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Fan engagement

TWC Editor

Abstract—Editorial for Transformative Works and Cultures, no. 22 (September 15, 2016).

Keyword—Fan studies


1. Introduction

Living in the United States—or most other places—at the moment, it is nearly impossible to avoid the constant media coverage of the American presidential election. Whereas politics and the harsh realities of world events seem to stand in opposition to fandom and its often fictional escapist tendencies, the all-pervasiveness of both creates intersections. Between the media spectacle of the conventions and the fannish investment in favorite candidates, it’s often difficult to tell from the style and rhetoric alone if we are reading a political commentary or a fannish shipping site. TWC’s first issue, which appeared in 2008, likewise preceded a US election that followed a highly contested primary season. In "Participatory Democracy and Hillary Clinton’s Marginalized Fandom" (http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2008.0047), Abigail De Kosnik uses fan studies to explain the excess emotional responses: "Framing the Clinton-Obama rivalry as a war between two fan bases, with Obama’s followers constituting a dominant fandom and Clinton’s constituting a marginalized fandom, allows us to interpret the deep emotional response of the Clinton backers" (¶1.2).

2. Theory and Praxis

Over 20 issues—and two elections—later, this unusual frame remains appealing to begin to address both the intense emotional investment in and antipathy toward the central candidates. In fact, this issue opens the Praxis section with an essay that returns to Hillary Clinton, now the Democratic candidate: looking at a (fannish and political) viral mash-up video that features the presidential hopeful, Amber Davisson analyzes how mainstream media and transformative works compete in their creation of public memory. Moreover, "Mashing Up, Remixing, and Contesting the Popular Memory of Hillary Clinton" also speaks to the contested site of fan-created responses, both subverting dominant narratives and being co-opted by them. This simultaneous resistance and commercialization is also at the center
of Jessica Leonora Whitehead's "Local Newspaper Movie Contests and the Creation of the First Movie Fans." Looking at early 20th-century local newspaper movie contests, she studies how commercial paratexts interpellated female movie fans as it encouraged and rewarded their fan engagements. Rather than using fan studies methods to look at history, Jan Švelch and Tereza Krobová use the historical approach of Alltagsgeschichte to look at fan art in "Historicizing Video Game Series through Fan Art." Drawing from the banal everyday, they strive to create a model for a complex fannish history characterized by a multitude of subjective layers.

[2.2] Politics may be the most unusual place to look for fan engagements, but this issue illustrates that even within traditional fannish activities, there exists an enormous range that is worthy of close study, including Jeremy Groskopf's "Hoarding and Community in Star Wars Card Trader," Sara Mariel Austin's "Valuing Queer Identity in Monster High Doll Fandom," Josef Nguyen's "Performing as Video Game Players in Let's Plays," and Carissa Ann Baker's "Creative Choices and Fan Practices in the Transformation of Theme Park Space." What all the essays share is a focus on identity and community among the fans. Whether it is the hoarding of digital trading cards or the performative aspects of Let's Play videos, whether it’s the individuation and personalization of Monster High dolls or the interactive aspects of theme parks, fans use, alter, and reshape commercial ideas and products to reflect their own needs and desires, creating and participating in community spaces that use and resist the official media properties.

[2.3] One of the central themes in fan studies has been the role of gender and sexual identity. Where earlier work used a more singular model of minority resistance, the essays in this issue complicate and expand these notions of identity and community. April S. Callis's "Homophobia, Heteronormativity, and Slash Fan Fiction" presents an expansive case study of Kirk/Spock fan fiction and argues that there are clear changes over the last few decades in attitudes toward gender and sexuality. In "Toward a Broader Recognition of the Queer in the BBC'S Sherlock," Amandelin A. Valentine moves beyond the seemingly default slash ship of Sherlock and Watson to look at other ways the show suggests and invites queered characterizations. Finally, a broader look at gender and sexuality also means moving beyond the empowerment of minority positions and representations to study how fandoms can complexify all genders and sexualities. Accordingly, Samantha Close's "Fannish Masculinities in Transition in Anime Music Video Fandom" and Theo A. Peck-Suzuk's "iCuteness, Friendship, and Identity in the Brony Community" both focus on the destabilizing of masculinities in fannish engagements.

[2.4] Rounding out this issue are three further essays. In her study of ethics in online fan studies research, Brittany Kelley's "Toward a Goodwill Ethics of Online Research Methods" weighs earlier approaches against the author's own experiences and encourages an ethics that balances fan and research demands. Victoria Gonzalez's "Swan Queen, Shipping, and Boundary Regulation in Fandom" anticipates TWC's Queer Female Fandom special issue, forthcoming in 2017, in her close analysis of Once Upon a Time (2011–) Swan Queen fandom and the internal boundary policing between different fan communities. Finally,
Elizabeth Gilliland's "Racebending Fandoms and Digital Futurism" offers an important intervention into the discussion of race in fandom by studying Tumblr movements of racebending and its political and social impact. By celebrating fans who diversify homogeneous whitecast entertainment offerings by creating and sharing their own fan works, she illustrates how fandom has always had the potential to be a political force.

3. Symposium and Review


[3.2] Fan studies books and collections continue to proliferate, and this issues showcases this increasing expansion with the review of four recent publications: Helena Louise Dare-Edwards reviews Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age, by Louisa Ellen Stein; Gregory Steirer discusses Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom in the Digital Age, by Paul Booth; Bambi Haggins comments on The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting, by Kristen Warner; and Abigail De Kosnik looks at Playing Harry Potter: Essays and Interviews on Fandom and Performance, edited by Lisa S. Brenner.

4. Conclusion

[4.1] The next two issues of TWC, Nos. 23 and 24, will appear in spring 2017 as guest-edited special issues: Roberta Pearson and Betsy Rosenblatt coedit a special issue on Sherlock Holmes Fandom, Sherlockiana, and the Great Game, and Julie Levin Russo and Eve Ng's special issue focuses on Queer Female Fandom.

[4.2] TWC No. 25 will be an open, unthemed issue, and we welcome general submissions. We particularly encourage fans to submit Symposium essays. We encourage all potential authors to read the submission guidelines (http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/about/submissions#onlineSubmissions). The close date for receipt of copy for No. 25 is January 1, 2017.

5. Acknowledgments

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[5.2] The following people worked on TWC No. 22 in an editorial capacity: Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (editors); Cameron Salisbury and Francesca Coppa (Symposium); and Louisa Stein and Katie Morrissey (Review).

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Theory

Toward a goodwill ethics of online research methods

Brittany Kelley

University of Jamestown, Jamestown, North Dakota, United States

Abstract—As more academic work (teaching, research, and publishing) moves online, we acafans face ever more challenges regarding how academia and online communities can and should interact. Since academia enjoys a position of power, while fan communities are often highly marginalized, I argue that, as acafans, we have a special responsibility to the fan communities we engage with and study. Fulfilling this responsibility means using what I call a goodwill ethics heuristic approach to online research methods, which requires us to balance the concerns of fans with those of scholarly development. In order to trace what this goodwill heuristic approach to online research methods might look like, I start by examining ethical values of research methods as they are defined by the Belmont Report. I then revisit the methods of previous fan studies. I add to these methods an extended set of ethical values as they have been described by prominent scholars in a range of fields using human subjects research. Finally, I discuss my own online fannish profile, focusing on my self-positioning and how it has been crucial in developing a goodwill ethics approach in my own research. Ultimately, I argue that all online research should use a goodwill ethics heuristic approach, and that such an approach is chiefly characterized by researchers' willingness to abdicate their expert status where necessary; ongoing negotiations between researchers and participants; and researchers' taking sufficient time to establish both an emic perspective of the community or site being researched and relationships with participants.

Keywords—Literacy; Methodology; Qualitative; Technology


1. Introduction

On February 13, 2015, an article appeared in the Daily Californian about a new course at UC Berkeley: The Theory of Fanfiction (Van Tooke 2015). In the course, students read and discussed fan fiction stories, considering their genre features, especially as these features related to gender, sexuality, and kink. Just a few days after the release of the article (weeks after the start of the course), waldorph, a fan author, updated a Tumblr blog to warn the fan community about the course. Confused to see comments being left on one of their older stories, waldorph found out it was required reading. Waldorph's response is telling:

The comments I received were bizarrely tone-deaf, condescending, rude, and more than that, completely out of step and touch with all fannish norms... Unfortunately, I dealt with this all week before one of the teachers stepped in, and that was only when I started receiving flaming trolls.

For this reason, I've alerted all of the authors listed on the syllabus that they're about to experience this because, frankly, I would have appreciated a heads
Waldorph's closing paragraph is a poignant reminder that the academy's actions in relation to online communities can have significant consequences: "Ultimately, there's nothing we can do about people examining works that we never meant to be examined this way. I think we all have to accept that the way fandom gets interacted with is changing, not just the way that we interact with the rest of the world. I do think that as a community we can and should support each other." From Waldorph's perspective, the main issue was not that students were reading and responding to their stories but how they were responding. Indeed, the comment that Waldorph "would have appreciated a heads up" reads to me as a serious understatement. It is clear that for Waldorph, the creation of this course, without any kind of outreach to the fan community, was a serious breach of fan etiquette.

While academics should have the freedom to engage critically with cultural texts, including online fan texts, I would also point out that, unlike authors of traditionally published works (that is, works published through academic or commercial presses), fan writers are often not protected from censure. Online fan spaces were created as safe zones for fans to engage in reading and writing that was otherwise unsanctioned, and as such, they have developed certain rules of engagement in order to both support and protect their participants. Busse and Hellekson (2012) have argued that "many fans find unacceptable the notion that their works may be freely perused by outsiders. Fan publications...are perceived as existing in a closed, private space even though they may be publicly available" (39). This perception has a long history in fan communities that have been extremely stigmatized (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992). Historically, fans have seen themselves as resistant to dominant forms of consumption, and this status is fiercely protected and defended in fan circles. I argue that the defense and support of fan works within fan communities is representative of a larger fan ethics of goodwill (what Hellekson [2009] has referred to as a gift economy).

The Theory of Fanfiction course raises important questions about the university and its relationship to other communities. It is important to note that this class was designed and taught by undergraduate students who doubtless had little (if any) training in the ethics of moving into and engaging with new communities. However, I would argue that UC Berkeley nonetheless had a responsibility to its students and to the communities those students might study to consider the ethical quandaries such a course might pose. One reason that this did not happen may be that some scholars (even seasoned ones) still view texts on the Internet as analogous to texts published in print; another may be that many in the academy are still unfamiliar with the ethical particularities of working with online communities. Furthermore, although this example concerns teaching, it raises questions relevant to all forms of academic work and scholarship. The debate instigated by the course and Waldorph's response, which has come to be referred to in fan communities as "Fangate" or "Theory of Ficgate," was on the minds and lips of all fan studies scholars at the 2014 Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association conference in New Orleans, where most sessions ended up discussing the ethical responsibilities we hold as academics when we go into fan spaces. I start with this example, then, because it is incumbent upon us as academics, and certainly upon those of us
who identify as acafans, to think and then rethink the ethics of our online research methods in fan spaces and beyond.

[1.7] In this article, taking into consideration scholars of research ethics such as Whiteman (2012), I argue that as acafans, we have a responsibility to enact an ethics of goodwill that balances the concerns of fans with those of scholarly development. In order to trace what this goodwill heuristic approach to online research methods might (and should) look like, I start by examining ethical values of research methods as they are defined by the *Belmont Report* (a foundational document shaping the wide variety of institutional research board [IRB] protocols). I then revisit the methods of previous fan studies. I add to these methods an extended set of ethical values as they have been described by prominent scholars in a range of fields using human subjects research, including education, social work, and rhetoric and composition. Finally, I discuss my own online fannish profile, focusing on my self-positioning and how it has been crucial in developing a goodwill ethics approach in my own research. Ultimately, I argue that all online research should use a goodwill ethics heuristic approach, and that such an approach is chiefly characterized by researchers' willingness to abdicate their expert status where necessary; ongoing negotiations between researchers and participants; and researchers' taking sufficient time to establish both an emic perspective of the community or site being researched and relationships with participants.

2. Values of goodwill ethics of research

[2.1] The very first document many researchers are provided with as they begin considering their methods for human subjects research, and certainly the first one provided in IRB training in the United States, is the *Belmont Report*, first released by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research in 1979, when it focused largely on medical research. It has since become the standard of research ethics in academic institutions, though its application varies from institution to institution, depending on individual IRB committees. I focus here only on the basic ethical principles that all researchers are introduced to through this report, and how these have largely been codified into the official IRB application documents (particularly study summaries and sample consent forms). Given the wide variance across institutions, the entire IRB process is outside the scope of this article; it has been discussed in depth by the research ethics scholar Heidi McKee (2003). The *Belmont Report* is structured around three ethical principles: (1) respect for persons, (2) beneficence, and (3) justice. Respect for persons is defined as incorporating "at least two ethical convictions: first, that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents, and second, that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection." Beneficence is defined as following "two general rules": "(1) do not harm and (2) maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms." And finally, justice is conceived of as providing equal opportunities for people or communities to participate in a study, as well as for researchers to carefully consider the benefits and burdens their studies may carry with them for participating communities. These principles can cover a wide range of research situations, but they have generally been codified in the following ways (McKee 2003): (1) obtaining the informed consent of subjects, (2) anonymizing or de-identifying data through such means as the use of
pseudonyms, (3) keeping all data secure, and (4) constraining the collection of data to the
time of research, which is typically 1 year from the date of IRB approval.

[2.2] The Belmont Report's stated ethical principles form an important foundation for
researchers, and the typical codifications of these (especially the use of consent forms) can
help researchers to consider the goals and ethics of their research as they develop their
methods. However, these processes are an artifact of medical research, a model that places
"the entire research enterprise more starkly within the broader economic and political systems
which favor an individualistic...and a capitalist approach to knowledge generation quite at odds
with the collaborative, egalitarian, social change focus of action research" (Brydon-Miller 2009,
246). In other words, simply trusting the Belmont Report and the relevant IRB process will not
ensure the establishment of complex goodwill relationships among researchers and
participants. The Belmont Report provides an excellent starting set of values for researchers,
but online spaces require us to come up with a set of heuristic, goodwill-focused values to
better address and balance the needs of researchers and online spaces. The Association of
Internet Researchers has started to build these kinds of values (see especially AOIR 2012), but
it is important to continue adding to these as we learn more about the complexities of different
online spaces and practices. In order to move toward this goodwill ethics heuristic, in the next
section I will address previous fan research as a particularly useful methodological foundation
for fan studies.

3. Goodwill methodology and online research

[3.1] In order to begin a thoughtful discussion of research methods and ethics, especially in
light of the conflict that arose in the wake of the UC Berkeley fan fiction course, we must take
a look at previous fan studies. Central among the foundational works are Henry Jenkins's
Textual Poachers (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith's Enterprising Women (1992), both of which
established an ethnographic approach to researching fan practices. It is important to remember
that Jenkins and Smith would have had almost no access to fan materials if they had not
communicated personally with fans, both face to face and over the phone. Nonetheless, neither
of these studies would have gained the traction it did without its author's careful concern for
fans. Since these publications, many fan scholars have similarly taken an ethnographic
approach to research, which strongly places the focus of research on human participants. In
addition to this ethical positioning, fan scholars have pondered what can be considered public
or private; whether their studies concern texts or people; when, how, and from whom to gain
consent; and whether it is appropriate to "lurk" in a community. Finally, acafans continue to
fiercely debate how we will write up our research and what acknowledgments and identifiers
we will use.

[3.2] There are a wide range of approaches to using online fan texts in research, especially
since many of these texts are openly accessible. In a recent article posted to The Learned
Fangirl, Bethan Jones argues that is it tricky to decide what can reasonably be judged as public
or private in fan spaces, and that fan works are often "posted as a private act in a public
space" (2016). However, as Busse and Hellekson (2012) have discussed, if the scholarly focus
is largely on a close reading of a text, then the discursive features matter, and, therefore,
authors should receive credit for their work (49). While it is true that many, perhaps most, fans expect that their writing will circulate only among fellow fans, I would argue (as does Whiteman 2012) that either requiring each author's consent to discuss a story or speaking of stories only in the aggregate is not only largely untenable but potentially disruptive, and, what's more, not necessarily in the best interest of either scholarship or fandom. A goodwill approach to fan scholarship should take the time to consider and negotiate fans' privacy concerns and make research findings fully available to fans. Furthermore, goodwill requires what bell hooks would call a "loving critique": taking the time to analyze, engage with, and question fan texts just as fans do with popular culture texts.

A goodwill approach to research ethics in fan studies is rooted in the ethnographic perspectives and methods used by early fan scholars (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992). The first key to achieving a goodwill ethics is to spend enough time in the fannish space to get a sense of how it operates and, therefore, what practices fans might see as acceptable (Whiteman 2012; AOIR 2012; Freund and Fielding 2013). Different scholars of online fan activity have used this approach to gain very different understandings of what fans might expect in terms of privacy, consent, and participation. Boellstorff (2008) knew that, in studying Second Life, he couldn't feasibly lurk, but that it would also be untenable to describe and analyze the space without providing certain identifiers, including the game's name and information about his character in it. Kendall (2002) knew that she couldn't lurk in the chat room she was studying, and as a result, she got to know her participants so well that there was a high risk that they might be identifiable in her writing, which could have risked their jobs. Therefore, she decided to employ a system of pseudonyms and obfuscation. "I based my decision to change BlueSky participants' online pseudonyms in part on the conclusion, based on my research, that such pseudonyms are important 'identity pegs' that enter into real and important online interactions and relationships. In my experience, objections to the provision of 'pseudo-pseudonyms' in research reports often come from people who do not view online forums such as muds as 'real' social spaces" (Kendall 2002, 241). Given what she knew of her site participants, her approach is appropriate. However, it may not be right for all projects with all fan sites or activities. The beauty of a goodwill values-based heuristic is that it allows researchers to address the ethics of their research methods in each context they may find themselves in.

In her study of X-Files (1993–2002) and Due South (1994–99) fans, Rhiannon Bury (2005) took a different approach to the issues of privacy, consent, and participation. Like Kendall, Bury never conducted any of her official research as a lurker. Rather, Bury chose to participate entirely in her research sites in an ethnographic manner, stating that "conducting ethnographic research online is more than reading a newsgroup archive with no contact with participants" (24). Borrowing from Hine (2000), Bury asserts that effective online research, especially online ethnography, cannot be conducted without both gathering texts and talking to participants. From the start, then, she rules out lurking as an acceptable method of research. This did produce some challenges for her, particularly in gaining participants' consent. "Like any research project involving human subjects," she writes, "ethical guidelines must be followed...Since the David Duchovny Estrogen Brigades and the Militant RayK Separatists are closed lists, access could not have been gained without explicit permission of the members. I
prepared formal letters of consent as part of the ethics review process at the universities where I was a graduate student and faculty member" (23–24). She did more than send consent forms, however. In order to gain the kind of consent and participant–researcher relationship she wanted, she set up her own fan e-mail list for David Duchovny fans (related to the David Duchovny Estrogen Brigades lists). Only participants who agreed to the terms of the study were on that list, and Bury still obtained specific consent to quote comments posted to the list.

[3.5] When we study fandom, we are looking at people interacting, which very often requires that we use a qualitative approach. However, the online environment poses particular difficulties to research, especially the need to protect participants' privacy. Natasha Whiteman has written extensively on research ethics in Undoing Ethics: Rethinking Practice in Online Research, in which she argues that we should undo blanket ethics, and instead develop new ethics for each case and space that we study. "Whilst this limits the 'power' of our ethical statements, this delimiting also means that our decisions are more sensitive to the nature of the setting...and that the researcher is less likely (perhaps) to be destructive through a lack of consideration of the particular characteristics of the research and the research setting" (Whiteman 2012, 13). She urges online researchers to be attentive to our online spaces and communities so that we can see precisely how participants view the rules of engagement. That way, we can weigh their expectations against our own positioning and the research goals of the institutions we work within. She is very clear, however, that although we should carefully consider our participants' expectations for good research, we should not always defer to them (Whiteman 2012, 68).

[3.6] Using an ethnographic approach to fan studies requires that researchers gain a clear view of the particulars of their site(s) of study. In contrast to Whiteman's reluctance to defer too much to participants' needs and feelings, I argue that an ethnographic perspective requires researchers to be extremely attentive to them. Moreover, I argue that the academy's current approach to interaction with online communities, in research and in teaching, would benefit from a values-based heuristic in each new site, especially considering the highly variable training and institutional guidelines that researchers (and teachers) may be working within. In the studies that I have discussed so far, the researchers did their best to understand how the online communities operated, to make community members aware that research was being done, and to anonymize data in order to protect participant identities. However, as more and more research (as well as writing and teaching) will be done online, it is important not only to take a local approach to online research (Whiteman 2012), but to revisit values that have developed in the traditions of human subjects, social research (in such fields as education, social work, and rhetoric and composition), and action research, in order to better define what an effective heuristic for online communities and practices might look like by providing a set of guiding value terms. In the next section, I will move through important human subjects research in the social research and action research traditions in order to address three necessary guiding value terms for approaching online research methods: respect, reciprocity, and transparency.

4. Toward an ethical heuristic of respect, reciprocity, and transparency
Respect is an underlying value that has been upheld since the *Belmont Report* and is maintained in recent, more generalized research methods. Its definition in the *Belmont Report* focuses on subjects' autonomy, but the concept has been greatly expanded in the growing tradition of human subjects research in the humanities and social sciences.

Respect for persons, for example, under the guidelines of the Belmont Report and most sets of human subjects research guidelines, is limited to providing research subjects with the opportunity to decline to participate in a particular study and is assumed to be addressed through the informed consent process.

In action research, on the other hand, this principle extends to our conviction that all individuals have the capacity to contribute to the process of knowledge generation and the right to play an active role in shaping policies and processes that affect their own well-being and that of their families and communities. (Brydon-Miller 2008, 202)

Collaborative knowledge generation and policy shaping mean different things in different types of studies, but very generally, they have meant that researchers should

1. Be careful about how they represent participants, their research, and themselves.
2. Maximize opportunities for collaboration, or at least reciprocity, with participants.
3. So far as possible, be transparent with participants about their goals, methods, analyses, and conclusions throughout the research process.

Respect has been one of the most difficult ethical values to define, especially when we understand ethical decision-making as always local, and as "an activity that is engaged in throughout the research process and is therefore in motion rather than fixed: ethics as, and in, process" (Whiteman 2012, 9). Within this process-oriented and flexible approach to respect in person-focused research, respect expands to include an ongoing consideration of representation—of the participants, the study, and, from recruitment to reporting, the researcher. Researchers' self-representation can introduce the greatest risk of misinterpretation, appropriation, and even ideological violence, because participants are seduced (Newkirk 1996) into a study by the supposed objectivity of the researchers and the professionalism and authority of the institutional consent forms. Newkirk (1996) argues that, "paradoxically, the measures devised to protect those being studied often aid the researcher in the seduction...Typically these [consent] forms provide a very brief and often vague description of the project, and then provide a number of assurances" (4). In other words, while it is important to have consent forms, and while it is certainly pleasant for a researcher to have an approachable demeanor, these elements could invite participants to share more than they might otherwise.

One way to ameliorate this problem of seduction and betrayal is to warn participants that the conclusions of the study will not necessarily put them in a favorable light (Newkirk 1996, 13). Another is to take special care in how participants are represented. Even better is to share the report with participants as soon as possible, and to be willing to talk through its writing, so participants can have a chance to negotiate different meanings, and even to pull out
of the research entirely. But another particularly productive avenue is for researchers to take great care in how they position and represent themselves throughout the research process: they should work through what Brydon-Miller (2008, 2009) has called structured ethical reflection. Brydon-Miller (2008) has suggested that, in preparing our research, "we might begin with a critical examination of ourselves as individual researchers using a first-person action research approach" (204). This approach requires researchers to deeply and recursively explore their ideological and ethical foundations—to ask themselves what they are taking for granted. It requires them not only to examine, name, and question their core values but also, as Michelle Fine (1994) has put it, to work the hyphen: "By working the hyphen, I mean to suggest that researchers probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations" (72). In other words, not only should we critically examine and position ourselves, we should take care in representing both our relationships with our participants and their own self-positioning in their communities. Both deeply considering our own positioning and openly communicating with study participants are ways to reduce the risk of seduction while still achieving a loving critique of fan practices.

However, while this process absolutely requires sharing the personal, it does not mean confessing the personal for its own sake. Rather, it means sharing the personal while considering what participants might make of our positions and self-representations. Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie (1995) suggest that composition researchers theorize their locations by examining their experiences as reflections of ideology and culture, by reinterpreting their own experiences through the eyes of others, and by recognizing their own split selves, their multiple and often unknowable identities. Further, we propose changes in research practices, such as collaborating with participants in the development of research questions, the interpretation of data at both the descriptive and interpretive levels, and the writing of research reports. (8)

Put another way, a truly goodwill ethical positioning requires that we abdicate the throne of expertise and open ourselves to vulnerability. This means not only being open and thoughtful about our positions (as fans and researchers), but being willing to negotiate our analyses and conclusions with participants, or, at the very least, carefully balancing participants' interpretations of and conclusions about their engagement in fan communities with our own loving critiques of those spaces and practices. What's more, as Powell and Takayoshi (2003) have argued, sometimes it is essential in goodwill research methods that we respond to participants' needs by understanding and sometimes enacting roles that participants might wish us to play, in addition to enacting our roles as researchers.

This is where respect and representation meet reciprocity in an ethical research value system. Powell and Takayoshi (2003) describe reciprocity as a "nonhierarchal, reciprocal relationship, in which both researcher and researched learn from one another and have a voice in the study, [that] is informed by a feminist desire for eliminating power inequalities between researchers and participants and a concern for the difficulties of speaking for 'the other'" (395). Moreover, an ethical approach to research methods includes not only consideration for participants, but a sense of what Brydon-Miller (2009) would refer to as covenantal ethics,
which are focused "on the development of caring and committed relationships, on respect for people's knowledge and experience, and on working with community partners to achieve positive social change" (253). The term "covenant" is crucial here, as it suggests a deep and even sacred duty to one's study participants, "a solemn and personally compelling commitment to act in the good of others" (255). Ultimately, this means that ethical research values that enact goodwill require relationships between researchers and participants to be forged and maintained.

[4.12] Finally, these relationships can be neither ethically forged nor maintained without full transparency. In human subjects research, particularly within the tradition of action research, transparency has meant not only discussing consent forms, interview questions, and methods (such as of observation) with participants in person, but also a sense of collaboration with participants. As Williams and Brydon-Miller (2012) have put it:

[4.13] In the case of digital research, two additional principles seem to us to be especially salient: transparency (i.e. the extent to which the entire research process is clearly articulated to participants and those using the research) and democratic practice (i.e. the extent to which participants are able to contribute to the research process from the creation of research questions through decisions regarding dissemination of results). (185)

[4.14] Since research is a recursive process, transparency requires researchers to continually revisit the goals of their study and to discuss these goals with all participants to make sure they know what's at stake: for them, for the researchers, and for the research report. A truly goodwill ethics of research requires that researchers always be willing to negotiate with participants about the goals, conclusions, gains, and risks of the study.

[4.15] The guiding values of respect, reciprocity, and transparency form an excellent foundation for a values-based heuristic to help us continue developing and redeveloping ethical research methods in studies involving human subjects. Many of these values translate directly into online research. But many must also be amended in the digital environment because of this technology's different affordances for production, circulation, and access. In particular, as was seen in Waldorph's case above, the online environment raises important concerns regarding traceability, concepts of ownership and authorship, and distinctions between public and private. But since the online environment still involves humans, it is appropriate to turn to the ethical research methods developed in human subjects research, especially in the humanities and social sciences. In the next section, I will take these values of respect, reciprocity, and transparency and apply them to my own methods in my study of online fan fiction practices.

5. Making myself vulnerable: The fan girl reaching from her ivory tower

[5.1] So far in this article, I've focused heavily on the themes of person-based research and IRB certification, as well as sets of values that have tended to inform and shape human subjects research methods, both face-to-face and online. What I have not yet discussed in any
depth is the positioning and (self-)representation of the researcher. But as Fine (1994) made clear, it is essential that we probe the complexities and values of researchers as they position themselves in their fields, in their publications, and in relation to both their potential and actual research participants. I began my journey as a researcher terrified of revealing my fan status. But the more I engaged with fan fiction as a researcher, and the more I considered what fan fiction might have to teach us about learning, writing, and self, the more I acknowledged that it was impossible to remain entirely behind the mask of an objective academic. As I began to see the Internet not as a neutral (and absolute) tool, but rather as a shifting set or sets of social practices (Hine 2000; Jenkins 2006), I began to realize I needed not only to be more thoughtful in the consent and data collection processes, but also to make myself vulnerable to academia and (prospective and current) participants by proudly proclaiming my status as fan girl and acafan.

[5.2] I began doing this by writing an open profile for inclusion on my fan fiction sites of study. This profile (which is a variant of the recruitment e-mail I developed for the IRB certification process) is excerpted below.

[5.3] Hi! My penname is PhoenixSongFalling, and I've been a *Harry Potter* fan since I was 15 years old. I first discovered fanfiction during my junior year of college in 2007. I had just finished reading through the whole series (for the third time), and I was chomping at the bit for the seventh book to come out that next summer. Needless to say, I got hooked on fanfiction. I loved all kinds of pairings, but especially Harry and Draco, and, to my surprise, Hermione and Severus. I loved dystopian, "Voldemort wins" stories, and fluffy, romantic stories, and Time Turner stories. I lurked for a long time. I then started writing my own fanfiction story about Severus Snape, an original character, and a Time Turner accident...I'm embarrassed to say that I haven't finished it yet, but I hope to do so soon...

[5.4] But I'm also here as a researcher. My academic alter ego also really loves fanfiction...I am currently working on a PhD in English...I am most interested in researching how people write in different kinds of spaces—school v. personal v. work v. online, etc.

[5.5] From a procedural, legalistic perspective, there is nothing wrong with the document—a version of it was certified by the IRB, after all. From an ethical perspective, however, there are still some issues to consider. In particular, it is important for me to ask: How does this profile enact the goodwill research ethics of respect, reciprocity, and transparency?

[5.6] It succeeds in being transparent, as it makes clear my status as a researcher, my academic affiliation, the general interests of my project, my methods, and, importantly, my contact information for any complaints or negotiations. However, it's unclear how far it goes beyond the solipsistic use of the personal (see Kirsch and Ritchie 1995). While the first paragraph does establish my fan status, it seems very shallow when compared to the three paragraphs that follow, establishing me as a scholar and researcher. The declaration of the personal here can seem like a cheap effort to establish in-group status. It resembles the arrival story trope of the ethnographic tradition in anthropology, in which a stranger arrives in an alien
world, except that I'm cast as a sympathetic fellow fan who just happens to be in graduate school. Even worse, this profile heavily emphasizes my academic status, and therefore risks seducing participants (Newkirk 1996). The profile also explains that I'm interested in researching fan fiction because it "is, well, really fascinating to me. How I think about myself as a writer, and how I think about what good, supportive writing communities can look like, is heavily influenced by my engagement with fanwriting." This passage appears to place the focus of study on myself, rather than making clear that I will be critically reading other fans' work. The profile's wording takes for granted my own benevolence and membership in the group, rather than genuinely acknowledging the power differentials between my academic position and the marginalized positions of so many fan writers. And while it attempts to respect fans and to be transparent about the nature of my work, it falls short of truly inviting discussion or negotiation with other fans, nor does it do any of the critical work that Kirsch and Ritchie (1995), Brydon-Miller (2008, 2009), McKee (2003, 2007), and McKee and Porter (2009, 2015) have called for.

[5.7] Nonetheless, I have done my best to develop, adjust, and enact a goodwill ethics of online research methods in this project, as I believe most researchers do. Importantly, this means continually reconsidering the very terms "goodwill," "ethics," and "methods," and for me this has meant being vulnerable. This is partly a result of my decision to take an ethnographic perspective in my research; ethnography "has long been identified as a method based on vulnerability, even failure, on learning from mistakes" (Boellstorff 2008, 72). It's difficult to achieve an emic perspective without participating, and, therefore, taking on some of the risk faced by the other participants. Ethnography is impossible without a goodwill disposition, which, I would argue, requires the willingness to become vulnerable.

[5.8] "Vulnerability" is a tricky term. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "vulnerable" comes from the Latin vulnerabilis, "wounding." It has generally meant being open to attack. But vulnerabilis comes from vulnerare, "to wound," and in the 17th century the word "vulnerable" was sometimes used to mean "having the power to wound." I'd like to rehabilitate this double meaning here. When I use the term "vulnerable" in my work, I am admitting that my academic position gives me the power to wound, which then requires that I be willing to accept being wounded myself. Of course, vulnerability often connotes weakness, ineptness, and emotionality. I admit that I cannot shake off these troublesome connotations. In fact, I argue that they can be helpful in my structuring of vulnerability, because they highlight the emotional and embodied elements of experience, which are crucial to what I am trying to openly incorporate into my work. I argue that it is possible—a la Micciche (2007)—to do vulnerability, to turn vulnerability into a calculated, rhetorical move or device that may undermine academia's potentially violent appropriation of communities. If I do vulnerability, then I must truly open myself to critique by fans, in order to ameliorate or even rid myself of the unnecessary wounding my work could do.

[5.9] It is with an awareness of the double-edged blade of doing vulnerability that I'd like to "work the hyphen" (Fine 1994) of the troubling and troublesome term "acafan." The shape of the term suggests several things: that an academic can be (or is) a fan, and vice versa (on a horizontal, equalizing plane); that the acafan is always an academic first and a fan second;
and, finally, that one of the two aspects must be not only primary but more powerful—the acad(emic). Hills (2002) referred to this conundrum as a moral dualism. Fine (1994) would refer to this structure as the Self-Other form: she examines "the hyphen at which Self-Other join in the politics of everyday life, that is, the hyphen that both separates and merges personal identities with our inventions of Others" (70). Therefore, the term "acafan" primarily breaks down to indicate that the Self is an academic while the Other is a fan. In other words, part of the Self is isolated and even excised as the troublesome Other—an Other who is entirely too emotional, subjective, bodily, even feminine (see Jenkins 1992 on the feminine and feminized fan). However, by doing vulnerability, as I discussed above, we could see the term as admitting the power to wound that our academic positions allow us, and also opening ourselves to wounding by owning our fan Selves. Still, we have to be careful not to merge "aca" and "fan" too closely as we work from our powerful positions within academia, or we may reify damaging research methods. Doing the vulnerable "aca-fan" requires us to carefully tread the hyphenated space between academia and fandom such that both worlds can exist on the same level and overlapping, rather than in a violent vertical hierarchy where the myth of the distant, disinterested academic mind prevails.

6. Conclusion: Still toward a goodwill ethics of online research

[6.1] I began this article by discussing how UC Berkeley's fan fiction course brought academic literacy practices and values into fandom without first considering how fans might feel about them, even though both creators and supporters of the course identified as fans. Their failure to contact the fan writers whose work they were assigning before the course began may have been due not only to their being undergraduate students, but perhaps also to their having had very different experiences within fandom. I am sure that they did not mean any harm. Nonetheless, it would have been better for them to be trained to more deeply consider what it means to explore and engage with a community outside of academia, especially when that community is so vulnerable. Waldorph's highly negative response to the course is just one of a complex network of fans' perspectives on academics' research into their community activities. This is not to say that all fans oppose research into fandom; simply that, when we are studying online fan communities, our research methods should take on more of the values of humanities-inspired human subjects research in order to more ethically address fan concerns. If we are academics who are fans, then we have an especial responsibility to "support each other," as Waldorph states. But even if we are not fans in the same way that our study participants are, we still owe it to both these communities and future generations of academics to act ethically in all of our scholarly endeavors.

[6.2] The nearly global ubiquity of digital and Internet technologies has raised some crucial concerns about privacy, ownership, and representation. In the current moment, the entities with the most power over representation are institutions—corporations, the government, and even academia (MacKinnon 2012; McKee 2007). The onus is therefore on us, as scholars, to develop ethical research methods. Many fan scholars and fan studies scholars have addressed ethical issues in online research (Busse and Hellekson 2012; Whiteman 2012; AOIR 2012; Freund and Fielding 2013), particularly in terms of the unique issues that fans in online spaces face. In this paper, I go beyond Whiteman (2012) to argue that ethical online research should
consider the rules of engagement participants have for the spaces in which research is done. Particularly in fan studies, we need a values-based heuristic to help guide our ethical decision-making in these spaces. I have taken the concept of goodwill from my own participation in and understanding of fan fiction communities. Members of these communities tacitly understand that we strive both to maintain the integrity of the universes we so love, and to encourage others to keep reading or watching, discussing, and writing about these universes. What best define these goodwill ethics are the values of respect, reciprocity, transparency, and, I argue, vulnerability.

[6.3] We show respect by openly and carefully representing ourselves, as complex as that prospect is, as well as representing participants in ways they might represent themselves. We enact reciprocity not only by providing balanced accounts of the communities we study, but also by accepting and fulfilling some roles these communities might ask of us. We are transparent when we state our positions, values, institutional affiliations, and methods, and are willing to negotiate the latter. And, finally, we can best achieve all three by doing vulnerability. Waldorph stated, "I think that sometimes, when we're leaving comments for each other, it's easy to forget that there's someone on the other side of that computer screen who doesn't necessarily receive the comment in the spirit you intended" (Tumblr, February 18, 2015). In other words, we will be most effective as researchers when we reach out as emotional and embodied humans to the emotional and embodied humans on the other sides of our computer screens.

7. Works cited


**Theory**

Racebending fandoms and digital futurism

Elizabeth Gilliland

*Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA*

[0.1] Abstract—Online fan art can be a way for communities to celebrate a particular fandom, characters, or relationships; yet though these pieces have been studied for their ability to create community and express identity, one area that has yet to be fully explored in connection to fan art is as a form of activism. The racebending movement on Tumblr suggests an effort by fans to reclaim books, films, and television from the whitewashing that often takes place in the entertainment industry. In particular, this project explores Tumblr art devoted to recasting popular fiction with people of color, and how this activism has ties to movements such as Afrofuturism, as well as relating the history of the term "racebending" itself. I will examine how these recastings are performed to gauge the intention behind them, and to trace how they are being used as a commentary on society. I believe these rewritings of popular fandoms not only indicate a desire by fans to see more portrayals of diversity, but are also in essence creating an ethnofuturistic space. Though for the most part, the television and film industries continue to whitewash their programming, these fans protest that notion through creating their diversified fan art; in essence, rejecting the homogenous entertainment of the past and present in favor of a self-made, heterogeneous future.

[0.2] Keywords—Afrofuturism; Fan works; Fan art; Fan casting; Tumblr


1. Introduction

[1.1] The future is white—or so, it seems, Hollywood would have us believe. In most depictions of future societies, whether on a dystopian Earth, an intergalactic spaceship, or even on planets and in solar systems in realities removed entirely removed from our own, the characters are predominantly white, and the stories and ideals they perpetuate are widely Westernized in their depictions. As Malisa Kurtz explains, "SF’s emergence as a predominantly white, male tradition is reflected in narratives that excluded women, people of color, and the 'Third World'" (2014, 177). When characters who fall outside this bracket of whiteness are included in the narrative, they are often killed off or exoticized/hyper-sexualized; or they remain in largely supportive roles, seemingly included to act as the token person of color.
To elucidate this notion, it would probably be easier to find exceptions than to list the vast amount of science fiction media and literature that falls into this category. The film industry, in particular, seems to shy away from depictions of a non-Westernized, non-whitewashed future, with Hollywood "construct(ing) whiteness as the norm in comparison to which all 'Others' necessarily fail" (Kilgore 2014, 31). Tumblr user browngirlsintherain's poem "White Only" further expounds on this idea:

Hollywood has no problem
Finding people of color
To play terrorists, thugs,
And mindless villains
But casting one to be a hero
Sorry,
Those roles are reserved
For the actors and actresses
Who are the best for the part
But why does that always translate to
Sorry
These roles are white only.

It is not only Hollywood that chooses to cast in these terms; rather, this seems to be a larger problem, particularly in terms of genre fiction. Ytasha L. Womack elucidates:

It's one thing when black people aren't discussed in world history...
But when, even in the imaginary future—a space where the mind can stretch beyond the Milky Way to envision routine space travel, cuddly space animals, talking apes, and time machines—people can't fathom a person of non-Euro descent a hundred years into the future, a cosmic foot has to be put down. (2013, 7)

In some ways, that foot has been put down, but from a rather unexpected source. Various fan communities have embraced online spaces, and Tumblr in particular, as a site to re-envision the future. Users on the site frequently "fan cast" (recast an established book, series, franchise, and so forth, with one's own preferred choices) people of color into markedly white fandoms, and connect these pieces of artwork with the hashtag #racebending to unite across these fandoms into one shared community.

The pervasiveness of these fan casting experiments on Tumblr (including hundreds of individual posts, as well as blogs devoted to fan art dealing exclusively with this movement) suggests that a demand for diverse casting exists that Hollywood
isn't answering. Even more notable, these pieces of fan art indicate a dissatisfaction with a society in which white is constructed as the unquestionable norm to which all other cultures must conform. Through the diversified reshapings of popular culture touchstones, these fans are creating an online space which rejects the homogenous entertainment of the past and present in favor of a self-made, heterogeneous future.

2. A history of racebending

[2.1] The racebending movement began as a result of the 2010 live-action film of the animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005–8). The characters in the television series are coded as ambiguously Asian. Since they exist in a world outside our own, they do not conform to any specific markers of Asian culture or heritage; but through physical appearance, costuming choices, and folk references, they appear to be embodying a sort of Asian conglomeration. As such, the live film version received major backlash from fans when virtually all white actors were cast in these roles. Though one of the characters was eventually recast with British-Indian actor Dev Patel, and the franchise was taken over by Indian-American director M. Night Shyamalan, fans continued to protest the overwhelmingly white cast.

[2.2] One shape this protest took was the formation of a site called Racebending.com (along with a community of the same name on LiveJournal), which is described in further detail by Lori Lopez:

[2.3] The name was a playful riff on the notion of "bending" that was an important part of the universe of *The Last Airbender*—each tribe is based on a natural element, and individuals known as "Benders" have the ability to manipulate that element...By referencing "bending" the activists mark their fandom and attachment to the world of the franchise, even as they use the same term to articulate their frustration with an industry where roles are systematically taken from Asian Americans and given to white actors. (2012, 433)

[2.4] A major source for this protest, Lopez further explains, is that "'racebending' can be seen as more than simply changing the race of a character: it is changing the race of characters of color to white for reasons of marketability"—a phenomena that remains a fairly common occurrence in the world of filmmaking. For example, in discussing the recasting of the titular role in the popular BBC series *Doctor Who*, author Chuck Wendig expresses his frustration at the string of white male actors who have filled the role: *"Doctor Who is a show about a character whose very flesh is transitive. This character has carried across multiple iterations so far—this role is tailor-made to see actors and actresses who are not white dudes"* (2013). Yet as of the
current 12 iterations of the doctor, all have been played by white men. A similar frustration can be viewed in actor Donald Glover's campaign to portray Spider-Man in a recent reboot of the franchise (Truitt 2014)—a role that eventually went to a white British actor, Andrew Garfield (note 1).

[2.5] Perhaps as a result of these continuing issues of whitewashing in film, the legacy of Racebending.com continues to live on, despite the fact that six years have passed since the film's release. The site itself, along with the associated LiveJournal community, remained fairly active and influential for quite some time, populated by "daily posts written by a large number of community members and an extremely active base of commenters turning each post into a rousing debate" (Lopez 2012, 437). This debate eventually progressed beyond merely the instance of whitewashing in this one particular franchise, and also began looking closely at other occurrences within the entertainment industry. As the LiveJournal community site explains, its purpose is to be "advocates for artists from underrepresented groups by featuring their talents—and researching why they face discrimination, and how to stop it." Part of this activism included branching out into other mediums to spread the word, accomplished by the use of the hashtag #racebending on Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr. On Tumblr in particular, this movement has begun to take on a life independent of the original meaning suggested by the Last Airbender fandom, in which "racebending" translated to characters of color being cast as white. Instead, racebending has become the code word for fan casting characters of color into traditionally white franchises. Searching under the hashtag #racebending can begin to offer an idea of just how far this community reaches, and how prevalent this practice has become, with multiple posts being added every day (note 2).

3. Legacies of the past

[3.1] The impetus behind this racebending movement is not unique to online culture, and it would be remiss to not include at least a brief history of similar movements that have been taking place for years in film, literature, and music, most notably Afrofuturism and the subset of other ethno-futurisms (including Chicano-futurism, Asian-futurism, and so forth). For the purposes of streamlining these into a cohesive history that can be used to prefigure the racebending movement, I will address Afrofuturism in particular, and detail how racebending may be seen to follow a similar pattern in its methods.

[3.2] "Afrofuturism" was a term originally used in 1991 by Mark Dery and which soon came to encompass an entire movement of studying literature, film, and music. Yet precisely what it purports to encompass has varied as scholars have delved deeper into its possibilities. In its strictest form, Afrofuturism might be viewed as any text that
explores the future of people of African descent, as well as how that future reflects the reality of today and/or the realities of the past. Lisa Yaszek elaborates: "Afrofuturist artists are interested in recovering lost black histories and thinking about how those histories inform a whole range of black cultures today. They also want to think about how these histories and cultures might inspire new visions of tomorrow" (2015).

[3.3] However, Afrofuturism does not stop at merely depicting more colorful futures; another important tenet of the movement is using these depictions of the future as a strong critique of the present, working to make the world we live in better now. By encouraging the reader to challenge these visions of the future—and, in turn, to challenge the society of now that might allow (or prevent) such a future from existing—Afrofuturism does more than just present a diverse future; it works to redress some of the deeply rooted prejudices and biases that exist in society's present. Walidah Imarisha describes this movement as being "vital" for the process of decolonization, "because the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless" (2015, 4). One of the most important ways in which Afrofuturism does this is to simply make black faces more visible. As Sheree R. Thomas explains, "People have always been frightened by what they cannot see—and the specter of blackness looms large in the white imagination" (2000, 5). With police brutality in the headlines and cases like Michael Brown and Eric Garner proving just how dangerous preconceived notions of the Other can be, the necessity of people from diverse backgrounds to have their voices heard has become even more paramount.

[3.4] To claim that racebending accomplishes the same work as Afro- and other ethno-futurisms would not only be false, but a disservice to the history and struggle behind these movements. Rather, racebending might be seen as one of the results of these movements, and a reflection that the work performed by the authors and artists involved has begun to make a ripple effect into pop culture, fandoms, and online communities. As such, it may be helpful to look at ways in which other results of these movements have proven to be problematic, and sometimes even detrimental toward the cause which they purport to promote. For instance, one of the major difficulties of the Afrofuturist movement centers around the debate about what actually constitutes an Afrofuturist text. As Eshun writes, "Afrofuturism does not stop at correcting the history of the future. Nor is it a simple matter of inserting more black actors into science-fiction narratives" (2003, 298). The 2004 movie I, Robot, starring Will Smith, for example, has been resisted by many as being termed as an Afrofuturist text, as it does not address the status of African Americans in the future world, but merely features a black lead (who could have easily been written as a white man) in a futuristic setting. As troubling as a whitewashed future may be, plugging in characters
of color at random to add some flavor and diversity to the lineup can be just as problematic an alternative. Kurtz describes this as "an evolutionary white or color-blind future, marginalizing people of color and depicting race as a matter of little importance" (2014, 180). The problem of this kind of "color-blind future"—which some might arguably and perhaps rightfully claim is what the racebending movement actually promotes—is that it "erases the history of racial struggle and the material conditions that perpetuate racist ideologies" (Kurtz 2014, 180).

[3.5] This idea provided much of the basis for a series of LiveJournal debates that have been termed "RaceFail '09." The issue began when white author Elizabeth Bear wrote a blog post instructing other writers as to how to integrate characters of color into a story. The post generated hundreds of comments, as well as response blog posts that questioned Bear's advice, as well as her authority on writing these allegedly diversified stories, which many felt to be appropriations of black culture. In the aftermath of the back and forth posts and comments (which lasted over many months), it is difficult to know what the original blog post which sparked the debates actually contained, as it has since been altered by Bear. However, one aspect of her advice that seemed to draw particular vitriol was the idea that "othered" characters' identities should not be formed around their cultures.

[3.6] For example, Bear writes of one of her characters, "She wasn't DROPPED FROM MARS TO BE CHINESE. She's an FBI agent who happens to have that cultural background" (Bear 2009). One of Bear's most outspoken critics, blogger Avalon's Willow, retaliated with the following response:

[3.7] I despise the phrase happens to have. Do you happen to be white? Do people happen to be straight? No. You hear "He or she happens to be Chinese/Indian/Gay/An Immigrant/Etc..." ...I do not happen to be black or gay or have a Caribbean culture background. I'm not a straight white woman who just happens to have on these "accessories." Who I am, the facets that make up me cannot be picked up somewhere for $3.95, no matter how well you think you shop in exotic locations for true bits of said exotic culture. I am not white down deep beneath my brown and my dreads and my accent and SGL. (Avalon's Willow 2009)

[3.8] Ridding a character of the important cultural facets that have shaped her essentially erases the importance of her individual story; it is not envisioning a world where racism doesn't exist, but creating a world where racial identity doesn't matter because it has been conformed to a white ideal. As Lavender elucidates, "Even if race and the color line are the work of humans, they are political realities...To transcend various repetitions of the color line—black, red, and brown—we must be conscious of these repetitions" (2014, 6).
Tobias Van Veen, in providing his explanation of what Afrofuturism can do, offers one potential avenue to begin envisioning "alternate identities, timelines and counterrealities" that will "challenge whitewashed futures and colonialist histories with Africentric and futurist revisionings" (2013, 10). More specifically, Van Veen continues, this may include "alternate timelines and other worlds as allegories capable of representing but also transforming the coordinates of the present," which will "allow us to think through Afrofuturism's temporal effects—how it challenges the reality of certain histories, and the history of certain realities" (2013, 12). These transformations, Lavender agrees, might help to "reconfigure our sense of viable political futures in which people of color determine human destiny" (2014, 8). If it is, in fact, the case as Yaszek suggests that Afrofuturism is "not only a subgenre of science fiction" but rather "a larger aesthetic mode that encompasses a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media who are united by their shared interest in projecting black futures" (2006, 42), then perhaps—although these racebending projects are operating on a much smaller scale than Afrofuturism—they can at least be recognized as evidence that their creators have been influenced by Afro- and other ethno-futurisms. Thus, rather than labeling racebending as Afrofuturist, or even ethno-futurist, I will heretofore term the movement as "ethno-futuristic" to indicate that, while it may not be accomplishing quite the same work, it can be viewed as a 21st-century, cyber-inspired descendent of these other efforts.

4. What racebending does

The racebending movement currently taking place on Tumblr generally consists of a user fan casting an already existing text with significant race reversals. These fan castings seem to be in direct conversation with the predominance of white males in pop culture, pursuing in particular those fandoms that are known for their white male Westernness. Common targets for these fan casts include Batman, Doctor Who, Sherlock, and Harry Potter, all of which feature traditionally white, American/British, male protagonists who are generally surrounded by similarly white supporting casts (note 3). Some users create fan work that looks at individual characters within these fandoms, now recast to reflect a more diverse identity. British actress Antonia Thomas often recurs as the top choice to play a fan cast Hermione Granger from the Harry Potter series, appearing in multiple posts, including the photoset (figure 1) created by Tumblr user ronanschainsaw, which received over 4,750 notes in response. Naomi Harris has similarly proved to be a highly popular choice for a fan cast of the Twelfth Doctor in Doctor Who; a fan blog by user naomieharrisisfor12 bears the tagline, "The Doctor is a woman of color. Deal with it." The Twelfth Doctor was, in actuality, cast as white male actor Peter Capaldi, yet fan casting women of color into this space continues to happen regularly, including actress Angel Coulby as the Doctor (by
Naomiharrisfor12), and Indian actress Parminder Nagra as the doctor's companion (by Tinyattacksquid).

![Image](image)

**Figure 1.** Hermione Granger fan cast (based on the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling), featuring actress Antonia Thomas. Created by Tumblr user ronanschainsaw.

[4.2] Other fan casts are more ambitious in scope, repopulating familiar media narratives with not only one or two notable actors of color, but entire casts. In a post titled "Racebending the Bat family," user ubiestcaelum fan casts the Batman universe entirely with black actors, as follows in figure 2. Other posts attempt similar feats, but with even more multicultural casts. For example, user thatcupofjo's post, "Racebent: Star Wars—Part 1" (figure 3) received over 2,500 notes; it includes black actors Michael B. Jordan and Jasika Nicole as Luke and Leia, as well as actors Daniel Henney as Han Solo and Edward James Olmos as Ben Kenobi, who are of Korean and Hispanic descent, respectively.
Race Bent Fancasting - The Batfamily

- Bruce Wayne - Idris Elba
- Dick Grayson - Taye Diggs
- Jason Todd - Anthony Mackie
- Tim Drake - Lee Thompson Young
- Damian Wayne - Jaden Smith
- Barbara Gordon - Kerry Washington
- Cassandra Cain - Amerie Rogers
- Steph Brown - Monique Coleman

#fancasting #racebent #batfamily #bruce

783 notes

**Figure 2.** Batman fan cast (based on the series by Bob Kane and Bill Finger), featuring actress Amerie Rogers. Created by Tumblr user ubiestcaelum.
Figure 3. Star Wars fan cast (based on the series by George Lucas), featuring actors Michael B. Jordan, Jasika Nicole, Daniel Henney, and Edward James Olmos. Created by Tumblr user thatcupofjo.

[4.3] User s4karuna takes this one step farther; her mixed-race retelling of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* includes multiple black actresses filling the roles of the Bennet daughters, including Angel Coulby as Jane, Lenora Crichlow as Elizabeth, Gugu Mbatha-Raw as Mary, Antonia Thomas as Kitty, and Jessica Sula as Lydia. In addition, she has a Hispanic Darcy (Chilean-born actor Santiago Cabrera), an Indian Bingley (Aditya Roy Kapur), and an Asian Charlotte Lucas (Chinese-American actress Constance Wu). Such a multicultural recasting is certainly ambitious in scope, yet it is problematic in that it mimics some of the problems found in Afrofuturism and other alternate-future movements—namely, the exoticization of these diversified characters as figures to be inserted into popular mediums at will, but without carrying any of the racial insight or history that would allow these fan art pieces to be truly futuristic in scope.
Figure 4. Pride and Prejudice fan cast (based on the book by Jane Austen), featuring actors Angel Coulby, Lenora Crichlow, Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Antonia Thomas, Jessica Sula, Colin Salmon, Alex Kingston, Santiago Cabrera, Adita Roy Kapur, Karen David, Constance Wu, Richard Ayoade, Godfrey Gao, Pedro Pascal, Seychelle Gabriel, and Rita Moreno. Created by Tumblr user s4karuna.

[4.4] One essential element of online culture is the anonymity of its users, which can be a helpful backdrop to allow the openness that can lead to the kind of discussions these platforms engage in on gender, race, and sexuality. However, this can also be problematic in that it is impossible to know the actual background of these users. Even if they identify online as being African American, female, bisexual, and so forth, there is no real way to verify this; they must be taken at their word. While people of any color, gender, and sexual orientation are certainly welcome to create fan art celebrating diversified backgrounds, it may not truly be deemed as an ethno-futuristic movement once it shifts away from people of color attempting to continue their narrative in a new format and in a new way. The nature of a Tumblr poster creating an alternate space where a black woman can portray Ariel from The Little Mermaid changes dramatically if that poster is a woman of color who grew up longing to see someone like herself in the Disney princesses she grew up watching, rather than a white man who likes to photoshop pictures of "exotic" women into seashell bikini tops. The racebending experience is not mutually exclusive to people of color, but the platform does take on new meaning if code words like "color" and "diversity" are merely being used, as Avalon's Willow suggests, as a sort of easily assimilated commodity. To do so would, again, suggest less of a futuristic space and more a cut and paste free-for-all where people of color, like paper dolls, can be glued into any fandom to see how they look in this hat or that outfit.
However, a closer look at some of these blogs may indicate that more is going on in terms of social discourse than initially meets the eye. The above-mentioned blogger s4karuna identifies herself as, "Autistic Sri Lankan Canadian. She/her pronouns. Aspiring librarian focusing on representation in media. Taking over the racebending tag one fan cast at a time." Something that particularly distinguishes her original artwork is that she not only recasts popular fandoms with diverse characters, but also constructs a new historical and social narrative within her fan art. Her fan castings not only include a token person of color, but also often say something important about that character's newly ethnicized background, and how it changes the familiar story now that this background has been included. This may, perhaps, be in response to criticism received for earlier pieces of fan art that did not do the same, such as multi-ethnic recasting of *Pride and Prejudice*, featuring black, Hispanic, and Asian actors in the traditional roles. Later, she did another post (figure 5) featuring the same black actresses portraying the Bennet sisters, this time with an explanation attached:

![Figure 5](image-url)

*Figure 5. Pride and Prejudice fan cast (based on the book by Jane Austen), featuring actresses Angel Coulby, Lenora Crichlow, Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Antonia Thomas, and Jessica Sula. Created by Tumblr user s4karuna.*

Note: Before anyone says that this casting is historically inaccurate... there actually has been a history of mixed race people in England during the Regency era, including a certain Dido Elizabeth Belle. So this was a great opportunity to do something a little more diverse with *Pride and Prejudice*
since all film adaptations I've seen are a little too white for my taste. In keeping with the Bennet sisters' mixed heritage, I even cast Colin Salmon and Alex Kingston as Mr and Mrs Bennet.

[4.7] This move—though again, perhaps made as a reaction against earlier criticism received—begins to transcend this fan work as something done for the novelty of pairing together dark faces and begins to place it into an historical storyline that could be plausible, if retold with this particular lens.

[4.8] S4karuna does something similar in her fan casting of the Harry Potter movies with Indian actor Suraj Sharma in the titular role (figure 6). Again, she writes a note of explanation about her choices:

![Harry Potter fan cast](image)

**Figure 6.** Harry Potter fan cast (based on the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling), featuring actors Suraj Sharma and unnamed. Created by Tumblr user s4karuna.

[4.9] I know that Suraj isn't mixed race, but I needed someone who could convincingly look the part... The fact that Harry's resemblance to his dad is constantly reinforced made me realize that the Potter men can be read as Anglo-Indian in the text. Being the child of an Indian father and a white mother would give additional meaning to Petunia's dislike for James as well as Harry being considered "half-blood" by the wizard world. Anyways, I'm savvy enough to know that people are going to say that Harry can't have green eyes if he's Indian, but actually it's not uncommon for South Asian actors like Aishwarya Rai, Hrithik Roshan, and Lisa Ray to have green eyes.
Genetics are complicated that way so there's no reason that a mixed race Harry couldn't have inherited Lily's eyes. (note 4)

[4.10] Here, she makes similar moves to establish cultural background within her neo-narrative; although, instead of basing this in historical evidence, she uses genetic evidence, as well as context clues from the text that never definitively code Harry as being white. These notes do more than merely offer a defense by the artist; they also suggests that in this self-made community of racebending fan art, users are holding each other accountable. As the wariness of the note suggests, this may sometimes be perceived (and, indeed, intended) as harsh criticism, but perhaps it also serves to encourage artists to truly create a narrative that engages in the culture of the minorities being represented instead of just appropriating their faces.

[4.11] With these pieces of artwork, s4karuna and other users performing similar moves may not be providing a vision of the future, as one might expect an ethno-futuristic text to do; instead, they offer a re-envisioned conception of the past that challenges what the future of film, television, and theatrical adaptations could do with similar types of literature. As such, the process may not be identical to a more traditionally futuristic text, but rather works inversely, working toward similar end goals while approaching from the opposite direction.

5. A space of one's own

[5.1] Luckily, even though diverse stories may still be few and far between in mainstream pop culture, the Internet has ushered in a new era of possibilities. As Womack points out, "The storytelling gatekeepers vanished with the high-speed modem, and for the first time in history, people of color have a greater ability to project their own stories" (2013, 10). Perhaps one of the places where this becomes most readily visible is on Tumblr. The workability of Tumblr as a site hinges on its visuals—or, as Alexander Cho describes it, "the felt register of suggestive imagery, one of intimation, assemblage, intensity, and aesthetic" (2015, 44). This creates a space in which users like s4karuna may choose to provide historical context for images, but where this is not required or even necessary, since the power of a visual piece is automatic, visceral, and deeply impactful, often instantaneously. Users can connect to the visual for its aesthetic pleasure, but also for the strong emotional response that it garners—or, in Tumblr speak, the "feels" it generates (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014, 7). Cho explains that Tumblr offers a "unique opportunity to trace the lines of intensity and affinity that connect people through affect" (2015, 45). As a living stream of constantly rebirthing images, Tumblr creates a space in which people can be connected by ideas, by emotions, and by a network that allows users to restructure their own sense of identity while also building conceptualizations of a
possible future. Individually, these pieces of fan art may seem comparatively insignificant in the efforts to create social change, particularly with the high turnover rate of these images; however, if one takes into account the reported 60 hours a week that some high-frequency users have estimated spending on the site (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014, 5), then the potential impact of these kinds of images and the messages they promote may begin to take clearer shape.

[5.2] The importance of having an online space to explore identity is perhaps not as clearly defined as seeing, say, a blockbuster superhero film helmed by a black actor, or a post-apocalyptic society populated by more than one or two token people of color; however, these spaces still allow unparalleled explorations of self, as well as how that self is defined, in ways that we perhaps do not yet fully understand. Karen Hellekson notes that sites such as Tumblr permit "performance of gendered, alternative, queered identity" (2009, 116); increasingly, conversations about race are emerging with just as much emphasis. In addition to aligning themselves with particular fandoms and ships (romantic pairings), many Tumblr users identify themselves based on their gender, their sexuality, their nationality, and their ethnicity. As such, these online spaces often become a place for people of color to use technology to discuss issues of their cultures. Serena Hillman, Jason Procyk, and Carman Neustaedter find that these kinds of "social justice" issues are often paired with discussions centering around a fandom, which extend their reach beyond those who identify themselves by a particular race, gender, sexual identity, and so forth. Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter quote one user, who notes, "There is a sense of learning there, like I've learned so much about sexism, feminism, and other social issues that I didn't learn anywhere else, people critique media as well as view and discuss it, so it is a really interesting mix of art and discussion in a pretty easy blogging site" (2014, 8). Though not explicitly named in their study, as charted above, racebending can easily fall into this category of ideological questioning of a metatext. These pieces of fan art can inform discussions that may cause users to identify their own beliefs about the current whitewashing not only in film, television, books, and so forth, but also in their own practices, which traditionally tend to favor white characters in fan-generated blogs, fiction, and art. As such, these users can begin to challenge not only the norm of media, but also their complacency toward it and efforts in perpetuating it.

[5.3] Furthermore, racebending posts can allow users—ostensibly from all different backgrounds, but with a common interest in this sort of social justice activity—to come together as an online community. Rhiannon Bury defines contributors to these types of movements as "active producers of their own texts" (2005, 1), who become united by common interests, desires, and goals. Though they may have started with a shared interest in a particular fandom (or in this case, movement), these interactions can gain an increased importance as users move away from the initial source of inspiration and
begin to form their own set of language, visual cues, rules, and behaviors—in essence, as they begin to create their own community (Sims and Stephens 2011, 30–31). Hellekson further discusses the sense of community engendered by fan practices, writing, "When the fan work is proffered, it is taken into the metatext. The individuality of that piece is lost; it becomes a part of something greater" (2009, 115). Individually, these fan castings may not seem to be saying anything of great importance; observed as a collective, some distinct patterns begin to emerge that indicate the kind of future these users are attempting to build for themselves within these digital communities. Even if the fan art being created by these users does not predict a future society, the community that is being built around them is working toward this future by putting these ideals into practice.

[5.4] Take, for instance, blogs like user racebentdisney's, which are devoted to not only promoting these fan works, but also to calling attention to Hollywood productions that whitewash their casts, such as the 2015 Pan film, which features a white actress in the Tiger Lily role. They also celebrate productions that racebend in their casting choices, like the Broadway production of Cinderella (featuring the black lead actress Keke Palmer) and the Berkeley production of Mary Poppins (featuring Black actress Taylor Jones as Mary Poppins and Hispanic actor Alex Rodriguez as Bert). Such a specific focus within a blog indicates an interest not only at playing with diverse casting, but also in promoting opportunities for actors and artists of diverse ethnic backgrounds, making clear that there is an eager audience for such productions; furthermore, blogs such as these may act to prove to users that this kind of "fantasy" casting can become an actuality.

[5.5] For the most part, reception of these fan casting pages seems to be predominantly positive, but some users have resisted the racebending movement, including poster cryingcrowgirl, who writes:

[5.6] I try really hard to imagine characters as the AUTHOR has written them...It bothers me more when an author's description of a character is thrown entirely out of the window by the fan because "OMG, SHE SHOULDN'T BE ____ BECAUSE THAT'S RACIST, SO I'LL MAKE HER ____ INSTEAD." The author wrote this character a particular way for a reason, not just because they lacked any imagination... Stop ruining things for the rest of us that just want to be around other people that enjoy the same books we do.

[5.7] User irresistible-revolution points out another potential infringement on this ethno-futuristic space in a Tumblr post, writing, "Yo white ppl u do realize that racebending refers specifically to changing white characters into POC, right? cos I'm seeing a disturbing number of folks citing 'race bending' to turn POC characters white
there's already a word for that it's called WHITEWASHING." This quote refers back to the issue of potential appropriation noted above, which some users do not seem to find problematic. User petit soleil, for example, responded to irresistible-revolution's post with the following:

[5.8] I'm gettin real tired of this double standard shit...If you're okay with all of them cool; if you think 'racebending' ANY character is wrong, cool. But don't pick and choose, because they are, in fact, doing the same exact thing...I Draw Elsa of Arendelle as an Indian character (because traditional clothes from India are amazing)... I draw Tiana how I imagine she'd look if she were from a Russian family, or a Filipino family.

[5.9] To which irresistible-revolution responded by pointing out the difference being that "mainstream media is not actually lacking white representation at the moment."

[5.10] Another potential problem of the racebending movement is the prevalence of using mixed-race—and thus, usually lighter-skinned—people of color, rather than allowing for a range of individuals. In addition, there tend to be a recurrence of standard actors of color fan cast into all the roles of a certain racial background—that is, Idris Elba as the go-to for black male characters and Dev Patel as the go-to Indian male. Arguably, both issues could be attributed to representations in the film industry, which tends to use a small bank of actors of color in all its "ethnic" roles, and further tends to favor those who are lighter-skinned; thus, the pool of actors available for the images created for racebending would necessarily reflect this. One could also attribute another common problem found in racebending to a practice often performed in Hollywood in particular, in which subtleties in race are often overlooked; for instance, a Chinese woman may be cast as a Korean character because she looks "Asian," or an Indian actor like Patel may be fan cast as a Middle-Eastern character because he looks "Arab." However, to dismiss these problematic moves entirely just because they may be modeling similar practices in the entertainment industry would be negligent, just as it would negate a history of narrative and visual preference to a certain kind of ethnic representation that privileges some peoples of color over others.

[5.11] Though these gaps may seem less than favorable in creating a potentially ethno-futuristic space, the conversation remains an important—albeit, flawed—one, and will perhaps encourage even those not belonging to the racebending movement to begin challenging their own acceptance of a whitewashed future. With each new post potentially reaching more and more people who may have never thought about the lack of colored faces in films and television, more and more people in turn may begin to question every time they turn on the television and begin to see this lack in practice. As Hellekson notes, "The metatext...created has something to say, sometimes critical things, about the media source, but for those of us who engage in it, it has
even more to say about ourselves" (2009, 114). Eshun discusses the possibilities of what this enlightening process can mean, writing, "A subtle oscillation between prediction and control is being engineered in which successful or powerful descriptions of the future have an increasing ability to draw us towards them, to command us to make them flesh" (2003, 290–91). If the racebending movement can encourage more and more users to question the present reality of media, then perhaps we will be closer to creating a different kind of future.

6. A better future, now

[6.1] Instead of a far-distant timeline with robots and alien life forms, racebending presents a near future in which diverse faces populate films and television as readily as Afrofuturist black characters populate planets and spaceships. Indeed, this interest in racebending may have acted as the impetus for a recent set of videos created by Todrick Hall, including one reposted on racebentdisney's blog called "Cinderonce," in which the story of Cinderella is told entirely through Beyoncé's music. Although this video is not exclusive to the Tumblr universe, it was heavily reblogged, gif-ed, and commented upon in that sphere, which I believe makes it pertinent to this discussion. Furthermore, it puts into living, breathing reality what some of these fan casting experiments still deem as wishful thinking: an entire cast of a fairytale composed entirely of black actors, using the narrative structure of familiar stories with familiar characters in a way that celebrates some popular touchstones of cultural heritage (not just in the inclusion of Beyoncé's songs, but also in the dance styles and in the inclusion of drag queen Shangela Laquifa Wadley) (Nichols 2013). This is not the first of Hall's fairytale reimaginings; he also produced "Beauty and the Beat" and "Cinderfella," which have earned him an impressive online following. "Cinderonce" itself has amassed over three million views since its premiere (Hall 2013).

[6.2] Hall's videos have begun the movement of fan casting away from the realm of hypothetical and into that of reality, encouraged by support from similarly minded online users, who have helped to make them a viral success. This also allows new audiences to be reached who may not be familiar with the racebending movement, and who may be introduced to this idea of a discrepancy in casting choices for the first time with media such as this. YouTube comments are notoriously a hotbed for politically charged arguments, yet many for "Cinderonce" not only laud the video's achievements (user AdventureTimeLover28: "I like this version of Cinderella much better!") but also call for similar moves to be made in other forms of media (user Renaldo Holder, Jr.: "Cinderonce on Broadway!!! Please make this happen!” and user hash tag Awesome: "They need more black princesses"). Many of these viewers may have had no previous conception of what an alternate future for entertainment media could hold, but with examples such as "Cinderonce" perhaps illustrating the way, other
genres—such as superhero films, detective novels, and supernatural television programs—could follow suit.

[6.3] Unfortunately, projects such as Hall's remain the exception, not the rule. Indeed, though works such as the musical *Hamilton*, the television series *Merlin*, and, perhaps most controversially (note 5), *Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens*, have shown the potential success of diverse casting in the film, television, and theater industries, we continue to live in an era where a respected black actor can still be deemed too "street" to play James Bond (note 6). The racebending reflected in these pieces of fan art, then, are not projections of a present reality, but a speculative future in which this sort of media will not be a rare event, but rather a common practice.

7. Conclusion

[7.1] This racebending movement has created a unique, potentially ethno-futurist space for those who do not see themselves depicted in the mainstream media—or at least, not in representations that they recognize in themselves. Instead of accepting that they must always, as browngirlsintherain writes, be portrayed as "terrorists, thugs, and mindless villains," they can create themselves as starship captains, mermaids, goddesses, and whatever else can be imagined. These spaces unfortunately do not reflect the reality of now, but they provide a vision for what the future of media and literature could be. Furthermore, they challenge our view of what society can be, not only in the future, but also in the present. If we as a society can learn to embrace a future in which black women pilot starships and brown faces are as indispensable as white in intergalactic wars, then perhaps we can move a step closer to a reality in which young black men do not inspire a "shoot first, ask questions later" policy. And if mainstream pop culture refuses to broadcast the kinds of stories that could inspire this kind of change, we can still ensure that diverse voices are heard and broadcasted through online platforms.

[7.2] That is not to say that the creators of films, books, and music should not still endeavor to incorporate these elements. Whether these and other similar works continue to be the exception or the rule, the racebending movement and all of its ethno-futuristic efforts are still happening, and can provide an empowering example. Technology, and Tumblr in particular, have helped to perpetuate an alternative in which the future does not have to be framed in black and white, but rather in whatever color—or colors—its creators choose to make it.

8. Notes
1. Though Glover was unsuccessful in his campaign to portray Spider-Man onscreen, he inspired Brian Michael Bendis, a comic-book writer who was rebooting the comic franchise after Peter Parker's death with a new Spider-Man named Miles Morales, a teenager who is both black and Hispanic. Bendis attributes his conception of Morales to both Glover and to President Barack Obama, saying of Glover in particular, "I saw him in the costume and thought, 'I would like to read that book.' So I was glad I was writing that book." (Truitt 2011). Glover has also gone on to voice Morales in Disney XD's animated series *Ultimate Spider-Man: Web Warriors* (Truitt 2014), though as of the writing of this paper there are no confirmed plans to release a live-action depiction of Morales's story.

2. I very quickly learned the danger of not saving individual posts of note, since waiting even a week to return to Tumblr and attempting to find them again resulted in scrolling through hundreds of newer posts that had taken their place in the lineup.

3. It should be noted that the Doctor is an alien from Gallifrey, so technically not codified as white or British, though the actors playing the role have always belonged to this category.

4. After this post was published, J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, made headlines when she defended the casting choice of a black actress in the role of Hermione in the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, a continuation of the book series penned by Rowling herself. In response to some negative backlash on social media, Rowling tweeted, "Canon: brown eyes, frizzy hair, and very clever. White skin was never specified. Rowling loves black Hermione"—thus validating s4karuna's earlier argument about the possibility of an Indian recasting of Harry.

5. An early trailer for the film sparked some controversy, with fans complaining about the casting of John Boyega as a black stormtrooper. Some fans claim that the outrage had more to do with continuity—*Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* revealed that all stormtroopers were clones of Jango Fett, played by New Zealand actor Temuera Morrison, who is of Maori, Scottish, and Irish descent—than with any kind of racism (Anderson 2015). Director J. J. Abrams seems to imply the same, quoted as saying that those "who are complaining about that probably have bigger problems than there's a black Stormtrooper" (Dowd 2015), though various others—including fans, academics, and performers/filmmakers—spoke out about the racist undertones of such a complaint. Boyega addressed the implied racism, stating, "I'm not saying get used to the future, but what is already happening. People of color and women are increasingly being shown on-screen. For things to be whitewashed just doesn't make sense" (Renshaw 2015).
6. In discussing his casting choices for the upcoming reboot of the James Bond film franchise, James Bond novel writer Anthony Horowitz is quoted as saying, "For me, Idris Elba is a bit too rough to play the part. It's not a colour issue. I think he is probably a bit too 'street' for Bond. Is it a question of being suave? Yeah" (Opam 2015).

9. Works cited


Abstract—With an eye toward the growing body of scholarship on the new *Sherlock* (2010–), this article considers both the show's possibilities for queer identification and the limitations of analyses of the show that rely too heavily on Holmes's relationship with John Watson as evidence of Holmes's queerness. Despite the producers' proclamation that Holmes is above sex, much less gay sex, the show is ripe with a queer subtext that viewers have recognized and reclaimed as their own. Several scholars have examined *Sherlock*'s appeal to these viewers, but their focus has primarily been on the ways these readings conflict or intersect with how the show and its producers understand him. This article calls for a reading that conceives of a queerness outside of the homosexual domestic. Using José Escobar Muñoz's theory of disidentification, I argue that we should explore readings of the show that do not demand validation of queerness through normative relationships and behaviors. Instead, Sherlock's illegibility allows him to exist in a queer space, outside both essentialist and constructivist ideas of who and what people can be.

Keywords—Disidentification; Fandom; Sherlock Holmes; Slash fiction; John Watson


1. Introduction

The BBC's critically acclaimed reboot of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's great detective stories, *Sherlock* (2010–), has a dirty little secret: Sherlock gets up to all sorts of things in the shadowy, slashy corners of the Internet. With over 80,000 works on fan fiction archive sites and nearly 50,000 of those featuring male/male erotic adventures (otherwise known as slash), *Sherlock*'s position as a contemporary queer icon cannot be denied. Despite the producers' proclamation that Holmes is above sex, much less gay sex, the show is ripe with a queer subtext that viewers have recognized and reclaimed as their own. Several scholars have examined *Sherlock*'s ambiguous status as a queer text, but their focus has primarily been on the ways these readings conflict or intersect with how the show and its producers read him. Others have conceived of Holmes as a contemporary antihero, compelling in his complexity and social ineptitude. Instead, I focus on the construction of Holmes as a character who is
recognizably queer—though this recognition troubles the very people constructing him. Using José Escobar Muñoz's theory of disidentification, I suggest that we explore readings of the show that do not demand validation of queerness through normative relationships and behaviors. Muñoz's theory is particularly applicable to fan communities, as it acknowledges the subject's ability to find or create space within texts and contexts that are otherwise coded to exclude them. While much of the criticism surrounding the show's queerness or, alternatively, queer-baiting focuses on the relationships between Sherlock and John Watson, Irene Adler, and even Moriarty, I wonder if it isn't a step backward, rather than forward, to consider Holmes's sexuality as contingent upon others', when his very ambiguity may be why the show has such a profound resonance for its queer fan base.

[1.2] *Sherlock*'s Holmes provides a point of identification in a cultural moment marked by gender and sexual fluidity, shifting identity boundaries, and a sense of disconnection from mainstream expectations. In particular, he demonstrates an inability (or, perhaps, unwillingness) to color within the lines of traditional gender performance, sexuality, and personality. This inability or unwillingness seems to resonate with an audience increasingly struggling with these issues in their own identity formation. Though the original Sherlock Holmes is commonly seen as a paragon of traditional British masculinity in all of its logical, legible, patriarchal glory, Tom Bragg's work on the original stories argues that Doyle struggled to reconcile his hero's transgressive, contradictory masculinity with the traditional, chivalric variation he preferred (2009). The BBC's new *Sherlock* provides a contemporary lens through which our expectations of these values are interrogated and, ultimately, queered. This queering is a significant reason for the show's immense popularity, particularly among members of its fandom. In claiming Holmes as a queer figure, viewers are able to disidentify with a character whose illegibility and contradictions speak to a queer experience.

2. "Who the hell knows about Sherlock Holmes?"

[2.1] *Sherlock*'s popularity has not gone unnoticed, and there is a growing body of scholarship interrogating what, exactly, makes this particular adaptation so compelling for the modern audience. Sabine Vanacker and Catherine Wynne's 2013 collection, *Sherlock Holmes and Conan Doyle: Multi-Media Afterlives* tackles the modern Holmes more generally. Bran Nicol's essay in that volume on adapting Sherlock for the 21st century highlights the detective's "work and occasional indiscretions" (2013, 125) as essential to his appeal, while the idea is introduced that fan works "focus on scenes not described in the canonic stories, or develop and speculate on certain characters" (97). Louisa Ellen Stein and Kristina Busse's collection *"Sherlock" and Transmedia Fandom* focuses more specifically on the BBC series. Lyndsay Faye's prologue, "Why
Sherlock? Narrator Investment in the BBC Series," notes in particular that "humans are compelled to fill in the blank spaces upon the map, and thus one may argue that a hero about whom very little is known proves to be the most compelling sort" (2012, 5). It is this ambiguity that has made Sherlock a site of such intense scrutiny and analysis. Faye argues that although the canonical Sherlock Holmes is "monastic...his extreme reticence to discuss any aspect of his sexual inclinations has led to speculative romances for him of every nature imaginable" (2012, 6).

[2.2] Judith Fathallah considers the interruption of heteronormative performance and paradigm in the BBC series, arguing that even as the show works to disrupt normative masculinity, it either delivers such disruptions as jokes or undermines them by quickly backpedaling to explicitly reinscribe the characters' normativity. She introduces Lee Edelman's No Future to discuss how Sherlock fulfills Edelman's "manifesto for jouissance and embrace of the death drive" through Holmes's, Watson's, and particularly Moriarty's performance of (or failure to perform) traditional masculinity (Fathallah 2015, 497). In "Queer (Mis)recognition in the BBC's Sherlock," Stephen Greer (2014) also addresses elements of queerness and recognition in the show, though he determines that the show ultimately creates a "(mis)recognition." He notes, in particular, that while Holmes and Watson are often misrecognized as a gay couple, the show's seemingly essentialist defense of the binary of gay versus straight works to close down the possibilities opened by their unusually intimate bond.

[2.3] To limit one's reading of Sherlock's queerness to his relationship with Watson is, however, as reductive as is the gay/straight binary that critics argue the show relies upon. Instead, we can recognize the doctor as heterosexual and the detective as queer in a way that does not depend upon a monogamous, faux-normative romantic bond between them. To do this, we must look for gay romantic possibilities beyond those patterned on the heterosexual. In "Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main)streams," Lynne Joyrich notes that representation of queer identities on television has moved beyond the inclusion of explicitly nonnormative characters. She explains that the very nature of television programming is becoming "more queer: more eccentric and playful, more connective and transformative, with more stand-out strangeness than just stand-up straightness." She goes on to define queering and the queer as separate parts of speech, with the verb queering referring to "the process of playing, transforming, and making strange" and the noun queer as "identifying people who are 'recognizably' LGBT" (2014, 135).

[2.4] Both of these elements are at play in Sherlock, though we might benefit in our understanding by updating Joyrich's acronym to LGBTQ+, as it's the + that is perhaps most relevant here. She explains also that television programming has been the very definition of mainstream for years and "is still typically seen as the most ordinary,
everyday, and commonplace of our media forms." In contrast to this, she defines the queer "as the subversion of the ordinary, as the strange, as the irregular" (Joyrich 2014, 134). Because of the possibilities for this sort of subversion on television, some scholars have referred to the genre as a haven for the nonnormative. Quinn Miller, in "Queer Recalibration," explains that primary television texts "serve as scaffolding for a broader array of intertexts, paratexts, extratexts, and auxiliary texts that, in drawing out cross-pollinations and meanings that exceed standardization, draw out the networks of meaning within which representation comes to life in its queerest manifestations" (2014, 143). Even as Sherlock relies on these same kinds of texts for its canonical characterizations and deductions, Miller's observation produces a general lens through which the viewer can read Holmes's characterization as decidedly outside of the normative. Queer fan readings proliferate in interactive settings, frequently online, where the very boundaries that contain the show's text are blurred and bent. Using the show's subtext and Holmes's transgressive characterization, many viewers construct narratives that address the moments occurring between the ones depicted in each episode.

[2.5] Can the nonnormative remain illegible, though, without undermining the queerness of the text? In "Slashing the Fiction of Queer Theory: Slash Fiction, Queer Reading, and Transgressing the Boundaries of Screen Studies, Representations, and Audiences," Frederik Dhaenens, Sofie Van Bauwel, and Daniel Biltereyst note the problematic tendency of some LGBT advocates to "normalize" queer relationships by paralleling their structure with traditional heteronormative paradigms. Specifically, they argue that "queer theorists are concerned mainly with how gay and lesbian scholars try to legitimize homosexuality as a sexual minority by positioning it within the binary construction of homosexuality versus heterosexuality...As a result, these minorities remain conceptualized as the opposite extremes in a spectrum where the center is intact." They further note that queer theory is a "conscious refusal of labels" and that it "emphasizes a retreat from binary thinking" (2008, 337). This binary thinking plagues readings of Sherlock as a show whose failure to follow through on its homosexual subtext undermines its queer presence. It is important to acknowledge that Holmes doesn't have to be homosexual to be queer, and he certainly doesn't have to be romantically or sexually involved with Watson.

[2.6] Instead, Holmes's queerness is the result of a collection of nonnormative characteristics that exclude him from traditional paradigms of identity and sexuality. His very illegibility may be what appeals to the diverse group of fans who both receive and reciprocate the pleasure of reading (and writing) Holmes as a queer character. He deviates completely from traditional expectations, which very well may be the quality that makes him so compelling. Though scholarship has often identified slash writers as predominantly heterosexual females, these labels again revert to a limiting binarism—
after all, how traditionally heterosexual can a woman be if she invests so heavily in the production and consumption of queer erotica? Francesca Coppa's "Sherlock as Cyborg: Bridging Mind and Body" illustrates the limits of these identity binaries even—or perhaps especially—when discussing fans. She notes, "Sherlock, by putting all these binaries on the table—man and machine, intellect and desire, public and private, nature and culture, primitive and civilized, sane and crazy, straight and gay—but not quite managing to put them together in a way that looks normal...attracts a female and queer mediafannish audience that is looking to renegotiate and integrate these binaries in new ways for themselves" (2012, 218).

[2.7] In fact, writing (slash) fan fiction has only recently emerged as a mainstream occupation. For many years, the practice itself was transgressive—something writers and readers generally hid from their nonfannish friends and family under the assumption that these more normative loved ones would find the practice deviant. In "A Critical Eye for the Queer Text: Reading and Writing Slash Fiction on (the) Line," Rhiannon Bury relates one fan's experience of confessing her slash proclivities to her husband: "He finally broke down and admitted that he thought slash and homosexuality were just sick and that I was a lesbian because I liked it" (2006, 1156). Bury also references Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, in which he argues that a variety of identity sites and locations can be read as queer, noting that even a viewer who identifies as a heterosexual woman may obtain pleasure from reading the "gay erotics of male buddy films" and that "queer reception...stand[s] outside the relatively clear-cut and essentializing categories of sexual identity under which most people function" (1993, 16, 15). In fact, it is the ambiguity of many characters that compels fans to recognize them as queer. For *Sherlock*, this recognition transcends the erotic pleasure of a queer reading and provides a site of identification. A motivated searcher could likely find a fan-authored slash text for virtually any media product, but the discourse surrounding *Sherlock* goes beyond these texts, revealing that many viewers find their own queerness embodied in Holmes.

3. "If anyone out there still cares, [John Watson is] not actually gay."

[3.1] There may be no better place to begin discussing the queerness of *Sherlock* than with its ostensibly least queer character—or, at least, the character whose heterosexuality the producers go to the greatest lengths to affirm. Scholars have criticized the show's relentless denial of Watson's potential romantic or sexual attraction to Holmes, and it's certainly difficult to miss the smoke signals, skywriting, and billboards *Sherlock* has put up to remind us that Watson is the hetero king of London. The markers of his masculinity are overt from the first: he was a soldier, he
keeps a gun handy, and he has difficulty sharing his feelings, even on a blog. These elements of characterization are carried over from the original stories; Bragg, in "Becoming a 'Mere Appendix': The Rehabilitated Masculinity of Sherlock Holmes," notes that while many critics have attributed Doyle's mention of Watson's military service to an atmosphere of Imperial anxiety, it serves an important additional function. He explains, "To Victorian males...the reference would signify the most heroic qualities of British manhood in the face of adversity...By including these conventional adventure stories and military references, Doyle masculinizes the ambiguous atmosphere of [A Study in Scarlet]" (2009, 12). He further notes that "the conservative Watson" was "always closer to Doyle's preferred style of masculinity than Holmes" (2009, 11). The BBC's adaptation functions in much the same way—though Watson and Holmes form a close, intimate bond, Watson is wearing the traditional pants in the household.

[3.2] Watson's heterosexual leanings are constantly affirmed, and critics are quite right in noticing that much of this affirmation occurs immediately following someone's misrecognition of him as Sherlock's romantic partner. We're hardly fifteen minutes into the first episode of the series before this happens: their landlady Mrs. Hudson tells them there's a second bedroom upstairs, if they'll be needing it; she sympathizes with Watson's burden of a husband who's always on the go, but not to worry, they've got all sorts around here—even some gays who are married; Sherlock's brother Mycroft wonders if there might be a happy announcement coming; Angelo, the restaurant owner, offers Sherlock and his date anything they want, on the house. With both John's heterosexuality and its perceived diminishment when he's in the company of Sherlock established, the restaurant scene tasks John with asking Sherlock the questions to which those around them have already been assuming the answers:

[3.3] John: You don't have a girlfriend, then?

Sherlock: A girlfriend, no. Not really my area.

John: All right. Do you have a boyfriend? Which is fine, by the way.

Sherlock: I know it's fine.

John: So you've got a boyfriend.

Sherlock: No. ("A Study in Pink," 2010)

[3.4] When Holmes rather delicately attempts to discourage Watson from what he perceives to be romantic interest, he does so without referring to an incompatible
sexuality: "John, I think you should know that I consider myself married to my work, and while I'm flattered by your interest..." Though we might consider this scene as an instance of queerbaiting, to do so is to undermine this important first step that the show takes toward revealing Sherlock as a queer character. Whereas John is flustered and a little defensive at the suggestion that they may be romantically involved, and anxious to assure his new (maybe gay) flatmate that he's not homophobic, Sherlock is concerned not about what this discussion means in regard to identity and recognition, but rather about what it suggests about the dynamics of their budding relationship. As Jennifer Coates notes in "The Discursive Production of Everyday Heterosexualities," "heterosexuality, like gender, is performed; in other words, sexual identity has to be repeatedly and interactionally achieved" (2013, 537). Coates even argues that "when someone has an affair or claims she does not want children or does not align themselves with the dominant norms of masculinity or femininity, they undermine the taken-for-granted nature of heteronormativity, and thus queer it" (2013, 549). Though Watson's heterosexual identity is supported by his statements, Sherlock's never is—he wanders away, seemingly unconcerned, from every attempt to identify him as either homo- or heterosexual. The one character who consistently interacts with Holmes as though he were an eligible bachelor of traditional bent is Molly Hooper, a morgue registrar with a blatant and enduring crush on Holmes. Sherlock's apparent (and out-of-character) obliviousness to her romantic affection for him may serve a comic purpose, but it also serves to decenter a normative reading of him. We are supposed to believe that while Holmes can easily read the interest of Molly's allegedly gay new boyfriend, Jim, he is incapable of recognizing it in Molly herself.

[3.5] Of course, unlike Sherlock, John does date throughout the series. He dates quite prolifically, in fact—unsurprising, since he seems to leave few female characters unpropositioned in his efforts to perform the work Coates notes above. More than that, he is apparently quite successful with the ladies, which indicates that John on his own does not read as queer. It's only when he's with Sherlock that these assumptions are made, and one has to doubt that Londoners are quite that parochial. It must be the presence of Sherlock, then, that nudges John across the line from eligible bachelor to sexually ambiguous. It's not insignificant that Watson is quick to correct all of these misconceptions, but then it's also not insignificant that Holmes never does. John's denials function as a reflection of his discomfort with what everyone seems to recognize as a beautiful (and very queer) friendship.

[3.6] Though scholars have paid much attention to the restaurant scene in the show's first episode, there are others that give, perhaps, a more intimate view of the relationship. "A Scandal in Belgravia" (2012) is particularly rich in examples. Roughly halfway through, as John and Mycroft rush to evaluate Sherlock's mental state following the apparent death of Irene Adler and, just in case, clean 221B Baker Street
of any drugs or related paraphernalia, John's girlfriend Jeanette waits (long-sufferingly) on the couch. "You know," she says, "my friends are wrong about you. You're a great boyfriend...Sherlock Holmes is a very lucky man." She has but one request in answer to his protestations: "Don't make me compete with Sherlock Holmes." Later in the episode, when a shocked John meets with a still very much alive Irene, Irene observes a similarity between herself and John:

[3.7] Irene: Are you jealous?

John: We're not a couple.

Irene: Yes, you are...

John: Who the hell knows about Sherlock Holmes, but, for the record, if anyone out there still cares, I'm not actually gay.

Irene: Well, I am. Look at us both.

[3.8] In this episode, then, we have two women commenting on John and Sherlock's relationship, both of whom are in a position of some authority on the issue. Irene's opinion in particular should carry significant weight; after all, she knows what people like.

[3.9] While the show also freely allows strangers to misrecognize John and Sherlock's relationship, these two women are bound to the men with their own forms of intimacy. Is it really fair to say that they, too, are mistaken when they identify the relationship as queer? Is there room for a humorous misrecognition in these scenes? We could discount the innkeeper in "The Hounds of Baskerville," Angelo's assumptions in "A Study in Pink," and the almost kiss of a fan's fantasy in "Many Happy Returns" as attempts at lighthearted flirting with queerness, but Jeanette's and Irene's investments in the two men are far from superficial. Instead, the moments in which the women identify John and Sherlock's relationship as queer are significant—with Jeanette, the moment marks the end of her relationship with John; with Irene, it highlights a point of profound affinity between her and John. Irene Adler is a gay woman and John Watson is a straight man—what they should have in common is an attraction to women, but instead it is an intimate bond with this man. The balance of comic relief and uncomfortable insight may lean a bit self-consciously toward the former, but we're doing the queer possibilities of the show a disservice if we disregard the latter.

[3.10] In many ways, *Sherlock* honors the sexually ambiguous origins of its hero. Bragg has argued that Sherlock Holmes began his long life as a "marginal, sexually-
problematic figure" who, "despite Doyle's best efforts...would never be so uncomplicated a proponent of manliness and normality as the soldiers, explorers, and athletes that people Doyle's other fiction" (2009, 4). Similarly, Sherlock's Holmes stands in contrast to much of contemporary heteronormative television masculinity. Rebecca Feasey, calling on Raewyn Connell's Masculinities, argues that those dominating the cultural climate are "white, heterosexual, competitive, individualist and aggressive men in the paid labor force" (2009, 358). In his stirring "Masculinity as Homophobia," Michael S. Kimmel explains the performance heterosexual men put on to be sure that no one gets "the 'wrong idea'" about them: "every mannerism, every movement contains a coded gender language...Never dress that way. Never talk or walk that way...Always be prepared to demonstrate sexual interest in women that you meet" (2005, 148). We can loosely identify a hegemonic masculinity as one that is dominant, emotionally controlled, violent, sexually accomplished, powerful, and demonstratively superior to women and homosexuals. Kimmel makes much of the power of the "sissy" slur to incite a man's fear and anger, and it's not much of a leap from this pejorative to John's stubborn repetition of "not gay," "not gay," and "still not gay." In his responses to many of these early misrecognitions, he performs the traditional hegemonic knee-jerk response to an accusation of homosexuality: emphatic denial. It is all the more significant, then, that Sherlock himself never deigns to comment. His failure to comment is so total, in fact, that all his closest friend in the world can say on the subject is, "Who the hell knows about Sherlock Holmes."

[3.11] Even if we highlight those elements of traditional masculinity that Sherlock does display—dominance, emotional control, superiority—we cannot translate these qualities to heteronormativity. The instinct to read Sherlock's masculinity (or femininity, for that matter) as proof of his sexuality is problematic. Queerness and masculinity, after all, are not mutually exclusive, and to complacently conflate the masculine with the heterosexual reverts to essentialist perceptions of gender and sexuality that harm, not help, every viewer. The markers of Doyle's straightening out of Holmes may very well have been patriarchally hegemonic, but we must hope that a contemporary audience is better able to accept these traits in individuals all along the spectrum of gender. In "'Real' Men: Construction of Masculinity in the Sherlock Holmes Narratives," Joseph A. Kestner notes traits that were "radically gendered as masculine in Victorian culture: observation, rationalism, facticity, logic, comradeship, pluck, and daring" (1996, 77). Sherlock's detective may very well embody these qualities, but so do a variety of other characters in our popular culture lexicon who are not normatively male: the teen girl detective Veronica Mars, the plucky college girl comrades of the Pitch Perfect movies, and several (very queer) gentlemen in Queer as Folk. Within Sherlock itself we have John's wife, Mary, whose secret skill set draws upon the same masculine markers that characterize her husband. We simply should not assume that the presence of these "masculine" characteristics unambiguously indicates hegemonic
heteronormativity. To premise analysis on the hopefully outdated assumption that a masculine male character cannot be queer is to discredit the many queer individuals who embody such characteristics and might relate to such a character.

[3.12] Sherlock does not shy away from depicting LGBT+ characters textually. Our first example, of course, is Harriet Watson, John's lesbian sister, whom Sherlock at first misrecognizes as a straight man. Then we have Irene Adler, whose very introduction comes on the heels of a set of scandalous photographs of her and some unnamed female member of the royal family. A more muddled example may be James Moriarty's performance as the closeted gay boyfriend of Molly Hooper in "The Great Game"; Sherlock immediately reads him as gay, but is not in the least surprised when Jim apparently recognizes a queerness in him and discreetly gives Sherlock his phone number. It's easy to gloss over this moment, as Moriarty later admits to playing dress-up so that Sherlock would read him as queer, but the fact remains that no one in the room at the time finds it unusual that a gay man would be hitting on Sherlock Holmes. Ultimately, Sherlock's sexuality is completely illegible, which leads critics to a variety of conclusions: he is gay, or he is very straight, or maybe he is asexual, or possibly he is just above sex. There is another option, though it's less satisfyingly definite: Sherlock's illegibility allows him to exist in a queer space, outside of both essentialist and constructivist ideas of who and what people can be.

[3.13] As Guillermo Avila-Saavedra reminds us in "Nothing Queer about Queer Television: Televised Construction of Gay Masculinities," "queer studies propose that sexuality is not restricted to heterosexuality or homosexuality, a binary system reinforced by hegemonic patriarchal societies, but is a more complex array of gender possibilities" (2009, 7). Further, he argues, "representations of gay and lesbian identities in the mass media are occurring in a rather conservative period for American society and therefore are harmless to heteronormative values. Homosexual images are presented in a way acceptable for heterosexual audiences by reinforcing traditional values like family, monogamy and stability" (2009, 8). It is arguably these faux-heteronormative elements that we find wanting in Sherlock if we deny its queerness on the basis that Watson and Holmes are only misread as a joke. To demand a Sherlock whose romance with Watson is physical and canonical is to fall prey to the mainstream trend of "queerness that is less socially threatening: that of the urban, sophisticated gay male...In the radical, disruptive sense of the term, there is nothing queer about queer television when the flexibility of the term is reduced to an interpretation that reinforces the traditional homosexual/heterosexual binary" (Avila-Saavedra 2009, 11).

[3.14] Certainly, one way to read John's stalwart heterosexuality is as a disavowal of the queerness of the relationship. Another way to read it, however, is as a point of
normativity against which Sherlock's deviance stands in stark contrast. When placed alongside Watson, Sherlock is demonstratively bent. This is perhaps never more evident than when John and Mary marry (and accidentally reproduce) in "The Sign of Three" (2014). The wedding ceremony is both the peak and the foundation of the heteronormative. It is, Coates notes, "the taken-for-granted end-point of the (heterosexual) romantic journey" that does "enormous ideological work, reaffirming what is 'normal' and acceptable in Britain today. A traditional wedding is one of the most visible symbols in our society of heteronormativity" (2013, 537). This particular wedding is a symbol for which Sherlock is painfully aware he has little affinity, though he endures and even attempts to adapt to it in service to his profound relationship with John. In fact, "The Sign of Three" stands out as one of the most textually explicit acknowledgments of Sherlock's queerness. It is in this episode, after all, that we see Sherlock participating most closely in the "sissified" wedding planning activities of cake tasting and seating planning, while simultaneously planning a booze-soaked bachelor party. We see him both folding fancy napkins and threatening to ruin Mary's ex-boyfriend if he seems too attentive. We see, too, the way he either opts out of or fails to be aroused by the traditional wedding party mating activities—made evident by Janine's obvious interest in him and his obvious disinterest in her. "I wish you weren't...whatever it is you are," she says, gazing at him with an air of longing regret. He replies, "I know." What, then, is he? Janine is yet another intimate companion who finds herself unable to put a name or label on what Sherlock is. It is difficult, after all, to read the performance of a person who cannot be located on either side of our most popular binaries.

[3.15] Though Stephen Greer offers a way to read Sherlock as queer, if opaque, he still finds that "the queer potential within Sherlock's depiction of a broadly post-homophobic cultural space imagined by the series is nonetheless constrained by narrow and normative associations of gender and sexual identity" (2014, 51). Focusing on the idea that sexuality and identity are readable from a set of epistemic social markers that signify their wearer's identity with near-certainty, Greer finds that while the show's canonical "(mis)recognitions" might suggest a queerness, "the recurring 'joke' of the first two seasons may enact a kind of regulation which constrains the terms of intelligibility that exist for relationships between men, even as the possibility of other attachments and identities is implied" (2014, 66). Though Greer's analysis thoughtfully considers the potential of both the homosexual and the homosocial, it focuses on the possibility of discovery of a sexual or romantic relationship between John and Sherlock as the central point of queerness in the text. The illegibility of this relationship, however, is not the problem—it's the answer. In presenting an intimate bond between a man whose sexuality is never in doubt and one whose always is, Sherlock queers these boundaries and the way they are so narrowly and restrictively represented in much other programming. If we want Sherlock to address the
possibility of identities and relationships that step outside of the heteronormative binary, we need to stop evaluating it in the terms of that binary—Holmes's identity cannot and must not depend on Watson's.

[3.16] What could (and often does) problematize a reading of *Sherlock* as queer is the insistence of its writer, Steven Moffat, that Holmes is neither gay nor asexual. Moffat asserts, "There's no indication in the original stories that he was asexual or gay. He actually says he declines the attention of women because he doesn't want the distraction. What does that tell you about him? Straightforward deduction. He wouldn't be living with a man if he thought men were interesting" (Jeffries, 2012). Of course, Moffat's insistence that Doyle's Holmes was celibate by choice rather than queerness has its own problems—namely, the inconsistencies between such an assertion and the text of the show. How, for example, can we believe that Holmes finds women so interesting if he fails to notice Molly Hooper's repeated attempts to get his attention? What are we to make of the dozens of literal question marks that make up his first reading of Irene Adler's nude body? And what of the great detective's earliest origins? Bragg's analysis contextualizes Holmes's character as

[3.17] uniquely suited to celebrate many Victorian masculine paradigms, managing to move from one style to another with a seamless grace: the cold scientific reasoner but also the committed artist, the consummate professional but also the gifted amateur, an honorable conservative but also a "bohemian" outsider...Rife with contradictions, he is able to reconcile differing models of masculine behavior...but these very contradictory qualities that suit him to this widely acknowledged role also problematize his masculinity, opening him to suspicions of abnormal behavior and transgressive sexuality which Doyle was always at pains to contain. (2009, 4)

[3.18] Like Moffat's, Doyle's preference for traditional masculine values faltered as a result of his depiction of the detective as "an effeminate and morally ambiguous character, with hints of social deviance," and his attempts to rehabilitate Holmes were only partially successful (Bragg 2009, 4). These contradictions plague Moffat's incarnation, as well. Despite Moffat's desire, and that of the show's other creators, to write Sherlock (and have him read) as a definitively masculine, logical, straight-as-an-arrow-but-celibate-by-choice paragon of British masculinity and rationalism, the text itself is rife with queer subtext. Judith Fathallah explains that Moffat's perception of Holmes reflects "the series' investment in a well-known model of white British neoimperial masculinity and triumph of the individual over the social" (2015, 492). This model is not the one that is recognizable to or resonant for a significant portion of the show's fans, however. Instead, these fans have found their hero in a man whose
social awkwardness, intensity, and ambiguity make him defy easy categorization. The Watson/Holmes paradigm may take for granted that viewers will position themselves with John, the everyman—indeed, Fathallah notes that Martin Freeman, who plays Watson, is frequently cast as "archetypal 'nice guys' who get pulled into adventures and emerge as unlikely heroes"—but many viewers find themselves identifying with Holmes instead (2015, 494).

4. "Desperately unspoken"

[4.1] The question we ask, then, is whether Moffat's perception of Holmes can define or even reflect the way the character is received by the audience, or if we must allow Sherlock's textual ambiguity and illegibility to speak for themselves and value, instead, the show's resonance with its queer audience. In Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, José Esteban Muñoz details a process of disidentification that allows the subjective memory to reformat experiences, "letting it work within... internal narratives of subject formation" (1999, 4). Since much of the representation of queer identities on 21st-century television errs toward the normative in order to defuse the impact of its subversion, likely in an effort to avoid alienating mainstream audiences, people who claim nonnormative queer identities may have to read between the lines to find themselves represented in the media. These viewers already know that representations of themselves are unlikely to be explicit, so points of identification (or disidentification) rely on subtext to straddle the mainstream and the queer. Sherlock performs just this straddling, and while Moffat's denials of Holmes's queerness are adamant, they are also external to the text and contradicted by any number of experiences and observations within the show.

[4.2] As Muñoz explains, "to disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject," or to "hold on to this object and invest it with new life" (1999, 12). The process of disidentification with Sherlock, then, may be not only to find oneself within nonnormative moments, but also to find oneself within the normalizing discourse that surrounds them. Though some aspects of the show may attempt to use Sherlock's self-diagnosed "high-functioning sociopathy" to associate the character's queerness with antisocial behavior, it is clear to many in the audience that the story is a redemptive one. Sherlock is redeemed by his relationship with John even as John is rehabilitated by it. The unusual intimacy of their bond, along with Sherlock's status as an outsider to traditional heteronormative paradigms, speaks to its queer audience, regardless of how many times John Watson reminds us that he's not gay.

[4.3] As is increasingly the case with popular cultural texts, the published critical work on Sherlock is only one small part of the conversation. Turning to the online
fandom reveals a number of critics whose work is, in its own way, published and peer reviewed. *Sherlock* fan scholars perform close textual readings and detailed analyses of the show that move beyond mainstream expectations of erotic fan fiction. In one such reading, Tumblr user EmmyAngua notes, "3 series. 3 finales. ALL of them have the same ending. John is in danger and Sherlock chooses to die to protect him" (Tumblr post, December 9, 2015). Another user performs a close analysis of the development of John and Sherlock's relationship throughout the series that she titles "Desperately Unspoken: The Ongoing Relationship between Sherlock and John," arguing that its queerness exists not in what is said, but in what remains unsaid:

> [4.4] They can happily enjoy their sexual tension without either of them having to alter their plans or their identity. Sherlock has sort of let him off the hook by being resolutely disinterested in sexual or romantic relationships. John is safe to feel whatever he likes, essentially. Sherlock will remain unthreatening to John's self-perception, because if John does feel something for Sherlock, it can be safely channeled into their work and their unorthodox friendship. (Ivy Blossom, Tumblr post, January 11, 2014)

> [4.5] These "amateur" readings of the text, fueled by both insight and investment, manage to create what few published scholars have achieved: a queer space in which Sherlock and John can blur the normative lines of male friendship and attraction without being forced to conform to some sort of norming gay or straight standard. Another fan responds to Moffat's rejection of a queer or asexual identity for Sherlock by referencing Moriarty's "playing gay" scene: "Moffat makes me laugh. Also if Sherlock isn't gay then why does he put product in his hair? Moffat's show told me that is definitely a sign of homosexuality in men" (raonndx, comment on a Tumblr post, December 9, 2015). Coates's analysis of the social performance of heterosexuality explains how these identities must be actively perpetuated (2013). As the fan readings demonstrate, claiming that a text is straight is not the same as proving it to be—to establish Sherlock as a heterosexual would require the show to "repeatedly and interactionally" validate that identity (Coates 2013). Instead, the text repeatedly and interactionally destabilizes any possible heteronormative identity for Holmes.

> [4.6] It may be tempting to write off fan analyses and recognition of the show's queerness as part of the increasingly public phenomenon of online fandom, but we must also consider consider *Sherlock* fandom's remarkable impact and reach to evaluate how recognizably queer it is in comparison to similar offerings. Another Moffat-written show, *Doctor Who* (2005–), which is comparatively popular in many other online fandom venues, had 55,116 works on the fan fiction site Archive of Our Own as July 29, 2016. Of these, only 14,567 are tagged m/m (male/male erotica or romance). The CBS show *Elementary* (2012–), which similarly features a
contemporary Sherlock Holmes, has only 2,093 stories in the archive, 246 of which are tagged m/m. The 2009 and 2011 Sherlock Holmes films starring Robert Downey Jr. have a total of 1,612 stories in the archive, though the proportion of m/m stories here is staggering at 1,108. In contrast, Sherlock currently has 88,688 stories published, of which 52,941 are tagged m/m. The three most popular when these searches were done, "A Cure for Boredom," by emmagrant101, "Performance in a Leading Role," by Mad_Lori, and "Nature and Nurture," by earlgreyteag68, have a combined hit count of over 1,525,970.

[4.7] If we turn our attention to asexuality, a less mainstream orientation that is frequently cited in discussions of Sherlock, then we find much lower numbers overall. The Archive of Our Own lists a mere 5,001 stories tagged "Asexual Character," but of these, 776 also feature Sherlock Holmes tags. The "Asexual Relationship" tag has even fewer entries, only 925; of these, 186 relate to incarnations or versions of Sherlock Holmes. Roughly 20 of these tagged "Sherlock Holmes and related fandoms" and either "Asexual Character" or "Asexual Relationship" are about the Downey films rather than the BBC series, while the Elementary tag has a handful of stories containing asexual relationships or characters. Sherlock is also one of the ten fandoms that contain the most stories tagged "Aromantic," "Queerplatonic," "Genderqueer," "Trans Character," or "Pansexuality." Since Archive of Our Own claims to include stories from more than 22,250 fandoms, then Sherlock's strong representation across the taggable spectrum of LGBTQIA+ fan works bears consideration. These are not isolated readings, and it would be shortsighted to discount the queer resonance Sherlock has with its audience.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] Sherlock's story is still evolving, and so must our understanding of its text and subtext. Ultimately, however, I believe that readings of the show's queerness that rely on a physical relationship between Holmes and one of the men (or women) in his life revert to a destructive binary that adheres too closely to essentialist definitions of gender and sexuality. What Sherlock does, with or without the validation of its producers, is to present a character whose identity is entirely illegible, and in this very quality, it is a site of profound recognition for its queer audience. Holmes may be gay, or he may not. He may be asexual, or he may not. He may even be straight (or he may not). What he continues to be, however, is a point of identification (or disidentification) for viewers to whom his inability or unwillingness to find a place within the hegemonic, heteronormative paradigm of "traditional values" is a point of rare representation in popular culture. The show's writers and producers may be guilty of queerbaiting, as some scholars have argued, but they may also be guilty of mainstream baiting, since the first three series of the show have no textual denials of
Holmes's queerness, only extratextual ones. If we limit our reading to the text itself, however, and (metaphorically) kill its author, we find that Holmes's queerness is as frequently textually rendered as Watson's heterosexuality.

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Homophobia, heteronormativity, and slash fan fiction

April S. Callis

Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, Kentucky, United States

[0.1] Abstract—I analyze the relationship between homophobia/heteronormativity and slash fan fiction. Through reading and coding almost 6,000 pages of Kirk/Spock fan fiction written from 1978 to 2014, I illuminate shifts in how normative gender and sexuality are portrayed by K/S authors. Writers of K/S, while ostensibly writing about the 23rd century, consciously or unconsciously include cultural norms from the 20th and 21st centuries. Thus, slash becomes a lens through which readers can view a decrease in both homophobia and heteronormativity in US culture over the past several decades.

[0.2] Keywords—K/S; Kirk/Spock; Star Trek; sexuality


1. Introduction

[1.1] In this article, I analyze the relationship between homophobia/heteronormativity and slash fan fiction. Slash fan fiction is a genre of fan-written stories that involves a sexual and/or romantic relationship between two (or more) characters of the same sex. For this project, I analyzed almost 6,000 pages of slash fan fiction in order to document how homophobia (prejudice against nonheterosexuality) and heteronormativity (assumptions of cisgender heterosexuality) were depicted, as well as how these depictions have changed across the last 35 years. Through reading and analyzing Kirk/Spock fan fiction written between 1978 and 1987, and then comparing that to stories written from 2005 to 2014, I was able to track themes in how heteronormativity and homophobia were portrayed, and also to compare how often these themes were present.

[1.2] From this analysis, I found that homophobia and heteronormativity were present in stories from both time periods. However, when instances of homophobia/heteronormativity were compared, I found that stories written between 1978 and 1987 were twice as likely to contain heteronormative content and three times as likely to contain homophobic content as stories written from 2005 to 2014. While some of this shift might point to changing styles within fandom, I believe that
much of this shift is due to culture. Writers of K/S, while ostensibly writing about the 23rd century, consciously or unconsciously include cultural norms from the 20th and 21st centuries. Thus, slash becomes a lens through which readers can view a decrease in both homophobia and heteronormativity in US culture over the past several decades.

[1.3] As mentioned above, slash fan fic (named after the "/" used between the paired characters' names) are stories that depict the romantic and/or sexual relationships of two men or, less frequently, two women. Recently, there has been some debate as to whether the characters portrayed in fan fic have to be canonically represented as nonqueer for the work to count as slash (Hunting 2012). Regardless, slash has grown from a controversial "premise" within the Star Trek fandom to a fandom phenomenon. As an example of slash's popularity, as of February 2016 there were three times as many stories published on AO3 (a well-regarded fan fiction Web site) about the most popular slash couple from the Harry Potter series (over 13,000 about Harry Potter/Draco Malfoy) as there were stories focused on the series' most popular het (heterosexual) couple (just over 4,000 about Hermione Granger/Ron Weasley).

[1.4] The popularity that slash enjoys today was not the case in the 1970s. The first slash story ever printed was the Kirk/Spock story, "A Fragment Out of Time," by Diana M. This two-page snippet was printed in a 1974 issue of *Grup*, a zine reserved for adult-themed fan fiction. While "A Fragment Out of Time" is explicitly sexual, it is written in such a way that it is not immediately obvious who the characters are, or even that they are both male. No names are used, and masculine pronouns are only used to describe one character (with the second character being referred to only as "the other.") However, from context clues, the reader comes to realize that the story is from the point of view of Spock as he receives a massage from Kirk—a massage that becomes erotic.

[1.5] Within the story, Spock thinks to himself that the situation "had been building all of these years...no one set of circumstances was the cause...now, it seemed it had been inevitable from the outset" (Diana M. 1974). Though Spock might have found the sexual relationship between himself and his captain inevitable, fans of the series did not. Starting in 1975, letters of comment submitted to various Star Trek zines were filled with back-and-forth discussion of Kirk and Spock's possible sexual relationship, with many fans vehemently opposed to such an interpretation (Langley 2007). Many of these oppositions were couched in prejudiced or disbelieving terms; as long as there has been slash, there have been homophobic and heteronormative reactions to it.

2. Kirk/Spock slash fan fiction
[2.1] Before I discuss methods and findings, it is important to know a little of the history behind Kirk/Spock, and fan fiction. Captain Kirk and his first officer, Mr. Spock, are two characters from *Star Trek: The Original Series* (ST:TOS or simply TOS), a television show that ran from 1966 to 1969, and that followed the adventures of a crew of space explorers aboard their ship, the USS Enterprise. ST:TOS was canceled after three seasons, but through syndication became a cult favorite in the years after its cancelation. This rise to popularity eventually led to the expansion of the Star Trek universe, with an animated series, four other live-action television shows, 12 movies, countless video games, and hundreds of professionally published novels.

[2.2] Star Trek is often credited as being one of the major catalysts in the rise of modern media fandom and the popularity of fan-created transformative works such as fan fiction and fan art (Pugh 2006; Coppa 2006). Since 1966, TOS fans have been creating and self-publishing fan magazines (fanzines) filled with stories, poems, and artwork that has continued the adventures of the Enterprise's crew where the episodes left off. Often, these works centered on the dynamic relationship between Kirk and Spock. While these began as friendship or hurt/comfort stories, the fan fiction surrounding these two characters began to take a sexual turn, and K&S friendship stories became K/S romance stories.

3. Homophobia/heteronormativity

[3.1] Before I discuss homophobia and heteronormativity within slash fan fiction, it is important to elaborate on what is meant by these concepts. The term homophobia was coined in 1972 by George Weinberg, originally meaning "the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals" (1972, 4). While the term originally denoted fear and was thought of as similar to other phobias, such as arachnophobia (fear of spiders), it has since morphed into a term to cover an array of negative emotions towards nonheterosexual individuals (Hudson and Ricketts 1980; Haaga 1991). Currently, homophobia is generally understood to mean "prejudice against homosexuals" (Plummer 2014, 128). My own use of the term is very broad, and refers to both active and passive prejudice against same-sex actions and assumed nonheterosexual people. Active prejudice includes hate crimes and name calling, while passive prejudice includes disapproval of homosexuality or equating homosexuality with crime, child abuse, or sin. I also include both individuals' prejudice and institutional or structural prejudice (such as different laws for same-sex couples) within this definition.

[3.2] Much of the literature surrounding homophobia has focused on potential correlates to negative attitudes about same-sex relationships in the United States. Perhaps the most written about of these is religion. It has been found that frequency of church attendance, denomination, and degree of fundamentalism correlate to sexual
prejudice, with conservative Protestants, individuals with fundamentalist Christian beliefs, and those who attend church frequently rating highly on measures of homophobia (Finlay and Walther 2003; Schwartz and Lindley 2005; Eldridge, Mack, and Swank 2006). Other correlations of homophobia found in social science research include being on a sports team or being from the southern United States (Keleher and Smith 2012; McDermott et al. 2014). One recent study found that men who had been taunted with homophobic slurs were more likely to be homophobic themselves (Birkett and Espelage 2015). Conversely, direct contact with a sexual minority individual has been linked with decreased homophobia (Herek 1996; Smith, Axelton, and Saucier 2009), as has believing that homosexuality is biological rather than a choice (Eldridge, Mack, and Swank 2006; Rowniak 2015).

[3.3] Gender and gender roles are also tightly tied to homophobic attitudes. This is somewhat true for women, as the fear of being labeled as a lesbian keeps women acting within feminine gender roles (Worthen 2014). However, it is perhaps even truer for men, and studies have shown that men are more likely to hold homophobic attitudes than women (Osborne and Wagner 2007; McDermott et al. 2014). Social scientists have noted that homophobic slurs are often used against boys and young men who are breaking gender roles, rather than portraying any sort of same-sex desires (Pascoe 2007; Plummer 2014). Therefore, homophobia becomes a way to police masculinity as well as sexuality.

[3.4] Recent studies seem to point to a decrease in the level of homophobia, or at least in the homophobic policing of masculinity in the United States. McCormack and Anderson found that heterosexual boys in the United States were more willing to be physically and emotionally intimate with other boys without fear of homophobic insults hurled their way (2014). Adams (2011) found that on one US college soccer team, men were comfortable touching each other, being well groomed, and even wearing pink cleats, without fear of being homosexualized or facing homophobia. This change is most likely related to the increased acceptance of homosexuality in US culture. While acceptance of homosexuality was low in the 1970s and 1980s, by the early 1990s, this trend began to shift (Loftus 2001). Whereas over 70 percent of the population thought that homosexuality was always wrong in 1973, this number had shifted to only 46 percent in 2010 (Keleher and Smith 2012, 1308).

[3.5] While homophobia might be decreasing in the United States, it is certainly not gone. The FBI reported that almost 20 percent of hate crimes in 2010 were perpetrated against individuals with minority sexual orientations (McDermott et al. 2014, 191). Further, a national study of over 7,000 LGBTQ teens in 2009 found that 84 percent of them had been verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation, while 40 percent of them had been physically harassed for the same reason (Kosciw et
A study of adults in the same year found that 20 percent of them had been a victim of a hate crime based on their sexual orientation since turning 18, while over 50 percent of them had been the victim of verbal harassment because of their sexuality during the same time period (Herek 2009). These numbers paint a picture of fairly pervasive homophobia in the United States.

[3.6] While most people are familiar with the term "homophobia," the term "heteronormativity" does not share this widespread understanding. Coined by Michael Warner in 1991, heteronormativity refers to the positioning of heterosexuality as default, normal, or natural within society. Within a heteronormative system, heterosexuality is privileged, while nonheterosexuality is marginalized (Herz and Johansson 2015; Dwyer 2015). Societal norms of marriage and kinship are based around assumptions of heterosexuality, and romantic love is depicted as natural chemistry between men and women, who are "made for each other" (Eaton and Matamala 2014; Dhaenens 2012; Wolkomir 2009; Jackson 2006). In fact, the entire system of masculine/feminine can be read as heteronormative, as it is assumed that to be masculine is to sexually desire women, and vice versa (Ingraham 1994).

[3.7] Individuals imagine that homophobia is easy to spot, and some examples (the use of slurs and physical violence against nonstraight people) certainly are. However, structural homophobia, such as denying health care benefits to same-sex partners, is more difficult to read, and thus often goes unnoticed. Heteronormativity, like structural homophobia, can be difficult to spot, because it is both pervasive and naturalized. Examples range from the performances of gender and sexuality intertwined with prom (Smith 2011) to the search for the "gay gene" (while assuming that heterosexuality is natural, and thus not looking for a cause for that). Heteronormativity can also be found in beliefs that "real sex" involves a penis and a vagina (Jackson 2006), which causes individuals to question how lesbians can possibly have sex.

[3.8] Heteronormativity and homophobia are, in many ways, two sides of the same issue. If heteronormativity is best understood as the belief that heterosexual cisgender relationships are natural/correct, homophobia is the negative reactions that individuals in nonheterosexual, noncisgender relationships face. For example, a 2013 study (Hayman et al.) analyzed the interaction between health care service providers and lesbian mothers. Heteronormativity within these interactions (such as women being asked, "Where's the father?") went hand in hand with homophobia (such as women being denied fertility services because they were not part of a heterosexual couple) (Hayman et al. 2013, 123). The intertwining of these two phenomena starts at a young age, as was shown in a study of elementary school-aged children, where girls would enact heteronormativity through their discussion of male "hotties," while using
negative comments to discuss homosexuality (Myers and Raymond 2010). In both examples, normative expectations of heterosexuality led to negative reactions to nonheterosexuality—and then these negative reactions to homosexuality enforced heteronormativity, in a continuous cycle.

[3.9] Because of the related natures of these concepts, decreasing levels of homophobia in US culture have led to a corresponding decrease in heteronormativity, at least in some areas. For example, Baunach (2012) found that attitudes toward marriage had shifted away from a heteronormative assumption of only male/female couples, with 47 percent of respondents to a national survey approving of same-sex marriages in 2010, compared to 13 percent in 1988 (368). The overturning of same-sex marriage bans at the federal level in 2015 further illustrates the lessening of heteronormative views on marriage and the family. However, assumptions of the normality of heterosexual cisgender relationships is still widespread in US culture, impacting everything from bathroom labeling to dorm room assignments to the roles we play in romantic relationships (Eaton and Matamala 2014).

4. Methods

[4.1] In order to research changing depictions of homophobia and heteronormativity in slash, I decided to do a comparative study of fan fiction across several decades. I originally planned to include fan fiction from a variety of fandoms, rather than relying only on Star Trek fan fic. I was sensitive to Green, Jenkins and Jenkins's critique of academic work on fandoms. In a 2006 article, they noted that "most academic accounts center almost exclusively upon Kirk/Spock stories...[when] in fact, slash is written about a broad range of fictional characters" (Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins 2006). As someone who had read fan fiction in dozens of fandoms, I was both aware of this fan fiction diversity, and comfortable writing about it.

[4.2] However, in the end, I decided that I would only analyze fiction written about the Kirk/Spock relationship, because Kirk/Spock slash offers 40 years of uninterrupted writing history. As Falzone notes:

[4.3] Not only was K/S the first manifestation of a slash narrative, but it has also proven to be the most widespread and enduring because the Star Trek narrative is ongoing, whereas many other slashed programs are either short lived (Twin Peaks, 1990–1991), long extinct (Starsky and Hutch, 1975–1979) or limited in their distribution (Blake's 7, 1978–1981). (2005, 244)

[4.4] Focusing on Kirk and Spock allowed me to analyze the way these two characters have been rewritten and reinterpreted by fans across the decades. My
hypothesis was that K/S fan fiction would show a decrease in portrayals of homophobia and heteronormativity, mirroring decreased levels of homophobia and heteronormativity in US culture.

[4.5] With this hypothesis in mind, I compared 3,001 pages/62 stories written between 1978 and 1987 with 2,776 pages/64 stories written from 2005 to 2014. The earlier 10-year period was chosen because 1978 was the year that Thrust, the first dedicated K/S fanzine, was published (Carol F. 1978). While "A Fragment Out of Time" was published in 1974, there were very few stories published between 1974 and 1977 (though many of these, such as "Shelter" and "Desert Heat," are considered absolute classics). Therefore, starting with 1978 gave me a wider range of stories to pull from.

[4.6] One of the most difficult decisions I made when setting up this research project was what to do with the reboot series, referred to as Alternate Original Series, or AOS. In 2009, a new Star Trek movie was released to theaters. This movie, and the 2013 sequel, did indeed follow the adventures of Kirk and Spock, and is considered canon. However, AOS Kirk and Spock are different versions of these characters from an alternate timeline. Currently, AOS fan fiction is thriving online, and the popularity of the movies has caused some recent fans to discover TOS. This has brought a wave of new fans to TOS fan fiction, both as readers and writers. After much deliberation, I decided to divide the sample of newer Trek fan fiction between stories written about TOS (36 stories/1,284 pages) and stories written about AOS (28 stories/1,492 pages).

[4.7] There were several limitations I put on the stories I chose to analyze. Most importantly, I looked for stories written by US authors, as this would allow me to compare changes in US cultural norms. As a cultural anthropologist, I am sensitive to the fact that all cultures do not have the same understandings of sexuality and gender. While K/S fandom has always been multinational (with K/S fanzines published in the UK by 1980, and Canada by 1982), and has become increasingly more so with the move to the Internet, I deliberately narrowed my search to focus on the shifts within one culture. In order to ensure stories were US-based, I only chose US-published zines for my 1978–1987 sample. After I had a list of potential stories, I circulated the author names among longtime K/S fans to weed out non-US citizens who had sent their stories to US fanzine publishers. For the 2005–2014 story sample, I tracked down author nationalities on Web pages and blogs. When they were not listed, I e-mailed the authors to ascertain nationality.

[4.8] Author nationality was not the only limitation I imposed on my story sample. Beyond this, I looked for stories that were at least 10 pages long, giving the author time to develop ideas of gender and sexuality. Further, I did not include any stories that involved Kirk and Spock in an established relationship. I found that established relationship stories were much less likely to delve into issues of gender and sexuality...
than were stories where the relationship between the two was new. Finally, all of the stories that I analyzed were set within the main Star Trek universe, rather than any "alternate universe" stories where the Kirk and Spock characters were placed in wildly different settings, such as in Earth's past, within a fairy tale, or within the Mirror-Mirror universe. These guidelines ensured that I had a fairly homogenous sample of stories, meaning that differences in homophobia/heteronormativity portrayals were not the result of differing story types.

[4.9] Once I had my guidelines in place, I set about actually finding the stories. For the early set of stories, I first asked K/S fans online which zines, stories, and authors they thought were most influential or most important from the time period I was studying. I also utilized fanlore.org, a wiki run by the Organization for Transformative Works, to gauge the historic impact of zines and stories. I then located these zines/stories through the KS Press Library, the University of Iowa Fanzine Archive, and the Texas A&M Fanzine Collection, as well as through several fans who were willing to lend or sell me zines. I was also able to find several of the stories online through ksarchive.com. In my final analysis, I pulled from 41 different fanzines published between 1978 and 1987. For stories written between 2005 and 2014, I once again asked online fans to recommend stories and/or authors they thought were important/influential. I searched for stories online through ksarchive.com, focusing on stories with the most reviews or star ratings. I did the same through AO3, sorting stories by number of "kudos" or positive reviews. Additionally, I found stories through online and print zines, including Legacy, Side by Side, T'hy'la, and First Time.

[4.10] Once I had my sample, I began reading and coding the stories using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis program. Codes were developed organically as I read through the stories for the first time. As I read, if I noticed a potential theme or recurring point, I would create a code for it. After I read through and coded all of the stories, I then streamlined the codes and read through the stories a second time, ensuring that all codes were applied evenly across the sample. A total of 74 codes were utilized, which were then subdivided by topic (homophobia/heteronormativity, gender/sexuality, power/role, and bodies/mechanics). Roughly 20 codes had to do with homophobia and heteronormativity in some way. This article specifically analyzes data on eight of these codes.

[4.11] Once codes were in place, I compared the number of times codes were found in the older samples of fan fiction with how often they were used in newer fan fic. Here, I focused on the number of stories that contained examples of each code, rather than the number of codes within each story. Thus, whether a story contained a single example of a code or a dozen, it was counted only once in the following analysis.
5. Homophobia within K/S fan fiction

[5.1] When comparing K/S fan fiction written from 1978–1987 with that written from 2005–2014, I was not surprised to find that homophobia was much more present in the early works. Some form of homophobia was found in 44 percent of the older stories that I read, compared to only 14 percent of the new stories. Breaking this down further, I found several different themes in how prejudice against nonheterosexuality was portrayed. The most obvious is what I coded as "blatant homophobia." This included the use of negative slang such as "fag," as well as using words such as "disgusting" or "wrong" when talking about same-sex actions or attractions. This blatant homophobia was found in 10 percent of older K/S stories, while only three percent of newer stories included such blatant prejudice.

[5.2] Blatant homophobia in my sample of K/S was generally portrayed by someone other than the main characters, such as an Enterprise crewmember or member of Starfleet that the author created for just this purpose. For example, in the zine Alternative Continuing by Gerry D., Kirk overhears an ensign talking about same-sex behavior, saying "It's disgusting...it's a perversion...it's not natural" (1979). In a different story, "Lessons" by Vivian G., it is the captain of another ship who is portrayed as homophobic. Captain Orozco "made the mistake of expressing her own personal feelings of disgust concerning the [same-sex] life style" and is then punished with a less than ideal assignment (1984). In both instances, the homophobic Starfleet officer is punished or made to see the error of their ways.

[5.3] In other stories, it is not anyone in Starfleet who is homophobic, but instead someone from Captain Kirk's hometown or upbringing in small-town Iowa. For example, in Ellen T.'s short story "Long Way Home," Kirk is visiting his hometown and is attacked by a group of men who assume that he is a homosexual. As they assault him, one man says to Kirk, "You're a hot-shot, and you get all that glory, and you're nothing but a gagging fag" (1985). In another story, Kirk tells Spock about his grandmother, who believed that "that mixing with aliens was an abomination, that sexual love between two men or two women was an affront against those who had sacrificed and struggled to preserve the human species" (Anna G. 2007). In these situations, the homophobic individuals are not corrected, but they are clearly presented as in the wrong by the authors. Therefore, blatant homophobia, though present, was always written as problematic.

[5.4] Perhaps because of Kirk's upbringing in a small town in Iowa, he is often portrayed as homophobic himself. After noting this in several stories, I created my second homophobia code: "Kirk openly homophobic." I found this theme in 13 percent of older stories, versus only two percent of new stories. This homophobia was
sometimes blatant name-calling, such as when Kirk refers to another character as "that fag" (Ellen T. 1985). Other times, Kirk's homophobia was not in action, but in mindset. In "Chameleon," by Pamela R. (1982), Kirk thinks to himself that he has "a distinct aversion to homosexuality that he'd never been able to dispel. He tried to be tolerant when he ran across it in acquaintances, or on the ship, as long as they left him alone, but he'd always retained a subconscious feeling of superiority." In another story, Kirk realizes that he has always thought of homosexuals as "...incomplete. Not as masculine. Pretty boys" (Vivian G. 1987). Kirk's homophobia also shows itself during conversations he has with other characters. For example, in "Those Who Favor Fire," Kirk tells Spock that "there are certain attitudes held about...men who submit to others. It's considered a sign of weakness, a need to be dominated" (Lezlie S. 1982). In all of these examples, Kirk must learn to overcome his homophobic thoughts and feelings in order to have a meaningful relationship with Mr. Spock.

[5.5] In canon TOS, Kirk's best friend (outside of Spock) is Dr. "Bones" McCoy. Spock also has a close, though quarrelsome, relationship with McCoy, to the point that he invited Dr. McCoy to his bonding ceremony in the episode "Amok Time." Because of the importance that Dr. McCoy holds to both Kirk and Spock, his reaction to their sexual relationship is often highlighted in K/S fan fic. While Bones did not respond in a homophobic manner in any of the stories I coded, Kirk was written as being worried that he would in six percent of older stories. In Nightvisions, Kirk talks to McCoy about his relationship with Spock, and then asks "Bones, nothing has changed between us...has it?" (Carol F. and Susan J. 1979). And in Alternative Continuing, Kirk says to McCoy "Will you still be friends with us... We're probably going to need it" (Gerry D. 1979). In contrast with the older fan fiction, this third homophobic theme (What will Bones Think) was found in none of the newer stories.

[5.6] The fourth and largest homophobic theme that I coded for I labeled "general assumption of homophobia." This code was used anytime Kirk or Spock assumed that some entity (Starfleet command, their families, the crew of the Enterprise) was going to react negatively to their relationship, or to same-sex desire in general. This theme was found in 40 percent of K/S stories written between 1978 and 1987, compared to 11 percent of recent K/S fiction.

[5.7] In some stories, Kirk or Spock wonder how their families will take the news of their same-sex relationship. For example, in "From the Fields," by Dovya B., Spock assumes that his mother is going to have a problem with his desire for Kirk. He asks her "How can you be so accepting" when she tells him that "love for another of the same sex...is as beautiful as any love" (Dovya B. 1984). In Alternative Continuing, Kirk speculates on how his brother Sam would react to the news, concluding that he "would have laughed that big booming laugh of his and clapped him on the back and
made some joke about 'liking them tall and skinny now' and then quietly introduced him to his nearest single female neighbor" (Gerry D. 1979). In both of these examples, the main characters assume that news of their relationship will cause problems with their loved ones. Whether or not the family members end up reacting with prejudice, the fact that Kirk and Spock worry about this shows a general assumption of homophobia within their society.

[5.8] In other stories, it is the crew or Starfleet command that Kirk and Spock are worried about. In "This Simple Feeling," Kirk needs to get to Spock, and one of Starfleet's admirals offers to help him. This causes Kirk to ask if he is "doing this because you'd rather not have my relationship with Spock made public?" (Beverly S. 1983). The assumption being made here is that prejudice against same-sex couples might cause certain professional decisions to be made. In another story, Dr. McCoy says that if Kirk ends the relationship with Spock there will be "no damage to the Great Starship Captain's reputation, no nasty rumors, no command problems" (Syn F. 1985). Again, though no blatant hate crime is happening in this scene, there is an assumption being made that homosexuality is a problem within the workplace.

[5.9] Though these sorts of assumptions are made less frequently in modern K/S, they still show up in roughly one out of every ten stories. In "People Like Us," written in 2007, Spock takes Kirk to a bar during shore leave. Kirk, noticing that most of the clientele are men, says "Um, Spock, I'm getting the idea this is a club for...men-together... Homosexuals. Gay men." Spock responds with "Yes. This does not make you uncomfortable, does it?" (Kathy S.). Just as in the paragraphs above, there is the idea that same-sex pairings might make someone uncomfortable—that this might not be perfectly acceptable. In "So Wise We Grow," written in 2009, Kirk feels as though Spock is trying to insult his sexuality and sex practices. After asking if Spock is trying to call him a whore or a slut, he says "Or if it's the fact that I go with guys that bothers you, maybe you want 'cocksucker.' That one's even true" (Deastar). Though Kirk is not being called a homophobic slur directly, the fact that he mentions it as a possible insult, and feels that Spock might have a problem with him engaging in oral sex with another man, illustrates homophobia.

[5.10] An analysis of homophobic themes within K/S demonstrated that, across the board, authors are writing about homophobic situations less than they did 30 to 40 years ago. Kirk is less likely to be homophobic himself, the characters are less worried about their friends, families, and peers reacting in homophobic ways, and they are also less worried about ramifications to their careers. This mirrors recent academic works that have found that homophobia is decreasing in US culture (McCormack and Anderson 2014; Adams 2011; Keleher and Smith 2012; Loftus 2001). This is not to say that homophobia has disappeared—both recent academic works (McDermott et al.
2014; Herek 2009) and recent K/S only point to a lessening, rather than a complete eradication.

6. Heteronormativity within K/S fan fiction

[6.1] Just as with homophobia, I analyzed the frequency that heteronormativity was written into K/S stories, both from the 1970s–1980s and in stories written since 2005. I found that in my older sample of K/S, heteronormativity was present in 60 percent of the stories. In contrast, heteronormativity was only found in 28 percent of newer stories. Situations I coded as heteronormative included, among other things, assuming that sex was only about procreation, assuming that Vulcans would find homosexuality illogical, and discussing the "reason for" or "cause" of homosexuality. Each of these themes was found at least three times as often in older stories versus new.

[6.2] Sex was characterized as for procreative purposes in 11 percent of older TOS stories, versus three percent of newer K/S fiction. For example, in the 1985 story "Between the Dark and the Daylight," Spock thinks to himself that "it was ironic that he should invest so much in a sterile relationship" (Tere R. 1985). Similarly, in "The Matchmaker," Spock thinks of his attraction to Kirk as "sterile lust, outside of the possibility of procreation—how had he fallen into this terrible fault" (Janet A. 1985). In a 2007 story, it is Kirk who thinks of sex in terms of procreation. He says to Dr. McCoy that he had "always thought that someday, after I'd grown too old for space, I'd find a nice woman, settle down with her on some uncomplicated frontier world, and raise a couple of children" (Anna G. 2007). When McCoy tells him that there are options for children in same-sex unions, such as adoption and surrogacy, Kirk says "Those aren't the sort of options I had in mind." In all three of these examples, correct or fulfilling relationships are tied to procreation and thus heterosexuality.

[6.3] A second theme I coded within heteronormativity was "questioning how Vulcan feels about same-sex." Within 16 percent of older stories, and three percent of newer stories, one of the characters asks Spock, or another Vulcan, what stance the planet as a whole takes on same-sex relationships. For example, in "Realities and Rebirth," Kirk asks, "Do they allow that on Vulcan?" when asking Spock about same-sex bondings (Ann C. 1983). In Courts of Honor, Kirk says to Spock "But I don't know what it means for you as a Vulcan... I don't know what Vulcan thinks about homosexuality" (Syn F. 1985). Similarly, in a 2006 story, "Trying Times," Kirk "tried to find out if Vulcan disapproved of same-sex partners but had admitted defeat after several days' fruitless search" (Elise M. 2006). The assumption being made in all of these cases, that same-sex relationships might be problematic, or might not be considered logical, is heteronormative. Often this was tied together with the previous theme, as it was assumed that Vulcan would be against homosexuality because it was
Illustrating this point, in "Beyond Setarcos," Spock says to Kirk "Vulcan is a sexually conservative culture. As reproduction is the logical reason for mating, such a relationship would be considered perverse" (Gayle F. 1978). Again, the assumption that sex must be procreative to be approved of is an example of heteronormativity.

[6.4] A third heteronormative theme that I coded for was "etiology of sexuality." In this trope, one of the characters would provide a reason for why some people had same-sex orientations. Often (but not always) this involved a conversation with Dr. McCoy. For example, in "The Price," Kirk asks McCoy if his "psychfile says [he] could go that way," indicating that there is some psychological difference between heterosexual and nonheterosexual individuals (Syn F. 1981). A similar assumption is made in "Command Decision," when McCoy "mentally reviewed Kirk's psych profile" to determine if Kirk could be attracted to Spock (Cassandra S. 1986). The lone example of this trope in a recent story is in "Storm," when Kirk is hit by a dart that turns him gay through "a little rearrangement of the neurons in the hypothalamus, [and] slightly elevated testosterone levels" (Anna G. 2007). Here the author posits a difference in brain structure and hormone levels between gays and straights. In each of these cases, the thought that an explanation for nonheterosexuality needs to be provided can be read as heteronormative.

[6.5] The fourth theme of heteronormativity I coded for was "general heteronormativity." This theme was very broad, and included any time that a character made an assumption about the naturalness of heterosexuality. This theme was found in 47 percent of older stories, versus 22 percent of new stories. In older stories, this theme often showed itself in Kirk's or Spock's surprise at having a male lover. For example, in "Aftermath of the Intruder," Kirk muses that though Spock is male, it "didn't bother [him] as much as he would have expected" (Marie S. 1987). In "Beyond Setarcos," Kirk likewise thinks it "strange still, to be so moved by a man's body" (Gayle F. 1978). That someone would be shocked at having a same-sex partner, and/or always assumed they would be in heterosexual relationships, clearly demonstrates heteronormativity.

[6.6] The theme also showed itself when Kirk or Spock would make assumptions about relationships. For example, in "Blind Date," Kirk is being set up on a date with a crewmember, and thinks to himself that he would not be disappointed because "the list of charming ladies serving aboard his ship was encouraging"—he did not consider that the date might be with another man (Brandy A. 1985). In "Touch of the Hand," Kirk describes love as "the kind of relationship a man and woman would share," and is thrown when Spock asks if "this love you speak of [can] not also be shared by two of
the...same?" (Bonnie G. 1985). In both of these examples, the assumption is that all
romantic relationships involve heterosexual unions.
[6.7] In K/S stories written since 2005, general assumptions of heteronormativity are
found in roughly one­fourth of the stories. For example, in "Your First Time Should Be
Special," the story starts with the sentence "They've been in space for more than a
year before Jim finds out that Spock likes dudes—no—prefers dudes" (Helen 2010).
That Kirk automatically assumes that Spock would be attracted to women is
heteronormative. In "Five People Who Loved Spock," Spock thinks that he "can't
possibly have feelings for another man when to date his only relationships [had] been
with females" (Corpus Invictus 2009). The idea that heterosexual desires or
experiences automatically preclude any same­sex desires is another form of
heteronormativity. Finally, in "Contemplation on Olive," Kirk thinks about his long term
plans, which have always included "a very nice, comfortable home with a beautiful,
devoted wife and two ideal children—one of each sex" (Orinne M. 2007). This notion of
completion coming from heterosexual marriage and family life is a classic example of
heteronormative thinking.
[6.8]

An analysis of heteronormativity within K/S fan fiction shows that, like with

homophobia, the number of stories including this premise have decreased significantly.
Authors are currently less likely to write characters who assume romantic relationships
occur only between heterosexual individuals, that homosexuality needs a scientific
explanation, or that sex is only logical if it is procreative. However, these scenarios are
still present in almost one­fourth of K/S stories, highlighting the continued presence of
heteronormativity in modern US culture.

7. Conclusion
[7.1]

K/S fan fiction is written about two characters who live in a fictional version of

the 23rd century. Yet an analysis of changes within K/S across the last four decades
helps to highlight changes in how gender and sexuality are understood in US culture.
The Kirk and Spock written about in the 1970s and 1980s were more likely to face
blatant homophobia if they were out about their sexual relationship than are the Kirk
and Spock depicted in the last 10 years. Further, 1970s/1980s Kirk and Spock were
also more likely to worry that they would be rejected by family and friends, or fret
about the "illogic" of a nonprocreative relationship. This is not because the 23rd
century has changed. Rather, the large shifts in fan fiction representations of the
future point to a corresponding shift in current understandings of the acceptability of
nonheterosexual relationships.


Social science research has pointed to a gradual lessening of both homophobia and heteronormativity in the United States since the 1970s. That this lessening is mirrored in K/S fan fiction points to the utility of fan fiction as a lens through which to study society. While writers of slash fan fiction might be, on the whole, more accepting of nonheterosexuality than their nonslash-writing peers, these individuals are still clearly influenced by normative cultural expectations. Therefore, a study of slash fan fiction across the decades could also point to changes in how sexual identity is understood, how roles within relationships should be articulated, or even in our understanding of what is sexually pleasurable. Thus, studying changing US norms of gender and sexuality through slash fan fiction is a fruitful—dare I say logical—endeavor.

8. Works cited


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Abstract—Politically engaged scholarship often interrogates the experiences of groups without privilege. But in order for social change to happen, privileged identities must also be reworked. An analysis of anime fandom in the early 2000s shows that fan works, such as fan video and cosplay performances, concretize masculinities that are both transgressive and desperately seeking normative confirmation. By means of queer and masculinity theory, I argue that fandom is a uniquely generative space for reworking masculinity. This will only remain true, however, if it can hold onto its subversive practices in a time of increasing mainstream attention.

Keywords—Cosplay; Fan video; Gender performance; Queer theory

1. Introduction

As an academic doing cultural studies, I feel a particular comfort in writing about subaltern and oppressed populations. Deconstructing the ways in which groups of people are silenced and oppressed is vital work, for one, which is still too often marginalized or dismissed. So too is documenting the existence of cultural logics and practices that act as alternatives to the mainstream. Writing as a member of one of these groups is hazardous. Academia is never as progressive as we hope, and it is easy to be identified with one's work in reductive ways. At the same time, it is powerful. Scholars today have the benefit of generations of brave earlier academics who wrote from their own vantage points and proved the importance of embodied experience in research. Female scholars are still instrumental in women's and feminist studies; queer academics in sexuality studies; African American academics in African American and postcolonial fields; this list could go on. Acafans created the contemporary field of fan studies by writing from their unique perspectives and by refusing shame and stigma.
But doing scholarly work solely as a critique of normative ideologies and institutions from the perspective of stigmatized groups also produces unique blind spots that academia (and fan studies in particular) is overdue to address. Some of this work is being done via theories of intersectionality: being both African American and female or lesbian and a fan makes culture work differently than when only one of the above is true. But by focusing our attention on people suffering under increasing vectors of marginalization, we risk scholarship becoming only the study of oppression.

Scholarship must also analyze the workings of power and of groups with degrees of privilege. Without transforming the ways in which privileged identities work, identifying new ways of doing whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, we are left with simply (though importantly!) empowering groups in societies still stacked against them.

To these ends, in this article I analyze the workings of masculinity, a privileged identity, within fandom, an oft-stigmatized subcultural group. I define masculinity as a gendered identity, a way of acting and relating to others, which is often socially and implicitly defined as the inverse of femininity. Masculinity is not, however, confined to male subjects or male bodies. For instance, a butch woman has a masculine gender identity but performs it with a body sexed as female (note 1). Multiple types of masculinities exist, and, just as masculinity is privileged over femininity in patriarchal societies, some masculinities are privileged and positioned above others (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 846). From this emerges the concept of hegemonic masculinity, a normative ideal that "embodies the currently most honored way of being a man, requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and ideologically legitimates the global subordination of women to men" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832).

I ground this analysis in American otaku fandom during the first decade of the 2000s. I chose this case study because it is a world I knew well and in which I am implicated. As a teenaged white lesbian fan who fell hard for *Sailor Moon* (1995–2000) after an accidental Cartoon Network viewing on a family vacation in the late 1990s, American otakudom of this time is where I wrote and read my first slash, or yaoi, fiction, watched untold numbers of anime music videos (AMVs), reclaimed childhood sewing skills for use in cosplay, and met a great number of good friends. I do not claim here to speak for fandom or even for otakudom. Rather, I use autoethnographic techniques to critically reflect on my own experiences as a fan and a young woman with a more feminine gender identity.

There is a strong tradition of reflecting on personal fannish experiences in acafannish writing, for example Zubernis and Larsen 2012 and 2013, Penley 1991, Okabe 2012b, Jenkins 1992 and his ongoing *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* blog. This
resonates with autoethnographic methodology, wherein anthropologists "direct the ethnographic lens onto themselves...writing autobiographical life and oral histories, reflexive accounts of personal experience" (O'Reilly 2012, 130). For more introduction to autoethnographic methods, see Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011). I follow Krane (2009) and Kipnis (1992) in combining my autoethnographic reflection with a feminist and queer analytical lens. Keeping my own positionality in view is particularly crucial to this analysis because gender is fundamentally relational. Masculine identities and practices of masculinity "are also affected by new configurations of women's identity and practice, especially among younger women—which are increasingly acknowledged by younger men" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 848).

[1.7] I argue that although American otakudom was and is a subcultural space, it is still structured by hegemonic masculinity that demands overt heterosexuality and a controlling presence, particularly over women. However, it is also a space where the cracks in that hegemony open wider than in mainstream environments, such as schools. I apply queer theorist Edelman's (2004) concepts of jouissance and futurism as well as theory from masculinity studies, primarily Pascoe (2007), to interrogate the dynamics of and practices associated with both normative and nonnormative masculinities in this case. At this time, when the field of fan studies is starting to become institutionalized and fan practices are moving more and more into the cultural mainstream, the transgressive practices and spaces must be maintained. As fans and academics, we must also continue to interrogate and critique the ways in which our practices sometimes reinforce damaging cultural structures.

2. Welcome to Oz(aka)

[2.1] Masculinity plays out and is played upon in the spaces of interaction between individual fans, their creations, their audiences, fannish cultures, and the wider society from which fans come to fandom. I analyze American otakudom as an ecology, which "encourages us to pay attention to both the individual and social aspects of authorship and, perhaps more importantly, to the interactions between them" (Turk and Johnson 2012, ¶5.1). Getting at these spaces and interactions requires a basic grasp of American otakudom during the turn of the millennium.

[2.2] Anime fandom has been around in the United States for decades, at the least since the 1970s. In the earlier years, college anime clubs and screening rooms at conventions provided the most reliable access to programs that were not widely shown in the US. The MIT Anime Club, for example, hosted weekly screenings of anime in its original Japanese form (in my experience, known as raw anime) wherein "someone would stand up at the beginning and tell the plot, often drawing on what they remembered when they heard someone else recite the plot at another screening"
Survey and interview research of anime clubs in 1998–1999 found them to be 76–85 percent male, a strong contrast to the many female-dominated Western media fandoms (Napier 2000, 247). In the late 1980s and 1990s, anime increasingly became available through fansubbing, "the amateur translation and subtitling of Japanese anime," and a network of fans who mailed VHS tapes back and forth (Jenkins 2006, 162). Fans used these same technologies of analog VHS systems, eventually replaced with digital editing tools, to create their own AMVs by sampling clips of anime and then editing them together to music of their choice (Ito 2012a; Close 2014). Even as anime conventions began to proliferate, the pool of AMV creators remained small to the extent that EK, an AMV editor who began creating videos in the late 1990s, told researcher Mimi Ito that in 1998–1999, "pretty much every AMV editor in the US knew each other, or knew of each other" (Ito 2012a, 281).

Mainstream, particularly university, Internet accessibility in the 2000s dramatically changed American otakudom's dynamics. Anime could now be downloaded via BitTorrent, and fansubbing groups produced speedy and high-quality subtitled versions of anime soon after it aired in Japan. These fan subs were shared with the rest of otakudom for free via library-style Web sites of BitTorrent links. The growing accessibility of computers and the Internet also vastly expanded American otakudom's internal production. Fans created and shared fan fiction, fan art, show reviews, industry news, cosplay tutorials, con photos, and many, many message board discussion threads. Particularly notable was the founding of Anime Music Videos (http://www.animemusicvideos.org/), a site that became an important hub of otakudom through comprehensively indexing and hosting AMVs, in 2000, 5 years in advance of the advent of mainstream video-sharing sites such as YouTube (Ito 2012a, 281).

Particularly after the gigantic success of the Pokémon franchise, fan demographics became "younger and included more female fans" (Eng 2012, 165). Users of Anime Music Videos who responded to a research survey posted on the site's home page in 2006, for instance, were 62 percent male and 38 percent female (Ito 2012a, 282). This is a 10–20 percent shift from Napier's findings in the late 1990s. AMV editor Zettai estimated the true demographics of AMV editors during that time as more even still, as he noted that when "you would go to Anime Music Videos and look at the most used anime [in AMVs hosted on the site], you would see Inuyasha and Yu Yu Hakusho," shows with a large female viewership (quoted in Close 2014). When I started as a college freshman in 2003, the anime club booth at the extracurricular fair was staffed exclusively by guys. By the time of my senior year in 2007, our anime club officers, save one, were all female.
Otakudom's place in wider American culture also changed during 2000–2009. These years witnessed anime and manga's emergence into the mainstream, as they appeared on television screens, in DVD stores, and on the shelves of chain retailers such as Barnes and Noble. They likewise found their way into the spaces of the broader American geek subculture, popping up on the convention floors and panels of the San Diego Comic-Con and New York Comic Con. The growing visibility of Japanese popular culture inspired anxiety and some hostility from both mainstream and subcultural America. Comedy Central show *South Park* (1997–), for example, parodied American kids' *Pokémon* fandom by portraying the franchise as an attempt by Japan to brainwash and control American kids. The *Comic Journal*'s Dirk Deppey recalls standing outside Emerald CityCon in 2005 and seeing a young girl in a kimono, distressed that there had been very little manga on display, leaving the convention with her family. Intrigued, Deppey related the story to a friend "prominent in the art-comics publishing scene. 'I hate to say it, but good,' was his reply," as was that of several other "indy-comics and superhero-comics professionals" whom Deppey talked to that day (Deppey 2005, 15). His article "She's Got Her Own Thing Now" spared few words in expressing his disgust at the American comics industry's failure to consider or value female readers. Deppey's description of manga as a "women's thing" is odd in light of the otaku demographics noted earlier, but it demonstrates the associations that some in the established American comics scene had of otaku.

These changing dynamics contributed to otakudom's vitality but also produced anxiety over the shifting culture. Much of this anxiety was highly gendered. Mainstream acceptance of Japanese popular culture, particularly *Pokémon*, stemmed from a sense that it was soft, innocent, and cute—read feminine—especially when parents compared the content to first-person shooter video games or American action films (Allison 2006, 250–53). This frustrated many otaku, who went to great lengths to acquire raw or fan-subbed copies of even those series broadcast on American television, as "violence, nudity, and sexuality are all much more censored by US TV than is the case in Japan" (Allison 2006, 292). American otaku created the *Sailor Moon Uncensored* Web site, for example, to track each and every change made to the American broadcast of famed shojo series *Sailor Moon*—ironic as the *Sailor Moon* broadcast was heavily critiqued by Japanese and American television executives for hewing too closely to the Japanese original and thus alienating American girls (Allison 2006, 152). Similarly, AMV editor Inertia described his hugely popular AMV *Sail On* as an advertisement for and introduction to his beloved series *One Piece*, "an epic series, long running and always fresh, but it hasn't got the best recognition this side of the pond...Do note this is from the original One Piece, not the hacked up American dub version with water pistols, cork guns and no blood or plot" (quoted in Ito 2012a, 283–84).
This popular (mis)perception of anime and manga as feminine and child-safe media changed how nonfans perceived my teenaged otakudom—and it grated. I vividly recall my father sitting down to watch a tense, emotional episode of science-fiction political drama *Gundam Wing* with me and getting up after a few minutes, shaking his head at his inability to follow "these new kids' shows." For me, even as a female fan, instances like these were inflected as masculinity challenges. A masculinity challenge is a "contextual interaction that resulted in masculine degradation" and labels the challenged individual as subordinate and lacking in masculinity (Messerschmidt 2000, 298). In that instance, my father, a common source for children's definitions of masculinity, dismissed my fannish engagement as childish and emotional rather than adult and logical—that is, masculine.

The turn of the millennium was an exciting and exasperating time to be an American otaku. Our fannish objects and texts were emerging into greater prominence but often in ways that were out of our control and even threatening. Otakudom was expanding, bringing in people like me who needed the "hacked up American dub" versions to introduce us to anime in the first place. This also brought the different conceptions of fandom into conflict with each other. The fans who maintained the *Sailor Moon Uncensored* Web site kept a running critique of other fans, the *Save Our Sailors* (*SOS*) campaign, who lobbied to keep dubbed versions of anime on American television. During my tenure as copresident of my college anime club, a past president contacted the club. He and another club alumnus were returning to campus to finish painting an anime-inspired mural. He hoped that one of the club's officers could host them in the dorms. My "otaku ethic," where Okabe (2012b) emphasizes the importance of maintaining and extending networks of fans, crashed against a very gendered concern about having a man whom I did not know personally stay in my room. When a friend who had known the former president told me he was the sort of otaku who "didn't think you were a real fan unless you were watching raw anime on an old VHS tape," the antithesis of my fandom, my mind was made up. We recommended the visitors stay in a hotel—not a decision that I recall with pride.

3. "There is life outside your apartment"

Fans, even if they are white, straight, and male, are far from the top of the cultural hierarchy. Jenkins points out the way in which William Shatner's (in)famous 1986 sketch on *Saturday Night Live* congealed multiple stereotypes of fans. Among other points, fans are denigrated as "social misfits who have become so obsessed with the show that it forecloses other types of social experience...are feminized and/or desexualized through their intimate engagement with mass culture...[and] are infantile, emotionally and intellectually immature" (Jenkins 1992, 10). Shatner's skit marks both active heterosexuality and engagement with media only through genres.
such as sports and news as key requirements of normative masculinity. As almost all of the fans in the skit are depicted by white male comic actors, these stereotypes are also ways in which Trekkers are "doing whiteness incorrectly" (Stanfill 2011, ¶2.10). Media often depicts such white male fans as recuperable; so-called happy endings occur when fans make the choice to give up their fannish behaviors and get married, thereby achieving normative masculinity.

[3.2] These references and stereotypes might feel dated in the current Internet-enabled Age of the Geek. Fanboy auteurs like J. J. Abrams or Joss Whedon are visible and successful, and media corporations increasingly recognize fans' monetary power and sometimes also their intellectual and creative abilities. Otakudom is a prime example of these dynamics. Many American anime distribution companies were founded by former otaku, or they hired from the ranks of talented (and self-taught) subtitling groups (Jenkins 2006, 163). Ito and Okabe pinpoint an otaku ethic, "guidelines that dictate how fans should 'give back to the industry' and what content is appropriate for subbing and distribution" (Ito 2012b, 180; Okabe 2012b). Many BitTorrent library sites would remove torrent files for any show that had been licensed for distribution in the United States, and I was one of many fans who refused to watch the fan sub of a licensed show even if it was available online. This was not out of fear of cease and desist letters or other industry actions but out of a feeling of shared mission: we all had to support anime if it was going to succeed in the face of the domestic American entertainment industry.

[3.3] Unfortunately, fan stereotypes are not so simply dismissed. The now almost 30-year-old Shatner skit still serves as an industry reference point. Fred Lehne, a guest actor on Supernatural (2005), a US TV show with a very active fan community, told researchers that "Everyone saw William Shatner on Saturday Night Live say 'Get a life' to fans, and I think he's kind of an asshole for saying that. Kind of a slap in the face to your fans" (quoted in Zubernis and Larsen 2012, 212). Even as Lehne and much of Supernatural's creative team disavow negative fan stereotypes, those stereotypes remain to structure the discourse.

[3.4] That discourse is also structured by the evolution of hegemonic masculinity from the time of Shatner's skit and Jenkins's writing in 1992. Fanboy auteurs with mainstream success, such as Abrams or Tarantino, are a particular kind of fan: one who channels fannish engagement into the creation of so-called original work that can be sold in the commercial marketplace. As Jenkins noted in 2006, fan parodies or "'calling card' movies to try to break into the film industry" were contested but generally enjoyed much broader legal protection and corporate support than did more clearly appropriative work like fan fiction or fan vids (Jenkins 2006, 158).
definition of hegemonic masculinity admits fans but hinges on their production of (albeit textual) offspring and thus at a broad level on heterosexual reproduction.

[3.5] Even given the fanboy auteur example of a normative fannish masculinity, shame about being a fan and engaging in fannish activities is present—and contested—within fandom itself. It might surprise nonfans that editor dokidoki's video "Stop Watching Anime and Go Outside!" won multiple Viewer's Choice awards in the Anime Music Videos 2007 contest (video 1) (note 2).


[3.6] The video uses clips from 35 different anime along with the Avenue Q song "There is Life Outside Your Apartment." It stages a fan's friends drawing him outside his apartment to discover life, defined in the video as heterosexual intercourse and the physical place of Japan itself, and then cheering his return to the apartment to have sex with a cat-cosplaying moe-style Japanese girl he met outside a furry convention. The narrative ends, however, with the girl's discovery of the fan's obsession with otaku culture and (although improbable) evidence that he has been stalking her. She runs from the male fan, now outing him as a creep. The fan's initial contact with the girl seemed to fulfill hegemonic masculine criteria—meeting a female in public and convincing her to initiate a relationship. By contrast, surreptitiously stalking the girl by technological means created an artificial and sexually violent situation where the male fan was "in masculine control and in which they could not be rejected by 'emasculating' boys and girls no matter how their bodies appeared or acted" (Messerschmidt 2000, 302). Messerschmidt documents such strategies as (criminally culpable) ways in which men with subordinate masculinities try to validate themselves as real men. Accordingly, in the last shot of the narrative, the fan is suggested to have been homosexual all along, in love with the friend who brought him out of the apartment.
Many of the awards for "Stop Watching Anime and Go Outside!" are for humor. It's best understood as a fannish self-parody, as suggested in editor dokidoki's annotation "Your room doesn't look like this...does it?" on shots of the apartment stuffed full of otaku merchandise and pictures as well as stalking paraphernalia. The editor also includes a final credits screen after the narrative conclusion with the text, "Now that I've finished making this video, I should go outside..." followed a few seconds later by "Nah, I like it in here." Versions that screened at conventions ended instead with a specialized note: "Well, you're at a convention...That's a start...sort of..." In this self-parody, the editor calls up the specter of male fan stereotypes but ultimately validates fan practices. He dramatizes his choice to remain in otakudom (that is, watching anime) and more subtly asserts his own cultural expertise via visual jokes and notes requiring sophisticated knowledge of both high cultural references, such as the critically acclaimed Avenue Q, and the Japanese language. The video is tightly edited and required advanced postproduction skills to create the multiple visual puns and unlikely lyrical matches, implicitly making the case for dokidoki as a fanboy auteur.

Unlike William Shatner, dokidoki is not seriously suggesting that anyone leave otakudom. "Stop Watching Anime and Go Outside!" is, however, also drawing clear boundaries about who does otaku right and who does it wrong. Good otaku learn about Japan, are not quite as obsessive as the fan in the video, and, in particular, are in control of their masculinility. Fannish anxieties emerge especially strongly when nonfan judgments or spaces are invoked. Zubernis and Larsen heard female real-person slash "fans worry about actors finding racy fanfiction, or just squeeful posts about Dean Winchester's rare appearances in a tee shirt" (2012, 213). Editor dokidoki stages anxiety about how a woman would respond to male otakudom, even if the woman in question is a fan herself, by suddenly transforming a scene of acceptable behavior by a man meeting a woman into the final step in a criminal stalking campaign. Fannish practices pushing at the boundaries of normative values, like explicit fan fiction that demonstrates an active and agentic female sexuality or moe fandom that invokes the specter of pedophilia through the fetishization of young characters, are particularly likely to be censured by other fans who worry that those fans make the whole community look bad. For more discussion of moe fandom, readers could begin with its entry at Fanlore (http://fanlore.org/wiki/Moe) and Patrick Galbraith's 2014 The Moe Manifesto.

4. Fandom as Sinthomosexuality

Acafans, including myself, often feel the pressure of the outside view almost by definition. We continually translate fan practices to the historically skeptical outside audience of academia. One very effective strategy to validate fans and their practices
has been to attach them to existing cultural discourses of legitimation. The word *transformative* in Organization for Transformative Works, for example, references the US Supreme Court's definition of fair use. This work is vital in practical advocacy and created the space within academia where scholars can celebrate, debate, and critique issues in fan studies.

[4.2] This strategy becomes problematic, however, when it leads to the impression that only those fans and fan practices which fit best with existing legitimating discourses are valued (Close 2014, 209). As fans, acafans are well positioned to notice this gap. In a conversation with other acafans on Henry Jenkins's blog, Kristina Busse writes that "if another scholar gets to read one story, sees one vid, I want it to conform to traditional aesthetic notions...When we choose fan works that fit into our arguments, that make fandom look more creative, more political, more subversive to outsiders because that's the image we want to give to the world at large, are we ultimately misrepresenting and betraying fandom?" (quoted in Jenkins 2011). Monden argues that such has been the case in scholarship on shojo manga, whereby researchers overemphasize boys' love and gender-bending genres and evoke "a lack of scholarly interest in 'typical' or 'conventional' shoujo manga," which portray a more girlish femininity (Monden 2010).

[4.3] The irony of a progressive, politically engaged feminist scholarship neglecting and even devaluing femininity indicates why it is not enough for transgressive subcultures to be legitimized and absorbed into the mainstream. Edelman (2004, 19) takes issue with the normalizing and legitimizing goals of much mainstream gay activism, such as marriage legalization and securing the right for openly gay people to serve in the military. He argues that even if actual homosexual people gain these rights and become full citizens in the larger culture, the rhetorical, theoretical place currently occupied by homosexuality (particularly gay male cruising culture) will still exist. That place, which he calls sinthomosexuality, will simply be occupied by a different group or by those who continue practices, such as cruising, that are contrary to broader mainstream values (Edelman 2004, 38–41). The overall societal power structure widens to include homosexuals as another privileged group, but the preexisting workings of power remain largely intact. Similarly, I argue that we cannot accept a mainstream redefinition of fandom to only what resembles academic argument or industry-sanctioned interactivity.

[4.4] The cultural figure of sinthomosexuality is more specific than simply a common enemy around which the larger culture rallies itself. Sinthomosexuality centers jouissance, "stupid enjoyment" or continuously circling and repeating pleasure without defined meaning (Edelman 2004, 38). Normative society, structured by its legitimizing discourses, shuns jouissance. It defines itself against jouissance's (immediate,
repetitive, meaningless) pleasures and instead dedicates itself to the promise of perfect pleasure in the future—aging, maturing, progressing, improving, increasing to a perfect state. As long as homosexuality is associated with "just sex," rather than the responsible (re)production of the future in the form of children, it occupies the place of sinthomosexuality (Edelman 2004, 40).

[4.5] Devotion to meaningless pleasure, stupid enjoyment, refusing responsible heterosexual reproduction—there is remarkable overlap between Edelman's definition of sinthomosexuality and stereotypes of fan culture. Just as hooking up is central to many sexual subcultures, rewatching, reworking, reviewing, and redoing are central aspects of many fannish practices. For instance, the categories coded into Anime Music Videos for viewer feedback on AMV's include rewatch value alongside more traditional criteria like originality or technical proficiency. This queer, fannish emphasis on the re, rather than the mix, is the place where creation and authorship in fan communities most clearly opposes normative practices of future-oriented production.

[4.6] As Edelman urges holding onto jouissance, the practices that are the most transgressive, oppositional, and powerful if also some of the most potentially problematic, I focus on two prominent instances of texts and practices created within otakudom that emphasize the re rather than the mix: the AMV Hell video phenomenon and the male crossplay of Sailor Bubba and Man Faye. All of these fan texts were prominent within American otakudom during the first decade of the millennium and, particularly because of their transgressive nature, created friction during this period when the fandom was already struggling with increased membership and cultural visibility.

5. AMV Hell and masculine confirmation rituals

[5.1] Editors Zarxrax and SSGWNBTD (SSG) made their first AMV Hell video in 2004. AMV Hell videos are compilations, each featuring a series of short clips paired with different songs. The idea spawned from AIM conversations where the two editors played with matching audio and video (note 3). As SSG describes it, this aesthetic appealed to him on the basis of his appreciation for variety-style comedy shows and because "editing to a full song was difficult. Most of the time there just wasn't enough action in the source anime to make a 4-minute music video interesting...By 2003, I had maybe 20 or 30 short clips, most terrible." Zarxrax eventually suggested that they put some of the clips together into one AMV and submit it to the contests at a few conventions. Each video and the series as a whole aims to be comedic, with a style aptly described by the tagline at the end of the first AMV Hell: "Now, nothing is sacred."
To say AMV Hell caught on in American otakudom would be an understatement. "AMV Hell 1," their first video, won numerous awards at conventions as well as Anime Music Videos Viewer's Choice awards for Best Comedy and Most Original Video (video 2). To Zarxrax and SSG's great surprise, AMV Hell grew into a series of multieditor project videos that they organized as well as AMV Championship Edition weekly editing events and the AMV Minis project, whereby new segments of AMV Hell are produced in smaller chunks to help Zarxrax manage the ongoing production. Some of the later AMV Hell videos are of motion-picture length: "Anime Hell 3" (2005), the first multieditor project, contained 232 separate segments. A full 10 years after the debut of the original videos, AMV Hell continues with an active dedicated Web site (note 4). This longevity is an even more remarkable feat considering the changes in otakudom between 2003 and 2013, as discussed earlier, as well as Zarxrax and SSG's impressive dedication to the project throughout a full decade of their lives.

Video 2. "AMV Hell 1" (September 23, 2006).

AMV Hell's aesthetic is antinarrative, pulling from the principles of jouissance in its continual repetition of short segments that each have a joke (note 5). Many of these jokes highlight the sexuality in the anime shown, and the series as a whole revels in sexual imagery. Male fans are continually stereotyped in mainstream American culture as sexually inexperienced. As an active and overt heterosexuality is a key component to developing a hegemonic masculine identity, such instances constitute masculinity challenges. In response, AMV Hell strongly asserts fans' status as sexually knowledgeable. It displays eroticized images of female characters with, depending on the video source, more or less explicitly pornographic natures. This continual repetition of sexual imagery parallels the sex talk that Pascoe (2007) and Messerschmidt (2000) observed among male high schoolers. The boys continually
competed with each other by passing around (and inventing) stories of sexual activity with girls. These games of sex talk one-upmanship, like the collection of explicit sexual imagery in AMV Hell, "expresses boys' heterosexuality by demonstrating that they were fluent in sex talk, knew about sex acts, and desired heterosexual sex" (Pascoe 2007, 104). For "AMV Hell 3" (2005) and "AMV Hell 0" (2005), Zarxrax and SSG solicited crowd-sourced clips with a call "not to hold back...[editors] should make the most nasty, disgusting, or offensive things that they could. Nothing would be censored." The result, basically "a lot of Hentai [pornographic] videos," suggests that the desire to prove masculinity via the AMV version of sex talk was widely shared (note 6).

[5.4] Sex talk is one "confirmatory ritual" that Pascoe identifies in her fieldwork, a way in which male high schoolers established their possession of hegemonic masculinity. Here, hegemonic masculinity is above all defined by dominance and control over female bodies, "what boys could make girls' bodies do" (2007, 104). The editing of sexual imagery in AMV Hell follows the logic of sex talk confirmatory rituals. Images of female bodies are tightly controlled via beat and lip sync, video-making techniques that emphasize movement as well as the editors' technical proficiency (Close 2014, 207). One "AMV Hell 1" segment, for example, highlights the movement of breasts and butts in the fantastically sexual anime *Eiken* by synchronizing that movement with beats in the electronic progressive metal song "Penis Fly Trap" by Vomitron. This dynamic repeats over and over again, via the jouissance aesthetic of the video, continually confirming and reconfirming the editors and viewers' masculinity via their implied control over the characters' sexualized female bodies.

[5.5] The stereotype of fans as infantile hits male and female fans in different ways. For female fans, it ties into long-standing misogynistic discourses that define femininity as immature, childlike, and weak. For male fans, this stereotype evacuates their very claims to masculinity. As these fans clearly know well, masculinity is often associated with male bodies, but being biologically male is no guarantor of being masculine. Indeed, continually laying claim to masculinity comprised most of the public social interactions of male students that Pascoe (2007) observed.

[5.6] It is not hard to understand why male otaku might have been (even if unconsciously) eager to demonstrate their masculinity. What might be surprising, however, and more hopeful, is that anxiety and jokes about male bodies also appear in multiple segments of AMV Hell. The pairing of anime *Berserk* with the *Annie, Get Your Gun* musical's song "Anything You Can Do," for instance, stages a character who appears to be a woman and exults over being able to do anything better than the normatively male character. This includes, at the end of the segment, physically being a man. Such anxieties were rarely voiced by boys inside the high school, particularly in
public spaces. The same Viewer's Choice awards that recognized "AMV Hell 1" for comedy and originality also gave out awards for Most Romantic Video, Best Dance Video, and Most Sentimental Video—genres that evince interests and public discussion far outside normative masculinity. In fact, the year before "AMV Hell 1," the Viewer's Choice contest recognized the comedy and lip sync proficiency of editor absolutedestiny's "I Wish I Was a Lesbian" (2003) (video 3). He uses the Loudon Wainwright III song to suggest that "there's some anime characters who really do wish they were lesbians because, let's face it, guys suck. Especially anime guys."

**Video 3. absolutedestiny, "I Wish I Was a Lesbian" (2003).**

[5.7] Although the video uses the concept of lesbian sexuality, the discussion is clearly about normative masculinity, its flaws, and the effects of those flaws on women. Such texts circulate, discussions occur, and social recognition rituals confer status in otakudom's shared social spaces but parallel the tender private discussions Pascoe (2007) recalls with male students about their feelings for their girlfriends—the same girls whose bodies they used publicly as masculine identity resources. These texts demonstrate that there are communally valued ways of being male, particularly a fannish male, which run counter to hegemonic definitions of masculinity.

[5.8] Acafans and fans themselves often rightly celebrate the way in which fandom can be a safe space for women. Slash and kink fan fiction, in particular, are ways in which female fans actively explore their sexualities and shape new discourses of femininity. As a longtime slash and yaoi fan, I agree with Zubernis and Larsen's (2012) conclusion that these practices can be immensely beneficial for women, particularly queer women, trying to understand their desires and realities and to work through past traumas. There is far greater potential here than in expanding women's access to masculinity as it is normatively defined, as Pascoe (2007) observed
"basketball girls" doing by controlling other, more feminine, girls' bodies or as Monden (2010) argues that shojo critics do in neglecting the conventional shojo manga of ribbons, feathers, and wide eyes.

[5.9] Slash and yaoi are also, however, spaces where female fans assert their control and dominance over male bodies. In American media fandom, female fans, particularly slash fans, split off from male-dominated fan conventions and spaces early on. As has been well documented, they held their own cons, circulated their own periodicals, and vidded for a female-dominated fan community. American otakudom was smaller than domestic media fandoms, and the otaku ethic places great emphasis on acquiring and sharing source material, to the extent that "unlike fandoms around domestic [US] television, anime fans see their ability to access and acquire the media content as itself a unique marker of commitment and subcultural capital" (Ito 2012a, 283). Though internal divisions always exist, convention spaces and online fora such as Anime Music Videos were largely mixed gender (note 7). This is perhaps best illustrated by the AMV "Mystery Yaoi Theater 3000," created by Zarxrax of AMV Hell. This video stages two male fans watching a yaoi video that one has created with the purpose of relating to female fans (note 8). This AMV evinces an understanding of and proximity to female otakudom that contrasts sharply with Jenkins's 2006 finding that most male Star Wars fan video creators were unaware "that women were even making Star Wars movies" (Jenkins 2006, 161). In the same time period as Pascoe (2007) observed that male students adamantly refuse even to go to their school prom if a very outwardly feminine gay male student attended, male anime fans, already stereotyped as feminized, walk down artist alley hallways full of yaoi images and fiction.

Editor Autraya writes that her AMV is "the story of the Otaku trying to get ahold of fanservice and there is a moral to this story...Well you'll see what that is in the last scene." The moral for the male otaku, depicted using military tech to get intimate, voyeuristic views of female characters, is to wind up face-to-penis with a naked man in a hot spring—canceling out male otaku's attempts to confirm their masculinity throughout the video.

As a feminist who became a fan of anime in search of more agentic female characters than were available in mainstream American media, I see myself in Autraya's note to the video that she had to "beg/borrow/steal anime from several friends, because strangely enough I don't own any anime with fanservice...well not purposefully anyway." Fanservice, or gratuitous shots and images of female characters, is a fairly common aesthetic feature of anime. It irritated me every time I saw it and served as a constant reminder that I, as a female and even as a lesbian, was not the imagined audience for the texts that I loved. I consider "Mission: Fanservice" and the AMV Hell videos together here not to suggest that they somehow cancel each other out. The hegemonic masculinity repeatedly confirmed in AMV Hell has considerably more cultural scaffolding, both in the original anime sources and in their links to institutions of gendered oppression. But if we recognize the efficacy of female fans working through shame, producing slash, and recognizing desires that cause more than one fan to say, "Yeah, I am disturbing" when they reflect on kinks like being "fascinated and attracted by male suffering," then there is reason to believe it may be helpful for male fans to do the same (Zubernis and Larsen 2012, 73). If anything, AMV Hell reiterates the ugly shapes that discourses of normative masculinity place on male sexual desires. It also, along with the larger AMV and otaku ecology
within which it thrives, displays complex human beings working through anxieties, desires, and social changes that include but are not reducible to those discourses.

6. The performance of effeminate masculinity

[6.1] In discussing AMV Hell, I have largely focused on otaku's attempts to fulfill the requirements of a depressing definition of hegemonic masculinity, one that centers heterosexuality and the control over women and their bodies. However, as the wider ecology of AMV editing and other videos suggests, American otakudom also fosters the development of alternatives to this toxic definition of masculinity. I move now to focus in on one such alternative: effeminate masculinity.

[6.2] The halls of anime conventions are populated by vibrant communities of cosplayers. As a fan practice, even in American otakudom's early years, cosplay tends to swap the gender dynamics of otakudom mentioned before. While people of all genders wear costumes to conventions and participate in activities like skits, group photos, and cosplay contests, a majority of cosplayers are women. Many of these women, myself included, crossplay male *bishounen* characters and sometimes strike poses, including *yaoi*-style ones, alone or with other fans for photos. These photos are uploaded and shared online.

[6.3] Male crossplay is less common, particularly in the United States. It is by no means unknown, however, and two male crossplayers (figure 1) became famous within, and somewhat without, otakudom: Sailor Bubba and Man Faye (note 9).

*Figure 1. Image created by author in 2015 that puts together online photographs of Sailor Bubba (left) and Man Faye (right) posing at conventions in their costumes.*

[View larger image.]
These two men regularly cosplayed as, respectively, the eponymous Sailor Moon (1999–) and Faye Valentine (2000–2007) of Cowboy Bebop (1998–2002). Both costumes liberally mixed masculine and feminine signifiers rather than attempting to exactly resemble the female characters: Sailor Bubba wore his blond pigtail wig over his beard, and Man Faye displayed body hair in the midriff and bare thighs of the revealing Faye costume. In this combination of bodies sexed male and performance gendered female, both fall into what Pascoe (2007) identifies as the fag position. Masculinity studies originally developed the concept of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities by considering the experiences of gay men, whose masculinities were continually culturally subordinated to those of straight men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Pascoe argues that LGBT activism has had some effect, to the extent that male homosexuality may or may not be pathologized depending on the situation and location, "but gay male effeminacy is. The lack of masculinity is the problem, not the sexual practice or orientation" (2007, 59). Rather than a lack of masculinity, I characterize these gendered performances as effeminate masculinity.

Anime Expo staff actually banned Man Faye from attending the convention. After being forced to surrender his badge and leave Anime Expo 2004 as a result of supposed complaints from nonfans who saw him, Man Faye went to the 2005 convention and "after waiting for three hours in the registration line, right when I get to the tables, five security guards are waiting to prevent me from registering. I asked to talk to Con Ops, but they said no. I asked for a phone number to call Con Ops. They gave me what turned out to be a fax line" (Bamboo Dong 2005). Man Faye's narrative points to a connection between gender discourses and the discrimination he faced, saying that "if a woman can wear an incredibly revealing outfit, a man should be allowed to as well. I have no doubts that a girl wearing the SAME costume as mine would not have any trouble at all. In fact, I have photos of girls at the con doing just that and not ONE of them had any trouble" (Bamboo Dong 2005).

Man Faye's statement in this interview that "not ONE" of the women wearing revealing costumes at conventions "had any trouble" highlights the complexity of both gender and sex at play here. Female cosplayers do, in fact, have a great deal of trouble. Like Sailor Bubba and Man Faye, those without idealized thin bodies are frequently shamed and their images appropriated for hateful memes. The "Cosplay Is Not Consent" campaign combats sexualized violence against cosplayers, most but not all of whom are female, at conventions. The project started by collecting photographs of cosplayers and con photographers holding signs with the slogan "cosplay ≠ consent" or, in the style of Project Unbreakable's work with rape survivors, signs on which they have written disturbing things that have been said or done to them while cosplaying (figure 2). The campaign has progressed into working with conventions to implement
and enforce sexual harassment policies and to teach cosplayers strategies for protecting themselves, such as "escalated use of voice."

Figure 2. Photograph from the Cosplay Is Not Consent project of a cosplayer in a Poison Ivy costume, holding a sign reading, "Not asking for it (even though my boobs are great)"; the project's current Web site is Cosplay Is NOT Consent (http://cosplayisnotconsent.tumblr.com/). [View larger image.]

[6.7] By contrast, Man Faye transformed an instance of unwanted touching into part of his fannish lore through just such use of voice. At the second convention he attended, a stranger hit Man Faye on his rear, whereupon Man Faye instantly roared "HEY, WHO JUST SMACKED MY ASS!" (Bamboo Dong 2005). Man Faye then appropriated the stranger's gesture, asking his supporters to line up to spank him. This ritual sits in opposition to the games that Pascoe (2007) observed, wherein one boy would briefly perform a caricature of effeminacy and the others would run away to avoid being touched, a game similar to tag. Slapping Man Faye's butt is a public, consensual act of eroticized contact that denounces this stigma of effeminate masculinity as repulsive and contagious. However, it is an appropriation only available to people of male sex: those bodies are ideologically associated with control over sexual expression, while bodies sexed as female are assumed—or required—to be controlled by others, particularly in their sexual behavior.
7. Repudiation: Fat guys in sailor suits

[7.1] Many fannish discourses around Sailor Bubba and Man Faye are remarkably cruel. Both regularly come up in "Best of" cosplay lists for the explicit purpose of being disavowed. Even Kotaku, a gaming and geek culture blog that explicitly aims to be a safe space for people of all genders, ethnicities, and sexualities, is decidedly ambivalent about Sailor Bubba. Contributor Brian Ashcraft (2012) wrote an article rounding up good Sailor Moon cosplay photos online entitled "The Tough Women (and Bearded Lady) of Sailor Moon" which collects "some—not all—of the best Sailor Moon cosplay the Internet offers, showing off the character's trademark sailor suits, footwear, headbands, wands, and beards [sic]." Though the canonical characters do not have beards, unlike the rest of the attributes mentioned, it is hard to read the strikethrough and the epithet "Bearded Lady," reminiscent of the circus freak, as affirming. This is particularly true when immensely hurtful memes circulate online (figure 3) (note 10).

**Figure 3.** Demotivational poster-style meme image showing Sailor Bubba walking across a street. The text reads, "Cosplay: Because Mama always said, 'If you can't be a good example, you just have to be a horrible warning.'" [View larger image.]

[7.2] These discourses resemble the repudiation rituals that Pascoe (2007) identifies, wherein "the aggressiveness of this sort of humor cemented publicly masculine identities as boys collectively battled a terrifying, destructive, and simultaneously powerless Other [the fag], while each boy was, at the same time, potentially
vulnerable to being positioned as this Other" (157). By drawing a line between
themselves and the nonnormative male crossplayers, such anime fans repudiate the
specter of the obsessed, overweight, femininized weirdo and validate their own
normative masculinity.

[7.3] The gaze from outside fandom is particularly significant here. Fans are often
strongly aggressive toward "other fans who they believe are 'doing it wrong'" citing
fears that those "doing it wrong" will make outsiders look upon fandom poorly
(Zubernis and Larsen 2012, 125). It is remarkable how much fannish lore attributes
restrictions on fandom to complaints from either unidentified nonfans, as in the case of
Man Faye's expulsion from Anime Expo, or unverified stories of creators reacting badly
to fannish texts involving gender and sexuality, as in the case of George Lucas
allegedly attempting to restrict Star Wars fan work after reading erotic slash (Jenkins
2006, 158). Man Faye went considerably public with his attempts to change Anime
Expo's policies, peaking with an appearance on The Tonight Show. Otaku continually
critique him for "attention-seeking" behavior, consistent with Japanese cosplayers'
disdain for those who wear costumes in order to draw attention to themselves (Okabe
2012a, 241). Similarly, while the Sailor Bubba meme circulates within and without
fandom, its form posits an outsider view wherein Sailor Bubba represents all of cosplay
rather than a particular parodic approach (Lamerichs 2011, ¶3.5). The Cosplay Is Not
Consent movement, Man Faye, and Sailor Bubba are often targets of fans who
"respond to perceived external criticism," like the public suggestion that gendered
harassment is a problem within otakudom, with "reactive aggression whenever a
fellow fan appears to be supplying evidence for outside conceptualization of fans as
'crazy, fanatic, obsessed, perverse, or stalkers'" (Zubernis and Larsen 2012, 127).

[7.4] Perhaps ironically, many of Man Faye and Sailor Bubba's defenders also
rhetorically perform repudiation rituals. The difference is that they position Man Faye
and Sailor Bubba firmly on the good, masculine side of the line. Isaac Sher (2011), a
longtime con staffer, wrote an article reminiscing on his memories of Sailor Bubba.
After posting a picture, he cautions readers to read the entire story "before you start
making snap judgments, rude comments, or jabber about reaching for the brain
bleach." He writes that Sailor Bubba "doesn't wear the suit because he gets some
perverted jollies off of it. He likes Sailor Moon, sure, but he's not obsessed with it. He
dresses up because IT'S FUNNY." The ironic stance puts Sailor Bubba on the safe,
masculine side of the line, in control of his masculinity.

[7.5] He goes on to position Sailor Bubba as a true otaku and contributing fandom
community member by pointing to Bubba's efforts as a volunteer for the AnimeCentral
convention's security detail. One particular year, a con creeper drew attention to
himself at AnimeCentral by brandishing handcuffs at cosplaying girls. As Sher (2011)
recalls it, Sailor Bubba, holding his pink Sailor Moon Wand, "walks up to Handcuff Creep as if they were the best of friends. 'Hey wow, you've got cuffs! I've got the sex toy! Let's make this happen!' The creep took one look at Sailor Bubba, turned a distressing shade of purple and orange, and bolted...never to return, and Bubba just kept on walking, smiling and making sure everyone at the con was having a great time." These kinds of stories and defensive rhetoric figure Sailor Bubba as one of the masculine boys that Pascoe observed performing imitations of fag behavior. These performances assure "themselves and others that such an identity deserves derisive laughter" and that they do not really have such an identity because they are able to easily cast it off (Pascoe 2007, 61). Arguing that Sailor Bubba or Man Faye are ironic, joking, and being funny downplays the transgressive nature of their visual depictions of feminine men—even better, defenders argue that these fans are so hypermasculine that they can take on these performative identities to discipline other men, like the con creeper, whose sexuality is out of bounds and threatens the convention community.

[7.6] Like the confirmatory rituals of AMV Hell mentioned earlier, fans are almost certainly not conscious of these repudiations as such. Many, like con staffer Sher, are motivated by truly laudable desires to protect and defend the real men they have met and befriended from vicious public ridicule. Others, initially repulsed by the specter of the effeminate masculinity embodied in these gender performances, have come to enjoy their humor or see the men as crusading for equal rights within otakudom as thus improving rather than disparaging, fandom. One commentor on Man Faye's interview with major otakudom news site Anime New Network, for example, writes, "I feel sorry for Man-Faye getting banned by AX [Anime Expo]...I used to be one of those fans who used to hate him, but not anymore." Magicreaver, a participant in an Anime Central Con forum poll pitting Man Faye against Sailor Bubba, voiced similar sentiments: "My first ACEN [Anime Central con] I remember seeing Sailor Bubba and being creeped out...and then last year I didn't see him and was disappointed, ah how one matures (is that really maturing) over the years."

8. It's right, but it feels wrong. It's wrong, but it feels right:
Toward a conclusion

[8.1] Constructively engaging with nonnormative masculinities and the people performing them is, indeed, maturing. Or at least it was for me. I've never had the pleasure of meeting Sailor Bubba or Man Faye, but they are only the most visible and widely discussed incarnations of male crossplay tradition seen at many conventions. As an anxious teenage female fan attending my first convention, I remember seeing a large man dressed in a sailor suit and feeling a hot flush of shame and horror: is that what we are? Somewhat overweight at the time myself, I had not had the confidence
to cosplay. My shock was of recognition and fear that perhaps the stereotypes told about fans, which I had vehemently rejected, were true after all. Throughout the course of the small con, though, nothing bad happened to or around the sailor-suited man. People seemed to be having fun, and he was there with friends, wandering around the viewing rooms and dealer's hall like everyone else. When I came back for my second convention, I wore my first costume. My experience here falls in line with Lunning's argument that through cosplay "fetishized imaginary identities supplant the real identity through the crisis and trauma of abjection...securing for the cosplayer a temporary symbolic control and agency" (2011, 77). This is echoed by the experiences of many fans who have written or spoken to Man Faye, sharing that seeing him inspired them "to do everything from wear the racy costume they never had the nerve to wear, to come out of the closet to their parents" (Bamboo Dong 2005).

[8.2] Defending the concept of maturing is an unusual stance in the context of queer theory. Edelman defines and critiques maturity as always privileging the future over the present, prioritizing the (forever deferred) culmination and realization of ultimate meaning over in-the-moment pleasure and joy. What I mean by maturity here is the opposite: sinthomosexuality. It is identity without anxiety. A mature masculine identity, by my definition here, does not constantly strive to prove itself by living up to an imagined masculine ideal. It relinquishes the need to police boundaries of ought to or should be. It is the space of jouissance and re: reflecting, reworking, refeeling, rewatching, redoing without an end goal in mind. A mature, sinthomosexual masculinity in this sense "scorns such belief in a final signifier...insisting on access to jouissance in place of access to sense, on identification with one's sinthome instead of belief in its meaning" (Edelman 2004, 37).

[8.3] Particularly from a feminist perspective, this might seem an overly breezy conclusion to a discussion of masculinity. The discourses of masculinity circulating throughout American otakudom were—and in many ways continue to be—deeply problematic. As much as fandoms are subcultures, they are still attached to the larger American culture and to the workplaces and schools that fans attend in their regular lives. It would be frankly astonishing if the discourses of gender and sexuality current in the mainstream, with all the problematics delineated by feminist and queer theory, did not come with many fans into the separate space of otakudom. But as I have shown, much of the violence of masculine privilege stems from masculinity's need to continually prove itself worthy of an ideal, to reconfirm itself with a very particular goal in mind. This is one instance of reproductive futurism's violence, the demand that the present always be dedicated to the service of an imagined, perfect future.

[8.4] Fan cultures are uniquely well-equipped environments to foster sinthomosexual masculinities and, as research on cosplaying women argues, nonhegemonic
femininities (Lunning 2011, 75–76). Cultural practices of distilling thoughts, identity experiences, and narrative into artifacts, like AMV’s, and performances, like cosplay, allow for a perspective on these concepts and experiences that we do not otherwise have. Fannish objects are circulated, discussed, imitated, critiqued, parodied, and all of these things again. These practices displace the ultimate focus on meaning—the one true meaning of a text—in favor of focus on the texts themselves and the irreducible particularity of each person’s relationship with them: play rather than perfection. To the extent that fans of all sexes have an interest in masculinity and to the extent to which it shows up in the source texts, this discussion, circulation, and play allows for the creation of many masculinities to emerge and displace the hegemonic masculine ideal. This development of alternative masculinities is essential for culture to move toward more equal gendered relations (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

[8.5] These practices are certainly not the whole of fan culture. For one, there is no value here on technical perfection or social critique, which are integral to many fan practices—acafans and fannish activists did not invent them for the purpose of respectability and advocacy. Jouissance is also not the space of fan wank, forum drama, and shipping wars. Differentiation, judgment, and the policing of boundaries, whether by academic critics inscribing a canon or by fan fic authors crusading against Mary Sues, are practices of futurism rather than of jouissance. I do not argue that we should abandon analysis or wank—as if we could! Just as Edelman argues that jouissance, even denied and stigmatized as "perverted jollies" to borrow Sher (2011)”s term, is always present in human society, I argue that there will always be a place for futurism and a value on creation. Indeed, the very practice of writing an academic article or book requires a focus on meaning, logic, and progression that is alien to jouissance. But at this time when fan studies is becoming legitimized within the academy and fannish practices folded into the commercial mainstream, it is essential that fannish cultures retain their emphasis on jouissance in order to remain catalysts for a desperately needed reconfiguration of masculinity.

9. Notes

1. It is important to note that masculine and feminine identities are not in binary opposition such that an individual can only have one or the other. Gendered identities exist on a continuum, which also includes transgendered and explicitly queer identities. I am using more reductive phrasing here to aid readability.

2. These awards, for which there is no prize other than community recognition, occur annually on the Anime Music Videos Web site. Awards are given to videos in multiple categories, from Best Humor to Most Original to Best Romantic video, as well as to fans who are the Most Helpful Member or Rookie of the Year. The award nominees are
suggested via fan nominations, and awards are determined via popular vote. Because the Viewer's Choice awards occur online, they are particularly prestigious in being open to all English-speaking fandom, not just attendees of a particular convention.

3. In the course of putting AMV Hell together, the editors split the project into two videos: "AMV Hell 1" and "AMV Hell 2." The first was family friendly and could be shown at conventions, while the second was more risqué and appeared online only.

4. As of an update to the site on May 13, 2015, Zarxrax announced that the most recent installment of AMV Hell would be its last, as his available time has decreased and the landscape of online video has changed. The site will remain up, however, so that discussions in the forum and chatroom can continue.

5. Each segment is defined by the pairing of a particular audio source and one or more anime. A new segment begins when a new audio source begins. The original video had 18 segments; the most recent boasts 265.

6. Zarxrax notes, "There were a few videos submitted which even made me uncomfortable, particularly a few which contained racism, solely to offend. However since I had particularly told people to make offensive videos, and that nothing would be censored, I decided to let some of these in." These submissions might have taken their cue from a sequence in the first AMV Hell pairing Hiroshima film Grave of the Fireflies (1988) with the Dead Milkman's "If You Love Somebody, Set Them on Fire" (2002). For reasons of space, I do not consider here the vectors of ethnicity and national origin at play.

7. This being said, AMV editor Zettai felt that men and women's AMV editing cultures on Anime Music Videos were more parallel worlds than intersecting ones.

8. The depicted AMV editor's friend is skeptical of this plan, noting "I don't think extensive video editing ability is a common turn-on."

9. There is a more established crossplay tradition in British otakudom. These costumes are mainly parodic but are sometimes serious attempts to pass as the female characters. (http://fanlore.org/wiki/Cosplay)

10. Although, as will be discussed later on, attitudes about effeminate male crossplay are beginning to change. The example of Ladybeard, glowingly discussed in Kotaku by Brian Ashcraft (http://kotaku.com/ladybeard-is-one-pretty-pin-up-model-and-wrestler-1621434278), is one such positive example.

10. Works cited


Theory

Historicizing video game series through fan art discourses

Jan Švelch and Tereza Krobová
Charles University in Prague, Prague, Czech Republic

[0.1] Abstract—In this article, we argue that fannish histories should not be dismissed as mere nostalgia over past experiences of one's own media fandom. Instead they should be understood as complex narratives which combine various historical layers (personal, productional, fictional) and influence the future reception of and anticipation for sequels. They also shed light on the personal histories of fans, which are often juxtaposed with extratextual and fictional histories of a video game series. The subjective nature of these historical discourses is not to be seen as a constraint but as a feature of everyday history which points to the prominence of historicizing in fan cultures of video game series. These topics are examined in the selected multimodal material from the site DeviantArt consisting of fan art pieces, authorial captions, and respective comments inspired by two single-player video game series: Tomb Raider and Mass Effect.

[0.2] Keywords—Everyday history; Fan history; Historical discourse


1. Introduction

[1.1] Video games, history, and fans regularly align in the works of scholars. However, there is still a lot left to be explored, especially regarding the division between official histories of video games and the way in which fans themselves embed history in everyday fan talk and discussions. First of all, many histories focus on the official production and deal primarily with the business side of the industry (Wolf 2008; Donovan 2010; Trammell 2013). Such histories often marginalize the role and importance of other stakeholders in video game culture other than the traditional actors—meaning the developers and the publishers. There are of course exceptions to this trend. Among recent works we can, for example, find histories of role-playing communities (Peterson 2013), female developers (Nooney 2013), or homebrew hobbyists (Švelch 2013).

[1.2] Despite the relative richness of historical topics, fans are often relegated to the roles of bystanders or footnotes, serving to confirm the groundbreaking influence that a video game or a developer had on the video game culture as a whole. Instead, we propose to refocus the debate on the fans and look more closely at the ways in which they write their own video game histories in the context of video game series. Even though Whitman (2008) has already closely analyzed fans' nostalgia toward the previous entries of a video game series, her account of Silent Hill fans is much more interested in the reception of new games in the light of previous titles than in the importance of the historical dimension within the overall fannish relationship toward the whole Silent Hill series. Heineman (2014) proceeded to the discursive level of official and vernacular histories of video games; however, his essay is more focused on the commodification of nostalgia (Juul 2015; Sloan 2015) and on retrogaming than on the actual role that history plays in everyday fan cultures.

[1.3] We intend to look closely at everyday fan cultures to see how they interact with the historical dimension, going beyond the overstressed cognitive frames of nostalgia. While nostalgia is an important aspect of these historical discourses on video games, we would argue that it is only one of many perspectives present in the fannish histories of video game series and we aim to show how it relates to the opposite trope of progress and other possible historical narratives. The paradigm of Alltagsgeschichte—the history of everyday life—(Lüdtke 1995a) serves as a theoretical and methodological inspiration, as the focus of the article is the way in which the historical dimension is integrated into general fan cultures. However, we intend to look beyond the traditional perspective of historiography in order to include the rich tapestries of complex everyday fannish histories which are present in fan art discourses.

[1.4] In 2011, the journal Transformative Works and Cultures ran a special issue on the relationship between fans, history, and fan studies. Apart from academics mapping the history of fandoms, the special issue explored the area of fan historians, archivists, and their histories (Reagin and Rubenstein 2011). Such historical inquiries into fan histories are often oriented toward the histories written about the fandoms themselves, effectively being fandom genealogies, or toward the fan histories of the objects of a given fandom. Elaborate online wikis are a perfect example of the latter; however, these collaborative historical projects often adopt a professional encyclopedic style as opposed to everyday fan talk where history is personalized.
[1.5] Reagin and Rubenstein (2011) also point to other forms of amateur historical activities, such as rehabilitation of memorial sites or collecting and archiving of various artifacts related to a fandom. In a more recent issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, Geraghty (2014) and Hills (2014) both addressed some questions of material fandom that overlap with history; their work, however, focused on different areas of fandom—music and TV series, respectively—where practices such as fan tourism and pilgrimage seem more at home than in video game culture. Thus, we would argue that there is still much to be explored regarding the everyday history-making that takes place throughout various fan cultures of video games, especially on the discursive level.

[1.6] We propose to put aside the fan historical activities that mimic the work of professional historians and archivists and that have already been studied and instead look at the more subtle ways in which history is interwoven in fan cultures on an everyday level. Such historicizing takes place continually and does not necessarily have to begin after a set amount of time, for example with an upcoming anniversary of a video game launch. We would also argue that the historical dimension present in fan art discourses reflects the personal connections of fans toward a video game series by combining official, fictional, and subjective histories.

[1.7] Inspired by Denson and Jahn-Sudmann’s (2013) work on the importance of popular video game series in the overall video game history, we focus on two acclaimed video game properties, *Tomb Raider* (1996–) and *Mass Effect* (2007–). *Tomb Raider* (and its main character Lara Croft) has become a recognized cultural enterprise spanning not just the main series of video games but also feature films, comics, and spin-off games. The *Mass Effect* series developed by the Canadian studio BioWare has also quickly become a popular transmedia storytelling franchise, including the original trilogy of games (2007–2012) featuring Commander Shepard and various novels, comics, and one anime movie. Both franchises have over 1 million fans on their official Facebook profiles, and developers often go on record praising their dedicated fan communities (Pierse 2014).

[1.8] Fan art and surrounding discussions are scattered in different places around the Web, from forums to creative communities such as DeviantArt. However, fan art has recently caught the eye of video game developers, among them BioWare or the current developer of the Tomb Raider series, Crystal Dynamics, who run art contests and display fan art on the official social media profiles of video games (note 1). Still, this increased attention does not change the fact that most interest in fan art is short-lived. Facebook and Twitter are perfect examples of Web ephemerality (Grainge 2011) in which content is still accessible even though the chronological ordering obscures its retrieval as time passes. Periodic events such as #FanArtFriday or Dragon Age FanQuisition Spotlight are built around the repetitive nature of everyday life, which is also one of the aspects stressed by Alltagsgeschichte scholars (Lüdtke 1995a). Moreover, DeviantArt follows this daily logic with special one-day showcases of so-called Daily Deviations (“FAQ#61” 2015). Because of these aspects, we deem fan art and especially the discussions surrounding it to be suitable material for the analysis of everyday fannish history-work.

2. Embedding nostalgia into complex fannish histories

[2.1] Traditionalists would claim that history is what professional historians do. As John Tosh points out, "professional historians commonly deplore the superficiality of popular historical knowledge” (Tosh 2013, 2), even though popular histories (or popular representations of history) attract big audiences whether it is reality history TV or historical first-person shooters (de Groot 2006). The conservative approach of historicism draws a line between social memory—a set of shared ideas about the collective past—and history in order to transcend the political uses of history and focus on the autonomy of the past (Tosh 2013). The resulting drive for objective historical awareness then stands in direct opposition to the activities of fans who through discussions write their own passionate histories. Their effort might be subjective given their position as active participants within fandom, but their discourse on video game series nonetheless deals with the historical dimension and influences the collective fannish histories. Calling such efforts genealogies (Reagin and Rubenstein 2011), collective (Payne 2008), or public (Heinemann 2014) memories does not change the fact that they present events in a historiographic manner and appropriate the tropes of progress and nostalgia (Whiteman 2008) that have once been part of the classical history (Tosh 2013) while remaining very personal at core (note 2).

[2.2] By associating fannish video game history first and foremost with nostalgia, scholars take into account only one potential emotion, interpret it as an obstacle that bars fan memories from becoming (f)actual history (Whiteman 2008; Payne 2008), and therefore make those memories irrelevant to historians. However, a relatively recent turn in the study of history seems to overcome similarly elitist approaches. Alltagsgeschichte has been conceived as a countermovement to classical German social history in the 1970s by refocusing historical inquiry onto everyday life and everyday people (Lüdtke 1995b). In this respect, the history of everyday life challenges the notion of an essentially unified history built around great events.

[2.3] Histories of fandoms are closely related to the ethos of Alltagsgeschichte and also to the heritage of British cultural studies in the way in which they emphasize the agency of audiences and amateurs in their relationship to professional
producers and focus on the specific fan reactions rather than on authorial interpretations. In his enthusiastic chronicle of the legendary tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974), Peterson explains this mindset of the study of history rather poignantly: "while the authors create the work, the fans create the phenomenon." (2013, 20)

However, the political implications of Alltagsgeschichte and fan studies differ to some extent despite the shared belief in the autonomy and agency of everyday people and fans, respectively. While Alltagsgeschichte is at its core a leftist rejection of German nationalistic historical narratives (Lüdtke 1995a), fan scholars are often more open toward negotiations between the fans and the producers regarding their power relationship and their potential symbiosis (Jenkins 2006a). Video game fandom is not devoid of occasional conflicts between players and producers, for example over the power to steer the fictional narratives (see Marino Carvalho 2015). The framework of Alltagsgeschichte then allows for inquiry into struggles over these acts of history making, which can take place on the fictional or extratextual historical layers. Personalized playing experiences can be easily neglected by developers when they decide in favor of one clear-cut narrative continuity, but they find their place in the everyday fan cultures.

[4.1] While we are aware of the differences between traditional historiography, fannish histories, and other historicizing fan cultures, scholarly understanding of these historical forms could benefit from a more inclusive approach inspired by Alltagsgeschichte. Fans engage with the historical dimension of their fandom on a daily basis albeit in very different ways, especially considering the metalevel of historical discourses (Schöttler 1995) where strict quasi-historiographical activities, such as wikis, coexist with more personal fan cultures like fan art discourses.

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### 3. Fannish historiography versus everyday history

[3.1] As mentioned before, the classical historical aspect of fandom is most visible in wiki Web sites which function as all-around encyclopedias of individual video games, including their fictional universes. It is here where the so-called great events of historicism find their place in fan cultures. The Mass Effect Wiki and Tomb Raider Wiki both feature timelines of the fictional events ("Timeline (Original)" 2015; "Timeline" 2015). This drive for historical account, albeit fictional, is especially challenging in the Tomb Raider franchise which has gone through numerous continuity changes and reboots, requiring the wiki to list different canons. Apart from fictional chronologies, wikis also tend to chronicle the official development history of a video game and occasional game events, such as weekend multiplayer challenges in *Mass Effect 3*. As a collective effort, wikis are structured along clear objectives of mapping the objects of fandom—in the cases of Tomb Raider and Mass Effect, this means all of the officially produced (or licensed) strands of transmedia franchise, including soundtracks or even collectible figures. This fannish dedication to collecting and organizing data about video games mirrors some of the routines of professional video game historiography which have been criticized as lacking a wider cultural framework (see Nooney 2013; Guins 2014).

[3.2] Seemingly in opposition to these rather objective historiographical efforts stand the subjective recollections present in fan art discourses. These subjective histories present the personal experiences of favorite video game moments or chronicle player choices in nonlinear games like *Mass Effect*. In turn, these individual recollections can inspire and incite fan discussions that also deal with the historical dimension in some way. These fan cultures and discourses are arguably more ephemeral than are organized activities such as wikis; they are much more loosely amassed in various community hubs despite the calls of various fan activists for archiving and preservation (Lothian 2011; Versaphile 2011). While the official events covered by wikis often serve as backdrops subjective histories in fan art discourses, actual fan art pieces are almost never used to illustrate video game wiki entries. Instead wiki creators use official artwork (screenshots, concept art, etc.) (note 3).

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### 4. Methodology

[4.1] In the article, we analyze multimodal amalgams of particular fan discourses surrounding selected fan art pieces regarding their relation to the historical dimension and their role in establishing historical discourses of a video game series, making use of the framework of Alltagsgeschichte (Lüdtke 1995a). Our goal is to show that history plays an important role in fandom on an everyday basis but in much more nuanced ways than the previously identified fannish narratives of nostalgia (Whiteman 2008; Payne 2008). We focus primarily on the discursive level of historicizing, sometimes also defined as the "third level" (note 4) of history (Schöttler 1995). But we also pay close attention to the visual content of fan art as well as its context. Considering that fan art is only rarely presented on its own on the Web, we take into account the multimodal mix of fan art showcases, a mix which usually consists of the artwork, authorial caption (Brenner 2007), and comments which are semantically linked together (Van Leeuwen 2005).

[4.2] Because of the previously mentioned ephemeral aspects of DeviantArt, we chose it as the main site of the empirical work. While there are more fandom-specific venues and also arguably more ephemeral ones (for example, Tumblr or LiveJournal), previous analyses have shown that many artworks are still sourced and housed at DeviantArt although they...
also appear elsewhere, for example at the official sites and events of TV series producers (Bennett, Chin, and Jones 2016). DeviantArt's interface allows for the organization of the corpus of the multimodal fan art showcases by the individual fan art pieces akin to, for example, online news galleries (Caple and Knox 2012), offering thus a more rigorous approach to the material than do the participant observation methods available on discussion forums (Schott and Burn 2007).

[4.3] The sample of empirical material consists of two parts which were both constructed using DeviantArt's built-in search tool and the key phrases "Tomb Raider" and "Mass Effect." First, we have looked at the most popular ("Popular All Time" in DeviantArt's terminology) fan art pieces for both video game series in question, Tomb Raider (TR) and Mass Effect (ME). Given the large numbers of comments on the most popular fan art pieces, only the first 10 search results have been picked for analysis, including nearly 7,000 respective comments (TR 1,913, ME 5,027) (note 5). However, considering the rather disproportionate share of the comments between the two video game series, we aimed in the second step for a more comparable sample. Keeping in mind that video game history has been previously described as "above all a history of popular series" (Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013, 2), we have chosen the official announcement of a new installment as the basis for the second part of the sample. Both video game series in question are regularly updated by new sequels: Rise of the Tomb Raider (2015) was officially announced on June 9, 2014 at the Electronic Entertainment Expo and released on November 10, 2015, while Mass Effect: Andromeda was officially revealed roughly a year later on June 15, 2015 during the same video game exhibition and is still in development. In this step, 29 (TR) and 28 (ME) multimodal pieces of fan art and respective comments (TR 477, ME 336) were collected through a classical chronological search during a 1-week period from the date of the announcement where we expected fan art pieces directly related to the newly revealed sequels. At this stage, and also combined with the first part of the sample, we believed that we had reached a varied sample of fan art discourses for a qualitative analysis. As the main selection criterion for the fan art pieces from the second sample, we used a clear relation to history and historicizing (note 6) as there were some unrelated fan art pieces among the search results. Altogether, the sample consists of 77 pieces of fan art including all of the comments (7,753) on the respective DeviantArt pages.

[4.4] We analyze the material with the framework of discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) appropriate to the interest in the metahistorical level (Schöttler 1995) and by the nature of our multimodal material (Norris and Maier 2014; Caple and Knox 2012). Apart from the individual discursive elements of everyday history-work present in the material, we also explore the question of historical perspectives that intertwine in fan cultures—from personal and communal to official and fictional. We support the findings with quotations that we classify as authorial captions (A), authorial comments in the discussion (B), or comments from other fans (C). We also include codes for both games (TR, ME) and the number of the fan art showcase within the respective part of the whole corpus as well as feature illustrations from the material. However, to respect the specific context of DeviantArt and the privacy of its users we anonymize the excerpts (Sveningsson 2009).

5. Memories and expectations in fan art discourses

[5.1] Fan artists and fans who comment on and discuss fan art approach the historical dimension of this fannish activity from various perspectives that are often interconnected in the fans’ accounts. Compared to wikis, fan art allows for a more personal tone and thus for connections between the personal and community histories and the official production histories and fictional in-game timelines. The following paragraphs first introduce important aspects of historicizing.

[5.2] As already mentioned, fannish video game histories were previously relegated to the category of nostalgia by some scholars (Whiteman 2008; Payne 2008). Therefore, we first focus on the dichotomy of historical tropes of nostalgia and progress. Visually, many fan art pieces from the second sample were inspired by the announcement trailers for the Rise of the Tomb Raider and Mass Effect: Andromeda and depicted scenes or characters from the respective trailers (figure 1). While these fan creations (and the fan discussion incited by them) look toward the future of the series, these expectations—excitement over progress or feelings of loss and nostalgia—are usually explained through historical references. However, similar discussions also take place in the fan discourses of the 10 most popular fan art pieces.
While fans are reminiscing about their past player experiences with a hint of longing, these feelings do not bar them from appreciating the upcoming sequels. Nostalgia and progress are often presented hand in hand; they are, in consequence, not mutually exclusive within fans' historical understanding of a video game series.

C: Part of me is mourning that we'll leave the Milky Way and its races and locales behind. The other part of me is overflowing with giddy excitement. (ME1).

However, even those who disliked the previous games can look forward to a sequel. That is especially the case for Mass Effect 3 which has been widely criticized for its ending (note 7).

B: Agreed. Better to just pretend ME3 didn't happen and go back to the drawing board from scratch. Too much damage has been done with ME3 (ME8).

It would seem that previous history with a series has no clear impact on the feelings of nostalgia and progress, but if we look past basic generalizations, we see a pattern of putting a new game into the broader context of personal memories of a series. Fans justify their expectations by pointing toward the history and in consequence chronicle their reception of the series as a whole. Some remain hopeful even after a perceived letdown, while others are more cautious because they were disappointed by the previous installments or too emotionally attached to them.

The case of Mass Effect also shows that players reference other games from the same developer. Many fans comment on the history of the fantasy RPG series Dragon Age regarding the announcement of the Mass Effect: Andromeda.

B: I had the same feelings about Dragon Age: Inquisition. Luckily though, the game turned out alright. Only the story part was way too small. (ME18)

Fans are aware of the historical dimension of their favorite video game series. Their creations and discussion go beyond simple feelings of nostalgia and progress. While these two emotional stances are often present, even both at the same time, they are just one part of a complex of interconnected historical perspectives.

6. Interconnected histories

What is most evident from the analysis is that the everyday histories combine various viewpoints and topics. Fans often connect official histories with their own personal histories, whether it be their personal milestones or their particular player experiences, thus creating a rich historical amalgam that puts formal production histories in the light of individual and, subsequently, shared stories. The act of connecting different historical layers and perspectives takes many forms and...
usually happens at the intersection of fan art, its caption, and the comments. However, we focus particularly on two aspects of these relationships: (1) personalization and (2) fictionalization of complex video game histories.

[6.2] The personal character of fannish video game history is established through a variety of connections between the fans and the video game. From an artist's standpoint, the most practical connection to history is through a record of creation of a fan art piece, as we can see in the following quote from a fan artist who explicates her relationship with the Mass Effect series:

[6.3] B: I'm happy so many people are enjoying this piece. I think I put 50 solid hours of work into it, if not more. At times I thought I'd never be done with it, but seriously, I haven't fangirled a couple this much in 12 years or more. (ME37)

[6.4] Such historical accounts of a process of fan art creation clearly establish the artist's personal connection to a series and serve as evidence of a fannish dedication and faithfulness to a fandom. Fans use jargon inspired by the official discourse of the game to describe the major events of the fictional narrative. However, the juxtaposition of objective milestones, which could as easily have found their place in strictly historiographical wikis, with a subjective experience creates instances of Alltagsgeschichte where a personal perspective is suddenly made relevant in the context of shared fan art discourses. Both artists and commenters reminisce about their past playthroughs of a series, often adding details about a gaming platform and other technical information.

[6.5] A: Garrus Vakarian and my custom build female Shepard from the game Mass Effect 2, for those of you coming in who don't know the source. Colonist, sole survivor, vanguard, full paragon... (All on PC I haven't dusted off the 360 in months.) After not having played the first game when it came out, when ME2 came out, I played both back to back for about 70 hours of great times. I think my proudest moment was bum-rushing Harbinger. (ME37)

[6.6] Closely connected to the question of personalization of history is the aforementioned dichotomy of factual accuracy and fan creativity. Previous works have suggested that fan art is based on the ideas of reconstruction and reproduction and rarely becomes transgressive (Schott and Burn 2007). Visual details of fan art, such as eye, hair, and skin colors or Lara Croft's shorts, are disseminated with references to historical evolution of a series. Such discussions often result in complaints about factual inaccuracy of a given piece of fan art. Personalization in the sense of fan creativity is accepted when it is allowed by the game itself; for example, Commander Shepard is highly customizable including gender, face proportions, and skin and eye colors. Different versions of Shepard are accepted by the community as the rightful personalization of a game experience and constitute the theme of many fan art pieces.

[6.7] C: I never know which color are Lara's eyes? (TR36)

[6.8] C: Nice colors, your Shepard reminds me of one of my cousin's ME characters! (ME32)

[6.9] An important part of one's fannish dedication is an origin story about the discovery of the series. Longtime fans and even recent converts often explicate the history of their relationship to a game series:

[6.10] C: I've been a TR fan since 1996. I bought Tomb Raider 1 & 2 then Angel of Darkness, Legend, Anniversary, Underworld and Tomb Raider Reboot. (TR1)

[6.11] A: I must say that I'm kind of glad I didn't play it before, because now I can finish the whole trilogy without waiting for the next chapter to come out. (ME31)

[6.12] Fandom easily becomes an everyday activity and serves as both a backdrop to personal life and its milestones and as a measure of history keeping. For many fans, the origin of their fandom can be traced back to their childhood; however, that does not apply to everyone. In this context, some players feel the need to point out that they encountered the game much later in their lives and that they form an exceptional subgroup of fans.

[6.13] C: My childhood heroine, I spent ten years wanting to be an adventurous archaeologist, I almost ended up going to college for it. (TR32)

[6.14] C: It's funny for me to think of her being someone's childhood heroine. I think I was 30 when the game came out. Not that I didn't love it. It was ground-breaking. (TR32)

[6.15] The personalization effect is not limited to an individual artist or commenter; fandom is often shared with romantic partners, friends, and family. Such shared memories, which are in some cases visualized in fan art, also often have a historical dimension.
The second specific aspect of the interconnected histories is the personal interpretation of the fictional (in-game) histories. Fan creations often depict memorable game events and present them in historical context of other deeds performed by fictional characters. Such recollections often interact with personal and official production histories.

For example, the scenes from the Mass Effect: Andromeda trailer are shared, remixed, and appropriated, and in turn they inspire discussions about the place of the upcoming sequel within the fictional timeline. Commenters explore the implications of a substantial time jump between Mass Effect 3 and Andromeda, arguing about whether there would be any returning characters and how it would affect the technology available to the in-game characters. While Rise of the Tomb Raider is arguably much easier to locate within the fictional timeline, as it is supposed to continue roughly where the previous installment ended, fans are still exploring the gap between the last entry and the announcement trailer. It is at these points, when one fan recommends the Tomb Raider comics series that bridges the events between the two games, that the various historical perspectives become connected.

Another example is the question of the impact of previous player choices on the events portrayed in the sequel. While Tomb Raider is a linear game and leaves minimal space for such discussions, Mass Effect implemented player choices through save file imports. Such an option now seems unlikely to some fans because of a shift to a new generation of game consoles. These discussions connect production, fictional, and personal histories and often reference other historical precedents of video game development, in this case the series Dragon Age from the same developer.

7. The role of poster heroes

Although we have already addressed some specific issues of the individual series in question, arguably the most divisive aspect—the role of the main character—has to be explored separately. While Lara Croft is a mainstay of the franchise despite various reboots, Commander Shepard’s story has concluded with Mass Effect 3 and Andromeda will feature the new protagonist Ryder.

Lara Croft is the embodiment of the Tomb Raider series. However, it is important to realize that there are at least two different canons of Lara Croft: the original version of Lara who appeared in the main titles made from 1996 to 2008, and the one that started with the 2013 reboot of the series. Both Laras are framed differently—while the first one can be defined as a (self-)ironic and tough sex symbol (Kennedy 2002), new Lara is much more realistic, both visually and emotionally (MacCallum-Stewart 2014). This discursive shift is logically transferred into fan art. Therefore, one can observe disputes over which of these two rather different Lara Crofts is the right one and how the new Lara fits into the fictional world of Tomb Raider. Interestingly, several fan art pieces show both Laras depicted together, but separate.

There are not just two Laras but many versions or variations, including the recent official facelifts made in the definitive edition of Tomb Raider (2013) and in the sequel. One of them refers to the movie version of Lara Croft embodied by Angelina Jolie; newer versions of rebooted Lara are considered to be well made if Lara looks like the film heroine Katniss Everdeen (Hunger Games). Other images show versions of Lara from particular sequels. One such artwork shows nine Laras in a bar (figure 2).
[7.5] C: This is basically showing how much Lara has grown up over the years. (TR1)

![Figure 2. Tomb Raider fan art “1996 to 2013” by JamesC (http://james--c.deviantart.com) shows different historical versions of Lara Croft (TR1). [View larger image.]]

[7.6] Although fans are aware of the discursive shift and depict it in the fan art, they often talk about the new face, new look, or the different design of one single Lara. They not only incorporate the different versions into one continuous timeline, but they also rediscover the old Lara through the new one and vice versa. One artist, for example, suits the new Lara into the costumes, poses, and environments of the old one. Despite various formal and thematic inconsistencies, for many fans there is still just one Lara, and throughout fan art discourses they negotiate the official established histories and appropriate them into one, arguably personalized, historical narrative.

[7.7] A: The goal of the project is to both reenvision and recreate Lara's greatest moments. (TR23)

[7.8] The interconnectedness and unification of history is often accompanied by a quote that appeared in the announcement trailer for the *Rise of the Tomb Raider*: "We Become Who We're Meant to Be" (2014). In the selected fan art pieces and discourses, new Lara is then defined as the precursor and younger version of the original who is older both in the fictional and the social reality. Such fan interpretations are encouraged by the implicit fact that this younger Lara gradually becomes the older one in the official promotional materials (note the title of *Rise of the Tomb Raider* or "Discover the Legend Within" taglines). In the unified fannish history of Lara Croft, the reboot games can be understood as the beginning of a journey whose subsequent course fans already know.

[7.9] A: You know how with every Tomb Raider reboot Lara has become smaller and less busty? Hopefully with the next reboot the series will go full circle and make her bigger than ever. (TR7)

[7.10] Commander Shepard—or more precisely MaleShep and FemShep (note 11)—was for many fans a defining factor of the Mass Effect series. Their departure at the end of *Mass Effect 3* has led to discussions about whether *Andromeda* is really a continuation of the franchise or just a way to cash in on an established name. However, the idea of discontinued seriality is contested by *Andromeda*'s game play similarities to previous games, including the reintroduction of some mechanics from the first *Mass Effect* (2007), such as the Mako vehicle and open-world exploration. Therefore, one could say that while *Andromeda* maintains the ludic seriality (Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013), at least according to prerelease promotional materials, the narrative seriality is disrupted by the great time jump and loss of the main character. This tension is reflected in fans' historical interpretations of the evolution of the Mass Effect series, which are present in the fan art pieces, authorial captions, and comments.

[7.11] The problematic seriality is most evident in discussions about the name of the sequel. Until the official reveal, fans usually referred to *Andromeda* as Mass Effect 4 despite BioWare's claims that the new game would tell a separate story (Phillips 2014). The numeration is, in this case, closely related to the character of Commander Shepard who is now missing from the series and also missing from the fan art.

[7.12] C: It's not ME 4, the dev team has made it very clear that adding a 4 after ME makes it feel like it's connected to Shepard and Andromeda has nothing to do with the first story, it's just set in the same reality. (ME2)

[7.13] On the other hand, the aesthetics and their reproductions through fan art remain very similar, although updated as a result of a time jump between the games. These visuals together with aforementioned shared game mechanics support feelings that *Andromeda* is indeed a rightful continuation of the Mass Effect series. The Mako vehicle also recreates a lost piece of seriality and becomes an easily identifiable visual cue of the first game's influence on the new game which is then reinforced through fan art.

[7.14] C: Seems to have all the good things of ME1 plus the combat of 2 and 3. (ME1)

[7.15] However, not all fans are convinced by these traces of video game seriality. The recurrent character of the previous three games embodied in Commander Shepard was, after all, suddenly disrupted, effectively shaking the everyday fan
relationship with the series. It then makes perfect sense for some fans to feel detached from the future of the series and to record their disappointment in the sense of history of everyday life.


[7.17] It seems that for many fans, their own personal histories are very closely connected to the customizable histories of Commander Shepard, suggesting that the connection between a player and an avatar for whom they might feel responsible (Banks and Bowman 2014) is qualitatively different from a relationship with the rather static heroine of the Tomb Raider series. The added layer of personalization available in the Mass Effect series allows for more subjective histories, which however seem to be somewhat disregarded by the new sequel that moves past the events and the cast of the original trilogy. While the Tomb Raider series in a way motivates fans to engage in the unification of various histories and timelines of Lara Croft, many Mass Effect fans feel that their everyday histories were disconnected by the departure of their avatar.

8. Conclusion

[8.1] The everyday history-work present in the fan art discourses is first and foremost characterized by the interconnectedness of various historical perspectives. Unlike more quasi-professional historiographies (such as those present in fan video game wikis), fan art pieces and their respective discourses inspire and incite personalization of video game history. Through this fannish scope, the history of a video game series is not just a mere chronicle of officially recognized great events but becomes a more complex narrative where personal experiences are juxtaposed with in-game events and bits from the history of video game production. Without the need to adhere to the strict and formal style of traditional historiography, fan art discourses engage with history as an organic constituent of fannish relationships with a video game series. On the level of everyday life of fandom, the historical dimension and its interpretations go beyond the simple tropes of nostalgia suggested in some previous works (Whiteman 2008; Payne 2008; Heineman 2014) and create much more nuanced historical vignettes of fandom where previous disappointment, origin stories of fandom, hopeful expectations, nostalgia, and many more seemingly contradictory feelings and narratives coexist. Memories of previous game experiences serve as contextualization for anticipation of future installments. However, there is no evident causality between the past reception of a video game series and the tone of expectations—for example, past disappointment can be linked to either pessimism or excitement.

[8.2] Fan art discourses become a space where disjointed official histories and different fictional timelines are brought together and discussed as a whole. This effort to unify and appropriate disparate historical threads into one complex history is best seen in the case of the Tomb Raider series which is also held together by the character of Lara Croft, who embodies the whole series for most fans. Despite multiple timelines and reboots, players often talk about a single heroine whose presence provides a continuous historical link between them and the video game series. However, fan art discourses also provide a place for bridging the time jump between the original Mass Effect trilogy and Mass Effect: Andromeda by allowing for speculations and fan fiction pieces dealing with the legacy of Commander Shepard.

[8.3] The aforementioned findings show that everyday fan cultures such as the selected fan art discourses interact with the historical dimension in nontrivial ways that can be explored and analyzed precisely with the more inclusive framework of Alltagsgeschichte. Still, the personalization of history has its boundaries when it comes to the continuity of a video game series. In these situations, everyday fan cultures provide a refuge for individual historical accounts as a series moves on to new themes, locales, and characters and forgets the old. The power of fans to influence the dominant historical narratives might be limited, but through everyday fan cultures and discourses they nonetheless participate in the history-making processes by sharing their own histories with other members of fandom.

[8.4] The various historical layers that are interconnected in everyday fan cultures are relevant constituents of an overall fannish relationship to a video game series. By understanding the historical links between personal experiences, official production history, and fictional timelines, one can shed more light on particular fan activities, such as active anticipation of new sequels or the declarations of dedication to a given video game series. By continuing in this line of scholarly inquiry, future works can explore how the life of a video game series intersects and influences the life of its fans and vice versa. While the object of the article is not historiography in its strict sense, we argue that challenging the pseudo-objective and elitist narratives of great events allows one to see how actively fans interact with the historical dimension of their favorite video game series and their own fandom.

9. Acknowledgment

[9.1] We thank fan artists AvrilValleau and JamesC for permission to use their artworks as illustrations for the article.
10. Notes


2. Nostalgia and progress can be understood as two opposite historical tropes—while nostalgia stresses the loss of what has been before and cherishes the past, progress expects future improvement (Tosh 2013).

3. However, fan wikis with limited access to official visual materials, such as book fandoms, often use fan art pieces to illustrate their entries.

4. The first two levels of social history are economy and society (Schöttler 1995).

5. Jenkins (2006b) has already pointed out the necessity to scale down the amount of data when doing qualitative Internet research to avoid being overwhelmed by the sheer number of potential texts.

6. By this relation we mean that a fan art piece, an authorial caption, or a comment explicated the historical aspect of a given video game series, for example by commenting on previous installments or on a release date of a new sequel. We have excluded multimodal mixes without any connections to the announcement of a sequel or to a history of the series, fandom, or a member of fandom.

7. The ending of the original Mass Effect trilogy was criticized for ignoring player choices made throughout the three games. BioWare has released a free ending DLC to deal with the uproar: "Whatever the developers’ intention was, what the public whose desires were fulfilled by the ending DLC felt they were doing was not passive (i.e., spectator’s) storytelling, but creative (i.e., author’s) world building." (Marino Carvalho 2015, 136).

8. The fan art piece discussed in this comment depicts a woman distracting her male romantic partner with her breasts while playing a new installment of the Mass Effect series. However, more important than the actual content of the picture are the shared personal histories found in the respective fan art discussion.

9. So-called retcons (acts of retroactive continuity) are often criticized by players who feel affected by them (see The Milkman 2012); however, some game writers seem to be aware of the potential negative reception of such narrative decisions (Heussner et al. 2015).

10. Tomb Raider was already rebooted once during this era. However, the version of Lara Croft that was introduced in Tomb Raider: Legend (2006) was rather an update and kept the heroine's original characteristics. This Lara is also featured in the spin-off Lara Croft game series.

11. Players can choose the gender of Commander Shepard. The female version, so-called FemShep, quickly became a fan phenomenon (Patterson 2015). In order to equalize both gender versions, male Commander Shepard is often called MaleShep or BroShep.

11. Works cited


Praxis

Mashing up, remixing, and contesting the popular memory of Hillary Clinton

Amber Davisson

Keene State College, Keene, New Hampshire, United States

Abstract—This essay looks at the viral video "Rebel Girl," released in 2015, which was produced by fans of Hillary Clinton. Following the trajectory of the video, one can see the potential for fan mashups to make arguments that subvert dominant narratives of public memory and, conversely, the way the way mainstream media moves to subsume outsider voices.

Keywords—Bikini Kill; Fan video; Politics; "Rebel Girl"


1. Introduction

Hillary Rodham Clinton - "Rebel Girl" aka Hillary is badass


[1.1] In February 2016, a mashup video from 2015 made by Hillary Clinton fans Eric Wing and Stacey Sampo went viral. The video juxtaposes clips and images from over
40 years of Clinton's political career with the 1993 riot grrrl anthem "Rebel Girl" by Bikini Kill. At the time of the video's release, mainstream news media was painting Hillary Clinton as both a Washington insider and the establishment candidate (Shear 2016, Nutting 2016). The dominant media narrative placed her as the conservative opposition to a liberal candidate out to revolutionize the Democratic Party. That depiction comes on the heels of 25 years of the Republican Party framing the popular memory of Clinton as a collection of scandals and power-hungry political maneuvers (Campbell 1998, Parry-Giles 2014). Clinton is, and always has been, a divisive figure. "Rebel Girl" delivers a new vision of the candidate by telling her story from the perspective of two fans. The video depicts Clinton as a long-time feminist, powerful politician, and beloved wife and mother. The rebellious act within the narrative is her ability to be all these things at once. Anger about the video from the riot grrrl movement was swift, and "Rebel Girl" was quickly removed from YouTube for copyright violation. The controversy surrounding the video highlights the precarious position of fans within political communication and points to both the possibilities and limitations present for those wishing to use the strategies of participatory culture in an effort to reshape popular memory. Music video mashups, popular within fan culture, allow the user to draw on the Internet's vast archive of video footage in order to create interesting juxtapositions that ultimately function as new frameworks for remembering popular narratives. When these techniques are applied within political fandom, they intervene in the mainstream media narratives that shape the political imaginary.

[1.2] Remembering the past is not an activity that takes place in isolation; instead, it is a social practice. Our memories of the past are often derived from an intricate web of personal experiences, cultural rituals, and mediated exposures to key events. As a result, "history and memory have traditionally remained separate projects—one highly objective and rational, the other highly subjective and playful" (Spigel and Jenkins 2015, 171). In popular memory, where media intertwines with daily life, the element of mediation takes on an added emphasis as the public memories we are processing are of things we did not directly experience but which are nonetheless connected to our personal histories. Paul Cohen (2014) has argued that in moments of crisis we often mine history for narratives that can help us cope. When we find useful moments from the past, we reconstruct them to respond to modern exigencies. That reconstruction supplants the facts of the event and becomes the popular memory. When history is popularized, it is rendered relevant and made meaningful, through media, to a broad audience (Haskins 2015).

[1.3] Within fan culture, mashups have been a critical tool for fans to alter and play with the way we remember mass media texts. Paul Booth (2012a) argues that temporality is one of the things that gives a mashup its meaning. Mashups often do
not engage in either a rigorously accurate or entirely linear telling of events. Instead, in reconstructing an event, they invite the audience to shift the gaze they use when they look back on a moment. Take, for instance, slash fan fiction mashups, which Henry Jenkins (2013) tells us "exist on the margins of the original text and in the face of the producer's own efforts to regulate its meaning" (24). Slash fan fiction is often circulated within close-knit fan communities. However, on occasion, something like the use of a popular song can cause a video mashup to drift outside the traditional fan viewing audience. Paul Booth (2012c) highlights the "ubiquitous" example of the Star Trek K/S video "Closer," which was made by fans TJonesy and Killa (71). To date, the video has received more than 1.8 million views on YouTube, and the more than three thousand comments on the video seem to indicate that it is being viewed by both a fan and a nonfan audience. A viewer of Star Trek who is less plugged into the fan community may have never considered the relationship between Kirk and Spock to be sexual. However, after viewing the popular fan mashup, which brings together the song by that title and clips from the Star Trek episode "Amok Time" to tell a story where Spock rapes Kirk, it is hard to look back on the relationship without seeing unexplored sexual tension in the original text. Fan mashups mine popular texts and reconstruct them to tell new stories. In doing so, they create a lens through which we look at the original text. They alter our memory. As fan works drift out of the fan community, they have the ability to enter the broader popular memory.

[1.4] In the case of the "Rebel Girl" video, two fans use the technique of mashup to reframe and rework the popular memory of Hillary Clinton. Much of the strength of "Rebel Girl" comes from the use of historical footage to intervene in current political conversations. Paul Booth (2012b) has argued that one of the key potentials of mashup and remix is to disrupt linear conceptions of popular culture, bringing together different time periods to create a new framework for viewing events. He points to DJ Danger Mouse's "The Grey Video," which mashes up the Beatles' White Album and Jay-Z's Black Album, as an example of this phenomenon (Booth 2012a). Bringing together the historical moments comments on the way the sexualization of female fans has changed little from the 1960s to the 2000s. Booth (2012a) explains that "traditionally, taste rests on a linear sense of temporality, not the multifaceted system demonstrated by mashup videos." We typically read taste as historically situated, but mashing up different historical moments invites us to view things from a different perspective. In recent years, Hillary Clinton has become such a part of the political landscape that we may have lost sight of just how exceptional her achievements are for a woman in politics. The video makes use of modern footage placed next to clips going back to the 1970s and 1980s to encourage the viewer to shift the frame they use to view Clinton. The accompanying song "Rebel Girl" draws attention to how revolutionary Clinton's actions are when placed into a historical context.
The "Rebel Girl" video, and the backlash it received from the riot grrrl movement, can only be understood by taking into account the potential for participatory culture to intervene in public conflicts over popular memory. Henry Jenkins and Sangita Shresthova (2016) explain that in a participatory culture, the extent to which media producers feel empowered to both create and take ownership of their creation is directly related to the community in which that media is produced. As Ekaterina Haskins (2015) argues, in the late 1900s public participation in the production of commemoration and memorial increasingly became the norm. However, within these community contexts, participation was often directed, framed, or co-opted by official government memorializing. By contrast, participatory culture in the context of fan communities has traditionally operated outside official modes of media production, and fan communities tend to strongly resist corporate attempts to capitalize on their efforts (Bennett, Chin, and Jones 2016). As an act of public memory making, "Rebel Girl" originated not from the culture of public memorializing but from the culture of fandom. At the same time, the critique rose out of the riot grrrl fan community, which is embedded in the punk music scene and has a strong "do-it-yourself ethic: if you have something to say, pick up a guitar, write a song and say it" (Japenga 1992, H30). The video, and the resulting conflict surrounding it, show the way that fan communities apply their values, traditions, and practices to the generation of public memory. On one hand, the potential for fans to use community practices to participate in political debate in meaningful and disruptive ways is evident. On the other hand, it is hard to deny the general lack of willingness in both political communication and fan communities alike to acknowledge the activities and existence of political fans. In order to explore this conflict, the remainder of the essay is divided into two parts. Part one is an analysis of the video itself, and part two is an analysis of the copyright conflict that followed the video going viral. These two sections highlight the way fan communities both lay claim to the interpretation of media texts and use those texts to intervene within the mainstream media narratives that have traditionally shaped popular memory.

2. Creating a new popular memory

While the terms fan and fandom come with a lot of baggage, they are also useful for understanding the unique relationship that certain audiences have with the mainstream media. Fans are spurred by an affective desire for the content they consume (Wilson 2011). Fandom, therefore, connotes a particular relationship to media content, which is characterized by emotional engagement. Part of what makes the "Rebel Girl" video such an interesting intervention into the traditional media narrative surrounding Clinton is that affective component. Much of the popular memory of Hillary Clinton is framed by consistently negative emotional responses to a
woman with political power. With that said, political discourse tends to push aside emotional language in favor of rational argument. Public conversation avoids dealing with the affective framing of Clinton. Fan discourse embraces affect, and using this discursive framework allows Wing and Sampo to make some arguments that are often missing from the public sphere. The analysis that follows highlights three arguments the video makes through this affective lens. First, the video responds to media framing of Clinton as lacking sexual desirability. Second, the video addresses the framing of the marriage between Bill and Hillary Clinton as a political arrangement. Third and finally, the video deals with the media narrative of conflict between being maternal and being a strong leader. The Wing and Sampo video, in making an argument about how we should remember Hillary Clinton's career, is also arguing that we should rethink our social view of women in politics.

[2.2] For most of her 40-year political career, media coverage of Hillary Clinton has included commentary on her appearance. Writing about her college years, journalist Carl Bernstein (2008), in his biography of Clinton, described her as awkward and homely. He made the observation that she was so unused to male attention that she was taken aback that Bill was even interested in her. Betty Winfield (1997), writing about media coverage of Clinton during her husband's presidency, points out that she routinely refused to answer questions from journalists about her clothing and fashion, which was translated as a larger indicator of her unwillingness to perform appropriately in the position of First Lady. As a result, reporters became even more critical of her wardrobe. While research into Clinton's Senate run in 1999 indicates that much of the media framing in the campaign veered away from gender issues (Anderson 2002), in the 2008 election these conversations reemerged. Diana Carlin and Kelly Winfrey (2009) note that during the 2008 election, "Clinton was viewed as not feminine enough in pantsuits that covered her 'cankles' [thick ankles]" (330). Clinton continually received "an unusual amount of attention focused on her appearance, from her 'cackle' to her cleavage" (Heldman and Wade 2011, 160). In a more recent political contest, Anne McGinley (2009) argues that one of the issues for Clinton is her age: men get more attractive as they age, while social convention tells us that women do not. The media repeatedly invites us to see Clinton as unattractive and, by relationship, to also find her behavior wanting and undesirable.

[2.3] Wing and Sampo use the visual grammar of a music video to counter this narrative and to invite the viewer to engage in the visual pleasure of seeing Clinton as a powerful sexual being. Within traditional political conversation, sexually objectifying a female candidate would be nothing short of inappropriate. As such, the media narrative of Clinton as unattractive, failing to perform femininity, and lacking in desirability is most often ignored or simply dismissed as sexist. That dismissal means the narrative survives unchallenged. Fan work has historically operated outside of
social norms, and it routinely transgresses notions of appropriateness. That makes this discursive form and community of practice ideal for disrupting the dominant social narrative that Clinton's political acumen and power lacks the sex appeal it might have if she were a man. This essay is not meant to defend objectifying women. Instead, I argue that Wing and Sampo's sexualization of Clinton uses the affective frame of fan discourse to disrupt a dominant media narrative. That disruption, and the commentary it generates, is necessarily facilitated by the outsider status of fandom.

[2.4] The disruption is accomplished most successfully in two scenes where Clinton is dancing. In the first scene, Clinton is at a political event and is casually swaying side-to-side. The footage has been edited, with the dance put in slow motion to appear less casual and more seductive. Additionally, camera angles have been altered to focus on Clinton's hips and breasts. As the camera zooms in on Clinton's body swaying, her face is cut out of the shot. This technique of focusing on particular parts of the body, to the exclusion of the face, is commonly used to encourage the viewer to objectify and sexualize the subject being viewed (Unger and Crawford 1992). With no eyes staring back, the viewer is free to take pleasure in viewing the body. Wing and Sampo use this trope of video editing to direct the viewer to engage that pleasure when viewing Clinton. The second scene of Clinton dancing comes from footage taken at a State Department dinner hosted by South African Foreign Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane (Lemire 2012). A performer at the event called Clinton up onto stage to dance. In scenes used by Wing and Sampo, the performer, a Black woman, is shown grinding her posterior into Clinton's pelvic area. In recent years, performers ranging from Shakira to Miley Cyrus to Meghan Trainor have drawn criticism for the use of Black female dancers as seemingly sexual props in music videos. The scene of Clinton dancing, as it is used in the Wing and Sampo video, calls to mind what has become common imagery of a white woman expressing her sexuality through proximity to a fetishized Other. bell hooks, in her writing on the erotic consumption of Black bodies, states that "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks 1992, 21). hooks argues that sexual fantasies of the Other are on the surface about violating taboos, but looking deeper they are also about creating a desired object to be consumed. Wing and Sampo use this footage of Clinton with the fetishized Other to encourage the view of Clinton herself as a fetishized object. The sexualizing of Clinton is placed next to multiple clips of her performing her role as Secretary of State. The viewer is directed to see Clinton's position of power as sexy.

video produced by Wing and Sampo takes a very clear stance on the relationship, and it makes use of Bill's gaze to establish an affection for Clinton. In one of the more memorable scenes, Clinton tells the story of being in the law library in college and seeing Bill. She walked up to him and said, "If you are going to keep looking at me, I should introduce myself." Then, it cuts to a scene of Bill saying he was so blown away he could not remember his own name. The scene is paired with another clip toward the end of the video where Clinton is speaking at the 2008 DNC, and the camera cuts to a shot of Bill mouthing the words "I love you." These depictions of their relationship function as a clear response to media framing of the marriage as merely a political arrangement, and invite the audience to see Clinton as her husband does. Beyond this discussion of the romantic aspects of their relationship, the video clearly tackles media debates about power differentials in the marriage. In several scenes, Clinton is shown entering a room walking in front of Bill. It implies that she is taking the lead and he is following behind her. One clip shows an event where someone had asked Clinton about her husband's stance on an issue and she, rather aggressively, says that she is not going to "channel" her husband when she answers questions. Her statement is followed up with a defiant look and hand gesture. The video is clearly arguing that while the two have a strong marriage, Clinton is not riding her husband's coattails.

In her book on the double binds that women face in American politics, Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995) referred to Hillary Clinton as a Rorschach test for the state of feminism in the United States. For Jamieson (1995), Clinton is the personification of "unresolved relationships between concepts taken as antithetical for women by those of our grandmothers' generation: women versus power, work versus marriage, childrearing versus career" (22). One of Jamieson's double binds that Clinton has often found herself in is womb vs. brain. With the womb vs. brain double bind, women are portrayed as emotional creatures ruled by the body through the physical experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, and motherhood. When women develop more analytical or strategic ways of thinking, they are seen as developing a masculine mindset that pulls energy away from the embodied experience of femaleness. Furthermore, there is a long-standing narrative in media coverage of women in politics that the bodily experience of femaleness causes emotions to rule. Any seemingly rational behavior will be impossible to sustain. The pull of the womb is simply too strong. If a woman holds the highest office in the country, the nation is unsafe for at least one week every month. The affective lens of fandom encourages the viewer to see Clinton as affectionate and motherly without contradicting the depiction of her as a strong leader.

The Wing and Sampo video tackles the media narrative surrounding the womb vs. brain double bind. The mashed up images of Clinton performing as Secretary of State and performing as mother argue for her ability to be both and for the two to function in a complementary way. At the halfway mark in the video, there are two
scenes of Clinton with her daughter Chelsea. In one scene, Chelsea looks on in admiration while Clinton is sworn in as Secretary of State. This is immediately followed by a much older video of Clinton and Chelsea in front of the White House exploring rocks. Directly after, there is a sound bite from Chelsea's introduction of her mother at the 2008 Democratic Convention, where she calls her mother her hero. The images of Clinton and her daughter show Chelsea looking up to her mother. Throughout the video, there are scenes of Clinton meeting other young girls and giving them hugs or patting them on the back. After each scene of Clinton acting as mother, or expressing affection to young female supporters, we see scenes of Clinton acting as Secretary of State. Clinton is shown greeting troops, wearing a bulletproof vest on a battlefield, and conferring with generals on a military base. Clinton is shown at the Benghazi hearings defiantly responding to allegations from members of the investigation committee. Placing these scenes back to back, and pulling together archival material dating back to the early 1990s, makes an argument that Clinton is fully occupying both the womb and the brain, and has a long history of doing so.

[2.8] Shawn Parry-Giles (2014), in her book on media coverage of Hillary Clinton, argues that much of the troubling media depiction of Clinton comes from the press's inability to handle the complexities of modern womanhood within the standard practices of narrative journalism. The mashup uses the emotional relationship of fans to the text to tackle these complexities. A candidate's political image is largely a product of mediation, and "for most of us, we come to 'know' Hillary Rodham Clinton through the news media" (Parry-Giles 2014, 15). Over time, consistent depictions become realities. Marguerite Helmers (2001) argues that in cases where our interactions with a public icon are highly mediated, society develops a shared narrative of the person that becomes popular memory. Our popular memory of Hillary Clinton is less an accurate historical narrative and more a highlight reel of critical mediated moments. The mashup functions as an intervention into the constructed public memory. Wing and Sampo, fans of Hillary Clinton, invite us to remember Clinton as they do.

3. Not a true "Rebel Girl"

[3.1] Popular memory is a collaborative construct, but it is also deeply personal. Lynn Spigel and Henry Jenkins (2015) explain that "popular memory is grounded in notions of personal identity...popular memory is based on the dialectic between autobiography and the description of public events. This autobiographical element continually entwines the past in present day identities, so that people strive to place themselves in history, using the past as a way to understand their current lives" (173). This is at least in part because popular memory relies on "voluntary participation of ordinary people in selecting, producing, or performing interpretations of distant or
recent historical events" (Haskins 2015, 2). It is natural that the personalized nature of popular memory would lead to conflict when individuals and groups have different narratives of the past. The conflict over the "Rebel Girl" video is the result of the way different communities remember the cultural artifacts that make up the video's soundtrack and the video's highly controversial subject.

[3.2] The "Rebel Girl" video was a collaborative effort from Clinton fans Eric Wing, 36, and Stacey Sampo, 47 (Gray 2016). It should be stressed that neither of them has any official affiliation with the Clinton campaign. The two are longtime fans of Clinton who have made several mashup videos about the candidate and routinely post Clinton fan art on their Facebook pages (figures 1 and 2). As they say at the end of the video, the project was "created by a couple who just thinks Hillary is awesome." The two made the video after a trip to DC to try to prevent a government shutdown of Planned Parenthood (Gray 2016). In an interview about the project, Sampo explains: "It's important for people to see women in positions of power... It's time, I think our country needs that" (as quoted in Gray 2016). Wing articulated a slightly different motivation for the project: "Whenever she's not running for office, she's beloved by everybody...but as soon as she starts to go up against a man, frankly, suddenly all the Republican talking points start coming out and they seem to stick" (as quoted in Gray 2016). The video uses archive footage to tell the story of Clinton as her fans see her, a story that is very different from the one often told by mainstream news media. Quotes from the couple indicate that this was intentional. As Sampo explained: "I wanted people to see how long she has been in politics...how long she has been advocating for people who need a voice" (as quoted in Gray 2016). Abigail De Kosnik (2008) explains that the way media depicts a candidate works to inform fans of that candidate about their own position in the social structure. In 2008, consistent media messages that Clinton was losing created the position of her supporters as a marginalized fandom (De Kosnik 2008). Wing and Sampo speak from that position in the creation of their video. The video was first uploaded to YouTube in September 2015, but it did not get much attention until February 2016, when Lori White, a curator for Upworthy, posted it to Facebook with the heading "I try to stay away from politics on Facebook, but this video is way too cool not to share" (Gray 2016). In a matter of days, the video had more than 7,000 likes and 15,000 shares (Gray 2016). Then, just a few days after the video had begun receiving widespread attention, it was pulled from YouTube for copyright violation (figure 3) (Nelson 2016). At the time of the removal for copyright violation, it had more than 1.7 million views. Despite Vail's copyright claim on the original "Rebel Girl" video, multiple versions of Wing and Sampo's mashup continue to circulate on YouTube.
Figure 1. Fan art posted to Eric Wing's Facebook account in May 2016. [View larger image.]

Figure 2. Fan art posted to Eric Wing's Facebook account in May 2016. [View larger image.]
The soundtrack of the video is undeniably important for the overarching argument that Wing and Sampo are trying to make about Hillary Clinton. It should be said that the video relies less on a historically accurate meaning of the song as it was situated in the riot grrrl movement, and more on the cultural connotations of the punk aesthetic and the word "rebel." The video is trying to build a narrative of Clinton as someone who fought social norms, defied conventions, and acted like a "Rebel Girl." Both the lyrics of the song and the genre of the song work toward that message. The borrowing of cultural connotations to make an argument is very much in the spirit of what Lawrence Lessig (2004) dubs "Free Culture": "Free cultures are cultures that leave a great deal open for others to build upon" (30). Lessig (2004) argues that we live in a "cut and paste" culture, but one that is not supported by the current legal infrastructure. He explains that copyright law has created constraints on speech. To speak using certain cultural artifacts requires permission, and that need for permission gives power over speech to those who would grant permission. For Lessig (2008), a healthy public domain and a respect for remix culture is about creating "permission free" and "lawyer free" zones for discourse. What this spirit of freedom may fail to take into account is the way free circulation can alter the popular memory and cause the original meaning of a text to be diluted. Steven Hetcher (2009), in writing about the legal ramifications of remix culture, points out that while remix is a popular tool of fan culture, remix creators are not always fans of the underlying work they are using. One can see this in the "Rebel Girl" video. The riot grrrl movement developed in no small part as a response to the oversexualization of women in rock music, and the general perception that women were just not as hardcore punk as men (Schilt 2003). The depiction of Clinton in the Wing and Sampo video, while it does represent a rebellion against the way female politicians have been expected to behave, is certainly not the kind of rebel girl the riot grrrl movement would have had in mind.

While Wing and Sampo saw Hillary Clinton's history as evidence of her rebelliousness, members of riot grrrl fandom responded to what they saw as a co-optation of the artistic work of their community by someone who did not honor their
values. Just days after the video reached heavy online circulation, Tobi Vail, a member of Bikini Kill, the artists behind the song "Rebel Girl," filed a takedown notice with YouTube. In the months that followed the takedown notice, if someone attempted to view the video they found a screen that said "the video is no longer available due to a copyright claim by Tobi Vail" (figure 3). When reporter Jamie Peck (2016) contacted Vail for a comment about the takedown notice, Vail said: "Dude, I was seriously trying to just ignore it…but Bikini Kill fans and friends would not allow it." Vail said she filed the copyright claim because the band and their fans did not want to see the work used as part of an advertisement (Peck 2016).

[3.5] As was mentioned previously, Wing and Sampo had no official connection to the Clinton campaign. Much of the conversation surrounding the removal of the video from YouTube either asserted that the fan creation was an advertisement or implied through innuendo that it was a conspiracy by the Clinton campaign to engage in astroturfing (fake grassroots activity). Tobi Vail herself said of the video that "it's basically an advertisement...we [Bikini Kill] don't authorize use of our songs in advertisements" (as quoted in Peck 2016). Another article on the blog Kill Our Stereo was actually headlined "The Clinton campaign use Bikini Kill's 'Rebel Girl,' Tobi Vail not happy" (Sievers 2016). The article notes a long history of candidates attempting to use music without getting the permission of the artists and makes no mention of Wing and Sampo. There is in fact a history of presidential candidates either using music without an artist's permission or asking for permission and being denied. Focusing on that narrative denies Wing and Sampo the outsider status that is important to their argument. In Sarah Lazare’s (2016) essay about campaigns using music without permission from the artists, she does correctly credit Sampo and Wing with creating the video. However, she repeatedly refers to it as an advertisement. Music journalist Jamie Peck (2016) questioned that the video was fan made, and asked if it was "yet another tone-deaf creation of the Clinton campaign designed to go 'viral' and appeal to us riot grrrl loving millennials?" In all of this commentary about whether we are dealing with an advertisement or a fan-made video, there is a clear implication: if this is an advertisement made by the campaign, then using copyright to enforce a political perspective is morally justified.

[3.6] The song "Rebel Girl" is the artistic work of Tobi Vail and Bikini Kill, and she is justified in saying a political campaign should not use it to further a perspective antithetical to the song. However, if this is a fan video, the morality is much murkier. At that point, the copyright enforcement is about stopping two individual citizens from expressing a political perspective that the song's authors or original recording artists do not like. What is more, that act being committed by a community with an expressed dedication to DIY culture is doubly suspicious. Attributing the video to the Clinton campaign is a much more comfortable narrative.
Scholars, journalists, and political commentators are reluctant to allow political fans the same access to the tools of participatory culture that exist in other fandoms. When fans of Harry Potter appropriate or rewrite the text, their work is typically seen as transgressive or additive in some way. When political fans attempt to reinterpret the text, their work is read not as responsive, but as part of the ongoing political debate. Many of these issues surface in the rather tense relationship that fan work has to copyright law within the context of US culture. It is worth noting that at the time when Tobi Vail filed to have the video removed for copyright violation, her Twitter profile only contained one sentence: "I'm voting for Bernie Sanders" (Nelson 2016). Part of Vail's reasoning for filing the takedown notice was the amount of attention the video was receiving: "Yeah in the past 24 hours or something every few minutes someone would email or message me or tag me, I guess it was getting a lot of shares" (as quoted in Peck 2016). As reporter Jamie Peck (2016) noted, after the takedown notice was issued, Vail's Twitter profile contained several posts about her dislike of Clinton and her support of Sanders. It is hard to ignore the potential political motivations behind the copyright claim. James Boyle (2008), in his writing on the history of copyright within the United States, points out that the goal of copyright within the context of US history was to democratize media: "If the system works, the choices about the content of our culture—the mix of earnest essays and saccharine greeting cards and scantily clad singers and poetic renditions of Norse myths—will be decentralized to the people who actually read, or listen to, or watch the stuff. This is our cultural policy and it is driven, in part, by copyright" (5). Underneath these hopes for creating a healthy cultural economy, Boyle (2008) highlights the fear that copyright law will be used to enforce political views. The concern is that one person will possess copyright on a large number of cultural artifacts, and that person will refuse to license that work to anyone who has a view different than their own. Furthermore, they will sue those who borrow from these cultural works to express differing viewpoints. Laws surrounding parody were created to prevent exactly this kind of political power grab.

In the mashup process that takes place when fans create music videos, new meanings emerge from old cultural artifacts. However, this does not necessarily mean that the previous meanings of that artifact simply fall away. Fans borrow music, image, video, and sound to write new ideas and new arguments in the mashup process. As Jenkins points out, "writers' mastery over their appropriated terms does not come easily; old meanings are not stripped away without a struggle; writers can never fully erase the history of their previous use or the complex grid of associations each term sparks in the reader's mind" (Jenkins 2012, 224). More often than not, "new aesthetics, based on remixing existing content, engender a new appreciation for older texts" (Booth 2012a). The meaning built into the original does not disappear. When Wing and Sampo chose "Rebel Girl" as the soundtrack for the video, the song's association with the riot grrrl movement gave force to the couple's argument about
Hillary Clinton. With that said, fans of the riot grrrl movement felt that the juxtaposition of the song with Clinton stripped meaning from the original text. They were not ready to let another fan community borrow meaning from their cultural artifacts. Sarah Keenan, whose feminism developed in the context of the riot grrrl movement, described herself as "sickened at the discovery that 'Rebel Girl,' a classic Bikini Kill track, had been used in a recent promotional video for Hillary Clinton's presidential nomination campaign" (Keenan 2016). She argues that for "Clinton's capitalist-loving, war-mongering machine to exploit the radical, grassroots, anti-establishment, DIY-sound of riot grrrl was a particularly offensive co-optation" (Keenan 2016). Framing the video as promotional is key to Keenan's argument. As a promotional video, the mashup becomes part of the Clinton campaign. Keenan argues that her frustration with the appropriation of "Rebel Girl" rises out of her belief that "part of the joy and momentum that powered the riot grrrl movement was the space that it created for fans—primarily young women—not only to consume music and ideas, but to participate in their making and to take ownership of them. Riot grrrl belongs to its fans, who in turn constitute the movement" (Keenan 2016). The riot grrrl movement was developed and implemented as much by fans as by the musicians who provided the soundtrack. Everything she is articulating here should make her a natural ally of the work that Wing and Sampo are doing with their mashup. Her opposition to the work stems from an inability to conceptualize that same kind of participatory spirit within the context of the modern American political campaign.

4. Summary and concluding thoughts

[4.1] Much of the debate surrounding "Rebel Girl" centers on the question of whether or not someone can be a political fan in the same way one can be a sports fan or media fan. In an essay on youth activism, Henry Jenkins and Sangita Shresthova (2016) tell the story of an MIT conference where several speakers, who had just presented on participatory politics, were asked if they viewed their work as activism. The speakers were quick to distance fan engagement from activism because of the perceived political connotation. Increasingly, fan communities are becoming places to mobilize political action; yet it seems fan scholars are reluctant to view fan work as overtly political (Brough and Shresthova 2012; Hinck 2012; Jenkins and Shresthova 2016; Sandvoss 2013). Ashley Hinck (2012) points out that many would prefer to refer to fan engagement with politics as media engagement instead of civic engagement. At the same time, Catherine Burwell and Megan Boler (2008) argue that there is a tendency to overlook fans in political research, which may be largely related to stereotypes surrounding fandom: "This oversight might be explained by the historical marginalization of fans and fandom. Even as fan practices move into the mainstream and fans themselves become coveted audiences, fans and fandom
continue to be stereotyped as irrational, emotional and most relevant here, as peripheral to the political sphere." With that said, the overtly emotional relationship that characterizes fandom in politics offers a critical lens for understanding seemingly nonsensical political decisions. As De Kosnik (2008) explains, when political fans feel disenfranchised, "emotional investments and affective relationships seem to trump ideological commitments and long-standing party loyalties."

[4.2] The productivity of fans makes them uniquely situated to engage political content in a proactive way. To borrow a term from Jenkins (2012), fans are comfortable "poaching" mainstream media texts and remaking them in their own voice. That is a skill that is increasingly critical for political participation. Today, citizens on sites like Facebook and Twitter are being asked to somewhat passively circulate content distributed by political campaigns and news outlets. Participatory culture has prepared fans to see places where they can intervene and reshape political conversation. The "Rebel Girl" video is a powerful example of this potential. Furthermore, De Kosnik (2008) points out that the emotional dimension of political fandom might be the key to driving stronger citizen engagement. In this video, one can see how the emotional relationship fans have to the text can open new ways of looking and remembering. When that affective framework enters the discussion, it offers a powerful intervention into the mainstream media narratives that shape popular memory. However, that intervention is only made possible when we recognize the fan voice within the text. To allow the tools of participatory culture to change the way we conduct political discussions, we must identify and highlight the existence of fan activity within modern political discourse.

5. Acknowledgments

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6. Works cited


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Abstract—This article explores the advent of local newspaper movie contests in the 1910s and how these contests helped to create active movie fans. Such contests increased the popularity of the new medium of film by engaging local audiences in the process of filmmaking, including fans as scriptwriters and even stars. They helped to transform film into a dominant cultural practice by creating local spaces for film patrons to become part of the national pastime of going to the show. They did so by appealing directly to female spectators, who both legitimized going to the movies and created dynamic film fan communities.

Keywords—Digital archives; Female fandom; Historical fandom; Silent film fandom


1. Introduction

On May 12, 1915, a headline in the Lima Daily News read, "Who Will Be Ruth?: Question Put to Women Readers" (figure 1). This same headline was repeated in several newspapers and towns across the United States from 1915 to 1918, announcing a traveling film contest developed by itinerant film exhibitor and producer Basil McHenry. The contest was created to cast a film called The Man Haters, which was filmed in over twenty locations using local casts. In each city where the contest was held, McHenry partnered with one local newspaper and one local theater to help promote and finance the contest and eventual film. The "Man Haters" contest was not unique; rather, it was only one of several contests that were announced in American newspapers in the early 20th century and intended to promote local engagement with film. Newspapers, theater owners, and film producers helped to create an active audience with these contests, which, in turn, helped to create the first film fans. Movie contests encouraged participation in the act of going to the show and even in producing amateur films in the prestudio era.
[1.2] In the 1910s, newspapers across America began to create film-related contests that often targeted the female audience. The gendered dynamic of early movie fandom gave women agency before they had attained a national right to vote. Early movie contests solicited women's participation by having them both create and star in local films. By the 1920s, film contests had become a staple of American fan magazines such as *Motion Picture Magazine*, which famously discovered silent film star Clara Bow with the "Fame and Fortune Contest" of 1921; however, before these larger nationalized contests there were local versions that promised to make small-town girls stars. Contests ran in large cities such as Pittsburgh and smaller cities such as Lima, Ohio, with the similar intention of involving fans in the moviemaking industry.

[1.3] The first movie contests coincided with the transformation of film from a cheap amusement to America's first mass medium during the second decade of the 20th century. The earliest contest I found began in 1911, and the latest ended in 1918. The years between 1908 and 1917, which overlap this period, are often referred to in historical film studies as the transitional era. This era saw radical changes in the technology of filmmaking, audience demographics, the types of films made, and the development of an organized industry. The cultural changes that came with the transitional era were particularly significant, and this is the historical period when going to the movies became a leisure practice ingrained in American culture.

[1.4] It was also during the transitional era that women were most openly and aggressively targeted by the burgeoning film industry. During this period, young female movie fans became the staple of many exhibitors' businesses, and advertising campaigns and promotions were designed to attract them (Stamp 2000, 2). Female fans were not just important to increasing revenue but also to normalizing moviegoing as a middle-class leisure pastime. Early film exhibition was associated with male immigrant audiences, but white middle-class women were important in changing the image of the film industry. While women clearly had an impact on the medium of film, there is a clear contradiction in how the film industry dealt with the female viewer
Shelly Stamp (2000), Marsha Orgeron (2003, 2009), Denise McKenna (2011), and Heidi Kenaga (2006) all explore how the film industry simultaneously solicited middle-class female audiences and pathologized obsessive female fans. Stamp (2000) argues that the characterizations of female filmgoers show a deep ambivalence, because while showmen promoted portraits of refined female patrons, the trade press and newspapers often characterized women as "movie-struck girls." The caricature of the movie-struck girl portrayed women as narcissistic and unable to control their desires. Movie contests reflected the complicated relationship of the movie industry to female filmgoers by initially encouraging female agency but then ultimately limiting female involvement in film and promoting traditional gender norms.

[1.5] This study is based on an analysis of local newspapers across America and the types of film-related promotions found in these papers. Digitized historical records like trade journals and local newspapers are the new frontier for film studies. The Media History Digital Library's vast array of digitized trade press and fan magazines has opened up new ways for scholars to look at the American film industry, as has recently been discussed by film scholars Richard Abel (2013) and Eric Hoyt (2014) (note 2). For this project, instead of relying on nationally distributed magazines, I have focused on how film was promoted in local newspapers during the transitional era. There are several databases that house local papers, and in this research, I consulted Newspapers.com, Historical Abstracts, and the Google News Archive. I searched each for the keywords "motion picture," "film," and "contest," discovering numerous contests related to film across the United States. Within these results two key types of contests appeared. The first type asked for trivia and rankings of movie stars, and the second solicited participation in the process of making films.

[1.6] This article focuses on three of these contests, chosen because of the wealth of material available to analyze, as many of the other contests had only partial records in the digital archives. They are the Lyman H. Howe contests, which ran in 1911 in different markets across the country; the "Made in Milwaukee Picture Play" contest, which ran in the *Milwaukee Journal* in 1915; and the "Man Haters" contest, which ran from 1915 to 1918 in 20 cities and towns across the United States.

[1.7] The proliferation of local movie contests in the 1910s reflects how film became part of the fabric of communities throughout America largely by creating a loyal and engaged fan base (Keil and Singer 2009; Singer 2001; Seeley 1996). This fan base consisted largely of women, and movie contests specifically targeted women's public ambitions and personal desires by involving them in the filmmaking process. At the same time, women's participation in contests served the film industry's commercial interests. Through contests, movie fans could demonstrate their knowledge, produce content, and even star in films. Although contests gave women a voice, they also
reflected societal anxieties about the "new woman," and ultimately these contests limited fan involvement by rewriting fan-submitted scripts and diffusing images of female power in the films that were made.

2. The transitional era and the making of the movie fan

[2.1] When motion picture ads first appeared in newspapers (both local and national), they were often contained within the pages devoted to theatrical releases and vaudeville. During the transitional era, the papers shifted their coverage of motion pictures, moving away from covering them as one among many amusements and toward dedicating sections specifically to film. These sections not only contained advertisements but also offered stories promoting the new pastime of going to the movies.

[2.2] These new sections that were dedicated to motion pictures significantly helped to popularize them. As film historian Paul Moore (2008) points out, "Journalism and promotion did not merely reflect and comment on the place of film in society. Newspapers fundamentally were agents themselves in reshaping the meaning and practice of going to the movies" (14). One key element that shaped the practice of going to the movies was the creation of an active audience, that is, of film fans. One of the mechanisms utilized to do this was promotions that advertised to and engaged early audiences.

[2.3] The use of contests to create active fandoms did not start with the promotion of motion pictures and, in fact, can be traced to earlier forms of literary fandom. As fan historian David Cavicchi (2014, 53) notes, fandom has "a longer historical trajectory that included the nineteenth and even eighteenth centuries" (note 3). Consequently, film fandom must be placed within the larger social and historical trends of the time. Film fandom, and the contests created to foster it, can be placed within the larger histories of cross-media promotions. The first cross-media promotions were for literary works in the 1700s (Law 2000, 3). Publications such as Lady's Magazine would often promote stories by involving their readers in contests. Like these earlier promotional contests, early film contests were a way of engaging an audience.

[2.4] The earliest movie contests were a reflection of how newspapers promoted to their readers the leisure practice of going to the movies. The traveling showman Lyman H. Howe created the earliest contests that can be found in the digital newspaper archives. Howe started his traveling exhibitions in 1883 and added motion pictures to his exhibit in 1896, which was the first year cinema was commercially available in North America (Musser and Nelson 1991). A prolific exhibitor, Howe developed his own projector, the animotoscope, and his shows were seen throughout
the United States and Canada until 1920. Howe originally had little competition, but by 1910 there were several traveling shows and purpose-built theaters across the United States and Canada making his shows less of a novelty. Consequently, Howe had to seek new ways to promote them (Musser and Nelson 1991, 219). In order to solicit newspaper coverage, he created contest tie-ins for his traveling exhibitions. The Lyman H. Howe contests not only helped advertise his shows, they also engaged local fans with their themes.

[2.5] The first Lyman H. Howe contest was an essay-writing contest in the *Pittsburg (PA) Press* in 1911 (note 4). The contest was announced on May 26, in a box on the newspaper's front page, and it ran in conjunction with the Lyman H. Howe Festival, which showcased fifteen short moving pictures (figure 2). Readers were asked to write a fifty-word essay on which of the showcase's films would interest them. The first-place winner received $50, the second-place winner $25, and the third-place winner $10; tickets to the festival were given to all three; and another 500 tickets were mailed out to participants. The contest was covered every day in the *Pittsburg Press* until the results were announced on June 11. In announcing them, the paper noted that interest in the contest had been "overwhelming" and that it had been unprepared for the high level of participation.

![Screenshot of the of the Pittsburg (PA) Press, May 26, 1911, with the headline "Enter the Press' Moving Picture Contest," indicating the rules of the Lyman H. Howe Travel Festival contest.](View larger image)

[2.6] Howe continued to run contests in the 1910s throughout the country in conjunction with his traveling exhibitions. A key feature of these contests was how they associated the exhibitions with high culture, asking questions about art and history. As has been noted by film historians Ben Singer (2001), Shelly Stamp (2001), and Charles Musser and Carol Nelson (1991), a feature of the transitional era was the film industry's efforts to make motion pictures a high-class amusement. Starting in 1913, Howe developed contests that made fans of his exhibitions feel cultured. The first of these was announced in the *Fort-Worth Telegram*, offering free exhibition tickets to those who could identify the thirty-three portraits printed in the paper. The portraits' subjects included European royalty (the czarina of Russia), politicians (Woodrow Wilson), and newsmakers (J. Pierpont Morgan). In announcing the results,
the *Telegram* noted that women were more likely to participate in the contest and had higher success rates in their answers.

[2.7] After the *Fort-Worth Telegram* contest, Howe started a similar trivia contest called the "Famous Building" contest, which ran in local newspapers in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Illinois, Kansas, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Nebraska in 1913 and 1914. In this contest, readers were asked to identify pictures of the Seven Wonders of the World; those who succeeded would win tickets to the Lyman H. Howe exhibition. Like later local contests, the "Famous Building" contest claimed to be unique; however, the same contest was held in several markets and all the newspapers published similar articles (figure 3). The language of the contests was also similar, indicating that all of the newspapers were designing the contests from a press release sent by Lyman H. Howe. Each newspaper remarked on the popularity of the contest and the intelligence of its readers. Many of the newspapers also remarked that women participated more than men. Most local film contests that I found targeted female audience members, and the Lyman H. Howe contest was the first of many to create a space for female fans to participate actively in the new medium of film.

![Screenshots of the Lima Daily News (left) and Wilkes Barr Times (right) announcing the winners in the Lyman H. Howe "Famous Building" contest. Note that both the headline and opening paragraphs are almost identical.](View larger image)

3. The serialization of movie contests

[3.1] The genre that became most identified with the female audience during the transitional period was the serial. As mentioned above, cross-media promotions had been used in the magazine and newspaper industries to promote literary works in ways similar to how film was later promoted in newspapers. The development of serial stories in the 18th century allowed both the popular press and literary publishers to split the cost of production. Popular newspapers and magazines needed to attract female readership in order to increase sales, and they did this by publishing serials that often focused on stories of confident young heroines. Two of the most popular magazines published to attract the female reader, *Town and Country Magazine* and *Lady's Magazine*, regularly ran serials in the 1700s and 1800s, and often promoted them by creating avenues for audience participation. *Lady's Magazine* ran several
promotions inviting female readers to submit their own serial stories (J. Pearson 1996). From the 1730s onward, newspapers also started publishing serial stories, reflecting the changing practices of the reading public. The same strategies that were used to promote serialized fiction were later adopted by the film industry, as the serial genre was part of the early film industry's attempt at increasing female viewership.

[3.2] The serial genre became closely associated with the use of contests, which directly engaged the female audience. As the serial genre is intertextual, it demands the active participation of the audience, and a key mechanism in cultivating this participation was again the use of contests. In fact, it can be argued that contests became the norm in the promotion of film serials; the two most popular serials, *What Happened to Mary?* and *The Perils of Pauline*, both used contest tie-ins to solicit fans (note 5). The first motion picture serial was *What Happened to Mary?*, which was created from a partnership between *The Ladies' World* magazine and the Edison film company, and a contest was a key element of its promotion. Each month, the magazine posed the question "What will happen to Mary next?" and offered a hundred-dollar prize to the reader who most successfully answered it (Enstad 1995, 73). By the fifth month of the contest, the magazine had received almost ten thousand responses, and a couple of winning essays became the plots for future installments of the serial. The *What Happened to Mary?* serial was wildly popular and was credited with expanding readership of *The Ladies' World* by 100,000 subscriptions, making the total readership of the magazine one million, and it was also reported that two million people saw each monthly installment of the film (Enstad 1995, 67).

[3.3] After the success of the "What Happened to Mary?" contest, similar contests began running in newspapers across America. In 1914, the biggest one—linked to the serial *The Perils of Pauline*—began with a partnership between Pathé American and Hearst Newspapers. This serial utilized trivia contests similar to those of Lyman H. Howe. They asked audiences to solve mysteries placed in each episode, for a prize of one thousand dollars (Abel 2006, 208). With its aggressive marketing campaign, *The Perils of Pauline* became one of the most popular films ever and broke all records for bookings and patron-pulling power.

[3.4] With the popularity of national contests like "What Happened to Mary?" and "The Perils of Pauline," local newspapers also began to engage female fans with local contests. In April 1915, the *Milwaukee Journal* ran a contest asking readers to write a motion picture script (figure 4). The contest, called the "Made in Milwaukee Picture Play," was run through a partnership between the *Milwaukee Journal* and the Strand Theater of Milwaukee. The newspaper and the theater contracted the E. E. Fulton Co. of Chicago to shoot the chosen script in May 1915.
A key goal of the contest was to promote Milwaukee as an ideal location to shoot films and the possibility that Milwaukeeans could work in the motion picture industry. In fact, the Milwaukee Journal claimed the contest would help people find employment in the industry. It urged readers to get involved because, while they might have watched movies before, the contest would "prove the first opportunity they have to familiarize themselves with the steps taken in motion picture making," and thus it was marketed to "those seeking to get a foothold as writers of photoplays" (figure 5). Submitted stories had to be simple, had to be set in "out-doors Milwaukee" in the present day, and could not exceed 750 words. The winner would have his or her story made into a film and would also receive a fifty-dollar gold watch.
The paper heavily promoted the contest, and even ended it a day early because of the large number of entries (figure 6). The winner was announced on Sunday, April 25, 1915. "Jozie's Jitney Duke," a story by Mrs. B. F. Peterson, was about a working-class heroine named Jozie who was fooled by an unscrupulous duke. Mrs. Peterson lived in Bay View, a suburb of Milwaukee, but was originally from Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. The Milwaukee Journal published an interview with her, in which she reported that she had submitted several other photoplay scripts to film companies but this was the first one accepted. It was reported that the contest boosted her ambitions of becoming a photoplay writer, and she declared that she would continue with her "literary pursuits" after her success in the contest.

Figure 6. Screenshot of Milwaukee Journal, April 21, 1915, with headline "Journal Photoplay Story Contest Ends Friday: Film Stories so Numerous Judges Need an Extra Day," indicating the popularity of the contest. [View larger image.]

It is clear that women played a central role in all aspects of the film made as a result of the "Made in Milwaukee Picture Play" contest, writing, directing, and starring in it. A female reporter for the newspaper, Mary Robinson, wrote columns throughout the shooting of the film with humorous anecdotes of the filming, including one devoted to the film's star poodle. Robinson wrote regularly for the "PicturePlay and Players" section of the Journal from 1914 to 1917, but no other information on her can be found in the historical records. She and Mrs. Peterson are examples of how women were involved in, but peripheral to, the early film industry. In Go West, Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood, Hilary A. Hallett (2013) sheds light on the involvement of women in the early movie industry and explores how many women migrated to Southern California from cities and towns across America to work in it. Women not only worked as actresses but were also writers, and female journalists played an important role in reporting about early film. The "Made in Milwaukee Picture Play" contest clearly demonstrates that women were interested in getting involved in the moviemaking process outside of California. In cities and towns across the United States, women were involved in film by reporting on it in local newspapers, and
through the advent of movie contests, they could become part of the movie-making process without leaving their hometowns.

[3.8] Although the contest attempted to appeal to women, and they were involved in the film, female work on the film was also marginalized. Mrs. Peterson may have had continued ambitions to write for photoplays, but her script was completely rewritten by the E. E. Fulton Company and she largely disappeared from the coverage of the film. The coverage of the film shoot also reflects how female fandom was often dismissed. Mary Robinson, in her reports on the casting of the film, detailed the fierce competition for roles and the large number of women who tried to get parts. According to Robinson, many of them lied about their age and marital status, or the fact that they had children at home, in order to be considered. Robinson depicted the female fans as frenzied in their attempts to become part of the film, reflecting the discourse surrounding the "movie-struck girl" at the local level.

[3.9] Robinson reported that she applied for a role in the film herself, and was disappointed. Despite the claim in the newspaper that all of the actors would be Milwaukee natives, it appears that the Chicago-based casting agency brought in outside actors. Not much was reported in the newspaper about the actors, but the man who played the duke, Clarence Cheasick, was from Stevens Point, Wisconsin (Stevens Point Gazette, May 19, 1915). The only actor who was regularly mentioned was Harry Cohen, who played the newsboy, and it appears he was a professional actor, as he received substantial coverage, being identified as a "David Warfield type" (note 6) or a "Yiddish comedian," even though the newsboy was not a named character. Indeed, the director, Robert Henri, added a scene "to demonstrate his abilities as a Jewish comedian," and in her final review of the film Robinson declared, "To Harry Cohen, Yiddish comedian, belongs the honours in Jozie's Jitney Duke." Harry Cohen continued his career as a "Yiddish" comedian, performing a Yiddish musical comedy in Pennsylvania in 1919 (Harrisburg (PA) Evening News, December 18, 1919).

[3.10] Although the serial craze of the 1910s often involved stories with strong female characters, Jozie's Jitney Duke did not have a strong female lead and the actress who played Jozie was not covered to the degree that Harry Cohen was. A copy of the film does not appear to be in existence, but a summary of the plot was published in the Milwaukee Journal on May 9, 1915. It was a simplistic romantic narrative about a young girl, Jozie, who rejects her reliable boyfriend for the chance of marrying a duke. Jozie's innocence is almost destroyed, as the duke is already married. She realizes at the end of the story that she should suspend her ambitious nature and marry her boring but reliable boyfriend. Although the original script was a love story, a comedic scene was added, as indicated above, to highlight Harry Cohen's talents.
The "Made in Milwaukee Picture Play" contest demonstrates the complex relationship that developed among film producers, newspapers, theaters, and early fans. The contest was a partnership between the local newspaper and a theater, which hired an outside company, the E. E. Fulton Company, to produce, cast, and ultimately rewrite the chosen screenplay. While the *Milwaukee Journal* wanted to demonstrate that Milwaukee and Milwaukeeans could make films, they chose to make the film with a company from Chicago and at least one actor from outside Milwaukee. The message first presented to female fans was that they could become part of the moviemaking process, and it is notable that a woman wrote the winning screenplay and a female journalist covered the making of the film. While women were clearly targeted by the "Made in Milwaukee Picture Play" contest, they were also clearly marginalized, as the abundant coverage of Harry Cohen attests. Local contests like this one were increasingly popularized in local newspapers across America, and soon fans would be not just writers but also stars (note 7).

4. Who will be Ruth?

Movie star contests were a key element of advertising to female spectators, as they allowed female movie fans to become part of the moviemaking process. Movie star contests were also often featured in fan magazines, and as mentioned above, silent film star Clara Bow was a product of this type of contest (Orgeron 2003). Before the national movie star magazine contests, local newspapers ran these contests during the transitional era. The longest-running local contest that I found in the digital archives is the "Man Haters" contest, which ran from 1915 to 1918. The "Man Haters" contest, like the "Made in Milwaukee Picture Play" one, involved the shooting of a film, but instead of competing to write the script, local movie fans competed to star in the film. The contest promised participants that they could become a "real movie actress" in a film that reflected the changing role of women in society.

Itinerant filmmaker and exhibitor Basil McHenry created an exciting contest that appealed to communities around the United States. Readers were asked to register their votes for potential actresses by sending in coupons that were printed in the newspaper. The April 21, 1916, edition of the vaudeville newspaper *The Opera House Reporter* stated that the success of McHenry's movie contest was very promising in smaller towns, and explained that he intended to enlarge the contest in order to increase the popularity of local pictures. McHenry continued to expand his operations, running more than twenty contests between 1915 and 1918 (figure 7). Although the contests were generally located in the Midwest, McHenry also traveled south to West Virginia and Kentucky and east to New York. It is very likely that cities were chosen on the basis of train routes, as the Midwest was a hub for train lines. Most contests were held in smaller cities and towns, although there was one in
Nashville and another in Youngstown, Ohio. The *Opera House Reporter* explained that the principal cast were chosen through a newspaper contest ten days before the cameraman and director arrived to shoot the film.

![List of cities that ran "Man Haters" contests.](View larger image)

[4.3] Each contest resulted in a version of the same movie, *The Man Haters* (McHenry 1915), shot in each city where the contest ran. The plot of the film concerned a group of man-hating women and their leader, Ruth, who eventually falls for a handsome young man named Henry. This plot reflected many of the discourses surrounding the "new woman" that became prevalent in the late 1800s and early 1900s. With women increasingly present in the workforce, a new modern identity for women was reflected in both print and early film (Sharot 2010). The early depictions of the "new woman" in newspapers often associated women's entry into the workforce with independence from men and reflected anxiety about the change in gender roles. One of the terms often used in conjunction with the "new woman" was "man hater," which reflected male anxieties about female political groups rejecting men entirely.

[4.4] Man haters and the phenomenon of man hating appeared often in newspaper stories starting in the late 1800s. The *Janesville Gazette* warned readers (June 8, 1871) that women were becoming "professional despisers of men." On July 5, 1892, the *Olean (NY) Democrat* published an editorial on the nationwide man-hating craze. A common theme of these stories was that women were forming man-hating groups and even clubs. The *Glenwood (IA) Mills County Tribune* reprinted a story from New York about a man-haters club in Williamsburg. The man-hating phenomenon eventually culminated with fears that entire communities of women might reject men, and in 1908 newspapers carried stories on the Belton Woman's Commonwealth. The Commonwealth, a Protestant commune, had been founded in Texas in the late 1860s on the basis of female celibacy and communal living, and it relocated to Maryland and Washington, DC, at the turn of the century. By 1908, the community had dwindled to
only nineteen women and children, but despite its small size, newspapers routinely reported on it and their supposed man-hating tendencies.

[4.5] The plot of *The Man Haters* was directly influenced by the man-hating discourses found in newspapers, and a key theme in many of these stories was women in man-hating groups falling in love. On April 29, 1908, the *Pittsburg Press* published a story on the Belton Woman's Commonwealth in the "Of Interest to Women" section of the paper (figure 8). The story chronicled Adah Pratt, with a sensational headline claiming that she married the first man she met. The same story of Adah Pratt was reported in several newspapers, and all of the stories sensationalized her marriage. In one account from the *Trenton Evening Times*, the reporter remarked that Pratt was "stolen away" by her new husband, and her marriage was a major setback for the commune.

**Figure 8.** Screenshot of the Pittsburg Press, April 29, 1908, with the headline "Of Interest to Women: Taught Marriage is Sinful, She Marries First Man She Meets," which tells the story of Adah Pratt of the Belton Woman's Commonwealth. [View larger image.]
Newspaper stories of man-hating women falling in love were codified into Clyde Fitch's play *Girls*, which was first performed in New York City at Daly's Theater (note 8). A story in the *New York Times* on April 2, 1908, reported that Daly's ran an April Fools Day promotion to lure man haters into the theater to see the play. The theater also attracted female viewers by holding a man-haters' matinee and sending free tickets to hundreds of women, who packed the theater. The plot of *Girls* was strikingly similar to the plot of McHenry's *The Man Haters*: it too revolved around a group of man haters who "succumbed to the sterner sex."

Although there were more than twenty "Man Haters" contests, only two copies of the resulting movies survive, and the only publicly available copy is the Muncie, Indiana one, in the Ball State University collection (note 9). The following synopsis and figures draw on this version. The acting is amateurish and stilted, but the film has a clear and entertaining plot and the production is clearly professional. The opening scene of the film reveals the cast members as they bow to the camera. All of the female cast members took part in the contest, with Dora Grim winning the part of Ruth, and the McHenry Film Company chose the male actors. The archivists at Ball State have explored the backgrounds of the cast members and determined that the male actors were all members of prominent Muncie families, while the women were from working-class backgrounds and worked as shop girls and telephone operators (Turner 1996).

After the stars are introduced, the film starts with a scene of Ruth sitting on the front steps of a grand house in Muncie, writing a note that says, "The Fallacy of Man—we have all agreed to absolutely ignore men." She is then shown with her female friends in the "anti-man" club, whose members tend to travel together through the town. The male lead, Henry, spots Ruth one day and asks his sister, Alice, who is also a member of the club, to introduce him to her. Ruth rebuffs all of Henry's attentions until he forcibly separates her from her female companions and takes her to a bench, where she falls for him (figure 9). Ruth then sneaks out of her house, climbing down a ladder to meet Henry, and the two are chased by the women of the club. The story culminates in the marriage of the two lovers by the mayor on the steps of the courthouse. The club finds out about the marriage, and the entire group is shown crying (figure 10). The film ends with Ruth telling the group that she still hates men—except for one (figure 11).
The scenario of *The Man Haters* paints a complicated image of the "new woman" of the 1910s and the anxiety surrounding female empowerment. It is the female group or club that inspired fear in newspaper articles, and in the film it is clear that joining a female-only club makes women unresponsive to men. When she is with her fellow group members, Ruth will not respond to Henry, and it is not until she is physically separated from the group that she becomes susceptible to Henry's advances and rejects her core values and friends. The female group is shown as behaving...
unnaturally and are often used as comic relief in the film (figure 12). The message of *The Man Haters* is one of conventional romance and fear of female empowerment, but Ruth's last line complicates its narrative. Like the contest through which its female characters were cast, *The Man Haters* attempts to support female empowerment—in some ways—while ultimately critiquing it, thus providing a dual message to female fans.

*Figure 12. Screenshot from The Man Haters, showing The Man Haters Club in hot pursuit of Ruth and Henry. This is one of the many comedic scenes where the club is characterized as ridiculous. [View larger image.]*

[4.10] The newspaper accounts from different towns indicate that while the general plot of the movie was the same in its various local versions, there were differences among them. None of the newspapers published the exact plot of their local version, but reporters did describe incidents in shooting, as Robinson did for *Jozie's Jitney Duke*. A key scene that was often described in these reports, and one that does not appear in the surviving Muncie version, was one in which Ruth is rescued by Henry. In the Youngstown version, she is rescued from a frigid river, but papers in most other cities described a building fire. The *Dunkirk (NY) Observer*, the *Kokomo (IN) Tribune*, the *Nashville Tennessean*, and the *Hagerstown (MD) Morning Herald* all mention such scenes. The *Morning Herald* offered two front-page articles on the film's fire scene, saying that both Ruth and Henry were stuck in a burning building and were rescued by actual members of the local fire department. The *Nashville Tennessean* and the *Kokomo Tribune* also reported that local firefighters took part in the film. It appears that scripts were modified to showcase local monuments and groups, thereby creating a sense of the local in the national pastime of going to the show.

[4.11] The popularity of the contests varied, but, judging by the population of each city, it appears they were all very popular. In fact, in larger towns, the contests racked up tens of thousands of votes. In Muncie, Ohio, where the total population was 34,000, 22,000 votes were recorded. In Cedar Rapids over 50,000 votes were cast—more than the total population of the city itself, which was 40,676 in 1915. In
Youngstown, Ohio, which had a population of 106,000, the paper reported it had to print 60,000 more papers after 96,490 votes were cast for the contest. Each newspaper the contest ran in would regularly reference its popularity. The *Muncie Press* reported that girls would follow paper carriers around and enlist the help of newsboys to collect as many coupons as possible. The *Lima Daily News* reported that staffers spent hours counting the ballots. The popularity of the contests is important because they not only created a space for women to contribute to the moviemaking process but also gave them agency in a time before political voting rights were nationwide.

[4.12] Each of the contests directly addressed the female audience, soliciting its members to both enter and vote in the contest. The opening articles of almost all of the contests had the same first lines. In Lima, Cedar Rapids, Mansfield, Logansport, and Youngstown, the contests all opened with the lines "Who will be Ruth? [City name] girls and women ask yourself this question and herewith become acquainted with [newspaper name] motion picture contest" (figure 13). The stories that ran on the second day of the contest also had similar phrasing, stating that the newspaper's "telephones have been answering hundreds of questions" about the contest and giving women tips for successfully competing, such as "line up all your friends to vote for you." The McHenry Film Company may have sent out press releases for the papers to follow, as most of the coupons and rules were the same for each contest: each aspiring actresses had to be over the age of sixteen, a resident of the city, and an amateur who had never appeared in a film (figure 14).
Figure 13. Screenshots of the Lima Daily News (left) and Logansport Journal Tribune (right) showing the standard opening articles for the "Man Haters" contest. [View larger image.]

Figure 14. Screenshot of a standard coupon for the "Who Will Be Ruth?" contest from the Cedar Rapids Republican. [View larger image.]

[4.13] There are a couple of outliers that differ from the majority of the contests. In spring 1916 the contest that ran in Nashville was unlike the others in many ways; for example, the opening ad did not use the usual language, asking instead, "Is there a Mary Pickford in Nashville?" (figure 15). In this contest the McHenry Film Company was not mentioned; instead William Conklin was listed as the film's producer, and the paper identified him as a talent scout "working for one of the largest producing companies in America." Another difference was that the prize included a wardrobe from the ready-to-wear store Rich, Schwartz and Joseph. The other outlier was in Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania, where the contest was originally called "Who Will Be Flo?" (figure 16) —although the film and contest were later identified as The Man Haters, and the contest later appeared as "Who Will Be Ruth?" These outliers suggest that McHenry may have sold the script to other producers.

Figure 15. Screenshot of Nashville Tennessean, February 27, 1916, showing an ad for a "Who Will Be Ruth" contest in the city. [View larger image.]
Basil McHenry, like Lyman H. Howe, used contests as a way to continue his traveling film entertainment business. McHenry started his career with traveling circuses and continued with minstrel shows and vaudeville before he turned to the new medium of film. With the demise of itinerant exhibitions and the rise of the nickelodeon, he partnered with the newly established local theaters and newspapers to produce locally connected films in towns across America. He seems to have continued the scheme after the "Man Haters" contest; the December 1916 edition of Variety reports that McHenry had shot another local film, called 'Twas Schooldays, in Newark, Ohio. It is not known how many films McHenry produced through such contests, but as more local newspapers and trade papers become digitized more of them will likely be found. His use of female-centered contests seems to have inspired other producers, and more such contests run by others may also be discovered.

5. Conclusions

The prevalence of movie contests promoted in local newspapers in the early 20th century created a dynamic movie public that, through their active participation in these contests, became creators of a new popular culture. Movie contests were created as ways of publicizing and popularizing a new and burgeoning medium, and the different contests show the early film industry (in the prestudio era) encouraging different levels of fandom. Film exhibitor Lyman H. Howe was the first to realize the potential of newspaper contests as a mechanism to promote his shows. His contests represent an initial level of fan participation, wherein fans were asked to demonstrate their knowledge. The next level of fan participation appeared in screenplay and movie-star contests, in which fans helped produce content. In both the "Made in Milwaukee Picture Play" and the "Man Haters" contests, local movie fans actively participated in creating a film that the whole town could later watch.

While trivia contests tended to focus on the general population, participatory contests almost exclusively targeted female viewers. Women helped to shape moviegoing in the transitional era in many ways, and local contests reflected the ways in which the early film industry tried to attract female fans while also attempting to regulate their power. The "Made in Milwaukee Picture Play" contest asked women to submit photoplay scripts, suggesting that they could become professional scriptwriters. However, the newspaper completely rewrote the winning script, and the woman who won the contest was mentioned only peripherally in accounts of the film, while the male lead received most of the coverage.
The early film industry had an ambivalent relationship with female fans, whom it both solicited and pathologized, as is clearly evident in the "Man Haters" contest. The "new woman" was a contentious topic, and there was a fear that members of female clubs would become man haters. The "Man Haters" contests aggressively targeted women in each town. Like the "Made in Milwaukee Picture Play" contest, the "Man Haters" contest promised participants that it could help them become movie stars, but none of the female actors appears to have continued in the profession. The script itself is a conventional romance that promotes heterosexual love over female companionship, reflecting fears of female empowerment. With that being said, the last scene does contain the subversive message that Ruth still hates all men save her lover, which seems to demonstrate some acceptance of "man hating."

Digital archives provide rich resources through which to explore how film was received at the local level in small and large towns across America. It was at the local level that film became ingrained as a mass leisure practice, and film contests played an important role in helping to cultivate an active and excited audience. The history of fandom is a difficult topic to explore because of a lack of sources, but through an exploration of local newspapers we can see how newspapers, theaters, and early film producers engaged early movie fans. This early and largely female audience was not simply interested in watching movies but wanted instead to make and star in their own. Active participation of fans in mass culture is not only a contemporary phenomenon; it can be traced historically. I hope that with the advent of new historical research tools, like the digital archives, more aspects of the history of fandom will be located and explored.

6. Notes

1. Gitelman (2003) argues that it was consumers who influenced the uses of the phonograph. With film, female consumers clearly shaped the types of films produced and even exhibition spaces in the post-nickelodeon era.

2. Richard Abel warns that these new research tools contain limited amounts of material and do not allow for the same types of discoveries that can be made in traditional archival research.

3. The history of fandom is a burgeoning area of study within fan studies. See, for instance, the special issue on the topic in *Transformative Works and Cultures* entitled "Fan Works and Fan Communities in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," edited by Nancy Reagin and Anne Rubenstein. Also see Pearson (1997, 2007); Saler (2003); Ryan and Thomas (2002); Ryan and Johanningsmeier (2013); Boyce, Finnerty, and Millim (2013); Coppa (2006); and Ryan and Cavicchi (2009).
4. The city now known as Pittsburgh was officially "Pittsburg" from 1890 until 1911, and the *Pittsburgh Press* was the *Pittsburg Press* until the 1920s.

5. The concept of serial fandom has been thoroughly studied in film history. See Dahlquist (2013), Canjels (2011), and Wilinsky (2000).

6. David Warfield was a famous stage actor known for his comedy roles.

7. I found several examples of these types of screenplay contests in local newspapers across North America. The "Made in Milwaukee Picture Play" contest was one of the most covered contests available in the digital archives.

8. *Girls* was adapted into a Famous Players–Lasky film in 1919, starring Marguerite Clark.


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7. Works cited


Praxis

Hoarding and community in *Star Wars Card Trader*

Jeremy Groskopf

Averett University, Danville, Virginia, United States

[0.1] **Abstract**—Transitioning collectibles from the physical to the digital sphere changes the culture of collecting by increasing the accessibility of trading partners and adding digital limitations on personal interaction. In this analysis, I examine the collecting game *Star Wars Card Trader* (2015) and its culture of mass hoarding—the collecting of vast quantities of a single, valueless digital object—through which players reintroduce elements of personality, camaraderie, and nonrivalrous collecting into a system designed primarily for anonymous profitable acquisition. Via an analysis of player behaviors both within the game itself and in online venues, I argue that mass hoarding—a user invention—acts as the central community-building behavior in this digital realm. Mass hoarding is thus a clear indication that even in the digital realm, human personalities and relationships are vital to the construction of collecting as a pastime that is more complex than an investment opportunity.

[0.2] **Keywords**—Collecting; Digital commodities; Video games


[0.3] You can have the entire Star Wars galaxy on your phone...like music. I don't want to lug my record collection with me everywhere, but I have it on my phone...[where] I enjoy it even more because I have better access to it. There are so many other things that we can do digitally that we can't do with physical cards. There's endless possibility.

—Steve Ciccarelli, original producer of *Star Wars Card Trader* (quoted in Ratcliffe 2015)

1. Introduction

[1.1] Digital media in the 21st century has increasingly become an alternative means for the distribution of experiential goods. Digital music, video, and text files are now commonly sold through mainstream retailers for use on a variety of devices. However, this transition changes the circumstances of our relationship to the goods (increased portability, decreased transferability, decreased production costs, etc.). Several collectible goods have also begun to make the transition. Comic books, for example, have developed a thriving digital market. Notably, however, digitizing comics has come at the expense of much of their collectability, as the ability to display and exchange books has been coded out of their digital versions (Steirer 2014). Digital versions of Collectible Card Games (CCGs) have also developed, as apps such as *Hearthstone* and *Earthcore: Shattered Elements* are now available for Apple and Android devices. In these cases too, however, collectability is virtually eliminated; there are no built-in trading functions in either of these games, and thus traditional collectability—based in display, transfer, and secondary-market profit—is coded out.

[1.2] In immaterial culture, with the presumption of unlimited reproducibility and the practice of licensing restrictions (selling access rather than ownership), collectability has been a difficult feature to retain. Often digital media reference the collecting ethos as a form of play, not ownership; in the *Pokémon* model, collecting is slang for completion and thus competitive behavior, not a means of financial valuation and exchange (Geraghty 2015). Occasionally such completionist collecting is even monetized in computer gaming, as downloadable content (DLC) is offered for those players dedicated enough to desire an enlarged or personalized experience. Paid DLC can even become a display artifact; games like *Neverwinter* and *Star Trek Online* have integrated models for clothing one's avatar in paid DLC. This digital display, however, is restricted. There is no direct corollary to the complex display behaviors of collectors of physical objects (Hoebink, Reijnders, and Waysdorf, 2014). The DLC collection's size and breadth remain a private affair. Collectible editions of media are thus still predominantly physical: physical packages laden with feelies, like the *Batman: Arkham Asylum—Collector's Edition* which was packaged with a life-sized Batarang, among other artifacts (Peters 2014).

[1.3] In recent years, trading cards have begun to make the leap into the digital realm in apps oriented specifically around collecting and exchange. Sports cards were the first to make the transition, as Topps (the largest maker of sports trading cards) has created digital app versions of their baseball (*Bunt*), football (*Huddle*), and Soccer (*Kick*) cards, all of which included both a trading function (and thus a secondary market) and a digital re-creation of scarcity through limited
card production. However, it is clear that Topps has been hesitant about the replicability of collecting culture digitally; each app has a prominent game component that echoes fantasy sports.

[1.4] In 2015, however, the *Star Wars Card Trader* app became Topps's first app to be oriented exclusively around collecting and trading, with no game-play element beyond the completion of sets. This extension of film tie-in card collecting not only helps us to envision how physical collecting practices can be rendered digitally but also clarifies some of the ways in which the digital experience changes those practices. *Star Wars Card Trader* is physical collecting amplified by both speed and intensity. A less marketing oriented take on Ciccarelli's quote above would claim that the "endless possibilities" of the new field of digital card collecting translate to an endless claim on the user's attention. With onetime releases of limited count cards (marked sold out as soon as the limit is reached), global demand, and award cards provided free for completion of sets by a particular date, interest in individual cards can spiral wildly out of control and then collapse in a matter of days, if not hours. For many cards in the app, their peak trade or resale value occurs within the first hour of release. Trading can thus become an intense, frequent, and time-consuming experience, as players are continually chasing and/or disposing of the newest available cards.

[1.5] In this article, I wish to focus my attention on an outgrowth of this pacing and intensity: hoarding, which appears to have been spontaneously generated as both a cry of individualism and a coping mechanism. Hoarding, in *Star Wars Card Trader* (2015), is not the collecting of all available cards or upgrades. Nor is it directly related to the pathological disorder in which a person accumulates and becomes attached to vast quantities of objects. Hoarding, in this case, is the intentional acquisition of fantastic quantities of a single, valueless card. Mass hoarding is an inversion of the encouraged behavior both in the app and in other games with collecting elements, where the player is encouraged to chase either the rarest collectibles or a complete set of all available items. *Star Wars Card Trader*, like its sports-card brethren, drives attention toward new and low-count cards through timed award releases, thus steering attention away from the basic white cards which are unlimited and can reach counts well over 3 million copies. Although Topps has monetized and incentivized hoarding, increasing the practice by integrating rewards for sizable hoards, the original practice continues in the form that I term mass hoarding: the collecting of quantities far in excess of what may be rewarded and thus entirely driven by the player's whims.

[1.6] User conversation in *Star Wars Card Trader*–related forums—including, predominantly, a Reddit subgroup and the Facebook community Black Sun Card Cantina—renders the behavior and reasoning of mass hoarders clearly visible. Card hoarding is both a shadow culture and a coping mechanism for digital collecting. As the concepts of profit, haggling, artificial scarcity, and even anonymity wear thin, *Star Wars Card Trader* players create an artificial zone of profit-blind and personal behavior within the app. The behavior is a blur between punk fashion and commune. Like punks, mass hoarders implicitly critique capitalist values by inventing a playstyle that elevates self-expression, personal goals, and nontraditional desires. But this practice is communally rather than rebelliously focused: they create a mutually supportive subculture in which the profit motive is derailed in favor of a rigorous sense of fairness. Through this combination, the fans turn an app designed to stress profit and acquisition and to minimize personality into a space where both clear identities and fair play can rule. They create pockets of humanity and humane behavior in a digital world where those sentiments were (perhaps intentionally) omitted.

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2. A game of stress

[2.1] *Star Wars Card Trader* launched in early March 2015. It is a combination of game (it has a score and awards for completing goals), social platform (it has fan forums and avatars, and players can peruse the holdings of other players), and card collecting. The app is available for both Apple and Android operating systems and is available for download in several countries. At the time of writing, there are more than 80,000 active accounts in the system (note 1). Many players, however, play with multiple accounts, despite the fact that this is against the rules of the game. As such, there are likely significantly fewer than 80,000 players globally.

[2.2] The program provides the user with 25,000 credits on each day in which they sign in, with a bonus awarded for logging in on 7 consecutive days. Players can add to their available credits either via interacting with advertising or paying into the system with a credit card. The user can spend these credits at any time to open packs, which cost between 1,000 and 900,000 credits each. The system then sorts and tracks the cards acquired by the user. The digital cards mimic physical cards in that they are predominantly rectangular, have a front and back, and emerge from a digitally animated wrapper.

[2.3] As in collecting of physical objects, the cards within the app separate into two clear categories: base cards (unlimited cards that make up the basic set) and inserts (available for a limited time and in limited quantities). The base
cards are separated into five rarity levels: in 2015, white, blue, red, yellow, and gold. The 2015 series was retired in January 2016 with just under 4 million copies of any given white available and roughly 20,000 of any gold, with the other colors residing somewhere in between (figure 1). The inserts can have color variations as well and range from under 100 to well over 50,000 copies. Sometimes packs contain a guaranteed insert; other inserts have odds as rare as one in 1 million packs (figure 2).

![Image](image1.jpg)

**Figure 1.** The 2015 White Admiral Ackbar.

![Image](image2.jpg)

**Figure 2.** The most universally desired insert card from the first 30 weeks of the app, “Han in the Millennium Falcon” from the Vintage series, colloquially known as Vintage Han. [View larger image.]

[2.4] The game has a score, but it fluctuates to accommodate new card releases and is hazily understood by the average player. Scores are hierarchical; the best account has a score of 100, with everyone else beneath that score. In my time spent playing, three different players have held the peak score: MJFHMATT, who left the game in October 2015 ([https://www.reddit.com/r/starwarstrader/comments/3pui62/a_hero_has_left/](https://www.reddit.com/r/starwarstrader/comments/3pui62/a_hero_has_left/)); GEBEAU31, who purchased MJFHMATT’s account and transferred most of its contents (note 2); and PARMTHEPOM, who emerged as an extraordinarily heavy spender in late 2015 and took over the top score on December 29 ([https://www.reddit.com/r/starwarstrader/comments/3yobbm/a_new_100/](https://www.reddit.com/r/starwarstrader/comments/3yobbm/a_new_100/)). Thus, unless a player is willing to spend many thousands of dollars on the app, the top position is unattainable.

[2.5] As such, the only truly attainable goals for the bulk of players reside in collecting. Sets can be completed either through repeated pack purchases, by trading with other players, or through resellers online—typically on eBay. Attempts have been made by Topps to intensify the interest in completing sets, especially new releases, by offering an award card for the completion of each set. Thus, much of the actual game centers on completing numerous small goals and adding
to one's list of awards. Unlike physical card collecting, this results in a perpetual upgrade model, in which the perceived value of cards decreases drastically with age. (In the community, cards with awards yet to come are termed live, while cards with an expired award deadline are dead.) Thus, the desirability structure of digital cards is predominantly inverse to that of physical cards: the newest cards are the most heavily in demand, and only the most aesthetically pleasing or historically important of the dead cards maintain any value. (For an example of the dollar values of these digital cards, see Lussier 2015.) The game element is therefore to be found in the award chase, while subcultures of taste and less demanding collecting orbit around the current chases.

[2.6] Card chases are intense, can require a massive expenditure of credits, and can cause a player to obsessively check the app for new releases. Regardless of the pack odds, most inserts are available in packs for a day or less. Some particularly desired cards sell out in less than an hour—for example, the September and October release "The Force Awakens: Topps Classic," in which each card sold out in roughly 45 minutes (figure 3). If a player misses a card that sells out, the player's only recourse is trade or resellers.

Figure 3. BB-8 from the "The Force Awakens: Topps Classic" series. [View larger image.]

[2.7] Also, as with many freemium games that are built on microtransactions, Star Wars Card Trader has a class system (Seufert 2014, 156–57). Many users use the system solely as a free-to-play application; they spend no real-world currency on the game, playing only with credits earned within the game. These players form the vast underclass of the system and are typically incapable of chasing the more desirable insert cards because of a lack of funds (https://www.reddit.com/r/starwarstrader/comments/36i3iv/insert_set_tiers/). Many users regularly pay-to-play; some pay into the system on a daily basis (https://www.reddit.com/r/starwarstrader/comments/3p5k23/the_death_of_the_f2p_user/cw3cj9a). At the very top are the extremely heavy users—some of whom may pay upwards of $100 or more per day—who are colloquially referred to within the community as whales. (User PARMTHEPOM appears to have paid approximately $15,000 into the system on the night of November 2, 2015 [https://www.reddit.com/r/starwarstrader/comments/3rbnrj/somebody_just_went_a_bough_the_rest_of_the_neons/].) Whether the whales play for business or pleasure, their scores are the highest, their holdings the most consequential, and their value to Topps enormous. Although class status can put limits on what and how much a user can collect, it has no inherent correlation to the player's frequency of use. The 7-day credit incentive keeps users regular.

[2.8] From the outside, Star Wars Card Trader doesn't look much different from any other fan culture. Twitter accounts, Facebook accounts, a Reddit subheading, multiple Web sites, and two podcasts (The Trade Federation and the Card Trader Illuminardy) disseminate news and provide a place to discuss the app and negotiate trades (figure 4). Fan-art and remix culture is also common, including images of both official characters and cosplay performers (figures 5 and 6).
[2.9] It is the intensity of card chases that gives this online community its most recognizable features. The pace of online activity is not only rapid, especially in the wake of each newly released card, but also includes frequent discussions of the stress caused by collecting. The pace of play demands near constant attention from either inside or outside of the app. Players dedicate huge quantities of time to the chase (https://www.reddit.com/r/starwarstrader/comments/425x2x/and_im_out/). It is not uncommon to see players fret about cards being released while they are unavoidably engaged at work (https://www.reddit.com/r/starwarstrader/comments/3ty6yk/am_i_the_only_one/). As the app becomes like a second life, it also prompts digital solutions to the sense of captivity that it creates.

3. Sameness in a storm of difference
Hoarding multiple copies of a single collectible is a much simpler proposition in the realm of digital culture than it is in the physical world. The reach of a physical collector is limited, and the desire to accumulate vast quantities of the same object is rare. Collecting within an app, however, includes a built-in global network of trade partners. Add to this network the fact that white cards are the waste product of the system (unlimited filler material, distributed like packing foam around the better cards), the pool of common cards available to a given player explodes in number. Acquiring massive quantities of digital goods, provided the system allows for duplication, is exponentially easier. Mass hoarders expect to acquire not merely dozens or even hundreds of a card; they collect thousands of copies, often in a very short space of time. Hundreds can be acquired in an hour-long binge.

Although mass hoarders also collect the rainbow (that is, all available color variations of their hoard card), the focus of mass hoarding is typically the white base card. The selection of which card(s) to hoard can be personal (I chose to hoard "Luke Skywalker: Jedi Knight" because of a childhood love for that costume and character), seemingly random (Claudia of @SWCT_info selected Max Rebo because he "was the most colorful card in Series 1" and thus "the easiest for my eye to find") [October 6, 2015, 10:18 AM; October 23, 2015, 9:04 AM], or motivated by convenience (the fewer people competing for a hoard card, the more likely it is to find them available). Some players expand their hoarding to include multiple different white cards.

The largest mass hoard I have encountered—and I believe the largest hoard in the app—is that of user RICHKULACH, who holds over 85,000 copies of the 2015 white Bossk. Another prominent hoard is held by Claudia of @SWCT_info, who owns more than 22,000 copies of the 2015 white Max Rebo. Though there is no known list of particularly successful mass hoarders, my personal research list places Claudia eighth in terms of bulk. Although I have examined the accounts of many active hoarders, 10,000 copies and above remains a rare achievement.

Mass hoarding is also in process of being overshadowed by Topps's monetized variant. Since the middle of 2015, Topps has been releasing Monument cards as hoard awards—a player can acquire a Monument in exchange for 5,500 copies of the white card being honored. If insert chasing is the mainstream and hoarding the subculture, the Monument card is the point at which they intersect. The Monument incentivized hoarding and also gave it a logical endpoint (those concerned only with awards could stop at 5,500). Between January 10 and 14, 2016, Topps released a Monument variant for every remaining 2015 white card, confirming that there was no longer any base card that could be hoarded unprofitably. At this point, hoarding became simply another chase. Before this point, and for the remaining subculture of mass hoarders, the hoard was the noise in the system: offbeat, pleasant, and implicitly critical.

Those who persist in mass hoarding invert the norms of behavior, focusing on quantity over quality and on haggle-free trades. They also engage in public celebrations of numerical milestones. If the culture of cutthroat acquisition and completionism is the typical doxa of Star Wars Card Trader, then hoarding is an explicit rejection of that doxa (Bourdieu 1984, 170, 471). It is thus to a great degree the nearest that a collector can get to what Dick Hebdige (1987, 80) terms a "symbolic form of resistance"—in this case, a resistance to the profit ethos that drives insert chasing. Many players describe trading as a scenario with a winner and a loser (https://www.reddit.com/r/starwarstrader/comments/44jey7/i_think_i_won_this/). Hoard trading denies either party a financial victory.

However, mass hoarding is still based in consumption, and hoarders do not actively seek to overturn or rebel against the game's built-in power structure (Hebdige 1987, 148n6; Smith 2012, 35). Indeed, mass hoarding is usually a sideline for a player who is also engaging in mainstream collecting. Mass hoarding is less an act of rebellion than of frustration—a self-made chase with no reward, designed to pleasurably fill a player's down time. It is, to a great degree, the equivalent of role-playing in a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). As with role-playing, "it offers no tangible rewards" and may even slow down the player's progress by consuming time that could be more profitably spent elsewhere (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2008, 227).

Unlike the visual possession of insert chasing (acquiring a new card adds its image to your My Cards list), hoarding relies upon a mathematical fantasy of possession. There is no way within the app to actually look at, for example, 512 copies of the white Admiral Ackbar card. A player cannot click a button and witness the majesty of scrolling for 5 minutes through their hoard. Players cannot even personalize the organization of their own collection in order to foreground the hoard; cards are always sorted via one of a few presets, determined by the viewer, not the owner, of the cards. A viewer can, if they choose, sort by quantity, thereby placing any hoard at the top of the list; this, however, is at the viewer's discretion. Unless one is actually trading the cards, then, the only thing that differentiates a single card from a vast hoard is a small number added like a flag in the upper right-hand corner (figure 7). Effectively, hoarding is a number fetish. Although the act of hoarding undoubtedly connects to imagination of physical plenty, the
reality is that a hoard is simply an ever-increasing number on a screen. Its nearest parallel may, in fact, be a bank balance—a simple numerical accounting of the number of pennies at one's disposal. It is both a collection and a measurement of time spent.

![Image of hoard](https://example.com/hoard.png)

**Figure 7. Claudia's Max Rebo hoard, as posted to @SWCT_info on 4 Aug 2015. Are there 8 cards here, or 18,233? [View larger image.]

[3.8] Even for players of the game, the pleasures of hoarding can be difficult to understand. At times nonhoarders react with befuddlement. Take, for example, the VintageHan.com user Hofy, who asked, in early August 2015, "What is the deal with some people hoarding hundreds or thousands of a particular common card? So what if you have 897 Jar Jar white boarder [sic]. This just baffles me" (http://vintagehan.com/forum/index.php?/topic/3704-why-hoard/?hl=hoarding). This likely relates to the tradition, especially prevalent in physical card collecting, of seeing one's collection as not only a pleasure in itself but also an investment for the future (Baker and Gentry 1996, 135). The rarity structure of *Star Wars Card Trader* encourages the player to define white cards as valueless and thus meaningless. With no clear card value, mass hoarding seems like a profitless expenditure of time. For such players, the only reason for hoarding is the occasional chase for Monument cards.

[3.9] Despite the existence of Monument cards, mass hoarding is generally seen as an end in itself. As mentioned by Claudia via @SWCT_info, hoarding is a fun way "to pass the time in app" (October 2, 2015, 6:55 PM). For some (increasingly in the minority), that is all it has ever been. VintageHan user EthanFriend03 responded to Hofy, in the query above, by simply saying: "Most people just think it is a fun side quest." The chances of a Monument card honoring a particular hoard were, initially, considered too remote to be worth the effort. Indeed, Reddit.com user 30newme revealed that he or she "decided to hoard Mas Amedda, even though I knew that the odds of getting a Monument award...were slim to none" (https://www.reddit.com/r/starwarstrader/comments/3fh5q1/one_month_of_hoarding_madness_how_did_you_do/). In general, then, mass hoarders ignored the concept of the Monument, choosing to receive news of a Monument as a pleasant surprise, not as the goal of the enterprise.

### 4. Various meanings of vastness

[4.1] Despite the frequency of mass hoarding, the app's users spend little time rationalizing the behavior. In a Reddit thread called "Who and Why Do You Hoard?" all but three of the ninety replies were about the appeal of the character on the card, not the appeal of the activity itself (https://www.reddit.com/r/starwarstrader/comments/3pwgbe/who_and_why_do_you_hoard/). But hoarding was a widespread phenomenon even prior to its monetization, and, as the examples above attest, it expands well beyond the territory of favorite characters. If, as Daniel A. Nathan asserts, "a collection always reflects its owner's values and tastes" (2012, 557), what are the values and tastes reflected in a hoard conceived simply to have a hoard?

[4.2] The most basic explanation is that mass hoarding is an escape from the stress of typical app pursuits. It includes rudimentary interactions with others—generally amounting to nothing more than an acceptance of a trade offer and an occasional "thank you" comment—without any of the tension involved in trying to strike the best deal for a card.
VintageHan user JEDIMASTERBEYP asserts that "hoarding...gives me a break from chasing inserts." Fellow user LEFYETTE adds that hoarding "virtually guarantees you fair trades as well" (http://vintagehan.com/forum/index.php?/topic/3704-why-hoard/?hl=hoarding). Reddit user renmotigo put it bluntly when he or she simply said, "I do it [hoard] because it allows me to actually trade, as opposed to getting frustrated that I can't find anyone to trade other cards with" (https://www.reddit.com/r/starwarstrader/comments/36c2rc/just_want_to_ask_everybody_for_their_thoughts_on/crddmlq). These comments confirm that, for many players, mass hoarding is seen as a way to either evade, protest, or repair the unpleasantly rigorous negotiations of trading cards with clear value.

[4.3] Typical trading within the app operates much like William D. McIntosh and Brandon Schmeichel's description of physical collecting: it creates and releases "manageable tension," but can create depression and anxiety when it becomes too materialistic (2004, 88). With a standard practice of one-for-one, same-color trading, hoarding is a no pressure zone where a player can engage in hardcore play without investing a great deal of emotion or effort. Mass hoarding and hoard trades are tension management for an app that is a nearly permanent zone of stress. It can, in fact, threaten to become a habit-forming behavior; some mass hoarders discuss their hoarding as binge behavior equivalent to heavy drug use (figure 8). In short, it would seem that mass hoarding is an attempt to seek respite, without leaving the app, from the more difficult, profit-seeking negotiations that occur in the bulk of trades—a way to play without consequences.

Figure 8. Reddit user jdinger29's joke meme "How I feel after chasing my hoard card all day."

[4.4] One explanation for mass hoarding, then, is that it represents a profit-blind approach to a hobby app that is predominantly profit-oriented in its inflection. Historically, the profit motive has often been seen as an imposition on the personal pleasures of collecting (Cook 2001; Baker and Gentry 1996, 135). Although this may not be literally true (Gregory Steirer [2014] makes a compelling case for profit motivation being inherent in ownership-based consumption), some Star Wars Card Trader hoarders engage in mass hoarding specifically to create an innocent space within the app where they can divorce their thoughts from dollar value and think only of personal value. This is an explanation centered in utopian longing. If trading is too frustrating in the era of insert cards and planned scarcity, hoarding is its idealized corollary—freedom from frustration through a return to a space of abundance (Dyer 1985, 228).

[4.5] However, evading haggling is only one aspect of mass hoarding. Through hoarding, the players also turn a largely anonymous venue into a means of self-definition—what Russell W. Belk (1988) terms the collector's creation of an extended self. Socialization is limited in Star Wars Card Trader. One is allowed only a name and a small photo as an avatar, and communication between accounts is difficult (private messages can only be sent alongside a trade offer). As such, in the absence of a hoard, there is little that individuates a collection or provides a player with a recognizable persona. Hoarding, however, provides a unique and recognizable identity both to the player and to the collection. It is, in a way, a digital re-creation of the "external props" that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi says are required to keep our mental sense of identity in "focus" (1993, 22). The hoard becomes the account's face—its de facto avatar—created by the human acquisition of digital things. Indeed, players frequently use a picture of their hoard card as their avatar photo, collapsing the distinction between avatar and hoard completely.

[4.6] Some players enter the digital space with an identity in mind. User CHEWBACCA123456, for example, hoards Chewbacca cards. VintageHan user Obi-John sees his hoard as a digital extension of his real-world Obi-Wan Kenobi memorabilia (http://vintagehan.com/forum/index.php?/topic/3704-why-hoard/?hl=hoarding). In both cases, we can see the preexisting fandom in the account name. In this approach, a mass hoard becomes an extension of broader fan behavior. This act of self-definition often dovetails with childhood proclivities. Out of 20 comments in the Reddit.com thread "A Message for New Hoarders," four specifically mention that they loved the character as a child, and two more mention collecting a character for reasons of attachment not specifically connected to childhood
When hoarding for fun, attachment to the character pictured is often placed above expectation of a reward for the behavior. This aspect reveals hoarding to be an extension of another kind of profit-blind collecting into the digital realm: the elevation of card content over card rarity or dollar value. Here, mass hoarding links to the eccentricity of collecting—an atypical fixation, often originating in childhood, on a particular character (Smith 2012, 34–36).

Even when players do not enter with an avatar persona in mind, they can discover a persona through their hoard. Here, the eccentricity can be intentionally cultivated as an app-specific persona. Claudia claims to have selected Max Rebo solely because his card was colorful and therefore noticeable. However, her @SWCT_info Twitter account background is now covered with images of various Max Rebo cards, and her Twitter avatar is a piece of fan art of Max Rebo with Claudia as the name (visible at lower left in figure 4). She is as recognizable as “the Max Rebo hoarder” as she is as “Claudia.” In this way, mass hoarding (always an act of self-expression) becomes an element of self-creation. Constructing a self through hoarding means that the game can take on a narrative component, as the player’s behavior becomes its own type of story (Meadows 2008, 23). A player’s quest for larger and larger totals can take on the status of spectator sport, as is the case with Claudia’s Max Rebo collection and RICHKULACH’s Bossk hoard. Claudia’s audience receives semiregular updates on her hoard counts. RICHKULACH has become the stuff of legend, arising randomly in conversations about hoarding in fan forums.

Mass hoarding is thus also the creation of alternative cultural capital. In the absence of the traditional sense of cultural power and status afforded by the grandiose, the rare, and the expensive (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 24)—in this case, high-end digital cards—a mass hoard is the creation of a popular cultural shadow-capital. Indeed, the following description of fan cultures by John Fiske could be a description of mass hoarding behavior: "Popular culture capital, unlike official cultural capital, is not typically convertible into economic capital...Acquiring it will not enhance one's career, nor will it produce upward class mobility as its investment payoffs. Its dividends lie in the pleasures and esteem of one's peers in a community of taste rather than those of one's social better" (1992, 33–34) (note 3).

In short, a mass hoarder may engage in hoarding not simply to avoid endless haggling over highly valuable cards, but also because they cannot attain those cards in the first place. As such, one could attain a sense of cultural power and importance by being one of the game's greatest hoarders, despite having no other hope of ascending into the upper echelon of players. A mass hoard overwhelms a lack of quality with quantity.

This explanation is given added validity by the fact that hoarders often have a routinized "possession ritual" (McIntosh and Schmeichel 2004, 94). After attaining a round number, mass hoarders will often circulate celebratory messages with an image of their hoard count. Such celebrations are unavoidable on the Star Wars Card Trader subReddit on Sundays, as that day has become, by consensus, the day when players discuss their hoard progress. These celebrations, however, occur in all online venues, including Twitter and Facebook, and become a space for congratulation and even minor remarks of jealousy. The veneration of an escalating number becomes the mark of the collection's value to the group.

This act of personal differentiation can, however, also create a microculture. Mark Stephen Meadows has noted that similar avatars tend to cluster into groups. See, for example, his discussion of America Online, in 1993, when his impulsively chosen screen name PigHed quickly resulted in a friend group of pig-themed avatars (2008, 9–11). Star Wars fandom, with a finite number of recognizable character names to choose from and thus a finite number of characters to hoard, is ripe for such clustering. For example, Reddit user LeviTriumphant makes an effort to connect with other hoarders of "Space Slug" by adding them to his friend list and sending them congratulatory messages when they reach milestone numbers.

Unlike mass hoarding in general, which is traditionally nonrivalrous and friendly—presuming that any trade partner will have a different hoard—these microcultures can create friend groups that return to the competitive behavior of mainstream collecting. For example, each "Jedi Luke" collector may attempt to acquire a larger hoard than the others have.

Even this friendly rivalry is, however, value-blind—or, at the very least, measures value in terms of effort rather than dollars. Unlike the collecting of insert cards, which is a practice where pay-to-win issues can creep in (players who pay for additional credits have more chances to acquire rare cards), hoarding is almost exclusively effort based. As Reddit.com user modok_baby said: "Having a vast supply of dupes to trade can only help you as fast as you can trade them, which can be quite tedious, so I think the...deciding factor won't be how many white dupes you start with, but
5. A gathering of gatherers

[5.1] Mass hoarding thus reveals several significant behavioral traits of this particular digital fan culture. Firstly, it is apparent that the acceleration of the pace of release in a constantly updated app, especially when that app is itself commodity oriented, produces an equal and opposite obsession with the mundane. In the mutually defining sphere of valuable and valueless objects, both sides of the equation become objects of fascination.

[5.2] This obsession with the mundane psychologically links to a network of preexisting concepts that are often considered the opposite of profit-oriented behavior: innocence, childhood affections, and identity formation. Though identity is formed in reference to what one chooses to consume (which character to hoard), it is the ultimate uselessness of the object that is stressed by the mass hoard. Much like the punk rock adoption of taboo clothing, grime, and a lack of both mainstream taste and talent, hoarders clothe themselves in the castoffs of a profit-oriented culture. Although the political implications are weaker, the hoard is a digital version of Hebdige's "mundane objects which...reveal the tensions between dominant and subordinate groups" via double meanings (1987, 2).

[5.3] As such, mass hoarding is digital collecting's version of punk fashion—a culture of taste created out of the clutter of a commodity hierarchy. Traditional value is replaced by a swarm of valuelessness, which is simultaneously translated into a marker of both personal affection (an elevation of taste over capital) and, paradoxically, a celebration of one's dedication to the system despite a lack of capital. The hoard is thus a gasp of both personality and dedication in a realm that privileges scarcity and wealth.

[5.4] Unlike punk, however, mass hoarding is communal rather than combative. If it is true that "the friendship and camaraderie of other collectors is one of the most rewarding aspects of collecting" (McIntosh and Schmeichel 2004, 93) and that the most meaningful objects are those that "remind us of who we are with respect to who we belong" (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 27), hoarding is an attempt to create sociable behavior in a system that is perceived to lean too strongly toward predatory profit seeking. The common description of the in-game Fan Feed as the "Greed Feed" is a clear indication that a large swath of players associates the masses with ugly, profit-oriented behavior. Recall as well the various animal metaphors that populate discussions of the acquisitive trading behavior: live, dead, chase. In conversation, the term "chase" is sometimes interchangeable with the word "hunt," and a card that has been released is referred to as having been spotted in the wild. In the game, trading for value links self-centered behavior to the iconography of the lone hunter. The identities and friendly behavior formed through mass hoarding and hoard trading, alternatively, create communal behavior—something akin to ritualistic consumption (the exchanging of gifts) or a community of gatherers rather than individualized hunters (to return to the foraging metaphor). Hoarding restores humanity and camaraderie to a system suffering from weak social integration (Hornsby 2008, 79–81, 87–89). It is kindness and companionship in a system optimized for predatory acquisition; it is a gathering of gatherers (note 4).

[5.5] Mass hoarding is thus the spontaneous generation of society in a game that did not account for the importance of community to the psychology of collecting. As such, at least in the digital realm, mass hoarding is direct evidence that Sigmund Freud was incorrect to assert that collecting is "a turning away from human relationships" by investing one's time in building relationships with objects (quoted in Van Den Eede 2010, 111). Mass hoarding indicates that without community the act of collecting is less pleasant. Collecting culture—even, and perhaps especially, in immaterial culture—is reliant on human interaction, not an escape from it. The structured absence of community in the coding of Star Wars Card Trader prompted the restoration of humanity to the system through community building and the personalized hoard.

6. Notes

1. In late 2015, Topps was offering one free Crimson card per day, limited to one per account. The cards had to be manually claimed and peaked with 81,470 for the Crimson Boba Fett released on October 29, 2015. This number represents the most accurate public approximation of active accounts.
2. Though the transition to GEBEAU31 is not clear in the above link, it is common knowledge within the community. Account purchasing and transfer remains a thorny issue within the app, as Topps can permanently ban accounts for suspicious behavior.

3. It would be profitable to follow Fiske further and determine whether the lines between mainstream players, hoarders, and those who both hoard and collect inserts fragment along age and gender lines, with older males behaving traditionally and youth and females preferring the alternative culture. Further, it would be interesting to try to map them onto Bourdieu's model to determine how mainstream cultural capital within the game connects to the player's opinion about hoarding.

4. Although its function in community building is similar, this is not directly related to a gift economy. Hoarding is traditionally performed by one-for-one trading. Players rarely seek out hoarders in order to give them hoard cards. It is a rigorously fair exchange of nearly valueless objects.

7. Works cited


Cuteness, friendship, and identity in the brony community

Theo A. Peck-Suzuki

University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, United States

Abstract—I examine the practices of fan productivity and gender negotiation in brony fandom, the community of primarily college-age men who are fans of My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic (2010–). I examine the contours of brony textual and material practices, noting how productivity within the fandom plays a role in the negotiation of identity and community ethos. I also consider the implications of cuteness in the fandom and discuss how this aesthetic and its corresponding narrative have led to the development of a unique discursive mode among bronies, which I term the discourse of friendship. Drawing on Matthew Gutmann’s theory of contradictory consciousness, I argue that the discourse of friendship is an innovative framework that encourages new ways of taking part in existing social institutions that destabilize hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords—Consumption; Contradictory consciousness; Fan fiction; Fandom; Gender; Masculinity; Material culture; My Little Pony; Nerd

1. Introduction

Bronies, adult fans of the television show My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic (2010–), have garnered substantial publicity in recent years. This is primarily because the majority of bronies are men, while the show itself was clearly developed for young girls. Conventional wisdom about what men should and should not find appealing offers little to explain the emergence of this community, with the result that bronies are often associated in the public imagination with sexual perversion and antisocial behavior, among other things. In this paper, I aim to articulate some of the sociocultural negotiations that are at play in brony fandom, seeking ultimately to reconsider the fandom as a site where individuals can disrupt commonly held assumptions about masculinity, nerdiness, and sociality.

This essay draws from ethnographic work conducted in both online and off-line settings, as well as from interviews with self-identified bronies and pony fans. Pursuing this kind of research demands critical reflection on how online and off-line socialities intersect; in the My Little Pony, or MLP, fandom, I have found that while certain distinct forms of social interaction do emerge through the Internet, they cannot be fully understood without considering how they modify off-line behaviors and vice versa. Therefore I present evidence only rarely as exclusively "online" or "off-line," seeing it rather as, in some respects, both. Most of my online research involved spending time on Equestria Daily, a Friendship Is Magic blog that is widely recognized as a nexus of fandom news and media and that features sections for discussion of a range of MLP-related topics. Other Web sites I visited include YouTube, DeviantArt, FIMFiction, and the
professional gaming Web site Team Liquid. This digital fieldwork is supplemented by my experiences at Trotcon 2014, a brony convention that took place in the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Columbus, Ohio, during the summer of that year. While small in comparison to the better-known Bronycon, that year’s Trotcon nevertheless boasted about a thousand attendees, with much-loved scriptwriter M. A. Larson and voice actors Andrea Libman and Peter New appearing over the course of the weekend. Whereas online ethnography provided me with important insights into the day-to-day activities of "pony" (a shorthand some bronies use for the MLP scene generally), Trotcon afforded me the chance to see what it is that bronies do with each other in person and the ways in which they bring the values of the show to those interactions. Being in such close proximity also meant that I could speak directly to bronies and other attendees (pony fans who did not adopt the brony label) about what the fandom means to them.

[1.3] In this paper, I seek to articulate the distinctive set of practices and values that have emerged in the brony community. I refer to this as the discourse of friendship: specifically, the negotiation that exists among bronies between the show Friendship Is Magic, the established conventions of nerd behavior and hegemonic masculinity, and the needs and aspirations of individuals. I begin with the production, sharing, and consumption of (primarily) cute, pony-themed media. Drawing on authors such as Matt Hills (2014) and Benjamin Woo (2014), I trace the contours of this exchange, taking note in particular of the ways in which participation along material and textual axes of production is central to the constitution of the fandom as a whole. With reference to Arjun Appadurai’s "tournaments of value"—social institutions through which the values of cultural goods are determined (Appadurai 1986, 21)—I argue that material and textual productivities serve distinct roles in the negotiation of individual and communal identity for bronies.

[1.4] From here, I attempt to clarify how the narratives embedded in Friendship Is Magic and the presence of cuteness intersect with brony identity, with a particular focus on how this intersection impacts brony masculinity. I adopt Matthew Gutmann’s concept of "contradictory consciousness" (Gutmann 1996, 14–15) to frame the interplay between male nerd culture and hegemonic masculinity within the brony community, with the aim of showing how the discourse of friendship inspires bronies to renegotiate their own gendered practices. Contradictory consciousness describes the dialectical relationship between dominant and popular gender ideologies. According to Gutmann, one cannot understand why men "do what they do to be men" by only considering hegemonic gender guidelines, which are "largely and uncritically accepted," because individuals often make decisions that contradict, or at least do not cleanly overlap with, those norms. Instead, Gutmann argues that dominant ideologies exist in a dialectical relationship with alternative practices and beliefs that unite "individuals with others in the practical transformation of the world" (Gutmann 1996, 14–15). I argue that the brony community navigates this dialectic, and I support this claim by highlighting cases in which bronies deploy the discourse of friendship in their day-to-day lives.

2. Brony material and textual culture

[2.1] Bronies, like members of other fandoms, produce a large volume of media. The importance of this productivity to the fandom was evident at Trotcon, where the second-largest room was set aside for artists to sell their creations. From dozens of personalized stalls, artists
sold prints and drawings, plushies and figurines, keychains, T-shirts, and wireframe sculptures. Across the hall, another room was set aside for the Traveling Pony Museum, which appears at conventions across the United States and exhibits objects created by some of the fandom's best-known artists. This abundance is not limited to conventions—fan fiction, music, original songs, and other digital creations are a constant part of the day-to-day life of pony fans. Equestria Daily regularly posts the day's or week's best drawings, PMVs (pony music videos), and stories on its homepage. Artists take commissions on their DeviantArt or Tumblr pages, and the purchasers upload pictures of themselves with their new merchandise to Facebook group walls and the subforums of other online communities. Bronies unconcerned with the sideways glances of other customers sometimes even make trips to the Hasbro aisle of their nearest Wal-Mart or Target to pick up official My Little Pony toys for their collections.

[2.2] Several authors have written on the importance of fan productivity in defining community identity and institutions. Karen Hellekson, for example, has written both with Kristina Busse (Busse and Hellekson 2006) and separately (Hellekson 2009) on the social functions of fan fiction and other textual media, while scholars like Matt Hills (2014) and Benjamin Woo (2014) have given substantial attention to material practices such as replica making and collecting. In the brony community, both textual and material productivities are common, and they usually inform each other directly. However, it is important to differentiate between these two broad categories, as the forms of participation they entail define different aspects of the fandom. Hills has written on the importance of "mimetic fandom" in other fan groups, observing that fan-made replication is compelling because it makes real something that otherwise exists only in the source text: "the fan-made replica...is a physical object that nonetheless relies on absent or noncoincident media for its meaning" (Hills 2014, ¶2.13). In addition, making and owning part of a fandom's material culture has interpersonal implications. As Woo notes, ownership is exclusive, since objects belong to one person and not others; through this limitation, owning a piece of material culture becomes "the price of admission to a social world" (Woo 2014, ¶4.10). By owning and occasionally displaying pony merchandise, individuals can accomplish a number of crucial social tasks. In particular, they can constitute themselves as bronies and establish an immediate social connection with anyone who shares their interest.

[2.3] At Trotcon, I learned of a military veteran of the war in Afghanistan who had revitalized his struggling marriage when he and his partner developed a mutual interest in Friendship Is Magic. One of the couple's friends, another military brony and the person who told me this story, made them a custom Shining Armor and Princess Cadance plushie set with magnetic noses (so they could kiss). The creation and exchange of pony merchandise helped provide the couple with a mutually accessible social arena (the fandom), and also served as a physical reminder of a romantic ideal, the successful marriage on the show of Shining Armor and Princess Cadance. The experience of the storyteller is also significant: making the plushies affirmed to himself and others that he was a brony, and by giving them to his friend, he established himself as a community veteran offering a welcoming hand to a curious, potentially vulnerable newcomer. Offering newcomers a "welcome to the herd" is common in the brony community (Robertson 2014, 26–27), and I explore it further below.

[2.4] Textual projects such as fan fiction, movies, songs, and digital art are also highly relevant to the fandom's productive exchanges, though their social roles differ from those of material
works. As noted above, material culture is generally limited by money and space (Woo 2014, ¶4.1). This is not the case for textual productions, because anyone with a computing device, an Internet connection, and network permission to visit a relevant Web site (e.g., Equestria Daily) can find and access them. Thus they belong to no one in particular but rather to the fandom as a whole (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 7). In contrast to Derek Johnson’s argument that assigning authorship to bronies “attributes the creativity of participatory culture to exclusively masculine, adult, and heterosexual identities” (Johnson 2013, 145), I have found that the combination of accessibility and the ambiguity of digital creativity creates a situation in which no one possesses exclusive rights to fan fiction, just as no one owns the show *Friendship Is Magic*. As a means of participation and expression, fan fiction and digital media allow individuals and groups to explore and renegotiate the MLP source text in a way that has a tangible impact on how the community in general thinks about and draws from pony and its own history.

[2.5] I use the concept of "tournaments of value" (Appadurai 1986, 21) to help clarify the difference between the material and textual sides of MLP productivity. As Hellekson has observed, textual exchanges in fan communities revolve around gift economies that result "in a community occupied with theorizing its own genderedness" (Hellekson 2009, 114), that is, with negotiating issues of fan identity. What kinds of textual and digital media deserve public recognition in MLP fandom? This is the question that the textual tournament of value seeks to answer. When I have posted my own thoughts on MLP forums, I notice myself evaluating the quality of my contributions by their popularity. How many people quote or reply to my comment? Do they respond negatively or positively? Similarly, perusing DeviantArt or Equestria Daily makes evident the extent to which bronies themselves evaluate their more substantial textual contributions to the fandom by how positive the comments and creative follow-ups are. Particularly successful writers and artists may even see their work headlining an Equestria Daily news entry, an achievement that both affirms the work’s high value and enables maximum exposure in the community. These textual reimaginings can have a permanent creative impact on the fandom and even spawn their own reproductions, as in the case of the enormously popular MLP/Fallout crossover *Fallout Equestria*. By contrast, forms of textual and digital media whose place in the fandom is contested—for example, MLP pornography, also known as "clop"—are kept out of many high-visibility places, such as conventions and Equestria Daily. Discussion of this taboo on forums likely to be seen by outsiders is usually discouraged as well.

[2.6] Bronies recognize and negotiate the value of MLP fan merchandise, unlike that of textual media, through ownership and limitation of access. A one-of-a-kind print signed by Tara Strong, the voice of Twilight Sparkle, is precious because it is so rare; more common merchandise may still be desirable but lacks the same splendor. Nowhere is this clearer than at the charity auctions that are often held at MLP conventions. Here, bronies compete for special pieces of material fandom, such as the aforementioned signed print, or the lanyard worn to the event by voice actress Andrea Libman, or a unique poster of the Trotcon 2014 mascot. In these cases, value is expressed in terms of the money someone is willing to spend on exclusive ownership of a given piece. The spectacle is a competition: attendees at Trotcon were allowed to view the items on offer before the auction, giving them the chance to plan a bidding strategy. While the "likes" and "retweets" of social media permanently enhance a piece’s visibility, at the conclusion of the auction everyone but the new owners loses access to these unique pieces of physical merchandise. As tournaments of value, auctions identify winners through limitation, but this
same limitation allows individuals to distinguish themselves from passersby as bronies. That a
certain degree of privilege is required to attain this distinction bears mentioning, as well, though
it deserves closer examination than this essay allows. Both participating in an auction and
distributing one's handcrafted MLP plushies, paintings, and other paraphernalia serve to affirm to
oneself and others that one is a brony, that one belongs to this community.

[2.7] The different tensions that emerge around material and textual productivities hint at their
different roles within the brony community. On the one hand is the ambiguous question of one's
own place in the fandom. Material practices work in part to clarify this ambiguity. By owning and
competing for pony merchandise, the "price of admission to a social world" (Woo 2014, ¶4.10),
one affirms that one is a brony; by creating and selling it, one establishes oneself as a certain
kind of brony; by giving a newcomer a present, one constitutes oneself as a community veteran
and welcomes a newcomer "to the herd." On the other hand is the question of how the aesthetic
and ethos of the source text inform the community. They do not do so in a constant or
unchanging way, but rather in a discourse contingent on ongoing processes of textual negotiation
that occur through practices like brony fan fiction and fan art, as well as decisions about where
and how to display these works. A story, comic strip, or painting that appears on Equestria Daily
becomes the fandom's face; the themes, scenes, and fanon that artists reproduce become part of
the lived experience of being a brony.

3. Cuteness on a personal level

[3.1] Brony textual and material cultures demonstrate how Friendship Is Magic is ethically and
emotionally compelling to members of the fandom. More than the actual productions themselves,
the intensity with which bronies act as producers and consumers and the dedication they must
apply to both their crafts and their roles as owners of pony merchandise demonstrate just how
important the show, its characters, and the fandom can be to individuals.

[3.2] Making and owning pony merchandise is not always a comfortable social occupation for
bronies embedded in communities outside the fandom. Negative stereotypes of bronies are
common, and the hyperfeminine brand of cuteness in Friendship Is Magic can make even the
most tolerant of outsiders uncomfortable. In spite of this, cuteness retains a central place in the
productive cultures of the fandom. Browsing through "Drawfriend" posts on Equestria Daily, one
observes brony illustrators making a wide range of creative choices, but in almost every case,
their works emulate or reenvision the exaggerated cuteness of the source text, to the praise of
their followers.

[3.3] Disconcerting though it may be to some, cuteness is in fact well established in other
fandoms and in consumer culture more generally. Granot, Alejandro, and Russell (2014, 71)
argue that mass-produced cuteness originated in Japanese youth culture. They state that
cuteness "lent personality to objects such that consumers could have relationships with [them]
that they might lack with other people." The claim that these person-object relations exist to
replace interpersonal relationships is problematic, as I hope this essay will demonstrate;
however, the observation that cuteness enables personification, and that this in turn can make
objects (and the characters they represent) more relatable, is highly relevant to the brony
community.
Many bronies have told me that the first thing about the show that drew them in was the artwork. Some outsiders I have spoken with have heard similar things and concluded that these were roundabout references to clop, but this is hasty. As Venetia Laura Delano Robertson has observed, the Japanese cute or "kawaii" aesthetic that Granot, Alejandro, and Russell discuss is "currently in vogue in the western world," and it is this aesthetic's influence that is clearly visible in *Friendship Is Magic* (Robertson 2014, 24). In fact, cuteness has a specific history of meaning and symbolism (Granot, Alejandro, and Russell 2014, 74–75) that *Friendship Is Magic* explicitly draws from. The aesthetic is not itself revolutionary; what is significant is that the show draws so effectively on its heritage that individuals who are used to kawaii characters have an easier time relating to what they see onscreen. This may be why so many bronies point to the art style of the show as one of the first things that drew them in: where the unorthodox, hyperfeminine character names and narrative themes could make watching *Friendship Is Magic* unappealing or uncomfortable, the recognizable influence of Japanese cuteness was reassuring, familiar, and reproducible.

4. Contradictory consciousness and the discourse of friendship

By reenvisioning the show as something that is personally relatable, bronies can use it as a source of inspiration in their social and emotional lives. Invoking MLP, however, puts bronies into conflict with dominant gender ideologies that find adult, and especially heterosexual adult male, interest in the show inherently perverse. The strategies that bronies employ to negotiate this conflict form the basis of the discourse of friendship. I define the discourse of friendship as the negotiation between the ethos of the show, digital socialities, and normative gender practices that impacts both how bronies think of and relate to themselves and how they assert their place in the world. I draw on Matthew Gutmann's use of "contradictory consciousness" to articulate this concept more clearly.

Gutmann argues that contradictory consciousness tends to emerge in settings where social or economic shifts have disturbed traditional ideas about gender (Gutmann 1996, 14–15). It is my view that the brony community, as a fandom existing largely in digital settings like message boards, possesses this kind of social ambiguity. That being said, it is a unique collision of social influences and expectations, and not just the presence of the Internet, that produces the discourse of friendship. On Equestria Daily and in Team Liquid’s MLP subgroup, users engage in conversations that stem from but also oppose other, more typical online social settings. Ultimately, the discourse of friendship gives bronies an unusual but effective set of tools with which to confront the problems they face both on- and off-line, and it does so in part by rejecting some of the most frequent patterns of traditional nerd behavior.

In her 2002 ethnography *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub*, Lori Kendall argues that participants in computer tech chat rooms often deploy the term "nerd" self-referentially to both subvert and reaffirm hegemonic masculine ideologies. "Nerds," she argues, are themselves "disqualified from a more hegemonic masculine identity"; nevertheless, they retain a "connection to a reconfiguration of middle-class male masculinity" that is very much compatible with hegemonic norms. This compatibility is particularly visible when male nerds in chat rooms adopt hegemonic rhetoric in discussing women, whom they conceive of as unattainable sexual fantasies or objects of desire (Kendall 2002, 82). While the language they employ is often self-mocking,
Kendall suggests that these linguistic maneuvers serve ultimately as a tool with which to "deflect the loss of masculinity connoted by the inability to get dates" (Kendall 2002, 84). Moreover, nerds still engage in rituals of dominance among one another. In the case Kendall examines, these usually involve programming skills; lacking them—or worse, incorrectly believing oneself to have them—is socially debilitating (Kendall 2002, 75). Similarly, Chad Parsons notes that players of the popular first-person shooter game Halo are well-advised to learn the relevant jargon—including terms like "noob," "pwnd," and "get owned"—because "speaking the language is evidence of experience and insider knowledge," a prerequisite of social membership (2007, 26). Thus nerd discourse operates against but also alongside hegemonic masculinity. Even as nerds refuse, or cannot attain, the traditional "macho" identity, they continue to find ways of asserting their own (gendered) dominance, thereby reaffirming heteronormative gender ideologies (Kendall 2002, 82).

[4.4] The discourse of friendship emerges from this tradition of nerdiness but does not always replicate it. For example, bronies articulate the "welcome to the herd" ethos in typically nerdy ways, such as posting memes on discussion boards in the style of 4chan, but the connotations of "welcome to the herd" constitute a break from the institutions of both hegemonic masculinity and traditional nerdiness (Robertson 2014, 27). The near-imperative of bringing others into the fold impacts not only how bronies interact with each other but also how they engage with the world at large. Many of the independent artists I interviewed at Trotcon rejected the brony label, not out of discomfort but because they simply did not see in themselves an appropriate level of devotion to the show or the community. Nevertheless, their stalls stood right next to those of the fandom's most well-known producers, and, more importantly, people who did call themselves bronies were just as enthusiastic about chatting with them and buying their work as about chatting with and buying the work of anyone else. One artist reported to me that, at non-brony conventions, attendees respond with hostility to signs of ignorance about the source text; by contrast, "no one questions your bronyness [at a brony convention]." During that conversation, a young man approached and, apologizing nervously for taking up the artist's time, confessed that he deeply appreciated her willingness to draw "anatomically correct and nonsexualized ponies" when so many better-known artists often fail to do so. While friendliness within fandoms is often expected, friendliness toward outsiders who are not interested in joining the community is less common. The discourse of friendship goes beyond brony-to-brony conversations to become something that bronies can also deploy in any number of other situations.

[4.5] One of the attractions of the discourse of friendship is that it gives bronies a way to adapt and thrive within an otherwise intimidating or inhospitable world. This can be seen in a range of situations, but I have observed it most frequently among individuals whose experiences with hegemonic and nerd masculinities were problematic for one reason or another. For example, a young man with the handle Scribble Mane told me that, when Friendship Is Magic debuted, he was twenty years old and spent twelve hours a day playing World of Warcraft in his parents' basement, the epitome (in his own telling) of a stereotypical, socially dysfunctional, unhappy nerd. As a child, he said, he was bullied, which he felt had driven him to close himself off from other people and from his own emotions—until, that is, Friendship Is Magic "snuck empathy back into [his] life." The show, he noted, is about learning to care for and stay connected to others, lessons that are addressed to younger audiences but that, it turns out, had ample resonance for him as well. Inspired by the experiences of Twilight Sparkle and her friends, he cut back on WoW
and started reaching out to other bronies. In place of gaming, he tried writing MLP fan fiction, a project he found so enjoyable and rewarding that eventually he produced an entire novel. His newfound passion ultimately led him to seek connections outside the fandom by enrolling in an honors creative writing program at a nearby university, from which he recently graduated.

[4.6] Scribble's case offers important insights into the discourse of friendship. Before discovering MLP, Scribble engaged in an archetypal nerd behavior—binging on *World of Warcraft*—and he did so in part to avoid a social world that he had come to fear. Becoming involved with MLP fandom was not merely a jump from one nerd hobby to another; it entailed a radical change in his conception of himself, his productivity, and his ability to relate to others. These shifts reflect a change in his ability to negotiate the pressures and expectations of nerdiness and hegemony; whereas childhood violence had conditioned him to remain hidden and anonymous, the discourse of friendship was a form of contradictory consciousness through which he could establish himself as an active and productive member of society.

[4.7] For many, MLP prompts a major disruption of even the sturdiest assumptions about masculinity. The case of Swagger Tail, a brony and former US Marine who served in Afghanistan, captures this very well. He told his story during a military brony panel at Trotcon, flanked on either side by other members and veterans of the US Armed Forces. Waiting stateside for his first deployment, he downloaded the second season of *Friendship Is Magic* to an external hard drive on a whim and then forgot about it. While overseas, he worked at a base as a data technician. Living in a war zone took an intense emotional toll on him, and for weeks he survived on two hours of sleep a day and a diet of "Power Bars and Powerade." After his staff officer called him "a disgrace to the Corps" for making a serious mistake with the base's computers, he despaired of his ability to make it through the rest of his deployment—until, on the long walk back to his bunk, he remembered the episodes of *Friendship Is Magic* he had stored on his hard drive. He started watching, and soon felt as though the show was "vomiting rainbows" all over his bleak surroundings. The episodes were happy and emotionally comforting, but he emphasized that they taught basic leadership skills that he, as a Marine, found highly applicable to his own situation. The trials that Twilight Sparkle undergoes in the Season 2 premiere, he said, mirrored his own: the way the villain Discord twists her friends into their respective antitheses was, for him, an analogue to what was happening to him and his fellow soldiers. He knew right away that "this was how [he] would get through" his tour. The discourse of friendship inspired him to reinvent himself as a soldier; embracing Twilight Sparkle as a mentor-figure and becoming a "military brony" was an unorthodox way of coping with war and the strains inherent in normative military masculinity.

[4.8] Swagger Tail's story is particularly striking because the dominant and local gender ideologies between which he found himself appear, at first glance, to be entirely incompatible, and yet, by bringing them together, he emerged from an excruciating ordeal in better physical and emotional shape than many of his companions. Whereas his failure to live up to his staff officer's military ideal threatened to undo him, the discovery of a non-idealized alternative invigorated him and, intriguingly, gave him a form of agency through which he could actually accomplish more as a soldier. Thus participation in MLP fandom is not, as some might speculate, an act of rebellion or an outright rejection of heteronormativity; in fact, it catalyzes bronies' involvement in a variety of longstanding social institutions just as it draws them deeper into the
adventures of Twilight Sparkle and company. But perhaps this is the underlying anxiety for those outsiders who find adults' fixation on cartoon horses perverse—that is, that by merging with and transforming patterns of dominance, the discourse of friendship can actually fill the roles traditionally held by hegemonic masculinity better than that hegemony itself.

[4.9] As troubling as brony-hood may be to some defenders of the status quo, its compatibility with external aspirations and values—a healthy and fulfilling social life, a successful career, the ability to lead oneself and others through a period of intense difficulty—makes it very appealing to those immersed in it. Whereas traditional nerdiness self-identifies as subordinated everywhere but in its area of specialization (Kendall 2002, 81), the discourse of friendship is self-empowering within and beyond MLP fandom. Thus it is not surprising to see the emergence of figures like the Manliest Brony, a large, bald, muscular fandom celebrity whose YouTube videos have achieved tremendous popularity within the community (Bronies 2013). The mere presence of the Manliest Brony affirms what is so distinctive about the fandom, namely, its capacity to unite dominant and local gender ideologies in diverse configurations of contradictory consciousness.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] As Woo notes, "In fan cultures, participants orient themselves to some object or set of objects" (2014, ¶8.5). In the brony community, they orient themselves to both material and textual cultures. Through productivity and consumption, bronies orient themselves to the source text, the television show Friendship Is Magic. In doing so, they reconsider themselves not only as members of the fandom, but as individuals within a system of complex and difficult gender expectations. Through exchanges at conventions and online, individuals constitute themselves as bronies and negotiate what being a part of the fandom means as they engage with the world at large.

[5.2] The brony community has an unusual capacity to bring together that which conventional wisdom dictates must remain separate, and in doing so it destabilizes the easiest assumptions about gender and catalyzes a potential for change within masculinity. The stories of Swagger Tail and Scribble Mane make this clear. In the former case, encountering the discourse of friendship inspired Swagger Tail to carve out an innovative place for himself as both a brony and a soldier during his tour overseas. For Scribble, MLP was a starting point for a full-scale reconfiguration of his aspirations and lived experience. There is an augmentative quality to the MLP fandom, one that can bring about changes even in the harshly enforced arena of men "do[ing] what they do to be men" (Gutmann 1996, 14). But really, this is just another way to say that the discourse of friendship does not define itself by suppressing tangential behaviors and aspirations; if anything, it more often defines itself by amplifying them.

[5.3] Situated between hegemonic masculinity and other nerd traditions while overlapping with and opposing both, the discourse of friendship offers new approaches to old problems. For both Scribble Mane and Swagger Tail, embracing MLP did not mean abandoning the daily practices they had known previously. Instead, it helped them enrich and balance those practices and to lead more fulfilling lives. The discourse of friendship reveals that hegemonic masculinity can, despite its privilege, be extremely limiting; that sometimes the real magic lies in practices not of dominance but of companionship.
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Valuing queer identity in Monster High doll fandom

Sara Mariel Austin

University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut, United States

Abstract—According to Mattel, Monster High dolls topped $500 million in annual sales in 2014, quickly gaining on Barbie, whose $1.3 billion in annual revenue plummeted for the fourth quarter in a row. Monster High’s recent ad campaign claims, "We are monsters. We are proud." Race, ethnicity, and disability are coded into the dolls as selling points. The allure of Monster High is, in part, that political identity and the celebration of difference become consumable. The female body, the racialized body, and the disabled body have long been coded as monstrous. Monster High reclaims this label, queering it. Using Jack Halberstam's work on children's culture and Richard Berger's and Rosalind Hanmer's work on fandom, this article explores the queer potential of Monster High. Fans rewrite the Mattel narrative through fan fiction, repainting the dolls, and embodying them through virtual avatars, makeup, and costume play. These fan practices both queer the dolls' identity politics and create communities of interest that act as safe spaces for expressing queer identity and generating fan activism. These fan practices have also influenced Mattel's branding of the dolls, specifically with the recent inclusion of activism campaigns such as WeStopHate and The Kind Campaign into the Monster High Webisodes and Web site. By exploring the queer politics of Monster High fandom, this paper explains how that queering generates social change.

Keywords—Children; Consumer; Fashion; Gender; Sexuality


1. Introduction

In 2007, Garrett Sander introduced Monster High to Mattel, just as MGA Entertainment's Bratz dolls gained momentum as Barbie's first real challenger for the hearts and dollars of little girls. Monster High functions as Mattel's answer to Bratz and includes all the elements that made the original Bratz dolls successful. As a member of one open access fan site explains in her introductory message, "I was amazed that a toyline fashion doll wasn't pale or light haired or ambiguously brown but someone I could read as a person of color AND she had rocket boots." Mattel markets the Monster High dolls as "freaky fabulous," celebrating their monstrous identities; but the fan culture that has grown up around the dolls queers their identity politics even further. Though queer identity can refer specifically to nonheterosexual desire, I use
the term more broadly to connote both a connection to queer theory as well as the
cultural valuing of any identity position outside of a hegemonic cis, heterosexual, able-bodied sexual or gender identity.

[1.2]  Monster High is a transmedia narrative that includes a collection of two-minute Webisodes, novels, 12 movies, dolls, an official Web site, and various other licensed merchandise. The franchise follows four friends who are the teen daughters of famous movie monsters: Frankenstein's monster, Dracula, the Mummy, and the Wolfman. These girls, along with a larger cast of teen monsters, attend high school together and navigate the trials of being a teen. Despite a first season with no clear direction and a host of bad monster-related puns, the current incarnation of the show promotes female friendship and body acceptance. The movies and many of the episodes feature the narrator, Frankie Stein, welcoming new students to Monster High while proclaiming that everyone should "love their freaky flaws." In addition to its body-positive message, Monster High is unique in that it is one of the first toy lines to commit financially to a transmedia narrative as marketing strategy.

[1.3]  As Henry Jenkins points out, transmedia storytelling lends itself to doll play. Jenkins's Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture (1992) defines the fan practice of textual poaching, derived from Michel de Certeau, as a form of appropriation that values the fan's own meaning of the text over that of the creators or producers (1992, 33–35). While Monster High fans could be described as poachers, Jenkins acknowledges the limitations of poaching as a model in reference to online spaces, since the Internet allows a broader range of textual interpretation and sharing via memes, videos, artwork, and so on. In Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide (2006), Jenkins explores Internet fandoms in more detail, specifically addressing transmedia storytelling and concluding that major publishers have yet to work out exactly what the boundaries of transmedia storytelling are and how it should be employed (2006, 167). Despite this lack of brand clarity, many fandoms, such as Star Wars and Monster High, use the licensed ephemera of transmedia storytelling, including soundtracks, costumes, and toys, as a way to generate their own narratives within online spaces (2006, 146).

[1.4]  Monster High's online presence, as well as its interactive characters, has helped build a large fan base, ranging from the target demographic of girls ages 10 to 14 to a perhaps expected audience of adult men and women. While the Hasbro property My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic also boasts a large adult male fandom, Monster High may be unique in its appeal to fans of multiple queer identities. Many fans self-report as queer on their own or in group social media sites. For example, one Monster High fan site includes a thread "Boys Club" that asks adult male fans to discuss their experiences within the fandom. Based on the self-reported data of the 15 men who
responded, three identify as straight, three as bisexual, one as asexual, and eight as gay. Gender binaries also break down here, as four of the men who responded are transmen. While there is no concise listing of female sexual or gender identity on the site, many female members do self-identify in various comment threads as lesbian, bisexual, asexual, or transgender. Ruth Deller (2015) explains that though fan practices surrounding sexual desire are ridiculed by those outside the community, sexuality and preferences, especially the preferences of female fans, are often criticized by members of the community as well. Since not all fan space is safe space, it is especially important that Monster High fans are able to be open about sexual identity and preference, both within the community and in more public online spaces.

[1.5] Rosalind Hanmer and Richard Berger have both asserted that the Internet opens up possible sites for queer identity and politics that can be mobilized through fandoms. Hanmer identifies fandoms as possible safe spaces for queer discourse. Her discussion of the Xenasubtexttalk (XSTT) forum concludes that women utilize the confidence they gain from both the empowering storylines of the show as well as the friendships made in the online forum to challenge hegemonic identity categories (Hanmer 2010, 156–57). Hanmer suggests that fandoms act as an ideal convergence point for queer online communities, since sexuality is not the primary focus of the group and one does not have to openly identify as queer to join. Berger echoes and expands on Hanmer, claiming that not only do fandoms create safe spaces online for queer identity, but also fandoms are essentially queer, enacting "subversion through play, rather than necessarily direct[ing] politics" (Berger 2010, 183). Mattel's Monster High line capitalizes on this subversion through play; fans must literally buy into Monster High to gain membership in the fan community, which then self-polices its boundaries and supports its members in both physical spaces such as comic cons and online spaces such as Tumblr, Wikia, and others. While many communities police their boundaries and the behavior of members, Monster High emphasizes the buy-in of fans rather than shaming as a primary means of regulation. By emphasizing fan buy-in, Monster High fandom generates welcoming online space, which in turn contributes to subversion through play and the queering the canon of cultural properties through fan fiction and slash fiction (Berger 2010, 177).

2. Methods

[2.1] Just as Berger suggests, fans rewrite the Mattel narrative through fan fiction, doll repaints, virtual avatars, makeup, and costume play. These fan practices both queer the dolls' identity politics and create communities of interest that act as safe spaces for expressing queer identity. These communities are loosely separated by age, but the practices of each group are similar and often overlap, creating a vibrant and socially active community. Writing from my position as a fan, I will identify general
trends in how fans are appropriating and queering Monster High, and how Mattel has responded to these fan practices. This essay will utilize teen and adult fan communities, since many online spaces require users be at least 13 years old. To investigate if Monster High fandom supports queer identity rather than if fans would express sexual identity in any password-protected or monitored community, the online conversations and art referenced here are only those openly available for public view and comment without joining a community or relinquishing anonymity. Though these communities might be interpreted as public spaces, written permission was obtained for the fan art used in the essay and pseudonyms are used to protect the artists' privacy.

[2.2] Fan studies can be celebratory of fan culture and the properties that generate fandom; thus, this article does not function as a critique of Mattel, but rather as an exploration of how Mattel's profit motive works with fandom to provide spaces for identity exploration and play. While I may be more laudatory of Mattel than some critics would expect, I hope to open a dialogue concerning both who Monster High is leaving out or misrepresenting and how the fan practice of buying in can function as exclusionary. Using Jack Halberstam's work on children's culture (Halberstam 2011), this article will discuss the queer politics of Monster High fandom, which opens up a space in popular culture to discuss monstrous identities, including the female body, the racialized body, the disabled body, and childhood sexual identity. Monster High attempts to reclaim the label of monster as "freaky fabulous," by telling consumers to "be proud of who you are" without directly challenging normative social assumptions about gender, race, and so forth. Monster High fandom queers the "monster" label within the tradition of fan activism outlined by Melissa M. Brough and Sangita Shresthova (2012), mobilizing around charitable causes and using popular culture to draw attention to humanitarian concerns such as bullying. Through this queering, online Monster High fan communities suggest that Monster High could become a flashpoint for social change.

[2.3] In volume 10 of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, entitled "Transformative Works and Fan Activism," Melissa M. Brough and Sangita Shresthova broadly define fan activism to include mobilization around charitable causes, the use of popular culture to draw attention to humanitarian concerns, and direct political action by fan groups (Brough and Shresthova 2012, ¶2.4–2.9). In their explanation, Brough and Shresthova discuss the role of fandoms in changing cultural narratives, and the usefulness of communities of interest in getting young people involved in political action. Brough and Shresthova also acknowledge that longevity is one of the main challenges of fan activism, since popular culture changes so rapidly (Brough and Shresthova 2012, ¶6.6). Monster High addresses this concern in part, since the nostalgia associated with children's culture slows the pace of cultural change, as do
the continued physical presence of toys and Mattel's periodic introduction of new characters and storylines. These new characters also illustrate how Mattel's product line and marketing are directly influenced by fans, expanding the cultural visibility and corporate acceptance of different types of bodies.

3. Monster as metaphor

[3.1] Making monstrosity a commodity is the founding principle behind Mattel's Monster High product line. Using catchphrases such as "be yourself. be unique. be a monster" and "embrace your freaky flaws," Mattel actively promotes the acceptance of bodily difference. Fans take this monstrous identity a step farther, using it as a starting point to access a queer identity politic. Intersections of identity have long been described by queer theorists such as Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Jack Halberstam in terms of fluidity—identity categories that leak and bleed into one another. These intersections of identity create a queer subject who does not fit into normative models of identity performance. Racialized or disabled subjects, nongender-conforming subjects, and subjects with alternative desires are all queer bodies. Kathryn Bond Stockton suggests that children are also queer subjects, since social convention constructs childhood as a space innocent of knowledge and sexuality, but real children cannot and do not occupy this space (Stockton 2009, 6). Jack Halberstam's work on animation explores this connection between children's culture and queer identity politics. According to Halberstam, identity categories in animation create "a new space for the imagining of alternatives" since "gender in these films is shifty and ambiguous," "sexualities are amorphous and polymorphous," "class is clearly marked in terms of labor and species diversity," and "bodily ability is quite often at issue" (Halberstam 2011, 47–48). According to Halberstam, only race is left unexplored in the animated movies. As an example of the queer potential of animation, Halberstam claims that Pixar's *Monsters Inc.* (2001):

[3.2] makes monstrosity into a commodity and imagines what happens when the child victim of monstrous bogeymen speaks back to her demons and in the process both scares them and creates bonds of affection, affiliation, identification, and desire between her and the monsters. This bond between child and monster...is unusual because it allows for the crossing of the divide between the fantasy world and the human world, but also because it imagines a girl child as the vehicle for the transgression of boundaries. The human-monster bond is queer in its reorganization of family and affinity. (Halberstam 2011, 44)

[3.3] In contrast to Pixar, Mattel does include a discussion of race by mapping these identities directly onto the teen characters in both character bios and through Monster
High movies like *Fright On!* that explore the racial tensions between werewolves and vampires. Mattel also encourages fans to appropriate, inhabit, and expand these identities through games, apps, virtual avatars, fan video contests, costumes, antibullying campaigns, and by the very nature of doll play itself.

[3.4] Monstrosity has long been bound up with sex, disability, and race. According to 16th-century texts like Martin Luther and Phillip Melancthon's pamphlet *Of Two Wonderful Popish Monsters* (1523) and Ambroise Pare's *Monsters and Prodigies* (1573), if a mother was overly sexual, sinful, or was frightened during pregnancy and had unholy thoughts, then the baby would be born monstrous (Davidson 2004, 97–101). Freud's "On the Sexual Theories of Children" (1975) describes women as already castrated, lacking the penis they desire and blaming their mothers for this deformity. In this way Western culture has described the female body and female sexuality as responsible for monstrosity. Naomi Wolf explains in *The Beauty Myth* that "Where women do not fit the Iron Maiden [societal expectations/assumptions about women's bodies], we are now being called monstrous, and the Iron Maiden is exactly that which no woman fits, or fits forever. A woman is being asked to feel like a monster now though she is whole and fully physically functional" (Wolf 1990, 228). Wolf's description links the female body to disability and monstrosity; a "whole" and "functional" female body is socially coded as disabled.

[3.5] Susan M. Schweik and Felicity Nussbaum explain that in a Western context, the white male body is the social ideal, and therefore women and nonwhites belong to "the category of the monstrous...[which] loosely refers to many varieties of unfamiliar beings" (Nussbaum 1997, 167). While Schweik discusses 20th-century America and Nussbaum 18th-century England, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson bridges this gap. Garland-Thomson describes the treatment of Sarah Saartjie Baartman, whose "monstrously" sexualized African body was exhibited all over Europe in the 19th century. After Baartman's death, her body was publicly dissected and her genitals, an example of monstrous African womanhood, excised for display in the Musée de l'Homme (they were not removed until 1974) (Garland-Thomson 1997, 72). Garland-Thomson explores the conflation of femininity and disability, showing how phallocentric authors, including Aristotle and Freud, see feminine identity as disability, but feminist scholars like Jane Flax turn this rhetoric on its head, asserting that sexism and women's social roles deform them (Garland-Thomson 1997, 19). Garland-Thomson links her work to that of Eve Sedgwick and hopes that disability studies will add to a "spectrum of identities," suggesting that sex, race, queer identity, and disability are all political identities to which an individual might lay claim, even if the larger social structure deems them monstrous (Garland-Thomson 1997, 22). Thus, while the contemporary Teratology Society (Greek for "study of monsters") does not blame mothers for birth defects, traveling freak shows have mostly disappeared, and
psychologists do not diagnose women with penis envy, the long tradition of labeling women's, nonwhite, and disabled bodies as monstrous has had a profound effect on Western cultural discourse surrounding bodies and identity.

[3.6] The cross-media narrative and queer politics of Monster High utilize children's culture to push the boundaries of discussions of identity within social media. Monster High fan culture has been integrated into existing social media spaces, including Wikia, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, LiveJournal, Deviant Art, Pinterest, FanFiction.net, and Archive of Our Own. Original domains such as Monster High Arena and Monster High Online also exist, creating a digital community of interest that acts as a space for promoting queer cultures and shifting public conversations about identity. Queer theorists Margaret Cooper and Kristina Dzara note that social media, specifically Facebook, offers an opportunity for those previously confined by geography to find support networks online and engage in discussions relating to LGBT issues. The "one-to-many" communication platform of social media, however, makes it almost impossible for users to completely control the image of themselves that social media projects. Cooper and Dzara give the example of a man who is not out online but joins a gay rights group on Facebook. All of his Facebook friends will get a notification that he has joined this group (Cooper and Dzara 2010, 105). Fandoms increase the safety of online communities, since they promise a shared interest with other users and often allow for more anonymity than Facebook.

[3.7] The combination of Internet communities and children's culture opens up space for younger fans to enter the discussion. As Halberstam notes, "A cynical reading of the world of animation will always return to the notion that difficult topics are raised and contained in children's films precisely so that they do not have to be discussed elsewhere and also so that the politics of rebellion can be cast as immature, pre-Oedipal, childish, foolish, fantastical, and rooted in a commitment to failure" (Halberstam 2011, 52). Grounding discussions of identity in children's culture also gives children purchase on the material basis for debates about identity. By celebrating monstrous embodied differences and allowing both adult and child fans a space to enact identity subversion through play, Monster High brings these discussions out into both the commercial discourse of media and marketing and the active discourses of play and fandom.

4. Monstrous bodies

[4.1] Market analysts and columnists such as Dominique Mosbergen (2013) from the Huffington Post have labeled Monster High "Goth Barbie"; but unlike Barbie or Bratz, Monster High incorporates character variation, disability, and narrative into the product line. Margaret Talbot's 2006 New Yorker article "Little Hotties: Barbie's New
Rivals" explains that while Barbie has been a mainstay of the toy market since her introduction in 1959 (the category "fashion doll" was created to describe her many imitators and competitors), Bratz dolls, introduced in 2005, captured 40 percent of the fashion-doll market share by 2006. That same year, Barbie accounted for 60 percent of the market (note 1). Though Mattel attempted to compete by introducing the My Scene Barbie, the close imitation of Bratz's style ignited a lawsuit. Even though Mattel lost the suit, MGA Entertainment was left drained of resources, unable to invest in Bratz and keep apace of the market. While Barbie may have exhibited more staying power than Bratz overall, the My Scene dolls lacked what Talbot identifies as the major draw of Bratz: "ethnically indeterminate...dark skin, almond eyes, and full lips" and "'sassy'—the toy industry's favored euphemism for sexy" clothing. Talbot's article quotes Naomi Wolf as saying, "If I were betting on culture as a form of stocks, I would get out of skinny Barbie and into multiethnic, imaginative Bratz dolls." Though black and Hispanic Barbie dolls were introduced in 1969 and 1980, respectively (Leonard 2009), the physical forms of the dolls support Talbot's and Wolf's analysis of Barbie as less ethnically diverse than Bratz.

[4.2] Until the release of the So In Style dolls in 2009, all Barbie dolls were designed with white features, with pigment added to the plastic to give the dolls darker skin tones denoting ethnicity. In contrast to both Barbie's one-size-fits-all and Bratz's "ethnically indeterminate" approaches, Monster High uses an individual face mold for each character and gives the dolls specific ethnic backgrounds, including Chinese, Jewish, Incan, and Tibetan. These ethnicities, however, are subsumed into the dolls' metaphor of monstrosity in ways that are sometimes clumsy or off-putting, such as Clawdeen, the African American Werewolf character with a Long Island accent, whose freaky flaw in Mattel's Web bio reads, "My hair is worthy of a shampoo commercial and that's just what grows on my legs. Plucking and shaving is definitely a full-time job, but that's a small price to pay for being scarily fabulous." The Monster High dolls are also thinner than Barbie or Bratz, with curved backs, small breasts, and splayed fingers and toes. The thinner bodies combined with short skirts and high heels have generated some concern that the dolls' monstrous bodies are too sexy and unrealistic. Monster High dolls, like Bratz, have detachable limbs. Bratz shoes were molded onto their feet so the whole foot had to be removed at the ankle to change the shoes.

[4.3] Mattel's commitment to the monster as a metaphor for ethnicity and gender can manifest itself in problematic ways. The ability to literally take apart the dolls to change their clothes (their arms pop off at the elbow, their hands at the wrist, their legs at the knee), suggests a fraught relationship between the female body and fashion. Yet it is worth noting that limbs, including those of the male characters, can also be swapped between dolls. Swapping body parts between dolls could encourage a uniform standard of female beauty, a sense that women are interchangeable, or the
idea that female bodies merely exist to be dressed and modified. However, Mattel's production of dollmaker toys such as the Create-A-Monster Design Lab that allows fans to draw on blank dolls, also suggests that interchangeable limbs could be another invitation for fans to personalize the dolls and play with bodies and body image. By making the dolls interchangeable, Mattel has created a line of toys in which all body parts are prosthetic and all embodied identity is mutable.

[4.4] Monster High is capitalizing on self-acceptance and difference and is changing its marketing strategy to reflect a fan base that embraces these narratives. Parents' activist Melissa Atkins Wardy met with Mattel in September 2012 to discuss the overall message of the dolls. Her blog describes a meeting with Mattel executives in which they listen and respond to concerns about both the sexualization of the dolls and their effectiveness as antibullying tools. Wardy concludes that the brand could "create something that is truly empowering to its young fans" (note 2). While Wardy's focus is only on the gendered aspects of the dolls, Mattel has demonstrated an investment in a range of visible embodied identities, including race and disability. Mattel's Web site describes Monster High's newest line, Freaky Fusion Hybrids, as "the frightful children of two completely different, completely creepy cool creatures!" One character, Bonita Femur, is "part Skeleton and part Moth but 100 percent monster!" The rhetoric of "100 percent monster" acknowledges the mixed-race status of these characters. In the Webisode "Happy Howlidays," character Sirena Von Boo explains that she knows very little about either her mermaid or ghost cultures because her parents were careful to "never to push one of their scaritages over the other." The diary that comes with the doll uses similar examples: "Today I had to stop at the ghostery store for my dad, and this little vampire was all like, 'Mommy, is that a ghoul, a ghost or a mermaid?!' (*cringe*) ...Sometimes I think if I was just one thing, I wouldn't feel so divided all the time. But which would I choose??" Sirena and the other Fusion monsters are cautious about attending Monster High because their racial status has made them outsiders. Mattel not only sells the Fusion movie and the Fusion dolls, but race-bent Fusion versions of the major Monster High characters as well. By adopting the fan practice of changing a character's race, Mattel both capitalizes on fan culture and introduces this disruptive fan practice to a larger and possibly younger audience.

[4.5] Another fan practice Mattel has adopted is the fan poll, soliciting votes at the 2011 San Diego Comic-Con and online in 2014. In each case, Mattel offered three possible characters and asked fans to choose one that would be made into a doll in the following year. While all three of the 2011 contenders (Scarah Screams, Headmistress Bloodgood, and Wydowna Spider) are now available as Toys R Us exclusives, the 2014 winner, Finnegan Wake, made his appearance in 2015. Interestingly, Finnegan Wake is a merperson who uses a wheelchair, adding to Monster High's growing list of embodied identity positions. Finnegan is arguably not the first Monster High doll with a disability.
The other male characters often require assistive devices. Gil Webber must wear a diving helmet containing water in order to breathe on land, and Deuce Gorgon wears glasses to prevent him turning passers-by into stone. Other male characters experience mental or psychological disability. The zombie Slowman "Slo Mo" Mortavich is coded as intellectually disabled (note 3), and Jackson Jekyll/Holt Hyde has a split personality, complete with blackouts. Though these representations of masculinity may seem socially inadequate, all of these characters are embraced by the other students and integrated into their social and romantic lives. Thus, male fans are also given the option to embrace their "freaky flaws."

[4.6] Since its launch in 2010, Monster High's marketing campaign has shifted away from fashion toward highlighting the diversity of the Monster High line and actively incorporating not only young girls but also boys and adult fans into marketing materials. The initial taglines for Monster High featured in commercials and on product boxes were "freaky just got fabulous" and "high school just got scary cool." As the brand evolved, these taglines changed to "Don't you want to be a monster too?," "Imperfect is totally perfect," and "We are Monster High." The new taglines both highlight what makes individual monsters different from each other and invites fans into the monster community. The "We are Monster High" campaign launched with two music videos produced by Mattel and featured on the Monster High Web site. One video features YouTube personality Madison Beer singing "We Are Monster High" with a complement of back-up dancers. The other video uses the same song, but includes a compilation of young fans, who appear to range in age from three or four to about 12, dancing to the song. Mattel conducted a contest to collect these videos and spliced them together into the version featured on the site. The fans who dance in this video are diverse in terms of gender, race, and nationality. The song featured in these videos includes the lyrics: "We are monsters, we are proud. We are monsters. Say it loud," "stay fierce forever," "perfectly imperfect," "we're drop dead gorgeous each and every day," and "friends like these will never die" (video 1). The "We are Monster High" campaign invites fans to embody monster characters or create characters that reflect themselves.
Video 1. Mattel's Web site hosts this compilation fan video made from contest entries in which fans dance to the Madison Beer song "We Are Monster High." Monster Videos, November 24, 2015.

5. Expanding the canon

[5.1] Even though the Monster High novels include one ambiguously queer character, Draculaura's uncle Vlad, none of the teen characters represent nongender-binary or nonheterosexual identities. Vlad is also not given a love interest, nor is his sexuality discussed in the novels. Fans do not concentrate on Vlad's sexuality, perhaps because he is a minor adult character who only appears in the novels. While Vlad may not be a popular choice, fan art does expand the Mattel narrative to challenge canonical depictions of race, gender, and sexual identity. One Tumblr user's blog dedicated to Monster High includes alternative sexualities and gender-bending such as original artwork of Holt Hyde as David Bowie or Sailor Moon, and Jackson Jekyll and Deuce Gorgon kissing (figures 1 and 2).
While fan art on Tumblr can change the visual narrative, repainting changes the actual bodies of the dolls, remaking them in the image of the individual fan's identity politics (figure 3).
Figure 3. Spectra Repaint as Beetlejuice. Evilunicorn97. DeviantArt, November 15, 2015. [View larger image.]

[5.3] Repainting involves artistically remaking the doll and can include painting the face, rerooting the hair, and making new clothes. Repainting allows fans to read race, sexuality, and disability onto the dolls in ways not authorized by Mattel, separating the dolls from corporate control. Yet the production of Monster Maker toys, and Mattel’s conversations with activists like Melissa Atkins Wardy, all suggest the company invites fan participation.

[5.4] In addition to changing the dolls’ identities, fandom queers the Monster High canon through shipping. Shipping is a way for artists to add sexuality to characters to include same-sex desire as well as heteronormative desire. The images ascribe an overt sexuality to the characters that Mattel avoids. Some fan artists cross Mattel properties by depicting Clawdeen Wolf from Monster High and Cerise Hood from Ever After High (another Mattel property that inhabits the same world as Monster High) together. The Clawdeen/Cerise ship is based on the girls’ shared identity as werewolves (figure 4).
Shipping also occurs in fan fiction. Stories that depict romantic relationships between same-sex characters are called slash fiction, referring to the fiction labeling that uses a slash between the character's names to denote a romantic pairing. Berger claims that slash fiction allows fans (mostly young women) to engage in a semi-public and "sexually explicit exploration of desire" in a safe environment that does not involve a partner and benefits from the relative anonymity of the Internet (Berger 2010, 181). Yet slash fiction is not the only way fan fiction can expand on a character's canonical identity.

Fan fiction also expands the narratives of identity formation by writing about the adult lives of the Monster High characters, and backstories of the characters and their parents. Though Monster High Yeti Abbey Bomidable is a major character in Web series, her background is rarely explored in the Mattel canon. Canonical Abbey does seem occasionally confused by Western concepts of gender norms, but identifies and performs as female. Fan fiction, however, expands Abbey's confusion into a genderqueer identity. The fan fiction novel Moon Ice, published on both Archive of Our Own and FanFiction.net, explores gender and sexuality as it tells the backstory of Abbey Bomidable. In the fan fiction novel, Yeti initiation ritual requires Abbey to kill a human. When she fails, her tribe casts her out and a human boy finds her. As she negotiates cultural difference, Abbey learns to construct gender within a specific cultural context. Because Yetis do not highlight gender difference, the humans interpret her as male. It is not until Abbey makes friends with another teen girl, learns "'girly' practices" (chapter 10), and removes her clothes (chapter 12) that the humans begin to figure out her biological sex. The novel's explanations of sex and parenting in Yeti communities also invert gender norms:

How did she explain that most Yetis were mainly attracted to those of their own gender and were encouraged to share a bed with those of the
same gender except when they must reproduce. Males and females did interact and often there was a bit of trouble here and there, but usually an unexpected child was discovered only after the babe had died from not having their father near them. (Silverbulletsdeath 2014, chapter 10)

[5.8] The fan fiction explains that Yetis are a warrior culture, and strict gender roles would be a waste of resources. Abbey is confused by the differing gender roles of humans and has to learn how to act like a girl, since the category of girl does not exist in her culture.

[5.9] Gender becomes a more pronounced cultural barrier in the fan fiction when the villagers want to get rid of Abbey because she is gender nonconforming; "'The yeti is male and yet he allows himself to be called Abbey,' said the human man... What was it with humans and their obsession with gender? 'More than that we've heard he's been picking up female habits. He is a deviant and worse still a threat to our women'" (chapter 12). When Abbey is revealed as female, the humans no longer see her sexuality as a threat, probably since Abbey is not represented as a reproductive body after she is separated from her tribe. The lack of possible mates and her age remove the threat of Abbey as mother. Instead, the humans question her sexual identity, since she refers to her mate as female. In this story, Yetis reproduce sexually, but their long-term partners can be of either sex. In other fan fiction, and to a lesser degree in Monster High canon, Abbey's reactions to gendered and sexual norms represent these categories as cultural constructions, opening a space for nonconforming fans to see themselves reflected and normalized in the expanded and queered Monster High narrative.

6. Role-playing monstrosity

[6.1] While fan art queers characters to reflect a variety of identity positions, fans may also choose to enact identity subversion through play, by embodying monster characters through costumes or virtual avatars. Monster High Wikis allow users to expand the canon by generating Original Characters (OCs). Users can then embody either OCs or canonical characters through a Roleplay tab. In online role-play, users chat with each other in real time or over a period of days or weeks. Embodying virtual monsters generates a safe space for fans to explore issues of gender and sexual identity. Users can interact with one another as a character until they are comfortable speaking as themselves. Wikis and fan forums also maintain a safe space by policing the boundaries of the sites through both formal and informal means.

[6.2] Though it may not offer the same support network as independent fan forums, MonsterHigh.com allows fans to role-play in a digital world of monsters, subverting a
connection between physical embodiment and gender identity. The Web site invites fans into the narrative of Monster High, in which the Maul, School, and Student Lounge sections of the site allow players to generate their own monster avatar and interact with other fans in the online space of the game by attending classes, shopping, and creating a digital scrapbook. Like independent forums, which use consumption as a form of informal policing, in all sections of the corporate site identity is constructed through both interaction and consumption. Fans can make themselves into digital monsters that can then buy digital clothes, or they can buy the toys to generate the same effect in the physical world. Mattel capitalizes directly on fan identity through advertising, and also benefits when independent fan forums require buying into the franchise as a cost of admission.

[6.3] While the Mattel and fan forums facilitate monstrous embodiment through virtual avatars, fans can also physically embody their favorite characters through role-play. Makeup and costume play attach the metaphor of the monster to material reality more firmly than even the dolls, since costume play (cosplay) connects the Monster High character to the physical bodies of fans. YouTube channels that focus on Monster High costume play police fan identity in the same way the wikis and forums do; the background of the videos often shows off the poster's Monster High collection, proving their fan credentials through buying in. Yet the comments sections of these videos suggest there is more at stake in identity subversion through play that connects to a physical body. While a majority of these comments are positive, outsiders, especially adults, may be critical of the identities these posts reflect, and so are often not welcome in the comment threads.

[6.4] Identity politics are a major source of contention even for the youngest fans, and questions of childhood sexual agency, race, class, and gender all surface in these discussions. Many adult commenters praise users for their creativity, but some adults or older teens question what is appropriate for children. The most common of these concerns center on agency and sexuality. On a YouTube channel devoted to Monster High cosplay, a young fan uses makeup tutorials as a way to connect to the fan community and her favorite characters; but for some viewers, a child using makeup is an issue of boundary crossing. Questions and comments such as "Hw old r u," "ur so young 2 wer make up by ur self☺☺☺☺," or "your just a kid what do u think ur doing" are common. Younger members of the community who self-report as nine, 10, or 11 years old immediately jump to the YouTube fan's defense with "also so what if it uses a lot of make up??? you sure didn't have to buy it for her, and it's not like it's a limited resource. ppl just look for things to be mad about," "Playing and having fun. That's what she's doing," "I hope this is a troll, if not, that's really sad..." "Shut up!! Know before u comment...she only uses if for tutorials," "ITS FANCY DRESS! did you never dress up as a kid? if so poor you. this kids creative and clever for her age, she'll go far
in life. probably further than you." The readiness of young users to defend the YouTube fan suggests a common concern about the limiting of childhood agency. As Deller explains by referencing Joli Jensen and Bethan Jones, "Fannish practices, particularly those of young and female fans, are often ridiculed by those outside of the community" (2015, ¶1.8). By proclaiming the YouTube fan's right to play with makeup, these young fans are pushing back against the attempts of those outside of Monster High fandom to regulate their behavior as well as the adult impulse that suggests young girls should not play with dolls that have short skirts and high heels. These young fans use the Monster High community to reject adult attempts to regulate child sexual identity and preserve the myth of the innocent child within public discourse.

[6.5] Community members also police the gender boundaries of the group as a way to shut down disapproving outsiders. Phrases like "are u a boy" and "why are even commenting on a girl video" are common insults in the comments. This policing around gender only happens when someone challenges the YouTube fan's right to make these videos. The assumed Monster High fan identity of a girl between the ages of six and 12 can be mobilized as a way to mark anyone who opposes the community as an outsider. Monster High is unique in that rather than deriding fans for acting like young girls (Deller 2015, ¶4.23), the fandom promotes young women as the fandom's ideal members. Oddly, this identity policing within the fan community opens a space for fans to explore various identity positions. The YouTube fan's right to use makeup to embody different monstrous characters transgresses boundaries of childhood sexual agency, disability, and race. The YouTube fan's commenters use assumptions about acceptable fan identity to bind the fan community and protect their right to play with these very identity categories, generating a potential for both subversion through play and direct activism.

7. Potential for fan activism

[7.1] Just as Mattel and the fan community both require a monetary buying into the Monster High narrative, both groups also support activism as described by Brough and Shresthova. In much the same way Hasbro incorporates fan characters into the canon of the shows and comics of My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic, Monster High utilizes canon to promote fan activism. Mattel teamed up with the Kind Campaign to produce an antibullying Webisode called "Kind: The Shockumentary" and with WeStopHate for an episode of the same name. The antibullying message of these episodes is aimed at body shaming and young girls, but could also apply more broadly to an acceptance of difference in gender and sexual identity. Though this corporate activism has been limited to publicity and small donations to the groups, Mattel seems devoted to promoting philanthropy directed by young girls. Besides inviting young fans to
participate in activism and focusing on an antibullying message, Monster High is generating fan conversations around identity politics that question social norms.

[7.2] Mattel's purpose may have been to colonize issues of identity to generate profit, but by bringing queer bodies into popular culture, Monster High gives fans both an anchor text and a supportive community to begin questioning social constructions of identity. Fan authors and artists use Monster High as a source text to deal with race, gender, disability, and sexuality as social constructions. Fans extend the existing narratives, but they remain true to the canonical character traits by maintaining the personalities and monstrous metaphor of the characters that Mattel has written into the official novels and Webisodes. The discussions of race, sexuality, and disability are merely extensions of threads already present in the Mattel Webisodes and other media. Even when fans further queer Monster High characters, these stories fit within the established Mattel universe. Though the current Web series does not include any characters with alternate sexualities or gender expressions, the novels do include the background character of Vlad, and such a character would easily fit into the Web series. Since Mattel is currently adding more racially diverse characters and characters with visible disabilities, queer characters cannot be far behind. In fact, many fans have already taken to YouTube and Tumblr to request Mattel produce such a doll.

8. Conclusion

[8.1] Through both its product narratives and active fan culture, Monster High reappropriates negative labels like "freaky," "flawed," and "monster" as desirable queer identities. While the Monster High narrative is certainly flawed (presenting teen girls as fashion-obsessed, reifying the feminine beauty ideal as skinny with long hair, absenting queer or genderqueer characters, etc.), by playing on "monstrous" identity, Mattel invites a queer reading of the dolls, a reading taken up and expanded on by fans around the world that promotes queer visibility and activism online and in popular and children's culture. The requirement to buy into the Monster High line may be exclusionary for some fans, yet the profitability of toys like those of Monster High demonstrates the buying power of marginalized identity groups, including children. If Monster High continues to be a dominant force in both sales and fandom, perhaps this economic power will lead to an increased political voice for these same marginalized identity groups.

9. Notes

1. Pesce (2014) notes, "Barbie is still America's top-selling doll, but her market share dwindled to just 19.6% last year, down from 25% in 2010...Barbie's biggest
competition comes from her own company, Mattel, which also produces the "Frozen," Monster High and Ever After High dolls.


3. In addition to Slo Mo's speech and body language, several specific episodes suggest that zombies generally, and Slo Mo in particular, are intellectually disabled. "Flowers for Slo Mo" depicts the title character using an amulet to make himself smarter, only to realize he was happier before. "Dodgeskull" shows all of the zombies being picked on because they are physically and mentally "slow." "Student Disembodied President" shows Slo Mo becoming school president to stand up for the frequently bullied zombies.

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Performing as video game players in Let's Plays

Josef Nguyen

University of Texas at Dallas, Dallas, Texas, United States

[0.1] Abstract—This article examines the fan practice of Let's Plays—video recordings that video game players create of themselves playing that include live commentary or riffing. I argue that the riffing accompanying game play footage in Let's Plays highlights how players play idiosyncratically by constructing and performing game-playing personalities. These videos emphasize the performative nature of video game players as fans who actively negotiate with the video games that they play through presentations of individual playing styles and experiences. I show that in accounting for how and why they play the way that they do, Let's Players demonstrate what I suggest are various modes of playing in which players can engage with video games generally. Consequently, creating, sharing, and discussing Let's Plays can render visible a wider diversity of game-playing identities, experiences, and styles.

[0.2] Keywords—Fandom; Performance; Riffing


1. Introduction

[1.1] Let's Plays are videos that fans create of themselves playing video games, coupling game play footage with simultaneously recorded commentary by the Let's Players. While it may include nested video of the Let's Players, this predominantly audio commentary enables Let's Players to remark on game features, share thoughts, and express emotional reactions during game play. These videos as showcases of games and game playing are often available on user-generated content-sharing sites such as YouTube and on streaming platforms like Twitch. Game designer Lucas Pope, for one, credits the creation of Let's Plays of his game Papers, Please (2013) for its success (quoted in Cullen 2014).

[1.2] In this article, I show that Let's Plays demonstrate how players perform processes of meaning-making with video games while they play. Let's Plays stake claims in the interpretation of cultural texts and media, as Let's Players offer their individualized experiences of playing for circulation, consumption, and discussion by
fan communities. I argue that through live commentary, known as riffing, Let's Plays highlight the performative nature of video game players more broadly, showcasing audiencehood as a performance in itself. Understanding how players make sense of game playing through performing personalities, in both their performance as distinct individuals who play video games and in sharing those performances, offers an important opportunity for understanding how players locally and individually negotiate, revise, and make meaning about playing video games. Moreover, I assert that in accounting for how and why they play the way they do, Let's Players highlight what I suggest are various modes of playing in which players can engage through interacting with video games.

[1.3] I explore the formal features of Let's Plays, situating them within a larger context of fandom and fan practices. Drawing on work in fan studies, video game studies, and performance studies, I theorize the significance of riffing for Let's Plays in the construction of liveness that I argue is central to the individualized performances of video game player personalities. While I make brief references and offer examples of several Let's Plays throughout, I conclude my analysis with a close investigation of a specific Let's Play to outline the expressive and critical potential that Let's Plays offer video game fans. Let's Plays render visible a wider range of game playing for fans to perform, circulate, and discuss and, by extension, offer a wider range of ways to make meaning from video games and game playing.

2. Video game fandom and fan productions

[2.1] Research on Let's Plays has only appeared in the last few years as such videos have increased in visibility and popularity. Often, studies of Let's Plays examine them as indexes to players' lives beyond video games. For example, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, Michael Waltmathe, and Xenia Zeiler (2014) explore players' relationships to religion by analyzing player responses to religious game content. While not using the term explicitly, Hector Postigo's (2016) account of video game commentating focuses on how game commentators can monetize their game playing as digital labor. Peter A. Smith and Alicia D. Sanchez (2015) explore how Let's Plays and other online media suggest shifts in digital literacies and learning for consumers. Examining Let's Plays more formally, René Glas (2015) connects these fan videos to the history of early film to theorize the "vicarious play" offered to viewers, while Gabriel Menotti (2014) and Niklas Nylund (2015) both explore how Let's Plays can preserve video games and the contexts for game playing. Rather than focus on what Let's Plays reveal about players' lives or about the relationship between Let's Players and viewers, however, my aim is to examine the formal features and capacities of Let's Plays as they present performances of video game player personalities.
Radde-Antweiler, Waltmathe, and Zeiler note two key features of Let's Plays. First, Let's Plays allow Let's Players to create and disseminate a localized and particular instance of video game playing (2014, 17). The rise of Internet-celebrity Let's Players, including PewDiePie, GameGrumps, and the Yogscast, demonstrates a growing popularity of Let's Plays as performances of individual game players playing games. Postigo's study of video game commentating, for example, shows that such videos are not only about the games being played but also about how specific players play them (2014). Let's Plays often provide one vehicle for these Internet figures to showcase their personalities, since their channels might include reviews of games, original comedy sketches, and alternate kinds of content. Game Grumps, for example, is a group of Let's Players who play a range of newer and older video game titles. The main duo forming Game Grumps, known as Egoraptor and Danny, define their personalities in relation to being "gruff." In addition to videos of game play in varying degrees of "gruffness," such as a Let's Play of Pokémon: FireRed (2004) (video 1), the Game Grumps' YouTube channel also includes original comedic commercials for merchandising related to their Let's Plays and other channel content, which they note as part of their "reputation for making the stupidest commercials ever" (video 2).

Second, Let's Plays enable conversations among a community of video game players and Let's Play watchers about opinions and interpretations of not only the video game played but also the Let's Plays, the Let's Players, and the playing experiences of those watching (Radde-Antweiler, Waltmathe, and Zeiler 2014, 17). Let's Plays grant game players occasion to discuss games, gaming cultures, and gaming experiences through presenting individualized video game playing to consume. Critical work in fan studies demonstrates how audiences actively engage with the media that they encounter (Jenkins 1992; Lewis 1992; Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005; Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007; Larsen and Zubernis 2012; Standfill and Condis 2014). Fan productions, such as Let's Plays, highlight the various ways that fans stake and circulate claims to participate in meaning-making practices surrounding cultural texts, objects, and phenomena. Henry Jenkins (1992), for example, demonstrates how fans draw or "poach" from mainstream television to create original works, including stories, videos, and songs. Jenkins argues that textual poaching reveals specific modes of reception, interpretation, and production practices among fan cultures (1992, 1–2).

Similarly, John Fiske (1992) outlines textual productivity as a key category of fan creation. In addition to semiotic and enunciative productivity, which describe individually internal and socially external constructions of meaning-making, respectively, textual productivity accounts for fans generating texts, performances, and artifacts inspired by the media they consume (Fiske 1992, 37–39). Examples of textual productivity include fan fictions, fan videos, cosplay, and other circulatable creations. Through textual productivity, fans also perform the roles of author, director, costumer, musician, and other creators in their encounters with media. Matt Hills (2013), however, notes how Fiske's categories, which are drawn from pre-Web fan
practices, become difficult to distinguish with increasing use of Web-based authoring and publication technologies. In particular, Hills argues that attention to the many kinds of expertise necessary to account for the range of digital fan productions—from videos and fan fictions to comments and status updates—demonstrates how "digital fandom collapses semiotic and enunciative productivity into hybridized or generalized textual productivity" (2013, 150).

[2.5] In Stuart Hall's (1980) model of media consumption, he suggests three different ways that audiences actively make meaning from the texts that they consume. While even he has later clarified that his model was not meant to present a grand theory (1994), Hall's articulation of dominant, oppositional, and negotiated modes of reading offers a heuristic describing how audiences can make meaning through a range of dispositions that they may shift among in their encounters with media texts. For example, to read under the ideology of a media artifact and its systems of production is to read in the dominant mode (Hall 1980, 132). Dominant ideologies in video games, in particular, dictate the contours of legitimate and illegitimate games, players, and playing styles (Sicart 2003). Video games present ideologies through a complex of rules coded in the hardware and software that reward and punish player behaviors and through social conventions from surrounding gaming cultures, which are also called the hegemony of play or the values at play (Fron et al. 2007; Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014). All of these elements in and around video games posit an implied player, drawing on Wolfgang Iser's (1981) concept of the implied reader (Aarseth 2007; Iversen 2012). The implied player is the kind of player, or kinds of players, that the video game as well as the gaming cultures in which it is embedded suggest is necessary for playing (Iversen 2012).

[2.6] Rarely, however, do players—and consumers of media generally—align perfectly with implied audiences, since attention to fan productions demonstrates ways in which audiences oppose and negotiate with dominant codes while consuming media. In contrast to the dominant mode, resisting the ideologies of media artifacts and their systems of production involves identifying the dominant codes at play. Hall defines this mode of reading as oppositional, where the reader "detotalizes the message in the preferred code" to reject it and reveal how it operates (1980, 137–38). Oppositional readings identify and critique the dominant code, which Anita Sarkeessian's Tropes vs. Women in Video Games, for example, does both to video game representations and to dominant misogynistic gaming cultures (video 3). Sarkeessian launched Tropes vs. Women in Video Games during the summer of 2012 as a crowd-funded project on Kickstarter for a documentary web series to provide feminist commentary identifying, critiquing, and opposing the degrading representations of women, people of color, and other marginalized figures in video games (2012) (for more discussion of gender and video games, see Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Kennedy 2002; Nakamura and Wirman
The intention of Sarkeesian's project, like all oppositional readings, was not only to say something critical about media but also to say something that would stop its propagation. But as the caustic responses to Sarkeesian's project show, oppositional readings may meet hostility from those supportive of the dominant framework (Moore 2012).

To the dominant mode and the oppositional mode of reading, Hall articulates an alternative option. According to Hall, the negotiated mode lies in between these two extremes, suggesting a wider range of possibilities for how audiences make meaning from the media they encounter (1980, 137). In negotiated readings, audiences accept and reject select elements of a cultural text, a process that enables more nuanced and particularized media consumption. Fan productions often fall into the negotiated mode, because they operate as fan-created supplemental material that implicitly or explicitly suggests that the originary media is lacking even while consuming it. In her study of *The Sims 2* (2004), for instance, Hanna Wirman describes how the female Finnish players whom she interviewed created custom content, drawing on more local brands and icons such as textiles and patterns from Marimekko and Moomin, to negotiate "the game's 'Western,' if not North-American, white suburban lifestyle" into one more Finnish (2014, 62).

While other fan productions seek to negotiate the dominant codes in the meaning of video game playing, Let's Plays do so by emphasizing individualized performances of playing through live commentary. Custom maps, levels, and modifications to the game code—or mods—for example, open up video games to

**Video 3.** "Damsel in Distress: Part 1—Tropes vs Women in Video Games" by feministfrequency, March 7, 2013.

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alternate ways to play but do so by directly changing and augmenting the video game platform. (For a further discussion of modding, see Kücklich 2005; Postigo 2007; Sotamaa 2007; Postigo 2010; Scacchi 2010; Sihvonen 2011; Lauteria 2012). Let's Plays do not require such modifications, though Let's Plays of mods to games are common. The British Let's Play group Yogscast, for example, recorded a Let's Play demonstrating a Pokémon-themed mod called PokeMobs for the massively popular video game *Minecraft* (2009) (video 4) (note 1).

**Video 4.** "Minecraft—Mod Spotlight—Pokemobs" by YOGSCAST Lewis & Simon, August 20, 2011.

[2.9] Let's Plays share similarities with machinima as both contain video footage recorded from playing; however, fans create machinima by repurposing recordings from video games to create original cinematic productions (Lowood 2008, 165). Machinima focuses on video games as generators of computer animation, often for use in original fictional narratives (Menotti 2014, 84) (for more on machinima, see Hanson 2004; Lowood and Nitsche 2011; Johnson and Pettit 2012; Ng 2013). Like Let's Plays, walkthroughs focus centrally on playing; however, walkthroughs are typically crafted as guides detailing how players should play video games (Consalvo 2003, 327–28) (for further discussion of walkthroughs, see Ashton and Newman 2010, 2011; Newman 2011). While walkthroughs are often instructional materials emphasizing expertise and thoroughness, which some Let's Plays also provide, Let's Plays often feature uncertainty and error as central to individual playing experiences. Through expressions of confusion, frustration, delight, surprise, and embarrassment, Let's Players react to and comment on not only the game but also their actions and consequences in playing.
Let's Plays value personality over mastery, although demonstrations of mastery might serve to construct a Let's Player's personality. In a Let's Play of *Kirby’s Dream Course* (1994), for example, the Game Grumps remark on the difficulty of this Kirby-themed golf-like game as player competence becomes a central topic of discussion during the act of playing (video 5). In another example, two other members of the Game Grumps channel, Barry and Ross who form Grumpcade, play the drawing game *Pokémon Art Academy* (2014) by revising the demands of the game to suit their own playing styles (video 6). Instead of complying with the expectations of the game to draw the frog Pokémon Froakie, the Let's Players impishly draw and joke about the title character of the animated television show *Hey, Arnold!* (1996–2004). What is critical to Let's Plays is the simultaneous commentary offered by Let's Players during an individual instance of playing—expert, exploratory, or otherwise—that fans can then consume and discuss.

**Video 5.** "Kirby's Dream Course: Arin Immediately Hates Dan—PART 1—Game Grumps VS" by GameGrumps, April 4, 2014.
3. Riffing live

[3.1] Audience reception is always performative (Bennet and Booth 2015). For example, Hills argues that discussions about the television show *The X-Files* (1993–2002) in the alt.tv.x-Files newsgroup demonstrate how fans construct themselves in "a mediated and textual performance of audiencehood" (2002, 181). Although performances of fan consumption manifest in a range of fan productions, the different media used for textual production function on different temporal relations between fan consumption and production. For example, in Jenkins's study of *Survivor* (2000–), online fans of the American reality television show perform as collective investigators who engage in forum discussions to predict how the season will unfold (2006, 25–26). These textual traces record how fans discuss the show after viewing an episode by identifying clues, debating causal links, and revising their own theories.

[3.2] Let's Plays rely on construction of simultaneity of both fan consumption of video games and fan production about video games, as Let's Players record both playing and commenting. This simultaneity allows Let's Players to perform extemporaneous narration of individual experiences of playing. While Radde-Antweiler, Walmathe, and Zeiler write that "Let's Plays present an individual's subjective experience of a game," their description assumes that Let's Plays offer transparent and direct presentations of player interiority (2014, 17). Instead, I contend that Let's Plays as recordings of video game playing do not offer subjective experiences but rather constructions and performances of playing personalities.
Rather than limit conceptions of game performance to in-game presentations of self or virtual avatars, Let's Plays demonstrate how video game playing should be understood as localized and embodied performances where players execute the role of video game players. Garry Crawford and Jason Rutter, for instance, assert that it is important to understand "gaming performance within a wider social, cultural, and media audience framework" beyond the boundaries of the virtual game world (2007, 276). Regarding video games in particular, Wirman (2009) argues for nuancing what constitutes the range of productivity for fandom beyond textual productions, since players are always producers even in but also beyond their acts of playing. This oversight that Wirman identifies reinforces Peggy Phelan's argument about the ephemeral and disappearing nature of performance (Phelan 1993, 146). Regarding this issue, Nylund (2015) suggests that Let's Plays, along with walkthroughs, can preserve contexts of game playing. If video game playing is performance, and performance always disappears without a record of it, then Let's Plays offer an index to the productivity of game playing as a record of that performance.

Let's Play commentary presents players narrating their thoughts, strategies, ideas, and reactions live as the game play unfolds or is believed to be unfolding, since liveness is constructed. As Philip Auslander argues, liveness often opposes mediatized performances, defined as products of recording and reproduction technologies (2008, 5). Liveness is always a contextual phenomenon produced through constructions of "intimacy and immediacy" (Auslander 2008, 32). In his study of rock music, for example, Auslander argues that the focus on live concert events allows rock musicians to construct the authenticity of their talents by contrasting them to the mediatized studio and radio recordings of popular music to value what is considered performed live over what is previously recorded (2008, 65).

The liveness of Let's Plays seeks to shape specific understandings of authentic and inauthentic game-playing experiences, player personalities, and meaning-making. Although it can be fabricated to appear as such, the commentary part and parcel to the video footage of game play is constructed as recorded live alongside the act of playing, suggesting that the commentary, reactions, and jokes are spontaneous and unscripted. Perceptions of the commentary as spontaneous and unscripted rely on assumptions that responses produced after the experience of playing, such as written comments, are less authentic and more calculated. Even audiovisual commentary that discusses previously recorded game play footage lacks this construction of immediacy to the experience of video game playing that Let's Plays purport to present. Rather than reflecting back on the experience of playing, Let's Play commentary presents players as reacting to playing live.
Live commentary is also known as riffing—comments made by viewers about a text while consuming that text (note 2). For instance, by commenting on a film's plot, its similarities to other cultural touchstones, and even the scene of viewing, filmgoers can construct their own more expansive version of the meaning of the films that they watch. As Ora McWilliams and Joshua Richardson argue, riffing "is always a grab for ownership, a vital tool in the struggle for the meaning of texts" through producing new material out of audience consumption of media (2011, 118). For Let's Plays, the concurrence of the riff with the playing of a video game constructs the media encounter as live, and it is this liveness that engenders the riff's power to perform the construction of subjective audiencehood.

Let's Plays emphasize the constructed performance of live, spontaneous, and authentic subjective experiences through riffs showcasing a range of feelings and responses by video game players as they performatively make meaning of game play. Instead of focusing exclusively on presenting mastery, Let's Players often mobilize their mistakes, discoveries, and surprises as significant opportunities for performing their individual personalities through expressive reactions and thoughts. For example, the Let's Player Markiplier is famous for an aggressively loud style of reacting, which he demonstrates in playing mostly survival-horror and action games like Nightmare House 2 (2010) (video 7). In his videos, Markiplier plays these tense, creepy, and violent games by vacillating between reacting confidently and methodically and reacting tensely and skittishly. The performance of surprise and fear when contrasted to his more prominently calmer playing style works to construct the commentary and attendant playing as authentic and unscripted.

Because Let's Plays present performances of individualized experiences of playing, they showcase how fans can engage in idiosyncratic processes of learning, experimenting with, and adapting to video games. As discussed earlier, however, it is important to recognize the performative nature of these reactions rather than assume that their constructed liveness authenticates Let's Player actions and thoughts as transparent. Through their riffing commentary, Let's Players mark their individual reactions, strategies, playing styles, and experiences as important in the meaning of the video games that they play.

4. Making meaning of playing

Key to riffing is the attention of audiences to their role as such, recognizing it as performance and production, since audiences can riff on the contents, forms, and contexts of the media that they encounter. As Beth E. Bonstetter contends regarding film riffing, for example, riffing requires audiences to understand media conventions, popular and political history, and personal reactions and responses as tools "for remaking a closed film into an open, new, meaningful experience" (2012, 103). Riffing suggests the ways in which viewers of films recognize their dual capacities as theatergoers and onlookers, terms coined by Erving Goffman to describe the dynamics of theater spectatorship. For Goffman, the theatergoer is aware of the construction of the fantasy, the drama, while the onlooker is an accomplice in the act of role-playing presented (1974, 130). To watch a drama purely as an onlooker is, in part, to subscribe to the dominant code. Spectators, however, are never fully one or the other but are always oscillating between onlooker and theatergoer, capable of producing criticism not only on the internal diegetic narrative—characters and causal trajectories, for example—but also external references to other media and to the viewing context itself.

A key site for shaping meaning in video games is attention to how players play and make choices in video games (note 3). Consequently, player input and decisions as well as their consequences afford central topics for riffing. Like Goffman's model of theater spectatorship, we can identify a related refraction of roles with video game playing. Where players participate under the ideology of a video game or cultural expectations for its consumption, within its rules and codes like an implied player, we can recognize players playing through the dominant mode. Where players resist or negotiate against the goals of the game or of the gaming cultures in which the game is embedded—through such acts as trying to discover the game's limits or to break the game or even refusing to play—we recognize players playing while aware of dominant codes. As such, another way to negotiate the meaning of video games is not through modes of reading but through modes of playing.
Cornel Sandvoss, however, reminds us that while "fandom can be subversive" it need not be (2005, 29, emphasis in original). While I argue that examining Let's Plays as a form of fan production reveals how fans negotiate the meaning of video games through performances of player personalities, it does not suggest that Let's Plays are innocent in reinforcing hegemonic codes and ideologies of games, gaming cultures, and popular culture more broadly. As the *Let's Play Social Justice* blog demonstrates, many prominent Let's Players, whom the site seeks to critique, repeat the misogynist, homophobic, and racist comments that reinforce dominant conceptions of gaming cultures and game industries as oppositional to marginalized, peripheral, and undervalued players and experiences of playing (*letsplaysocialjustice* n.d.). PewDiePie, for example, has been criticized for his frequent use of jokes involving rape, which trivializes the experiences of victims of sexual violence (note 4). Such marginalized identities and players represent what Adrienne Shaw (2014) refers to as players at the edge of mainstream gaming cultures.

By recognizing the negotiated potential housed in Let's Plays and other similar fan productions, however, we can expand the meaning-making possibilities of mainstream video games and video game play through increased creation, circulation, and discussion of alternate experiences, styles, and intentions of playing. In the introductory video for his Let's Play channel, for example, AngelArts articulates explicitly that he plays and approaches video games from the position of a gay male player (video 8). As Mia Consalvo argues, we need to recognize and study how video game players perform "different ways of playing and enjoying games" because "player agency is central to understanding games as well as the development of the wider game industry" (2007, 2). Part of this research requires understanding how different players from a diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and positions experience the video games that they play. Suzanne de Castell and Mary Bryson similarly assert the importance of fracturing, fragmenting, and dispersing differences in video games rather than attempting to consolidate representations and experiences of gender and, by extension, other identity categories (1998, 254).
I turn now to a specific Let's Play to show how, as in Hall's modes of reading, we might identify modes of playing in dominant, oppositional, and negotiated valences by examining riffs describing different engagements with video game rules. This analysis is not meant to be exhaustive of all Let's Plays but rather to illustrate the potential for negotiating the rules and codes that shape cultural expectations, discussions, and productions of video games and game playing. My aim is to describe, like modes of reading, the potential housed in various modes of playing available to players for widening the visibility of game-playing experiences and to advocate for the creation and circulation of more fan productions that do so.

For this analysis, I have chosen a Let's Play of DUALHAZE's indie game *Date the Boss* (2014), a point-and-click adventure and puzzle game following a young male protagonist who must obtain a job and affection from his potential female employer, Alicia Beaumont. The Let's Play features a pair of female video game players and commentators named Stacy and Mari who go by Geek Remix (video 9). Stacy and Mari, in this Let's Play, perform as video game players interested in both completing the game and making fun of the game as one that objectifies women. In this way, Stacy and Mari are playing a heterosexual-male-targeted game through counter-playing, what Nakamura and Wirman describe as a style of playing that identifies and negotiates with the rules, expectations, and logics of a video game to suit players' preferences (2005). During the early part of this Let's Play, Stacy refers back to a previous Geek Remix video, noting that "some of you [their viewers] may have seen the shorter—short—video that we did to take a look at this [game] a couple months ago. We decided to come back, because this seems to be the highest quality of all the boob games." Her ironic marking of *Date the Boss* as "the highest quality of all the
boob games” underscores the many registers to which "boob games" refers: games about boobs (breasts and women), games for boobs (idiots), and games made by boobs (idiots).

2 Girls 1 Let's Play DATE THE BOSS full walkthrough: Satanic Les...


[4.7] As the two Let's Players proceed through the game, they each read dialog aloud in different voices to participate in the dramatic performance of the virtual game world. Stacy reminds their audience, however, that "at a certain point, like every other game, we kinda forget which accents we assign to each character, so the voices change every time." This riff indexing previous performances by the Let's Players not only highlights their performance history but also demonstrates how Geek Remix incorporates a video game not explicitly designed for them by producing individualized performances around that very exclusion, especially in the failures of their own voice acting. As Mari declares, "There'll be funny voices and boobs for everybody" where the veracity of "boobs for everybody" is what they investigate.

[4.8] We can identify Mari and Stacy's commitment to completing the game as participating in the dominant mode of playing, to comply with the demands and rules of the game uncritically. As an example, that they must purchase the various items they need in the game, such as a business suit, is not initially questioned, so Mari and Stacy go about various options provided in the game for obtaining money, including monotonously gambling at a slot machine. The dominant mode of playing, then, requires completing the tasks of the game as a compliant implied player. To play under the dominant mode is to obey the rules and codes, akin to how Bernard Suits defines the player of a game in its most earnest form (1978, 47).
In contrast, we can articulate the oppositional mode of playing as refusing to play or participate in the fantasy of the game by drawing attention to its rules and construction. Consequently, Suits's characterization of the spoilsport as one who denies the validity of the game, its rules, and its goals aligns with this oppositional mode (1978, 47). Because Mari and Stacy are committed to completing the game, they do not offer instances of the oppositional mode of playing. As a potential example elsewhere, however, we can draw from Nakamura and Wirman's proposal for counter-playing tactics, including the potential embracing of nonviolence as one such playing style (2005). In a video game that values violence such as a war game, for instance, such a counter-playing style refuses the explicit rules and expectations set by the game. This conscious refusal, however, should not be confused with a mistaken or erroneous strategy, since this counter-playing demonstrates not only an awareness of the rules but a commitment to its opposition at the expense of winning.

Instead, we can see Mari and Stacy offer instances of negotiated playing throughout their Let's Play. For example, while interviewing with Alicia, the potential boss and love interest, the Let's Players are asked for the capital of Kenya amid a barrage of trivia questions irrelevant to the specific position being hired. Mari proceeds to address Stacy and the viewers by saying, "Stacy, look this up. Hold on, Guys. We're gonna cheat real quick." The Let's Players advance in the game by looking up answers to the trivia questions, explicitly framing this as cheating—opposed to the rules of the game but without denying the game's existence. After additional cheating, Stacy laughingly declares that the game is "gonna think we're a fucking genius, but we're googling everything," poking fun at the ease by which players can bypass this challenge. Rather than only pointing out the arbitrariness of this game element or complying with the game's rules, Mari and Stacy allow the game to continue operating but by taking advantage of resources beyond the game's scope. In this way, we can associate one operating under the negotiated mode of playing with Suits's articulation of the cheater, who recognizes the goals of the game but not all the logics of its rules (1978, 46–47) (note 5).

The negotiated mode of playing, like all modes of playing, requires engaging with the rules of the game. When players cannot express agency, they do not have access to opportunities for negotiating the game's rules through playing. For instance, when Stacy remarks on the scantily clad female workers of the massage parlor by saying "to make myself feel better about this, I'm gonna pretend that all of these girls are very well taken care of, well paid, and respected," she is engaging in a negotiated mode of reading the video game. Stacy produces additional narrative content to ameliorate her anxieties about the exploitation of women and, in doing so, highlights her negotiations with the game's objectification of women. This comment, however, signals a moment of reading the dominant code of the game rather than playing in or
against it. Stacy and Mari have no means of playing to demonstrate this, since this riffing does not augment, alter, or defy the rules of the video game.

[4.12] Through playing and riffing on *Date the Boss*, these Let's Players perform how they negotiate with the implied male players while still desiring to win. Humorously, for example, Mari and Stacy make comments such as "This is such a creepy game" and "This is inappropriate" when their potential boss makes suggestive advances toward them, demonstrating a split between themselves as players and the male character they control in the video game world (for studies of players and avatars, see Rehak 2003; Klevjer 2012; Vella 2013, 2014). Upon completing the game, Stacy announces "We did it!" with Mari following shortly after to cheer that "We dated our inappropriate boss!" Such declarations allow Mari and Stacy to revel in playing and winning the game, despite any distance or discomfort produced by playing the game. While acknowledging how *Date the Boss* is a game clearly constructed around their exclusion, the two female Let's Players still find ways to play the game by complying with it, ridiculing it, and revising it to make their own meaning from it. They produce their own content, their Let's Play, from it to perform and show how it is that they individually and uniquely play the game.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] Let's Plays provide opportunities to see players engaging in different modes of reading and playing as they riff on the video games that they encounter. Let's Plays show how fans can perform video game player personalities that in a given playthrough may subscribe to, resist, and negotiate with the demands of the video game and its larger contexts of production, circulation, and reception. Through different relationships with and against the rules and expectations of video games, players perform in different modes of playing, which the live commentary of Let's Plays can highlight. The construction of liveness emphasizes the performative element of Let's Players and their personalities, suggesting that playing video games means performing a role or personality that players can actively shape.

[5.2] As fan productions, Let's Plays offer accounts of how fans engage with video games that also serve as new materials for fans to share and discuss. The viewer comments, blog posts, fan art, and videos made in response to Let's Plays and Let's Players underscore how Let's Plays allow fans to examine, critique, and multiply these individualized performances of game playing. Like other fan-produced media that grapple with how players differentially and idiosyncratically make sense of and perform their audiencehood of video games, Let's Plays offer space to reimagine a wider account of what game playing can mean for a wider range of fans. Unboxing videos, where users record themselves unwrapping a new product for the first time, and other
performances of video game fandom, game playing, game consumption, and game making provide opportunities alongside Let's Plays for individualizing and localizing practices of meaning-making through the presentation of video game player personalities.

[5.3] Shaw argues that toward "normalizing video games for all audiences, [we should find] ways to emphasize their 'everydayness' in contemporary media culture" (2012, 40). To emphasize their everydayness and ubiquity, we can increase the visibility of the diverse experiences and performances of video game playing and recognize the ways in which video game playing is constructed and made meaningful. Consequently, we might increase production and circulation of more kinds of fan materials like Let's Plays to discuss and account for more negotiated, more queer, more subversive, more failed, and more confusing game play and player personalities as widely recognized and legitimated sites for making meaning of video games and playing.

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7. Notes


2. Critical work on riffing has examined the television show Mystery Science Theater 3000 (MST3K) (1988–1999) as demonstrative of the capabilities of riffing in fan meaning-making practices (Weiner and Barba 2011; Bonnstetter 2012). See also MST3K Riff-a-Day, a blog cataloging riffing examples from MST3K (Vorel n.d.).

3. Studies of electronic and digital media have been interested in theorizing the significance of interactivity (Laurel 1993; Aarseth 1997; Murray 1997; Frasca 2001; Galloway 2006; Bogost 2008; Wark 2009).
4. PewDiePie released both an apology on his blog and a video stating that he will cease references to rape (2012b, a). The sincerity of the apologies, however, has been questioned (Hernandez 2014).

5. Consalvo hints at this link between cheating and Hall's modes of reading (Consalvo 2007, 77; 200 note 25).

8. Works cited


Praxis

Creative choices and fan practices in the transformation of theme park space

Carissa Ann Baker

University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida

[0.1] Abstract—This article describes and interprets fan activities within the theme park space related to a particular fan object. It examines an evolving paradigm wherein the role of theme park visitors is changed. Rather than being perceived as observers of spectacles, they can participate and interact with the environment in new ways. An example of this is Sorcerers of the Magic Kingdom (2012), an interactive role-playing quest and collector card game at Disney's Magic Kingdom Park in Florida. Fans participate in a variety of practices that have dynamically redefined theme park activities. Together, management, designers, and fans have cocreated and reconstructed the theme park experience as one of exploration and participation. Despite multiple levels of control, fans will likewise persist in engagement with activities (in park and online) that help shape and interrogate the theme park space.

[0.2] Keywords—Disney; Interactivity; Magic Kingdom; Role-playing; Trading cards; Transmedia; Video games


1. Introduction

[1.1] On Main Street, U.S.A. at Disney's Magic Kingdom in Florida, there are some rather covert signs that read "Heroes Needed!—Enlist at the Firehouse." Next to City Hall in Town Square sits an unassuming firehouse with a banner strung across the top that invites guests to discover the community event where "Professor Merlin Reveals His Latest Sensation!" Just inside the entrance is another banner: "Secret Sorcerers of the Magic Kingdom Recruitment Center" (figure 1). The firehouse is easy to miss, as are the Mystic Portals (projected screens) hidden throughout five lands of the theme park, which only appear when activated. Less hidden, however, are the sorcerers (other guests) walking around, tapping key cards to magic boxes, standing on the Circles of Power, listening to stories, and holding up playing cards when the animated portals prompt "Cast Your Spell!" Unaware visitors might look at these sorcerers and portals with curiosity, and children are often enthralled by a dormant piece of
architecture suddenly erupting with Disney heroes and villains. Whether curious or enthralled, the reaction is likely to indicate that something different or remarkable is occurring. This attraction appears as a tangible implementation of the magic so often discussed in Disney rhetoric. The game also represents a shift in the theme park landscape, where guests have become a more active part of the storytelling fabric.

Figure 1. The banner in the firehouse on Main Street. Photograph by author, February 2016. [View larger image.]

[1.2] Theme parks have undergone changes over the years. Previously, the emphasis was often on more passive experiences; as engaging as the most classic rides at Disney are (Pirates of the Caribbean, Haunted Mansion, It's a Small World, etc.), they are essentially guests sitting back and watching a story unfold around them. Now, passive rides have evolved into ones featuring interactivity and immersion, often making use of new technologies. These are more active attractions with an emphasis on guests "becoming participants" (Niles 2016) or even taking the lead role in the adventure. This is a significant shift, as attractions have traditionally been spectacles or have employed different notions of interactivity (e.g., Jungle Cruise skippers joking with guests on board or multiple Frozen-based sing-along shows). Perhaps because of the prominence of video games and other interactive media in contemporary society, these kinds of technology-mediated interactive experiences have emerged in the theme park attraction mix. Many amusement and theme parks have added interactivity by way of competitive rides where guests shoot at targets, but the number of interactive quest games is increasing. At Walt Disney World alone, several physical quest-type attractions are currently running that fit the thematic tendencies of their parks (figure 2): Wilderness Explorers (Disney's Animal Kingdom), a fully physical, educational game with scout-style badges; Agent P’s World Showcase Adventure (Epcot), a spy-type adventure utilizing a cell phone interface; A Pirate’s Adventure (Magic Kingdom), a mostly physical treasure hunt with special effects; and Sorcerers of the Magic Kingdom, an integration of physical sets and technological mediation. Many interactive elements, games, story enhancements, and even customized messages to guests have been added to queues and attractions
throughout Walt Disney World. Additionally, events throughout the year (e.g., Easter, festivals at Epcot, school groups, hotel stays, and even one-off events like the launch of the *Lion Guard* television series) have sparked the creation of scavenger hunt games. Walt Disney World's expansive high-technology system, MyMagic+, brings interactivity to ride and restaurant reservations. All of these integrations of technology and interactivity represent the theme park moving into this generation and reimagining the notion of the attraction to include "individualized interactive spatial narratives" (Koren-Kuik 2013, 152).

![Figure 2. Walt Disney World quests (from left to right: Wilderness Explorers, Agent P's World Showcase Adventure, A Pirate's Adventure). Photographs by author, April 2016. [View larger image.]]

[1.3] The most complex of these interactive adventures, *Sorcerers of the Magic Kingdom* (SotMK), opened in 2012. It features the guest in the role of a sorcerer attempting to thwart the villain Hades, who has enlisted the help of nine other baddies from various Disney animated films to take over the theme park. The beginning sorcerer is given a map of all the portals, an RFID key card to activate the portals, and a pack of five spell cards. Players begin on easy mode but can advance to medium or hard if they complete the game. In total, there are over 70 collectible cards with Disney characters on them. These cards range from common to rare; the majority of them are free, but some cards are only available by purchasing tickets to special events or by buying sets of cards that include a rare lightning card. Easy mode can be completed with any cards, but the more difficult modes involve knowing villain weaknesses and creating combinations of spells. The richness of this game and the uniqueness of the experience have encouraged multiple audiences to play and inspired a fan culture. This in turn has added to fan-led practices that continue to help shape the theme park space.

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# 2. Business decisions

[2.1] The first constituent in the change of park space is management. Despite the creative ventures going on at theme parks, they still tend to make decisions that benefit the business. In the case of a game like SotMK, there are probable reasons why executives decided to fund it: distribution of crowds at the Magic Kingdom (the
most visited theme park in the world), repeat visitation (the holy grail of theme parks), enhancement of brand loyalty (through engagement with multiple film properties), unit synergy (between Studio Entertainment and Parks & Resorts), and related item profit (pins, power-up shirts, spell card binders, rare cards, the paper version of the game, and perhaps food and beverage during extra visits) (figure 3). Guests partaking in these quests are presumably less likely to spend time in lengthy attraction queues and more likely to purchase products. There are then both tangible and intangible benefits of having attractions like this.

[2.2] There are a few forms of control built into the game. Management represents the first level of control. The park schedule dictates the operating hours of the attraction each day. In addition, creators built in a system that routes players to specific portals so that crowds do not build up at each one. Portals are networked and can be circumvented completely with the system ready to cut off a segment of the story, bypass a portal being fixed, or skip an entire land during busy times or events. Like with other systems at the park (e.g., FastPass+, daily parade and show guest control facilitation), the portals are part of a design that ensures both proper guest flow patterns and the accustoming of visitors to these patterns. Attractions like SotMK assist efficiency as much as creative or aesthetic standards. Most video games do not

Figure 3. Master Sorcerer shirt: merchandise item, in-game power up, and fan identification. Photograph by author, April 2016. [View larger image.]
have the added complexity of managing people in a physical space. Despite a system that "actively distributes people to where they should be," however, it cannot account for, as the lead designer deems it, "human free will" (Ackley quoted in Brigante 2012). Guests can be told which portal to visit next, in other words, but they may choose to wait and do other things first, allowing for at least some deviation.

3. Creative explorations and controls

[3.1] Creative professionals in the themed entertainment industry work under budgetary, time, and other constraints including guest expectations. The lead designer of SotMK was Jonathan Ackley at Walt Disney Imagineering, a veteran game designer with an interest in "nontraditional, nonlinear storytelling" (Lewis 2012) who has experience with both older adventure games and other Disney quest projects. The group Creative Capers (2016) assisted with animating the game's scenes; on their Web site, they describe the challenge of animating "Disney's most iconic characters from ten beloved films" in addition to merging the settings of the films with that of the real park. SotMK is considered an "ambitious" and even "risky" project that took 4 years to create (Ackley quoted in Brigante 2012). As with all Disney attractions, the grounding of the attraction is story. SotMK has an overarching narrative that is a transmedia story of the synergistic variety (Jenkins 2006), though unlike transmedia stories with multiple channels, it is only accessible through the one medium of visiting the theme park (or through secondhand accounts on video). The creators had to determine a way for a story to work across multiple, differently-themed areas, so they chose a master villain, Hades, to enlist scoundrels from other animated Disney films to wreak havoc on the Kingdom. Merlin acts as the primary guide of the experience, urging players to "defend the realm" (figure 4). The use of Merlin as a (nonplayable character) mentor moving through worlds establishes some similarity to the popular Kingdom Hearts video game series (2002–) that has a comparable crossover fiction with Disney and other fantasy realms. Likewise, the mobile game Disney Magic Kingdoms (2016) positions Merlin in a similar way as a guide to help dispel dark magic. The films represented in the SotMK story are Fantasia (1940), Sleeping Beauty (1959), 101 Dalmatians (1961), The Sword in the Stone (1963), The Little Mermaid (1989), Aladdin (1992), The Lion King (1994), Pocahontas (1995), Hercules (1997), The Emperor's New Groove (2000), and The Princess and the Frog (2009). Villains, henchmen, protagonists, and sidekicks from the films are all present, and designers purposely selected canon movies from different Disney animation periods. The use of classic films, an unchangeable story, and determined video game structures (with specific objectives and ways to accomplish them) introduces another level of control into the game.
SotMK is an officially-authorized crossover story that meets some Disney standards; it fulfills one of the purposes of the Disney theme parks: to allow fans to "engage with their favorite fictional worlds" (Koren-Kuik 2013, 146). While there are many villains, they maintain their traits from the original films. With the exception of Hades and Merlin, who move seamlessly between each story segment (as their magic abilities and powers might allow), the heroes and heroines of the films stay within their segments (e.g., Rafiki from The Lion King helps guide the guest through the subplot where Scar and the hyenas are the antagonists). In addition, the characters that seem to belong to a specific land stay in that land. The game can be played in Main Street, U.S.A., Fantasyland, Adventureland, and Frontierland/Liberty Square, and the villains align with these themes (Maleficent in Fantasyland, Jafar in Adventureland, etc.). Having traditional portrayals of characters upholds canon integrity but also places limits on fan imagination. Fans may expect this internal consistency and self-limit subversive possibilities. Marie Patrice Amon (2014) observes that the "reference texts" of Disney narratives "hold deep cultural recognizability and popularity based on narratives that are dogmatically consistent, with a predictably constant set of social values" (¶2.1). SotMK obeys these basic tenets. The characters are contained within the Magic Kingdom, a canon space, and they fit the archetype of good versus evil. The
villains' motivations are conflated into one of desire for power; any deeper interrogations into the characters are unnecessary, as there is an expectation of familiarity with the stories. Furthermore, in Disney fashion, and probably as a result of the need for efficiency, it is impossible to lose the game. Unlike in many video games, performing poorly against a villain may mean losing a battle, but eventually the system relents to let the player win (after how many portals depends on the difficulty setting). The sorcerer rank will be lower with more lost battles, but the happy ending is ensured.

[3.3] Nonetheless, there are many transgressions of the canon. The first instance of this would be the presentation of all of the villains within the same world (ours, or at least the fantasy-reality space of the theme park). The story straddles the line between canon and fan fiction: canon, because it was created by Disney for a Disney attraction, but fan fiction, because it combines many villains and stories woven together into one crossover tale, a common fan fiction motif. In this way, SotMK is similar to the *Kingdom Keepers* (2005–) children's novel series from Ridley Pearson (published by Disney). In those books, the villains take over the parks and youth fix it; in the SotMK game, any park guest can be a sorcerer. Next, many of the villains who die (Maleficent, Ursula, Scar, Dr. Facilier) or are significantly transformed (Jafar, Yzma) in the films are all back in form at their peak of strength and evil. This may make sense because Hades is a deity with resurrection powers, but it is also quite a conceit that makes the core narratives seem unstable: are villains so easy to resurrect and transport into other worlds? At the game's conclusion, the villains are trapped inside of a crystal and are no longer deceased. SotMK is a kind of large-scale remix that the creators have utilized to facilitate a lengthier game with epic battles. These fictions complicate the notion of transmedia, providing a transfranchisal experience, or one that "bridges across multiple franchises" (Wolf 2014, xiii) but does not necessarily follow the internal logic of each film. Instead of merely a crossover plot, the game would be better characterized as an alternate universe that follows the logic of the theme park instead of the source movies. At the theme park, all of the characters exist at once in the same time and place. The time periods and places of the films no longer matter; meet and greets, parades, and shows mash them together. Villains live again, and a few characters remain suspended in earlier parts of their narratives (e.g., Ariel is still a mermaid, Rapunzel retains her long hair). There is tension present throughout the park between guest understandings of individual narratives and the timelessness of the park's story (something that removes story arcs and places characters in one landscape). Because the face characters especially are living and in a performance, they are imposed on the new space in the new time and maintain awareness of themselves as characters. Finally, the most significant element of gameplay, the spell cards, changes the story by expanding the universe. They "subtly shift the gaming experience," making it "less predictable" (Lewis 2012). While the story of Hades
gathering the Crystals of the Magic Kingdom by means of various villains is set and unchanging (though the villains are usually in a different order each time), the collectible cards feature dozens of characters from Walt Disney Animation Studios, Pixar Animation Studios, and a couple of Magic Kingdom attractions. These cards interface with the portals, and the player chooses which ones to utilize for each villain (figure 5). Characters from, for instance, *Bambi* (1942) or *WALL-E* (2008) could thus be used to defeat villains from a completely different universe. More advanced players use combinations of multiple cards from any number of films in each land, continuously subverting thematic and narrative consistency. This highlights an important change of theme park narrative represented by the game: not only are guests in the story, they can also subtly influence their story version by the in-game choices of creative spells, though all choices may lead to victory.

![Figure 5. Using a spell card against a villain. Photograph by author, April 2016.](image)

[3.4] Going beyond the stories within the game, the overall park’s story has shifted with the introduction of a multiland narrative. The design of the castle parks including Magic Kingdom (and its older sibling, Disneyland) is such that each land is distinct. Instead of neatly delineated spaces, the SotMK player is forced to explore the lands and view the areas as a continuous narrative space (though each chapter is still within a defined area, and there are narrative and spatial transitions). Rather than a
collection of attractions within a park container, experiences like SotMK turn the "entire park into an attraction" (Niles 2016, emphasis in original). While the story is built on well-known film properties, the other part of the tale is the Magic Kingdom itself, illustrating "location-based storytelling" (Lewis 2012). The general sense of aesthetics, peace, and uplift that visitors are theoretically supposed to enjoy when immersed in the fantasiescape is replaced by a mood of conflict and unrest. This works well in the role-playing realm, as many visitors already have emotional ties to the park or its narrative, so they will be more engaged in the sorcerer role. The game was also meant to be as unobtrusive as possible to nonplaying guests, so that their activities are unlikely to be disturbed by the game's presence (figure 6). The portals are often so seamlessly integrated into existing structures and theming elements that unaware park goers are even more intrigued to see sorcerers casting spells around the park. This functions in a similar way to Harry Potter Wands at Universal Studios, a spell-casting pursuit using wands instead of cards. Though it is an upcharge attraction that is more prominent and well advertised (as an essential part of the Wizarding World of Harry Potter experience), the Wands game is similar to SotMK in that guests playing the game interact with scenery, cast spells by means of a magical device, often dress the part (wizard robes or licensed shirts), face similar narrative inconsistency (inside the rides, guests are Muggles, but outside playing the game, they are wizards), and have preexisting emotional connections with the source material. In both cases, while the park premises are now part of this linked story, they have also become marketing venues since witnessing other guests playing the game may increase interest in trying the game.
SotMK changes the park's landscape, but it does a similar thing with the concept of video games. While there are motion-sensing interfaces for more than one gaming system, and while there are virtual reality spaces that involve user motion and gestures, SotMK combines image recognition (spell cards held up to cameras) with the physicality of a real quest (walking from land to land, portal to portal). This makes the majority of the Magic Kingdom itself a gaming space, even a game itself. SotMK has some similarities to other quest and interactive games as they employ "traditional narrative techniques interspersed with interactivity" (Salter 2014, 6). Like other role-playing and trading card games, the individual cards have a character image, statistics, and descriptions: spell name, a rhyme describing the spell, spell type, attack type, card rarity, and the level number of each card's attack, boost, and shield properties. These cards level up when played correctly and lose power when played incorrectly; harder modes are about using the right combinations of spells to defeat particular enemies. SotMK reflects the elements of casual game design that Jesper Juul (2010) defines: a fiction, usability, interruptability, difficulty, and "juiciness" (30). The appeal of the fictional narrative has already been discussed; the game has user friendliness with its repetition and consistent design and outcomes; it has flexibility and interruptability, as users can stop after each portal or each villain; its difficulty is
adjustable and more punishing on higher levels (but never impossible); and it has high levels of juiciness, or "excessive amounts of positive feedback" (Juul 2010, 45), when spells appear on-screen with colorful animations. As a result of these factors, SotMK can be deemed a casual game (though, as Juul argues, this is a debatable term, and some casual players may spend hours in the park playing) that has additional modes that can gratify more hardcore gamers. The game also has a satisfying dual goal. It has a virtual goal, that of defeating Hades to become a Master Sorcererer, preferably at the Gold level (figure 7), and there is also a physical goal, that of collecting all of the cards, a facet to the game that invites fan participation.

Figure 7. Portals revealing the Master Sorcerer medal and the sorcerer rank. Photograph by author, October 2014. [View larger image.]

[3.6] The most significant change that SotMK has wrought is its expansion of the concept of spatial stories in which the guest's role is privileged. Anastasia Salter (2014) describes spatial stories where "the player finds the story within his or her environment by taking on the role of 'you!'" (27). While in this role, the visitor "soaks up the atmosphere of the world while following the rules of the experience" (Salter 2014, 27). Spatial stories provide a new level of immersion; Meyrav Koren-Kuik (2013) explains that narrative and spatial immersion are interwoven and an essential part of the "consumer/fandom model" now (150). In this case, the environment is the Magic Kingdom, usually familiar to the visitor but with new elements, sounds, and lighting effects that defamiliarize the space. Experiences like SotMK go beyond just more elaborate theming. Lead designer Ackley explains, "we're sort of changing the role of the guest to be the main character instead of somebody passing through the world" (quoted in Brigante 2012). Like Brett Martin (2004) notes (talking about the trading card game *Magic: The Gathering* [1993]), the player is a "central character of influence to the events that unfold in the realm of the imaginary" (140). The theme park and SotMK are not an "unbounded" fantasyscape as *Magic* is described as being (Martin 2004, 141); the theme park is a real place (with boundaries and controls) overlaid with the imaginary. Nevertheless, fans have taken on a greater role in the
fantasy story and stand side by side with beloved characters. Parks, or at least certain attractions, are now being reimagined with this central guest role in mind.

4. Fan groups and practices

[4.1] SotMK has a large potential audience of at least a few thousand people per day despite its being a comparatively unknown attraction. Because of its easy mode with a low barrier to entry, the game caters to children and casual players, while the harder modes might attract adults and more experienced gamers. Ackley suggests that most guests will prefer the easy mode because of time constraints but that "locals and the hardcore gamers" will want more depth and length (quoted in Brigante 2012). The game works as a solo experience. However, because it is also in the theme park space, groups frequently play it. More practiced players and families might have multiple people holding up spell cards together so that the combinations are a team effort. In my couple of years playing the game (usually with my husband), I have witnessed diverse types of players: large families, couples, affinity groups, children, adults, men, women, solo fans, and off-duty cast members (Disney employees). The game could appeal to many fandoms: Disney film fans, Disney park fans, gamers, and card collectors/traders. The game does cater to repeat visitors (annual passholders, cast members) who may see community as an incentive to keep playing even once complete, but all types of guests participate daily.

[4.2] A fan culture has sprung up around the SotMK attraction. Ackley (quoted in Brigante 2012) was able to discern even during the test period that the game was "building a community of these traders and these sorcerers." Like with all fandoms, there are fans with a variety of styles, practices, and levels of intensity. Some SotMK fans care more about the gameplay aspect of the attraction while others prefer the collecting aspect; several engage in all facets. The common behavior that fans perform is playing the game. Some prefer to integrate it into their regular park visitation habits, playing a portal here and there between other attractions and activities. Others prefer playing the game and may not visit additional attractions. Every time an individual does play, she will interact with the portals in addition to with specific people: other players (met at the portals), nonplayers (inquiring about the portals), and cast members (met each time to collect a card packet). Trading cards is a recurrent activity, often happening at portals or in the Tortuga Tavern, a small restaurant that houses a portal and a meeting place for frequent players (figure 8). Collectors may bring card books, bags full of cards, or a stack of loose cards. When trading, I have been exposed to both the good and bad citizens of the game. In my first encounter with a young man who wanted to trade, he purposely exchanged a common card with me for a rare card before I was aware of the meaning of the symbols. He then did the same with another group of new sorcerers. His mother
looked on and seemed pleased by his duplicitous behavior; no doubt, fandom is made of people, with "all their imperfections as well as their strengths" (Coppa 2014, 77). There might be an intimidation factor when encountering strangers that are already experienced in the game, especially if some might prey on a new player's lack of knowledge. The same behaviors occur with the much older park-based fandom of pin traders, for instance. Good citizens tend to outnumber the bad, however. It is not uncommon for fans to explain the game to new players, tell them the trading rules, give insider tips, trade appropriately, or even gift multiple cards. One of my first encounters with a Tortuga Tavern fan, in fact, yielded many trades that lent to completing at least a quarter of my collection. These kinds of daily practices illustrate the situatedness of park fandom but also the ways in which the culture is shifting, even influencing the interactions of other park visitors. There are groups of fans who play this game regularly, but it is hard to know yet whether they comprise a "subculture" within the Disney fan culture or a "community" with common values and spaces (Coppa 2014). Social media platforms contribute to fan "fragmentation," so there is some dispersal of members with like interests (Bennett 2014). The more accurate term here might be "affinity spaces" (Gee 2007, 87), as these tend to be self-organized, interactive spaces around a common passion (with the interest, not specific people or cultural markers, being what initially brings the group together). James Paul Gee (2007, 5) considers this type of "social affiliation" a powerful thing with the ability to generate "new ways for people to produce knowledge, participate in social interactions, and create learning," all things that SotMK players do. Regardless of what they are called, however, these groups have some clear rules.

**Figure 8.** Portal at Tortuga Tavern. Photograph by author, April 2016. [View larger image.]

[4.3] As noted, there are rules written into every aspect of the game that emphasize control or at least the authority commonly present in narratives and video games. It is heavily rules based, fitting in to the role-playing game model (though the game does not provide an opportunity to create or customize characters other than with spell choices). These rules govern the players, so their likelihood of deviance, at least within
the story, is minimized. Fans present an additional layer of regulation. Major fans tend
to use hero language and refer to themselves as sorcerers or Master Sorcerers; cast
members around the park reinforce this language by calling players sorcerers or using
phrases related to defending the Kingdom. The player "enacts" the magic role,
associating it with wizards that "personify bravery and power" (Martin 2004, 141).
SotMK does not allow for role-playing within the villain roles. Players defeat all of the
villains to save the Magic Kingdom, and that alliance with good is unwavering. Fan
practices are governed similarly. A market around rare or event-based cards has
developed, with cards being sold on eBay or sold/traded within fan groups. As a result,
a bad behavior that has arisen is selling or trading counterfeit cards. Since the images
on self-printed cards are the same, the cards usually work in the game, so Disney has
little ability to regulate this (nor do they try). Fans, however, have a tendency to self-
police this kind of act. The public Facebook page of the Sorcerers of the Magic
Kingdom Rebel Alliance fan group, for instance, warns that "Any reproduction or
creation of fake cards will not be allowed for trade, selling or giving...Be honest in all
manners regarding the authenticated cards." Like in many collector cultures, authentic
artifacts are demanded. Also, the sorcerer role comes with embedded values;
counterfeiting does not fit within that persona. This particular group has a Code of
Ethics that defines the expected behaviors of the group members, provides a quick
ethics test with a list of questions, and outlines the responsibilities to new sorcerers,
each other, "our group," and "our game provider" (meaning Disney). The latter
includes the line, when referring to respecting the decisions of Disney employees, that
"Ultimately, Disney sets the rules to the game and we should follow these rules to be
allowed to continue to play." This is only one group's rule set, but it does demonstrate
the kinds of regulations that fans give themselves to guarantee the continued integrity
of their practices, spaces, and objects of fandom.

[4.4] Sam Ford (2014) stresses that fan studies should go beyond fan fiction and
more traditional modes of fan production. In this case, it is not only the written
production of fans that is interesting but the ways in which they engage with the game
itself and other in-park practices (really the "everyday process of fandom") that merit
further study (Ford 2014, 65). The role-playing identity in this game is that of the
Sorcerer, needed to save favorite Disney characters and the Kingdom itself. Amon
(2014) explains (as related to cosplay) that it "offers participants the opportunity to
construct their own identity through playful engagement with dogmatic text" (¶3.2).
While playing within a theme park is certainly more restrictive than cosplay, it still
allows for an alternative identity to the standard theme park guest. In this game, the
sorcerer identity allows for playful engagement by way of spell casting. Its spell
system is one of the creative aspects of the game. On medium mode, players need to
determine the attack types that best fit the villain they are battling. On hard mode,
this becomes randomized, so players must use the game graphics (which vary based
on spell) to determine effective attacks and the spell's current power level. Winning includes multiple combination spells; getting the best combinations means constant trial and error. Some fans sort their card books based on favorite mixtures or encourage others to not ask players for combos but to try their own. Spell testing is one of the enjoyable elements for advanced and returning players. Though there is not the same freedom available with creating a deck in *Magic: The Gathering* (one of the pleasurable elements of that game according to Martin 2004) because the cards do not influence the story in the same way, battles are variable and the rules are only determined through experimentation. The designers planned this, as Ackley (quoted in Brigante 2012) asserts that "part of the game is intuiting what the rules are, because we're not announcing what the rules are—which spells work against which villain." They wanted the players to "discover them while playing. And no two experiences are exactly alike" (Brigante 2012). Despite the layers of control, the sorcerer is given affordances for creativity and identity construction. New sorcerers do actually learn as they play, increasing their specialized knowledge while in the park and then regularly sharing what they have learned online. Thus the player becomes a learner and a teacher, a combination in the spirit of Gee's aforementioned concept of affinity spaces.

[4.5] Like most fandoms in this age, there are public, online components connected with SotMK social groups. Lucy Bennett's (2014) four "areas of fandom and enquiry" (5) are defined as communication, creativity, knowledge, and organizational/civic power. While activism as such does not appear to have surfaced thus far in these groups (unless counting ethics within fan practices), the other three are the most common expressions of affinity for SotMK online. Communication to other fans manifests itself in groups on Facebook and other sites, generally associated with news, card updates, trading, and meeting opportunities. Creativity is illustrated by written and visual production efforts like wikis, blogs, photography, and mobile applications, of which there are at least three. There are at least three examples of SotMK fan fiction at FanFiction.net. Some fans invent new character cards, a form of theoretical modding, though not a literal one, as they are not playable within the game. Dozens of fan-made cards can be found on sites like Pinterest, Tumblr, and DeviantArt; they attempt to replicate the look of the cards but use other favorite Disney characters (or even non-Disney characters or fan fiction characters) with new spells (figure 9). Additional fan works include custom spell books, buttons, hair bows, or other crafts. Falling somewhere between creativity and knowledge would be the under-discussed practice in gaming of playthrough vids. For SotMK, these are both visual walkthroughs of the spaces and playthroughs; they are creative in that they are fan-produced videos but also demonstrate and provide knowledge to others. These are reproductions of the game without the materiality of the space, but they do give inquisitive nonplayers an encounter with the narrative. Much of the online production would fall under the knowledge category. As Bennett (2014) argues, "shared knowledge and its exchange
is a central facet of fan culture" (9). The blogs, discussion forum threads on fan boards, card checklists, videos, and Wikia page all provide information to new sorcerers but also to veteran ones. The sharing of meaningful information might be enjoyable to fans, but it also contributes to the continuation of the practices in which they are invested. The conversations about SotMK online and within social media ensure the extension of the theme park space. Theme park fans have robust online cultures, so fans of this attraction are likewise served by existing sites of conversation (in addition to critiques, which are also present). A consideration of fan labor (production, conversation) reveals that fans impact the theme park space and the online discourse surrounding that space. They actively partake in the practices that shape the theme park and then interpret both the space and the practices.

**Figure 9.** SotMK fan-made card, created by the author and her husband. [View larger image.]

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5. Transforming space

[5.1] With the interplay of these constituents (management, designers, fans), Magic Kingdom Park has been transformed into a convergence space (Jenkins 2006). The theme park is a canvas of exploration and a game while simultaneously facilitating a cultural shift. The stereotype of theme parks might be that visiting them is about experiencing as many attractions as possible. Decades of guidebooks and trip planning sites online are dedicated to maximizing time at the parks and hyperplanning to
ensure as much. SotMK changes this perception; it slows down the pace of the visit and weaves not only a larger narrative together but represents a shift in the guest's role. Instead of being only a spectator, the visitor is a participant—a sorcerer. SotMK forces interactivity with the landscape; the user cannot choose to be passive. This distinction means that whether a player identifies as a fan (and/or prefers a sorcerer identity) or not, she is not really merely a "follower" because of the active engagement necessary to play at all (Coppa 2014, 75). SotMK changes the patterns and identities of guests who partake in the experience. Most guests still hold to the traditional model of visitation, but some fans embrace this alternate mode of engaging with the object of fandom. The very "process of convergence," according to Koren-Kuiik (2013), allows for the establishing of identity, personal narratives, individuality, and self-positioning within the space (152). In this way, the new conception of interactive attractions helps to strengthen the fandom model and allows for new ways to explore that role. However, because of the game's location in the commercial space, Disney has the ultimate control over the attraction. They could remove it tomorrow or allow it to stagnate. They have not released nonevent cards in years, for instance, which could eventually result in a reduction of interest from frequent players. Nonetheless, the model of park visitation has already been altered by the attraction and those like it. Creators sparked the change, but fans cocreated it, accepted it, and are the ones who play each day. Many postmodern and cultural critics have associated theme parks with the notion of consumption. Janet Wasko (2001), for instance, discusses Disney products (whether a film or the concept of fantasy), values, ideologies, and spaces in terms of the "process of consumption" (185). Sharp critiques include that of Umberto Eco ([1986] 1990), who describes Disneyland as "a place of total passivity" where visitors "must agree to behave as robots" (48). The visitors in this description are dronelike, both consuming and uncritical. SotMK would still be classed as part of the whole park, which generates profit for a large corporation, but the notion of "consumption" has shifted to that of the "experience economy" (Pine and Gilmore 1999). It is not only goods, products, or services that matter but also experiences and, in some cases, transformations. Fans will consume the space, the experience, and the culture in addition to merchandise, but this is active, selective consumption (figure 10). Fans go beyond passivity when they participate in processes of interpretation and production. In fact, Martin (2004) argues that imagination itself, including the "fantastic imaginary" that manifests itself in games like SotMK or Magic: The Gathering, is an activity that consumers "generate...during consumption" (136). Directly related to the theme park would be the guest disposition that desires an "active participation in the fantastic imaginary setting" (Martin 2004, 143), not mere passive consumption. With fandom, there is an essence of ownership but not always allowances for such within corporate spaces (though, as illustrated, the fan role continues to expand). Even so, agency may be observed in fan practices, and there
has been a shift from the "fan within a space" to the "process of making that space" (Parrish 2013, ¶4.8).

**Figure 10.** Tangible SotMK items: cards in a collector's album, the paper game, and pins. Photograph by author, April 2016. [View larger image.]

[5.2] Fans rarely possess equal power with commercial producers. Despite this, SotMK fans co-opt the space, reconstructing the expected practices of theme park visitors. In fact, while the text of SotMK cannot be changed by fans, the text of the Magic Kingdom is being actively altered. In this way, fans are participating in a process, similar to what Juli Parrish (2013) describes (in reference to fan fiction) as "world building," or a "process that remakes the place itself" rather than just borrowing pieces of it (¶0.1). The Magic Kingdom is a physical place and thus a different kind of text, but it is dynamically influenced by the guests who traverse its paths. Some of the behaviors associated with home or typically coded as private have entered the public space of the theme park. SotMK represents some of these: video gaming, individual card collecting, loose-knit communities, family play, social media interaction, quests, role-playing, and creative spell casting. Behaviors such as spending hours playing a video game and hanging out at the theme park without partaking in the big attractions might be pathologized. Despite the large number and diversity of Disney fans, they may be marginalized as strange or their behaviors construed as living at the theme park. Wasko (2001), for instance, describes Disneyphiles or "Disney freaks" and the fans that are disparaged for their lifestyle, expended income, values, or apparently blind acceptance of Disney's "encoded messages" (204). It may be assumed that fans here are enmeshed in "escapism from the real world," as one player of *Magic: The Gathering* mentions as his reason for participation (Martin 2004, 140). Nonetheless, this is complicated by the many players who don't cite this reason and by Juul's (2010) observations about the stereotypes of hardcore gamers where "children, jobs, and general adult responsibilities" interfere with gaming (51). The majority of people, he illustrates, are flexible and move between intensity of play during life stages. SotMK players represent some ways in which fans can operate against the status quo in the park and in the perceptions of their interests (annual passholders tend to have day jobs, after all). There is little doubt that fan practices are sanctioned by Disney at least theoretically. Koren-Kuik (2013), in fact, argues that "Disney encourages participatory fandom in its most complex and wide range form, inviting fans not only to watch movies and television shows but also play, sing, learn, and experience" (147). The theme parks, are, according to Koren-Kuik, the "jewels in the crown of this participatory fandom construct" (147). Long existing as places to play and experience, theme parks now position fans as characters in their favorite narratives. Their voices are also sought out
in interpretive exercises. These voices are not suppressed because fans are a part of the capitalist system and a "centerpiece...of marketing strategies"; they assist brand recognition and loyalty and now operate with increased "cultural currency" (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007, 4, 8). Fans are allowed to repurpose spaces, and perhaps the smaller scope of SotMK has meant less regulation. Pin trading and collectible activities are generally more controlled. The norm of fan collecting is continued with the cards, however, and certainly the assumption of fan loyalty predates the change to more interactive media offerings.

[5.3] The SotMK experience was easier to prepare because of a preexisting fan presence. In addition to the brand representation encouraged by Disney with many guests wearing Mickey Mouse ears, Disney shirts, and pin lanyards, there were already common visitation rituals, organically-developed watering holes, and location-based fannish culture. For example, though adult costumes are not allowed at Disney parks except during a few special events, other forms of fan identification through dress have arisen: wearing Disney-produced or fan-produced geek shirts, clothes or items identifying Disney-focused social clubs or online affinity groups, pin vests or display books indicating pin traders or collectors, coordinated dress practices on designated days (e.g., Bats Day, a Gothic tradition at Disneyland; Dapper Day, a fancy dress event at more than one park; and Gay Day, a celebration with political undertones at multiple parks), and Disneybounding, a Tumblr-driven practice wherein park visitors assemble outfits that represent the colors, styles, and patterns of Disney characters. The latter is a fashion statement, an expression of fandom, and an online practice (with the post illustrating the chosen attire as popular as is wearing the clothes in the park). These practices signify the public performance of fandom. Like SotMK, they are also part of the ongoing interplay between park constituents. Constituent interactions represent the larger relationships between fans and producers including the fuzzy line between the two (i.e., fans as producers, producers as fans) and the benefits found in mutual goals. In the case of SotMK, both fans and Disney gain from participation and shape each other in the process. Recalling the text of the SotMK Rebel Alliance group, however, the fans do play at the whim of Disney, so a hierarchy is maintained. Fan activities are encouraged, as Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (2007) affirm, "as long as their activities do not divert from principles of capitalist exchange and recognize industries' legal ownership of the object of fandom" (4). This is accepted within SotMK groups, but their reliance on Disney is greater than is the case with other objects of fandom because the game cannot be transported or modified as a book or film can. The place-based nature of SotMK guarantees that the fan practices are likely to be different. At least the aspect of card collecting is portable, giving the fans a tangible element that can leave the park. The home game, on the other hand, bears only passing resemblance to its in-park version; multiple boards
need to be bought for completion, and it is more about learning appropriate spells for villains than experiencing a physical quest.

[5.4] Part of fan participation culture is undergoing fannish processes of "constant discussion, criticism, and theorization" (Ford 2014, 63). Like with other fandoms, Disney theme park fandom is a balance of "fascination and frustration" (Jenkins 2006, 258), and affinity spaces facilitate both. Despite the fun or interesting features of games like SotMK, fans have expressed a number of concerns about interactive gaming additions. Looking at the comments section in news releases about interactive games or through discussion forum responses on popular fan sites reveals some common anxieties. These can be characterized as follows: fans who question Disney's choices in adding nonsubstantial attractions over more elaborate ones; fans who do not appear to be the target audience of interactive games; fans who dislike technological enhancements or believe that technologies are better in home activities; and fans who worry about the future of theme park experiences, preferring more passive attractions or experiences with all physical/practical sets. The first anxiety reflects a common critique from Disney fans, that of how the corporation spends their capital. In the case of the Magic Kingdom, a park with near-constant crowds, Disney found that multiple interactive additions were viable expenditures to relieve crowding pressures and provide more options for guests. The next category would be fans who do not appreciate attractions that are not personally appealing to them, a display of human nature. Ackley (quoted in Brigante 2012) states that SotMK is purposely "serving what previously has been an unserved constituency." He might mean younger generations who are used to a technology-mediated world, video games, interactivity, and in some cases, card collecting and role-playing games. Plenty of players do not fit this description, but some of the defense of the game online came from younger players and especially from parents, many of whom argued that their children found interactive games more appealing than traditional rides and shows.

[5.5] The last statement could be precisely what is driving the worries of the fans that prefer the theme park experiences they are used to, as some core aesthetic values are at stake. These criticisms can be broadly applied to the shifting focus toward interactivity within theme parks as a whole and may not be directed at specific experiences like SotMK. Dark rides with cinematic features like elaborate sets, lighting techniques, music, and animatronic figures are also my favorite kinds of experiences, but attraction variety is a boon for a growing industry. Also, theme parks have had role-playing (e.g., Sorcerer's Workshop at Disney California Adventure) and interactive experiences (e.g., ImageWorks at Epcot) in the past; they just looked different and had a less obvious technological interface. There is apprehension about the use of technology in parks, but it appears to be a losing battle. While there are fans and industry professionals who worry about the extent of technological incursion (i.e.,
virtual reality-type immersion displacing physical immersive environments), attractions are becoming only more technological. As more than one article attests to (Brigante 2012; Martens 2016), parks are opting for a balance between physical and virtual experiences both in the park and even within attractions. Advanced technology may enhance or detract from theme park attractions, but it will continue to be used. The history of the amusement industry is built on technology, and themed entertainment venues have continued to leverage it. This article addressed SotMK's employment of practices that are typically done at home, but this is also changing with the widespread use of mobile devices (more home/private activities have become portable—communication, reading, learning, gaming, etc.). The concerns of Disney park fans should demonstrate that whether playing games like SotMK or not, they remain invested in the theme park space and its future disposition.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] With the decision to introduce more interactive elements into their theme parks including fully-realized, participatory quests, Disney management and creative personnel encouraged the transformation of the theme park into a space for more detailed exploration. Fans took this up, with the game contributing to new practices and levels of engagement. Fan culture cemented the notion of participation in parks, and their involvement will continue to shape theme park spaces.

Some past perceptions of theme parks include that they are spectacles where guests passively view wonders. Now, theme parks have become sites for some of the concepts of our time: hypermediated play and participatory culture. Judging by these examples and the ones emerging at other parks, companies will persist in adding layers of experience to existing spaces. Significantly, the position or role of guests and fans at parks has changed. They are not only passive spectators but also the marketers, interpreters, culture creators, heroines, heroes, and sorcerers of the Disney theme park. Dedicated fans may respond by partaking in these offerings or by expressing further anxiety, but they will likely continue to participate in the complex negotiation between producers and consumers. Affinity spaces, whether they are online forums dedicated to Disney parks or the locations at the parks themselves, are fascinating sites of cultural production that should continue to be studied. Likewise, examining the everyday practices of fans within commercial confines can lead to insight about the ways in which they contribute to the objects or spaces of fandom.

7. Works cited


Praxis

Swan Queen, shipping, and boundary regulation in fandom

Victoria M. Gonzalez

Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, United States

Abstract—There are a number of fan activities and practices that are subject to regulation. The mechanisms of regulation in shipping, however, are not always clear. Shipping, the fan activity of romantically pairing two fictional characters, has become a popular and contentious facet of fan interaction. The case that will be examined in this article is that of the Swan Queen ship, which pairs two female characters from Once Upon a Time (2011–). The lengths that fans have gone to support and promote this ship led to rather intense discussion and infighting among members of the Once Upon a Time fandom. I utilize comments and posts made on Tumblr to examine the mechanisms that dictate inclusion and exclusion in shipper communities. In doing so, I hope to identify the kinds of shipper activities that are subject to regulation and the kinds of boundaries that this regulation establishes. Shipping is dictated not only by fans' imaginations but also by boundaries that are performed and regulated on digital forums.

Keywords—Canon; Contention; Fan practices; Fanon; Once Upon a Time (2011–); Popular culture; Sexuality; Tumblr


1. Introduction

Shipping, or the pairing of two fictional characters into a romantic relationship, can be a highly contentious fan activity that leads to disputes within fandoms as shippers attempt to regulate ships and the ways in which fans go about shipping them. Fan scholars insist that shippers are members of interpretive subgroups (Bothe 2014) that are treated as a different and geekier type of fan (Busse 2013) and are often on the receiving end of fan hate or wank (mocking comments) by other nonshipping fans (Larsen and Zubernis 2012). Leora Hadas's (2013) research even goes on to identify the shipper as one of the two types of fans who suffer the most open condemnation on fan forums. She observed that they are described as being "rabid shippers" because their "interest in the show is dependent on and limited to a single romantic pairing portrayed therein" (Hadas 2013, 336-37). The generalizations made about shippers obscure the fact that within fandom communities not all ships or shippers are created equal and some are in fact deemed more rabid than others.

The evidence for this can be found in the arguments, negotiations, and discussions of shippers as they attempt to grapple with the relative merits or demerits of romantic pairings according to both canon (the television show or film text and plot as scripted by creators) and fanon (the interpretative body of work "developed by the fan community as an integral part of the process of interpretation of the original text" (Stasi 2006, 121)). One of the most popular
forums for these deliberations is Tumblr. This study analyzes the shipper discourse of members of the *Once Upon a Time* (OUAT, 2011–) fandom on Tumblr, specifically in regards to the Swan Queen ship. The OUAT fandom is made up of many different kinds of shippers, and as a result the discourse includes interactions between those who ship the Swan Queen ship, those who accept the ship but do not ship it, and those who oppose it. Those who oppose this ship often find it problematic because of the characters involved in the ship and how the fans ship them together. The Swan Queen ship pairs two female characters Emma (Swan) and Regina (Queen), and the narratives, stances, and activities of many of the fans are identified as going beyond the purview of normal shipping behavior. As a result, the discourse reveals the ways in which certain regulatory mechanisms establish boundaries according to preferred and discouraged shipping practices.

[1.3] The first episode of OUAT aired on October 23, 2011. This television series is one example of a vast number of films and television shows that attempt to reframe, reexamine, and reboot fairy tales (note 1). The premise of this fantasy drama is that an evil queen, Regina Mills, has cursed all fairy tale characters by transporting them to a land without happy endings: the state of Maine. The relationship between the characters Emma and Regina is very complicated according to canon: Emma Swan is the biological mother of Regina's adopted son, Regina was briefly married to Emma's grandfather, and Emma is the savior who will break the evil queen Regina's curse. To Swan Queen shippers, the subtext of the story indicates that these two characters, who appear to be fighting over the affections of their son, are actually in love and will one day realize that they belong together. To other OUAT fans and shippers, however, this ship and the actions of its fans must be regulated. Attempts to regulate Swan Queen shippers often come in the form of comments that urge them to accept the fact that "Swan Queen is not canon and it will never be. It's nice that you want to ship it, but if you want it to happen so much, start writing, read fanfiction, or roleplay! DON'T attack the people in the show" (withahook) (note 2).

[1.4] The above statement hits on several of the major themes that are apparent throughout the fan discourse on Swan Queen. The most prominent of these themes suggest that fans are particularly concerned about the strictures of canon, what is considered proper communication with television producers, and the limits of fan fiction (how seriously it should be taken and where it should be shared). The overall connotation of this statement is that Swan Queen shippers have taken their shipping activities too far; this has led to conflict among the fans and even conflict between the fans and the people involved with the program. Fans like the one above propose that the way in which to eliminate such conflict is not for Swan Queen shippers to stop shipping entirely but for the fans to limit themselves to several specific shipping activities. The elimination of conflict then hinges upon the use of particular inclusionary and exclusionary boundaries within the shipping community. The literature on fandom most frequently identifies and analyzes these boundaries when they are between fandom and the mainstream, between other fandoms, and even within fandoms but does not explicitly address how they form as a result of the regulation of boundaries through inclusionary and exclusionary practices. Therefore, this study attempts to examine the ways in which discussion of canon, fanon, and what fans do or are encouraged not to do when they want their ship to "happen so much," to use withahook's phrase, reveal the existence of shipping boundaries and regulatory
practices. This analysis complicates current understandings of shipping and the types of regulation that occur within fan communities.

2. Regulation in fandom

[2.1] Fandom, according to Henry Jenkins, is dictated by "a common mode of reception, a common set of critical categories and practices, a tradition of aesthetic production, a set of social norms and expectations" (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, 144). Though this is not explicitly developed in the literature on fandom, these common modes, practices, norms, and expectations result in the formation of boundaries by those who share these common traits and those who do not. This is in part demonstrated by the great emphasis placed upon distinguishing between what constitutes fandom and what constitutes the mainstream. According to John Fiske (1992, 35), the boundary that serves to separate these two modes of media engagement is "strongly marked and patrolled" on both sides. The primary regulatory practice that ensures the maintenance of this boundary is the tendency for fans to "discriminate fiercely" between those who qualify as fans and those who do not. There are other scholars who suggest that it is actually the discrimination at the hands of those in the mainstream that forges this divide, for ostracism from the mainstream is often cited as one of the reasons why fans seek each other out (Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002; Holmes and Redmond 2006; Larsen and Zubernis 2013).

[2.2] Another example of a boundary that fans identify as crucially important in their everyday fan activities is that which distinguishes the members of the fandom from the creative body responsible for the media production, such as the writers, producers, and actors, often referred to as The Powers That Be (TPTB). In the past, this boundary was an intrinsic reality of fandom because fans generally did not have many methods of direct communication with TPTB. This dynamic has changed dramatically since the introduction of social media technologies, which both fans and TPTB embrace as a frequent and generally acceptable method of engagement. Recent discussions of the influence of Internet technology on fan interaction and "tele-participation" led Sharon Marie Ross (2008, 254) to conclude that the growth of this technology has "stimulated a likely already-present desire among viewers to participate to a larger degree in the experience of storytelling—whether by influencing narrative decisions, or by understanding the process of creation more fully, or by sharing thoughts and feelings with both creative professionals and fellow TV viewers." What Ross is implying here is that the expectations are shaped by more than just a desire for communication but also by the desire for fans' critical engagement to be respected by and accounted for by TPTB. Clearly, these expectations, when shared by many different kinds of fans, result in a number of fans with vastly different perspectives of a media narrative and ideas about what constitutes viable plot options. Furthermore, these expectations prove to be a double-edged sword for fan interactions because this freedom, when exercised by countless members of a fandom, results in the sharing of content that some fans love but other fans deem problematic. One of the ways to filter such content is to correct the fans who produce it.

[2.3] The Twilight fandom, for example, became highly stigmatized because of the source of their fandom (the Twilight book series, a series that many other fandoms love to hate) and the
actions of many of their fans, which were perceived to be extreme. As a result, the members of this fandom are regularly censured by other fandoms. Matt Hills (2012) discovered this when observing the behavior of other fandoms like those of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and the band Muse, both of which went to great pains to distance themselves from members of the Twilight fandom who wanted to claim membership in those fandoms as well. In order to distance themselves from Twilight fans, the *Buffy* and Muse fans engaged in the "repurposing of negative fan stereotypes" (Hills 2012, 126). They dismissed the Twifans as being obsessive, immature, and crazy. These actions indicate the existence of a fandom hierarchy, where some fandoms are more established and respected than others (Busse 2013). A tendency to organize fans hierarchically has been observed not only within fandom generally but also within individual fandoms, as fans attempt to organize themselves according to the most established and respected fans. Fan scholars identify certain characteristics that inform the location of fans within fan hierarchies: knowledge of the media production/fandom and length of time spent in fandom (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995). In science fiction fandoms, knowledge of the show and the amount of time spent in the fandom serve as barometers that determine a fan's power and influence (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995). The appraisal of other fans' power according to these standards encourages the emergence of "senior" or "executive" fans" (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, 150). The understanding is that these fans have the ability to serve agenda-setting functions by exercising their "discursive power" to "establish and control an important reading formation" (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, 150). This means that the fans not only have power over what aspects of a program are being discussed but also how they are to be read and interpreted by the fandom.

[2.4] There have been several articles written about the ways in which such discursive power has been exercised and at times contested within the Doctor Who fandom. It has been noted that fans within this fandom are highly concerned about the prominence of certain thematic topics (Booth and Kelly 2013) and certain genres (Hadas 2013). The overall theme of these observations is that romantic topics and the romance genre broadly are dismissed as being the concerns of inauthentic fans. A study conducted by Leora Hadas (2009) found that the interactions within the fandom appear to be influenced by a profound ideological divide, but this divide is in fact reflective of two distinct generational experiences with the program and the fandom. The two opposing discourses that lead to clashes within the fandom are the "fandom-as-organized-community view," which relies upon guidance from particular "norms and standards" and the "fandom as a safe, equal opportunity creative and didactic environment" (Hadas 2009, 1.2). The former view is that which resonates the most with the generation of Doctor Who fans who have been fans since the early iterations of the program, while the latter view is shared by many of those who have been brought in as a result of the increasing popularity of the newer versions. The most apparent difference between the two generations is the attitude about the role of gatekeepers within the fan community, with the former deeming gatekeepers necessary and the latter deeming them a burden because of the belief that they stifle fan creativity and expression, especially on fan fiction forums.

[2.5] The types of regulations that are more apparent in the literature on fandoms do not often feature prominently in analysis of fan forums. In fact, there are a number of studies that characterize the Internet in general as a safe space for fans, where they can experiment with
media texts and different aspects of same-sex relationships personally and narratively (Tosenberger 2008, 202; Collier, Lumadue, and Wooten 2009, 598). Other scholars have corroborated this position by claiming that fan creative endeavors, such as fan fiction, serve many purposes such as providing people, young people especially, with the ability to explore writing, narrative (Jenkins 1992), and identity in collaborative and supportive environments (Thomas 2006). Even when faced with evidence to the contrary, the depiction of fan spaces as free spaces prevails, as seen in Catherine Coker's response to "Uhura Racefail" of 2009, a fan dispute that involved a segment of the Star Trek (1966–69) fandom strongly opposing the decision to cast a black actress to play the role of Uhura, the love interest of Spock. Coker (2012, 93) states, "As an aca-fan myself, I thus find these readings to be both interesting and discomfiting since science fiction fandom in general and Star Trek fandom in particular have traditionally been safe havens free of intolerance."

This, however, was not the experience of fans of the romantic pairing of Kirk and Spock, two male characters from the original Star Trek series. In the 1990s, the community of fans that wrote and read fan fiction featuring this couple were "relegated to the odd corner of Star Trek conventions, and shunned, sometimes cruelly, by many in the broader community of Trekkers and writers of fan fiction" (Falzone 2005, 244). A similar behavior occurred in the Xena: Warrior Princess (1995–2001) fandom, which experienced conflict resulting from the number of fans who adamantly shipped Xena and Gabrielle (Helford 2000). More recently, fans who attempted to share sexually explicit fan fiction featuring the two biologically related male lead characters of Supernatural (2005–) with the producers of the show were vehemently criticized for their actions (Larsen and Zubernis 2013). These conflicts are primarily the result of differing interpretations of canon and subtext. Subtext, or the underlying meaning of a text, is a source of such conflict because there are fans who utilize evidence in subtext to support the ships that do not exist in canon, like those mentioned above. There are a number of fans who contest this practice and dismiss subtext as inconsequential or incorrectly interpreted. Alexander Doty (1993, xixii) claims that the labeling of such information as subtext and even the fact that it is regarded as categorically different than canon suggests a heterosexist reading of the text. Such is the case in the Swan Queen discourse as those aspects of the show that are most often relegated to subtext are those that would lend any credence to the possibility of homosexual feelings or actions between two major characters. As the analysis of the Swan Queen discourse will show, the regulation enforcing a heterosexist reading of canon, not dissimilar to that experienced in the Star Trek community, suggests that fans are still attempting to negotiate where homosexual pairings and fans of those pairings belong in fandom.

3. Collecting the Swan Queen discourse: Method to the Tumblr microblogs

Shipping wars are now a familiar aspect of media fandoms (Arachne 2010; Larsen and Zubernis 2012; Hawk 2014). These wars involve competitive voting for fans' preferred couples, the results of which are viewed as a source of validation and bragging rights for the fans who are able to turn out the highest number of votes. These numbers, however, do not reflect the arguments that are made by fans for why their ships exist, should exist, or why they are
important to them. These kinds of arguments are present on Tumblr. Tumblr is one of the newer fan technologies such as Twitter and Facebook. Despite such relative newness, Tumblr has 420 million users (as of October 23, 2014), 217 million blogs (as of January 2, 2015) and 113.6 million posts on average per day (as of January 26, 2014) (Smith 2015). The research design of this project involved the archiving of fan discourse on Tumblr about shipping generally and about the Swan Queen ship specifically. The terms that were used to guide the content search were the hashtags #swanqueen and #antiswanqueen. The search results included gifs (short moving videos), images, links to other Web sites, and the comments, remarks, and arguments of different kinds of OUAT shippers. However, because the primary concern of this paper is how members of this fandom debate about shipping and about the existence of the Swan Queen ship, text-based posts were the primary focus. It is in these kinds of posts where fan attitudes about shipping and about the relative merits or demerits of the Swan Queen ship are best articulated. After omitting the gifs, images, links, and doubles, a selection of 1,250 posts were analyzed for themes. This body of posts includes messages from fans as early as October 2011 when the program first aired to November 2014 when data collection was completed. This is because results from the search engine are presented in order of recent reblogging (or reposting) as opposed to in order of original post date.

[3.2] The names of the individual fans who are cited below have been altered in order to avoid potentially committing "a cardinal fannish sin," which is to reveal the identities of fans and link names either pseudonymous or real to fan activity that some would rather keep secret (Busse and Helleckson 2012, 39). However, there are many Swan Queen shippers who have started to post their own names and pictures on Tumblr in order to display how serious they are about their ship and their desire to have this ship recognized and realized. The content of the microblogs, in general, is underestimated for its potential to reflect and also to problematize current conventions in fan behavior, which show that attitudes about the linking of fan and personal identity are changing. The findings here recognize that there are certain inner workings of fandoms that should be brought to light and treated with a seriousness that is often not given to shipping activity or fan interactions online.

4. Sailing in murky waters: Swan Queen and shipper boundaries

[4.1] The first signs of the Swan Queen ship appeared on social media soon after the airing of the first episode. Many fans perceived the chemistry between Emma and Regina from the first moment that they met. Fans of Swan Queen often bring up this fact when defending the ships' presence among other popular ships. In response to a challenge from other fans, one shipper writes, "Need I remind you that SQ has been there since season 1 episode 1? CS didn't even come along till season 2 and OQ didn't come along till 3" (homosexualtigers). The other ships being referenced here: Captain Swan (Captain Hook and Emma) and Outlaw Queen (Robin Hood and the Evil Queen) are the relationships that the characters are involved in according to the canon of the television show. This statement is appealing to the most conventionally accepted tenet of the fan hierarchy that determines a fan's placement according to length of time spent within the fandom. According to this logic, the Swan Queen fans who have been a part of the fandom from the beginning should be regarded as a type of senior fan. Yet, the
Swan Queen ship and fans continue to be challenged, primarily because of different interpretations of canon and subtext.

[4.2] Another shipper whose allegiances lay with other OUAT ships went on to suggest that Swan Queen shippers have no respect for canon at all. They are not just incorrectly interpreting canon but ignoring it completely. "SQ (and its shippers) is something I will never understand. Especially the crazy ones. The psychotic ones. I mean, what freaking show are you watching to get that ship and steadfastly ignore the canon? Are we even viewing the same show?" (asyouswish). In one fell swoop, this fan dismisses the creative efforts of the Swan Queen shippers by labeling them as crazy. The implication here is that shipping Emma and Regina together is so thoroughly illogical that it is the stuff of pure fantasy and completely ignores any consideration of the OUAT canon. This also insinuates that abiding by canon is the primary way in which normal or sane shippers function within fandom.

[4.3] Other comments have more explicit appeals to normalcy, especially when attempting to mark certain fan activities as normal and others as deviant. One fan goes on to apologize to the normal shippers when they write "Im really sorry for the nice swanqueen shippers that get the bad name because the biggest part of their fandom is a bunch of douchebags." The apology is followed by a clarification: "i am reffering to the normal fans, the ones who don't send hate to the writers or actors/actresses, the ones that don't jump on other fandoms throats for no reason, and the ones who simply enjoy their ship and are greatful to the show and its creators for making them passionate about something" (captain-always).

[4.4] The writer uses the nice and "normal fan" as a point of comparison to paint the actions of other Swan Queen shippers as disrespectful. The conception of normal fans established here suggests that they must pay deference to the creators of the program and that doing so entails passive engagement and enjoyment of said program. They are allowed to be passionate about the program but not so passionate that it leads them to "send hate." The actions that have therefore been identified as those which are only perpetrated by the opposite of the normal fan, or the deviant fan, are sending hate to writers and actors and attacking other ships.

[4.5] The hate that the shipper is describing here includes comments and inquiries that Swan Queen shippers make about the potential for this ship, whether or not the subtext is intentional, and how TPTB feel about the existence of this ship and its shippers. Some fans believe that these inquiries and critiques are the root causes of the aggression being experienced in the OUAT fandom. The following are two examples of statements that reflect this belief: "It bothers me that SQ essentially labels itself the victim yet takes no responsibility for a lot of the drama that they cause/are involved with. You have seen the hate that writers and actors get over SQ. It's the only ship that has caused actors to issue statements shutting it down" (Anonymous comment to SQ shipper wildchild)."Cheers for anyone who's not throwing hate at Adam, Eddy, the entire cast, regulars and guests" (rendezvous).

[4.6] These comments further validate the idea of the normal fan as being one who does not send hate. They also expand this concept by implying that deviant fans, like Swan Queen shippers, cause drama within the fandom by forcing TPTB to negatively engage with the fandom. Clearly, the concern here is informed by the desire to maintain open communication
with TPTB, which explains why such emphasis is placed upon positive reception and communication. These comments indicate that the targeted types of shippers in the case of the OUAT fandom are not Hadas's (2013) rabid shippers but rather shippers who are critical of canon.

[4.7] Swan Queen fans admit to thorough dissatisfaction with canon, yet there are also a number of shippers who express concerns about TPTB's ability to adequately manage the Swan Queen romance narrative. They fear that TPTB would essentially change the relationship as fans have imagined it or ruin it completely. One fan posed the following question to another: "Have you ever worried that if SQ ever became more than (ridiculously potent) subtext, and A and E actually tried to write it explicitly canon, that they would mangle it so badly that we'd actually look back to now as 'the good ol days' of SQ fandom?" (anonymous). The response they received was:

[4.8] No, not at all ... But canon is canon. However crappy it may be, it counts for something huge. It's representation, recognition and validation. Fanon is important, fandom makes a difference, we won't be entirely lost to history, but fan works are the raw scraps we've been tossed ... while canon is being cooked and served a fresh, homemade, full course meal. (tabulaic)

[4.9] In addressing this subject, this shipper inexplicably taps into the issue at the heart of the canon and fanon divide: legitimacy. OUAT shippers who have spoken out against Swan Queen wonder: "What makes SQ so special? Why should the cast have to talk about a ship that isn't happening in a romantic way?" (against-sq). Both types of comments, those supporting and those dismissing the ship, acknowledge that the only way for Swan Queen shippers to be viewed as legitimate by the rest of the OUAT fandom is through introduction into canon. All of these fans seem to share the understanding that canon and TPTB are infallible, inflexible, and not something that fans control. Fanon by comparison is identified as an important aspect of fandom but not as something that has much influence outside of the realm of fandom. A narrative when solely located in fanon is not thought to be worthy of representation, recognition, and validation.

[4.10] In response to the comments that attempt to regulate and delegitimize the Swan Queen ship, a number of shippers have been trying to establish their cause as an issue that is crucially important in media generally. They are doing this by linking this ship to the fight for more lesbian representation on television. Swan Queen shippers proclaim that they are "so tired of almost canon lesbians. Tired of the tease, tired of the denial, tired of almost enjoying books or t.v. or movies. Tired of loving characters and seeing their lesbian potential and then witnessing the oncoming dick parade" (colorandstones). This sentiment is tapping into the conviction of Swan Queen shippers that by limiting the amount of LGBT representation on their programs, TPTB are actually forcefully closeting certain characters. Another shipper expresses concern about how this lack of representation and the closeting of characters who appear to be gay affects and influences the audience:

[4.11] LGBTQ* kids are still not the ones their favorite stories are about. They're forced to remain a passive audience for television shows that cater to their bullies.
It's not explicit, but the message is clear: We're nothing...I wonder: When exactly are things going to get better? I need Swan Queen, Sleeping Warrior, Red Beauty and/or any other same-sex pairing. I need Mulan, and my other childhood heroes, to be like me. I need LGBTQ* characters on television. I need them as individuals. And I need them in relationships. (real-vision)

[4.12] The writer indicates the introduction to canon of the Swan Queen ship or other ships like it is not just about pleasing shippers but about indicating that such relationships are possible, which is an important message to send to both adults and children who are LGBT. Other fans take issue with the way in which Swan Queen shippers have been introducing LGBT representation into the shipper discourse. Under the guise of a "fun fact," one such shipper remarks, "asking for LGBT representation should be about asking for LGBT representation, not harassing writers and cast members to make their straight characters gay so your crack ship can happen" (captainswan). The perspective shared here treats the sexuality of the characters as an aspect of canon that cannot be altered. According to this fan's logic, more LGBT representation on television should not take the form of altering a character's established sexuality but can only be brought about through the introduction of characters that are already LGBT. This suggests that shippers would find it less problematic if the ships that featured homosexual pairings were composed of canon homosexual characters. This fan also categorizes the Swan Queen ship as a "crack ship" or one that is so utterly ridiculous that people ship it solely because it is humorous and ironic to do so.

[4.13] According to one Swan Queen shipper, the type of vitriol found in this comment is a reflection of the power and popularity that the ship has achieved. The evidence for this, they claim, is in the fact that the Swan Queen ship is not just treated as an illogical fallacy but is treated as something that needs to be dismantled:

[4.14] So people like me, who are used to noncanon ships, are happily and adamantly shipping SwanQueen. And we don't fully understand the tension with the canon het [heterosexual] ships—to us, they're nothing new, just things to work around in fic [fan fiction]....Almost all het pairings COULD happen, in a way that queer pairings almost never do. By fighting us, however, they unwittingly give our ships a legitimacy that we wouldn't have otherwise. We're used to being ignored, but suddenly we aren't anymore. Suddenly we have power. (bookland)

[4.15] The tension within the fandom then is portrayed as something that originates with the critics of Swan Queen, for by engaging the shippers they have unwittingly legitimated their claims and their efforts. This person speaks from the position of being a fan for many years, not just of Swan Queen but also of other queer ships. Fan fiction, in their experience, serves a dual function. The first function is that it allows those interested in exploring certain narratives the ability to do so, and the second function is that it allows those who have a problem with such narratives the ability to remain ignorant of them.

[4.16] This is a sentiment shared by many non-Swan Queen shippers who contend that if Swan Queen shippers are intent upon exploring the narrative of their ship, the proper venue for it is in fan fiction. "I think it's perfectly fine to ship SQ," one fan states, "do fan-fics etc. but to
constantly pester and insist despite being told it's not happening, it's just uncalled for" (bigmac). Though Swan Queen shippers produce copious amounts of fan fiction, they have largely refused the request that fan fiction be the only medium where this ship should be realized. This has resulted in the ship being referred to as its own fandom. It is difficult to say at this time whether this is because the ship has been thought of as separate since the beginning of its existence or if the contentiousness has resulted in the creation of a boundary between the Swan Queen shippers and the rest of the fandom. The general sense that non-Swan Queen shippers share is that the Swan Queen ship is a fandom predominantly made up of problematic fans, with only a minority of normal fans. Though the boundary between this ship and the rest of the ships in the fandom appears to be clearly established and recognized by many shippers, other comments also explain that separation from the OUAT fandom proves to be a complex proposition because "every time SWEN complains about the general disrespect we and other queer ships are treated with we were told to just stop watching. And when we do just that we get told we aren't true fans and are being pathetic" (cheshire). What the fan is expressing here is a desire to be separate from the fandom while maintaining the ability to still call themselves fans of certain characters and premises of the show. Other Swan Queen shippers, however, embrace this disconnection because, as one Swan Queen shipper argues, "we've been a separate fandom for a good long while now really. And we can continue to be a fandom til the end of our days" (mills).

5. Conclusion

[5.1] The Swan Queen discourse proves that the role of the shipper within fandom, though often portrayed as one-dimensional (as in the rabid shipper) is more nuanced than it appears. The description of fandoms put forth by Henry Jenkins can also be extended to shipping. Ships, just like fandoms, share "a common mode of reception, a common set of critical categories and practices, a tradition of aesthetic production, a set of social norms and expectations" (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, 144). In this case, what is deemed common in shipping is determined by the regulation of shipper activities that enforce boundaries dictating how fans should interpret canon, how fans should communicate this interpretation to TPTB, and where such interpretations should be shared. The expectation of these fans is that a shipper must remain respectful by accepting canon completely, engaging with TPTB positively, and restricting extreme dalliances in fanon to fan fiction. The fact that such boundaries exist suggests that shippers within an individual fandom also form hierarchies not just according to popularity but also according to the strictures of idealized fan behavior. In this case, the problem is not simply being overly interested in a romantic pairing but being dedicated to a romantic pairing that will never happen. Objectively speaking, all fan creations are fictional; however, some are subjectively deemed more fictional than others. This complicates the notion of how far is too far when it comes to fan fiction. Is portraying a character in a queer relationship more of a violation than portraying them in a heterosexual relationship that is not canon? According to some fans, the answer to this question is yes, absolutely.

[5.2] The interactions observed above suggest that claims that the Internet is a safe platform for nuance and diversity are only talking about one part of the fandom story, a part that is not necessarily applicable to shipping. When engaging in shipping activities, fans have employed
discursive mechanisms that foster a model of normal fan activity by which fans are judged and compared. This model reflects the tension between those who want to embrace diversity and those who think that doing so comes at the price of destroying what fandom is/should be. Additionally, the self-proclaimed arbiters of legitimacy on Tumblr are not those who have been fans the longest but rather those who remain the most faithful to the program, as deference to canon is serving as a proxy for superior knowledge and understanding. Because of the emphasis placed upon deference to canon, the regulation of deviant groups of fans such as Swan Queen is serving the purpose of stripping the ship of legitimacy and the status that comes with it. Legitimacy then becomes a mechanism to determine inclusion and exclusion.

[5.3] Fan fiction, when discussed in this case, becomes a place where problematic shippers can exert their creative efforts, that is, as long as the stories are confined to this realm. This is identified as a way to maintain order within the fandom, to respect canon, and also to shield other shippers from such controversial content. The treatment of the queer ship in this way shows that fans are creating boundaries between varying degrees of fictional possibility, where queer ships comprised of what are supposed to be heterosexual characters are treated as a kind of hyperfictional creation put forth by overzealous fans. Therefore, fans described in this paper are making sexuality into a narrative construction that is less flexible than are other aspects of a story or of a character, especially once sexualities have been established through action, pronouncement, or connotation in canon. This is displayed by the fact that even the possibility that the characters could be bisexual is openly disregarded or dismissed, playing into the notion that sexuality only exists according to the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

[5.4] The fact that there are an increasing number of openly gay and lesbian characters on television would lead one to assume that queer ships would not experience such regulation and relegation to fan fiction. Though there are no comments above that explicitly discuss whether it is right or wrong to be a homosexual, this concern lies in the subtext of the conversation had about canon, character’s sexualities, and the desire of shippers to change these sexualities. In this way, it is not the sexuality of the fans themselves per se, since not all Swan Queen fans mention theirs, but the desire to portray some characters as having different sexualities that is structurally affecting the ways in which these shippers are treated. The regulatory practices displayed in the case of the Swan Queen ship allude to an unspoken but palpable desire for homogeneity in fandom, which would allow for the positive aspects of fandom to continue unabated and the only negative tendencies that remain would be those that serve the gatekeeping function of maintaining peace. Further research is needed to assess how this desire to maintain boundaries within fandom excludes certain fans, activities, and even communities of fans from engaging equally on digital platforms.

6. Notes

1. Some examples of the many productions based on fairy tales are The Princess and the Frog (2009), Tangled (2010), Red Riding Hood (2011), and Puss in Boots (2011).
2. The pseudonyms are loosely based on those used by fans in the *Once Upon a Time* fandom. They reflect specific aspects of the program that are recognizable to other fans.

7. Works cited


Symposium

Wikipedia and participatory culture: Why fans edit

Paul Thomas

University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, United States

Abstract—Online, fans of popular culture media partake in participatory culture in various ways, such as writing fan fiction and scrutinizing media on message boards. Another way they do so is by editing relevant articles in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. In fact, research has shown that Wikipedia articles skew heavily toward pop culture, suggesting that fans of pop culture are among the most enthusiastic of Wikipedia's editors. Of course, the question emerges: Why are pop culture fans in particular so interested in editing Wikipedia? Building on previous research, I argue that fans want to take part in the production of the media that they enjoy, that Wikipedia allows editors to create their own paratext (i.e., the Wikipedia article) in relation to a main text (e.g., a movie, a television show, a book series), and that this paratext may be heavily used by the general public. Such usage is a form of implicit approval that affirms the editors' knowledge and encourages them to make more edits. Thus, Wikipedia validates the fan editor's work in a way that other outlets for participatory culture (e.g., fan fiction, fan art, songwriting) cannot.

Keywords—Fandom; Popular culture


1. Introduction

Participatory culture is a type of relationship between producers and consumers wherein consumers are encouraged to take part in the dissemination and production of a media object. Online, fans of popular culture media partake in participatory culture in various ways, such as composing fan fiction and scrutinizing media on message boards. Another way in which they do so is by editing relevant articles in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. In fact, research has shown that Wikipedia articles skew heavily toward popular culture, suggesting that fans of pop culture are some of the most enthusiastic of Wikipedia's editors. Of course, the question emerges: Why are pop culture fans in particular so interested in editing Wikipedia?

I argue here that fans want to create a paratext that will be read and that will disseminate facts about their chosen media object, and that approval of their efforts encourages them to continue. Fans favor Wikipedia over other forms of participatory culture largely because of the site's infrastructural nature, which guarantees both an audience (ensuring that the fan's work will be read and that information about a media object's canon will be successfully disseminated) and a mechanism of implicit approval. In other words, fans choose Wikipedia over other forms of participatory culture because the site is better able to both broadcast and validate their work.

2. On the nature of participatory culture and fandom

The term "participatory culture" is used to discuss the "shift in power relations" between producers and consumers, such that consumers are encouraged to participate in both the creation and dissemination of content, rather than merely consuming it (Burgess and Green 2009, 10); participatory culture is thus often considered the opposite of a more spectatorial consumer culture (Jenkins 2006, 41). According to Jenkins et al., participatory culture has "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of information mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices" (2009, 7). Jenkins et al. note that "a participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter" (2009, 3). Redundant as it is to point out, participatory culture encourages active participation.
Participatory culture is in many ways intertwined with fandom. Mittell defines fandom and fan culture as "existing principally in relation to another external cultural object... The key aspect for fan culture is that participants have an emotional engagement with a shared cultural form, dedicating their time, money, and creative energies to exploring that relationship" (2013, 38). Fans therefore often not merely consume but also interact with the object or objects of their affection. Today, there are myriad digital outlets (e.g., Tumblr, YouTube, Reddit, DeviantArt, and various discussion forums) that allow fans to engage with, consume, and create content, thereby taking part in participatory culture.

3. Enter Wikipedia

One manifestation of participatory culture is Wikipedia, which describes itself on its home page (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) as "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit." Wikipedia fits the description of participatory culture offered by Jenkins et al.: it has a low barrier to entry (a user can edit anonymously or sign up for a free account), support for creating and sharing content (editors come together to review and constructively critique articles to certify their quality), and a mentor system ensuring that information is passed from veteran editors to novice contributors (whole Wikipedia essays exist to explicate the finer workings of the encyclopedia to a novice, and many senior editors will leave useful messages on pages created by new editors to educate them and acclimate them to the site) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Essays). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, editors who share information on Wikipedia believe that their contributions matter; in fact, one Wikipedia essay is titled "Editors Matter" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Editors_matter).

Wikipedia covers a vast variety of topics: as of December 2015, the site hosted over 5 million articles, with an average of 800 new articles being created every day (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Statistics). However, the encyclopedia's concept coverage is not uniform, and the site definitely skews toward certain topics. In "Single White Males: Systemic Bias in Wikipedia's Obsessions," Au (2015) argues that Wikipedia is edited mostly by white men, who favor articles that focus on pop culture at the expense of other, more culturally important topics (note 1). While Au paints a fairly negative portrait of the encyclopedia, his assertion that Wikipedia is heavily skewed toward pop culture is particularly important in regard to this essay, for it suggests that many of Wikipedia's most ardent editors are members of specific fandoms.

4. Why do fans edit?

Fans engage in participatory culture in a variety of ways. Why, then, do some fans favor Wikipedia over other forms of participatory culture? The answer to this question is multifaceted, and to determine it, I will examine three theories put forth by previous scholars: first, many fans are eager to create paratexts that will be read; second, many fans are interested in documenting their cultural object of interest; and third, internal self-concept motivation (that is to say, motivation that "takes the form of the individual setting internal standards that become the basis for the ideal self"; Pandey 2005, 57) generated by approval of their efforts encourages fans to continue editing.

Theory 1: Mittell suggests that fans are often eager to create paratexts ("independent cultural works") in relation to main texts (e.g., a movie, a television show, a book series) (2013, 38). But these fans are not content to see their paratexts wither away in obscurity. "Fans," according to Camille Bacon-Smith, "write in order to be read, to be interpreted by a community" (quoted in Booth 2010, 26). This means that a fan-created paratext is essentially useless if no one reads it.

Theory 2: According to Mittell, some fans are interested in documenting their cultural object of interest, rather than modifying or building off of it (such as through fan fiction or fan art) (2013, 38). Forte and Bruckman argue that the motivations of Wikipedia editors are similar to those of scientists: "like scientists, contributors to Wikipedia seek to collaboratively identify and publish true facts about the world" (Forte and Bruckman 2005, 1). For my purposes here, both of these claims can be applied to fans. Scientists try to put
forth facts about reality, and fans seek to put forth facts (i.e., "canon," a term I discuss below) about their media property of interest.

[4.4] Theory 3: Yang and Lai (2010) test four possible reasons why people continue to edit the online encyclopedia: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, external self-concept motivation, and internal self-concept motivation. On the basis of statistical analysis, they argue that when people share knowledge and receive a positive response (i.e., approval) from fellow editors, they feel validated in their knowledge and are inclined to share more. Therefore, Yang and Lai conclude that internal self-concept motivation is the most significant factor for why individuals—including fans—continue to edit Wikipedia (2010, 1382).

5. The infrastructural nature of Wikipedia

[5.1] Let us assume that these theories are correct: that canon-minded fans edit Wikipedia out of a desire to put forth a fit-to-be read paratext about their media property of interest, and that they are encouraged to edit again and again by internal self-concept motivation. This does not, however, explain why they might prefer editing Wikipedia to some other form of participatory culture, such as creating YouTube videos to document the history of a fictional world, posting an article on Reddit that discusses an author’s statements about the plot of a novel, or blogging on Tumblr about the backstory of a show’s characters. Indeed, these are also ways in which fans can express facts about their media property of interest, and they can also receive approval, encouraging the fans to continue (note 2). However, I contend that the reason that many fans are drawn specifically toward editing lies in Wikipedia’s infrastructural nature.

[5.2] John Durham Peters quotes Paul Edwards to define infrastructures as "large, force-amplifying systems that connect people and institutions across large scales of space and time" (2015, 31). Examples include both the material (e.g., dams, power plants, highways) and the virtual (e.g., the Internet). These structures require continual modifications and improvements, their inner workings are often hidden from the public, and—perhaps most importantly—they are at risk of being sabotaged or hijacked by rogues (Peters 2015, 31, 33). However, despite their size, they often disappear into the background of culture and society. This is because, as they are used more often, they are taken for granted and become banal (Peters 2015). In other words, these massive structures become "mundane to the point of boredom" (Star 1999, 377) and thus fade into the "beaten paths of imperticiance" (McLuhan 1964, 198). As a result, infrastructures, although massive, are often invisible to those who use them.

[5.3] Wikipedia is the epitome of such a platform in the digital sphere. First, it is built upon the ethos of continual modification and improvement. Second, while the inner workings of the site are not exactly hidden from the public, they are tucked away behind tabs and hidden underneath article pages; they are not readily apparent to the layperson. Third and finally, Wikipedia is notorious for being hijacked by vandals. Thus, Wikipedia has all the trappings of a digital infrastructure.

6. The implications of Wikipedia's infrastructuralism

[6.1] Why does the infrastructural nature of Wikipedia affect why fans edit? In many ways, the site holds a monopoly on knowledge (even if it is merely aggregated from other sources), and consequently, it is often a first stop during the research process. Wikipedia is where people go to verify a bit of trivia, look up a name, or confirm a date; it is a heavily used—and therefore mundane—information acquisition tool. As a result, it all too often fades into the background, despite being an extremely important sociocultural "well of knowledge" with far-reaching implications (Au 2015).

[6.2] Because of Wikipedia's infrastructural nature, millions of people unreflectively use the site. These individuals—the consumers of Wikipedia's shared knowledge—are seeking out information, and are gaining it by reading articles that fan editors had a hand in creating. In other words, when a fan edits a Wikipedia page, that edit may be seen by anywhere from a dozen to a million individuals per day. Fans' edits are being
broadcast to a massive audience that is actively using the information, and their desire to create paratexts that will be read is being met. Thus, theory 1 is supported.

[6.3] Because of the site's massive audience, Wikipedia is an excellent platform for disseminating facts about a media property, or what fans call canon. In the realm of fandom, this term refers to "the complete fictional universe deemed (either by the fans or by the media creators) 'authentic,' or an accurate history of that story world" (Booth 2010, 35). There is thus a fine line between what is "canon" and what is "fanon" (a portmanteau of "fan" and "canon"), the latter a term that denotes beliefs about a media property that are commonly shared by fans but unsupported (even if not contradicted) by the property itself. Wikipedia does not allow articles to include made-up or unsourced information, and thus they almost never contain fanon (Mittell 2013, 38–39, 41). Consequently, because fanon is not allowed on Wikipedia, it follows that those who edit the encyclopedia are more likely to care about collecting and reproducing facts about—rather than unofficially expanding upon—a media object of interest. Therefore, other forms of participatory culture (such as writing fan fiction or drawing fan art) might not satisfy their desire to document a media object, whereas Wikipedia does. Thus theory 2 is validated.

[6.4] Finally, a very large number of Wikipedia articles are viewed almost every day; indeed, many of these articles are ones that fan editors have actively contributed to (note 3). This frequent use of the fan editor's work could therefore be seen as evidence that the public deems it informative and helpful, engendering a sense of implicit approval. Because Yang and Lai do not clearly indicate where the approval that is key to internal self-concept motivation comes from (2010, 1380–82), I contend that their argument can be modified and amended slightly: the implicit approval generated by frequent usage affirms fans' knowledge and encourages them to continue sharing it by editing Wikipedia. Thus, theory 3, while modified and extended, is for the most part supported.

[6.5] Because of its infrastructural nature, Wikipedia has both a built-in audience and a built-in mechanism for garnering approval. Some fans want to put forth readable paratexts (theory 1) containing facts about their media property of interest (theory 2), and editing Wikipedia is an efficient and effective way for them to achieve this goal; the site's implicit approval mechanism also ensures that they will continue to do so (theory 3). While other forms of participatory culture might require the same amount of knowledge and might disseminate facts about the media properties, the paratexts that result from them may go unread (e.g., a Tumblr blog might not be viewed, a YouTube video might go unwatched, a Reddit post might not be read). They are less reliable ways of satisfying the fan editors' goals (note 4). Wikipedia is perhaps the only platform available on which fans can effectively and efficiently broadcast facts about their media objects of interest and receive built-in approval, encouraging them to continue.

7. Conclusion

[7.1] Fans are initially drawn to Wikipedia by a desire to create a paratext alongside the main text as well as a desire to spread facts about the media property that they care about. By providing an infrastructure, Wikipedia ensures that others will view and use articles edited by fans. This can be seen as an implicit form of approval, and this approval affirms the editors' knowledge and encourages them to make more edits. While this may also happen in other forms of participatory culture, it is less assured. Thus, Wikipedia both broadcasts and validates fan editors' work in a way that other outlets for participatory culture simply cannot.

8. Notes

1. Kittur, Chi, and Suh (2008) asserted that roughly 30 percent of Wikipedia's articles dealt with "culture and the arts" and 15 percent dealt with "people and self." These categories largely contained "more traditionally encyclopedic subjects" alongside "popular subjects"—that is, articles concerning pop culture topics. By contrast, "articles dealing with the 'harder' topics, such as the natural sciences, technology, and mathematics have lower representation, accounting for only 14% of all category assignments" (1511). Further research is needed to determine the exact percentage of Wikipedia articles concerned with pop culture.
2. Of course, these are not exclusive: a Wikipedia editor can dabble in fan fiction or create YouTube videos, for instance. However, many members of a participatory culture seem to prefer expressing themselves in a particular way. This paper focuses on those who favor Wikipedia over other outlets.

3. Not every page on Wikipedia is being constantly viewed by someone online. Some articles are sporadically viewed every other day, whereas others go days and weeks at a time without viewers. As such, there is a chance that a Wikipedia paratext (like other forms of participatory culture) can indeed go unread. However, because Wikipedia is so massive and so heavily trafficked, the likelihood that a fan's given edit will be seen by an audience is much higher than were they to have expressed themselves via another outlet.

4. Fans might also create readable paratexts by editing fan wikis, which are Web sites that, like Wikipedia, use the wiki markup language but are devoted to specific subjects (Mittell 2013, 38). Fan wikis, however, are not as heavily trafficked as Wikipedia and thus are unlikely to be infrastructures. As a result, they do not have a built-in audience or an intrinsic mechanism for garnering approval in the way that Wikipedia does.

9. Works cited


Symposium

The creative empowerment of body positivity in the cosplay community

Jordan Kass Lome

Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States

[0.1] Abstract—In a case study about the cosplay community in relation to creative empowerment of identity and body positivity, I created a blog (http://cosplaycasestudy.tumblr.com/) and devised a survey that allowed cosplayers whom I met online and in person to discuss what cosplay meant to them as individuals. Using a combination of qualitative, arts-based research and journalism, I used online documentation to record the ways cosplayers see the community changing, noting themes such as body policing, social media, and sexual harassment.

[0.2] Keywords—Blog; Identity; Survey; Tumblr


1. Introduction

[1.1] Cosplay is a transformative art form that can empower one's creative identity while providing a space for body positivity. I have been casually acquainted with cosplay since my first anime convention in fourth grade, Anime Boston, which I attended with my older sister and my father. We were obviously fresh blood. Dad kept taking pictures of these weird people in outrageous yet amazing costumes. No one felt embarrassed when a 40-year-old man accompanied by two girls requested a picture; instead, they transformed immediately into the character they were personifying. I had no context yet for this crazy world, but 15 years later it has become part of my lifestyle. Ever since I became active in fandom studies in art education, I have been researching the creative empowerment of identity through cosplay by conducting interviews, surveys, and on-site field observations at comic conventions. I have collated my data in a blog that showcases cosplayers' stories and describes how they grew to love cosplay as both a hobby and profession. Cosplay makes people feel more confident about themselves—their bodies, their sexuality, and their physical abilities—no matter who they are or how much time and money they invest.
Cosplay is the act of dressing up or emulating fictional or historical characters. Fictional characters can include figures from television, comics, movies, and other various forms of media (http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2011.0246). In cosplay—the term is a portmanteau of "costume" and "role-play"—people create and become the art. While most cosplayers draw from existing characters, some create their own characters or use creative license to incorporate aspects of their own identities into their characters (figure 1). The culture of cosplay physically manifests at conventions, where cosplayers pose for press photos, meet up for gatherings, join collectives based on the work they are recreating, and form online fan bases that support their professional cosplay careers. Broadly defined, the culture of cosplay is a collective creation of traditions, products, and ideas that bring meaning to individuals in terms of their self-confidence, mentally and physically. Cosplay can transcend conventional costuming to become a transformative and creative means to view a character, as well as the person embodying them.

Figure 1. Photo of group of The Lord of the Rings cosplay: Merry (far left), Galadriel (second from right), and Pippin (far right). [View larger image.]

2. Methodology

Interested in learning who these cosplayers were outside of the costumes, I put together a case study this year for Boston Comic-Con to find more about the role of the arts in cosplay. I surveyed approximately 20 cosplayers, asking how they got into cosplay, what draws them to the community, and what changes they’d like to see happen in the future. Some of the responses went far beyond what I anticipated. In fact, they shifted the focus of my research. I became fascinated with the need to promote body positivity both for cosplayers and society in general. I read stories about how cosplay brought people out of their personal bubbles, how it was a freeing form of art for them, and how many cosplayers hope to make this hobby a profession. The more cosplayers I surveyed, the more my research began to change. I began documenting the survey responses in the form of a Tumblr blog.
(http://cosplaycasestudy.tumblr.com) while also using the blog to make the history of cosplay understandable to an external audience of professors, fellow cohorts, and parents. My blog contains all of my facts, documentation, survey data, and interviews with professionals in the field.

3. Cosplay online and off-line at Boston Comic-Con

[3.1] The first of my main research questions was, "How does cosplay play a role in being a creative/transformative act of empowering identity?" This became the focal question of my research during Boston Comic-Con. During my on-site research, most of my responses referenced creative license and the community itself. People like adding their own twist to already established characters, and like to share that transformation with others. Examples might be someone dressing as a steampunk-influenced Santa Claus, or as Sherlock Holmes in the 1970s. Some of these people do not consider themselves professional cosplayers, and instead see cosplay as a special craft to vent their creativity. "I myself have 'cosplayed' characters I've made up," said one respondent. "It's entirely about being whoever you want to be—acting is a huge part, you get to fully take on a character you love and know and other people treat you like you are that character." Others find investing in cosplay professionally useful. Cosplayers can spend a month or more creating elaborate costumes with stories tied to them, costing over $500 for materials. Then they find marketing opportunities at conventions, which is how some cosplayers become professional models or spokespeople.

[3.2] While at Boston Comic-Con (figure 2), I noticed a large percentage of attendees cosplayed as either characters from The CW's *Arrow* or Cartoon Network's *Steven Universe*, the latter of which has been most positive for female cosplayers of color and LGBTQ+ cosplayers. The former mainly appealed to men dressed as the titular character, Green Arrow; yet both men and women cosplayed as a variety of main and recurring characters in *Steven Universe*. Both of these shows are highly regarded for their diverse casting and character designs that make the characters accessible for any person to play.
[3.3] From my Boston Comic-Con and online survey data, I learned that people are generally drawn to the inclusive atmosphere of the cosplay community. "I really like how nice people are and open. When you're in cosplay strangers rush up to you excited to gush about you. And you make their days! That's the best part!" said one anonymous survey participant. People often become cosplayers through friends. Thanks to social media, which I would argue is the glue in the cosplay community, there is a diverse yet amicable environment built on inclusion and advocacy for the right to cultural expression through transformative work.

[3.4] Most people are first exposed to cosplay through the Internet, online groups, anime, or friends already in the community. Cosplay has many social media support groups that help cosplayers feel included. Sites such as CosplayingWhileBlack (http://cosplayingwhileblack.tumblr.com) and DisabledCosplayers (http://disabledcosplayers.tumblr.com) are meant as spaces where cosplayers of color and with disabilities can interact and share costuming secrets. These sites also provide a positive way for cosplayers to represent the missing voices within the community. My survey answers also showed that, since there is no primary physical destination for cosplayers other than cons, social media has become vital for connecting cosplayers to each other. Apps such as Cosplyr (http://cosplyr.com/), Anime Animo (http://animeamino.com/), CosplayNet (http://cosplaynet.com.au/), Cosplay Showcase, and Cosplanner are helpful in keeping cosplayers connected with other
cosplay groups. They also serve as important archives, as they are visual blogs and portfolios of cosplayers' work.

4. Body positivity and an imperfect community

[4.1] Although body positivity is an increasingly common catchphrase in online communities as well as at conventions, my research showed that cosplayers still encounter misconceptions as to whether people can cosplay characters of different genders, races, heights, weights, and so on. "You can't be that character because you are black!" "You are too fat to be x character!," and "A dude can't dress like a girl!" are still frequent complaints. As one survey respondent put it, "It's impossible to be a cosplayer and ignore the amount of elitism and policing in the community on top of the sexual harassment cosplayers of all genders experience at cons or online." While cosplay fosters a sense of creative empowerment in many people, it still faces many obstacles that affect its reputation and the cosplayers themselves. This policing and prejudice, as well as sexual harassment, defeats what cosplay is about.

[4.2] More stories are beginning to surface about harassment at conventions, ranging from nonconsensual photography to assault to child pornography (http://www.themarysue.com/cosplay-photographer-child-porn/). Harassment and body policing are the central issues that affect the cosplay community. What is worse is that most conventions do not have protocols set up to address sexual harassment or do anything to support victims (http://metro.co.uk/2015/07/09/is-sexual-harassment-ruining-comic-con-for-cosplayers-5286543/). Recently, conventions have been trying to improve policies that support cosplayers if they are feeling hurt, attacked, or assaulted. Because cosplay is intrinsically tied to the Internet, more cosplayers are becoming ready to unveil harassers online and report their stories.

5. Cosplay as art and craft

[5.1] The arts have a major influence on the cosplay community. "It's a way to take 2D characters and embody them on a 3D scale. You become a work of art," explained one respondent. Cosplay stems from fashion and costume design and could thus be considered a visual form of art, but it also includes role-play and other forms of dramatic play that create a performance. In addition to prints, jewelry, literature, and other fan-made merchandise, major cosplaying events showcase performers. Human chess, masquerades, which may include collaborative scenes devised by groups of cosplayers, and even dating games in full character are some of the performance games common within the community. When I go to these events, it is like being in the middle of a giant improvised drama, since everyone is in character and the audience is already engaged the minute they come through the convention doors. In
fact, audience participation is a crucial part of cosplayers' experience, as it includes the whole fandom community and gives everyone a role, even those who are not in costume.

[5.2] Cosplay is gradually becoming more recognized in the media as a form of art. In fact, I argue that cosplayers' undeniable artistry is one reason they are becoming more open about their hobby to the general public. I have cosplayed before—I have no pictures because I was too nervous at the time—but my background in theater made it feel as if I were a performance artist. Boston Comic-Con feels like a convention of visual and performance artists. At cons, people sell original prints of their favorite characters in addition to dressing up as them. The arts are the glue that bonds people with shared interests together. "Fandom" refers to their collective interest in a piece of media, and fan art, fan fiction, and cosplay solidify the community. As one survey respondent explained, "Cosplay is an open expression of fandom appreciation. It's a way to show someone 'this is what I love,' 'this is what I am passionate about' without using a single word. It's an open-ended art form and almost a little club that bonds with others through personal expression. It's a hobby, it's a little bit of a lifestyle and it's all one big fannish thing to enjoy."

6. Conclusion

[6.1] In my survey, I asked participants how they anticipated the cosplay community changing in the future. One answer from an anonymous participant struck me: "I think a fandom brings a community together, but cosplay takes that community a step further, just like fanfiction does. As a cosplayer, I embrace my love of Xena: Warrior Princess and share it with everyone. I act in character and hope it not only brings a smile to people's faces, as it always does, but I also like to remind people of what Xena stands for. I love having interactions with people who tell me, 'OH MY GOSH, Xena inspired me to leave an abusive situation/have confidence/love my body/etc,' and I love when young kids, especially girls, come up and ask if they can hug Xena. In a fandom, you have interaction with others, but as a cosplayer, that interaction becomes more intimate. Cosplaying isn't easy, especially if you make most of your costume. If you're not learning to sew, you're learning to dye a wig, engineer a PS2 controller to make a robotics part move, sculpt, paint...the list goes on! It takes tremendous dedication, patience, a willingness to learn various art techniques, and money to cosplay, and not every fan is invested in the same way or interested in it." Thanks to the efforts of this vibrant community, cosplayers have educational resources and support systems that bridge the online and off-line worlds. The transformative nature of cosplay has the power to make people self-confident artists in their own right.
Symposium

The selling of a story: Sherlock's Victorian excursion

Claudia Rebaza

[0.1] Abstract—The BBC's Sherlock (2010–) has from its beginning played with canon and audience response. Its alternate universe episode in Victorian England reaches an apex of metatextuality with consideration of its role as both commercial entity and participant in popular culture.

[0.2] Keywords—Characterization; Criticism; Motifs; Storytelling; Transtextuality; TV


1. Introduction

[1.1] Since its launch, BBC's Sherlock (2010–) has been a prominent form of fan fiction, not simply because it is an adaptation of an iconic figure and his original stories but also because he appears in an alternate universe: our present day. Indeed, part of the allure of the BBC series might be attributed to seeing how the writers will adapt Arthur Conan Doyle's characters as 21st-century individuals.

[1.2] One could say then that Sherlock has always been, on the metatextual level, about selling a story in a convincing (as well as entertaining) fashion. The wave of remakes populating the last decade has existed largely to draw on the name recognition of, if not affection for, stories and characters that potential audiences already know. A successful project must maintain its connection to those possibly beloved versions while still offering something new. In the case of Sherlock, it offered an opportunity to see how the detective's once cutting-edge forensic techniques would be adapted to the present day.

[1.3] Yet when the show's audience became aware that Sherlock's 2015 Christmas special ("The Abominable Bride") would be set in the canon's original Victorian period, the initial question about transferring Victorian characters and tales to a modern setting was now reversed. How would this latest story installment be integrated into the ongoing series so that it made sense with what had gone before?
A fictional tale typically requires its audience to suspend disbelief—and the more fantastical the story, the greater the need for audience buy-in. Viewers or readers who find their expectations jarred to the point where they are consistently questioning the text will soon find themselves removed from it and more aware of their positions as outside viewers rather than as participants within the story. While this distanced approach is common in the avant-garde, we rarely see it on commercial television. Television and film usually seek to convince us that what we're watching is really happening and consequently minimize the presence of the creators: authors, filmmakers, and directors.

In trying both to offer their audience a romp in a traditional canon setting and to maintain narrative and character continuity with the world that they had developed over previous years, Sherlock's creators ended up with a curious layering of storytelling that is unusually self-aware for mass media television but that echoes a traditional form of Christmas storytelling—pantomime.

This transtextual result appears in various storytelling devices but is also explicit in the two case plots—the supposed deaths and resurrections of both Emilia and Moriarty. The stories turn on how their illusions must be done well enough to sell to viewers the messages intended.

2. Storytelling forms

The theme of selling a story—that is, creating a coherent and convincing narrative that the audience will buy into—expresses itself in details large and small during this episode. For example, although we know that John blogs, we don't spend a lot of time on this fact in the typical episode. However, Victorian John's writing is a constant—one would even say the primary—feature of his persona. John's authorial presence reminds us of the nonnatural, entirely constructed reality of the Sherlock Holmes stories in general and of this one in particular.

The Victorian episode's first scenes are a reprise of the first scenes in Sherlock's initial episode, leaving the viewer with an odd feeling that the story they're seeing is an alternate universe when in fact it is closer to the canon as created by Arthur Conan Doyle. The opening credits are unique to the episode and end with a close-up of The Strand magazine, the actual publication in which Doyle published the Holmes stories. So the first minutes are all about beginnings—of Sherlock and of Holmes's first appearance in serialized print form. What immediately follows are references to Watson's role as author and to his financial success as an author, which is certainly a very literal example of an audience buying a story.
[2.3] There then follows an exchange between Watson and Mrs. Hudson about her role in the narrative, which she objects to as being reductive. This exchange ostensibly sets up one of the central themes of the Victorian tale, the invisibility and piecemeal role of women. Yet it also brings attention to the fact that we are being sold a story, and in the case of Mrs. Hudson, she's not buying it because she knows it to be quite different from her experience. While it was nice to have lip service paid to women in the plot, ironically they have fairly limited roles in the story itself, culminating in Sherlock mansplaining the plot to a group of silent female figures. So, perhaps unintentionally, the episode's execution rather mirrors the internal theme.

[2.4] The effect of the various hands present in storytelling is also amusingly acknowledged when John blames the drabness of their rooms on their illustrator and complains that he has had to alter his own appearance in order to match the expectations of the public. Presumably it's because they weren't buying the truth of him asserting that he was John Watson otherwise.

[2.5] References to the telling of stories continue to flow. Sherlock stops playing the violin to reference the coming story as a play. He refers to Mrs. Hudson as being a literary critic who is employing satire, but it is he and Watson who are the real literary critics, teaming up to analyze the details of the story that Lestrade brings them.

[2.6] The tale of the bride is presented in a clearly theatrical fashion—street theater—with pauses and cuts back to the Baker Street rooms as a stage set. This presentation is also a clue to the mystery's solution, since the bride's actions are entirely a performance, complete with makeup and special effects. Sherlock even utters the phrase "Poetry or truth?" about the witness statements, drawing yet another storytelling genre into the language of the episode, followed by the bride singing a song to highlight her message.

3. Visual cues

[3.1] While the first act of the episode, in keeping with the Victorian setting, demonstrates literary and theatrical references, the second act relies on special effects and visual cues available only in film. For example, when John and Sherlock go to visit Mycroft at the Diogenes Club, there is a close-up of the club's sign, and the words rearrange themselves to read "Absolute Silence."

[3.2] The scrambling of letters highlights the visual language play to come, even as it also serves the practical purpose of explaining the club's rule to viewers unacquainted with canon. John's efforts to communicate with Wilder using physical gestures (yet another reference to his role as author) is comedic, yet it also demonstrates how one
must be aware of an audience's expectations and practices, since his effort to make small talk is full of errors.

[3.3] In contrast to the elaborate theatrical elements used in Act One during Lestrade's story, when Lady Carmichael consults with Holmes and Watson we instead see film effects used to indicate that a story is being told about past events. It is also in this second act where we discover that the entire Victorian plot is taking place in Sherlock's head. Contemporary Sherlock has remained on the same private jet that we saw him depart on in the final scene of Sherlock Season 3. There, Sherlock is attempting to solve how Moriarty could have survived his apparent death in Season 2 by analyzing the events from the Victorian case. So as his inner dialogue becomes a mix of current and past events and of language, the visual effects reflect this chronological mix with techniques that didn't come into use until well after Victorian Holmes's time. For example, we see the Carmichael house spinning around to indicate day turning into night.

[3.4] At the end of the episode a film device shoots us back to the Victorian era one last time. Here, Watson and Sherlock explicitly highlight the structure of the episode as having two competing narratives—one being Watson's tale of the abominable bride, the other Sherlock's story of Moriarty's return. When Victorian Sherlock and Watson debate how best to present Watson's case by choosing a title, Watson declares that his version will sell. Sherlock defers to him by saying "You're the expert." This acknowledgment of John's superior skill as a storyteller is put, in this episode, on a par with Sherlock's own skills—that of story editor. Essentially, Sherlock's skills lie in unraveling events and cues put before him, adding or subtracting facts, to reveal complete stories that have an understandable sequence of events. It is then John's role to present them to a (paying) audience.

4. Obfuscation of narrators

[4.1] Throughout the episode, various characters narrate stories or challenge the narration of other characters. But this is most explicit in the dialogue between John and Sherlock, both in the past and present stories, about their characterization. For example, when John, Mary, and Mycroft join Sherlock on the jet, he tells John that he, Sherlock, is much cleverer in John's writing than he is in real life. Soon after, Victorian John admits to Sherlock that he allows himself to be more of a bumbling follower for Sherlock's sake. Yet Sherlock also aggrandizes John's intelligence, not only complaining that "He's always right, it's boring!" but also by making John his savior in overcoming Moriarty at Reichenbach.
Sherlock's inner stories, which we get to share in this episode through his Victorian avatar, do not exist in physical form and are not shared with others like John's are. Yet they also have a profound influence on him. For one, Sherlock is so successful at selling himself on the events within his own mind that he becomes confused about when he is or isn't within it, as he states when he finds himself at the waterfall with Moriarty. This is a scene particularly rich in metatextual references.

When Sherlock finds himself at the falls, he says, "I see, I'm not awake yet." That point in the story is one of several examples within the episode where the narrative has become so disjointed and confused that the story must change perspectives in order to provide a logical explanation for what is happening. Otherwise, the audience will stop buying in to what's being portrayed, just as Sherlock has when he realizes that his narration has become derailed by Moriarty's appearance.

In their conversation at the waterfall, Moriarty calls himself the virus in Sherlock's hard drive, which can have various meanings including, as we have already seen, affecting Sherlock's narrative plans. In an earlier conversation with John, Sherlock claims that emotions are merely "grit in the machine" of his mind. Yet throughout the series John has served as Sherlock's emotional minder, correcting him when Sherlock fails to read social cues or to properly account for the emotions of others. Sherlock's feelings for John and concerns for his safety have also derailed Sherlock's plans many times, making John that emotional grit in Sherlock's life. But John is also the grit in the sense of firmness of character or an indomitable spirit.

In the waterfall scene this grit is depicted visually, as John calls the shots (with a literal handgun), saving Sherlock and telling Moriarty: "There's always two of us. Don't you read The Strand?" Sherlock's avatar is not the only narrator of the story—John always reappears, regardless of the setting, and can change the way the story goes. After John saves Sherlock from Moriarty and boots him over the edge of the waterfall, John tells Sherlock that he must wake up (shift to a new story) because "I'm a storyteller, I know when I'm in one."

This claim is only one example of the confusion that exists over who's really telling what story in the episode and about whom. On the surface it appears that it is Sherlock telling a tale through John's character. But such a reading could also be counted as yet another of the episode's many illusion motifs. There are various allusions in the episode to the verity of things that John has written about Holmes versus Sherlock's self-interpretations. For example, during their train ride, John reminds Sherlock that he has promised never to take drugs on a case whereas Sherlock insists that this was merely something that John wrote. John then insists that "People need you [to hold yourself to a higher standard]." Holmes ridicules the idea...
that he owes anything to John's audience. Yet when Watson tells him to "Wear the damned hat," a reference to Sherlock's famous deerstalker cap, he does as he's told.

[4.7] Although it is John who speaks the words on the train—that he has sold a drug addict to the public as a hero—the speech originates in Sherlock's mind and would appear to reflect his vision of himself. Yet in an earlier point in the story, when Sherlock and Watson are awaiting the appearance of a ghost at the Carmichaels' residence, Watson claims that the words that Sherlock uses are ones that Watson wrote for him "in The Strand magazine." John's query reminds Sherlock that Watson's words are merely one version of Sherlock's story, the one presented to the public, and are not necessarily a truth.

[4.8] Sherlock ends that discussion in a remarkable fashion. When John asks him what happened to him to make him the way that he is, Sherlock asserts that nothing happened—rather, "I made me." It's left to the audience to deduce what it means when Sherlock claims that he is his own creator within a work that revolves around texts, textuality, authorship, and the ownership of narrative.

[4.9] The authors of Sherlock are well aware of the layers of professional hands at work in the creation of characters and stories, especially ones as iconically enduring as is Holmes, and theirs are not even the latest set of hands. Yet the characters remain somehow unknowable and separate from any single interpretation. Just as we see Sherlock made up of himself, Watson, Moriarty, and others inside his own mind, he exists piecemeal in the outside world, holding a collective identity. A story may be told in one way but there are many listeners. Each holds their own version of the story and of Sherlock, with no one author dictating his self as he exists in popular culture.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] This episode revolves around Sherlock selling himself a story in order to apply a solution to a different story. Through dueling storylines, dialogue, staging, and effects, the creators of Sherlock's Christmas special have also produced a work about storytelling in its many forms, with a focus on what elements sell a story to an audience and who gets to do the telling. In an episode that emulated canon in setting, its self-awareness, the commerciality of its audience involvement, and the style of its presentation, all seem thoroughly modern and entirely in keeping with this present-day take on classic characters and their world.
Book review

Millennial fandom: Television audiences in the transmedia age, by Louisa Ellen Stein

Helena Louise Dare-Edwards

University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom

[0.1] Keywords—Fan community; Generational fandom; Social media


[1] While teen shows, those directed at or populated by teens and young adults, have been a mainstay on most major television networks since at least the early 1990s, scholarship on such shows, and especially their fans, has been harder to come by. Louisa Ellen Stein's Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age is a welcome contribution that does well in beginning to address this gap in research. With Sharon Ross, Stein previously edited a collection, Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom (2008), and since then she has offered a number of articles and book chapters on millennial media fans and teen television. Yet, other than a handful of journal articles and one other edited collection, Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson's (2004) Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity, academic studies engaging with this demographic and this genre have been scarce. Indeed, summing up the genre's apparent value, status, and place within fan studies, Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (2007) referred to teen fandoms as an "inevitably missing genre" (16). Stein thus has an inordinate amount of ground to cover, more than any one book can, but Millennial Fandom takes great strides in revaluing the genre, taking its fans seriously, and establishing a place for both within the field of fan studies. Broadly speaking, Stein locates her work within the context of a third wave of fan studies, with the intent that it may provide a model for future work in this emerging wave.
[2] Through a number of case studies, including Fox's *Glee* (2009–15), ABC Family's *Pretty Little Liars* (2010–), and the transmedia Web series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012–13), Stein offers a discursive and textual analysis of commercial media texts directed at and representing millennials, and of media texts created by (millennial) fans. In doing so, she examines the complex intersection between representations of fan culture and representations of millennial fan culture, as well as that between commercial representations of millennials and millennial fans' self-representation through digital authorship. One of the book's central preoccupations is the evolving relationship, including similarities and differences, between media fans and millennials in contemporary transmedia fan culture (although, as Stein herself admits, this is an issue the book mostly "dances around" [144] until the final chapter). Stein argues that millennials have made fan practices more mainstream and more acceptable, as well as that the divisions between media fans and millennials may not be as stark as some may imagine.

[3] *Millennial Fandom* opens with an introduction by the author that deftly outlines the analytical and conceptual framework that structures the book: the notion of the millennial generation. The millennial generation comprises those born between 1982 and 2004, thus including both teens and young adults. Both the term and the work in which it originated, Neil Howe and William Strauss's *Millennials Rising* (2000), are well examined, critiqued, and built on by Stein, yet it is undeniable that "millennial" comes heavily loaded with a range of (perhaps mostly negative) connotations that some readers may find distracting. Stein works hard to recuperate the term for the purposes of her study without glossing over the issues it represents, and in lieu of an alternative, it works as a catch-all term for the people within the broad age range it encompasses. While acknowledging the term's problematic status as a construct, Stein uses it as a shorthand in order to examine "millennial" as a construct and an "evolving self-defined culture" (7), as well as examining those who are both affected by and included within its construct.

[4] In her introduction, Stein also begins to discuss the two opposing discourses that circulate about millennials: what she refers to as millennial hope, a celebratory narrative, and the darker version, millennial noir. Indeed, these two concepts structure the following two sections of the book, with three chapters in part 1, "Millennial Hope," and three chapters in part 2, "Millennial Noir." "Millennial" is thus also used as a conceptual framework, since millennial hope was an ideology set forth in *Millennials Rising*, and millennial noir, formulated by Stein, is a discourse in direct opposition to it that can be considered to contain, highlight, critique, and in some cases reform the negative connotations of the term that continue to circulate. The final section of the book, "Millennial Transformation," contains two chapters that consider transformations in fan authorship and the performative and collective display of "feels."
[5] Over the course of part 1's three chapters, Stein uses *Glee* as an extended case study to explore and interrogate the ideologies of millennial hope and the idea of the millennial as a "modified fan." She suggests that the media industry sees millennials as a watered-down and more palatable version of media fans and therefore embraces them more willingly than it did their predecessors. The image of a "cleaned-up fandom" (12) is also highly constructed and sold back to millennials to court them and increase their participation (though within corporate boundaries); this is most keenly shown through the discussion of *Kyle XY* (2006–9) in the second part of the introduction and in part 1. While millennials are digitally connected, highly invested in their choice of media text, engaged across multiple platforms, and technologically savvy, they are perceived to be—and are often constructed as—more mainstream and less excessive, less threatening, less political, more easily contained and controlled within a corporate, commercial version of prepackaged fannishness than media fans. But Stein finds a mass of contradictions within the hopeful millennial discourse itself, exemplified through *Glee*’s ideological unevenness and in groups of its fans (whom the industry redefines and co-opts as "Gleeks"), and these contradictions also contradict the image of the more agreeable millennial audience constructed by TV networks, media producers, and advertisers alike. For instance, Stein explores fans' negotiation (and critique) of the conservative and progressive discourses of millennial hope through a consideration of their engagement with, and championing of, the queer romance in *Glee* through fan activism and transformative and communal authorship.

[6] After three chapters focusing on one case study, part 2 then draws on four others to examine millennial noir. Although Stein acknowledges that these chapters "offer a snapshot of millennial noir discourses across a cluster of associated series" (13), I found myself craving more sustained attention to three of these four. Millennial as a conceptual framework also seemed slightly constraining at times. For example, chapter 6, "An Invitation to Transgress," examines how these texts invite fans to participate, transgress, and intervene, and in turn how fans exceed these invitations in their creative output. I was surprised that Stein chose *Gossip Girl* (2007–12) as her primary case study here rather than *Pretty Little Liars*, given the latter's fandom and use of transmedia extensions. *Pretty Little Liars* has been hailed as a TV show at the forefront of transmedia storytelling (Edelsburg 2012) and celebrated for its precedent-setting social media engagement (Ge and Hod 2015). Through spin-off webisodes, apps, multiple social media channels, an online scavenger hunt, and a second screen Halloween party (to name just some examples of its transmedia extensions), *Pretty Little Liars*’ transmedia campaign to invite fan participation has arguably extended beyond that of *Gossip Girl* and its world-building games and intertextual references to film history that Stein discusses. In turn, opportunities for *Pretty Little Liars* fans to transgress and intervene would also seem to be more plentiful than those offered to *Gossip Girl* fans. At least *Pretty Little Liars* would make for a rich case study in terms
of examining millennial fans' engagement with multiple and connecting transmedia extensions and the different, even contradictory, ways they may exceed invitations to participate (across and between extensions) in their creative output. Nevertheless, the discussion of the ways in which all four shows examined in part 2 draw on and rework themes, tropes, and aesthetics derived from film noir (such as the voice-over, which in millennial TV offers insight into female characters' interiority, helping audiences connect to and identify with them) offers Stein a valuable opportunity to broach issues of gender and, more specifically, examine the tensions and contradictions at the heart of millennial female subjectivity.

[7] Stein argues that female-led shows such as *Gossip Girl*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *Veronica Mars* (2004–7), and *Revenge* (2011–15) embrace and capitalize on the more negative visions of millennials. In particular, she suggests that they negotiate anxieties about millennials' digital prowess and moral ambiguity, as well as exploring (female) sexual and emotional power. In addition, bringing together the representation of millennials with millennial fandom and then extending that representation to the imagined audience of these shows, Stein argues that the "filles fatales" of these four series reflect, build on, transform, and rehabilitate the gendered vision of fandom distilled in the usually negative figure of the fangirl. Again, there's a lot of ground to cover, ground that remains largely underdiscussed in fan studies, and I wish these three chapters could have gone further. (The discussion could be expanded into a whole book, which I would very happily read.) Still, they are novel and insightful as well as significant in their offering of a solid foundation for future studies of fangirls, especially young female fans of teen media.

[8] The final part of the book, "Millennial Transformation," focuses more directly on fandom, fan works, community building, and fans' use of digital media. Its first chapter examines audience-celebrity interactions, focusing on fans of Misha Collins. Through a study of GISHWHES, an annual international scavenger hunt organized by Collins, Stein highlights how millennial fandom has moved from understanding authorship and creativity as belonging to privileged individuals to seeing them as attributes of a decentered collective. She explores the theme further in the following chapter, "Collective Authorship and the Culture of Feels," through a discussion of the performance of high emotion and affect in fan spaces such as the hugely popular, but somewhat under-theorized, Tumblr. Once more she uncovers a slew of contradictions in millennial fans' engagement and practices, this time in the combination of intimate emotion and high performativity, which serves to highlight how nuanced and uneven is this terrain. Stein argues that in the millennial "culture of feels," the perception of fandom is transformed from "marginal to mainstream and from liminal or taboo to shared, popular ethos" (134) and that Tumblr in particular is well suited to the highly visual performance of collective emotion. But this suitability is not limited to Tumblr; it
extends outward to digital culture more broadly. To illustrate this, Stein examines the ways in which feels culture informs and is reflected in the transmedia series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries.*

[9] Stein's book offers some important insights into contemporary fan culture, and its discussions of gender in part 2 and of emotion in part 3 are particularly strong. Indeed, this book opens up many interesting pathways that can be, and I hope will be, built on in future research as we continue to move into the third wave. As the first book-length study dedicated to an unfortunately much maligned genre and a much overlooked demographic, it will be valuable to fan studies researchers in particular but also media researchers more broadly, as well as youth scholars and fan readers interested in millennial culture. For fan studies researchers, one of the great strengths of the book lies in its engagement with the mainstreaming of fandom and fan identities, the ways in which the industry perceives and constructs fans, and fans' relations with text and industry in participatory culture. Whether you like or loathe the term "millennial" and the idea of generational categories, they are unlikely to disappear any time soon, and a sustained focus on millennial fans (who are prime targets of the media industry) is not only welcome, but long overdue. Stein's book offers an overview of the millennial audience and their media/fan practices and succeeds in balancing and interrogating both the optimistic and pessimistic images of, and discourses associated with, the millennial.

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**Works cited**


Book review

Playing fans: Negotiating fandom in the digital age, by Paul Booth

Gregory Steirer

Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, United States

How do media companies operate? How are media markets constituted? How are media properties shaped by economics and regulation? How do creative and managerial workers labor? Fan studies, as a field, has typically avoided such questions—and not without reason, since these questions do not appear, on the surface at least, to have much to do with fans. Indeed, given fan studies' longstanding interest in legitimizing, if not valorizing, fan communities and practices, these questions about industry might rightly be seen as incompatible with the politics of fan studies itself. Jenkins’ foundational Textual Poachers (1992) is a case in point, as the book’s theory of poaching, derived from de Certeau, is founded upon a vision of social practice that explicitly positions the powerless (fans) against the powerful (media companies, copyright owners, educational institutions, etc.). Recent work in fan studies has begun to complicate this vision, primarily by attending more closely to the political economies of what John Banks and Mark Deuze have called "co-creative labor" (Banks and Deuze 2009; Milner 2009; Stanfill and Condis 2014; Busse 2015).

Although this turn toward labor has been especially generative for fan studies, it has not yet entailed a complementary turn towards industry itself—and with it, the kind of questions with which I opened this review. The use in recent scholarship of Lewis Hyde's notion of the "gift economy" (Hellekson 2009; De Kosnik 2009; Scott 2009; Jones 2014), for instance, has tended to reaffirm fandom as a realm of activity and exchange that is fundamentally different and, except in cases of cooptation, separate from industrial practice. This is, to some extent, surprising, as Hyde's book
(1983), like other theoretical examinations of the gift economy (Mauss 1990; Derrida 1992; Schrift 1997), works to problematize giving as both an idea and an isolable social economy. From another perspective, however, we might see fan studies' particular construal of Hyde as indicating an uncertainty on the part of fan studies scholars (amongst whom I count myself) as to how to incorporate industry-oriented questions and research without losing what is distinctive—conceptually, methodologically, and politically—about fan studies in the first place. Indeed, the prospect of bringing industry into fan studies—refusing, in John Law's language, to "other-ize" it (Law 2004)—raises a number of difficult questions. What kind of methodologies will we need to employ? What kind of identities might we need to adopt? What ethical issues might we face in interacting with media companies? And, most importantly, how might we look to industry without losing sight of our primary research object: the fan?

[3] Paul Booth's *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age*, published by University of Iowa Press, bravely attempts to answer some of these questions. Arguing that "fandom is best understood as a continual, shifting negotiation and dialogue within already extant industrial relations," Booth sets out to replace overly Manichaean constructions of industry–fan interaction with a more nuanced conception of how various stakeholders practice fandom (1). "[B]oth media fans and the media industries," he explains in the book's Introduction, "must continually negotiate, navigate, and adjust to the presence of each other in tandem with changing paradigms of technological discourse in our digital society" (1). Though dependent upon a qualitatively inconsistent construal of its key actors (*fans* implies individual human agents; *industries* implies giant amorphous entities—a conceptual level above that even of the *company*), Booth's starting point is especially generative. Not only does it suggest a broadening of fan studies' scope; it also implies a useful muddying of its politics.

[4] The problem Booth faces, of course, is putting this theory into practice. To do so, he turns—at least, at first—to play, the key concept of one of his earlier books, *Digital Fandom* (Booth 2010). "I use the term 'media play,'" he explains in *Playing Fans*, "as a characteristic of contemporary media culture to focus on those instances in which individuals create meaning from activities that articulate a connection between their own creativity and mainstream media, all the while working within the boundaries of the media text" (15). Though *play*, defined in this manner, seems applicable only to fans—not media industries—Booth asserts its relevancy to both: "Both fans and the media industries (role-)play in the spaces and sites of the other" (16). For scholars working in the field of media industries, this is an unusual—though also intriguing—way of describing what media workers do, to say nothing of what media industries do.
But Booth himself seems to recognize this, as the book quickly de-emphasizes the concept of play, replacing it instead with the concepts of pastiche and parody.

[5] What does Booth mean by these terms? Although *Playing Fans* reflects upon the critical genealogies of these two practices throughout its pages, ultimately the book employs pastiche and parody rather simply (and somewhat ingeniously) to reduce "fan-industry interaction" to two basic modes. In "fan pastiche," fans imitate the practices of media industries. In "media parody," media industries imitate (while distorting) the practices of fans. A host of assumptions are built into these concepts—as well as the old Manichaean vision of industries versus fans—but pastiche and parody are nevertheless effective in providing the book a structure built around clearly defined case studies. Chapters 1 and 2 examine fan pastiche through *SuperWhoLock* fandom and *Inspector Spacetime*, respectively. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 explore media parody: chapter 3 via representations of fans in *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, and the film *Fanboys*; and chapter 4 via an autoethnographic study of *The Doctor Who Experience*. Chapter 5 explores what Booth calls "sociocultural parody" by analyzing professionally produced pornographic parodies in the context of fan-produced slash fiction. Finally, in chapter 6, Booth "synthesizes" fan pastiche and media parody through a study of the website Polyvore, which Booth identifies with the practice of "digital cosplay" (23).

[6] Though the case studies provide *Playing Fans* with an exceptionally clear structure, they also raise a number of methodological questions. How were the primary data for each chapter collected? What criteria were used to select these data? What are the limitations of each data set? And, lastly—but perhaps most importantly—why were the methods used appropriate, given the primary research questions? I've admittedly phrased these methodological questions in the terms of social science research, which is somewhat out of keeping with Booth's more humanities-oriented approach for the book. Nevertheless, the question of how we do our research is a vital one for fan studies, in large part because of the field's interdisciplinarity, but also because of our general politico-ethical commitment to fans themselves. Indeed, our need to wrestle reflectively with method is part of what has made fan studies such a dynamic and ever-evolving field. That *Playing Fans* forgoes such wrestling is thus one of the book's main weaknesses. Offering little in the way of methodological reflection, the book leaves it primarily to the reader to determine what has been done, why, and to what (or whom).

[7] All of the chapters—including, to some extent, the "autoethnographic" study of *The Doctor Who Experience*—are built around extremely brief close readings of individual texts. *Playing Fans* provides few direct explanations of why the texts analyzed were selected, but for the most part the reasoning is self-evident: the texts
were selected because they support Booth's arguments. Given the varieties of identities, practices, and texts that make up fandom (to say nothing of media industries), this is a problematic approach to data selection, as it ensures that Booth need not wrestle with texts that complicate or challenge his hypotheses. It also arguably misrepresents the communities and practices depicted in the case studies. The Polyvore chapter, for example, is built upon close readings of six "images," one produced by gapach97, three by summeranne, and two by a single unnamed site user. This seems to me simply too small and too homogenous a sample on which to build a convincing argument about the way fans use Polyvore—at least not without first providing some explicit acknowledgement of and justification for the limitations of the data set.

[8] The book's failure to reflect upon its own method, I suspect, is also ultimately responsible for the somewhat shallow form of textual analysis that it frequently employs. Though Playing Fans sometimes provides thoughtful and suggestive formal analyses of fan-produced texts (for example, some of the GIF fics in the SuperWhoLock chapter), at other times the analyses are frustratingly abbreviated. In the Inspector Spacetime chapter, for instance, a Tumblr post (also reproduced as an illustration) receives only one sentence of analysis (63–64). Such ultra-fast readings suggest that texts are being used less as opportunities for analysis than as a means of quickly "proving" larger claims. Though this method of using texts may at times be helpful or even necessary, it also increases the chance that a text will be misread. When these misreadings occur in Playing Fans, they are sometimes minor and easy to look past. In the Polyvore chapter, for instance, Booth uses an image that depicts a female costume for Marvel's Loki character as a means to suggest the kind of novel gender play in which female users of the site engage (154–55). This seems a reasonable conclusion, but one that may need to be slightly altered, given that Marvel Comics had itself turned Loki into a woman in 2008 and has regularly played with the character's gender in comics and other media since then (see Straczynski and Coipel 2008; Gazillion Entertainment 2013).

[9] In other places, the misreading is more serious. Chapter 4, which focuses on the different ways media industries represent fans, employs a quick reading of episode 5.9 of Supernatural to argue that the series frequently reproduces inaccurate stereotypes of fans as excessively invested weirdos (or hyperfans). I quote Booth's reading in full:

\[10\] In her fannish enthusiasm for Sam and Dean, Becky lies to them in order to get them to appear at a Supernatural convention in episode 5.9 ("The Real Ghostbusters"). Yet the fans depicted in this episode are more akin to representations of Star Trek than Supernatural fans. As Zubernis and Larsen note, the fans in this episode are mostly male and arrive in costume
—unlike most actual fans at *Supernatural* conventions. The stereotypical representation continues as the fans are depicted as being out of touch with reality, and it's only with the input of the real Sam and Dean that the fan protagonists of the episode are able to defeat the monster. Crucially, the only way the fans are personified here is through their interaction with the media text; the implicit assumption is that fan identity remains tethered to the show. (92–93)

[11] As a scholar familiar with this episode—and also, I'll confess, as a fan of *Supernatural*—I was surprised by this reading, which seems to simplify the episode to the point of misrepresenting it. Two of the episode's main fictional fans, Damien and Barnes, are "personified" not only, as Booth claims, through their interactions with "the media text," but also with each other. Indeed, the surprise revelation at the episode's end that the two fans are gay and romantically involved serves, at least potentially, to suggest an alternative frame of analysis for the representations of fandom the episode has previously shown. Less a form of antisocial (or subsocial) behavior, fandom is shown as a way for individuals to creatively manage, at both the personal and the interpersonal levels, the "rules of play" imposed upon them by a variety of social institutions (economics, education, family, etc.). At least, this is what the episode itself suggests has happened for the protagonists Dean and Sam, who are depicted leaving the fan convention with a new appreciation not only for *Supernatural* fans, but also, thanks to the example of Damien and Barnes, for each other. Though it is true, as Zubernis and Larsen note, that Damien and Barnes do not accurately represent the female *Supernatural* fans who typically attend fan conventions, neither are they the simple reproductions of fan stereotypes that Booth suggests.

[12] Methodological problems and misreadings notwithstanding, the individual chapters of *Playing Fans* are nevertheless original and thought-provoking, particularly in their attempts to theorize how fandom works in the digital era. In this, *Playing Fans* resembles Booth's earlier work, *Digital Fandom*, which was a sometimes-dazzling theoretical riff on fandom's integral involvement with new media. There's some theoretical carryover here—for instance, the concept of the carnivalesque and Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality—but overall, *Playing Fans* employs a more controlled and practice-oriented approach to high theory. Though I often wished Booth would have supplemented the literary/cultural theory on which he draws by adding explicitly sociological meta-theory (particularly that of Bourdieu and Latour) to the mix, part of the pleasure of reading Booth is seeing how he's able to take the former and apply it to a research object for which it was not originally intended: fandom. This aspect of Booth's work makes it especially valuable for those attempting to teach or produce work on fan studies from within a literature department.
[13] For all its value, however, *Playing Fans'* dependence upon literary/cultural theory ultimately renders the book ill-equipped to handle the "industries" side of its thesis. Though Baudrillard, Jameson, and Bakhtin are, to be sure, useful in thinking through certain types of cultural and aesthetic phenomena, they don't provide a particularly useful lens for studying how media industries—or, more specifically, media companies and media workers—function, let alone interact with fans. Indeed, relying on this form of theory may even encourage overly utopian or politically progressive representations of fan practice. In chapter 1, for example, Booth describes one of the key differences between industry and fandom in the following terms: "The time frame of publication means that a book about digital technology is outdated before it even sees the light of day...Fans are under no such schedule of publication; they work at the speed of imagination" (41–42). Sociological theory might have helped here, as might have some form of ethnographic or human subject research—though neither is essential for studying industry or production culture.

[14] What is essential, however, is some meaningful engagement with industry as a research object. In this regard, *Playing Fans* would have benefited immensely from some sustained interaction with media industry studies scholarship. Despite the book's stated interest in industry, almost no work from this field is cited or meaningfully incorporated into the chapters' analyses. In fact, with the exception of Derek Johnson's work on franchises, the only industry research employed in the book's discussion of media industries is critical political economy scholarship on neoliberalism. As a result, industry is portrayed throughout the book as a slightly nefarious abstract force, borrowing from fans or attempting to discipline them, and reinforcing, through its economic power, hegemonic value systems. This is a shame, as the phenomena Booth chose for case studies—*Inspector Spacetime* and Polyvore in particular—seem well-suited for more nuanced examinations, perhaps by way of actor network theory, of industry–fan interaction.

[15] In the end, *Playing Fans* demonstrates the very real challenges involved in trying to align fan studies with the study of industry. While *Playing Fans* fails at fully modeling an "industrial turn," Booth's instincts regarding this turn are right, and we as fan studies scholars would benefit from following them. "To learn about the media industry," he writes, "we must develop a methodology for understanding fandom; to understand fandom, we must concentrate on the ways the media industry understands fans" (23).

Works cited


Book Review

The cultural politics of colorblind TV casting, by Kristen J. Warner

Bambi Haggins

Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, United States

Keywords—Color-blindness; Color consciousness; Media industries; Shonda Rhimes


[1] In The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting, Kristen J. Warner intermingles personal, pedagogical, and political insight with close examinations of the construction of televisual texts in terms of casting, reception, and industrial framing—including such diverse areas as network PR to entertainment media coverage—to create an exceptionally astute and accessible volume that provides a vital intervention on race, media, and industry studies. In the book's preface, "What Happened After Killing the [Colorblind] Messenger," Warner engages with the notion of color-blindness on a personal level with an anecdote about blending in during a social gathering (as a black woman in a predominantly white space) as a means of stating the goal of the book: "to explore how framing colorblindness as a way of seeing, as a mode of behavior, as a mode of production in casting primetime television enables a close examination of the small and subtle methods used to trap us as a society into this vicious and painful cycle" (xiii). Warner's work constantly operates on multiple levels: industrial history and current trends are intertwined with skillful textual analysis and ethnographic research, always with an eye on representations of blackness. Clarity and richness characterize Warner's writing as she moves easily between varied forms of data, including her own savvy cultural and industrial analyses and personal interviews with industry professionals; accounts from popular and trade presses; sociohistorically and industrially contextualized explorations of specific media texts and the production cultures that produce them.
Warner speaks directly to the ways in which "both colorblindness and casting are founded upon unarticulated assumptions about the irreducibility of physiology—that is, in both cases individuals (casting directors or just ordinary people) assume an equality of opportunity, regardless of appearance, thus...practices of colorblindness and casting maintain an idealistic but myopic view of the world based upon normative (white) assumptions" (12). Warner consistently reflects on the ways in which the progressiveness of incremental change can remain problematic. Her assessment of the landscape of television casting recognizes prior work done on the state of minorities in Hollywood, including that of Darnell Hunt and Herman Gray. However, as a result of her accessible and sophisticated narrative style, she is able to illuminate the exceptions that complicate the logics of color-blind casting as a multicultural and utopian answer to problematic representations of race and ethnicity.

In "Casting as Cultural Production," Warner looks behind the curtain to detail how those involved in casting conceptualize, discuss, and execute their respective roles in the process. She mobilizes aspects of Paul du Gay's work on cultural production (as related to the manufacturing, marketing, and cultural impact of the Walkman) as well as that of Keith Negus, who cites Richard Peterson and John Ryan's challenge to the "filter-flow" model for the "production of culture," which asserts that "the act of producing a cultural artifact is not a filtration system but a system of fabrication that each member of the process shares, because production is not just about the product itself but also about the product's symbolic meaning" (33). Thus, through ethnographic work based on interviews with industry professionals in Austin, Texas, and Los Angeles, California, Warner presents a nuanced view of casting in the allegedly postracial era—a process that continues to be inextricably tied to "certain hegemonic assumptions of racial identity that are accepted and reinforced by the Hollywood industry" (33). Warner illustrates how tactics used at various levels of the casting food chain come into play, including color-blindness as an actor's self-fashioning strategy, the priority of gainful employment, and the ways that hegemonic assumptions about minority actors and their racial performances. Thus, color-blind casting ultimately becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for media professionals, which ensures that the color politics of myriad televusual milieus remains problematic.

In "'I'm glad no one was hung up on the race thing': ABC's Grey's Anatomy and the Innovation of Blindcasting in a Post-racial Era," Warner explores "post race, post feminist baby" Shonda Rhimes's first successful adventure in Shondaland, Grey's Anatomy (2006–). Amid a study of the cast, Warner engages in a moment of rupture in the race-neutral/color-blind world of Seattle Grace Hospital when the parents of Dr. Preston Burke (Isaiah Washington), played by iconic black actors Diahann Carroll and Richard Roundtree, visit their ailing son. Warner details the histories of the actors and the "divergent racial discourses of assimilation and pluralism [that] intersect in Grey's
space of race neutrality." Carroll, famous for playing the Super Negro on the situation comedy *Julia* (1968–1971), and Roundtree, who was Shaft in the eponymously titled 1971 film as well as the patron saint of blaxploitation, are coupled to play the clearly "Afristocratic" parents of Seattle Grace's star surgeon, who happens to be black. Warner notes, "And it is for this reason that when these actors appeared on *Grey's*, regardless of Rhimes' preference for race neutrality, their historical personas forced race into the foreground" (87). In the preface, Warner had already teased out how Washington's use of the other F word in an on-set tussle with Patrick Dempsey (aka McDreamy) resulted in former's inability to maintain race neutrality and retain his job. I discuss this example in detail because I think it illustrates how Warner complicates the reading of Grey's by providing us with a wealth of sociohistorical and industrial context, along with the implications of casting and character construction within the series. This example provides depth and texture to the study of TV casting as a cultural and political production practice.

[5] In her second case study, "'It's tough being different': The Pitfalls of Colorblindness in The CW's *The Vampire Diaries*," Warner teases out the impact of the de facto blindcasting of black actor Katerina (Kat) Graham as Bonnie Bennett on the politics of race and space in the fictional Southern town of Mystic Falls, Virginia, where *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–) is set. Although the character in the books on which the series is based is a white redhead named Bonnie McCullough, witch and best friend to female protagonist Elena Gilbert, Bennett belongs to a family tied to the centuries-old town through what one might assume are enslaved ancestors, although this lineage is not made explicit. Exploring the series' strategies of blindcasting as a means of fulfilling postracial goals of diversity (something that teen shows from The CW in general—and creator-producer Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec in particular—have lacked) reveals many unintentional pitfalls, particularly as they relate to black femininity and the space of the South as a site of black oppression. By articulating how *The Vampire Diaries* reverse engineers the notion of blindcasting used on *Grey's Anatomy* to create a "visible balance" while also addressing the portrayal and treatment of Bennett and her family, Warner interrogates the claim that the ahistorical trials and tribulations of the Bennetts have nothing to do with race. As Warner aptly states, "Claiming [Bennett's] portrayal is not racially motivated at best and systematically racist at worst—because the character was never intentionally written for a Black woman, therefore any historical patterns that could be traced are purely coincidental—is a savvy defensive maneuver" (96). Furthermore, the fan reactions to Bennett—from the by-the-book purists to those who were members of Team Bonnie even without sociohistorical or racial context—also make it difficult to see Bonnie Bennett's trajectory as a magical tragic mulatta who ceaselessly suffers in service to her white friends, both human and nonhuman, as a step toward a utopian vision of the postracial televisual milieu.
In "Is there hope? Alternatives to Colorblind Casting," Warner examines two TV shows that intentionally attempted to cast in a culturally specific manner: NBC's *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–2000) and HBO's *The Wire* (2002–8), both televisual products tied to former *Baltimore Sun* reporter and self-proclaimed Hollywood outsider David Simon. The realist, documentary aesthetic intertwined with the procedural genre and the production culture of the Baltimore set series allowed for—and arguably required—culturally specific casting. Although these two examples clearly stand as alternatives to color-blind casting, *Homicide* and *The Wire* (and the production cultures they generated and were generated by) are the exception rather than the rule. Although "the productions themselves called for a more realistic and authentic look, thus enabling more diverse and culturally specific representation...these examples are not strong enough to withstand the overall pressure of Hollywood logic and a nexus of power that, for the most part, has not had to be checked" (150). Warner's jadedly hopeful examination of these series as exemplars of culturally specific casting, which yields quality programming that is both relevant and critically acclaimed, is exceptionally clear-eyed: substantive change won't happen as long as industrial convention wisdom, despite all signs to the contrary, is not sold on the fact that diversity sells.

The *Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* requires that we examine the processes of cultural production and production culture responsible for contemporary American television. Warner reveals how "how colorblind casting can teach us some vital lessons about television and society at large." This book is an immensely useful text across the spectrum of television studies because of the ways it engages the politics of race, industry, and media. Warner's ability to speak to a wide audience—those who are engaged consumers of media, media studies scholars, students at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, and inquisitive members of the industry—extends this important conversation about the motivations for and impact of colorblind casting beyond the seminar room and the lecture hall. In her conclusion, "Not Quite Catching Shadows," Warner refers to her scholarly endeavor as attempting "to catch a shadow": "negotiating colorblindness in television casting is an exercise in reconstructing invisible processes and approximating visibility" (153). With her use of casting as the lens, Warner illustrates "how colorblindness shapes attitudes that reinforce whiteness at the expense of the racial and cultural difference" (153). The lessons that Warner provides on the production of culture have great value not only in the ways in which they illuminate the myriad elements that shape the formation of racial representations in television but also because they guide the reader to a more nuanced understanding of the industrial practices that give rise to those representations—and, just as significantly, to the cultural power that structures the industrial processes in the first place.
Book review

Playing Harry Potter: Essays and interviews on fandom and performance, edited by Lisa S. Brenner

Abigail De Kosnik

University of California, Berkeley

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[1] The contributors to Playing Harry Potter do fan scholars a valuable service by documenting a wide range of fan performance styles and genres that have emerged from the highly productive Harry Potter fandom. Some chapters offer detailed descriptions and theoretical analyses, some present authors' first-person accounts, and some offer authors' interviews with performers. The detailed renderings of a diversity of off-line and online fannish creativity makes this volume a rich resource for fan studies scholars, especially those who situate their work within the field of performance studies and/or engage deeply with performance theory.

[2] One mode of fan performance is costume play, known as cosplay, and this book represents cosplayers and cosplaying practices thoroughly. Lisa S. Brenner's chapter "Do Clothes Make the Man?" considers the significance of gender bending in cosplay; it includes an interview with Droxy Yaxley, who is perhaps best known for cosplaying Snape to great acclaim at fan conventions. Yaxley gives a costumer's perspective on the importance of theater makeup, how one decides on which character to play, and what her experience has been playing male characters in the Harry Potter fandom. Yaxley's comments on how she assumes male privilege when she is enacting Snape comprise one of the most memorable sections of the book. Costumes and other theatrical devices, such as props, also play a prominent role in other chapters, such as
Stevi Costa's essay "Accio Burlesque! Performing Potter Fandom through 'Nerdlesque,'" and Sandy Peterson's "Talismans as Performative Devices of Resistance for Harry Potter Fans." Costa and Peterson both foreground what Peterson calls fans' "embodied knowledge" (133) and the ways in which fan performers resist the authority of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, as well as social norms and conventions, through their specially staged physical actions. Both authors also frame Harry Potter fans' performances not as merely critical but rather as productive and generative—empowering for both the performers and their audience members.

[3] Playing Harry Potter does not limit its definition of fan performance to cosplay and its variants. Sport now constitutes an important corner of Harry Potter fandom: the number of active quidditch teams has increased exponentially since 2005, when a group of Middlebury College students invented a version of the game that can be played by athletes who remain on the ground rather than flying through the air. This volume dedicates two chapters to the growing popularity of quidditch: Suzanne Delle's interview with quidditch player Emily Anne Gibson, and Jennifer E. Popple's essay "Embracing the Magic: Muggle Quidditch and the Transformation of Gender Equality from Fantasy to Reality." Both Delle and Popple discuss the rule, which has been integral to muggle quidditch since the Middlebury students founded it, in "Title 9¾," which calls for gender equality and inclusivity on every quidditch team and game: at least two players on the quidditch field must identify with a different gender than at least two other players, and gender is not synonymous with sex. (Title 9¾ simultaneously puns on the number of the King's Cross Station platform in London at which Hogwarts students board the school train, and Title IX, the 1964 US legislation that bans discrimination on the basis of sex in all areas of education, including school sports.) Quidditch organizers' striving to build gender equality into their sport is one of the ways that Harry Potter fans have worked to, as Delle notes, "recreate the values described in that fictional world" of Rowling's books and the Warner Bros. films (83) — but interestingly, Gibson (Delle's interviewee) sheds light on the fact that many quidditch enthusiasts do not feel a strong allegiance to the Harry Potter fandom per se; many players are fans more of the sport than of the media texts, and in the eyes of some, the disassociation of quidditch from Harry Potter may be necessary to establish the sport's broad legitimacy.

[4] This collection contains two strong chapters on fans visiting and interacting with physical Harry Potter–themed spaces: Rachel Marie Gilbert's "A Potterhead's Progress: A Quest for Authenticity at the Wizarding World of Harry Potter" and Katherine Larsen's "(Re)Claiming Harry Potter Fan Pilgrimage Sites." Gilbert's piece combines an entertaining first-person account of her visit to the immensely popular Harry Potter theme park with an insightful argument that the site's "authenticity," by which Gilbert means both its official status and its use by fans as a means by which they can
experience "a visceral connection...to the wizarding world" (25), is called into question when the sensibilities of capitalism and consumerism dominate fans' experience, overriding their feelings of immersion in the setlike reproduction of the Harry Potter universe. Larsen's essay points out that a number of real-world spaces that are meaningful to Harry Potter fans become awkward and impersonal when taken over by Warner Bros. (which produced and distributed the Harry Potter films). Larsen's examples illustrate that official sites do not always feel like authentic ones to fans. Gilbert and Larsen situate their work within performance studies by fruitfully referencing canonical theorists of that field, such as Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett and Erving Goffman. However, readers may wonder why previous seminal work on fan tourism, such as Roger C. Aden's *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages* (1999), is absent from their analyses. Perhaps the combination of fan studies with performance studies is still so rare and new that it is difficult for authors working at that intersection to take both fields' bodies of literature into account.

One of the welcome ways that this volume advances the conversation between fan studies and performance studies is to position online fan activities as performances. In "Snape Written, Filmed, and Slashed," Vera Cuntz-Leng (who was a member of my research team when she visited UC Berkeley in 2014–15, and who was a coauthor on an article that my team published in the journal *Convergence* that year), uses performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte's concept of the autopoetic feedback loop to describe the interconnectedness of Rowling's version of Severus Snape in the Harry Potter novels, Alan Rickman's version of Snape in the Harry Potter films, and fan authors' versions of Snape in Harry Potter slash fics. In Cuntz-Leng's analysis, Rowling, Rickman, and fan fiction writers are all portrayers of Snape, and their portrayals inform one another's in a way that is similar (albeit more characterized by time shifting) to how theatrical actors and audiences constantly react to one another for the duration of a performance, thus cocreating the theatrical work.

An additional lens that *Playing Harry Potter* applies to fan performance is that of the relevance of fannish performances to fans' experiences of the real world and to their everyday lives. In "Developing Community through Wizard Rock," Rob Yoho emphasizes that wizard rock—rock bands that write and perform original songs about characters and themes from the Harry Potter universe, which often diverge from the Harry Potter canon—is about more than playing with and transforming what editor Brenner calls "the *Harry Potter* master narrative" (18). Yoho argues that wizard rock uses "the performative platform for the airing of social commentary and political action," and he notes the "strong linkage between wizard rock and The Harry Potter Alliance" (222). The Harry Potter Alliance, and its tremendous successes in fundraising for charities, campaigning for social justice and humanitarian causes, and other
"fan-based acts of civic engagement" (207), is the subject of "We Are Book Eight" by Heather Elise Hamilton and John Michael Sefel. In "Discovering Your Inner Wizard," Sarah Lynne Bowman describes how Harry Potter role-playing games facilitate "a sort of inner alchemy" (87) for players, allowing them opportunities to develop certain aspects of their personality (leading them to become more brave or assertive, for example), refine their social skills, and attain greater academic success. And in "Teaching Harry Potter: Pedagogy as Play, Performance and Textual Poaching," Edmond Y. Chang details the innovative ways in which he uses Harry Potter to enhance students' academic achievement. Chang, a classroom teacher, has found Harry Potter to be an exemplary set of texts on which students can practice articulating "informed and critical readings and analysis" as well as discerning and debating larger questions of equity and inclusion—problems that concern all media productions, such as "who gets to be represented, who survives to be the hero, and whose stories get to be told" (172). The point made by all of these essays is that fan performances can be impactful, in tremendously positive ways, on individuals and collectives, and moreover, that fan performances can also benefit small and large nonfannish populations. While those who tend to take a suspicious or highly critical view of fandom may find such claims overly optimistic, fan scholars will welcome these arguments as counterweights to the prevailing popular discourse that aligns fandom with harmful levels of obsession, isolation, and separation from reality.

[7] Brenner, the collection's editor, is by her own admission not a fan studies scholar, and so the introduction does not explicitly position the anthology in relation to the large bodies of scholarship on fan studies and participatory cultures. However, the strength of the book lies in its case studies of specific genres of contemporary fan performance; in the authors' documentations of performers' motivations, strategies, and perspectives; and in the myriad of theoretical lenses put forward as tools for analyzing the social, cultural, and political meanings of embodied enactments by fans. These assets make the book mandatory reading for performance scholars with an interest in fandom, and for fan scholars invested in performance studies.