody, inviting us to join their palimpsest and laugh along.

[5.4] "London Comic-Con" particularly emphasizes the empowerment of fans and explores their ambitions. The lyrics add to this and partly explain the competitive and ludic elements of cosplay. One passage, for instance, says,

[5.5] We gotta be the best, the best we can be
And though sometimes we don't wanna
Still we gotta chase our dreams
Reach up, and reach high, because we're gonna pull on through
And give it all we got, even though it can seem so hard to.

[5.6] The video affectively voices how cosplayers live up to the convention moment to deliver the best performance they can. Another significant passage is: "While the world is spinning / It's a brand new beginning / I'm here finally winning." Read in the context of cosplay, the last sentence articulates the subcultural elements of cosplay and focalizes the player as someone who finally makes a difference: a winner rather than an underdog. Other CMVs, such as "Born This Way" by Marieke Versonnen (2012), highlight similar themes of self-empowerment and stardom that are achieved through personal struggle.

[5.7] Like the previous video, this fan work celebrates cosplay but on a different level. While the first example narrates the social, outgoing motives of cosplayers, this video stresses their accomplishments and thereby their craftsmanship and affective performance. The cosplayers are chasing their dream of character reenactment. These notions influence their identity; their self that has to be "the best it can be." By drawing attention to the competitive aspects of cosplay, the video also reveals the effort that fans put in their outfits. Cosplay is revealed not only as a playful domain in this video but as "serious leisure" (Stebbins 2007)—a voluntary hobbyist practice that requires investments and competences that equate it with labor. The stakes in serious leisure are different from labor, however, in that they involve self-growth and competition. The video suggests that these elements are crucial in cosplay and also relates them to the validation of the fan or outsider.

6. "Katsucon 2012 2–3"

[6.1] The video "Katsucon 2012 2–3"

(<http://archive.cospix.net/KATSU%202012%20FANVIDEO%202-3web.mov>) by acksonl (2012), is part of a series of separate videos and offers an almost imaginary, lucid interpretation of the convention floor. In contrast to the previous videos, this CMV strongly engages in storytelling as it follows the events of a villain and contrasts these with the player's own identity (figure 5). Edited to the song "Lights," by Ellie Goulding (2010), the video artist explores light and darkness in conjunction with the heroes and villains that star in the clip. Moreover, the "lights" motif is explored in regard to the convention space that is fueled with imagination and suggests a spark that can be contrasted with everyday reality.



Figure 5. Screen capture from vid "Katsucon 2012 2–3" by acksonl (2012) showing a cosplayer unpacking her wig. [[View larger image](#).]

[6.2] The video focuses on cosplayer Yaya Han—a well-known cosplayer who, some months after this video premiered, starred in the reality show *Heroes of Cosplay*. She performs the female villain Countess Carmilla from the anime *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust* (2000). The anime portrays a lesbian vampire who is the patron of the villain Meier Link. She has died but became a ghost due to her unnatural bloodlust and now wants to be revived. The blood of the woman that Meier Link is courting, Charlotte, will serve this purpose well. The countess is a reinterpretation of the title character in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's gothic novella *Carmilla* (1872). The story's main character is Laura, a woman desired by Carmilla. Carmilla can thus be understood as the proto/archetype of the lesbian vampire whose reinterpretations are deeply ingrained in both Western and Asian popular culture. These motives, perhaps unconsciously, structure the fan narrative.

[6.3] The opening scene stages the cosplayer in backlight, filming her as a dark silhouette as she opens the curtains of her hotel room to let the sun in. We see a tracking shot of her outfit lying on the bed; then she carefully unpacks her wig (figure 5), and a woman with glasses helps her into her garment. The first lyrics are edited to

the cosplayer putting on her outfit and transforming her identity: "I had a way then losing it all on my own / I had a heart then but the queen has been overthrown." These lyrics also bring to mind the Queen of Hearts of *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), whose design can also be projected on Carmilla through similarities in color scheme and dress (figure 6). In her dark, royal costume, the player faces good and kind characters such as Pinkie Pie from *My Little Pony* and Supergirl, who comes to Pinkie Pie's rescue. Though Carmilla visibly shows hostility toward the innocent female characters, this could also be interpreted as queer desire, with the intertextual history of the character in mind. As in the anime, and its origin novella *Carmilla*, the female vampire preys on young women.



Figure 6. Screen capture from vid "Katsucon 2012 2–3" by acksonl (2012) showing the cosplayer in full dress, evoking the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland* (1951).

[[View larger image.](#)]

[6.4] Still, the video tries to go beyond the vampire stereotype to study the character more deeply. The light and dark motifs are accentuated by Goulding's lyrics, which echo the loneliness, misunderstanding, and ambiguous intents of the main character of the video. Its opening lyrics, "I had a way then losing it all on my own / I had a heart then but the queen has been overthrown," underline a loss of self and emotions, as the heart motif suggests. As she leaves the hotel room, the lyrics "I am not sleeping now / The dark is too hard to beat" are heard, reflecting her vampiric awakening and bloodlust. During the refrain, an addressee is hailed to help this main character: "You show the lights that stop me turn to stone / You shine it when I'm alone." While these lines suggest rescue beacons in the night, they also bring to mind the Medusa myth, where the reflection of the mirror turns the monster to stone. In the video, the female character can be understood as a Medusa prototype as she shies away from the lights, and addresses those who "shine" the light. Her loneliness and misunderstanding are amplified through this text.

[6.5] The cinematography of the video relies heavily on slow motion and a figurative play with lights. The shots are elaborate and often emphasize the dress of Carmilla, including her long train. At the middle of the movie, the narrative is lost as the focus

shifts to diverse cosplayers posing while long tracking shots emphasize their costumes. The video is partly revealed as a fan work that also aims to preserve and document Katsucon as it showcases outstanding costumes based on *Sailor Moon* (1992–97) and *Princess Tutu* (2003). Unlike the previous two videos, "Lights" hails its audience less, though some of the characters respond to the viewer's gaze by staring at, or flirting with, the camera. However, the main images study Carmilla while she stalks the convention ground.

[6.6] The end of the refrain, "and so I tell myself that I'll be strong," can be understood as the motivation of the fictional villain to find herself and redeem herself—not by relying on others to save her and shine the light, but by finding her own strength. In the video, these words are double-coded as they also speak to the sentiments of cosplayers themselves and their value in self-expression. The last words, "dreaming when they're gone," reveal that the lights are fleeting and only a figment of the imagination. While these lyrics are dark, and possibly suggest that the main character is beyond redemption, they may imply something different when read in the context of fandom. In the video, they also seem to befit the fictional and affective structure of the convention space where the protagonists emerge, but only for a moment when they actualize fiction and then disperse again. The lyrics remind us of the very fictionality of the playful moment and its disappearance.

[6.7] More than the other two videos, "Lights" tells a narrative and reflects on the portrayed source texts and characters. Like other forms of fan fiction and fan vidding, it is structured through elements of queer desire or slash, which in turn also depict the fan convention as a queer space (Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007). By creating intimate relationships between female characters of different media texts, this fan video is best understood as a sensual performance of heroes and villains. The viewer is served a slash palimpsest (Stasi 2006)—a queer reading that emerges through a bricolage of stories. Of the three videos, this example most clearly depicts cosplay as a theatrical practice by introducing the body of the fan as she dresses up. Best interpreted as a theater performance (Coppa 2006), this fan video explores cosplay not only as a reenactment of stories, but also of fan identity. The video shows that the cosplayer always moves betwixt and between a textual and narrative space, and the actual spaces of the convention floors, urban spaces, and hotel rooms.

7. Conclusion

[7.1] Cosplay is a shared, lived, and embodied space of play. While cosplay is grounded in physical bodies and the unique space of the fan convention, these fan performances are remediated through photography and video. I have analyzed several CMVs to shed light on this emerging genre of fan vidding that particularly flourishes on

YouTube. These videos give range to new expressions and costume performances that generate key insights into the experience of cosplay and the subculture of fandom. While CMVs serve to document cosplay at the convention space, they potentially draw new audiences at the different online media channels where they are uploaded. The videos emphasize the performative aspects of cosplay and the subculture itself, and do not simply rewrite existing outfits and characters. What is crucial regarding the CMVs is that they are double-coded. First, the videos provide vital insights into fandom itself as a lived culture, and also aim to capture this culture. Second, they are creative works in their own right, with lyrical dimensions and visual strategies that construct their meaning.

[7.2] The three videos include positive views of media fandom and represent its community on several levels. The first video celebrates the convention space, specifically its sociality and intimacy; the second stresses cosplay in terms of "winning" and details its challenging and self-expressive nature; the third studies the imaginary and how it is actualized at the convention, speaking of "lights" and the loss of the self. These positive motives are partly a result of the development of the cosplay community, and aim to validate the practice. I have shown that these videos can be used as theoretical objects that help us understand the dynamics of cosplay as they highlight the make-believe and performativity through dress. "Lights," in particular, draws attention to how the costume is worn and preserved. Overall, CMVs generate rich insights into cosplay culture. They not only display media costumes visually, but also textually, through lyrics. The videos reflect on the craftsmanship of cosplay and its unique culture of competition.

[7.3] While CMVs can be categorized as a type of fan video, they are not merely a homage to a fictional text or a rewriting. CMVs are unique objects that explore cosplay culture and fan identity. These videos explore characters and narratives, but are also deeply biographical. They focus on showcasing the costume and mediating the convention experience. Visually, CMVs fit into emerging genres in YouTube culture, such as the established genre or trope of lip dubbing. A particular difference between CMVs and other user-generated content is that CMVs are often heavily structured by the gaze. The cosplayers are put on display and are there to be looked at, but they are also aware of this and play with this. In some videos, the gaze is returned by female subjects. CMVs also differ from other types of fan videos in their intent. Often, their primary goal is not to study characters or texts more deeply but to document the fan convention and its related performances. As they form an emerging genre, CMVs can be understood as unique short works that partly serve to validate fan expressions to outsiders. These videos cannot readily be understood as a derivative fan genre, but serve to create exposure of fandom itself.

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Symposium

Exploring nonhuman perspectives in live-action role-play

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[0.1] *Abstract*—In this personal essay, the author, sometimes in the voice of a live-action role-play (LARP) sword, discusses the nature of LARP materials, arguing that the costume or elements of the costume (such as a sword) are actually nonhuman actors.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Actor-network theory; Game material; Role-playing game

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Call me Sword. Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, this account must show. I am a sword, yes. Imagine an object of 80 centimeters length, 300 grams of weight. That object includes other parts that have one job: they stick together to give me my recognizable shape. There is the silver blade with one sharp edge. There, the guard in the form of a black flame. When your eyes move farther along, you see that the guard is glued to the grip and the pommel. Both are of a different material, brown leather.

[1.2] Come closer! Then you can see that the color on the blade is not entirely silver. It is dirty. Mud and a red substance sticks to me. You can imagine that after eight years, I have a long history as a toy or game material. Now you might wonder: Is it not dangerous to use a sword for playing? It is! And for this reason, my job is not to be a sword but to pretend to be a sword. Instead of metal, the larger part of my body is made of foam. The soft stuff prevents injuries when I hit a player. I will speak more about my life later. First, I feel the need for some clarification, as some of my readers might be irritated. I think that you are more familiar with a human author than with a talking sword. Let him speak.

[1.3] This essay results from my research on materials in role-playing games, among them live-action role-play (LARP). LARP is a type of role-playing game, a genre of games that is popular for titles such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR, 1974) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004). In *World of Warcraft*, computers run and represent the fictional world in a virtual environment, but in LARP, people behave as if they were their fictional characters. While people play *World of Warcraft* in the virtual world, LARP takes place in the real world ([note 1](#)). LARPers use costumes and other requisites—for example, swords—that correspond with their characters' clothing. Harviainen considers this correspondence as one core of LARP: LARP is a "type of pretence play in which body language and other nonverbal cues correspond to those of the characters during play" (2012, 11). The goal of this type of pretend play is to create the suspension of disbelief for oneself and for other participants during a game session. The genres of LARP differ in the same way as do literary genres, with fantasy LARP as the most common choice.

[1.4] The idea to write this essay is rooted in an irritation. Before I began my research, I thought: People play with materials—materials do not play with people. It is the players who use costumes. It is the players who pretend play. Pretend play is a practice that requires a conscious player, not a nonconscious game material, or so it seems. When my research project reached its final stage, I doubted this assumption. I wondered if I could understand LARP from the perspective of nonhumans such as game materials, in this example a sword. Although an anthropocentric point of view helps to understand the details of LARP regarding conscious phenomena (Harviainen 2012; Montola 2012; Stenros 2013), it does not tell much about the actions of nonhumans. Thus, the irritation leads to a pair of questions that are central to this essay: How can we understand the role of materials? What can we tell about the role of materials in LARP?

2. The role of materials in LARP

[2.1] The answer to the first question provides the necessary shift in perspective that I need to answer the second question. To answer the first question and to achieve this shift, I need a methodology that moves me to such a perspective. I try to achieve this change in perspective by combining three methodological strands: actor–network theory, storytelling, and fabrication.

[2.2] The first is actor–network theory (ANT), a theoretical approach within science, technology, and society studies, associated with the work of Callon (1986), Latour (1987, 2005), Law (1987), and Law and Hassard (1999) ([note 2](#)). ANT draws attention to the ways in which heterogeneous networks are created and held together. The single parts of a network are actors, which can be either human or nonhuman. The

core of ANT is to "follow the actor" as Callon advises. With this method, the researcher focuses on processes during which actors change their individual actions with the goal of forming a network. Thus, the player and the sword are both actors that form the network LARP. It is the conscious decision of the researcher to choose one actor and describe the processes in the formation of a network. In the case of this text, it is the actor sword that I follow.

[2.3] The second method branches off to an experimental side of ANT. It results in an account that uses the perspective of a material by lending it a voice (Latour, 1996). While Latour exercises this approach to a limited extent (122-123), Tsing (2014) shows the benefit of an account that lends a voice to a nonhuman actor in her text on a mushroom spore, as it offers a multispecies research position. Letting the spore speak demonstrates that different species show different relations. This essay adapts Tsing's example from species in biology to materials in games. Instead of the spore, I let the sword speak in order to see new relations. Thus, it is possible to avoid an anthropocentric perspective. I use the tool of storytelling in the fashion of Tsing to lend a voice to the nonlinguistic actor sword.

[2.4] The third method is fabrication as an ethnographic method. Markham introduces fabrication as one "practical method of data representation in contexts in which privacy protection is unstable...involving creative, bricolage-style transfiguration of original data into composite accounts or representational interactions" (2012, 334). The basic idea is to write accounts based on empirical data, but represented in a transformed way. Because the word *fabrication* has the connotation of invention, I want to stress here that I use the word in the sense of manufacturing an imagination. Thus, the imagined account of the sword is based on manufacturing of firsthand data. During my research between 2010 and 2014, I selected qualitative data during 10 LARPs in Germany. The selection follows the method of participant observation and semistructured interviews as outlined by Silverman (2013).

[2.5] For this essay, I use field notes from the LARP *Epic Empires 2010* on the LARP location Utopion in Bexbach, Germany. Additionally, I use the transcript of an interview with one player for this text, Oliver Fischer. We have participated together in several LARPs on several locations, including the Utopion location. The interview questions centered on his history as a player, his understanding of role-playing, and how he used materials. Fischer told me that he has played different types of role-playing games since his schooldays. Getting together with other people was one element that Fischer liked about this genre of games.

[2.6] I combined field observations with the interview transcripts for the fabrication. In the footnotes, I provide a selection of these data samples. The result is the following fabricated account of one exemplary sword in LARP.

[2.7] With the combination of the three methods, I answer the first question. The understanding of the role of materials in LARP is rooted in a fabricated account that is based on the premise of nonhuman ability to act. The next step is to make this perspective fruitful and to tell more about the role of materials in LARP. And this brings me back to the sword.

3. The toy sword speaks

[3.1] Hi, it is the sword again, yes, the toy sword. I have promised to tell you something about my life. Follow me!

[3.2] My body consists of smaller parts; call them actors. Inside of me, the core consists of a glass fiber kernel to provide stability to the whole. The kernel is glued to the blade and the grip. The blade consists of foam with a colored latex covering. The silver color aims to more believably represent metal. The grip is glued to several layers of brown leather strips. Every part of me is soft. If you hit someone with me, the worst result may be a blue mark. It is similar to being hit by a thrown football.

[3.3] Now you know my secret: I role-play myself. I am a toy sword that role-plays a metal sword. I role-play well, because my appearance of a silver weapon is convincing. In LARP, it is important to be convincing; otherwise you are not taken seriously as part of the illusion of a living fantasy world that we all want to create ([note 3](#)). As I am convincing enough, people behave as if I were sharp. They cry when I hit them, and they do not touch the sharp edge of the foam blade. Moreover, I am true to my real self: I am a safety weapon, a toy. I am not here to kill; I am here to entertain. In being true to myself and in making people react as if I were dangerous, I think I fulfill my job well as a role player.

[3.4] As I said before, together with the human, we role-play a fictional character. The character can be a knight, a wizard, or a rogue. It does not matter as long as it fits the chosen genre of LARP. In our case it is fantasy, so we role-play a knight. Usually people think that LARP characters happen in the imagination of the players, but that is just half of the story. As the blade, grip, and foam are parts of me, I am one part of the whole costume. I have many friends, such as the tabard, the gambeson, the linen pair of trousers, the shoes, and many more. Together, we represent the character and make this imagined fictional character visible and tangible for everyone and everything else. As a costume collective, the sword, tabard, and the other actors act as a unified network. This network aims to fulfill further jobs in LARP.

[3.5] One job that I have already spoken about is to represent the fictional character in the material world. We form a complete costume because a complete costume works best in representing the character ([note 4](#)). As we role-play a knight, my job as

a sword is to provide the weapon. The gambeson provides the armor. The linen trousers and leather shoes make the costume complete because they are necessary to the role. We cannot play convincingly if the shoes are sneakers and the trousers a pair of jeans ([note 5](#)).

[3.6] Another job is to help other players and characters to recognize roughly what character we play at a distance ([note 6](#)). For example, imagine that you see someone standing on a hill. By the costume—including metal armor, weapons, and player behavior—you can recognize the role of another knight. If the player had only a tunic, it would be difficult to believe in his character. A tunic alone does not convince us of him role-playing a knight, because knights should have armor made of metal to protect them in combat.

[3.7] Moreover, you distinguish your character from others with a similar costume. While there are two knights on the field—one played by us, one by the others on the hill—other characters can distinguish us, because we do not have a metal armor in our network. That is of immense help for other players to approach us and categorize our network as one distinct character ([note 7](#)).

[3.8] However, when we costume parts have agreed upon the unity of a costume network, it does not mean that this unity stays forever. The actors that make up the costume network demand some action from the human. As a LARP sword, I demand from the player some care. One reason is obviously that I as a sword am an important part of the knight costume. When you think about a knight, you think about a sword. When you think about a sword, you think about a knight. You see? When I break or the human forgets me at home, the character can become less convincing because the costume is missing one essential part ([note 8](#)).

[3.9] As fantasy LARP is usually played outside, it might rain during play. People usually don't mind, and most of us costume parts are fine with some water, but I demand extra care when it is constantly raining. Because of the latex coating, the player has to keep me out of most of the rain, has to rub me dry, and has to keep me dry when he sleeps; otherwise the latex might begin to react with the rain water. Some call the chemical reaction between latex and water latex cancer, because it destroys the whole latex coating. It is like an illness! And I become infectious, too! If I touch one of my fellow swords, latex cancer can destroy them. Therefore, I demand good care!

[3.10] As I said before, I do something and people react. My human takes care of me; otherwise the latex will peel off, the sword as a network breaks into pieces, and a broken sword will make role-playing difficult for us all. Other people also react to my actions, for example, when I hit them. I do not say that in order to understand LARP,

my action is more important than the human action. My point is that game materials matter in LARP as a changing network of processes between heterogeneous actors.

4. Actors that become one

[4.1] After this account, what can I tell about the role of materials in LARP? The example of a toy sword tells the story of actors that become one, actors such as the blade, the guard, and the grip. Together they become one sword that serves as a part, an actor, for the whole costume, another network. Then, in relation to other costumes, the costume becomes another actor in the whole network of a LARP. Following the actor in this process makes other relations visible when one looks from the perspective of a nonhuman actor. The sword is an actor that follows orders, such as when it is swung by a player, and it gives orders, such as when it demands attention because of damaging water.

[4.2] Although a fabricated account that uses such a perspective moves from the human center, it cannot avoid that center. One reason is that I as the researcher am a human actor. Another reason is that this very text is a written account. It is a translation from something that I describe with language. In the end, I as a human need tools, such as a written account. However limited this method might be, I hope to have achieved some irritation that shifts the perspective in the reader. Using this perspective reveals some different ways in which materials matter. I think that it might not be as interesting how materials matter in general and into what categories different materials can be distinguished. The point is that the researcher is able to grasp the actions of materials when they form networks because these actions contribute to the understanding of LARP as a phenomenon that is neither human or nonhuman alone nor both human and nonhuman. ANT offers the theoretical background to take a perspective beyond preconceptualized boundaries, because "follow the actor" focuses on processes instead of on categories. This symmetrical perspective reveals new processes, new because they are beyond a human/nonhuman boundary, new because they offer a new direction for further studies of role-playing games, be they LARP, tabletop role-playing games (e.g., *Dungeons & Dragons*), or computer role-playing games (e.g., *World of Warcraft*). Without such an understanding, the sword would have remained silent and processes would have remained hidden, for example, the corroding effect of rain on latex.

[4.3] To conclude, studying LARP while following a nonhuman perspective allows new insights for the study of games. LARP as a network is not a static, central object of study. LARP is a moving network of actors that make and break relations during play. Observing these relational processes in the moment of transformation, the researcher becomes aware that the action of role-playing games is spread among different actors.

Role-playing works then beyond the simple division of active players and passive materials. When new actors emerge, such as swords, costumes, rain, characters, and locations, new actions can be studied. LARPers play with swords, and swords play with LARPers, right?

4. Acknowledgments

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5. Notes

1. I hesitate to make a distinction between a real world and a fantasy world for ontological reasons. For the sake of an introduction to LARP, I use this common categorization.
2. A pure actor–network analysis avoids explaining terms, concepts, and theories in advance. However, taking into consideration the context of this essay, I felt the need to introduce at least some aspects of the methods on which this account of a sword is based.
3. "Live-action role-playing is based also on how much one is able to take the other seriously. It becomes more difficult to take someone seriously if the costume is not convincing" (Oliver Fischer, pers. comm.). Here the network perspective is fruitful. It is the player who suspends his disbelief about the toy sword and treats it as if it was a real sword, but it is also the toy sword that acts: it demands the suspension of disbelief, it plays the role of a sword, and so on.
4. "Maybe it is simply, that one can say that with [an iconic part of the costume such as a sword for a knight] the costume is complete and it is always easier to represent a role with a complete costume than with half of the costume" (Oliver Fischer, pers. comm.).
5. Sneakers and jeans are a no-go for German LARPers today. The aim is to have a complete costume, and some LARPers add more and more fitting parts, such as socks, underwear, and pairs of glasses.

6. "And for me it is important that at some distance I recognize roughly what the character is, in order to be able to approach the character. When I do not recognize it, it becomes more difficult" (Oliver Fischer, pers. comm.).
7. "Other characters, other people recognize you much easier, remember very much easier what character you are, because you wear a costume. You distinguish yourself from others with the costume. Players or characters who see you for the first time, categorize you because of the costume. That is of immense help for other players to approach you and categorize you" (Oliver Fischer, pers. comm.).
8. "And there are always certain parts of the costume that make one say: this is part of the character. When I put them on, I am this character, or I play this character" (Oliver Fischer, pers. comm.).

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Symposium

Finding truth in playing pretend: A reflection on cosplay

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Cosplay fits easily in a life spent playing pretend. Upon reflection, the act of cosplaying is a practice in finding truths, not manufacturing lies.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Audience; Fan performance

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[1] I continued playing pretend long after most kids are expected to grow out of it. Though I cut my Internet teeth on sites like Homestar Runner, the majority of my time was spent on Neopets. For the unfamiliar, the site is a combination of Tamagotchi and Pokémon, with flash games and a robust message board. I took good care of my Neopets, but my heart and soul could be found on the role-playing boards. I spent hours creating real-time, collaborative fan fiction with other users for my earliest fandoms. From there, I segued into solo fan fiction. I'm proud to be one of the initiators of the Grey's Anatomy category on FanFiction.net, and wrote a novel's worth of words as an active member of the community. Left to my own devices, I would spend hours lovingly crafting stories sprouting from my favorite movies and shows.

[2] When I was in middle school, I discovered a new form of playing pretend. I felt alienated by the popular and preppy girls in my small school. They played lacrosse and had boyfriends; I spent a lot of time singing show tunes alone in my house. Obviously I wanted to rebel. I wore black tank tops and bought my shoes from Hot Topic. I listened to music much angrier than I actually was. The 13-year-old Shelby was pretending to be someone harder and cooler, trying to find some relief from an alien environment. I softened as I got older, after finding a firmer footing and better friends. I slipped in and out of groups—the jocks, the artists, and the honor students in high school—molding myself around the friends who were in front of me. College gave me a new chance to play pretend. Moving hundreds of miles away from anyone who knows you affords that sort of opportunity. I started dyeing my hair every shade of the

rainbow and playing ukulele. I was dressing up as the quirky sort of girl I aspired to be.

[3] Having nerdy interests has always afforded me the space to play pretend, but it reached its pinnacle the first time I visited the Chicago Comics and Entertainment Expo. At the convention, I spoke in the vernacular I had adopted from my time on the Internet ([note 1](#)). I made references in conversation and, for once, they weren't met with blank expressions. Best of all, I had a chance to try out cosplaying. Simply put, cosplaying is an act of fan performance where the costume of a fictional character is worn. Cosplays themselves may be painstakingly accurate, or they may be creative interpretations. Some are created with great skill, some are commissioned from professionals, and some are cobbled together out of cardboard and duct tape. All are honest expressions of passion and perhaps the highest form of dress-up you can imagine. The cosplay world has been receiving more attention as a result of Web and television series, as well as increased coverage on nerd-inclined media outlets. Remarkable talents and highly invested fans have been seeing more time in the spotlight and, generally, ushering new people into their world ([note 2](#)).

[4] If it isn't already obvious, I fell in love with cosplay the minute I was introduced to it.

[5] I've had a chance to cosplay at a handful of conventions, with plans to do many more. I've utilized my meager sewing skills and learned rudimentary crafting and prop-making as well. I am always dreaming up new costumes to pay homage to my favorite characters. Despite the impression given by television shows like *Heroes of Cosplay* (2013–), it isn't all about competitions. I have yet to enter one, nor do I intend to. I spend my hard-earned money and many hours creating something to give me a chance to play pretend, something I rarely get to do so fully as an adult. I get the chance to be someone else: someone strong or smart or charming, someone with powers or wit or a tail. It gives me a respite from my life and a chance to step into someone else's.

[6] And yet, as I reflected on the years I've spent playing pretend, with cosplay being only a fraction of them, I realized that during all that time, perhaps I wasn't escaping into someone that I wasn't. Those years of dressing a certain way to be perceived as someone different weren't inauthentic. In fact, they were about as honest as I could have been. My fan fiction stories were glimpses into the minds of characters I identified with. Off the computer, there was a part inside of me that felt the need to rebel, or play "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" on a ukulele. Those parts of me may not have been dominant or fully realized, but they were certainly real.

[7] Cosplay, too, was an authentic representation of who I was and am. My first cosplay was a simple interpretation of Spyro the Dragon, the protagonist of a series of platformer video games on the PlayStation. I spent hours as a kid hunched over a controller, collecting gems and head-butting bad guys. As an adult in a Spyro costume, I was relishing the innocence and sincerity of being twelve, immersed in a colorful world without any cares except getting to the next level. It reminded me of a time before electric bills and student loans and relationship problems.



Figure 1. First cosplay, creatively interpreting Spyro the Dragon, protagonist of the eponymous series. Photograph by author. [[View larger image](#).]

[8] The following year, I made a cosplay of Hawkeye, a member of the Marvel comic book universe popularized by the movie *The Avengers* (2012). Hawkeye is a human among geniuses, superhumans, and aliens, but he is able to hold his own. He is extraordinary in his own right. I may not have had remarkable archery skills with my toy bow, but I was able to tap into the confident side of me, unafraid of and undiminished by the amazing people I surround myself with.



Figure 2. Crossplay (gender-swapped cosplay) of Hawkeye, member of the Avengers.
Photograph by author. [[View larger image](#).]

[9] My latest cosplay and my proudest moment was Lilith, a character from the Borderlands video game franchise. She is endowed with significant power, and uses it to learn about her world, protect her friends, and fight evil. She is not weaker for being a woman and she doesn't conform to comfortable expectations of femininity. When I was cosplaying Lilith, I felt strong, something I am not used to experiencing. I felt capable.



Figure 3. Cosplay of Lilith the Siren, from the Borderlands series. [[View larger image](#).]

[10] The appeal of cosplay wasn't just in the embodying of my favorite characters. The act itself unearthed something inside me, something that brings me back to cosplay again and again. It gives me a chance to be unafraid of relating to others. The joy of taking pictures with or talking to people mirrors my love for giving smiles to others. It also lets me be transparent with my passions. It's hard to hide your love for something when you spent a paycheck and a week's worth of work recreating a character from it.

[11] I could list myriad reasons why I love cosplaying, from the fun I have crafting to the joy I feel relating to others who love the same things I do, but one reason stands above the rest. Rather than trying to be something or someone that I'm not, I'm teasing out things already inside of me. I loved being Lilith, for example, not because I could pretend I was strong, but because it reminded me of how strong I actually am. Spending time in these characters' skins helps reminds me of who I want to be and who I already am. This is true for my lifetime of playing pretend. The whole time, I was testing the waters of my own self, floating to the surface what I valued and seeing what stuck.

[12] I continue to play pretend to this day, whether in costume or not, and I doubt I'll ever stop. I cover up my tattoos when I meet with my academic advisors and bare them when I go to bars. I speak differently with my parents than I do with my partner. The choices I make to wear a different costume every day aren't contrived or artificial; they're magnifications of what I already have. This is the way people experience the world, and joy can be found in it when you embrace it. Whether you grin as you don a brown coat and revolver, or as you knot a delightfully tacky tie around your neck, let the character you show to the world be authentic. Strive for what you want and recognize what is already great. Famous drag queen Ru Paul is known for an intuitive and oft-repeated quote: "Everyone is born naked. The rest is drag." I don't think Ru would mind me rephrasing it here: Everyone is born naked. The rest is cosplay.

Acknowledgment

Thank you to my former professor and friend Dr. Paul Booth for recruiting me to write this piece. Though my current graduate work is in Catholic theology, he remembered my passion for fandom and fan performance and kindly invited me to speak to one of his classes on the subject of cosplay. This essay is adapted from that short presentation.

Notes

- 1.** A more in-depth and engaging discussion about vernacular or dialect on the Internet is available at YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDPasRas5u0>).
- 2.** There is a great deal to be discussed about the positive and negative aspects of the cosplay community, especially in regard to its relationship with body positivity, feminism, and elitism in a community, but I have neither the space nor the resources to do so here.

Symposium

My football fandoms, performance, and place

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[0.1] *Abstract*—In this personal essay, the author discusses negotiation of identity in the various spaces of football fandom.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fan spaces; Slash; Soccer; Sports fandom

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1. Television and tifo

[1.1] For the last American group game of the 2010 World Cup, a crucial match against Algeria for a spot in the knockout rounds, ESPN filmed in the bar that the Seattle chapter of the American Outlaws called home. It was a big deal—ESPN, the biggest name in sports in the United States, wanted to showcase us as US soccer fans on perhaps the biggest day in US soccer. As a member, as well as a member of a supporter's group for the Seattle Sounders (the Emerald City Supporters), I was a regular at other viewing parties and therefore knew how to behave. I knew what to wear, what to chant, and how to act to make us look the best on the big stage, to showcase to the rest of the country and indeed to the rest of the world that Seattle fans knew how to be proper football supporters.

[1.2] Football fandom is largely about performance, especially when you get into the supporter's culture that the American Outlaws and the Emerald City Supporters embrace. Based in the traditions of Europe, especially that of Italy, Germany, and to some extent the Balkans, it's a style that demands commitment and extravagance. Groups pride themselves on their tifo, ranging from small displays held by a fan or two to massive "carnival-type demonstrations of support involving the whole stadium end and requiring considerable outlay in money, labour and co-ordination" (Roversi and Ballestri 2000, 188). The Emerald City Supporters prided themselves on their ability to create such displays—massive hand-painted banners stretching across the end of the stadium we stood in, sometimes with multiple layers and moving parts. Major games,

like derbies against the hated rivals in Portland, featured the most elaborate performances, and it was part of the challenge to come up with something better each time.

[1.3] Even when there wasn't a display, there was singing, another habit borrowed from the Europeans. Chanting is a major part of the performance of one's fandom, as "the integral relationship between supporter and team demands, at least in theory, that fans must also do their part in the contest, which, disallowed as they are from entering the field of play, they largely manage through song" (Power 2011, 100). We gave our full 90, just as we expected of the team on the field. At games, song sheets were provided, and it was expected that if you were in the Brougham End (the name given to the general-admission section of the stadium), you would be performing. Through this performance, we could feel like we were making a difference at the game and could show off to the rest of the country—and the world—that we were real supporters, that we could hold our own with fans from countries with more storied traditions. By performing our fandom so flamboyantly, we could be respected.

[1.4] The bar was too small for tifo, and it wouldn't have been appropriate anyway, but the idea was the same. Through our singing, cheering, and bandanas, we could show to a broad audience that we were truly fans. Having the ESPN cameras there magnified this sense of performing our fandom, of needing to make sure that the way we were acting was how fans were supposed to act. Others would watch—we had to look good.

2. Among the fans

[2.1] Performing football fandom goes beyond tifo and chanting, however. I performed in the bars even when cameras weren't there, in chatting with other fans before and after games. This was more of a performance in the sense described by Erving Goffman (1959), a performance of everyday life, or in this case fan life. Like in any fan group, there are acknowledged ways to perform one's fandom. Outside of the theatricality of the game, there is a performance in dressing, acting, and communicating fandom and fan identity. In how I talked about leagues, teams, and players, I performed myself as knowledgeable and authentic, a real fan of the sport.

[2.2] As many female sports fans will attest, being a female fan is often fraught. It's well acknowledged that we must prove ourselves as authentic or real fans in a way that men do not—we're tested on our knowledge of the offside rule or a team's players, when male fans are assumed to be real fans until proven otherwise. The assumption that female fans are somehow inauthentic is also part of academic discourse on football fandom, as Victoria K. Gosling (2007) and Katharine W. Jones

(2008) discuss, with the latter noting, "When women are mentioned in the literature on football fans, scholars often assume that they are less authentic and committed fans than men and that they operate outside of the 'imagined community' of fandom" (517). Football, and sports fandom in general, is a man's pastime, and women have to prove themselves to be part of it.

[2.3] This requirement is often linked to the specter of eroticism. As Gosling discusses, it is "the belief (and unease) of male fans that women attend male mass spectator sports merely to 'swoon' over the players. Women fans are therefore viewed as inauthentic and not dedicated enough in their support" (2007, loc. 4810). The accusation that women fans are just there to lust after players is a sentiment expressed in a variety of studies on female football fans, including Israeli fans who "are accused that their motivation is not genuine, but is related to eroticism" (Ben-Porat 2009, 888), English female fans who complain about other women who "'let...us all down' by finding players attractive" (Jones 2008, 528), and Japanese female fans who protest that "I'm not a *mi-ha* fan, I'm watching soccer seriously" (Tanaka 2004, 54). To be a real football fan, you are there for the game or for the team, and you can't give any hints otherwise.

[2.4] This is the role I performed when at the bar and the role that I continue to perform in person now that I've left Seattle. I knew my trivia, my tactics, my history. I loved being a football fan among other fans, loved the discussions about the Bundesliga or what Arsenal (my English club of choice) needed in order to be title contenders again. But I am also the wrong kind of football fan. When Freddie Ljungberg joined the Sounders, I wasn't excited only because of what he could bring to the team or because of my memories of him at Arsenal. I was also excited because I had collected his Calvin Klein underwear ads, and because he was one of my favorites to write and read slash fan fiction about.

3. Fandom space

[3.1] Football slash has long been intertwined with my football fandom, with the way I understood the relationships between the leagues, teams, and players. The history and trivia I was so good at came to me from this fan practice. The seasons and tournaments were interwoven with potential narrative developments and love stories, and I watched Arsenal TV more for cute interviews that could be used in shipping discussions than for match highlights. I knew from early on that there were spaces in which to enact this kind of fandom and spaces where another kind of performance was needed. Slash fan fiction is the ultimate in the wrong way to be a football fan: it eroticizes the players, treats the game as media, and requires little attendance in the stadium.

[3.2] As with so many others, I found I could be different online, at least in particular corners of the Internet. I talked about the World Cup one way at the bar and another way entirely on my laptop. Even there, too, there were differences in fan performance. I commented one way on LiveJournal but another way on the *Guardian*.

[3.3] As I turned my personal interest in the form to scholarly interest, I began to pay attention to the ways in which my fellow fans navigated the different identities and performances of their football fandom. One wrote fan fiction under one name and a serious fan blog under another, keeping separate Twitter accounts for each. Another spoke of dude fandom and what needed to be acted there versus how she could behave in slash spaces. Some separated their teams out as for fanning or for sport, so that they could be, for example, a fan of Manchester United in slash spaces but of Southampton with family in the stadium. Others opted to enact their fandom entirely in the media fandom spaces of LiveJournal.

[3.4] However it was done, we all recognized the need to perform our fandom differently depending on where we were. The benefit of the Internet for us was the ability to do so—to perform one style on one site or even in person but then head back to our fandom space and talk about our favorite teams and players entirely differently. Secure in a pseudonym and in the knowledge that our friends and colleagues don't even know about this side of fandom, we can gleefully be inauthentic football fans.

[3.5] This too is a performance—I type differently in fandom space, highlight different things, offer different what-if scenarios to my friends. I perform media fandom in the way I learned how to perform it as a teenager; it's only the text that is different. I'm unwilling to say which performance of fandom is the most genuine, as they both are. They are both performative modes of fandom that I enact in different spaces.

4. Performance(s) of fandom

[4.1] Currently, I've been focusing my research on physical places of fandom. Place is an integral part of fandom, from the filming site to the comic book store to the convention, physicalizing the relationship that the fan has to the media text (Geraghty 2014). Within these spaces, it is generally thought that fans can be fans, expressing and performing their fandom in ways that might seem strange in nonfannish locations. The performances of fandom—cosplay, reenactments, talking in quotes—are accepted and normalized in these spaces, creating a sense that this is where fans can let loose and embrace their fandom without self-consciousness.

[4.2] Yet I try to remember what football has taught me. While the actions at a fannish place might seem like a natural expression of fandom, it is important to

remember that these are still performances. This doesn't mean they're not fun or that the fan is faking it but that there is consideration of the audience involved. There are different ways to perform fandom of the same object, perhaps even for the same fan. While the bifurcations of football fandom might be extreme, it is not the only object that inspires such varied forms. Therefore, when investigating spaces of fandom, it is worth considering what kinds of fandom performances are appropriate there, why this might be, and what other performances are possible.

[4.3] I am a football fan. Nearly everyone I know knows that about me. How they see it, though, depends on where they are.

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Symposium

Zombie walks and the public sphere

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This brief essay considers the phenomenon of zombie walks from a personal perspective, exploring the experience and practice of collaborative cosplay, as well as some of the theoretical and political implications of this widespread practice.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Collaboration; Cosplay

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1. Introduction

[1.1] I lurched toward the escalator in the Clark & Lake subway station, legs aching from a long walk around downtown Chicago. As a couple approached, the man did a double take and gasped, "Oh, God, buddy, are you all right?"

[1.2] I groaned in reply, reaching my bloody hands out toward them.

[1.3] His date gave me a disgusted glance and pulled the man along by his arm. "Come on. He's a *zombie*."

[1.4] I was limping home from my first experience of Zombie March Chicago, a massive group cosplay that shambles through the city each June. I played someone who had succumbed to a George A. Romero-style plague, complete with blueish skin, a vicious bite on my arm, blood all over my face, and a hunger for human flesh (figure 1).



Figure 1. Image of zombie participant in zombie walk. [[View larger image](#).]

[1.5] My interaction with this couple highlights in microcosm the range of reaction we zombies encounter when we're out lurching around. Like the zombie texts that inspire these gatherings, zombie walks serve fans and participants in diverse ways. This brief essay chews on the multifaceted nature of zombie walks, offering conceptual morsels from a number of intersecting cultural spheres. Like the walking dead themselves, what follows eschews easy categorization; the activity is neither and both ethnography and cultural studies.

2. Community and cosplay

[2.1] "Zombies are camera whores," a photographer said to me as we walked toward Daley Plaza, surrounded by moaning hordes of the undead. Like all cosplayers (costume-wearing pop culture enthusiasts), the individuals who show up for a zombie march do so to be seen. But whereas general-interest cons often include many plainclothes participants, zombie walks generally do not. Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Annika Waern describe it this way: "[The] primary audience is made up of the participants themselves. The community built by the shared experience of transgression is important. Simultaneously, most of these events are documented fully with photographs, videos, and blog posts" (2009, 263). Everyone in a zombie walk is a cosplayer, and we're all taking pictures of one another.

[2.2] Zombie walks occupy a liminal space between communal gathering and performance art. In many cosplay events, the location for the shared experience is a

private one. Granted, this private affair might be a convention with tens of thousands of people, but the bystanders have usually opted in. They're a self-selected community that appreciates the cosplayers' source texts. This mutual contract creates a defined space—similar to what game designers call a magic circle (Huizinga 1955)—in which both costumed and plainclothes individuals understand the event as it occurs.

[2.3] Zombie walks function somewhat differently. At the staging area—Grant Park for the Chicago Zombie March—participants are both audience and performers. Nearly everyone who gathers for a zombie walk is dressed for the occasion, some with a simple spatter of blood, others with elaborate makeup or full-body costumes. We shift roles between viewing and being viewed, taking pictures one moment, posing for photos the next. But we also gather in a busy public space filled with tourists and locals alike. The amused stares and photograph requests we get from bystanders echo the interaction between plainclothes participants and cosplayers, but they also come from a place of surprise. It's common, during this part of the event, to hear bystanders ask a zombie, "What's going on here?" before asking if they can take a picture.

[2.4] Zombie walks also differ from other cosplay activities in the subject of the costumes. Most cosplayers try to find a recognizable character or combination of characters to inhabit at the event. They hope to be recognized as a specific individual and to be admired for their attention to detail or creativity in remixing the character. Zombie costumes, in contrast, rarely attempt to evoke a specific cultural referent, leaving aside the occasional Ash (*Evil Dead*, 1981) or Shaun (*Shaun of the Dead*, 2004). Instead, zombie cosplayers aim for humor—like a zombie chef carrying a plate of brains (figure 2)—or a broad category. For instance, at the 2013 Chicago Zombie March, I joined three other individuals to become a zombie bowling team (figure 3). At a big zombie march, one sees zombie police, waitresses, lifeguards, and even the occasional undead baby. These costumes echo most zombie movies—following Romero's lead—which identify zombies via blunt cliché. Such costumes gain notoriety for their wearers not by their individuality but by contributing to the group ethos, by becoming part of the mosaic of former humanity that now shambles along the streets.



Figure 2. Zombie chef, Chicago Zombie March 2010. [[View larger image](#).]



Figure 3. Zombie bowling team, Chicago Zombie March 2013. [[View larger image](#).]

[2.5] Once the zombie walk begins, the event shifts into performance art, with most people acting the part of zombies, groaning at passersby and staring hungrily into cars (figure 4). Bryce Peake (2010) explains this experience as a shared trancelike state of flow. The cosplay event engages with the public at large, eliciting stares and scowls, laughter, irritation, and sometimes fear. For instance, one year, a couple having wedding photos taken at Grant Park took the opportunity to pose in the middle of the horde, capturing images of themselves cringing in fear as a massive mob of zombies

swarmed around them. Many people laugh and point at the mob of zombies, or they stop to have their picture taken like the newlyweds did.



Figure 4. Zombie staring at a bus, Chicago Zombie March 2013. [[View larger image](#).]

[2.6] At the same time, the journey into the streets leads to some less pleasant encounters. Occasionally drivers will scowl or honk at the mob, little children will hide behind their parents' legs, and harried pedestrians will shout at the zombie mob to make way for faster pedestrians. At the 2010 Zombie March, Grant Park was host to a Baptist gospel choir event. While I had a pleasant conversation with some singers (who insisted they would return the following year in zombie makeup), I also saw a minister, distressed and angry at our irreverent behavior, shouting religious exhortations as we paraded by; he was literally attempting to cast demons out of us. Further along, a restaurant manager was hollering at the passing horde to "keep the blood off the windows, guys!"

[2.7] Simon Orpana argues that zombie walks evoke Mikhail Bakhtin's ([1965] 2009) notion of the carnivalesque by providing "a temporary and imaginary dissolution of modern power structures. The walks create a spectacular performance that cathartically addresses social anxieties regarding contagion, exclusion and the increasing incursion of the modern state into the bodily, collective life of its citizens" (Orpana 2011, 154). The rupture of the walking dead into the streets of Chicago unsettles and bewilders the city itself, even if just for a moment. Sasha Cocarla makes a similar point focused on the disruptive aspect of a zombie march: "Because our urban spaces are highly ordered and regulated places, the purposeful disruption of the zombie walk—the performance of the living dead in public areas—affords the opportunity to reclaim urban spaces and disrupt dominant ideologies, even if only momentarily" (2011, 114). This effect became most clear to me in 2010, when the

water in the fountain in front of Daley Plaza had been dyed red in honor of the Chicago Blackhawks hockey team. My fellow zombies waded right in, making the water appear not red but bloody (figure 5).



Figure 5. Zombies in Daley Plaza fountain, Chicago Zombie March 2010. [[View larger image](#).]

[2.8] The cynic in me remembers, however, Michel de Certeau's (1984) dictum that power inevitably uses strategies to co-opt the tactical protests of the powerless. I was not surprised to discover how quickly the Chicago city authorities developed official processes for handling the Zombie March, including issuing rules (something Peake 2010 noticed for the Toronto zombie walk) and providing police officers to direct traffic.

[2.9] Though the rebellion against power is minor and short-lived, the overall tenor of the zombie crowd remains collegial and jubilant. We share an enthusiasm for zombie role-playing and take pleasure in the shared performance. While one zombie by itself is an amusing costume, a massive mob of zombies becomes an event. One moment in particular was telling for me as I tried to understand how a zombie walk differs from individual cosplay. As the 2010 Zombie March was getting underway, the mob leader used his megaphone to exhort the crowd into movement. After explaining the route we would take, he shouted, "What do we want?"

[2.10] "*Brains!*" the crowd answered lustily.

[2.11] "When do we want them?"

[2.12] "*Brains!*" we answered again.

[2.13] Our unity in perceiving and making this joke struck home to me—the crowd at a zombie walk draws on shared understanding of the subject. Our experience of the event gives the Zombie March a universality that few other pop culture subjects can support.

3. Politics and the meaning of zombies

[3.1] Zombies in cinema and fiction often serve as a metaphor for society, for social interaction, and for the relationship between insiders and outsiders. Zombies in stories arise in many ways, from toxic chemicals to magic or disease. Usually these causes reflect an underlying ill that the author worries might doom our society.

[3.2] In political conversation, the zombie has become synonymous with the mindless rabble. This is an image advocates for both major American political parties (not to mention independents) have used in characterizing their opponents. It reassures their audience that they, and not their opponents, are the thinking, rational ones. Those other people are just doing what they're told (figures 6 and 7).



Figure 6. Political image widely disseminated on the Internet of Obama zombies.



Figure 7. Political image widely disseminated on the Internet of Romney zombies.

[[View larger image.](#)]

[3.3] But aside from the occasional protester dressed like the walking dead, zombies have not become a wide-scale vehicle for protest events. Groups might perceive that the ironic distance needed for protest cosplay will diminish their ability to be taken seriously. For instance, does one dress up as a zombie and use satire to profess a

message opposite of one's views, or should one express one's authentic views, just in a zombie costume? And how can the bystander be sure which intention the zombie has? The effort made to show up for a protest then comes into question if the protest embraces costumes or cosplay.

[3.4] At the same time, it's worth remembering a lesson learned by the counterculture in the 1960s: humor in protest effectively undermines authoritarian power. Merry Prankster Wavy Gravy recalls, "One day I had to go to...a political demonstration and didn't have time to take off my [clown] makeup. That's when I discovered that the police didn't want to hit me anymore, because clowns are safe. They don't feel threatened by clowns" (Lee 2003). Perhaps zombie makeup could have a similar effect.

[3.5] The biggest benefit to imagining a political action based around zombies springs from the inherent counterintuitive nature of zombie walks themselves. Most costume play is individual and empathetic, aimed at characters the players love, admire, or enjoy. As such, creating a costume built around a particular character works well, but it does not afford a particular political view; it is linked too closely to the source text from which the character springs. In contrast, zombie walks are anti-individual events. While participants each craft their own costumes (and value the attention they receive for them), the walk itself is a communal event, and it is received by the public as such. In addition, this community has adopted the losers—the least desirable roles in the story. The hero gets the girl; the zombie just gets killed.

[3.6] Zombie mobs inherently parallel protest movements. Protesters perceive themselves in opposition to power; they gather in numbers to show those in power that they have political will, to make themselves seen. Zombie marchers embody characters with the same lack of access to power. Zombies (particularly those in the Romero films) are the powerless, the disenfranchised. Like the powerless in our society, one by itself poses little danger, but a mob sets the powerful quaking in their boots. It's not surprising, then, that the Occupy movement used zombies in protesting against the financial status quo. Tavia Nyong'o writes, "The zombie is a complex icon... for capitalism and for the protest of capitalism. As David McNally usefully argues, zombies are potent symbols because they work simultaneously as agents and victims of rapacious capitalism" (2012, 140). Zombies, after all, are the 99 percent (Wessendorf 2013).

[3.7] The optimist in me imagines zombie walks as a potential source of political action, a phenomenon both fun and significant, attractive to popular culture fans and providing a good hook for media coverage. I'd love to see more orchestrated political action using zombie walks. Alas, the perceived frivolity of the source material and the

difficulties regarding satire versus straightforward messages make it unlikely that we'll see mobs of zombies advocating a living wage any time soon.

4. Postmortem

[4.1] In the last decade, zombie walks have become a common tradition in cities around the world. There are zombie pub crawls, zombie marathons, zombie LARPs, and zombie ice-skating parties. Like the zombie plague itself, such events are becoming ubiquitous, perhaps even endemic. For scholars, this growing popularity provides an opportunity for further, fuller inquiry into why this unusual brand of costumed revelry has infected so many and to try to find meaning in understanding fans, fan communities, and their interaction with the public sphere.

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Symposium

What is global theater? or, What does new media studies have to do with performance studies?

Abigail De Kosnik

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This piece summarizes some key historical points of connection between new media studies and performance studies, beginning with Marshall McLuhan's concept of telecommunications networks as constitutive of a global theater. In combination with Kurt Lancaster's and Francesca Coppa's theories of fan works as performances, the global theater model can yield new insights into the nature and purpose of Internet fan fiction and fan fiction archives.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fan archives; Fan fiction; Fan performance; Global village; Erving Goffman; Marshall McLuhan; Performance theory

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1. McLuhan's global theater

[1.1] What does performance studies have to do with new media studies? Or, why use performance studies in an analysis of Internet cultures and digital phenomena? My answer: New media studies has had quite a long history of borrowing metaphors and frameworks from the fields of drama, theater, and performance, and while this genealogy may not be well known to either performance scholars or new media scholars, it is an important one. I situate my work within this robust, if unheralded, school of thought. I will briefly review the major intersections between new media studies and performance studies, then explain why I believe that it is useful to think of new media and performance together when studying online fan cultures and fan archives.

[1.2] Marshall McLuhan, one of the key founders of what we today call new media studies, first compared new media to performance in 1970, when he began to replace his 1962 term, global village, with a new term: global theater. In *From Cliché to Archetype*, McLuhan writes, "Since Sputnik [launched in 1957] put the globe in a 'proscenium arch,' and the global village has been transformed into a global theater,

the result, quite literally, is the use of public space for 'doing one's thing'" (1970, 12). The global village has become the global theater (apparently in 1957, even before McLuhan first mentioned the global village—but let us not scrutinize McLuhan's chronology too closely) because of the telecommunications networks that cross the world, making every place on the planet a potential performance space.

[1.3] McLuhan's replacement of village with theater as his preferred metaphor is read by John Tinnell (2011) as a commentary on live video transmission. Tinnell writes,

[1.4] Widespread televisual applications of satellite technology cultivated a tele-performative space, which...added an awareness that whatever took place in the presence of various electronic recording devices could be broadcast to and seen by large audiences all across the world, in real time and for all time. This awareness becomes a force of enculturation; one does not need to possess a video camera to be ontologically affected by the cultural (f)act of televisual recording and worldwide broadcasting.

[1.5] While I agree with Tinnell that McLuhan had global live television in mind when he declared that the world is now a theater, the implications of McLuhan's global theater extend well beyond the medium of television.

[1.6] The Internet, more than television (indeed, the two are increasingly converging), is a public space for doing one's thing, with participants generating their own content—putting on their own show, as it were. The Internet "turns the globe into a repertory theater to be programmed" by its participants (McLuhan 1970, 9–10). The Internet realizes McLuhan's vision of a space that serves as a stage that is theoretically open to an infinite number of players, each doing their thing for others to witness, and thus contributing programming to the nonstop theater. McLuhan is even clearer in his prediction of a networked participatory culture in his 1972 book, written with Barrington Nevitt, *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout*. They write of

[1.7] the institution of a new kind of global theater, in which all men become actors and there are few spectators. The population of the world is both the cast and content of this new theater. The repertory of the theater consists of a perpetual *happening*, which can include the retrieval or *replay* of any previous happenings that men choose to experience. (145)

[1.8] Thus is introduced the link between new media and theater, predicting future telecommunications platforms that will be open to participation by all (all who can gain access to the platforms and have the knowledge to use them, that is). From McLuhan and Nevitt's phrase "perpetual *happening*," and their statement that "all men become actors and there are few spectators," we can see the influence of 1950s and 1960s

performance culture—specifically, the famous Happenings by Allan Kaprow and others—on early 1970s new media theory. The connection that McLuhan perceives between performance and new media is interactivity, and McLuhan would not be the only new media theorist to see this resonance. In *The New Media Reader*, Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort write that "the *idea of interaction* associated with Happenings [in the 1950s and 1960s] was profoundly inspiring and has remained so for decades" because that idea "reflected and provoked a desire to break down distinctions between creator and audience—a desire and activity now central for many new media practitioners...The 'Happenings' are a touchstone for nearly every discussion of new media as it relates to interactivity in art" (2003, 83).

[1.9] Numerous new media theorists after McLuhan (though none cite him) have argued that all human-computer interaction, and not only computer-based art making, is most fruitfully conceptualized as a form of interactive performance. Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* (1991), Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen* (1995), Allucquére Rosanne Stone's essay "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?" (1991), and Stone's book *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (1996) all argue that new media actions and engagements are types of performance because they invite, and often require, computer users' interactions with hardware and software and/or other users via digital networks. Laurel, an interface designer, relates that designers often regard theatergoing as a model for human-computer interaction: "As researchers grapple with the notion of interaction in the world of computing, they sometimes compare computer users to theatrical audiences" (1991, 16). Laurel's own view is that users resemble actors more than they do audience members: "People who are participating in the representation [of actions on their computer screens] aren't audience members anymore...They *become* actors—and the notion of 'passive' observers disappears. In a theatrical view of human-computer activity, the stage is a virtual world" (17). Turkle writes that the interactivity of computer use has the potential to boost each user's sense of being an autonomous individual, of "being an actor in one's life" (1995, 274). Stone states that "computers are arenas for social experience and dramatic interaction, a type of media more like a public theater" than like prior forms of electronic media, such as cinema (1996, 16).

[1.10] Erving Goffman's 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* also began to be explicitly cited by new media theorists in the 1980s and 1990s, as performance studies (of which Goffman's is a foundational text) became established as a discipline—or what Shannon Jackson (2004, 30) calls an "antidiscipline"—in the US academy. Goffman proposes that every person is an actor playing a variety of roles in his or her daily life—that anytime "the individual is in the immediate presence of others," the individual expresses himself or herself and tries to manage others' impressions, and in doing so, performs ([1956] 1959, 1–4). Goffman's concept of

everyday social performance resonates with McLuhan's notion of a global theater in which all are actors; Joshua Meyrowitz's *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (1985) was the first to combine Goffman's and McLuhan's concepts. Although Meyrowitz's analysis centers on television and has limited application to contemporary network technologies, he forwards the notion that "electronic media [effect] a very discernible rearrangement of the social stages on which we play our roles" (1985, 4). Goffman has been by far the most influential performance theorist on new media scholars (Chan 2000; Waskul 2005; boyd 2006; boyd and Heer 2006; boyd and Ellison 2007; Pearson 2009; Aspling 2011; Markham 2013). Goffman's perspective on performance comes through clearly in statements such as this one, from a recent essay by Annette Markham (2013) called "The Dramaturgy of Digital Experience": "Regardless of which device or interface I'm using, what I'm wearing, or where I'm located I am performing multiple roles on multiple simultaneous stages with a globally distributed range of actual and potential audiences" (280).

[1.11] McLuhan, Laurel, Turkle, Stone, and the diverse and growing group of Goffman-influenced new media theorists all stress that network technologies facilitate what Mark Poster calls many-to-many communication ([1995] 2012). In a global telecom network, everyone can perform; the networks are like open stages that users fill with their performances. Importantly, liveness or presence is not a defining characteristic of performance for any of these thinkers. What is regarded as an essential feature of performance to many performance theorists—physical bodies that are copresent with one another at the time and place of action—is not at all necessary for performance as conceived by new media studies. Stone directly addresses this issue, stating, "We have to rethink some assumptions about presence" as major "shifts in cultural beliefs and practices" are giving way to "repeated transgressions of the traditional concept of the body's physical envelope and of the locus of human agency" (1996, 16). In other words, human agency, and therefore human presence, is no longer located exclusively in the human body. Stone claims that the computer is "a technological object that acts as a channel or representative for [physically] absent human agencies" (16–17) (Stone acknowledges her indebtedness to Laurel on this point). But Stone is rare among new media theorists who explicitly deal with the challenge that metaphors of online interaction as performance pose to definitions of performance as presence. Most new media scholars simply assume that bodily presence is not necessary for performance, and that, following McLuhan, Goffman, and the aforementioned theorists, people perform on the virtual stage of the Internet each time they post a comment, share a link, publish a fan work, or build an Internet archive.

2. What is fan fiction?

[2.1] Fan scholars have made a strong case that performance studies and theater studies offer the best frameworks for understanding what fan fiction is as a creative genre.

[2.2] Kurt Lancaster (2001) uses Richard Schechner's theory of "restored behavior" (1985, 35–36) to describe fan fiction writing and reading:

[2.3] Memories of [...] actors' performances of [their] characters reside within the fan texts, and writers as well as readers restore these performances through this work...[A] fan fiction author places strips of behavior garnered from watching episodes of [a television show] into new contexts. The reader of the fanfic imagines the immaterial behaviors occurring in the story as being concrete, or *performed*. (Lancaster 2001, 132–33)

[2.4] Schechner argues that all performance, "from shamanism and exorcism to trance, from ritual to aesthetic dance and theater, from initiation rites to social dramas," consists of restored behavior, by which Schechner means "living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed" (1985, 35). In Lancaster's conception of fan fiction, fan writers do not physically rearrange or reconstruct the strips of behavior that they witness actors performing into new live performances ("living behavior"). Rather, they effectuate such reconstructions through their fan fiction and so produce performances in their readers' imaginations. Fan fiction stories therefore resemble performances and operate according to performance principles more than other kinds of fiction stories do because fan stories, at least those that are based on audiovisual media texts, intentionally and explicitly strive to evoke actors' physical actions and vocal intonations in written form, and readers of fan fic understand that they should create mental images of specific actors performing scenes that the fan author describes. They know that they should envision those actors playing the scenes that the fan author has written for them.

[2.5] Lancaster's reasoning suggests a comparison between fan fiction and screenplays, and Francesca Coppa's essay "Writing Bodies in Space" makes this comparison explicit. Coppa relates that "some fan fiction has been written in script or teleplay form, often by fans who aspired to write for [a] produced show...To write in script form would be a sign of a writer's aspiring professionalism" in the 1970s and 1980s (2006, 234–35). "But the script form has always been unpopular among readers," Coppa states, "so a fan whose primary audience was other fans rather than

the television industry was more likely to tell her dramatic story in prose" (235). Coppa's point is that even though most fan fiction stories are written as prose rather than in teleplay format, all fan stories are essentially scripts: "The existence of the teleplay [as a format that fan authors occasionally use] helps to demonstrate fan fiction's roots as an essentially dramatic literature, but the larger part of my argument is that fan fiction directs bodies in space even when it's not overtly written in theatrical form" (235). Coppa echoes Lancaster when she writes that fan writers and readers "bring our memories of [actors'] physicality to the [fan] text, so the [fan] reader is precharged" (236)—that is, ready to imagine the actors playing out the scenarios written by the fan writer. "We've met these characters already, and now we're seeing them again. In theatre, we call that a *production*," writes Coppa (236).

[2.6] To think of fan fiction as a performance genre is a similar move to the one that the global theater thinkers make in identifying networked communications, including textual communications, as performances, as theater. For Lancaster and Coppa, as for the global theater theorists, writing can be performance. But the concept of global theater is that each person puts on a performance online, that each of us is an actor on the virtual stage constituted by digital networks, while Lancaster and Coppa propose that fan writers script and direct the action of what Coppa calls bodies in space, the actors whose screen performances fans admire, and the fan-directed enactments of these bodies take place on a virtual stage that is not online but rather in fan writers' and readers' imaginations. We know, from the existence of fanzines and other earlier print-based forms of appropriative fiction, that fan fiction as performance predates the Internet; the virtual stage on which these performances take place—the mind's eye of audiences—certainly has a longer history than the virtual stage of telecommunications networks on which global theater plays out.

3. What are fan fiction archives?

[3.1] If we consider fan fiction to be performances, as stagings, as variants of source texts that are not derivative but are simply diverse productions of popular play scripts, and if we also take into account that these sorts of fan performances are far older than electronic network technologies, we must define fan fiction archives as institutions that attempt to preserve interrelated performances. Lancaster's and Coppa's theories of fan fiction as performances lead me to ask a speculative question about fan archives: What if a fan archive were structured to preserve all of the fan fiction in a given fandom with an eye to the fact that every fan story is a unique performance of a source text, or a new performance of specific elements found within the source text, such as specific actors' manners of speaking and moving when they embody their characters?

[3.2] In fact, I argue that fan archives preserve fan fiction stories in just this way—as new extensions and versions and augmentations of source material. Fan archives are typically defined by their fandoms—that is, by the media texts that serve as the sources for fans' stories—and so every fan fiction archive is, in some sense, a concrete, visible incarnation of a wide variety of performances based on that source material. The *Lord of the Rings* archive, the *Avengers* archive, the *Romeo and Juliet* archive are all virtual meta-archives. A meta-archive cannot be seen; it is a construct, a metaphor that allows me to describe the relation of adaptations, transmediations, remixes, and fan texts to one another and to their sources. Lancaster's and Coppa's theories allow me to assert that fan fiction archives embody and make perceptible these formerly virtual-only meta-archives. A meta-archive grows without limit; it keeps growing as long as audiences keep encountering the source material and become fans of it. Before Internet fan archives, it would have been impossible to visualize any single always increasing meta-archive, except possibly by placing every fan fiction zine in a given fandom on the same shelf—and even then, only the fans who had physical access to that shelf would have been able to read through all of the contents of that collection. But Internet fan fiction archives make visible and accessible multitudes of stories that have been written in a given fandom.

[3.3] Fan fiction archives put all of the (public and published) performances based on a given source text on display for fan readers' engagement. It is as if Shakespeare enthusiasts were able to see all (or at least many) of the performances of *Hamlet* being produced simultaneously in one giant theater space containing innumerable stages, each stage occupied by a different company offering a unique take, revision, or reworking of *Hamlet*. Shakespeare fans could walk from stage to stage to stage inside that enormous theater, watching *Hamlet* after *Hamlet* after *Hamlet*, and when they reached what they thought was the last stage and the last version of *Hamlet*, they might find that the theater had the capacity to expand infinitely, and that new stages, with new performances of *Hamlet* being played out on them, were being added to the theater all the time.

[3.4] What does it matter whether we can "see" a meta-archive or not? What does it signify that fan archives make visible these constantly growing meta-archives that were, before the Internet, only conceptual? One significance is that fan archives finally put to rest a question that has been asked about consumers of popular culture and popular media for centuries: Are audiences of mass texts passive or active? Do they merely receive ideas and ideological messages that are injected into them by the media they consume (the hypodermic needle theory of media reception) (Katz and Lazarsfeld [1955] 2009; Lowery and DeFleur 1995; Berger 2012), or is there some kind of active response engendered in them by their acts of consumption (the active audience theory of media reception) (Fiske 1987)? For decades, cultural studies

scholars have argued that audiences are active, that they make their own meanings of texts, that they are never wholly passive in their intake of media (Fiske 1987; Lewis 1991; Hall [1981] 1998; Hebdige 1988; McRobbie 2000). Fan scholars, without exception, have made the same claims. But online fan archives, and all collections of remix—in fact, the rising popularity of remix as a new literacy, made possible by the affordances of digital and Internet technologies—offer visible evidence that audiences actively and imaginatively engage with media texts. Internet archives of fan appropriations and remixes are deeply important because the massive quantities of creative output that they contain serve as a kind of proof that audiences are not "cultural dupes" (Hall [1981] 1998, 446)—that is, the dupes of mass culture—but rather are users of mass culture, who take from media texts what they desire to incorporate into their own creative productions.

4. Acknowledgment

[4.1] A version of this article appears in my book *Rogue Memory*, forthcoming from MIT Press. The book examines what I call digital cultural memory—how we use networked technologies to collectively remember culture—through the case study of Internet fan fiction and fan fiction archives.

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Interview

Exploring fandom and the performance paradigm: An interview with Kurt Lancaster, author of *Interacting with "Babylon 5"*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This interview with Kurt Lancaster, conducted via e-mail in August 2014, discusses the use of the performance studies paradigm in his *Interacting with "Babylon 5": Fan Performances in a Media Universe* (University of Texas Press, 2001).

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fandom; Games; Performance; Role-play

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1. *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* and the performance paradigm of fan studies

[1.1] Kurt Lancaster's *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* (2001) represents one of the first explorations of a performance studies view of fandom. Breaking from the textual poaching metaphor of fandom pioneered by Henry Jenkins (1992), Lancaster's performance studies paradigm as applied to fandom reveals the generation of meaning through fan play and participation outside of the primary media text. By investigating and analyzing the way that fans used games, fan fiction, computer programs, and other paratextual elements "to 'visit' and perform [moments] from [and around] episodes of *Babylon 5*," Lancaster developed a comprehensive view of how fans can "immerse themselves in this universe" (67). In this interview with Lancaster, we discuss how a performance studies paradigm refreshes and revitalizes fan studies today, as the types of performances discussed in *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* are today becoming more conventional fan activities.

[1.2] As digital technology and interactive media have become commonplace within the media environment, new ways of addressing fan activities become not only relevant but also necessary for understanding the complex interactions between fans, media producers, and media texts. Indeed, in his foreword to Lancaster's book, Henry Jenkins (2001) notes that performance studies, a paradigm-breaking methodology for studying fans and fandom, "proves especially effective at identifying the space for improvisation opened up by various forms of interactive entertainment" (xx). New technology and styles of fandom today invigorate this paradigm, as highly interactive digital media like video games become popular paratexts, conventions like Comic-Con host thousands upon thousands of fans, and alternate reality games ludify real life for fans. As Lancaster writes:

[1.3] In these kinds of performances [the performances of fans playing games, writing fan fiction, role-playing characters, or simulating combat] participants' activities and desires intertwine within the functional characteristics of the environment. This is why people are required to bring a different kind of sensibility to them from what they are used to experiencing when watching television or reading a novel. People in conventional entertainment forms participate vicariously through another's performance... So-called immersive performances...require different kind of participatory technique—participants have to actively engage the site as performers. (32–33)

[1.4] Performance studies draws from theater, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, and history, among other disciplines; it is tied to an understanding of the practices that revolve around the presentation of a particular identity, activity, or custom. Performance is always something that we *do*. Fandom is a type of performance, as fans actively perform their identity in a variety of ways. At the same time, particular activities within fandom—playing games, writing fan fiction, vidding—reveal the performances at the heart of media viewership as well.

[1.5] These fan performances can take many directions. Some fans revel in dressing up as their favorite characters (cosplay), play board games based on their favorite texts, or even LARP (live-action role-play). All of these performances become "immersion in an imaginary entertainment environment" (Lancaster 2001, 5). The performance studies paradigm highlights not just formal sites of performance (theater, film, television) but also the smaller, more intimate sites of performance we all encounter on a daily basis—"in game stores, at schools, or in the living rooms of people's homes are where human beings are expressing their deepest desires" (33). Lancaster's work on performance inherently changes the way fans are viewed in fan studies—from audiences to co-creators, from viewers to doers.

[1.6] With J. Michael Straczynski's announcement of new *Babylon 5* feature film reboot (Munn 2014), it may be that the television show, which originally ran from 1993 to 1998, will find a resurgence in popularity on television and in DVD sales. However, beyond *Babylon 5*, performance studies has significantly changed the face of fan studies. In the following interview, which we conducted in August 2014 over e-mail, we asked Lancaster to expand on his use of performance studies as a methodology and to apply his discussion of fan performance in contemporary settings. Although Lancaster no longer focuses on fandom or fan studies in his research (having moved to documentary production), his work has had a major impact on the development of the discipline and continues to inspire and challenge fan scholars today.

2. Back to *Babylon*: Interview with Kurt Lancaster

[2.1] **Q:** Since *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* was published, how much have you kept up with *Babylon 5* fandom?

[2.2] **A:** My teaching focus doesn't allow for much fan studies. I've only stayed on the edges, since my main focus has been on cinematic production work and the DSLR [digital single-lens reflex camera] revolution with *DSLR Cinema*, *Cinema Raw*, and *Video Journalism for the Web*. I have not come across as much *Babylon 5* fandom as I do with *Star Wars* (1977–2005) or *Star Trek* (1966–69).

[2.3] **Q:** You published *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* in 2001 at the burgeoning stages of social media. In the book you talk about Web sites and fans' online textual poaching. In what ways do you think social media has developed, or even countered, some of the threads you develop in this analysis, including performance of character through fan fiction or through MUSH [multiuser shared hallucination, or fic based on multiplayer online games] fiction?

[2.4] **A:** If anything the performance elements have expanded. Computer games and online massive role-playing games, the technology, has taken over most of the other forms, but there's still more card and board games being published. In these types of games the performance isn't really about taking on a role but taking on the embedded strips of media behavior found in these games. Someone who isn't a *Star Wars* fan, for example, isn't likely going to play Fantasy Flight Game's *X-Wing* board game (2012). But those who do play imaginatively perform in George Lucas's universe—they become a part of it and by extension create their own stories within that universe, so it is no longer Lucas's dream but the dreams of all of the fans in this collective and collaborative storytelling universe.

[2.5] In computer games, environments are getting more realistic, so if you're participating in the *Star Wars* MMORPG [massive multiplayer online role-playing game], for example, the environments, the sound design, and the characters you play evoke the visual tropes originally found in the films. The game designers consciously utilize these tropes so when players enter that realm, it is as if they're performing in that universe. Their movie—as a dream state, the special effects, the sound effects, the emotional impact of the story—becomes reimagined through these games and helps create the immersion. It is these embedded elements from the film that get performed in the minds of the players as a point of inspiration as they engage in the universe.

[2.6] I think there's less fan fiction and more games and more fan films going on today. The games tend to promote the mainstream views of the films, and there's not as much alternative storytelling as you'll find in fan fiction—at least I haven't encountered any. The fan films allow young filmmakers to not only perform in the universe, perhaps playing a Han Solo type, but they also get to perform roles as the director—as if they're like George Lucas. So the Lucas role as filmmaker becomes embedded as performance tropes in these fans as well.

[2.7] **Q:** Obviously *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* is very much centered on Straczynski's show and draws from your own experiences with it and with its fandom, as well as with the games you cover. Does one have to draw from their own experiences (regarding acafan-dom) in order to discuss these themes of fandom, performance, and immersion in a fictional world? How would such a work look if it were more observational and less affective?

[2.8] **A:** I think that critics think they know what computer games and role-playing games are like. Experience is vastly different than performance made by observation. If you're an anthropologist, you don't sit back and observe a film or television show and say you're getting to know a particular subculture. You need to go there and become a participant-observer—but you still maintain your critical stance, because that's how you're trained. If you call yourself a filmmaker, you can't just watch movies. You have to actually pick up a camera and shoot something, then edit it. You need to understand storytelling. I sat on a thesis defense for a master's student in anthropology recently. He documented a Muslim community in LA that accepted gay members. He didn't just e-mail or interview members. He participated. He shot a documentary. He recorded events for the organization. He was a participant-observer. Could he have written about this community without participating, such as through e-mail and maybe an in-person interview? Yes. But the scholarship could never have been as rich as one who participates. You want to understand a computer game? You've got to sit down and play. You want to understand *Magic: The Gathering*

(Wizards of the Coast, 1993) tournaments? Enter a tournament and play, so when you do talk to people, you're coming from a place of understanding. You can't just sit back and observe.

[2.9] **Q:** When we first read *Interacting with "Babylon 5,"* we were taken by the way you approach games seriously as areas of performance, with players of games role-playing and articulating their own positions within the shared universe of *Babylon 5*. As more complex board games are being developed around science fiction programming (e.g., *Battlestar Galactica* [Fantasy Flight Games, 2008], *Star Trek: Expeditions* [WizKids Games, 2011]), do you see board games shaping fan interaction?

[2.10] **A:** A lot of the fantasy board games based on multiple universes are based on what Dan Mackay (2001) calls the imaginary entertainment environment or what Henry Jenkins (2006) calls media convergence. They're taking off. You can buy games as if you're flying an X-Wing fighter. Instead of a computer game that brings you realistic simulation, you're sold miniatures and engage in fighter combat. Back in the 1980s, the Avalon Hill Game Company introduced fighter combat simulation, as well as other types of war-based board games. They never revolved around existing fantasy universes. The new ones, such as Fantasy Flight Games, tap into a variety of universes, including *Conan*, *Game of Thrones*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *The Hobbit*, to name a few. They build online community forums. For example, the Game of Thrones Living Card Game forum contains over 9,200 topics and nearly 71,000 replies. That's engagement. Game companies are hyperaware of building online communities in order to maintain and build a fan base.

[2.11] **Q:** Fan studies has remained particularly wedded to the fans-as-poachers model rather than a performance studies model, although with some exceptions, like Francesca Coppa's (2006) analysis of fan fiction as performance. Why do you think this is? What are some of the advantages of a performance model?

[2.12] **A:** Fans who poach are performing. The fans-as-poachers model is just one theoretical position. Performance studies engages multiple theories in understanding human behavior. The specific performance theories I utilized revolved around a case study (*Babylon 5*) that was never hugely popular. Scholars doing research may not be as aware of it since it's called *Interacting with "Babylon 5"*—that may not be as clear in what it contains. If I had used *The Lord of the Rings* as a model, then it may have been much bigger and I would have sold more books.

[2.13] The advantage of the performance model is twofold. It allows for an intrinsic understanding of how players engage the fantasy universe through the interface of the game, and it allows for an understanding of how they perform in that universe. Elements of performance theories allow us to learn how the game works and how we

get immersed into the games. The fans-as-poachers model doesn't really allow us to understand the environment of the game. Treating text as text is different than examining how such texts may contain strips of embedded behavior that reinforce or induce performance in fans. But we're not talking about conventional performances either, such as an actor performing a role onstage or on screen. Fan players are not necessarily aware that they're performing, just as a person who is a fireman out of uniform isn't recognized as a fireman—but as soon as he puts on his gear, that costume, embedded with so many media tropes from television and films as well as our experience observing them at a parade or actually fighting a fire on the news, provides all the cultural codes needed for us to understand that this is a fireman. That's his performance. He's not taking on a role like an actor; he's taking on a sociocultural role that we associate as a fireman. In effect, his costume—as soon as he puts it on—is embedded with these media associations and from our living memories. That's the performance that gets enacted or is associated in our minds with the fireman. In many ways, the observer is performing the man's role by associating media memories onto him from their own imagination. The fireman, too, may perform based on what he thinks is how a fireman should behave (perform) from his own media associations and lived memories. Understanding fan performance in this way helps us understand that they're not playing traditional acting roles but rather sociocultural roles. That's what performance studies can bring to the table.

[2.14] **Q:** Along those same lines, when one thinks about fandom and performance, quite often cosplay comes to mind—and you describe a little bit of *Babylon 5* costuming in the book, as when fans "perform on the border between someone else's fantasy and the reality of everyday life" (159). Where do you see cosplay fitting into models of fan performance, and where do you see cosplay becoming relevant in contemporary fandom?

[2.15] **A:** Cosplay would make a great master's thesis or dissertation! There's not only cosplay where people perform in social settings, where it's more about the coolness of making a costume and showing it off. There's also a whole genre of fan movies that utilizes cosplay, parkour, and filmmaking reenactment. Video 1, based on the computer game *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007), reveals the nature of game movement actualized through film and the enactment of character through costume and his actions.

Assassin's Creed Meets Parkour in Real Life

Video 1. "Assassin's Creed Meets Parkour in Real Life" by devinsupertramp (2012).

[2.16] Fandom is really about the need for adolescents to help find a purpose or a moral center in a postindustrial, postentertainment world that no longer engages in liminal rites of passage that would typically help people to find their place in the social structure. By feeling an affinity for different fantasy environments—whether through novels, films, television, computer games, role-playing games, or board games—fans begin to discover a sense of purpose, and through interacting with others, they build a healthy social network. As adults, they maintain the ritual that helped shape their passions and identities, and it allows them to escape the mundane world—especially if they're living a job that doesn't really reflect who they are or wish to be.

[2.17] **Q:** *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* makes use of what you call the performance studies paradigm, a way of focusing contemporary culture through "different kinds of performances, irrespective of their cultural and social status in society" (xxix). In what ways does the performance studies paradigm function in today's media environment? Are there moments when it does not fit?

[2.18] **A:** The performance studies paradigm utilizes multiple models and multiple disciplines to examine how we live in the world, politically, socially, and culturally—so I think it always fits as a cutting-edge academic model that shifts us away from an academe of texts to an academe of lived experiences in a performative way. It doesn't look at static texts but at how we, as social performers, behave and live in the world. Some might argue that a media game, such as the board game *X-Wing*, is just a game, or that *Assassin's Creed* is just computer game entertainment. But when examined through the lens of the performance studies paradigm, we see it connected to a wider social and cultural sphere.

[2.19] When a group of fans make a movie like "Assassin's Creed Meets Parkour in Real Life" (video 1) together and create a short film that's just over two and a half minutes long, and it receives nearly 38 million hits on YouTube, performance studies is able to examine its social and cultural implications from a variety of perspectives that help us understand such a phenomenon. The experience of fans watching the film, making comments about it, attempting to mimic it—which is already an extended text from the computer game—helps create this short film to act as a living document. By this I mean that the fans make it come alive through their critique, praise, and other community-building experiences. It makes the universe of the game shift from the console of a living room computer game (73 million copies sold inclusive of its sequels) into a performance environment as people build online communities and create movies about the game. (There's a variety of story-based fan films, comic books, novels, and so forth.) Remember that performance studies is really about a variety of theories spawned in sociology, anthropology, theater, semiotics, and cultural studies, among others, as a way of examining the social, cultural, and political structures of everyday life as a lived—or performed—experience. The saturation of media itself isn't necessarily a performance. Taking these media items and making things with them or playing with them—fan films, fiction, games, social interaction online, costumes at science fiction conventions—does make it a performance because it has moved from the private to the public. In the public sphere we find performances happening around us all the time.

[2.20] **Q:** You conclude in the book that "ultimately, the fans are the ones who determine the future history of the universe Straczynski created, for it is the stories they create that keep the imaginary universe of Babylon 5 alive in the minds of its participants and thus in the wider culture" (xxxii). In this sense, and 13 years later, in what ways have *Babylon 5* fans been using digital media to remember the show and keep this imaginary universe alive?

[2.21] **A:** There's Facebook communities, fan fiction, and Twitter feeds, all keeping up with Straczynski's latest projects. Claudia Christian, the actress who played Ivonova, for example, interacts with fans online, including sending a birthday video with other B5 cast members (Andrea Thompson, Mira Furlan, Patricia Tallman) on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10152314589038581>). Her camera work is rough, and she says not to make fun of it. One of the fans makes a B5 reference by stating, "Make it a good 'un! As for the camera work: I think it is a highly original approach, simulating a Starfury pilot trying out all the possible manoeuvres..."

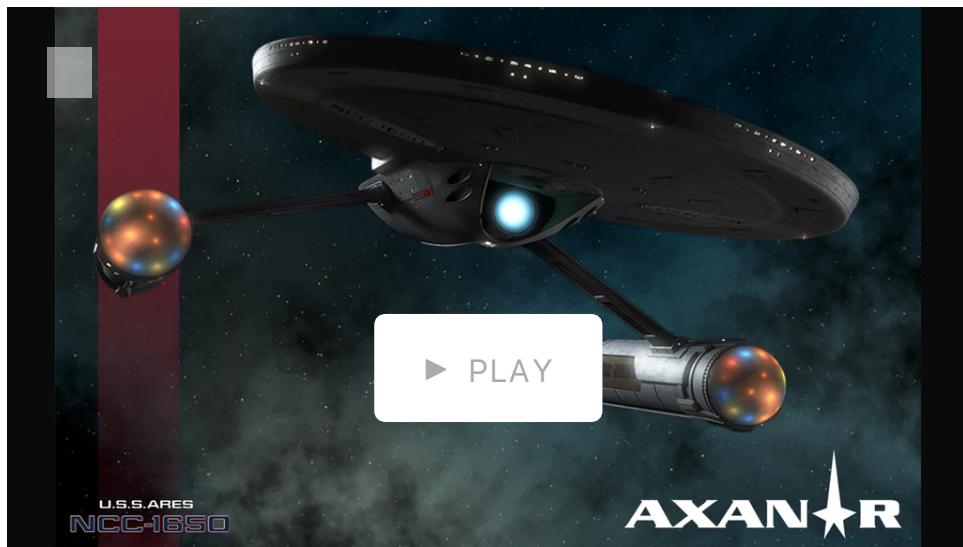
[2.22] Whether or not more B5 will be created isn't necessarily the issue—it's the fact that there's a fan base still interacting in the B5 universe through Facebook and Twitter, creating a community of like-minded people who love the show. It makes

them feel like they're still a part of something that moved them. This occurs through all kinds of media, not just science fiction shows.

[2.23] **Q:** You focus in the book on media producer interaction with fans and provide the example of Straczynski being challenged by fan critics. How do you think, in this current climate, media producer and fan interactions are unfolding? Are we seeing a performance on this platform from both parties?

[2.24] **A:** Straczynski was the first to do it online at a consistent level. It takes dedication and time. (His online critics were few, with a lot more positive comments about the series than negative.) It's a strong historical record of how a television series was produced at the time. I think we see similar interactions on a small, haphazard scale; I don't see anyone else posting as much as Straczynski did for over 5 years. Instead, you have such phenomenon as the television series *Veronica Mars* (2004–7) receiving feature-film funding because the producer went online, mentioned it, and raised \$5.7 million with a \$2 million goal in order to prove to the studios that it would be a viable product. The fan base of nearly 91,600 backers proved him right, and the production went forward. (The film was released in March 2014.)

[2.25] *Star Trek* is getting a second life due to fan producers creating fan films that are approaching broadcast and cinematic quality, the result of loyal fans being convinced by filmmakers (coming out of fandom) that its still a viable storytelling product. Fan producers are creating a feature film for release by raising money through Kickstarter, like *Star Trek: Axanar* (<http://www.startrekaxanar.com/>), which includes cast members from both *Battlestar Galactica* series (1978–79, 2003–10) and *Star Trek* television series as a way to build the fan base (video 2). Without this community of fans, such projects wouldn't get made.



Video 2. "Star Trek: Axanar" Kickstarter video (2014).

[2.26] **Q:** In the preface to the book, you touch on how nonfans sometimes perceive fan performance, such as engagement in role-playing games and other practices, in a negative manner. In what ways do you think, if at all, this has changed with digital fandom potentially making some of these practices more visible?

[2.27] **A:** Fan communities in game stores, such as a local game store called The Geekery here in Flagstaff, help mainstream the view, the performance. The Friday night *Magic* tournaments are full of performances. Now that there are many series that people watch—from Netflix's *House of Cards* (2013–) or HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–)—there's been a mainstreaming of media. This is really directly linked to the rise in smartphone and tablet use. People are building communities, communicating, engaging in all sorts of media from games to television series in public spaces, and it's discussed in public spaces. Comic-Con is considered to be a happening place. When I went to my first science fiction conventions in the late 1980s, it was not a mainstream event, as it is today. Those who dress up certainly see themselves as performers, but those who go to a game store and play games don't see themselves as performers. They're there to hang out, create friendships, build a community. A performance analysis sees the performance elements occurring there, but the fans don't see themselves in that way.

[2.28] **Q:** In what ways do you think video-sharing sites such as YouTube have affected fandom and performance?

[2.29] **A:** It's had a huge impact, as detailed above. It provides an outlet for fans to create films within their favorite fantasy environments, which of course media corporations love because it keeps the fan base alive for their products.

[2.30] **Q:** In your experience, how has fandom changed over the years? How have conventions changed?

[2.31] **A:** In the 1980s I went to a couple of Star Trek conventions and a traditional science fiction convention (set around novelists, as opposed to media-centered conventions). Conventions were listed in the SF trade magazine, *Locus*. Even though you would find a group of fellow fans it was still considered a bit strange to go to such conventions. Now it's considered cool. I remember attending a convention in the early 2000s, and Neil Gaiman was the guest author. Due to the widespread popularity of his *Sandman* series a lot of young people attended the convention. His fan base helped make conventions cool again.

[2.32] More recently, with the popularity of genre films, such as Spider-Man and large action films, Comic-Con becomes the default media-centered/saturated convention where it is the mainstream. You attend that con, and you're not considered to be on the fringe. My documentary about people wanting to go to Mars, *Dreams from a Red Planet*, was screened there in 2006.

[Dreams from a Red Planet from Kurt Lancaster on Vimeo.](#)

Video 3. *Dreams from a Red Planet* (2006).

[2.33] I have students in some of my classes who consider it cool to attend the Phoenix Comic-Con. The popularity of such shows as *Big Bang Theory* (2007–) and other types of the promotion of nerd culture—perhaps the coolness of Apple's Steve Jobs and the rise of new media technologies and the coolness of owning and operating new technologies birthed this notion of coolness—has led to a shift in the social consciousness about science fiction conventions over the past 20 to 30 years.

[2.34] **Q:** Have you any other work planned in the future focusing on fan studies?

[2.35] **A:** No. In many ways I've said all that I need to say in my books (with chapters on *Warlocks & Wardrive*, and in my published dissertation, *Interacting with "Babylon 5"*). I could certainly apply these concepts to the new fan communities being built today around a variety of different fantasy environments, but others can do that too. My work has shifted because I'm getting more people reading my film and documentary books than read my work on fan studies.

[2.36] **Q:** Your work has transitioned into documentary; do you see the two fields (documentary and fan studies) as related?

[2.37] **A:** Documentaries tell the stories of our time. There are very few good documentaries about fan culture. I'm currently working on a documentary about some of the people who hang out at The Geekery, the game store in my university town. Communities are being built around *Magic: The Gathering* tournaments. People may be trading cards, playing a game, but how they play—how they performed in the game—gets discussed after the game among friends, and that's where the real game is played; that type of community building is what allows the games to continue. If someone just came in and played and walked out afterward without talking to anyone or hanging out and discussing their mistakes and their wins, then the heart of the game would be empty of meaning. The community revolving around the games is the real game that gets performed. At tournaments, people from a fan base of a particular store will wear a store T-shirt. If they get knocked out of a round early, they'll go over and watch one of their friends in a match, giving them support. They'll also step back out of earshot and talk about a bad or missed play by that person. They're discussing how they would have responded—or performed—in the game.

[2.38] **Q:** Is there anything you wish you'd been able to cover in *Interacting with "Babylon 5"*?

[2.39] **A:** I'm proud of the work in with *Interacting with "Babylon 5."* I feel that it is complete and provides a strong, fully developed case study of how a particular universe—created by Straczynski—gets reiterated in other forms, like card games, tabletop role-playing and war games, computer games, and fan fiction. Each one

provides a different way for fans to enter that universe and become part of its collective story. If *Babylon 5* as a television series is the myth text, then all of these other forms become the way people perform in the myth, similar in many ways to ancient Greek playwrights writing stories about their central myths. If I were to do it over, I would look at *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *The Lord of the Rings* as models since these are mainstream and it would have generated a wider readership. But I'll leave that for others to do.

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Interview

Interview with Hello Earth Productions

Cameron Salisbury

[0.1] *Abstract*—Interview with Joy DeLyria and Kris Hambrick, cofounders of Hello Earth Productions, a grassroots, community-based theater company in Seattle, Washington.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Star Trek; Theater

Salisbury, Cameron. 2015. "Interview with Hello Earth Productions." In "Performance and Performativity in Fandom," edited by Lucy Bennett and Paul J. Booth, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 18. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0643>.

1. Introduction

[1.1] Joy DeLyria and Kris Hambrick are the cofounders of Hello Earth Productions (figure 1), a grassroots, community-based theater company in Seattle, Washington, that interprets pop culture in free, outdoor plays. They both produce Outdoor Trek, live adaptations of episodes from the original series of *Star Trek* (1966–69). They make the majority of sets, props, and costumes themselves; Kris stars as Captain Kirk, and Joy directs. Outdoor Trek has produced four plays so far ("Naked Time," "This Side of Paradise," "The Devil in the Dark," and "Mirror Mirror" [figure 2]). The plays usually run in July and August for three weekends with audiences of up to 300. In 2014, a total of 1,300 people saw "Mirror, Mirror."



Figure 1. Outdoor Trek logo featuring the Seattle Space Needle. [[View larger image](#).]

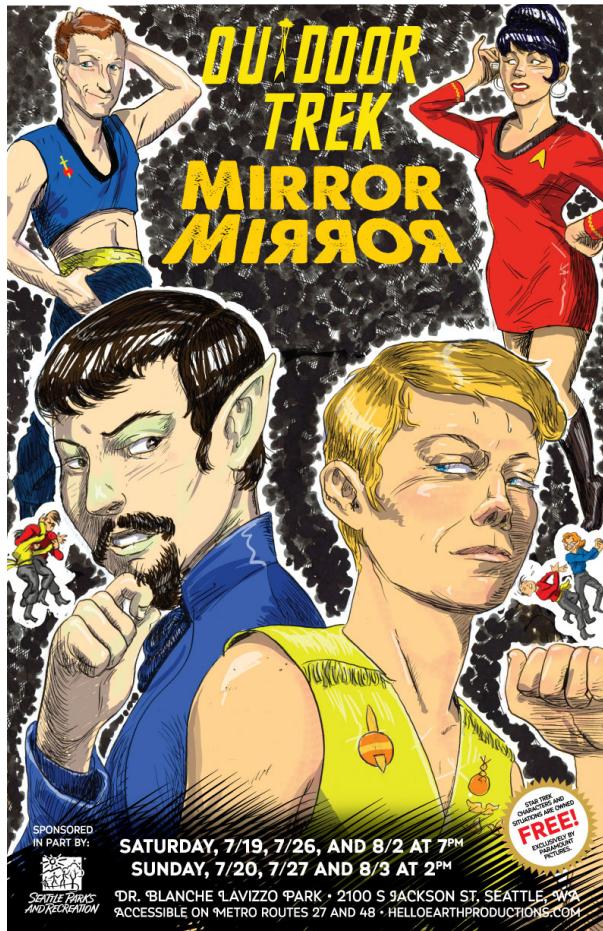


Figure 2. Outdoor Trek's poster for "Mirror Mirror." [[View larger image](#).]

[1.2] Outside of Hello Earth Productions, both Kris and Joy work at Pacific Science Center. Kris interprets science on the exhibit floor, which includes delivering live planetarium shows and sometimes laser shows. Joy develops interpretive and educational activities and shows; she sometimes gets to throw fireballs.

[1.3] This interview was conducted via e-mail and has been rearranged and edited for clarity.

2. Origin story

[2.1] **Q:** How did Hello Earth get started?

[2.2] **Hambrick:** We started in 2010, after we saw Atomic Arts' production of "Amok Time" in Portland in 2009. On the drive back home, we thought, "Hey, this should exist in every city. I wish we had it in Seattle." And we realized that we could be the ones to bring it there. We have an amazing group of people we've worked with over the years, and it has become a truly communal experience that runs entirely on donations from audience members.

[2.3] **Q:** Did you have any prior experience with theater?

[2.4] **DeLyria:** Wow. No one's ever asked me that before. When I was very young, Theatre was that cool older dude who was only rarely available and somewhat expensive on dates. I went all the way in high school and college, if you know what I mean, but after that, Theatre just kind of dropped off my map. I saw Theatre occasionally and lusted from afar, but dates were just too expensive and difficult to schedule.

[2.5] Eventually I learned that Theatre had this mad, bad, dangerous-to-know mirror!twin, Community Theatre, and I got very interested in becoming involved. I didn't know how, though. It wasn't until I saw Atomic Arts' production, Trek in the Park, that I realized I could do Theatre. I could do Theatre anytime and anywhere. I could do Theatre in the back of my car; I could do Theatre in my house, in my bed; I could do Theatre in public parks; I could do Theatre in hotels. I could even do Theatre in church (Fremont Baptist, to be specific).

[2.6] I could do Theatre and I did. Now I have had four bastard children by Theatre, and I'm looking to have more. I want to move in with Theatre; I want to shack up more than once a year; I want to get more people involved and have orgies with Theatre (we're not exclusive).

[2.7] Theatre, I don't know how to quit you.

3. Recasting cultural icons

[3.1] **Q:** Theater is by nature an exhibitionist, whereas Television, *Star Trek*'s original medium, prefers a quiet night at home. Why adapt *Star Trek* for a live audience?

[3.2] **Hambrick:** While it's true that the mediums elicit or even require different behavior from an audience, they are both performative. There's an argument to be made, for sure, that some things should not make the jump between the screen (of whatever size) and the stage. The best play can fall flat on screen, and vice versa. One of the fun things you can do with the translation, however, is experiment with how the audience responds and what it adds, or takes away, from the experience. Watching *Star Trek* on Netflix can be very solitary. But what happens when you take the same material and put it in front of people who can respond, both to what they're seeing and to the other audience members around them? It's not exactly the same, but it's one of the reasons I like seeing classic movies in theaters. I pick up something new every time, even from a beloved classic, because of the response and energy of the crowd around me. Outdoor Trek goes even a step farther toward making Trek a communal experience. It's broadening the conversation.

[3.3] **Q:** You cast your shows without regard for sex, gender, race, or ability (figure 3). Kirk and Spock, arguably two of the most influential masculine icons in science fiction, are played by Kris Hambrick and Helen Parson. Why did you decide to do it this way?



Figure 3. Sierra McWilliams, Kris Hambrick, Helen Tang, and Aleksandr Robbins on the bridge of the Enterprise in "Mirror Mirror." [[View larger image.](#)]

[3.4] **DeLyria:** I cast blind for several reasons. First of all, there are still a disproportionately higher number of parts in Western theater for thin, able-bodied, cisgender white males than any other group out there, yet many of those parts are not about being thin, able-bodied, cisgender, white, or male. They are roles that explore what it is to be human, and in most cases virtually any human could play them—yet in theater (as well as TV and cinema) there is a casting bias. I do not want to have that bias, and I want to make parts available to great actors who can play them, rather than actors who look the part.

[3.5] Secondly, we are not trying to re-create the original series TV show. Luckily, media outlets such as Netflix have made the show widely available, and I would far

prefer people to watch the episode on TV if they want to watch a version of the show that looks exactly like the original. The point of adapting an episode of TV for theater is to reinterpret it, which means exploring the text for different meanings, changing the context such that people ask new questions.

[3.6] *Star Trek*'s original series aired in the 1960s; it is now 2014. While the show was progressive for its time—far more than other *Star Treks* are for their times—some elements of the show are deeply offensive. Some people looking back at *Star Trek* choose to poke fun or condemn the ways in which it was prejudiced, but I feel that it is possible to respect the effort and impact the show made, while at the same time encouraging fans to question and reevaluate it. Starfleet was a dream for our future; it makes sense to me that as we learn more and understand more about each other, we will have to continue to edit and tinker with that dream so that it allows for infinite diversity in infinite combinations.

[3.7] **Q:** Has this way of casting taken any unexpected turns?

[3.8] **DeLyria:** For the first play we did, "Naked Time," I had no preconceived ideas about whom I would cast. Depending on who showed up at auditions, Kirk could have been a man, a woman, white, a person of color, cisgender, transgender, able, differently abled, short, tall, old, young, petite, plus-size. I cast Kris and Helen because I thought they were best for the parts, and doing so has proven (as Spock would say) fascinating.

[3.9] Sometimes when they are playing their roles, aspects of that person's appearance and identity fall away as he or she becomes the character. I don't claim to be blind to color or size or age or sex or whatever else—at times, that is impossible. Yet when I cast an African American man as Doctor McCoy or a woman as Doctor McCoy, they are not "the black Doctor McCoy" and "the female Doctor McCoy." Each of them is just Doctor McCoy.

[3.10] This is what acting is about—if I cast Chris Evans as Captain America, if Chris Evans is a decent actor, then Chris Evans should fall away until what you see is Captain America. Now imagine Kerry Washington as Captain America. You wouldn't forget that she's a woman and she's African American, but it wouldn't really matter, would it? She's a great enough actress that she could still be Captain America.

[3.11] Kerry Washington could play Captain America, but her body would affect how people read certain scenes and choices—just as Nick Fury's chase scene in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), in which a lone black man is pursued and shot at by white cops, would feel very different had he been played by George Clooney instead

of Samuel L. Jackson. In a vacuum (of space?), casting doesn't matter, but we're stuck on Earth.

[3.12] **Q:** Did Hello Earth's scripts yield any moments—as a result of casting or staging or even musical choices (you perform the shows with a live bluegrass band!)—that made you or your audiences go, "Whoa, that reads a little differently now"?

[3.13] **DeLyria:** Yes, of course. There was a part in the first episode we did where McCoy grabs Kirk, rips his shirt, and hyposprays him to give him a cure. In that episode, McCoy was played by a black man and Kirk was played by a white woman, so we had to work to make it look friendly and not violent.

[3.14] This year I cast a tall cisgender male actor as Marlena Moreau, who is Captain Kirk's love interest in this year's play, "Mirror, Mirror." There is a part where Kirk grabs Marlena, kisses her, and says, "You're the captain's woman until he says you're not" (figure 4). This was an extremely difficult part to direct because it was important for Kris to look powerful and in control without—as a petite woman—looking silly. Kris is playing a man's part, but this isn't drag—we don't try to hide the fact that she is a woman physically, and she doesn't lower her voice.



Figure 4. Captain Kirk (Kris Hambrick) embraces Marlena Moreau (James Lyle). [[View larger image](#).]

[3.15] So directing that kiss was difficult, because I ended up telling Kris not to do anything typically regarded as feminine—don't raise up on tiptoe, don't stroke his chest, put your arms outside of his, pull him down to you. That was hard for Kris, as a small woman—but it was also interesting, because I, as a tall and largish woman, never really do any of those things to kiss or embrace anyone. While these behaviors are much more about size than they are about gender performance, whenever Kris played to her size, it made her read as vulnerable, and she had to overcompensate because of it.

[3.16] But no matter how much she compensates, Kris is fairly recognizably a woman, and a small one at that. Having a much larger man say to her, "Am I your woman?" would, I think, for some audience members highlight the sexism inherent in the script and invite an empowered and/or feminist reading. For other audience members, hearing it from a man would excise the sexism and show what the writers perhaps intended: that Marlena was ambitious and wants to be assured of her position in the ranks. Either way, hearing a man say that line makes you think about it, whereas hearing a woman say it, you could easily dismiss it as sexist or think it perfectly legitimate.

4. Community and transformative fandom

[4.1] **Q:** *Star Trek* has always been a show with a community-minded fan base. Did you see this community in evidence during your production?

[4.2] **Hambrick:** Since we both come from fannish backgrounds, and since *Trek* has such a strong foothold in that tradition, it's hard not to see evidence of it at work both behind and in front of the curtain. *Outdoor Trek* is a transformative work, and I think we draw on that mind-set as much as that of traditional theater—or at the very least, we are mindful of how little can separate the two. We weren't part of that first wave of *Trek* fandom, but we have definitely heard feedback from those who have been in the *Trek* fan community a lot longer than we have, and it's been overwhelmingly positive. No one has come up and said, "You can't do that to *Star Trek*." They all believe in the spirit of what we're doing, because, I think, it follows the spirit of both fandom and *Trek* itself. In some ways, too, our audience and our production team represent a merging of the old and new fan experience.

[4.3] **Q:** Both of you have written fan fiction for *Star Trek* as well as other media. How do your fannish backgrounds affect your approach to theater, and this enterprise in particular?

[4.4] **Hambrick:** I've always felt a kinship between my acting and my fan writings, both in fic and in role-play. I like acting because I get to inhabit a character and work

through what they'd do. Sometimes that means inventing out of whole cloth. Sometimes that means I've got the plot and the lines all laid out in front of me, and I have to figure out how to get from here to there in a way that makes sense for myself. While using the original script means we're not transforming the actual words, it does require us to interpret what they mean. I feel like if we were trying to do not just a word-for-word but a literal copy of the original, it might feel less like a fan work. As it is, I think it's somewhere in between. All theater requires the company to take a work that's on paper and translate it to another medium. What we do translates a performed work onto paper and then into another performance, and the result is often fairly different from the original, despite our use of a transcript.

[4.5] For me, all theater feels like a fannish endeavor, because whether I'm writing new words for Kirk to say or acting out his words on stage, the question is still, "What is he doing, thinking, or feeling, and why?" So for me, Outdoor Trek is both Shakespeare in the Park and a fandom remix of a beloved story.

Book review

Fandom unbound: Otaku culture in a connected world, edited by Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Izumi Tsuji

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[0.1] *Keywords*—2chan; AMV; Anime; Cosplay; *Dōjinshi*; Fan community; Games; Japan; Manga; *Otaku*; Trains; United States

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Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe and Izumi Tsuji, eds. *Fandom unbound: Otaku culture in a connected world*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012, Kindle edition, \$35; paperback, \$38 (352p) ISBN 978-0300158649.

[1] Language barriers have kept Japanese scholarship about fans relatively inaccessible to English-speaking researchers. *Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World*, edited by Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Izumi Tsuji, is an invaluable door into the young but important field of *otaku* studies in Japan. The collection showcases a wide variety of Japanese fan practices, using mostly ethnographic approaches to clarify how *otaku* communities come into being, organize themselves, develop community-specific rules and ethics, and use infrastructure, especially the Internet, for networking and creation. The book also attempts to show how *otaku* practices have become unmoored from their Japanese origins to find expression in overseas fan communities. While *Fandom Unbound* is sure to be of interest to many audiences, I will use this review to evaluate its usefulness for English-language fan studies scholars in particular.

[2] *Fandom Unbound* has been released in print and e-book formats. It includes a detailed index, and most chapters have black-and-white illustrations and/or tables. The book consists of an introduction and 12 chapters, divided into three parts that focus on "the particular cultural logics of otaku culture, the underlying peer-to-peer infrastructures that enable it, and the varied niche subcultures that these logics and

infrastructures have encouraged" (Ito, location 132). The chapters are a mix of translations of key *otaku* studies texts by leading Japanese scholars such as Azuma Hiroki and Kaiichirō Morikawa, new contributions by younger up-and-coming Japanese *otaku* studies researchers such as Hiroaki Tamagawa, Daisuke Okabe, and Kimi Ishida, and also several US-based scholars of anime and manga studies. Just as *otaku* does not quite translate into "fan," *otaku* studies is not easily equated with fan studies. Fortunately, editor Ito's introduction offers a comprehensive framing of the scholarly background of the book in general and the individual contributors in particular, which should make this volume mostly easily accessible to readers who are unfamiliar with Japanese fan practices or Japanese scholarship on fans.

[3] That same introduction also situates the individual chapters within the book's overarching theme: how *otaku* practices inside and outside Japan fit in with broader cultural logics of peer production and open culture. All chapters serve to situate varied *otaku* groups and practices within a common framework of community-based exchange, creation, and learning, which Ito argues is typical of the kind of networked peer production that the Internet has enabled for many kinds of publics. Attempts to connect fan culture with broader open culture are increasingly turning up in English-language fan studies as well as Japanese, and Ito's assessment of fan culture's place at the vanguard of peer production is articulate and highly useful. In this context, the included excerpt from cultural critic Hiroki Azuma's 2001 book *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* gains a new relevance. *Database Animals* is still one of the touchstones of scholarship on *otaku* in Japan and beyond, and also one of few Japanese *otaku* studies works that have been translated into English (Azuma 2009). Azuma's linking of *otaku* culture with postmodernism, including a framing of fan work creation and reading as database consumption, is so strongly theoretical that it may feel slightly out of place among the other chapters. However, it also offers a framework for interpreting fan activities as a cultural phenomenon that bolsters Ito's arguments about how *otaku* production fits in with related open movements that function in a similar way.

[4] A particular kind of community formation and organization is one of the key traits of networked peer production-focused cultures, and *Fandom Unbound* pays ample attention to many different kinds of *otaku* communities. To scholars who are relatively unfamiliar with *otaku*, the chapters that focus on various kinds of Japanese fan communities are an eye-opening introduction to how varied *otaku* culture really is. Nevertheless, many of the identity and community formation practices that these disparate-seeming communities engage in will sound familiar. Daisuke Okabe, for instance, describes how practitioners of cosplay enter cosplay communities, find mentorship from more experienced fans, and protect the noncommercial nature of cosplay by policing actions that are seen as unfannish. Researchers of gaming cultures

will find familiar notes in Yoshimasa Kijima's account of how fans of fighter games structure their relationships with likeminded fans to form a community, setting themselves apart from more casual gamers through particular constructions of competitiveness. When Daisuke Okabe and Kimi Ishida examine the ways in which *fujoshi*, female fans of boy's love products, shape their identities in relation to each other and to nonfans, they reveal that the practice of concealment of fan identity by *fujoshi* is not merely a strategy to hide potentially embarrassing or illegal hobbies, but a rich source for social interaction and a weapon against ridicule by other fans or outsiders. *Fandom Unbound* contains several other interesting analyses of fannish rhetorics, from users of 2chan, the world's largest Internet forum, to overseas fans of manga and anime who refer to themselves as *otaku*.

[5] Also closely related to Ito's framing of *otaku* culture as part of open culture in general are the infrastructures that fans use for creation, distribution, and community formation. *Fandom Unbound* focuses not just on the Internet but also on connecting online practices with the kind of off-line fannish infrastructure that is particular to Japan-based fan communities. Hiroaki Tamagawa gives a highly detailed account of how Japanese infrastructure for distributing the zines called *dōjinshi* evolved into a dense web of conventions and shops fueled by both commercial and noncommercial motivations from participants. Tamagawa makes skillful use of survey data from Comic Market, also known as Comiket, the massive fan-organized *dōjinshi* market that served as a blueprint for Japan's particular fan convention format. The fact that Japanese fan cultures rely on extensive off-line infrastructure is further highlighted by Kaichirō Morikawa's chapter, which traces the growth of two famous fan-oriented shopping neighborhoods in Tokyo, Ikebukuro and (especially) Akihabara. Like Azuma's chapter, Morikawa's analysis of how Akihabara transformed into an *otaku* neighborhood through demand-driven concentration of fan-oriented shops rather than formal planning is another key text in Japanese *otaku* studies, and its inclusion in *Fandom Unbound* is fortunate indeed, particularly in light of the recent interest in off-line fan activities and fannish infrastructure that can be seen in English-speaking fan studies. The use of virtual infrastructures by fans for collaborative creation and community formation is also taken up in many chapters, from Azuma's theoretical account of how technology transformed *otaku* consumption in general to more specific practices of forum users, cosplayers, fighter game *otaku*, and—again—*otaku* communities outside of Japan, from anime and manga fans in general to the particular communities around fan subbing and anime music video creation.

[6] Four chapters about non-Japanese *otaku* are included in *Fandom Unbound* for a specific purpose: to illustrate that *otaku* practices exist outside of Japan, and to argue that these are not just extensions of Japanese *otaku* culture but distinctly localized identities that cannot easily be called Japanese. Lawrence Eng offers a highly detailed

history of the term *otaku* in the United States, attempts to identify an *otaku* ethic that is supposedly shared between *otaku* in Japan and overseas, and traces the history of anime and manga fandom in the United States to frame it as "an early prototype of peer-to-peer network culture even before the advent of the internet" (location 3822). Eng's account of how American fans encouraged the establishment of a manga and anime distribution industry within their country, as well as extensive off-line and online fannish infrastructure, is an excellent description of how fans can bring about direct change in the commercial media offerings available to them. In her chapters, editor Mizuko Ito also focuses on overseas *otaku* and their networked infrastructure, community organization, noncommercial motivations, and use of digital tools for creation, communication, and distribution. Ito's analysis of fan subbing as an almost professionalized system that supports and directs massive amounts of volunteer translation work, and the various sets of motivations of the many kinds of fans who are in some way involved, is a particularly good illustration of how some fan activities are organized in ways that are more than reminiscent of the open source software production that is often seen as the paradigm expression of open culture.

[7] *Fandom Unbound* is the most up-to-date and comprehensive collection of works on Japanese fan cultures available in English today. As such, it (unintentionally) illustrates the divisions that exist between English-language and Japanese-language scholarship of fans and even within various branches of English-language fan studies. There are several English-language fan studies traditions, and they are sometimes great strangers to each other. One particular rift in English-language fan studies that has often been pointed out is that between studies of Western media fans with strong roots in media studies, and research on fans of Japanese popular culture, which has more often emerged from anime and manga studies. *Fandom Unbound* is clearly meant to appeal to scholars from the second kind of fan studies. In her introduction, Mizuko Ito situates the volume squarely within anime and manga studies by almost solely referencing authors who are household names within those fields—Anne Allison, Roland Kelts, Sharon Kinsella, Susan Napier, and the like. One reason it is important to engage with this different branch of fan studies and its canon is that reading Kinsella or Napier can be a shortcut to learning from Japanese-language fan studies, a large body of fan studies scholarship that is virtually unknown to most English-speaking scholars. Parts of Japanese scholarship are becoming accessible through numerous recent translation efforts—for instance, in books like *Fandom Unbound*, the Mechademia series of edited books, the conference papers translated through the International Manga Research Center of Kyoto Seika University, and several translations in *Transformative Works and Cultures* ([note 1](#)). However, the essays by Japanese contributors in *Fandom Unbound* drive home that Japanese fan studies are at least as disconnected from English-language fan studies as the converse. While the Japanese contributors reference some English-language sources, almost none of the

chapters refer to scholars from media studies-based Western fan studies. Only Henry Jenkins, who gave feedback on the collection ([note 2](#)), receives several mentions, and many of those are to older works like *Textual Poachers* (1992). One hopes that learning from *Fandom Unbound* will inspire English-speaking fan studies scholars to make their work more accessible to Japanese-speaking colleagues, perhaps by having important works from English-language fan studies translated into Japanese.

[8] In spite of its great contributions, *Fandom Unbound* also has some imperfections. Several authors have multiple essays featured, which detracts from the otherwise impressive variety of the collection; introducing a few more scholars may have made the book more useful for those new to Japanese fan studies. A more vexing issue is that, with a few exceptions, most contributors do not clearly articulate the gendered aspects of the *otaku* culture they discuss. This is a problem for various reasons, but particularly because the word *otaku* itself is ambiguously gendered. While *otaku* can mean both male and female fans, it is often used to refer specifically to male fans—and many chapters fail to make it clear whether they are speaking of male fans, female fans, or both. The collection makes frequent pronouncements about *otaku* culture or *otaku* ethics that do not specify whether *otaku* is used in its all-inclusive meaning or in its meaning of male fan. This risks leaving readers confused about the gendered dynamics of fan communities in Japan, because male and female fans often have distinctly different practices, despite many similarities and areas of cooperation. It may also give the impression that male fans make up a larger percentage of all *otaku* than they actually do, both in Japan and overseas. Female fans have kept a relatively low profile in contemporary Japanese fan culture until recently, but they were active core participants from the start and are estimated to make up at least 40 percent of all *otaku*, as well as a majority of all *otaku* in *dōjinshi*, cosplay, and Vocaloid fandom (Yano Research Institute 2012, 642). Finally, while *Fandom Unbound* makes an invaluable contribution to growing scholarship on the transcultural functioning of fandoms, its examination of how influences flow in "the US–Japan cultural corridor" (Ito, location 218) is not an unqualified success. While the collection adroitly interprets fan culture as online networked culture, several chapters fail to consistently keep in mind that the online communities they discuss may very well consist of individuals of many nationalities. Descriptions of how overseas anime and manga fans relate to other English-speaking fan communities are also vague at best, and include a few important mistakes about non-anime and manga fan communities. Gaining a more useful understanding of online transcultural fannish interactions will probably take more sustained efforts across disciplines and language barriers.

[9] *Fandom Unbound*'s broad scope, numerous contributions by Japanese scholars, and skillful framing of *otaku* culture within broader cultural movements make the collection a must-read for anyone concerned with the cultural function or functions of

fandoms across the globe. For English-speaking fan studies scholars who are relatively unfamiliar with scholarship concerning fans of Japanese media, this book will be an essential introduction not just to Japanese scholarship but also to a lesser-known but important English-language fan studies tradition that has grown from anime and manga scholarship. The collection is a diverse and pleasant read, appropriate for readers without an academic background. The editors apparently intend for it to be read by a wide variety of audiences, with the book stating that it is available in its entirety on the Web site of Yale University Press. Unfortunately, an online copy of the book is not to be found, although a copy of Ito's introduction is available (<http://web.mit.edu/condry/Public/jing-articles/Ito12FandomUnboundOtaku-Intro.pdf>). I hope this will change soon, so *Fandom Unbound* can receive the broad attention it deserves.

Notes

1. See Mechadima (<http://mechademia.org>), IMRC (<http://imrc.jp>), Hori (2013), and Suzuki (2013).
 2. Jenkins also conducted an interview with the editors on his blog:
http://henryjenkins.org/2012/04/otaku_culture_in_a_connected_w.html,
http://henryjenkins.org/2012/04/otaku_culture_in_a_connected_w_1.html,
http://henryjenkins.org/2012/04/otaku_culture_in_a_connected_w_2.html.
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Review

Work/text: Investigating "The Man from U.N.C.L.E." by Cynthia W. Walker

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[0.1] *Keywords*—Audience analysis; Fan culture; Television

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Cynthia W. Walker. 2015. *Work/text: Investigating "The Man from U.N.C.L.E."* New York: Hampton Press, 2013. Hardcover, \$89.50 (367p) ISBN 978-1612891200; paperback, \$37.95 (379p) ISBN 978-1612891217.

[1] Before there was *Star Trek* (1966–69), there was *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964–68). The two shows vie for the title of first media fandom, and for that reason alone, Cynthia Walker's *Work/Text: Investigating The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (2013) might be of interest to media fans and acafans both. Walker's book traces the development of the whole U.N.C.L.E. universe from creator Norman Felton's almost offhand pitch to advertisers in 1962 to the Guy Ritchie-directed reboot scheduled for 2015. That path, described in detail (possibly too much detail for those only casually interested in the show), is characterized by a series of course-changing collisions and artistic interventions among writers, producers, networks, advertisers, fans, audiences, journalists, and other interest groups. Walker demonstrates that U.N.C.L.E. was an early and influential transmedia franchise, a story told not only via television but in movies and tie-in novels and comic books and on lunchboxes and through a startling variety of intertexts and fan texts. She also argues that understanding and theorizing the complexities of U.N.C.L.E. can serve to illustrate the immensely complex creative realities of television, which, despite today's current push toward auteurship, has always been one of the messiest and most collaborative modes of storytelling.

[2] In service of these arguments, Walker situates *U.N.C.L.E.* within two theoretical models: Marshall McLuhan's notion of hot and cool media, and Roland Barthes's concepts of work and text. *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* has always been described as cool, and Walker argues that the show was cool not only in the mid-1960s sense of hip, but also in the McLuhanite sense of being understated and low information, requiring its audience to fill in the missing pieces and thus inviting particularly high levels of participation and collaboration. Throughout the book, Walker presents *U.N.C.L.E.* as an intensely permeable work highly open to creative interventions, and she uses the dialogic model of work/text to organize her thinking on this; that is, that active writing (work) and active interpretive reading (text) happen simultaneously and continuously to create meaning(s). So Walker portrays *U.N.C.L.E.* as both a work and a text or as a work/text in which a changing roster of constituencies drives the show's formal expression, and a changing number of readers make meaning from the changes. The book also features diagrams illustrating *U.N.C.L.E.*'s crucial writers and readers at every stage (the diagrams show how writers and readers frequently and productively swapped roles), showing how the show's meaning and themes evolved through each creative iteration, each new revision.

[3] So, for example, Walker argues that *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*'s very concept can be understood as a text that Norman Felton produced by reading the work of various timely influences, which included 1960s television, James Bond spy stories, and a question posed to him by BBC executive Joanna Spicer: "Why must the leads in your American series always be big, tall, and muscular? And why do the heroes always have to be American and the villains from other countries?" (82). Here, at the very birth of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* concept, Walker depicts Felton not as a brilliant televisual auteur but as a particularly sensitive and talented reader who actively interpreted particular strands of his contemporary culture to produce the first text of *U.N.C.L.E.*—the concept of a spy who was not tall, muscular, or identified exclusively with America. Or, as Walker puts it:

[4] Felton both passively and actively "reads" the proto-text that results from the "work" of several sources: the questions of the BBC comptroller; the current situation in the television industry; Fleming's book, *Thrilling Cities*; the entire spy story genre; and, of course, Felton's own experiences, both professionally and personally. As a result of the interaction between Felton and these diverse sources, a concept (form) of "a different kind of action hero" (concept) occurs. (83)

[5] I can't think of a book that works so hard to radically decenter the idea of individual televisual authorship, and Walker continues in this vein throughout, illustrating a highly detailed series of work/text and shaper/interpreter relationships

and interactions. Felton pitches to advertisers, advertisers give notes to Felton, Felton pitches to Ian Fleming, Fleming rewrites for Felton and the network, producer Sam Rolfe rewrites Fleming, and so on. This process only gets more complicated once actors and other production personnel (directors, set designers, line producers) get involved in actually filming the episodes; moving from written script to dramatic action involves a new group of creatives. So, for instance, the casting of Robert Vaughn and David McCallum gave those actors obvious creative authority over U.N.C.L.E. agents Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin, and audiences responded by reading the characters intertextually with their actors, significantly changing their meanings. Similarly, the changing roster of show producers and episode writers—particularly in the series' third and fourth seasons, which were thought to have become too comic and too grim, respectively—resulted in changes to the U.N.C.L.E. work which changed the way the text was received by its audience. Lastly, U.N.C.L.E.'s work/text was complicated by its transmedia storytelling, particularly the series of contemporary Ace tie-in paperbacks, which were written by a group of freelance western, adventure, and science fiction writers, each of whom brought their own generic twists to the material.

[6] While Walker does situate fans on both sides of the U.N.C.L.E. work/text, she defines fans primarily as active core viewers of the show who, in making meaning of the text, rewrite the work. The book doesn't seem to be interested in transformative works per se: Walker almost glancingly gestures at a variety of fan practices, but gives no particular attention to the writing of fan fiction or the making of visual art, focusing as much or more on fan activities like conventions, scrapbooking, collecting props and scripts, and playing U.N.C.L.E. in the backyard with prop guns, badges, and communicator pens. However, Walker uses the core fan community of U.N.C.L.E. as a primary source, surveying their attitudes toward and opinions of the show and its characters and using them to demonstrate evidence of the multiple and contradictory readings of the U.N.C.L.E. text. Walker carefully illustrates all the varying shades of U.N.C.L.E. and tries to show how these different versions of the work played with fans, who seem to be the ultimate arbiters of the show's meaning: it is fans who have decided on the best and worst episodes and on what the truest vision of U.N.C.L.E. is. While Walker also looks at more standard metrics like ratings and audience share, it's clear that she shares fandom's assessment of U.N.C.L.E.'s merits. U.N.C.L.E. fans are the book's true experts, and they understand the show in ways that the casual viewer doesn't (for instance, fans and creators both hate many of the show's best-rated episodes: one in which Napoleon and Illya meet a gorilla is repeatedly cited as a loser despite its success at broadcast). Walker defers to fans' voices and their obviously well-considered opinions.

[7] The book also provides a fascinating glimpse of the cultural and social matrix within which media fandom developed in the mid-1960s. Walker points out that many

of the players who were later to create the elaborate participatory culture around *Star Trek* were already on the scene for U.N.C.L.E., not only professionals like science fiction writer Harlan Ellison and television directors like Marc Daniels, but fans, too: for example, Buck Coulson (who wrote U.N.C.L.E. Ace novels) was married to Juanita Coulson (editor of the zine *ST-Phile*), and Star Trek superfan Bjo Trimble (*The Star Trek Concordance* [1969], the Save *Star Trek* campaign) was housemates with U.N.C.L.E. fan and writer David McDaniel. Media fandom emerged out of a small and creative world of active SF fans and writers.

[8] There are other commonalities too, and other ways in which U.N.C.L.E. seems to be not just the first media fandom but also an ur-fandom. Walker points out that both *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and *Star Trek* feature wide-ranging adventures to exotic places, and that at the core "are two main characters—friends—one of whom is an extroverted, womanizing, swashbuckling adventurer while the other is a 'cooler,' quieter, more rational and technically minded 'alien'" (72). Walker further notes that while male buddy pairings have always been around, the characters of Kuryakin and Spock were both seen as so alien that they were both initially (and specifically) rejected by the networks sponsoring the shows. Similarly, in both *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and *Star Trek* there was a gender split in reception, with female fans more interested in the characters (and in Illya) and male fans more interested in the spy universe and gadgets (and in Solo).

[9] On this note, I myself can't help but be intrigued by the fact that the sidekick figure who eventually became Illya Kuryakin was originally proposed as Mary Smith, "a talented if struggling actress who also happens to be multilingual and something of a chameleon. She is ready to hop a plane to anywhere in the world to assume any number of identities as needed" (88). Walker notes that while the character experienced a number of changes, including that of gender, her main attributes—disguises, languages, a prickly relationship with Solo—survive in Kuryakin. In a 2008 article in this journal (Coppa 2008), I made a similar assertion about *Star Trek*'s Mr. Spock, arguing that part of fandom's fascination with him was that he was a placeholder for an excised female character: Number One, the captain's first officer in the pilot (and another character that the network objected to and rejected, with rather more success). So it's funny to read Walker's book and wonder, as I so often do, if whether behind *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* there was, after all, a woman.

[10] They say that if we knew how a sausage got made, we wouldn't want to eat it. But that's not true of Walker's book: she shows us the sausage of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* getting made—all the drafts, revisions, improvisations, collaborations, notes, collisions, and accidents—and it feels like someone's finally telling us the truth (and debunking a narrative of male auteurship that is now spreading, like a contagion,

to television). Walker describes how television actually gets made with honesty, understanding, and affection, and for this reason I would recommend the book to media and television studies scholars, especially those interested in production history.

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