Transformative Works and Cultures, No. 25, general issue (September 15, 2017)

Editorial
TWC Editors, Copyright and Open Access

Theory
Catherine Coker, The margins of print? Fan fiction as book history
Elizabeth Jeanne Nielsen, Christine de Pizan's The Book of the City of Ladies as reclamatory fan work
Lesley Autumn Willard, A longitudinal study of the development of fannish literacy through Teen Wolf's Tumblr promotional campaigns
Shannon Howard, Surrendering authorial agency and practicing transindividualism in Tumblr's role-play communities
Milena Popova, Compartmentalization and intertextuality in real person(a) fiction
Dan Vena, Rereading Superman as a trans F/Man

Praxis
Lauren B. Collister, Transformative (h)activism: Breast cancer awareness and the World of Warcraft Running of the Gnomes
Ludi Price & Lyn Robinson, Fan fiction in the library
Rachel Elizabeth Linn, Bodies in horrifying hurt/comfort fan fiction
Victoria Godwin, Theme park as interface to wizarding (story) world of Harry Potter
Sophie Gwendolyn Einwächter & Felix M. Simon, How digital remix and fan culture helped the Lego comeback
Seth M. Walker, Subversive drinking: Remixing copyright with free beer

Symposium
Kevin D. Ball, Fan labor, speculative fiction, and video game lore in the Bloodborne community
Babak Zarin, "Can I take your picture?"—Privacy in cosplay
Kelli Marshall, Milk and mythology in Singin’ in the Rain
Liza Potts, A case of Sherlockian identity: Irregulars, feminists, and millennials

Review
Bethan Jones, Post-object fandom: Television, identity and self-narrative, by Rebecca Williams
Amanda D. Odom, Role playing materials, by Rafael Bienia
Kathryn Hemmann, Anime fan communities: Transcultural flows and frictions, by Sandra Annett
Sandra Annett, Boys love manga and beyond: History, culture, and community in Japan, edited by Mark McLelland et al.

Transformative Works and Cultures (TWC), ISSN 1941-2258, is an online-only Gold Open Access publication of the nonprofit Organization for Transformative Works. TWC is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Download date: September 15, 2017. For citation, please refer to the most recent version of articles at TWC.
Copyright and Open Access

TWC Editor

[0.1] Abstract—Editorial for Transformative Works and Cultures, no. 25 (September 15, 2017).

[0.2] Keywords—Creative Commons; Fan studies


I. TWC’s new copyright license

[1.1] With this 25th issue of Transformative Works and Cultures, we have taken the unusual step of altering the copyright. TWC continues to use a Creative Commons copyright license, but it now uses an Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) copyright (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which removes the requirement that republication in other venues apply to TWC for permission. In the new copyright we’ve chosen, the author, not TWC, retains copyright.

[1.2] The copyright for issues 1 through 24 requires that the author transfer copyright to TWC. When we set up the journal, we chose this option because this is the norm in the publishing industry: it simplifies obtaining reprint requests because there is a single point of contact. We routinely granted reprint requests for free. Most are to the authors of the articles themselves, for their reuse in a book or for their translation and republication in another venue. Only rarely do we grant reprint permission for inclusion in an edited volume without the author’s knowledge.

[1.3] When researching the CC BY 4.0 copyright, at the instigation of an author who wondered, quite rationally, why she couldn’t retain copyright, we contacted acquisitions editors at several university presses, hoping they could advise us on whether academic presses would accept an Open Access Gold copyright. Unfortunately, they told us that even if the Open Access Gold copyright appeared prominently on the article itself (as indeed it does), and even if they printed out the license from CC’s Web site, to satisfy their lawyers, they still required release information from the publication itself from an editorial e-mail address or printed on letterhead. It thus seems that nothing has changed in the years since TWC launched; indeed, we chose the initial copyright on the basis of our concerns about reprints, so that TWC could do the paperwork on behalf of the authors and expedite granting permission to presses in a way that fit within the norms of the industry.

[1.4] To address the concern about granting reprint requests for presses who require documentation when TWC does not hold the copyright, TWC is now requiring authors to sign a form—not transferring copyright to TWC, as before, but expressing an understanding of the terms of the copyright itself and giving TWC permission to grant republication permission on behalf of authors. Going forward, we can provide the requesting press with the signed form, which should satisfy their due diligence. As TWC’s Web site notes, “This agreement in no way affects authorial ownership of the text; it is merely a way to create press-acceptable documentation for the reprint process” (http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/about/submissions#copyrightNotice).

[1.5] This new copyright license addresses everyone’s concerns. It addresses authors’ desire to retain copyright. It addresses TWC’s concern about and commitment to Open Access publication. And it addresses reprint venues’ concerns about requiring specific release documentation despite the free and open nature of the text. The copyright of previous issues still stands; TWC will not alter copyrights already granted. However, of course we will continue our practice of granting reprint permission for free.

2. Theory
Even as fan fiction loses much of its often gendered history, scholars continue to tease out the connections between gender, publication, and fan works. Catherine Coker situates fan fiction within a continuum of historical publication practices by women and challenges ideas of hierarchy, commercialism, and community. Elizabeth Jeanne Nielsen returns to the late Middle Ages by reading "Christine de Pizan’s The Book of the City of Ladies as Reclamatory Fan Work." In particular, she argues that seeing early works of literature as part of a long history of women's writing allows fan scholars to understand fan fiction as part of larger literary forces.

Whereas Coker and Nielsen look back to the relationship between published and unpublished fan works, Lesley Autumn Willard and Shannon Howard study the most popular current fannish platform, Tumblr, and how it affects fan engagements and fan identities. Willard’s "A Longitudinal Study of the Development of Fannish Literacy through Teen Wolf’s Tumblr Promotional Campaigns" studies several years of Tumblr campaigns to show the increased understanding of fannish communities in the industrial campaigns surrounding MTV’s Teen Wolf (2011–). In contrast, Howard’s "Surrendering Authorial Agency and Practicing Transindividualism in Tumblr’s Role-Play Communities” uses these communities to interrogate the ways fans use play to engage with, complicate, and undermine authorial identities.

In "Compartmentalization and Intertextuality in Real Person(a) Fiction," Milena Popova uses a case study to discuss the way real person fiction communities engage with news events. In so doing, she showcases the complicated processes of creation and negotiation of RPF characters and their tenuous but nevertheless crucial relationship to the celebrities they represent. Finally, in "Rereading Superman as a Trans F/Man," Dan Vena uses an autobiographical approach to read Superman as a model for trans narratives. By queering this most central of superheroes, Vena complicates the traditional nostalgia surrounding comic books and adolescence.

3. Praxis

As always, the Praxis essays showcase TWC’s broad range. This issue features essays on such diverse topics as World of Warcraft, Lego, beer, and theme parks. The scope of fannish activities, communities, and artifacts grows ever wider, and fan scholarship is only beginning to intersect with other fields and approaches. Lauren B. Collister’s "Transformative (H)activism: Breast Cancer Awareness and the World of Warcraft Running of the Gnomes" studies a breast cancer charity fund-raising event in World of Warcraft as a specific form of hacktivism that connects online and off-line activities. In "Fan Fiction in the Library," Ludi Price and Lyn Robinson look at the way libraries can and should preserve fan culture, with a particular look at the British system. Rachel Elizabeth Linn looks at a particular genre of fan fiction in "Bodies in Horrifying Hurt/Comfort Fan Fiction." Using different theories on suffering and pain, Linn focuses on Fullmetal Alchemist hurt/comfort fiction and its psychoanalytic implications.

Material culture is an important aspect of fan studies, and the final three Praxis essays all engage with it in various forms. Victoria Godwin’s "Theme Park as Interface to Wizarding (Story) World of Harry Potter" discusses the intersection of materiality and imagination by looking at the way theme parks offer specific forms of immersions. Moreover, theme parks also offer an exemplary study for the confrontation between corporations, which desire affirmational consumers, and fans, who often want to challenge and transform the corporate products. Whereas theme parks embody fictional worlds, Lego films create digital worlds out of material toys. In "How Digital Remix and Fan Culture Helped the Lego Comeback," Sophie Gwendolyn Einwächter and Felix M. Simon study the effect that The LEGO Movie (2014) has had on the toy maker business and how Lego can offer a case study of the continuing intersections of consumerism and fan cultural activities. Copyright is always an important issue with remixing of commercial properties, but rarely do we see discussions of crafts and food as fannish remixes. Seth M. Walker steps into this void with his discussion of "Subversive Drinking: Remixing Copyright with Free Beer." In particular, he uses the Free Beer movement to discuss how copyright law can suppress creativity and how open source movements can model free exchange of ideas.

4. Symposium and Review
Kevin D. Ball’s "Fan Labor, Speculative Fiction, and Video Game Lore in the Bloodborne Community" discusses the way fans create and shape the game’s mythology and the controversies surrounding their commercialization. In "'Can I take your picture?—Privacy in Cosplay," Babak Zarin discusses the legal and personal concerns regarding privacy within the cosplay community, while Kelli Marshall challenges an old myth surrounding the production of one of Gene Kelly’s most famous musicals in "Milk and Mythology in Singin’ in the Rain." Finally, in "A Case of Sherlockian Identity: Irregulars, Feminists, and Millennials" Liza Potts describes how fans create and share memories in a participatory culture and how these processes are inflected by various identity markers.

The book reviews include Bethan Jones reviewing Rebecca Williams’s monograph, Post-object Fandom: Television, Identity and Self-Narrative; Amanda D. Odom reviewing Rafael Bienia’s work on Role Playing Materials; Kathryn Hemmann discussing Sandra Annett’s Anime Fan Communities: Transcultural Flows and Frictions; and Sandra Annett looking at the collection Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan, edited by Mark McLelland et al.

5. Conclusion

Several special issues are coming up in 2018 and 2019. The two 2018 special issues—Tumblr and Fandom (guest edited by Lori Morimoto, Louisa Stein, and Allison McCracken) and Social TV Fandom and the Media Industries (guest edited by Myles McNutt)—are closed to submissions. We are currently soliciting for the two 2019 specials issues: Romance/Fans: Sexual Fantasy, Love, and Genre in Fandom (guest editors Katherine Morrissey, Athena Bellas, and Eric Selinger) is accepting submissions until December 31, 2017 (http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/announcement/view/31); Fans of Color, Fandoms of Color (guest editors Abigail De Kosnik and André Carrington) is accepting submissions until March 15, 2018 (http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/announcement/view/37).

Calls for papers are online in Announcements (http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/announcement) and are regularly updated. Guest editors interested in proposing a themed issue of TWC are invited to view our guidelines (http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/about/submissions#onlineSubmissions); we are looking at publication dates of 2019 and later.

The September 15 issue is always an open, unthemed issue. We always welcome general submissions. For our upcoming ten-year anniversary, we invite submissions on The Future of Fandom (http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/announcement/view/40). The close date of receipt of essays for the September 15, 2018, issue is January 15, 2018. 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).

6. Acknowledgments

It is not possible to properly acknowledge the depth of appreciation we feel toward everyone who has helped make this issue of TWC possible. They have suffered hard deadlines, late nights, and short due dates. As always, we thank the authors in this issue, whose original work makes TWC possible; the peer reviewers, who freely provide their time and expertise; the editorial team members, whose engagement with and solicitation of material is so valuable; and the production team members, who transform rough manuscripts into publishable documents.

The following people worked on TWC No. 25 in an editorial capacity: Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (editors); Cameron Salisbury and Francesca Coppa (Symposium); and Louisa Stein and Katie Morrissey (Review).

The following people worked on TWC No. 25 in a production capacity: Rrain Prior (production editor); Beth Friedman, Shoshanna Green, and Christine Mains (copyeditors); Claire Baker, Sarah New, Rebecca Sentance, and Gabriel Simm (layout); and Rachel P. Kreiter, Amanda Retartha, and Latina Vidolova (proofreaders).

TWC thanks the board of the Organization for Transformative Works. OTW provides financial support and server space to TWC but is not involved in any way in the content of the journal, which is editorially independent.
TWC thanks all its board members, whose names appear on TWC’s masthead, as well as the additional peer reviewers who provided service for TWC No. 25: Tonje Andersen, Carissa Baker, Stephanie Betz, Ceilyn Boyd, Sarah Boyd, Jeremy Brett, Tanya Cochran, Adam Cohen, Garry Crawford, Avery Dame, Stephen Epstein, Judith Fathallah, Casey Fiedler, Lincoln Geraghty, Sam Goodman, John Halbrooks, Kathryn Hemman, Ellen Kirkpatrick, Patti Kleeb, Kristin Linder, Anna Martin, Ann McClellan, Myles McNutt, Ingyo Oh, Line Petersen, Melanie Piper, Billy Proctor, Claudia Rebaza, Kate Roddy, Anastasia Salter, Mafalda Stasi, Abby Waysdorf, and Anna Wilson.
The margins of print? Fan fiction as book history

Catherine Coker

Abstract—Contemporary fan fiction is overwhelmingly digital in both publication and dissemination; it has never been easier to access this subculture of writers and writing. However, fan fiction in print has likewise never been so accessible, as a slew of recent popular novels proudly proclaim their fannish origins and make claims such as "More Than 2 Million Reads Online—FIRST TIME IN PRINT!" Further, traditional fannish mores insist that fan work should never be done for profit, and yet numerous print works adapted from fan fiction have become best sellers. I would like to problematize how we consider form and content in both creation and reception, how the popular value of work waxes and wanes in relation to its fan fiction status. In other words, how can we read fan fiction as part of a continuum of historical publication practices by women, and problematize our hierarchies of value between print and digital?

Keywords—Fan writing; Fanzines


I. Introduction

Contemporary fan fiction is overwhelmingly digital in both publication and dissemination; it has never been easier to access this subculture of writers and writing. However, fan fiction in print has likewise never been so accessible, as a slew of recent popular novels proudly proclaim their fannish origins on their printed covers in brick-and-mortar bookstores, making claims such as that of Anna Todd’s After series: "More Than 2 Million Reads Online—FIRST TIME IN PRINT!" Published novels such as Anna Todd’s series (which revises fan fics based on the boy band One Direction) and the infamous Fifty Shades series by E. L. James (revised from Twilight fan fics or "Twifics") have won their authors film deals, top rankings on best-seller lists, and heaps of scorn from both the fan and literary establishments.

The transition from private circulation—much fan fiction is shared on platforms aimed at specific communities—to mass publication is less unusual than these examples would have us believe; indeed, it makes up the greater part of the history of women’s writing. However, fan fiction has yet to be accepted as part of that history, or indeed, of the history of publication in general. Nonetheless, I would like to argue that if we problematize how we consider the form and content of fan writing in both its creation and reception, we can read fan fiction as part of a continuum of historical publication practices. This reading relies on acknowledging that we have accepted as a cultural norm hierarchies of value between print and digital that emphasize traditional patriarchal and public practices of reading and writing over private coterie practices, ones that have their roots in the history of women’s reading and writing.

To examine these points more closely, I would like to show how an interdisciplinary approach to fan texts using book history can reformulate our understanding of fannish reading, writing, and publication. I was once told that book history is not applicable to the study of fan fiction as, "by definition," such writing is not disseminated in book form—that is, as a printed codex. Though the contemporary discipline of book history looks beyond this narrow definition to include multiple technologies of production and consumption, from scroll to e-book, this challenge to including the study of fan fiction in book history ignores both the better part of fannish history and truly massive amounts of fannish production: library collections at the University of California, Riverside have fanzine holdings in the hundreds of thousands, while numerous other research institutions, such as the University of Iowa and Texas A&M University, hold thousands of issues as well. Fan fiction is also published online, whether in private and locked communities (such as some fan Web sites and closed groups on LiveJournal), on a semipublic platform such as Wattpad (which requires users
to provide an e-mail address and register as members), or in completely open archives such as FanFiction.net and the Archive of Our Own. Together, these sites provide texts in the millions. Too little fan studies scholarship notes that there is a linear progression in connections between and access to fan works in the transition from print to digital publication and circulation; for example, both Camille Bacon-Smith’s Enterprising Women (1992) and Henry Jenkins’s Textual Poachers (1992), seminal works in the field, focused on media studies rather than on literary study, and attempted to normalize perceptions of fans and fannish behaviors. While they both referenced print fanzines, they emphasized the why of their creation, rather than the how of their production and consumption. And they examined individual texts and authors as singular or exemplary case studies, not seeing them as connected to a significant body of work with its own history. Later studies, such as Rhiannon Bury’s Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online (2005) and Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse’s edited collection Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet (2006), similarly looked at specific fandoms and topics, including literary critique, but likewise considered only contemporary fan works rather than fandom’s print-based roots. As a methodology, book history can usefully reframe and recontextualize studies of fannish production, dissemination, and consumption, enabling us to expand our considerations of such texts, rather than isolating them as unique case studies.

[1.4] The first American and British fanzines appeared in the early 1930s, concurrent with new technologies of what we now call desktop publishing; using stencils and gelatin, fan writers could quickly and cheaply copy volumes of commentary on fans and fandom, plus, of course, the earliest fan fiction. The term “fan fiction” itself was also coined in the 1930s, signifying amateur writing by self-identified fans rather than the transformative works derived from media and literary fandoms that we know today. This linguistic and intellectual shift needs to be queried further (note 1), but from the 1930s through the 1990s, bound and printed fan fiction was circulated, read, and discussed by numerous social communities in science fiction (and fantasy) fandom. In her book The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction (2002), Justine Larbalestier describes publisher Hugo Gernsback, best known as the founder of Amazing Stories in 1926 and later memorialized through SFF fandom’s annual Hugo Award, using the word “fan” to describe “the passionate readers” of his magazine—and, “strange to say,” many of them were women—but Larbalestier’s focus is on fans as readers and writers of genre rather than as transformative readers and writers (2002, 23). Helen Merrick’s The Secret Feminist Cabal (2009) covers similar ground and introduces a number of women fans as readers and writers in the 1930s and later on, but she too avoids discussion of fans as readers and writers of transformative texts, and focuses on only a small number of specific fanzine titles as case studies rather than examining the medium more broadly. Further, both of these works are classified and presented as volumes of science fiction studies rather than of fan studies or literary history, though functionally they can be read as examples of both, since both examine literary production and consumption. This lack of attention is due to the low cultural value put on fan writing.

[1.5] While the history of fan writing is convoluted at best, its bibliography is neglected altogether. Very few bibliographies of fan writing exist, and almost all of them are created by and for fans themselves. This is largely because of changing practices of authorship in fandom; early works were often written under fans’ real names, and so what bibliographies there are run the risk of “outing” them (note 2). They are also often out of print and hard to find. One example is the Trexindex, a three-issue fanzine with seven supplements issued between 1977 and 1993. Subtitled The Complete Encyclopedia of Star Trek Fan Magazines, it aimed to index all fan stories and fan authors writing during that period. (There are also bibliographic lists created as finding aids for fanzines in library holdings, and while these are public, they are limited in scope and context.)

[1.6] Bibliography itself, loosely defined, is the study and analysis of texts, their production, and their transmission. As a discipline, it is much more than the dry lists of books and technical data found in library catalogues that describe material objects; rather, to quote D. F. McKenzie, one of its most important champions, it reveals the history of texts in society itself, investigating “what their production, dissemination, and reception reveal about past human life and thought” (1992, 298). While fan studies shares similar concerns in uncovering and analyzing fannish regard for the creation and use of fan texts, the field has not made use of book history’s methodology to do so. I would consider this an argument in favor of examining the methodology, and the material, more closely rather than disregarding them altogether, as I was urged to. To quote Leslie Howsam: “Like social class (in E. P. Thompson’s famous formulation), the book is not so much a category as a process: books happen; they happen to people who read, reproduce, disseminate, and compose them; and they happen to be significant. The book can be a force for change and the history of the book documents that change” (2006, 5).
At the same time, the field of book history is heavily invested in maintaining and reinforcing the traditional status of print culture, and especially of Western, Anglo-European printed discourse, and this investment has its drawbacks too. Indeed, studies of the book in Eastern and various indigenous cultures are only a few decades old; Henry Jenkins’s *Textual Poachers* (1992) predates studies of the book in the pre-Columbian Americas and a great deal of work on the book in Eastern and Islamic cultures, among others (Mignolo 1995; Suarez and Woudhuysen 2013). This very narrow discourse is currently expanding, but it nonetheless remains invested in microdefinitions of—and so, I would argue, microaggressions to—nonmale and nonwhite writing, reading, and textual circulation. And so, the "objective" (I use this word with awareness of all its connotations) form of the "book" is a printed codex created by and for a Western, patriarchal culture that emphasizes the public masculine voice and pointedly minimizes all others.

How then can we define a "book," when we have already acknowledged its wide range of meanings? The production of the printed codex, at least, has been best defined and revealed through Robert Darnton’s famous communications circuit, a theoretical model created in 1982 that centers the book as object in a schema that runs from the author to the publisher (if the bookseller does not assume that role), the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader. The reader completes the circuit because he influences the author both before and after the act of composition. Authors are readers themselves...So the circuit runs full circle. It transmits messages, transforming them en route, as they pass from thought to writing to printed characters and back to thought again. (Darnton [1982] 2005, 11)

Various interventions in this model have been formulated over the years (Adams and Barker 2006; Phelps 1996; McDonald 1997; Secord 2000; Bachleitner 2009; Weel 2015), but none of them query this basic context of masculine production or public consumption, nor how it functionally removes women both as writers and as tradeswomen. Moreover, this model is increasingly recognized as a picture of production during a very specific time period. In her 2014 essay "Do Women Have a Book History?" Michelle Levy points out these shortcomings, noting,

Rethinking [Darnton’s] communication circuit in terms of gender compels us to confront the gender asymmetry that existed within commercial publishing...Gender complicates some of the fundamental assumptions embedded in the communication circuit, which, by assigning discrete roles to various groups, obscures the overlapping roles that many individuals, and it seems, many women, played within the print marketplace. (312)

However, by focusing explicitly on commercial publishing, Levy too bypasses manuscript culture. There are currently no models of the book that consider manuscript publication—the form in which most women’s writing was disseminated and read for some 300 years. Nor have there been any expansive studies of private press or zine production, through which both SF fandom at large and women in particular disseminated texts through the second half of the twentieth century; nor of digital publication and print-on-demand, forms that are indisputably characteristic of contemporary fannish publishing and reading.

Indeed, the patriarchal print model is only just starting to be disrupted. Margaret Ezell, in her 1999 volume *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print*, goes into more detail on the actual materiality of women’s writing and publishing, particularly in the 16th through 18th centuries. She points out that women’s writing and its circulation in manuscript form, as forms of social authorship and interaction, are critical not only to literary context but also to its reception by contemporary scholars, noting that

having a "voice" is equated with being in print, with the obvious implication that "work" is equated with print texts and anything else, manuscript copy in particular, is only "silence." The sole criterion of the success of these generations of women writers is the amount they published, with no mention of the amount they actually wrote. Intentionally or not, we thus train our students to classify literary activity with print as the superior mode and to employ false gender dichotomies when interpreting early modern texts. (43–44, italics original)

The insight that Ezell applies to early modern texts I apply to contemporary ones: by minimizing or ignoring digital production in favor of print, we erase significant patterns of production and consumption and deny the true impact of readers and writers on the intellectual, social, and economic fields of textual markets. Further, by erasing the larger history of fan texts aside from or prior to media fandom, we create an ahistorical narrative in which
contemporary communities and texts are intellectually disconnected from previous ones, and thus minimized and decontextualized. In doing so we perpetuate and reinforce textual hierarchies in which print is valorized at the expense of the manuscript and the digital, masculine production at the expense of the feminine. We endorse intellectual values that privilege a specific image of the canon in our classrooms and culture. Unpacking these paradigms reveals a great deal about how the discourse of fandom is shaped by the discourse of the printed book.

2. Locating the space and materials of fannish publishing

[2.1] When literary historians consider the history of women’s writing, they typically look at how women operated in the public, "male" space of print publication as compared to the private, "feminine" space of manuscript publication. In the 16th and 17th centuries women writers built communities to share writing that they could disseminate in manuscript, or handwritten form: private, gendered literary production for a specific audience of cultural "insiders" (often known as "one's friends"). We should consider how women fans’ zine and Web publishing can function as an analog to historical manuscript circulation, especially since such fans are preoccupied with controlling access to their literary endeavors, how texts reflect small communities with specific personal ties, and how their writings often were and are denigrated by predominantly male publishers and scholars. In short, we should think how we might locate women’s fan writing as part of the greater history of women’s literary writing and production. By revising contemporary narratives of both book history and fan history, we can reread women’s work in the literary and book trades from the 17th and the 21st centuries as a function of operating with and subverting patriarchal norms of literary production. In other words, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

[2.2] Problematizing the space of production is a key point of entry into considering how we value the public, commercial space versus the private space of affective labor, especially given that one of the major fannish mores is to never profit materially from one's writing. (Indeed, some of the greatest objections I have seen to the popularity of Fifty Shades of Gray and similar novels is their authors' betrayal of the fannish community by republishing their work for money!) A passage in Margot Adler’s Drawing Down the Moon, an ethnographic study of contemporary neo-paganism first published in 1979 and revised in 1986, sets a scene that would have been very familiar—except for the nudity—to fans in previous generations:

[2.3] Eight or nine people sat around a long low table that was covered with stacks of freshly-printed pages...The sound of friendly chatter mingled with the rustling of pages, the steady firing of a stapling machine, and the occasional crunching of popcorn, which was being passed around in a large bowl...Only one person in the room was wearing any clothes, a fact that didn’t seem noticeable after a few minutes...Everyone—dressed or undressed—was engaged in the business of the day, which was sorting, collating, and stapling, and mailing the 74th issue of The Green Egg. (265–66)

[2.4] Collating parties were a staple, as it were, of zine publishing. Zines proliferated widely in the late 1970s, moving beyond their roots in science fiction fan communities and into the punk, feminist, and New Age movements. Zines took multiple forms, from letterzines (typed copies of correspondence that were then disseminated to all members of a textual conversation) to bound volumes. Sometimes they imitated traditional newspapers or magazines in their format, typefaces, and paper; at other times they appeared as codices, with colophons and illustrated soft or hard covers. They would usually be distributed by subscription, with a set number of copies produced for a set number of subscribers, occasionally with a handful of extras that could be sold or given to others outside the group. Zines were usually made in someone’s home (a private, domestic space), but they would often have significant public, and so "published," lives. Print runs could number anywhere between ten and several hundred, depending on the number of subscribers and the size of the potential nonsubscriber audience. Popular issues of zines could have multiple editions; colophons for certain Star Trek zines supply information such as "fifth edition, three hundred and fifty copies." Some of the most popular titles ultimately had two or even three thousand copies made and sold. Zines were thus not always small or inexpensive productions; they required a number of people to provide content, labor, and materials.

[2.5] We might then see contemporary fannish desktop and Web publishing as an inversion of historical printing practices. The very nomenclature of English and colonial American "printing houses" ties into a patriarchal government and guild system that legally required printers to work in their own homes for tax and census purposes, effectively combining the private and public spheres into one. For example, English printers were required by the Ordinance of
1653 to exercise their trade "in their respective Dwelling Houses and not elsewhere" (Firth and Rait 696). Women’s labor was often invisible except in cases where the men were absent: jailed or dead. While these laws were not enforced in the American colonies, they (and particularly their emphasis on authority and power) have nonetheless shaped our conceptions of books as printed volumes. Adrian Johns similarly notes that the "bifurcated representation of the workplace as a home and as a business was consequently made central to the production and reception of printed books" (1998, 125, italics original). In other words, the known site of production legitimized a text in a way that the laborers who produced it did not.

[2.6] In contrast, today’s home or self-publishing is now considered among the least respectable forms of literary endeavor, with fan fiction even lower because it is written for pleasure rather than profit. The "home" that was originally identified as the man’s purview is now identified as the woman’s, and this shift is key to redefining the discourse of public and private publication. Similarly, shifts in labor resources redefine our perceptions of activity; women’s work in the 17th-century print industry combined text with textiles, including sorting rags for quality to be made into paper and sewing paper sheets for pamphlets and book bindings. Women’s reading and writing have long been regarded with suspicion. To quote Elizabeth Long, it is always women who read "too much," and this criticism is leveled at both housewives and spinsters: "reading requires social control lest it take over from more worthy pursuits," namely more traditional (and feminine) domestic duties (2003, 13). Writing is equally suspicious, and publication not even to be thought of; redefining the home as the location of these labors subverts the intellectual power of masculine, public discourse. Consider the import of Virginia Woolf’s classic text *A Room of One’s Own*, which considers space and time to write as necessities.

[2.7] Further, Woolf herself co-owned Hogarth Press with her husband; she sorted the type for their fledgling press and typeset portions of the works they published; she learned bookbinding at the age of nineteen and continued to bind books throughout her life. And she was not the only one; women were an important part of the Modernist publishing scene. A recent biography of Blanche Knopf by Laura Claridge, *The Lady with the Borzoi: Blanche Knopf, Literary Tastemaker Extraordinaire* (2016), describes in great detail how Knopf cofounded that famous press with her husband, with whom she too sewed by hand the sheets for the books they published, as well as working as editor and agent, but was systematically written out of the history of the firm. Woolf as writer and publisher likewise speaks to the nature of book as object, with what Lisa Maruca calls "production values": "the social standards or community agreements as to what is worthy of notice and is best to uphold, and likewise what must be repressed in order to maintain these standards—that are promulgated both through the act of textual production and about textual production" (2007, 7).

[2.8] When we consider women’s history in publishing—whether as writers, typesetters, binders, or other laborers—we need to consider the problems of invisibility. At this point in time, all too often books themselves are not seen; we usually don’t consider the sourcing of paper, bindings, ink, etc. because we are so distanced from it. Looking at physical materials means a great deal in considering how they came to be. What, if anything, does it mean that different copies of the same issue of a fanzine are printed on different-colored paper? In some cases, these differentiate editions, while in others it indicates no artistic intention but only what paper was cheapest at the time. On the other hand, some zine producers went to great lengths to obtain high-quality paper and other materials for their zines.

[2.9] For example, the *Darkover Newsletter*, published by the fan club Friends of Darkover, saw 70 issues over 20 years, with a subscriber base ranging between 100 and 1,000 as Darkover and Marion Zimmer Bradley waned and waxed in popularity. (On Friends of Darkover publications generally, see Coker 2008.) Paper color changed with each issue, and was rarely repeated. Darkover fans I spoke to gave no reason for this beyond a shrug and "Well, that’s what we had to work with." Presumably the various lots of colored paper were what they could easily and cheaply obtain. The Friends of Darkover published several titles in addition to the *Newsletter*, including *Starstone*, a serial that lasted five issues; eight different one-shot titles, including *The Darkover Cookbook*; and a small pamphlet with a poem by Bradley called "The Maenads." This last is the single exception I have found to the pattern of their paper usage. It was printed in three editions with different-colored paper covers: the first edition was gray and ran 25 copies, the second was green and ran 75 copies, and the third was yellow and does not indicate the size of its print run. In short, fan work in print requires not only significant labor, expense, and materials, but also the knowledge and expertise to combine these into a print publication.
Fanzine publishing has become more expensive because of declining mechanisms of production, as well as the migration of much of fandom to online forums. Printed collections of fan fiction have largely been reduced to special publications, sometimes crowd-funded on Kickstarter or similar online venues. Agent with Style (http://www.agentwithstyle.com), a fan publisher that specializes in reprinting vintage fanzines, must do so with significant markup. For instance, the first issue of the classic K/S zine Nome, edited by Victoria Clark, M. V. M. Varela, and Barbara L. Storey, was published in 1979 and displayed no cover price. Used copies have been found priced $1–$9; a brand new reprint from AWS costs $22, or $29 for overseas orders, though this does include shipping and handling costs. (Other issues with the publisher and its productions have been reported; see https://fanlore.org/wiki/Agent_With_Style.) Most commercial printers today require a minimum number of copies before they will take a job on, with expenses increasing as page counts rise.

Nonfiction fanzines are much shorter than fan fiction zines: 4 to 30 pages versus 60 to 150 pages, on average. The shorter fanzines generally are similar to flyers or circulars, offering book and film reviews and conference information; the larger ones tend to be fiction anthologies. Both are reflective of their primary audiences. Fan fiction fanzines have become an outlet for a niche market of vintage collectors rather than a viable introduction to a fandom, while nonfiction fanzines are aimed at an insular and preexisting audience that is already a community. Because they are intended for very different audiences, they are functionally invisible to one another’s audiences.

The invisibility of the material object becomes a point of erasure: what is not seen becomes nonexistent. A major change in fan publishing in recent years has been the migration from print fiction fanzines to online archives, with a seemingly gender-based segregation taking place at access points. The shorter sf zines, in print and online, tend to be created by men for male audiences, while women fans adopt closed online communities that replicate a form of private space. (A brief survey of Efanzines.com, an online archive that contains pdf copies of sf zines that were once print and have gone digital but maintained their print layouts, demonstrates that most of the readers and writers there are men.) This shift is perhaps best described in a report on the 2014 WorldCon by Gavia Baker-Whitelaw (2014):

During discussions about how to attract a new generation [to] the convention, I’d hear people talking about how the Internet is isolating and incomprehensible—or how it lacked the personal touch of fanzine mailing lists. One audience member asked what had happened to slash fic. Why didn’t he see it in fanzines any more? What made it die out? Apparently he was unaware of the vast quantity of slashfic constantly being posted online, including in older fandoms like Star Trek, which long ago made the jump from print to Internet.

When I read this statement during a conference the following April, the room laughed. To fan scholars, the idea of slash writing having died out is absurd, because of both the quantity of it that is produced daily and the quantity of scholarship studying it that has been produced over the past three decades—but the vast majority of both is by women. That male fans could ask about its supposed disappearance at one of the major genre conventions indicates how very gendered both this form of literature and its points of access are.

A recent uproar (sometimes called "TheoryofFicGate") exposed, in a different way, how the invisibility of female fan space that is assumed, and that is problematic, is changing. An informal (student-led) undergraduate class called "The Theory of Fanfiction" at UC Berkeley upset numerous fan authors by directing students to read and comment on fan stories online. The authors had no warning of this, only learning about the class after some had received comments they found insulting or just upsetting. Gavia Baker-Whitelaw (2015) again summed the case up by saying,

As is often the case in this kind of conflict, the basic problem was a misunderstanding of the difference—and overlap—between private and public Internet spheres. While most fanfic is published on easily accessible platforms, it’s often posted with the tacit understanding that it will only be read by its target audience—and for the most part, it is. Fanfic authors are definitely not expecting their writing to be scrutinized by people who aren’t familiar with the source material or with fandom in general.

The conversations, debates, and flames that resulted from the assignment drew participants ranging from staffers of the Archive of Our Own (AO3) to acafans including Anne Jamison, Kristina Busse, and Karen Hellekson. Most interestingly for my purposes here, Jamison commented on Tumblr that "I advocate private communities, locked accounts, mailing lists and paper zines for people who value privacy but want to share. It’s not just other fans reading here. Maybe it once was, but it just isn’t true now." As a book history scholar, I am fascinated by the notion that print
zines and print culture are a locked, private form of communication to a privileged few. It reflects our changing notions of publication and of the spaces in which publications are created.

3. Stigmas of print? Closing a loop in the history of women's writing

[3.1] As demonstrated above, the norms of print publishing above all else value public access: public publishing, public circulation, public market through public buying and public selling, public reading, public engagement. The average fan text flouts these norms, whether because print zines are sold literally "under the table" at conventions or because fan works are posted to member-only online communities. The meaning of the word publish, "to issue text for sale or distribution to the public," derives from its etymological root, which means "people." This raises a deceptively simple question that has long dogged historians of women's writing: What does it mean to be "published"? Historically, the difference between manuscript publishing and print publishing has rested on the insularity of the intended audience in the private sphere and the public acts associated with the public sphere.

[3.2] For many years, book historians maintained several truisms regarding the higher quality and value of print: the printed text always existed in more copies than the manuscript text; the printed text was always more stable than the manuscript text; and all copies of the same edition of a book looked just alike. Each of these truisms has been demolished in the last few decades. It was entirely possible for a manuscript text to exist in more copies than a printed text, because there were various restraints (including legal ones) on the number of books that could be printed at one time, while a popular poem, letter, or other text could be copied at will by hand. As happens today on Tumblr, some texts were shared so often that their origins were lost. Note the old aphorism that "Anonymous was a woman."

[3.3] Indeed, scribal historian Harold Love has argued that the gendered differences in publication created a "stigma of print" against women writers (1993, 54), and so their retreat into private reading and writing practices became a form of what he calls "bonding" (180), in which literary cliques were formed as conspicuous, gendered acts of exclusion. These coterie practices continued well into the eighteenth century, when both the rise of the novel and the industrialization of print transformed literary production into mass culture. However, this practice of gender-based bonding continues to inform and illuminate social literary production, especially if we consider men's fanzine and women's fan fiction practices in this light. Social bonds create norms within the community that are policed by community members, and these norms extend into the very definition of literary work. When interviewing male fans about fan history in the FanHistory group on Facebook, I was adamantly told more than once that "fan fiction" is not transformative work, but original amateur work, and "it's too bad no one writes it anymore." When I pressed further, a group member stated that the term had been co-opted, that its current usage was incorrect, and that "non-fans are too lazy to come up with their own portmanteaus; according to some dictionaries, 'fanzine' is no longer restricted to SF fandom's publications" because of "lazy sex [sic] and a disregard for history, and disrespect towards niche interests. All is swallowed by the maw of 'popular culture.'" Not only does the comment reflect territoriality, it implies that authors of transformative works are not fans. It reveals much about how gender affects whether texts are perceived as literary.

[3.4] Finally, regarding the stability of text: printed texts were often more unstable than manuscript ones because of the physical make-up of the print workshop. With multiple people setting type and then putting their work together, it was easy to lose words and lines. These errors might be noticed and corrected later in the print run. The academic cottage industry of identifying textual variants and comparing collations is the backbone of studies of individual authors like William Shakespeare or Walt Whitman, and its chimerical goal is to recover a true text, the one supposedly intended by the author. Studies of the stability of fan texts have largely focused on comparing fan fictions to their published print revisions, such as Master of the Universe and Fifty Shades of Gray. However, there are multiple other avenues for investigating fannish textual stability. Aside from published fan fiction, numerous fics have both gen and slash versions (for example, Changing Destiny by Nadja Lee, a moviiverse Lord of the Rings novel that has a cover showing Aragorn kissing Arwen on the gen edition and Aragorn kissing Boromir on the slash edition) or PG and NC-17 variations. The supposed stability of print is thus less than stable.

[3.5] If we compare historical coterie manuscript practices to digital fan practices, we see more than one similarity in social literary production: both feature communities of women writers in their private spaces, their homes, reading, writing, and sharing one another's work. In print fanzines, room was usually left for letters of comment, so that readers could respond to stories. In the early days of the Internet, readers' feedback was usually shared in private e-mails
directly to the author, but increasingly sophisticated Web tools have enabled multiple forms of interaction. Livejournal users could comment on a post, while the AO3 allows users to leave a wordless kudos instead of or in addition to a comment. All of these are "public" in that they can be seen by other members of the community, so readers and writers are fully aware of the reciprocity of these actions. This reciprocity helps to build community, as reading and writing are practices shared by all, and a communal history of that activity is maintained. But it is increasingly difficult to maintain that communal history.

[3.6] The topic of preservation and access continues to haunt readers of both historical and contemporary writing. In many archives, women’s manuscripts are listed under the unhelpful cataloging title of "Domestic Papers," a barrier to scholarly access that is only slowly being worn down by academic inquiry. And until recently, the primary difficulty in locating and identifying digital women’s writing has likewise been in preservation and access. However, the Organization for Transformative Works, which runs the Archive of Our Own, has been making progress in preserving fan writing from earlier days of the Internet. In 2012, the OTW launched the Open Doors project, which, together with other efforts at digital and print media preservation, invited maintainers of at-risk fan archives to import them into the AO3. First to be preserved was the Smallville Slash Archive, and the effort has since included over two dozen sites, including the Henneth Annûn Story Archive, a hub of Lord of the Rings fandom in the early 2000s, in 2015, and the Due South Archive in 2016. Maintaining access to texts is the first part of literary study; without the texts themselves, we only see part of the story.

[3.7] Print production has spent centuries solidifying itself as the dominant demonstration of literary force, training readers (and writers) to accept very specific codes of aesthetics as defaults, such as the Times New Roman font that is the mainstay of academics and the octavo format codex that is instantly recognizable to genre readers. However, print production is as artificially constructed and gender-biased as any other system, and we should acknowledge this before we think to apply any series of production and consumption "norms" to bodies of writing. Book history as a field has worked to unpack the processes and codes that we use to consider reading and writing practices, and its tools are likewise useful in examining fan works for literary study.

[3.8] As a final anecdote to demonstrate the usefulness of this methodology, I will confess that, as a fan and a scholar, one of the things I do semiregularly is trawl through eBay and various antiquarian book dealer aggregates looking for fanzines. I bring this up because, frankly, book dealers have no idea what to do with fannish material, and this is repeatedly demonstrated by the widely varying prices charged for the same item. For instance, Jean Lorrah’s Star Trek fan novel The Night of the Twin Moons can be found selling for anything from $25 to $1,000. It was a very popular title in fandom in the 1970s; it went into at least four printings. It is 158 pages, stapled with paper covers and a strip of black book-tape along the spine, and its front matter states that it is available for $3 in person and $3.25 by book rate mail, or $4.50 for first class. Unlike mass-produced print material, fan publications have no catalogue of standard pricing and no bibliographies that can contextualize them. Book dealers have no guidance of the kind they are used to relying on. But the fanzine is a printed text, and if no one else has a copy for sale, clearly it must be monetarily valuable, right? That the monetary valuation of printed fan fiction, whether in the form of vintage zines or reworked into mainstream novels, contrasts so thoroughly with the literary valuation, which contrasts in turn with the academic valuation, is fascinating to me, and should be explored further. How do we value fannish writing?

4. Notes

1. Jack Speer’s 1944 Fancyclopedia spoke of "fan fiction, sometimes improperly used to mean fan science fiction, that is, ordinary fantasy published in a fan magazine." When Dick Eney published Fancyclopedia II in 1959, the definition had become bipartite: "1) Sometimes meaning by fans in the manner of pros; that is, ordinary fantasy published in a fanzine. Properly it means 2) fiction by fans about fans (or sometimes about pros) having no necessary connection with sf/fantasy" (56–57; sf/fantasy is an obsolete fannish term for science fiction and fantasy). However, by the mid-1970s the usage had shifted to imply the derivative and transformative works more familiar today; Jacqueline Lichtenberg used the term to describe the stories included in Star Trek Lives!, the licensed anthology of fan writing that she coedited with Sondra Marshak and Joan Winston in 1975. This is the meaning most often used today, although older members of the fan community do hold onto the older definitions. In 2004 the Oxford English Dictionary Online defined fan fiction as "fiction, usually fantasy or science fiction, written by a fan rather than a professional author, esp. that based on already-existing characters from a television series, book, film, etc.; (also) a piece of such writing" (http://www.oed.com/).
Clearly there was a shift in fandom and fannish activity between 1959 and 1975, and while those years are concurrent with the rise of media fandom through the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek*, as well as an increase in the number and proportion of women fans, further work should be done in examining this shift.

2. The public/private discourse of fannish publication and its inextricable relationship with authorial anonymity is of ongoing concern to both fans and scholars. It is worth noting that the fanzine reprint company Agent with Style seemingly does not reproduce content without permission (though some fans will argue otherwise), meaning that reprint fanzines may be missing elements (stories, art) that appear in the original. And current scholarly standards for journal articles—and, increasingly, monographs and edited collections—require at least an attempt to contact fan authors prior to publishing discussions of their work. Similarly, access to fanzines in library holdings can be complicated by whether the institution treats the titles as published material (and therefore lists them as periodicals in catalogs) or as private literary correspondence (and therefore lists them in finding aids). Further discussion across various viewpoints can be found in Musiani 2011, Busse and Hellekson 2012, Whiteman 2012, and Kelley 2016.

5. Works cited


Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* as reclamatory fan work

E. J. Nielsen

University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts, United States

Abstract—In what ways can medieval texts be looked at as fan works? How might the rhetorical tools of fan studies or affect theory aid in further understanding of these texts? Likewise, can we use medieval understandings of literary production to look at modern fan works in order to complicate our contemporary ideas of authorship? Here I consider how Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* (*Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*) can be read as a reclamatory fan work addressing issues of representation and gender within both the texts it responds to and the larger culture within which the work is situated. Moreover, contextualizing de Pizan’s work as fan work can help fan scholars by locating fan studies within a broader literary history. By reframing these earlier works of literature as part of a longer history of women’s writing that also involves the works being done today within modalities of fan writing, and by reconsidering fan works as part of a historical continuum of women’s writing, we, much as de Pizan herself did, create a theoretical space that historicizes, contextualizes, and indeed valorizes women writers of both fannish and nonfannish works.

1. Introduction

Yet here stand women not simply accused, but already judged, sentenced, and condemned!

—Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (c. 1403)

These are my characters now, and the characters of fellow fans—I rely on myself, and other fic writers, to push them forward.

—Elizabeth Minkel, "Harry Potter and the Sanctioned Follow-on Work" (2016)

A woman enters into a public debate over a problematic yet popular text, arguing that, among other things, it “speaks ill of women” (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1997, 41). Eventually, frustrated by the debate and by a general climate she finds misogynistic, she channels her thoughts and feelings about the depictions of women in the media into her own work, which strongly references a well-known work by a male author. She creates a text that uses female characters drawn from earlier works to tell a story subverting existing narratives about women, creating a narrative space within which she can see herself reflected.

While this story is one that plays out daily on social media and in contemporary fan works, it also dates back hundreds of years. The woman referenced above is the medieval author Christine de Pizan, and her work, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (*Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*), was written in about 1403. As I will argue here, it is possible, and indeed potentially illuminating, to approach medieval texts through the lens of fan studies. In what ways can medieval texts be looked at as fan works? How might the rhetorical tools of fan studies or affect theory aid in further understanding of
these texts? Likewise, can we use medieval understandings of literary production to look at modern fan works in order to complicate our contemporary ideas of authorship?

[1.5] Early in 2016, Transformative Works and Cultures published volume 21, a special edition explicitly focused on "The Classical Canon and/as Transformative Work," with the word "classical" serving as a shorthand for Greco-Roman, medieval, and early modern material. Editor Ika Willis notes that

the existence of this conceptual isomorphism [between Classical literature and contemporary fan fiction] suggests a shared practice and, importantly, a shared aesthetic between fan fiction and Classical literature—that is, between one of the most delegitimized, lowest forms of cultural production in the contemporary world and one of the highest and most valued. Attending to the similarities between these two communities of practice thus enables us to invert and displace the high/low binary and to expand and nuance our model of transformative work. (2016, ¶1.3)

[1.7] Anna Wilson has stated that "there is also a need for a more comprehensive study of immaturity and affect in medieval ‘fan fiction’—that is, texts that enter into and consciously engage with the imaginative world of another" (2015, 2). On the medievalist side, the 2016 International Congress of Medieval Studies offered a panel titled "Fan Fiction in Medieval Studies," while several recent articles have also considered the relationship between Shakespeare and modern fan culture. Here, I join that conversation by considering how de Pizan’s The Book of the City of Ladies can be read as an affective, reclamatory fan work addressing issues of representation and gender within both the texts it responds to and the larger culture within which the work is situated. Moreover, contextualizing her work as fan work can help fan scholars by locating fan studies within a broader literary history.

2. Contextualizing Christine

[2.1] Of course, we cannot simply call Christine de Pizan a fan author any more than we can unproblematically call her a feminist author, as both are contemporary terms that do not map directly or easily onto earlier periods of history. Many of her attitudes toward gender, though incredibly enlightened for her time, would strike the reader as intensely problematic today, such as her advice to married women at the end of The Book of the City of Ladies: "Don’t despair at being so downtrodden by your husbands, for it’s not necessarily the best thing in the world to be free" (1999, 238). Even the word author is fraught terminology when applied to creators of the medieval period—a situation with which fan studies scholars may find themselves intimately familiar. In "Women and Authorship," Jennifer Summit argues for a multiplicity of meanings for the idea of authorship during the Middle Ages, complicated by issues such as modalities of production and dissemination of texts, ideas of originality and authority, and even the idea of literacy (2003, 92–93). For example:

The auctor...is abstracted from the material realities of writing; his authority has no beginning or end and appears to stand outside of time. For living writers, in contrast, the act of writing was bound up in the wider social and historical networks of patronage, scribal reproduction and circulation. Those networks undermine the apparent autonomy of the auctor. (2003, 92–93)

[2.3] Minnis’s Medieval Theory of Authorship defines an auctor as one whose work was judged to be both "intrinsically worthy" by conforming to accepted "Christian truth," and to be "authentic" by being the work of a known auctor, an admittedly somewhat cyclical notion (2010, 10–12). Contemporary ideas of individual authorship driven by individual inspiration and producing what we conceptualize as original work therefore have limited relevance to the medieval period.

[2.4] The issues discussed above existed for all medieval authors, but the gender politics of the period meant that they had a greater effect on women writers than on their male counterparts. Indeed, in The Book of Margery Kempe, a spiritual autobiography and travelogue written in the early 15th century, Margery Kempe’s struggle to get her autobiography written down suggests that the very act of creating the text may have served as another form of penitentiary spiritual labor for “this creature”—as Margery describes herself throughout—to endure for the greater glory of God. Margery, who was herself illiterate, was afflicted by a first scribe whose transcription of her story is discovered to be "so badly written that he [the second scribe she brought it to] could hardly understand it, for it was
neither good English nor German, nor were the letters shaped or formed as other letters are," and only her direct divine intercession can "purchase him [the second scribe] grace to read it and also to write it" ([1501] 2001, 4).

[2.5] De Pizan is likely the woman writer of the Middle Ages who hews most closely to our contemporary understanding of what an author is. The general outlines of her life are known, unlike those of Margery Kempe or the possibly pseudonymous Marie de France, thanks to her own semiautobiographical work "The Vision of Christine." Christine makes no negotiated claim to quasi-authority through the medium of divine authority, as female mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen or Julian of Norwich do, but instead grounds her texts in scholarship and learning that, while not wholly analogous to modern scholarship, at least accord with medieval male scholastic practice. Indeed, her literary career began around 1401, when she entered the so-called querelle de la Rose and went head to head with some of the best-known scholars in Parisian literary circles to argue about misogyny and misinterpretation in Jean de Meung’s The Romance of the Rose (Roman de la Rose, c. 1230–75), a popular allegorical poem of courtly love. In The Romance of the Rose, the male figure of the Lover, aided by figures such as Friend, Honesty, Venus, and Pity, and opposed by figures such as Jealousy, Danger, and Chastity, must go on a quest to reach, woo, and seduce his love, the (female) Rose. In the querelle de la Rose, Christine publicly opposed the work, arguing that "Jean de Meung’s negative representation of women leads to disharmony between the sexes and thus to immoral and un-Christian behavior" (Brown-Grant 1999, 10).

[2.6] Christine has been described as the first professional woman writer, a role that was, interestingly enough, necessitated by both her social class and her gender. These prevented her from receiving the court appointment that many male writers of the period relied on for security—indeed, her father was court astrologer to King Charles V, and it was this appointment that gave Christine access to an exceptional education. She started writing poetry for money after the death of her husband in 1380, and several subsequent lawsuits forced her to start supporting herself and her family financially. Perhaps most importantly from a standpoint of auctoritas, she was educated enough to supervise the copying and even illustrating of her own works. Thus, when Christine presented Isabeau of Bavaria, the queen of France, with a copy of her collected works (preserved in the British Library as MS Harley 4431), which is illustrated with a frontispiece depicting a stylized scene of the same presentation, she is in control of both her own text and of her own image, supplying Isabella and future readers with a self-portrait of Christine as author. This professionalism, noteworthy even during her own time, would seem to be at odds with thinking of de Pizan as fan author or of her work as fan work, areas usually defined at least within the popular understanding by their perceived amateurism and distinct lack of monetization. I argue, however, that it is not paid remuneration but instead Christine's attitude to her own work and the works against which she is defining herself that make her also function as a fan author.

[2.7] Fan fiction is of course also a term, and often a spelling, of some contention. The "most narrowly defined" idea of fan fiction used by Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson in their introduction to The Fan Fiction Studies Reader (2014) is as "(sometimes purposefully critical) rewriting of shared media," a form that they then date to the 1960s. They admit that a wider definition, as a "response to specific written texts," would clearly include medieval and other premodern texts. The widest definition included in their discussion calls it a form of "collective storytelling," in which case fan fiction can be dated back to Homer’s Odyssey (2014, 6). All three of these definitions can be applied to The Book of the City of Ladies, as it responds not only to the larger medieval canon but also to specific, well-known texts, especially Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung’s The Romance of the Rose (c. 1260) and Giovanni Boccaccio’s Latin biographical collection Famous Women (De mulieribus claris; c. 1370). However, the above sets of prefatory definitions do not include several aspects of fan works that many fan scholars also consider important to the discussion of such works, and which is of particular importance when considering de Pizan: the fact that the majority of fan fiction authors are women and noncisgender men, the role of the community in which the text is designed to be read, the affective nature of fan works, and the potential role of the fan work as a resistant reading to both the dominant text and the dominant culture that is performed by marginalized bodies. As Anna Wilson says, "the affective quality of fan fiction—and its implications—could potentially be overlooked or erased through scholarship that identifies it too readily with classical literature" (2016, ¶2.10). Aja Romano (2016), writing on the popular musical Hamilton as fan work, argues, "The fundamental objective of fan fic, especially when it is written by women, queer and genderqueer people, and people of color, is to insert yourself, aggressively and brazenly, into stories that are not about and were never intended to be about or represent you." Christine inserts herself, both aggressively and brazenly, into the quarrels of scholarly men on the merits of the The Romance of the Rose. Soon afterward, she produces a book that is part collection of exemplary biography and part a mirror for princes—both genres dominated by male authors. It should be noted that not all fan
responses are inherently resistant; fan works may represent either "desire for 'more of'" (that is, an affirmational relationship with a text) or a "desire for 'more from' a source text" (that is, a resistant reading) (Wilson 2015, 26). These are not mutually exclusive desires, even within the same fan work.

3. Curating a city of women

[3.1] Like her contributions to the *querelle de la Rose*, de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* is a response to and a critique of both a specific, well-known text (in this case both *The Romance of the Rose* and *Famous Women*) as well as to themes and motifs extant within the larger literary culture of the period, a relationship with the earlier texts that can be defined, as Henry Jenkins describes contemporary fan fiction, as containing "not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism" (1992, 23). In *The City of Ladies*, Christine, in a manner similar to the self-insert allegory of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1308–21), describes how she is visited by the figures of Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice. They explain to her how and why women have historically been maligned by men and enlist her in the construction of an allegorical City of Ladies as safe dwelling place for all women of virtue. To build this city, the Ladies share with Christine examples of historical and contemporary women who are "worthy of praise" (1999, 11). The list includes women rulers, artists, scholars, warriors, inventors, and prophets, in addition to the more typical wives, virgins, and holy women. However, *The Book of the City of Ladies* is not simply a critical response to earlier texts. It is also a stand-alone literary work that affectively answers back to and repurposes the original textual canon sources to create something new and reparative, making it, I argue, explicitly a fan work.

[3.2] Here, Christine responds to Giovanni Boccaccio’s curated and interpreted list of both famous and infamous women in *Famous Women*—"I will adopt a wider meaning and consider as famous those women whom I know to have gained a reputation throughout the world for any deed whatsoever" (Boccaccio 2001, 11)—with her own list of explicitly praiseworthy women while also defending women more generally as being praiseworthy. "Our [the Ladies] wish is to prevent others from falling into the same error as you [Christine] and to ensure that, in future, all worthy ladies and valiant women are protected from those who have attacked them" (1999, 11). Christine also borrows the motif of the walled and thus fortified city so important to *The Romance of the Rose*. One of her opponents during the *querelle*, Pierre Col, had already used this motif, comparing his attacks on her to *Fol Amoureux*’s own actions in pursuing the Rose, who in *The Romance of the Rose* represents both the specific woman being pursued and women in general. Thus Pierre rather creepily cast himself in the role of the stronger, male, and ultimately successful opponent to Christine and "reiterat[ed] Jean de Meung’s representation of women as less than human and a race apart which Christine herself had denounced" (Brown-Grant 1999, 19). However, Christine’s *City of Ladies*, unlike the walled garden of the Rose, which exists as an obstacle to be overcome by cunning and treachery, is instead akin to the inviolate City of God described by Augustine of Hippo in his work of the same name (Morse 1996, 232).

[3.3] Boccaccio does not feel a need to apologize for or justify his choice to write *Famous Women*. Instead, his preface contents itself with noting that "some women have performed acts requiring vigour and courage" (2001, 9), and thus he will write his work as a "way of giving them some kind of reward" (2001, 13), especially pagan women, whom he feels are otherwise underrepresented. These women, while deserving, must still be gifted with representation at the hands of a learned man. Furthermore, unlike his previous collection of biographies, *On the Fates of Famous Men* (*De casibus virorum illustrium*, c. 1360), *Famous Women* does not have an overarching frame narrative, and when Boccaccio chooses to make general asides to his reader, they appear within specific chapters. Christine’s frame narrative—which has more in common with Boccaccio’s earlier work than with *Famous Women*—offers a vivid description of her despair as she sits in her study and wonders if she herself, and indeed all women, are truly the "vessel in which all the sin and evil of the world has been collected and preserved" (1999, 6). It is an issue of representation with which marginalized groups within today’s media structure would unfortunately still be intimately familiar. "This thought inspired such a great sense of sadness and disgust in me that I began to despise myself and the whole of my sex" (1999, 7). Boccaccio claims to have written *Famous Women* as a favor to women; Christine writes *The Book of the City of Ladies* out of a desperate need to create both a space and a defense for herself and for other women within a culture that condemns them. The work is thus one of explicit community building, not just within the fictional City of Ladies but also beyond the text, functioning, as Anna Wilson says of fan fiction, as a “form of literary response where literary allusions evoke not only a shared intellectual community in the audience but also a shared affective community” (2016, ¶1.4).
In framing his scholarship in *Famous Women*, Boccaccio relies on "learning where I can from trustworthy authors" (2001, 11), thus placing himself and his text firmly within the tradition of *auctoritas*, which is derived from "an affiliation with the past that renders individual authors virtually indistinct from one another" (Summit 2003, 92). Christine references such an authorial tradition in her own opening to *The Book of the City of Ladies*, comparing other (male) authors en masse to "a gushing fountain" (1992, 4) in a perhaps inadvertently phallic description of the weight of extant misogynistic scholarship, as well as a reference to her own familiarity with this canon, a trait that is both academic and fannish. A close reading of this preface will also note Christine’s purposeful framing of herself within the narrative as a scholar, as she begins with a description of herself "sitting in my study surrounded by many books of different kinds, for this has long been my habit to engage in the pursuit of knowledge" (1999, 5). This also echoes Boccaccio’s self-presentation throughout *On the Fates of Famous Men* as writing in his study while being visited by ghosts who demand that he tell their stories. She later describes herself to the Ladies as a "simple and ignorant scholar" (1999, 15), using the term *estudiante*, the feminine form of *scholar*, rather than by what might seem the more obvious descriptor of woman, or indeed abjecting herself as Margery Kempe does by referring to herself as "this creature." In explaining her own text, even though she clearly was familiar with and reliant on earlier scholarship much as Boccaccio was, Christine instead frames her narrative as a powerfully affective dream-vision. She describes herself as having a "head bowed as in shame and my eyes full of tears" (1999, 7) by the gulf between her lived experience of womanhood and the contempt with which the male authors she trusted invariably discussed women, convinced "women are guilty of such horrors as so many men seem to say" (1999, 7). In her despair, she is visited by allegorical representations of Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice, "crowned and of majestic appearance" (1999, 7), who tell her and teach her of women’s abilities and histories, positioning Christine’s self-as-character in the role of purposefully obtuse student. Indeed, Christine claims that when these visitors appeared, she "threw herself fully face down in front of them, not just on to my knees...kissing the ground they stood on, I adored them" (1999, 15), an embodied action of humbling, one which it is difficult to imagine Boccaccio making. In *On the Fates of Famous Men*, when Boccaccio is visited by the "laureate poet" Petrarch under similar despairing circumstances, Petrarch merely scolds Boccaccio for his sloth—"vicious idilnesse" (1967, 184) in John Lydgate’s 1430 English translation—and Boccaccio returns to writing, having "ouercam thympotent feeblesse / Of crokid age" (1967, 187–88). Petrarch thus functions as both teacher and authorial inspiration. In contrast, the textual framing device of adoration, and to an extent abjection, that Christine uses ties her into the tradition of medieval women’s visionary literature, in which "the writer establishes her authority on the basis of her self-effacement" (Summit 2003, 95). While Christine’s dream-vision and supernatural visitors would have been understood by readers as allegorical and not the literal, divine visitation present in visionary literature, Christine still rhetorically places herself as a channel for the work of these ladies in building the City in the way that echoes, for example, Hildegard of Bingen’s description of herself as "a feather...not fly[ing] of its own accord; it is borne up by the air" (2001, 1009). Her authority thus derives not simply from her own scholarship but from her role as amanuensis for these three divine Ladies. However, when the Ladies reveal to her that she "alone of all women have been granted the honour of building the City of Ladies" (1999, 12), Christine replies, "Behold your handmaiden" (1999, 16)—a phrase that readers would have recognized as an echo of the Virgin Mary’s words upon the Annunciation. This suggests that even when Christine rhetorically humbles herself, it is a careful and controlled action serving a larger purpose within the narrative.

While heavily allegorical, *The Book of the City of Ladies* is also a deeply affective and personal text for Christine, beginning as it does with a vivid description of her emotional state and as it engages in a reclamation both of the specific historical women mentioned by the text and of women as a group, capable of the same virtue and worth as men. Although Christine doesn’t explicitly invoke Boccaccio in this introductory section to the *City of Ladies*, both *On the Fates of Famous Men* and its sequel, *Famous Women*, were sufficiently well known that her readers would have known exactly what she was reworking.

No art she hadn't mastered

Of special interest from a fan studies perspective is Christine’s recontextualization of women who have appeared in earlier works as figures of infamy. Throughout *Famous Women*, Boccaccio does not refrain from criticizing women he has included if he thinks that they have overstepped the bounds of appropriate behavior, thus allowing his idea of fame to encompass both exemplars and cautionary tales. Christine solves this conundrum through a combination of selective gathering of examples and, within those examples, an emphatically reclaimed form of storytelling that allows even infamous women to enter the City of Ladies within certain parameters. In this way, she
highlights both a scholarly and fannish "high level of knowledge of and insight into its [her] source texts" as well as a willingness to fill in the gaps, performing an "interlinear glossing of a source text" (Wilson 2016, ¶1.4).

[4.2] One sterling example of Christine's reclamation can be seen by comparing Boccaccio's treatment of the mythological character of Medea to Christine's. To Boccaccio, Medea is worthy of inclusion in his Famous Women for being "the cruelest example of ancient treachery" and "the cleverest of witches" (2001, 75). After describing the trail of corpses she leaves, occasionally literally, in her wake, Boccaccio finishes his account by using her as an example of the danger of sight and, through sight, of desire:

[4.3] Certainly, if powerful Medea had closed her eyes or turned them elsewhere when she first raised them longingly to Jason, her father's reign would have been of greater duration as would have been her brother's life, and her virginal honour would have remained unbroken. All these things were lost because of the shamelessness of her eyes. (2001, 79)

[4.4] Thus in Boccaccio's telling, had Medea not shamelessly lusted after Jason, her father's reign, her brother's life, and her virginity, apparently all of roughly equivalent value, would have been spared such wanton destruction. Having restored her aged father to the throne of Colchis at the conclusion of the narrative, thus restoring appropriate, male dynastic power to the realm, Medea's own narrative ends abruptly with Boccaccio discarding any further concern for or interest in her: "I do not remember having read or heard what Medea did later, or where or how she died" (2001, 79). This stands in contrast to even classical Greek depictions of Medea, who, in Euripides' eponymous drama, is borne into the heavens in a celestial chariot after taking bloody revenge on Jason for betraying her.

[4.5] Christine includes Medea several times in her City, but as an exemplar rather than a cautionary tale. Medea first appears in part 1 as one of the examples given by Lady Reason of the heights of skill and knowledge to which a woman can rise if given the opportunity: "No art had been invented that she [Medea] hadn't mastered" (1999, 63). Here such ability is not proof of wickedness or witchcraft but merely an example of the skills that might be acquired by a highly intelligent individual of either gender who has been permitted to learn, not unlike Christine herself. Her Medea is not a clever witch but instead a skilled worker of marvels (1999, 63).

[4.6] Medea appears in a slightly longer entry in part 2 as one of Lady Rectitude's examples of a woman who is constant in her love, alongside other figures such as Dido. Again, the text immediately characterizes her as a princess "supremely learned" (1999, 174). Interestingly, while Christine describes Medea's love for Jason as "undying, [and] passionate," she also claims that Medea was "so struck by Jason's good looks, royal lineage, and impressive reputation that she thought he would make a good match for her," which frames Medea's falling in love with Jason almost as a rational, dynastically appropriate choice for the princess to have made (1999, 174) instead of the lustful, destructive desire condemned by Boccaccio ([1374] 2001, 79). It is not Medea's desiring eyes that drive her to choose Jason but a careful, reasonable process of decision making. Jason is the sole villain of Christine's telling, as he returns Medea's priceless knowledge, aid, and loyalty by breaking his oath to take "no other woman but her as his wife" (1999, 175). Instead of being a supremely violent and unprincipled committer of fratricide, in Christine's telling, it is Medea herself who would have "rather been torn limb from limb" than betray Jason's love. Her chastity, or lack thereof, is also never addressed in Christine's narrative. Christine's account thus ends focused on Medea's faithful suffering at the hands of the unfaithful Jason (1999, 175).

[4.7] While Christine has clearly made choices in her depiction of Medea meant to shape the reader's understanding of her, this does not place her telling in opposition to earlier tellings of Medea, since, as Ruth Morse points out in The Medieval Medea, "no morphology is neutral" (1996, 200). Boccaccio, himself far from a neutral chronicler, had already shaped his own retelling of Medea's story to focus blame on Medea and ignore, excuse, or otherwise deemphasize negative interpretations of Jason. He deliberately chose to leave out some details, included by the classical authors he had drawn from, that addressed Jason's status as a breaker of oaths to Medea as well as his second marriage to Creusa, the princess of Corinth (1996, 200). The difference, thus, is not that Christine recontextualizes the story of Medea but that she does so in a way that valorizes Medea not just as a virtuous woman but also as a virtuous person. Christine's Book of the City of Ladies shows that the same texts and tools of analysis used by male authors to denigrate women can themselves be used to instead validate the characters of women, even those traditionally repudiated by earlier histories. Thus, in fannish parlance, Christine is writing a form of fix-it fic for Medea, where the tragedies and misfortunes visited on her are rooted not in her own sinful nature but in the actions of those around her.
5. Morally impeccable

[4.8] We can see a similar pattern at work in Christine’s depiction of other famous women within the Greco-Roman tradition. Boccaccio, once again obsessed with issues of chastity, uses the mythical Carthaginian queen Dido as a way to shame women who remarry, exhorting them, "Let the women of today blush, then, as they contemplate Dido’s lifeless body...let them bow their heads in sorrow that Christian women are surpassed in chastity by a woman who was a limb of Satan" (2001, 179). Boccaccio’s Dido is clever, mentally strong, morally strong, an excellent ruler, and of distinguished lineage, but to him the importance of all of these virtues are only in their service to her "exceptional virtue and purity" (2001, 173). Wholly ignoring Virgil’s episode in book 4 of The Aeneid, Boccaccio argues that Dido "had already decided to die rather than violate her chastity" before even meeting "the Trojan Aeneas (whom she never saw)" (2001, 175).

Having opened his chapter with the "hope that my modest remarks may cleanse away (at least in part) the infamy undeservedly cast on the honour of her widowhood," Boccaccio has already positioned himself as a rewriter of Dido’s story to emphasize just one portion of it. The moral value of chastity in widowhood is what women should learn from Boccaccio’s Dido, and woe betide the woman who fails to live up to her example (2001, 167–79).

[4.9] Christine’s Dido, in contrast, is an example to women because of her "great courage, nobility, and virtue, qualities which are indispensable to anyone who wishes to act prudently" (1999, 82). Dido, who rules "gloriously over her city and had a peaceful and happy existence" (1999, 173) is, like Medea, ruined only because she has fallen in love with an unfaithful man. Again, in these examples Christine decouples the danger of love as an emotion from its force as a threat to chastity and instead focuses on her central thesis that virtues are not themselves gendered.

[4.10] The Princess Polyxena of Troy who inhabits the pages of Famous Women is "worthy of remembrance that her tender age, female sex, royal delicacy, and altered fortune could not overcome the sublime spirit of this girl" (2001, 133). Boccaccio’s Polyxena’s strength of character is at odds with her femininity and is thus even more to be valorized by both Boccaccio and presumably the reader. The Polyxena who dwells within The Book of the City of Ladies, though, is described as "not only beautiful but also extremely steadfast and resolute" (1999, 188); her virtues are not divided along lines of gender but are all of a piece. As Lady Reason explains to Christine, "It is he or she who is the more virtuous who is the superior being: human superiority or inferiority is not determined by sexual difference but by the degree to which one has perfected one’s nature and morals" (1999, 23).

5. Morally impeccable

[5.1] Christine does not content herself with including paragons of virtue already discussed by earlier male authors or in reclaiming women she thought had been falsely defamed by those selfsame authors. Her City of Ladies has room not just for saints, de-deified goddesses, and other characters of the distant or mythological past but also contains women from the recent historical record and, indeed, those who were Christine’s contemporaries, such as the duchess of Orleans, "astute in her affairs, fair minded with everyone" (1999, 196), or the duchess of Burgundy, "well-disposed towards others, morally impeccable" (1999, 196). Christine’s inclusion of these contemporary virtuous women bolsters her larger argument in several different ways and is also striking in that these women were on opposite sides of the French civil war that had raged through Christine’s lifetime. By not confining her catalog of worthy women to the past and by presenting the City of Ladies as both contemporary and politically neutral, she again repudiates the scholars who have nothing good to say about the women around them. Boccaccio’s Famous Women saves praise and efforts for women dwelling in the distant, pagan past, with only three exceptions: two women of Sicily from the 12th century and his own contemporary, Queen Giovanna of Naples, the subject of the book’s final chapter. The latter he could hardly leave out, having chosen to dedicate Famous Women to a high-ranking lady in Giovanna’s court. Christian women, in Boccaccio’s telling, while "resplendent in the true and unfailing light" of their faith (2001, 13), cannot be given the same credit for their own accomplishments, since pagan women managed to accomplish their deeds without the "commands and example of their holy Teacher" (2001, 13) that benefited Jewish and Christian women.

[5.2] By giving readers examples of noblewomen whose reputations they would have been familiar with through the readers’ own lived experiences, Christine also encourages the reader, whether a woman or a man, to consider their own lived experiences when judging the potential virtue of both women overall and of any individual woman. As she says in her preface, "I could find no evidence from my own experience to bear out such a negative view of female nature and habits" (1999, 6). This argument from experience, validated by Lady Reason herself, would have been a powerful one for those in her audience, especially women, who were likely to be less familiar with the full canon of classical scholarship, as it firmly places their own lived experience as legitimate source of both authority and
knowledge, an *auctoritas* that derives directly from both Nature and God and is thus capable of supplanting the false *auctoritas* of some earlier male authors. "Our aim is to help you get rid of those misconceptions which have clouded your mind and made you reject what you know and believe in fact to be the truth just because so many people have come out with the opposite opinion" (1999, 8). This framing also immediately contextualizes the value of the lessons and examples that Christine includes, continuing her argument, as seen in the case of Dido, that it is not the deeds of the women that matter but the virtues and values that such actions represent. Thus, as Morse argues, the significance of *The Book of the City of Ladies* is that it

[5.3] deploys allegory for a reinterpretation of history, and women's place in it; it assumes the authority to recontextualize and re-describe the gifts, talents, and deeds of women; in its ambitious intertextuality it appropriates and re-turns the examples of Boccaccio, adding copious "modern examples" to demonstrate women's contribution to the most public aspects of life. (1996, 231)

[5.4] Christine is reclaiming the exemplary tradition on behalf of women, who had previously only been allowed grudging inclusion, and even then usually as cautionary tales. She is thus, in fannish tradition, creating a space within the text in which she can see herself. It, like other fan works, becomes "affective hermeneutics," which "has a particular resonance for marginal communities whose histories must be read between the lines" (Wilson 2016, ¶4.8)

6. Conclusion

[6.1] What is added to the conversation by contextualizing de Pizan as a fan author or by considering the fannish modes of expression present in her works? The field of fan studies began as ethnographic studies of fan behaviors and activities, and it is often still heavily focused on contemporary fan practices or those dating back a few decades at most, to slightly prior to what is usually considered the birth of the field with the publication of Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* in 1992. It is often said that fandom itself has a short memory, but at present the same criticism could easily be offered of fan scholars (Coker 2016).

[6.2] This current lack of larger historicity risks making fan works seem like simply a by-product of contemporary media production, which, when combined with the still extant stigma attached to the work of women, threatens to marginalize fan works by women as mere ethnographic practice rather than as valid literary productions. In much the same way, viewing medieval writing primarily through the lens of the medieval scholastic traditions of *auctoritas* threatens, by nature of its close affiliation with institutions that excluded women, to remove women writers from consideration as authors. Just as looking at the full scope of medieval women's writing "unearths a range of literate forms and practices that existed outside the schools and their models of *auctoritas*, but held cultural significance" (Summit 2003, 93), looking at fan works as part of larger literary histories opens up lines of dialogue between both these texts and the canonical texts with which they interplay.

[6.3] Medieval modalities of literary production are of special interest to fan studies scholars because of the ways in which certain earlier concepts of writing and authority map onto contemporary ways of thinking about fan works. Recognizing complicated networks of authorship that may include the patron opens up spaces to consider, for example, the role of contemporary fan exchanges, in which ideas for works are suggested by persons to whom the finished fan works will be gifted. Reconsideration of the role of the compiler, described by de Pizan in *The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry* as "a lawful and praiseworthy matter when material is suitably applied wherein is the master of the material, for therein is the indication of having seen and read many books" (1999b, 144), may aid in conceptualizing the role of those who curate or compile information. This allows us to view fandom wikis or even curated lists with links to recommended works of fan fiction as "more than an act of textual subservience" (Summit 2003, 100). Medieval scholarship offers tools for understanding authorial anonymity "not as a lack of authorship but as a form of authorship with cultural value in its own right" (Summit 2003, 95). Summit’s further discussion of the potential playfulness of a space of nongendered possibility created by such anonymity and coined "epicene writers" (95) deserves to be of intense interest to contemporary fan studies scholars, given both the common anonymity or pseudonymity of many fan works and, more importantly, their production by women, queer individuals, and those who do not identify as cisgender. Most important of all are the ways in which incorporating medieval and other premodern scholarship into fan studies gives us methodologies with which to discuss ideas of *auctoritas* that flow not from originality but from history, tradition, and an affiliation with the past. This decentralizes originality as the most important part of a text and
breaks away from the stranglehold that authorial copyright has had on discussions, understandings, or indeed the very valuation of contemporary fan works, both within the academy and within the larger culture. If the field of fan studies begins with *Textual Poachers*, then it also begins with the implicit characterization of fan works as poaching, a term burdened with connotations of illicitness or even illegality. Methodologies present in medieval scholarship allow us a path away from that constricting framework.

[6.4] Locating contemporary fan works within extant modalities of literary histories is not intended to validate fan works because fan works are not works in need of validation. Nor is it meant, by the same token, to diminish the work of earlier women authors by tagging them as only or simply works of fan fiction. Instead, by reframing these earlier works of literature as part of a longer history of women’s writing that also involves the work being done today within modalities of fan writing, and by the same token reconsidering fan works as “acts of women’s literary activity in a continuum with historical practice and historical treatment” (Coker 2016), we, much as Christine herself did in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, create a theoretical space that historicizes, contextualizes, and indeed valorizes women writers of both fannish and nonfannish works.

[6.5] All of you who love virtue, glory, and a fine reputation can now be lodged in great splendour inside its wall, not just women of the past but also those of the present and the future, for this city has been founded and built to accommodate all deserving women. (de Pizan 1999a, 237).

7. Works cited


Wilson, Anna. 2015. "Immature Pleasures: Affective Reading in Margery Kempe, Petrarch, Chaucer, and Modern Fan Communities." PhD diss., University of Toronto.

From co-optation to commission: A diachronic perspective on the development of fannish literacy through Teen Wolf’s Tumblr promotional campaigns

Lesley Autumn Willard
University of Texas, Austin, Texas, United States

Abstract—Historically, fan scholars have focused on conducting deep dives into singular cases and revealing trends by comparing cross sections of those cases. While there is undeniable value in conducting close analyses of such instances, the reliance on this method can limit our assessment of long-running trends. By supplementing—or, more productively, combining—specific case studies with diachronic perspectives, we can better situate, contextualize, and trace emerging trends like the evolution of fan/producer dynamics. To model this approach, I analyze 4 years’ worth of fan-targeted promotional campaigns on the official Teen Wolf (2011–) Tumblr. The activities—fannish and/or promotional—of all participants in a shared ecological system like Tumblr are significant. They continuously construct, deconstruct, nuance, and challenge the ever-evolving context of fandom and fan/producer dynamics. Supplementing a close analysis of one of Teen Wolf’s recent promotional campaigns—the commissioned #TeenWolfExhibit—with a diachronic perspective addresses the ever-evolving ecology of media fandom and traces the evolution of MTV’s fannish literacy from 2011 to 2015. The #TeenWolfExhibit reproduces and reflects all the promotional successes, failures, and course corrections that predate it.

Keywords—Fan art; Fan contests; Fan professionalization; Fan/producer dynamics; Fandom; Gift economy

I. Introduction

On June 25, 2015, the fans, actors, producers, and the off-air creative or promotional team for MTV’s Teen Wolf (2011–) congregated for an unprecedented celebration: a public gallery exhibition of commissioned fan art to hype the show’s upcoming fifth season. The exhibition was publicized online, held in a professional gallery space, and attended by a mix of fans and industry professionals. In conceptualization, promotion, and execution, the exhibition blended and blurred boundaries between industry and audience, promotion and celebration, and fine and fan art. While Teen Wolf’s postproduction team has openly collected and displayed fan art in-house for years, this event marks MTV’s off-air creative team’s first foray into the commission and public exhibition of fan art (Twp2013 2014). This event, dubbed #TeenWolfExhibit by the show’s official Tumblr account and marketing materials, demonstrates the development of one cult television show’s (and, by extension, one network’s) strategies to appropriate, monetize, and professionalize fannish modes of production and engagement. If taken as a singular case of industry attempting to contain, sanitize, and legitimize fan art, it is an interesting but not necessarily novel example of increasingly shrewd industrial co-optation. However, when viewed as the culmination of 4 years’ worth of MTV’s fandom research and development on Tumblr, it becomes indicative of industry’s ever-evolving grasp of fannish literacy. Rather than merely appropriating fan works or imitating fannish modes of production, the Teen Wolf promotional team has gradually learned—by trial and flame—to mimic their fandom’s sense of community and reciprocity.

Historically, fan scholars have focused on conducting deep dives into singular cases and revealing trends by comparing such case studies (Jenkins 1992; Scott 2009; Felschow 2010). While scholars like Matt Hills (2005) have studied the cyclicity and temporal fluctuations of fan engagement, few have conducted longitudinal or diachronic studies on fan/producer dynamics. Paul Booth argues against this approach, explaining, “Rather than looking at or defining fan/industry relations at all, we can only hope to investigate specific sites and moments of interaction. Call it the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle applied to fan studies: We can never know the relationship if we look for it; but we can identify moments when it’s happened” (2015, 5).

Further substantiating the difficulties inherent in studying broad shifts in fan/industry relations, Ruth Deller notes that “few studies observe online fan communities over several years, compare multiple platforms or explore technological changes” (2014, 239). Fewer still consider industry’s involvement in or development of these shifts. While Deller’s own longitudinal study catalogs and compares changes between two groups of music fans over a decade, it primarily considers the shifts in fan activities, perceptions, and communal formations. Similarly, Harrington and Bielby’s work on life course and fandom focuses on “self-unfolding-across-time and fan-object-unfolding-across-time,” not industrial dynamics unfolding across time (2010, 443).
This work is vital for theorizing fan engagement across time, space, and life stages, but fans are not the only actors aging and developing with the digital fan ecology. With the mainstreaming of fandom and the move to public platforms like Tumblr, fans and fan practices are more visible and more accessible than ever before (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007). In addition to an influx of new fans, that visibility also leads to an influx of industrial agents in fan spaces. To address the contemporary fan ecology, we must interrogate the role of these industrial agents and track fan/producer shifts over time, and within and across texts, fandoms, industries, and platforms.

2. Theoretical approach

If there is one research conceit with which most fan scholars could agree, it is that temporality matters. Timing and context play key roles in production and reception, acceptance, and rejection. By supplementing—or, more productively, combining—specific case studies with diachronic perspectives, we can better situate, contextualize, and trace emerging trends in dynamic relationships like those between fans and producers. This integrated approach allows scholars to address the ever-evolving ecology of media fandom. Tisha Turk and Joshua Johnson (2012) demonstrate the advantages of the use of an ecological model in fan studies, noting that such a model addresses the positions, actions, and interactions of all actors in an ecosystem. As this model tracks affiliations and impacts over time, it allows for a more holistic, representative form of analysis that could be used to supplement current research methods. What makes this model so compelling, however, are the numerous critical threads embedded within it: connection, movement, spatiality, and temporality. Here I intend to pull on that last thread to highlight the significance of temporality in fan studies and argue for a diachronic approach that can supplement, provide nuance to, and contextualize case studies.

Turk and Johnson's (2012) approach builds on Marilyn Cooper’s ecological model of writing, which explicitly references temporality. "An important characteristic of ecological systems," Cooper notes, "is that they are inherently dynamic; though their structures and contents can be specified at a given moment, in real time they are constantly changing" (1986, 368). This dynamism is compromised when individual incidences and sites of fan/producer interaction are isolated for analysis. Without a diachronic perspective, our interpretive paradigm is unsuited to scrutinizing the adaptive elements of the fan/producer dynamic: the factors that precipitate these cases, the consequences that result from them, and the course corrections that then precipitate the next iteration. By foregrounding temporality through an ecological model, we can reconstruct these elements—in chronological order, over an extended period of time—and trace the provenance and progression of trends and processes.

While there is undeniable value in conducting close analyses of "specific sites and moments of interaction," reliance on this approach can limit our assessment of long-running trends, especially in relation to the evolution of fan/producer dynamics (Booth 2015, 5). Notably, a focus on isolated incidences can undercut the significance of temporality, historicity, and chronology. One way to address this deficiency is to supplement these analyses with diachronic research models. Combining the traditional case study with a diachronic perspective, an integrated approach benefits from both models: the depth and specificity of close analysis obtain further nuance by the breadth and dynamism of a diachronic perspective.

As I aim to demonstrate here, this approach allows fan scholars to better address generational shifts and memetic dispersions, as well as the development of literacies. It renders visible the ways in which producers learn from and develop alongside fans, as well as the larger technological, political, socioeconomic, and cultural shifts at play. While these aspects can surely be glimpsed in synchronic incidences like specific fan-targeted promotional campaigns, they are better situated and exemplified in integrated analyses that consider the progression therein.

3. Methodology

Teen Wolf’s Tumblr was created on March 29, 2011, and this study concluded on November 1, 2015, a time frame that necessitates sifting through over 4 years’ worth of data. To contextualize Teen Wolf’s current fan-targeted promotional campaigns, I scanned, analyzed, categorized, and chronologized the entirety of their Tumblr, spanning upwards of 400 pages and 4,000 posts. While the sheer amount of data can be intimidating, the process is as valuable as it is time intensive. All posts on the official Tumblr—original or reblogged—that addressed fan practices and/or fan works directly in the text, content, or tags fell within the scope of this study. This selection includes a cross section of topics, such as posts of fan art and GIF sets, references to fan practices, and acknowledgments of fan-run charity efforts, in addition to solicitations of fan engagement for polls or contests. While not all of the relevant posts are directly addressed in this study, they nevertheless collectively inform and contextualize my analysis of #TeenWolfExhibit. By reviewing the entirety of their Tumblr campaigns, I can construct a time-lapse view of sorts—a working timeline that illustrates both the evolution of their promotional approaches and the development of their fannish literacy through trial and error, success and failure. Teen Wolf is a particularly generative test case for an integrated approach, as it clearly shows how industry is able to develop fannish literacy over time and mobilize that literacy to great effect.

As an active contributor to the Teen Wolf Tumblr fandom since early 2011, I have had the opportunity to watch much of this evolution unfold in real time—an opportunity that many scholars share. Since fan scholars are often embedded within our respective fandoms in the long term, we can mobilize our positioning to reconstruct contexts and develop comprehensive perspectives (Hills 2002; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Ford 2014). That perspective has proved invaluable in evaluating how Teen Wolf’s promotional team has learned to hail fans and mimic fannish modes of production and engagement in progressively more thoughtful and sophisticated ways.

4. The curious case of Teen Wolf’s Tumblr
[4.1] *Teen Wolf* serves as a particularly robust case study for diachronic assessment, as the producers have a long history of engaging fans and appropriating their modes of production and engagement for promotional purposes. The majority of this engagement has operated on or through their official Tumblr account. As De Kosnik et al. (2015) explain, "When a fan platform is rising in popularity at the same time that a media text is rising in popularity, this co-occurrence can create a hot scene for fan activity." While Tumblr was introduced in 2007, it took a few years for the platform to become the de facto hub for online fandom. The official *Teen Wolf* Tumblr, created in March 2011, was ideally timed to take advantage of Tumblr's growing popularity with media fandom. Through their official Tumblr and promotional campaigns like #TeenWolfExhibit, MTV’s off-air creative team invites fans to contribute to a corporate ecology that is limited, canonical, and affirmational in scope. However, as the corporate ecology co-opts the fan ecology, there is slippage between the two that results in a complication of these binaries. Essentially, fans’ transformative practices—adaptive and unsanctioned by definition—are reconfigured and repurposed to generate a canonical, industrially sanctioned version of the show (obsession_inc 2009). What was once deemed a transformative mode of engagement is instead often rendered affirmative in tone through this industrial co-optation, while the gift/commercial economies and fan/producer dynamics are continuously renegotiated and increasingly intermingled.

[4.2] Millennial-focused networks like MTV and cult genre shows like *Teen Wolf* are often embroiled in these boundary renegotiations. Their promotional practices generally veer into the nebulous realms of transmedia extension, audience participation, and fan co-optation (Hellekson 2009; Lothian 2009; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; Hills 2014; Jones 2014). To use Jenkins’s definition, MTV (generally) and *Teen Wolf* (specifically) are collaborationists: via their official Tumblr, they experiment "with new approaches that see fans as important collaborators in the production of content and as grassroots intermediaries helping to promote the franchise" (2006, 138). Grant McCracken, a noted industry consultant, advocates a more participatory approach to promotional practices and audience engagement. He says, "Corporations must decide whether they are, literally, in or out. Will they make themselves an island or will they enter the mix? Making themselves an island may have certain short-term financial benefits, but the long-term costs can be substantial" (McCracken in Jenkins 2006, 137–38). The promotional team behind *Teen Wolf* has taken this advice to heart: from the beginning of their show in 2011, they have been active, and to an extent guiding, presence within the *Teen Wolf* Tumblr fandom. While they are hardly the first to do so, *Teen Wolf*’s promotional team is notable for its early adoption of Tumblr as well as its iterative, adaptive, and mimesis approach to fanfics and modes of production and engagement.

[4.3] The *Teen Wolf* Tumblr’s trajectory mirrors well-established and studied trends in fandom, progressing from co-optation to containment to commission (Jenkins 2006; Scott 2009; Felschow 2010; Stein 2011; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; Jones 2014; Booth 2015; Busse 2015). However, the linearity of this progression is articulated and emphasized by an integrated analysis, supplementing and contextualizing a synchronic case study with a diachronic perspective. By situating the #TeenWolfExhibit within the larger framework of *Teen Wolf*’s Tumblr promotional campaigns, the linear progression of these emerging trends illustrates industry’s development of fannish literacy. From each phase (co-optation, containment, and commission), industry is able to learn invaluable lessons about the most productive and organic ways in which to engage their various fandoms. Rupturing that linearity to assess each incident separately disarticulates that adaptive process; conversely, reconstructing the temporal context highlights it.

[4.4] From 2011 to 2013, the *Teen Wolf* Tumblr co-opted fannish modes of production with a number of fan fic and fan art contests. By 2014, they progressed to containment, attempting to redirect fan engagement from Tumblr to an industrially controlled third-party site, MTV’s Collective. The most recent stage, beginning in late 2014 and continuing through 2015, marked a move toward legitimizing fan works through commission and exhibition. This evolution demonstrates shifts from denigration to legitimation, from exploitation to professionalization—trends that may not be as evident in case studies alone. To analyze the most recent stage—commission—without understanding the progression of these trends would be to divorce the examples from their context. The synchronic approach, generative as it may be, risks negating the importance of chronology and temporality, while rendering invisible the industry’s ongoing development of fannish literacy.

[4.5] To address those limitations, I contextualize one of *Teen Wolf*’s recent promotional campaigns—the commissioned #TeenWolfExhibit—within the larger tapestry of *Teen Wolf*’s official presence on Tumblr and their fan-targeted promotional campaigns. This integrated approach will couch an exceptional case study within a diachronic framework, texturing each component with insights garnered from 4 years’ worth of MTV’s research and development on and within their Tumblr fandom. Diachronic analyses are accretive; similarly, this approach reveals that the case study is cumulative: the #TeenWolfExhibit reproduces and reflects all the successes, failures, and course corrections that predate it. To make these implicit connections explicit and to demonstrate the value of an integrated approach, I use the #TeenWolfExhibit as a lens to bring into focus and denaturalize the evolution of MTV’s fannish literacy on Tumblr.

5. #TeenWolfExhibit

[5.1] During the 10-month break between seasons 4 and 5, the promotional team behind MTV’s *Teen Wolf* developed a new marketing tactic. Led by Jim deBarros, MTV’s vice president of Off-Air Creative, they reached out to well-known *Teen Wolf* fan artists (eight women and one man) and commissioned them to create fan art promoting the upcoming season. The resulting works were displayed—though not sold—at a June 2015 exhibition in New York City as well as shared with the fandom via the official Tumblr. They also solicited unpaid submissions from Tumblr fans for informal display at the same event. This campaign, tagged as the #TeenWolfExhibit, was promoted through a plethora of social media outlets but was hosted by the official Tumblr.

[5.2] Jenkins explains that industry’s entrée into fannish spaces and modes is facilitated and expedited by the very infrastructure that fans developed for their own creation and circulation practices. The most effective way for industry to engage fans through this
The campaign had five components, each of which bears the influence of previous promotional successes and failures on Tumblr. These components, analyzed in chronological order, are the commission, invitation, advertisement, exhibition, and circulation of the fan-made artworks. Analyzed in concert and in conversation, they represent a diachronic accumulation of the tried and tested strategies that the Teen Wolf promotional team honed on Tumblr between 2011 and 2015.

6. Commission

Though the #TeenWolfExhibit included both commissioned and solicited fan works, Teen Wolf’s promotional team first contracted fan artists to create the paid promotional materials. Some of these artists had participated in previous promotional campaigns. Swann Smith, a professional artist, was previously contracted by Teen Wolf’s off-air creative department to develop a bestiary for the fictional Argent family. The bestiary—a fan art compilation of all the monsters relevant to the show’s mythology—has been featured in the show, but it was originally commissioned as a limited-edition collector’s item for fans; 8,500 copies were gifted to fans at the 2014 San Diego Comic-Con (Smith 2015a). Jessica Short, another previously contracted fan artist, won the #TWCreatureFeature contest in 2015.

In this AT&T-sponsored competition, fans were asked to develop and design a monster to appear in the upcoming season. As with most contests involving development of creative materials, all copyrights were immediately forfeit. This was explicitly stated in the official rules through an unfortunate turn of legalistic phrase: "Sponsor shall have the right to exploit the Entry in perpetuity worldwide in any and all media (whether now known or hereafter invented)"
https://web.archive.org/web/20150413071201/http://www.mtv.com/asm/ads/contests/teen_wolf/Teen_Wolf_Creature_Feature_Contest.pdf. As Kristina Busse observes, "Fan campaigns and contests...always seem to offload all the risks to the fan creator while reserving all the rights to the property owner" (2015, 112). In the case of #TeenWolfExhibit, MTV—as the client—again assumed the exclusive rights to each commissioned piece, but they compensated the artists for their labor (Short 2015).

This marks a change in Teen Wolf’s modus operandi concerning fannish promotional campaigns. Previously, they held fan contests (art in 2011, fic in 2012) that violated the tenets of a gift economy as fans submitted their entries without compensation or acknowledgment. Their lukewarm reception is indicative of fandom’s indifference toward asymmetrical attempts at engagement. With the shift from appropriation to commission, however, the Teen Wolf promotional team demonstrates an awareness of these concerns and of the importance of reciprocity in fandom. Indeed, this commission-for-exhibition model is reminiscent of the tradition of fan commissions, in which fans request works in exchange for similar works or minimal compensation. While some of these fan commissions are exchanged privately, most are shared communally in a manifestation of fandom’s gift economy. By commissioning fan works and then sharing them via the exhibition, the promotional team is demonstrating both a calculated move away from appropriative contests and a growing knowledge of prevalent fan practices and social norms.

While the commission model and its professional framing as client and artist (rather than industry and fan) risk divesting the exchange of its attendant fannish affiliation, it also implies a rare recognition and valuation of fan work as labor. It also explicitly professionalizes the fans and monetizes their work. Though not all commissioned artists were chosen for their previous experiences with the show’s fan promotions, they were all chosen with an eye toward professionalization. In addition to selecting artists representing a variety of styles and media, Teen Wolf’s promotional team sought out fan artists “who were pursuing a professional career in art” (Delhagen 2015). In keeping with the reframed client-artist dynamic, each fan was given a creative brief to guide their creations. As explained by deBarros and corroborated by four of the artists, they were each given specific guidelines for the artwork: color preferences, style guides, broad plotlines, and season taglines (Delhagen 2015; Indy 2015; Short 2015; Smith 2015b; Swezey 2015). These guidelines dictated not only form and tone, but also content.

All of the characters, pairings, and situations depicted in the resulting fan works are canonical. Noncanonical or fanonical content is contained by way of exclusion. By leveraging their power to select the artists and specify the types of work created, industry is able to create a corporate ecology that precludes the feminist, queer, and racialized politics endemic to fandom, especially as seen on Tumblr. Karen Hellekson illustrates this uneasy relationship: “Commodification squeezes and constrains because it serves the interests of a third party; fans comply as a term of use” (2015, 130). Fan art is a traditionally fan-directed, transformative mode of engagement. When created in a corporate ecology, like the #TeenWolfExhibit commissions, the artwork’s transformative potential is neutralized and rendered largely affirmative (Stork 2014). While the commission-for-exhibition model demonstrates a progressive evolution of Teen Wolf’s fannish literacy and promotional strategies, the presence of industrial guidelines blurs the boundaries between transformative and affirmative, as well as commission and containment.

7. Invitation

After the off-air creative team commissioned the promotional works, Teen Wolf’s promotional team took to Tumblr to promote the upcoming event. On June 19, 2015, they posted an invitation for the upcoming gallery exhibition (Figure 1). The temporality of the invitation is interesting. By posting it 10 days before the start of the new season, the invitation itself became a promotional paratext for season 5,
especially in relation to the solicited, informally displayed pieces (Gray 2010). Even if the invitation cycled through a Tumblr user’s aggregated feed with no context and no follow-up in the days preceding the exhibit and premiere, its clear branding (the show’s stylized title as well as the image of the titular character) hyped the show on a superficial level. The short time frame between invitation and exhibition narrowed the time frame for fans to react negatively to the solicitation of unpaid fan art. Previously, their contests gave fans a few weeks’ notice to create and/or submit their works. The promotional team also demonstrated their understanding of Tumblr’s affordances by providing the invitation in a JPG format. On Tumblr, an image is easier to share and reblog than a text post, though less searchable. To mitigate the decreased search functionality, the invitation promoted the desired hashtag for the campaign: #TeenWolfExhibit. This tag branding, first used with the #TWCreatureFeature contest, allowed them to easily track submissions and metrics for this campaign. It also allowed their promotional team to keep tabs on one small corner of the ever-evolving tagging conventions used by Teen Wolf’s Tumblr fandom.

![Teen Wolf](image)

Figure 1. MTV Teen Wolf’s fan art exhibit announcement and invitation, June 2015. [View larger image.]

[7.2] To entice fans to share and reblog the invitation, they included one of the commissioned art pieces on the left side. While this work illustrates the kind of art and the level of skill to be celebrated in the exhibit, it also promotes one of the VIP guests: the titular teen wolf, Scott McCall, played by Tyler Posey. Together with the textual elements, the artwork invites attendees to “join Jeff Davis and Tyler Posey.” In addition to the attendees and the artists, the kickoff of the exhibition boasts attendance from show runners (Davis), actors (Posey), and executive producers (both), as well as press and promotional team members. Notably, neither the art nor the artists are pitched as the main draw. For one night, the boundaries that separate these constituencies were renegotiated to the point of nonexistence. As Bertha Chin explains, ”The rise of social media…incited the media industry to engage with their core audiences more creatively in order to maintain the loyalty and interest of the consumers,” allowing ”media industry professionals…and fans to co-exist within the same symbolic space” (2013, 88). However, like fan conventions, this event relocates these interactions from symbolic to physical spaces.

[7.3] At the celebratory kickoff, all attendees were able to intermingle and interact among elevated fan art at the Art Directors Club. Though increased interaction between fans and producers is hardly novel in an era of integrated marketing, social media, and fan conventions, the move to a physical space is relatively new one for Teen Wolf. The creative team has attended a fair number of fan conventions and awards shows, but the team has rarely invited fans in such close and formal quarters. As Larsen and Zubernis explain, this momentary relaxation of barriers brings “fans and creators together in a carnival atmosphere that challenges accepted boundaries between fan and producer” (2012, 21). However, unlike conventions, where performers are “presented to the fans under highly ritualized conditions,” the professional gallery exhibition presents fans and fan practices under highly ritualized conditions (22). In so doing, the #TeenWolfExhibit is not just attempting to normalize and sanction (selected) fannish modes of engagement and artwork; the event also attempts to normalize and sanction (selected) fans. Controlling fandom—especially the fluid and amorphous Tumblr fandom—is impossible. However, by dint of their institutional power, industry can set the stage, select the actors, and determine the rituals needed to perform a sanctioned and sanctified mimicry of fandom.

[7.4] The influence of previous Tumblr campaigns is most obvious in the invitation’s language. The invitation uses expressly formal vernacular, befitting the opening of a formal art exhibit. Here, fans are “cordially invited” to “the grand opening” of a fan art exhibition, which in itself implies a demonstration of notable and considerable artistic skill. The exhibit, “showcasing a collection of works,” would open on June 25, 2015, for their “viewing pleasure.” Typically, the language used on the Tumblr displays a studied informality: the promotional team has attempted to cultivate a fannish persona that utilizes fan lingo and exemplifies the informal “feels” culture of Tumblr (see Stein 2015). John Caldwell notes that this practice is widespread, as “corporate employees—operating as stealthy lurkers and identity poseurs—actively masquerade along online fandoms and audiences” (2011, 298). As such, the reversal in tone is telling. Through its rhetoric, Teen Wolf’s promotional team is performing an elevation of fans and their works that has been heretofore lacking: instead of the typically affected informality, this formality implies and performs their recognition of and respect for not just the art but also the artists. This shift in tone is a marked correction of previous impropriety, especially in comparison to the occasionally dismissive address of Teen Wolf’s show runner and executive producer, Jeff Davis (note 1).

[7.5] The invitation also instructs fans to use the designated hashtag (deployed to brand, consolidate, and measure entries) when submitting fan art for a slideshow at the grand opening. The most telling and contradictory linguistic move, however, is the foregrounding of fannish identities. While the people who created the fan works were framed as artists during the commission process, their fannish identity is prioritized by the invitation’s language: “a collection of works from Teen Wolf fans across the globe.” The discursive shift from
artist/client to fan/producer is certainly understandable when promoting a self-proclaimed “fan art exhibit,” but, intentionally or unintentionally, it shifts the balance of power in the producer’s favor.

8. Advertisement

[8.1] Approximately 4 days after the invitation was posted on Tumblr, MTV began showing the commissioned fan art on their billboard in New York City’s Times Square (figures 2 and 3). The fan works were displayed, night and day, for the week leading up to the premiere of season 5. The visibility of these commissioned works cross-promoted both their imminent exhibition and the upcoming premiere. The results of Teen Wolf’s various promotional campaigns were on a gradual trajectory toward visibility over the preceding 4 years, a trend that has mirrored the mainstreaming of fans and fandom. Early fan art contest submissions were only shared on the official Tumblr, while the winning submission from the #TWCreatureFeature contest was incorporated into the show for all fans and viewers to see—though, notably, it was not marked as a fan contribution. The #TeenWolfExhibit is the culmination of this push toward visibility: fan art does not get much more visible than being projected, in lights, on the side of a New York City skyscraper, not to mention the subsequent exhibition in a public venue. It is worth noting, though, that this visibility is simultaneously local and spreadable, contextualized and decontextualized. Images of the fan art projected in Times Square were posted and circulated within Tumblr fandom, retaining their context while expanding their visibility both online and in real life. In Times Square, however, the population of New York City viewed the fan works out of context—except for the blatant “fan art” label affixed to the bottom right side of each piece.

Figure 2. Image of Teen Wolf fan art displayed in New York City’s Times Square (night), June 2015. [View larger image.]

Figure 3. Image of Teen Wolf fan art displayed in New York City’s Times Square (day), June 2015. [View larger image.]

[8.2] As figures 2 and 3 illustrate, this “fan art” label is literally and figuratively intrusive, effectively othering the art by highlighting its origin. By indiscreetly tagging fan art as such, the promotional team is at once differentiating the fannish works from the professional key art and performing community through the embracing of fans. As noted with the reversal between artist/client and fan/producer dynamics, industry alternately uses “fan” as an enticement, an endorsement, and, here, as a qualifier. While the exhibition of these works...
through official channels (Tumblr, the art venue, billboards) grants fans a modicum of industrial legitimation, it ultimately benefits the industry. The promotional team is simultaneously rewarding and encouraging future participation in these Tumblr-based promotional campaigns while branding *Teen Wolf* (and by extension MTV) as a collaborationist property able to gain traction in a hypermediated culture.

9. Exhibition

[9.1] The overall exhibition, including both the grand opening and the week-long display, is a relentless exercise in industrial legitimation of fan works and fannish modes of engagement. Originally scheduled to run from June 25 to July 2, 2015, it was later extended until July 16, 2015. The grand opening occurred just 4 days before the season 5 premiere. Like the invitation, the event itself became a promotional paratext for the upcoming season. The exhibition was hosted by MTV and the Art Directors Club, and was held at ADC’s New York studio. ADC, a well-regarded venue, is an exceedingly appropriate choice for an exhibition of promotional art. The club was founded in 1920 by Louis Pedlar to “ensure that advertising was judged by the same stringent standards as fine art” ([http://adcglobal.org/about/what-is-adc/](http://adcglobal.org/about/what-is-adc/)). Both ADC and MTV share a vested interest in the viability and visibility of promotional art. More of this art was on display at the grand opening than at any other time, as the solicited fan art submissions were also displayed via slideshow. Though these additional fan works were not created according to MTV’s creative brief, they were selected with the same canonical and affirmational guidelines in mind.

[9.2] As noted in the invitation, the guest list comprised a variety of stakeholders: fans, artists, actors, show runners, producers, press, and promotional team members. However, rather than the art on display, the main attraction of the celebratory event was the question-and-answer session with Tyler Posey and Jeff Davis, shifting attention toward those with industrial authority. In fact, upon entering the venue, attendees encountered a framing quote from show runner Jeff Davis ([note 2](#)) (figure 4). On this plaque, he simultaneously commends the artists for their fannish affection, legitimizes their “works of art,” and reifies his industrial authority:

> [3.3] It’s one thing to watch a tv show and enjoy it as an hour of entertainment. It’s quite another thing to be so inspired by it that you go off and create your own works of art. More than glowing reviews or ratings, these incredible pieces of artwork might be the greatest compliment fans can give the creators and artists behind their favorite show. It inspires us. It makes us want to do better. It makes us proud that maybe we’ve done a few things right. And most of all, it makes us want to keep inspiring you.

[9.4] While clearly trying to frame the event respectfully, Davis emphasizes the centrality and authenticity of the show in relation to the derivative works it inspired. Despite their intermingling and their incorporation of fans, the *Teen Wolf* creative and promotional teams shore up their position of authority. By legitimizing the fan art in the #TeenWolfExhibit, they demonstrate their singular ability to confer that endorsement. Industry may truly value fandom and fan art, but there is no mistaking that the imbalance of power in the industry/fandom dynamic is always in industry’s favor. Laura Felschow elaborates: "Producers have exercised control over online fans by inviting them to the party before they can crash it" (2010, ¶4.4). With the exhibit’s symbolic acknowledgment of fans, MTV is encouraging continued consumption and participation while also attempting to foster goodwill with an often fractious fandom.

![Figure 4. Image of signage at the Teen Wolf fan art exhibit at the ADC Gallery, June 2015.](view_larger_image)
DVDs. These works—a collection of contest submissions—were used without consent from or compensation to their creators. Three days after the DVDs were released, the Teen Wolf promotional team launched an MTV-controlled fan archive called The Collective (figure 5).

Despite attempts to frame it as a venue for the collection and exhibition of fan works, The Collective was a transparent move to enclose and contain fan practices—a move that echoes previous attempts to professionalize and/or monetize fan works.

Figure 5. Screenshot of MTV’s The Collective Web site, June 2014. [View larger image.]

[9.6] One of those previous attempts, FanLib, demonstrates the industrial desire for control over fan platforms as well as the importance of timing with such attempts. FanLib, a for-profit, multifandom fan fic archive, was created in 2007 by industrial agents. The Web site, a transparent money grab, was defunct by 2008. It was highly criticized, in large part because of its draconian terms and conditions: once fans submitted their work, they forfeited their rights to their work yet retained the risk of copyright infringement (Hellekson 2009; De Kosnik 2009; Scott 2009; Busse 2015). However, timing played a key role in its failure. FanLib was introduced nearly simultaneously with the extensive and invasive issues around industrial censorship and containment highlighted by LiveJournal’s so-called Strikethrough debacle (Busse 2015). In 2007, LiveJournal—one of the main loci of online fannish activity before Tumblr—deleted hundreds of journals and communities on the basis of claims of rape, incest, and underage pornography in fan works, despite the relative privacy afforded by age restrictions, password protections, and locked communities. Six years after fandom effectively shut down FanLib’s attempt at enclosure and control, Teen Wolf fans—already incensed by the appropriative fan art booklets—followed suit with MTV’s The Collective.

[9.7] An abject failure, The Collective was shut down within the year amid vociferous criticism. Shieldsexual (2014), one of the many fans who advocated for the site to be dismantled, articulates the reaction of many fans: "[Moving] fandom into an area where they have more control...[and] you don’t hold the rights to your work...is totally gross and inappropriate on their part. They aren’t the first ones to try this bullshit either, they’re just cloaking it in different words." Indeed, as Louisa Stein has shown, ABC Family has created similar industry-controlled fan spaces. These spaces complicate "traditional perceptions of authorship, but at the same time...potentially [contain] and [limit] authorship to that which is encouraged by or allowed by the official interface," the official terms of use, and/or the official party line (2011, 133). Like FanLib, MTV’s The Collective was an ill-advised and poorly timed power grab.

[9.8] Unlike the creators of FanLib, however, Teen Wolf’s promotional team learned a valuable lesson amid the wreckage of their archive: the exploitation of fan labor, regardless of legalities, is as ineffective as it is impolitic. Participation in a shared ecological system like Tumblr necessitates a degree of reciprocity. As Christopher Kelty argues, in digital spaces and in the new media landscape, "participation is now a two-way street" (2013, 23). Modes of containment, like FanLib or The Collective, violate the expectation of reciprocity and thus the tenets of a participatory culture. By rupturing the unspoken rules that structure fandom’s gift economy, promotional teams are effectively disincentivizing the participation they need and disrespecting the fandom they are attempting to integrate. However, by initiating and acknowledging that breach of conduct, Teen Wolf’s promotional team was subsequently able to correct their course.

[9.9] Fresh off the failure of The Collective, the promotional team’s framing of the #TeenWolfExhibit appears much more deliberate and corrective. Rather than repeat the same mistakes, they modified their approaches to production, exhibition, and circulation. Instead of exploiting contest and The Collective entries for promotion and profit, they commissioned fan artists from within Tumblr fandom and paid them for their labor. Rather than assuming control over the digital and physical spaces in which the art is displayed, they partnered with a third party to host the event on neutral (even auspicious) ground: the fan art was exhibited in a professional gallery (figure 6), implying value as well as encouraging a slippage between fan and fine art. As much as the previous contests and The Collective were transparent efforts to control and monetize fan art, the #TeenWolfExhibit was just as obviously framed as a formal, professional event to celebrate fan artists and their artwork. The promotional team behind Teen Wolf’s Tumblr had learned its lesson through trial and flame, and they wanted fans to know it. Thus, as the pièce de résistance of the #TeenWolfExhibit (and arguably their most fan-literate promotional move to date), they shared all of the commissioned works on Tumblr.
10. Circulation

[10.1] In the time between the grand opening of the exhibition and the start of season 5, the commissioned works were posted on the official Teen Wolf Tumblr so they could circulate freely throughout the fandom. They were also made available on the personal Tumblrs of the various fan artists. At a practical level, this circulation allows the fans who do not live in the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut to view the fan art, which widens the promotional net for the premiere. At a strategic level, however, the move from controlled exhibition to chaotic circulation acknowledges fans as not “simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined” (Booth 2015, 2). It also allows the Teen Wolf Tumblr promotional team to mediate and officiate the final act of legitimation, reifying their position of power in the fan/producer dynamic. Indeed, the refrain of validation carries through the Tumblr posts, each of which is tagged as “an official fan-made promo image.” While the decision to circulate the commissioned fan art through Tumblr fandom reaffirmed the fan/producer boundaries, it also blurred the distinction between gift and commercial economies.

[10.2] In fact, the entirety of the #TeenWolfExhibit (commission, exhibition, and circulation) renegotiated the boundaries between gift and commercial economies. Traditionally, fandom has operated on a gift economy marked by reciprocity and obligation that at once engender and maintain a cohesive communal structure (Hyde 1983, 66–67). As Karen Hellekson notes, the value of gifts is their ability to establish social ties because they are not (as) meaningful outside of the fannish context (2009, 115). In this context, the capital worth of fan works is replaced by communal value. However romantic that notion, it is worth noting that fandom has also engaged in a gift economy out of necessity. Because of the derivative nature of fan works, copyright and intellectual property laws prohibit creators from benefiting financially from their creations—unless, of course, they can prove that creation to be transformed in a manner of “productive use” (De Kosnik 2009, 122). Or, as this case illustrates, unless the fan artists are operating within an officially sanctioned sandbox. In a commercial economy, however, capital is king, and fan works are often leveraged for monetary worth rather than communal value.

[10.3] Fan studies often harbors a moral dualism in relation to economies (e.g., beloved gift economy, exploitative commercial economy). Hyde’s (1983) conception of a gift economy in particular complements the communal ethos of fandom. Tumblr’s technological affordances provide a different iteration of this gift economy—gifts are primarily visual in nature and shared through reblogging—but maintain the tenets of community and reciprocity. This iteration also affords industry an opportunity to participate in the gift economy. Rather than co-opting fan labor, removing it from its communal context, and exploiting it in a commercial economy, the Teen Wolf promotional team has clearly learned to mimic those central tenets of community and reciprocity. By posting the commissioned fan art on their official Tumblr, they are effectively preserving their communal context and participating in their fandom’s gift economy. In fact, as many fans follow the official Tumblr—to access their steady stream of fan-made GIF sets, if nothing else—the posting of the commissioned fan art allows for a wider circulation than unsanctioned channels could achieve.

[10.4] By circulating within the Tumblr fandom, these commissioned fan works are simultaneously producing commercial and communal capital. As marketing materials, they are generating promotional (and by extension commercial) capital. As expressions of fannish affect, they are gifts circulating freely throughout the community. However, as Suzanne Scott cautions, these gifts are not without strings: they allow industry to “regift a narrowly defined and contained version of fandom to a general audience” (Scott 2009, ¶1.6). Despite its celebratory framing, the #TeenWolfExhibit does contain and sanitize fandom. However, as a course correction from the debacle of The Collective, the Teen Wolf promotional team attempted to minimize the industrial containment somewhat by allowing the artists to post the commissioned art to their personal Tumblrs as well. On the official Tumblr, they also took care to recognize each artist, linking back to their respective Tumblrs. This concerted effort to respect the community and reciprocity characteristics of fandom and its gift economy is indicative of the ways in which the Teen Wolf Tumblr promotional team has developed its fannish literacy over the last 4 years.

II. Conclusion

[11.1] As demonstrated throughout my analysis of Teen Wolf’s most recent fan-centric promotional campaign—the commissioned #TeenWolfExhibit—the promotional team’s current strategies can be traced back through previous incarnations, successes and failures alike. A diachronic perspective evidences how the Teen Wolf promotional team progressed from the blatant co-optation of contests through the ill-advised containment of The Collective to ultimately arrive at commission. In this new phase, they solicit—rather than misappropriate
—fan works and compensate fan artists for their work, an arrangement that recognizes fan labor by way of professionalization and monetization rather than exploitation and domination. While the next phase of their promotional progression remains to be seen, it too will bear the marks of the preceding campaigns and serve as culmination of the lessons learned. Without a thorough, chronological record of Teen Wolf’s previous attempts to elicit and encourage participation in their Tumblr fandom, it would be difficult to recognize and track the ways in which their promotional strategies were honed and refined between 2011 and 2015. With the benefit of a diachronic approach, however, the context that forms and informs industry’s promotional practices is readily apparent. While it is impossible to definitively state whether or not these changes reflect a genuine change in Teen Wolf’s or MTV’s conceptualization of fans, they do demonstrate the development of their fannish literacy. Though Tumblr fandom has more or less abandoned the fan mentorship model, industry has not: they are constantly observing and mimicking the codes, norms, and practices they see in fandom. Supplementing a close analysis of the #TeenWolfExhibit with a diachronic perspective makes plain the evolution of this literacy.

[11.2] In any ecological or diachronic study, “context is not something that simply exists; it’s something that the participants in the ecological system create through their various fannish activities and, importantly, the textual traces of those activities” (Turk and Johnson 2012, ¶2.6). The importence of context and temporality, as the basis of fannish literacy and the value of a diachronic perspective, cannot be overstated. However, it is shortsighted to limit the definition of participants to fans only. The activities—fannish, promotional, or both—of all participants in a shared ecological system like Tumblr are significant. They continuously construct, deconstruct, and challenge the evolving context of fandom and fan/producer dynamics. Without a more holistic study of all the moving parts that comprise various fandoms, we will not be able to develop holistic understandings of larger trends such as legitimization, monetization, and professionalization. More pressing, perhaps, is the concern that we will not be able to keep pace with the rapidly adapting industry. If they are indeed adopting and refining fannish literacy skills in order to operate more effectively and organically within fandom, fan scholars need to adopt research models and designs that are better equipped to evaluate that adaptive process.

12. Acknowledgments

[12.1] I am indebted to Suzanne Scott for her guidance and encouragement. I would also like to acknowledge Tisha Turk and Joshua Johnson; their article on the ecological model has been both inspirational and instructive for me as a fan scholar.

13. Notes

1. For more information on the mercurial relationships between Teen Wolf fans, especially those on Tumblr, and producers, see Ballinger (2014).

2. Because I was unable to physically attend the gallery exhibition in New York City, I followed the event via the #TeenWolfExhibit hashtag and reconstructed the layout through photographs.

14. Works cited


Felschow, Laura. 2010. "'Hey, check it out, there's actually fans': (Dis)empowerment and (Mis)representation of Cult Fandom in Supernatural." Transformativ Works and Cultures, no. 4. http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2010.0134.


Smith, Swann. 2015c. "Last Week Each #TeenWolfExhibit Artist Had One of Their Illustrations Featured in New York's Time Square." *Tumblr*, June 30.


Swezey, Liz. 2015. Personal interview, October 23.


Rereading Superman as a trans f/man

Dan Vena

Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

[0.1] Abstract—While a noteworthy body of scholarship exists that "queers" the superhero, few attempts have been made to "trans" such famous comic book characters. I offer an introduction to trans identities via my own personal narrative and a cursory example of trans reading practices within the fields of comics and fandom studies. Writing as a trans f/m (fan and man), I set out to trans superheroes and also to rethink the temporal space of boyhood, which is typically positioned as the supposed beginning of one's manhood and one's passion for comic book heroes. As an example of this reading strategy, I offer a reinterpretation of the Superman origin story that explicitly highlights the hero's own innate transness.

[0.2] Keywords—Boyhood; Comic books; Comics studies; Nostalgia; Superhero studies; Superheroes; Transgender


[0.3] When men are growing up and reading about Batman, Spiderman, and Superman these are not fantasies, these are options.

—Jerry Seinfeld

I. Introduction

[1.1] I spent the majority of my childhood fantasizing I was a superhero. In my make-believe world, I transformed from a clumsy kid to a swift crime fighter. I populated my make-believe town with cardboard cutouts of buildings, peppered with stuffed animals as citizens, and fashioned an arsenal of necessary tactical tools from the art construction supplies at hand. I entertained myself like many young boys do, play fighting through imaginary obstacles to rid the world of evil ne'er-do-wells. However, having been assigned female at birth, I became a slight wonder to my parents, who assumed my tomboyish behavior was just a phase. To some extent, it was. Twenty years later, I forewent the label "tomboy," preferring the gender identifier "man" to express my experiences and expressions of masculinity. With this insight, I began an ongoing journey of transitioning, jumping through medical hoops and psychological evaluations, undergoing several surgical interventions and taking hormone therapy, all to access a body that my childhood self believed I would inherently grow into.

[1.2] That said, the process of transitioning is not solely a physical journey. For me and for others, transitioning also requires the production of a more unified gendered self that is both recognizable to the individual and to the world at large. Given the cisnormative, transphobic conditions in which we live, this includes the ability to authenticate one's masculinity and one's claim to manhood as genuinely valid (note 1). In general, whether this is done through normative, patriarchal rituals of initiation or through alternative expressions of masculinity is of course up to the individual; this individual may or may not share any investment in challenging hegemonic displays of masculinity; nor must their personal expression of gender have any alignment with deeper political projects. Working with a body whose morphology stands at odds from cisnormative definitions of maleness (and thus presumably an authentically male self), trans men must learn to navigate masculinity in ways both akin to and different from their cisgender counterparts. These navigations may lead to wholeheartedly different expressions of masculinity, or they may conform to more mainstream or traditional notions of what is appropriately masculine. It is thus not uncommon for trans men to
adopt or reproduce normative social scripts as a means of legitimizing our male gender identity because abiding by
dominant cultural values—problematic as this may be—helps validate us as suitably male (Noble 2006, 35). So although
trans and cis men alike may struggle to define their masculinity, I suggest here that the journey trans men undergo to
manifest and express their gender may produce markedly different results in relation to textual reading practices.

[1.3] I offer my own experience as a trans man and superhero fan as an example of this phenomenon. While
adjusting to new social negotiations as a man (or, that is to say, as someone actively read as a cis man), I relied on my
childhood hero, Superman, to guide me in understanding the complexities of masculinity. This (re)turning to a
childhood figure is, as S. Bear Bergman (2009, 31) explains, a common practice among trans men, as these figures may
represent a temporal moment when the formation of one’s masculine identity began to take shape. Yet the longer I
studied the Superman script, a Bizarro (note 2) outcome occurred whereby I began to read into the character my own
trans journey of becoming. This essay is meant to act as a narration of this rereading, especially in light of the fact that
Superman, as a character, has never transitioned (although he has transformed, maybe, in the safety of a telephone
booth) or expressed any form of gender dysphoria. The importance in selecting this character, while partially nostalgic,
is meant to highlight the ways in which a figure does not need to be intentionally written as trans or as having
transitioned bodily forms in some capacity (for instance, Mystique from the X-Men) to potentially resonate with trans
fans (note 3). I hope to render into discourse the affective reverberations and resonances of my lived experience,
coupled with striking moments of engagement with the Superman mythos, which have come to inform my reading
practice as a trans man and comics fan.

[1.4] On the one hand, this essay is meant as an introduction to trans identities for unfamiliar readers and as a sketch
of trans reading practices within comics and fandom studies. I borrow here from Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa
Jean Moore (2008), who suggest that the method of transing (as opposed to queering) be used to explore and explode
the gender dynamics operating within a particular text (note 4). Because gender is often misconceptualized as having
concrete categories (as located and fixed onto the sexed body), any expression that does not conform to cisnormative
regulations is often erased by mainstream culture. Transing seeks to expose the erasures that occur and to highlight
the very gaps where gender slippages are made apparent (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 2008, 13). Writing as a trans
man, the project of transing superheroes also includes rethinking the temporal space of boyhood, which is typically
positioned as the supposed beginning of one’s manhood and one’s passion for comic book heroes. In returning to this
temporal moment, I reevaluate the place of nostalgia within comics and fandom studies and how its affective response
remains contingent on cisnormative organizations of morphology and temporality (note 5).

[1.5] On the other hand, this essay also forwards an initial rereading of the Superman origin story as influenced by my
own experiences of transitioning genders. Within the world of comics, an origin story typically refers to a canonized
account that explains how a hero or group of heroes came into being. The assumption that one may be able to
precisely locate the moment or moments during which the superhero identity began to take shape may ring familiar to
trans readers, who may similarly be asked to continually locate the origins of their own gender identities—the
presumption being, of course, that cis persons are not usually asked the question “When did you know?” While the
textual examples used in this article in some way entertain the idea that a point of origin is possible to locate, I wish to
show how these narratives are perhaps the most malleable to reinterpret from a trans reading position given the
overlapping and persistent preoccupation with locating identity within a specific temporal boundary. In regards to the
elements used, I reference an eclectic collection of Superman cultural products I engaged with as a child, an
adolescent, and a transitioning young adult, which places the time period of these texts roughly between 1990 and
2011. Pulling examples from comic books, animated television series, and live-action television shows, I meditate on an
assemblage of texts that fuse to create a comfortable Superman narrative that I alone am familiar with. While this may
serve as a frustrating starting point for academic inquiry, this type of personal engagement is necessary when
investigating alternative reading practices since they remain contingent on our own lived experiences and the axes of
identity that we all continually navigate. We each have our own version of a superhero’s narrative. While we can rely on
a single author’s interpretation, or on the canon of a popular television show, ultimately, as fandom scholars know, we
write the stories that suit us, and for marginalized readers, this can manifest as an interpretive strategy that actively
works to reread and redefine these seemingly stable narratives (note 6).

2. Superhero (sub-)standards
[2.1] Comics studies scholar Peter Coogan (2009, 77) defines superheroes as heroic individuals who use their extraordinary abilities in a selfless, prosocial manner. But through their narrative exploits, superheroes, like other fictional genre characters, come to represent the dominant cultural values of the society they are produced within. The symbolic meanings of superheroes thus remain continually in flux; they are constantly affected by the social and political conditions of the era (Coogan 2009, 77; Harrison 2010, 122). These back-and-forth oscillations between challenging and/or reinforcing dominant ideologies ultimately make the dynamic of (re)serialization possible.

[2.2] Yet regardless of how a superhero may be crafted to embody, reject, or question certain political or moral values, the male superhero in particular is almost always meant to represent a normatively gendered individual. The male superhero is—and here I use a loaded psychoanalytic term flippantly—almost always the embodiment of the ego ideal, a quintessential male subject whose masculine identity is validated through his hypermasculine physical attributes and his subsequent masculine-defined feats of heroism and strength. The superbody's illustrated adherence to dominant codes of masculinity not only reinforces the hero's gender within the pages of the comic but also informs readers outside the comic how male-identified individuals should look and behave. Specific emphasis is placed on the superhero's musculature, which serves as the clearest signifier of masculinity and legitimizes his body as suitably male (Bordo referenced in Brown 1999, 27) (note 7). Within this paradigm, the superhero’s steel-hard body (with Superman being the literal Man of Steel), bulging in its (mandatory) skintight suit, is the manifestation of phallocentric masculinity and suggests that a flaccid or soft body is both literally and figuratively shamefully weak.

[2.3] Given the dominant masculine ethos of the comic industry as well as the mimetic androcentrism inherent in comics studies, the assumption remains that the main receivers of these messages regarding gender are cis boys. Though there is some scholarship that explores the relationship (assumedly cis) that girls and women have to comic books and superheroes, it remains implicit that readers have a stable or coherent gender identity as defined by cisnormative culture. However, as my own stake and enjoyment in comics and superhero popular culture attest, this is not always the case. Scholarship in the field of comics studies must reevaluate how it defines and visualizes comics readership if it aims to produce more nuanced understandings of the superhero. Part of this work entails rethinking prevalent conclusions, as highlighted by Richard Harrison, who suggests, “The superheroic body represents the body some boys wish they could have, [and] the secret identity represents the selves that some boys want to show the world but cannot—and there are a lot of those kinds of boys” (2010, 127). Though Harrison expands further on this account, suggesting that superheroes appeal to the outsider in us all rather than to our specific gender (129), his definition of "boy" (or man) nonetheless remains unopposed (note 8). Indeed, as Harrison's statement forces us to ask, what kinds of boys are we discussing? If his definition of a male reader remains partially contingent on the desire for an alternative body, then certainly trans fans fit the bill. While not all trans folks may subscribe to the narrative of being trapped in the wrong body, for me there remains a strong yearning to escape the perils of embodiment and the friction created by gender dysphoria. When I read a Superman comic, for instance, what I desire most is not to become a crime fighter or a hero but to occupy a (cis) body that will feel livable. Though a response of envy or desire may be common among cis and trans readers alike, its affective characteristics and textures may differ dramatically.

[2.4] As Harrison (2010) notes, for (cis) boys, superheroes may come to represent potential ideals they are seemingly capable of fulfilling. Jerry Seinfeld’s joke, which heads this essay, aptly summarizes this expectation, suggesting that superhero narratives are often very real experiences for (cis) boys. While improbable, they are not altogether off the table as feasible life options. Tzvetan Todorov explains the fantastic as a hesitation, a pause, that causes character and reader alike to rethink their positioning within reality ([1970] 1975, 25–26). We can make room to understand Seinfeld’s joke in a similar manner, and to insert within it a trans perspective that expands on the apparent expression of desire. It may be that for the cis or trans boy as comic book reader, the narrative of the superhero opens up a fantastic moment in which a breakdown of the acknowledged order of “the real” occurs and confrontation with “the imaginary” in the form of the superhero becomes possible (Todorov [1970] 1975, 25). If this is so, the momentary pause (however long), in which the young boy determines the lived possibility of becoming a superhero is precisely what constitutes the fantastic in this scenario. The fantastic is an undisturbed moment in which one makes a choice, and as soon as one does, the fantastic evaporates ([1970] 1975, 31). If we are to continue with this example, in both instances, the possibility of becoming a superhero is already foreclosed and overdetermined by the body, which, as both cis and trans boys grow, often falls short of the superhero standard because of ability and/or because of one’s birth-assigned sex/gender (note 9). Presumably, within this type of encounter, the process of acceptance and of coming to terms that one is not Superman is an evitable step of maturation for cis men before they reach adult manhood.
Within this mental space or state comes the acute awareness that my physiological home is lost forever. My attempt to was hence denied access to a particular corporeal self that may be more authentic and aligned with my gender identity. Boyhood for myself is an obscure psychic space that requires me to grapple with the fact that I was not born male and were never seen as boys to begin with. To preserve the origins of the term (1986) seems to be suggesting. I suggest that trans men cannot simply return to a time of (idyllic) boyhood because we were simply playing (note 11). It was within the safe temporality of childhood that I could momentarily forget or dismiss the inevitable experience of womanhood. However, within the same moment of nostalgic recollection comes the painful awareness that as a trans man, I have been robbed of my socially sanctioned boyhood (note 12). Because boyhood is such an emotionally and psychologically complicated time for trans men, it is not enough to generalize that superheroes allow men to nostalgically reflect on their childhood in a leisurely and pleasurable manner, as Giordano (1986) seems to be suggesting. I suggest that trans men cannot simply return to a time of (idyllic) boyhood because we were never seen as boys to begin with. To preserve the origins of the term nostalgia (note 13), the home time of boyhood for myself is an obscure psychic space that requires me to grapple with the fact that I was not born male and was hence denied access to a particular corporeal self that may be more authentic and aligned with my gender identity. Within this mental space or state comes the acute awareness that my physiological home is lost forever. My attempt to
return to this ideal and to locate the body that "should have been" (Prosser 1983, 83) has fueled my desire to seek surgical intervention, which aligns my experience with that of Prosser’s. As he explains:

[2.9] In the case of the transsexual the body constructed through sex reassignment surgery is not one that actually existed in the past, one that is literally remembered, but one that should have existed; sex reassignment surgery is a recovery of what was not. The body of transsexual becoming is born out of a yearning for a perfect past—that is, not memory but nostalgia: the desire for the purified version of what was, not for the return to home per se (nostos) but to the romanticized ideal of home. (84)

[2.10] Therefore, the nostalgic experience is one that is literally written onto my body; carved into each surgical scar is my understanding of home, of a body that can legitimize my gender. However, during my ongoing transition, I have also realized that I will never acquire the cis body I long for. In a sense, the nostalgic experience becomes my own personal kryptonite. It wounds, just as it harms Superman, through the realization that we have been deprived of something incredibly meaningful. For me it is my home body; for Superman it is his home planet. I (as well as other trans folks) and Superman are both thus held to the mercy of time and memory, haunted by a specter of a past we could (never) have had.

[2.11] An understanding of the comic object and text as a nostalgic trigger therefore requires acknowledging how the accompanying affective responses may be marked by larger personal histories of corporeal and psychic rupture, as is the case for me (and presumably other trans folks). It is my argument that this relationship to the body and to time comes to shape trans reading practices as markedly different from those of their cis counterparts. Returning to the moment of the fantastic, I originally stated that for both trans and cis men alike, the entry into becoming a superhero is already overdetermined by the limitations of the body. For me, when I read a Superman comic, I acknowledge, on a raw, fundamental level, that I cannot become him. Yet, if I may contradict myself, perhaps there does in fact remain a lingering dusting of the fantastic in this engagement where the fantasy is not foreclosed entirely. In an attempt to reduce the dis-ease felt by my own internalized transphobia (“If I am not like Superman, am I a man at all?”), I choose to reread and reconstitute the Superman narrative in a more familiar manner that legitimates my own masculinity and mirrors my entrance into manhood. In this moment, the door to becoming is left open, except it is not I who is transitioning. Superman himself begins to take on an identity more in line with my own transness.

3. A man for all seasons

[3.1] In Geoff Johns and Kurt Busiek’s *Up, Up and Away!* (2006), Superman has lost his powers for a year and must instead fight crime as mild-mannered Clark Kent. In this series, the focus shifts away from Superman’s extraordinary powers to Clark’s journalistic prowess as a hard-hitting, highly ethical reporter—his style being in part cultivated by the *Daily Planet*’s editor in chief, Perry White. This portrayal of journalistic integrity carries with it a nostalgic harkening back to a supposed time of reporting innocence, when the printed word still contained cold, hard facts and reporters resisted exploiting the truth for political gain. To emphasize the bygone days of journalism, artist Pete Woods consistently accessorizes Clark with an old-time newsman’s hat to signal his staunch, individual adherence to this old code of principled reporting.

[3.2] Adding to the nostalgic undertones of Johns and Busiek’s text is Woods’s artistic choice to consistently clothe Clark in his Smallville varsity jacket, signaling the character’s own nostalgic feelings for his hometown and boyhood. It is perhaps fitting that, within a narrative that sees Superman robbed of his powers, Clark (re)turns to supposedly simpler days when his extraordinary abilities did not interfere with or commandeer his day-to-day to routines. He regresses to a time before Superman, when he was unconstrained by sacrificial and heroic commitments. *Up, Up and Away!* depicts Clark as he should have been—the supposedly natural progression from Smallville citizen to Metropolis ace reporter. The letter jacket becomes a signal of this changing point, when Clark’s powers and dutifulness forced him to abandon this uniform for another. In comparison, Clark’s time before Superman seems overtly simplistic, but as other origin stories attest, this moment in time is anything but ideal. Clark’s years in Smallville are consistently characterized by feelings of isolation, loneliness, and anxiety as he begins to navigate his changing body and a potentially new identity. Though this reads like any other individual’s transition through puberty, there is still something affective and materially different about his experiences that cannot be accounted for or described as typical teenage angst that resonates with me as a trans fan.
Though the experience of puberty for cis boys can presumably be an awkward and uncomfortable time, it nonetheless signals a temporal and physiological shift wherein they develop the necessary psychological and physical characteristics needed to be read as male in society. (Of course, an individual may accept, reject, or subversively perform these traits/attributes.) As part of their maturation, cis men may even be socialized to forget the fear and anxiety of puberty in order to smoothly transition into manhood (Noble 2006, 49). However, for trans men, puberty becomes a time when the body betrays the authentic masculine self, disallowing the individual to identify (both to himself and to others) as masculine (Rubin 1998, 11). It is this note of betrayal—by a body that seems to morph outside of expectation—that similarly reverberates within the Superman narrative. For Clark, puberty also becomes a time of increased anxiety as he begins to experience his body in new and unanticipated ways. In Jeph Loeb’s Superman for All Seasons, Clark reacts in fear to his changing body, telling his father, "Pa. I’m scared" (1999, 27). And while his mother, Martha, explains that this is "all part of growing up," Clark remains distraught over a body he no longer recognizes as his own (95).

In both instances, the body becomes the focal point of discomfort and signals that one is distinctively different than other young men. For trans boys, their female physiology acts as the primary marker of their illegitimacy (Rubin 2003, 124, 141). As Rubin points out, one of the most important ways a man asserts his masculinity is through his body. If his body conforms to phallocentric, often hypermasculine standards, then his manhood will typically go unquestioned. It is the failure to approximate this normative body that often forces men, trans and cis alike, to feel grief over their "lacking" qualities (2003, 166). However, for trans boys/men, these feelings of distress cannot be soothed in the same way because it is the very makeup of the body—which may have breasts or postsurgical scars, a vagina or a neophallus, differing patterns of fat distribution, a larger waist-to-hip-ratio, shorter height, less muscle mass, and a higher voice—that places them directly at odds with accepted notions of cisnormative masculinity.

Conversely, although it may seem that Clark/Superman is the quintessential phallocentric male ideal, a trans rereading of the narrative creates room to challenge this assumption. I suggest that Clark/Superman is also marked by an otherness grounded primarily in physiological difference. In Superman for All Seasons, his father, Jonathan, tells Martha, “He’s changing. The boy. He’s...different now,” suggesting Clark’s body can do things “that other boys can’t” (Loeb 1999, 17–18). Clark is positioned through his father’s description as outside the acceptable norm for boys. Though Clark may supersede these other (supposedly more normal) boys in physical ability and might, his body is too much for the town of Smallville to contain. As his father’s words foreshadow, "We knew he was special, but...People will talk" (9). Because "Clark knew them all and they all knew Clark" (22), there is nowhere Clark can retreat; Smallville seems to act as a containment for the young man who must eventually seek the freedom of the big city, Metropolis, in order to truly flourish (an echoing of the desires of some trans and queer folks to move to supposedly more inclusive urban centers). Further highlighting the otherness and strangeness of Clark’s body within the town is Tim Sale’s art, which continually depicts Clark as being too big for the panel. His body is often drawn towering over that of other Smallville citizens, suggesting that he is different both physically and spatially—both in Smallville and in the comic’s frame. He is out of place; his body does not belong.

While the body certainly serves to out Clark as other, the production of his identity via his relationship with Jonathan also mimics various transitioning narratives wherein parents are the first to spot and worry about their child’s supposed difference. Indeed, the theme of transitioning is underscored by the opening panel of the comic, a framed image of Superman’s chest with Jonathan’s accompanying narration: "Folks tend to call him 'The Man of Steel' nowadays" (Loeb 1999, 9), clearly indicating his son’s adoption of a new name since leaving home. "Believe it or not," Jonathan continues, "there was a time before all that" (9). These words, which serve to underscore the existence of a surprising ("believe it or not") and distinct temporal rupture (“a time before all that”) wherein Clark has assumed an altogether unexpected identity, also form a subtle lament. Perhaps Jonathan also carries with him a nostalgic yearning for the uncomplicated joys of Clark’s childhood, a time before his son’s alien powers marked him as other. As the narrative continues, it is clear that Jonathan is at first uncomfortable with his son’s newly forming identity. As he tells his wife, "We both knew that one day we’d have to face this Martha" (18). I can only imagine a similar exchange between my parents as they watched their small superhero in training and wondered what might be in store for their daughter, the same little girl who insisted on being a pirate each year for Halloween so that she might have an excuse to paint a beard on her face. Similarly, as I imagine my own mother to have coached my father, Martha reminds Jonathan to “be gentle” when he confronts Clark about these changes (27).
In another reiteration of Superman’s origin stories, the television series Smallville (2001–11), which also focuses on Clark’s adolescent years, explores the lengths that Clark/Superman must go to in order to hide his identity from others. A striking example is provided in 1.04 "X-Ray," which aired in 2001. Clark becomes aware of his ability to see through objects, namely through the school’s walls—and into the girls’ locker room. Given the show’s context and overarching preoccupation with adolescent angst, Clark’s x-ray vision can be read as a metaphor for male sexuality and spontaneous bodily responses. (The initial manifestation of Clark’s x-ray vision happens as sporadic flashes that come on without warning.) Upon revealing his new superpowers to his parents, Clark is instructed to practice self-control and to train his eyes as he might other muscles in his body. Through sustained conditioning, Clark’s parents hope that he might be able to avoid detection, should he be caught in the act of staring.

Additionally, 1.04 "X-Ray" also seems preoccupied with the conditions of leading a double life and the fear one may have of being found out or seen through. In an appropriate subplot, viewers follow Tina Greer as she navigates her high school experience as a shape-shifter. Able to physically morph into another person, Tina is caught using her powers by her mother who, upon seeing her daughter shift, states, "Stop it, Tina. You promised you wouldn’t do that anymore." Foreshadowing the Kent’s later anxieties of Clark being caught in the act, Tina’s mother strongly discourages her daughter from adopting alternative bodily presentations, which, in this instance, include crossing gender boundaries (Tina had previously assumed Lex Luthor’s identity in order to rob a bank). Here I am reminded of the countless outfits I was wearily coaxed into taking off by my mother, who often attempted to curb my masculine presentation for fear that my gender identity would not be immediately legible. (The question, "Are you a boy or a girl?" was continually posed to me during my childhood and well into my adolescence.) Similarly, through Tina’s exchange with her mother, viewers are reminded that bodies ought not betray established frameworks of identity; within this paradigm, morphology ought to indicate a stable ontology.

Yet Tina brazenly defies these supposedly natural orderings of the body and continues to use her shape-shifting abilities. In the episode’s most interesting exchange, she eventually approaches Clark while morphed as Lana and talks openly about the pressure to conform to social expectation. And while Clark thinks that "Lana" is referring to her aunt, who is her guardian, viewers can surmise that Tina is actually speaking about her own mother:

Tina/Lana: She wants me to be something I’m not. It’s like having a dual identity. There’s the person that everybody sees and the person you want to be.

Clark: I know the feeling.

Through this exchange, an affinity is established between the two characters wherein viewers are encouraged to acknowledge their mutual status as outsiders, as determined by their shared unruly bodily differences (Shyminsky 2011, 294). Further strengthening their connection is the fact that Clark is the only one who can actually see through Tina’s disguises and expose her real identity, the hint here being that it takes one to know one. Though this shared bonding over dual identities may again speak to a more general feeling of teenage peer pressure (that is, to blend in socially), it also parallels familiar narratives of living in the closet, where one is continually forced to repress expressions of an authentic self for fear of being outed. What makes Tina such a striking character—and presumably such an effective villain—is not only her criminal activity (she robs a bank, steals a car, and murders her mother) but also her refusal to abide by normative expressions of bodily identity. Clark, on the other hand, in respecting his parents’ desires to hide his superpowers, actively seeks to be read as a normal teenager (note 14). However, although he may try, Clark ultimately will never be able to fully repress the strangeness of his body. It will always expose him as other. Like me and many trans men, Clark experiences a constant tension between belonging and not belonging; together, ours are the bodies that simply do not fit anywhere (MacDonald 1998, 6). For Clark/Superman, it is this precise inability to conform to normative organizations of physiology and temporality that lend him the nickname "The Man of Tomorrow." The dimensions of today prove too inadequate to house him (note 15).

In an interview with Entertainment Weekly, Brian Singer, director of Superman Returns (2006), was asked about the challenges of crafting a Superman story for the screen. Singer answered, "Although he has a difficult past of being an orphan and a stranger in a strange world, he’s not as tormented as a lot of characters like Batman or Wolverine, where there’s a lot of angst to explore" (Staskiewicz et al. 2013, 34). Singer’s interpretation, primarily disappointing for its lack of insight, is perhaps not an uncommon one. Seen as the all-American boy scout of the comic book industry and offshoot film and television franchises, Superman is often lambasted for his overtly good-guy demeanor versus other
grittier, darker figures such as Batman (Waid 2002, 6). It has become somewhat of a trope now in comic stories, television series, and animated shows for Big Baddies, as they are known, to physically accost Superman to an extreme in order to prove a point: he may be the world’s strongest, but he is certainly not the toughest. In 2006 (the same year as Singer’s film), the animated series Justice League Unlimited (2004–6) reimagined the complexities of Superman’s day-to-day life in their now-famous final episode, 3.13 "Destroyer" (2006). In what looks like a moment of defeat for the Justice League against one of DC’s more heinous and powerful villains, Darkseid, Superman emerges from the rubble and explains,

[3.13]  [Batman] won’t quit as long as he can still draw breath. None of my teammates will. Me? I’ve got a different problem. I feel like I live in a world made of cardboard, always taking constant care not to break something, to break someone. Never allowing myself to lose control even for a moment, or someone could die. But you can take it, can’t you, big man? What we have here is a rare opportunity for me to cut loose and show you just how powerful I really am.

[3.14]  Meant to be a jeering incitement into an epic battle sequence, Superman’s "World of Cardboard Speech" (as it has been dubbed) also reveals the grief and frustration of living in a world not suited to one’s body. The fragility of cardboard invokes the image of a precariously balanced society, one that Superman’s movements could potentially destroy. The logics and architecture of this world are thus depicted as too demanding and ultimately exhausting for the hero to navigate. (I am reminded here of my own childhood activities of knocking down cardboard-crafted cities—and also, more painfully, of the daily struggle to find spaces of inclusion amid a world organized for and by two sexes, with finding accessible washrooms being a prime example.) Evidently Singer has overlooked this particular aspect when he describes the character’s limited amount of torment. To live isolated in a world that is fundamentally at odds with the logics and materiality of your own body resonates powerfully with me as a trans man and points to a large amount of anxiety to play with as an artist. We can perhaps attribute Singer’s oversight to his own experience as a white cis man who has, I assume, been able to easily navigate society, although Singer’s openness as a gay filmmaker may complicate his relationship to privilege. It is this continued positioning of Superman as wholly unaffected by the material differences of his body that fuels my investment in a trans rereading of the character. I wish to highlight the moments of slippage whereby Superman does not and cannot conform outright to normative expressions of bodily intelligibility.

4. If you will excuse the Marvel reference…

[4.1]  I want to offer a final anecdote to conclude. One night, in an attempt to impress a date, I chose to play up my boyish charm by wearing a Captain America T-shirt to a casual dinner. The shirt was met with a small, sweet chuckle—not an insulting reaction, but curious nonetheless. It was not until later that evening that she offered to explain her reaction to my shirt. She laughed in part because her previous cis partner had been nicknamed Captain America because of his muscular, toned physique. She also laughed because I, an unfit, unremarkable, trans man, wore a Captain America T-shirt, thus assumedly worshipping this hypermasculine image—one that I actively resist in my own expressions of masculinity. I assume she saw a failure of embodiment. But what exactly was I failing at becoming? Captain America? A cis man? Perhaps I was a silly, soft little trans boy in a T-shirt, and nothing more.

[4.2]  This self-doubt is regrettably a common experience for trans men. Bergman (2009, 72–73) aptly summarizes these feelings of illegitimacy and inadequacy: "The great and terrible truth of transgender life, [is] that they will never let you be real, ever again...I didn’t know it when I signed on—maybe I should have, but I didn’t—but the transperson is always a knock-off, as in, ‘Why would you date a fake man when you could have the Real Thing?’" After being bombarded with cultural images of "real" men, or men whom we should at least aspire to be (such as superheroes), is it a wonder that trans men (like cis men) may question their claim to manhood? That evening I posed a similar question to my date. I asked why she was willing to go on a date with a trans man when she could (and did) have the real thing. She responded kindly by saying, "You are the real thing." If this is true (and of course I wholeheartedly assert my claim to a masculine identity), then what does it mean when I—a trans man—wear a superhero T-shirt? When invoking the superhero, am I not simultaneously recoding him as trans? Is this not what I am doing when I reread the Superman narrative? Through this interpretation, I do not fail at embodying Superman; in fact, I am perhaps a closer replication of him. By rereading the metatexts of the Superman narrative, I ironically succeed at Seinfeld’s quest: I become Superman—or rather Superman becomes me.
5. Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this work was originally completed under the supervision of Jane Tolmie. Thanks go to her and also to Eleanor MacDonald, both of whom provided sage guidance and support throughout the writing process. The duration of my master's degree, during which this work was completed, was funded through Canada's Social Science and Humanities Research Council.

6. Notes

1. Susan Stryker (2008, 19) defines the term transgender as referring to "those who identify with a gender other than the one they were assigned to at birth, as well as those who seek to resist their birth-assigned gender without abandoning it or those who seek to create a new kind of gender location." On the other hand, the prefix "cis" means "on the same side of," and hence "cisgender" describes persons who identify with their birth-assigned sex/gender (22).

2. Originally created by Lex Luthor’s misfiring duplicator ray, Bizarro is a failed copy of Superman who became most famous for his inverted sense of logic: good means bad, happy means sad, and so on.

3. As a trans man who is actively read as cis in everyday social interactions, the fact that Superman’s body is not observably different resonates doubly. Because our differences are not outwardly apart, I feel a kinship to Superman in that we are both masking an uncomfortably bodily truth that would out us as altogether other should it become known. For a sustained conversation on transformations, transition, and identity politics in superhero comics, see Kirkpatrick (2015).

4. While queer theory and trans theory certainly intersect and overlap at points, I use the term transing in order to highlight the divide between sexuality and gender. Though the two may inform one another, they are not mutually exclusive. Arguably they require that a distinct type of reading practice be developed for each in order to fully explore the nuances of both identity categories.

5. Of course, the rereading I posit here is not the only possible transing of superheroes. Mine is simply one story among many of trans individuals who share similar experiences. Though there does not yet exist an extraordinary number of documented stories on the topic, some can certainly be found within online fan communities, personal blogs, and magazine Web sites. This latter point is highlighted by a roundtable discussion moderated by Suzanne Scott and Ellen Kirkpatrick (2015). Another example is offered by blogger Rachel (2013a), who, identifying herself as "a post-operative transsexual woman," describes the history and appeal of Superman's underrated counterpart, Supergirl (2013b). Although she makes no explicit reference to her gender identity and her attachment to the character, her post makes clear the existence of trans comics readers and their investment in superhero narratives. Riley Chattin (2013, 1–2), on the other hand, discusses his identification with Superman, the Hulk, Wolverine, and other such heroes as a transgender man. Discussing, for example, his childhood bond with Christopher Reeve’s Superman, Chattin highlights the acute awareness of difference he and the character share. It is subsequently due to both their otherness and the social isolation associated with being other that bonds Chattin to the hero. What Rachel and Chattin reveal, implicitly or explicitly, are their attachments to comic book characters as based on a shared sense of experience, one particularly rooted in their journeys as trans individuals. It is within these conversations that I situate my own experience.

6. For an alternative methodological consideration of rereading Superman via critical race and queer theory, see Esteban Muñoz (1999).

7. The recent increase of superhero-inspired criticism based on the Marvel Universe franchise certainly validates this claim. However, it also suggests that the only engagement male comic readers and viewers may have with the text is one of ego identification for the sole means of self-improvement, thereby foreclosing other reading positions, including those grounded in queer desires. Admittedly, my project also separates trans reading practices from those tied to sexual desire. I acknowledge, however, that trans individuals may approach comic book characters with a range of intentions, and I do not dismiss the possibility that trans readers may not only see themselves reflected in the male superhero but may also simultaneously see an image they find to be sexually alluring.
Further room can and should be made to interrogate Harrison’s (2010, 129) claim that superheroes homogeneously appeal to the “outsider in us all,” given that most heroes represent a privileged social grouping (most being white, cis-heterosexual, able-bodied, educated men). Here Harrison’s claim runs the risk of glossing over the real-life factors that marginalize and disenfranchise particular subjects to produce some as more outside than others. That said, I understand the difficulty in attempting to position Superman (who is otherwise a privileged character within the diegetic world of comics) as a reflection of a marginalized subjectivity. To this extent, I wish to clarify my intention in that I am not suggesting Superman is an accurate reflection of trans lived experiences. Rather, I argue that parts of his narrative may reverberate with trans readers such that we/they are inclined to reread certain aspects of his mythos. The stake here is that this rereading may open up new possibilities for comic characters, such that they no longer remain exclusive representations of hegemonic cis-heterosexual masculinity.

In stating this, I also acknowledge the productive overlap that should be fostered between trans, crip, and disability scholars considering the shared investment in destabilizing ideas of gender and the body.

"Trans boys" as I use the term here denotes female-bodied children who either identified as masculine or male at a young age and transitioned to a male identity later in life. This includes trans men who as children may not have known themselves to be male but, upon transitioning and reflection, came to see the formation of their masculine identity in their childhood. "Trans boys" does not signify young children who begin to transition during their childhood or adolescence. Although there are an increasing number of children who transition, it goes outside the purview of this work to speak to this identity.

Green (2004, 15) echoes this sentiment. While playing with a neighborhood boy in the early 1960s, Green offhandedly exclaims he will one day grow up to be a man, to which his friend remarks, "Yeah, I can see that."

Rubin (1998, 32) records a similar lament when he expresses resentment over the time of adolescence when young boys typically hold a carefree demeanor towards their bodies. Boyhood, as Rubin understands it, is a time of bodily exploration during which the boy feels a certain amount of freedom in his own skin and is most often given social approval to explore his body in a visceral, messy way. Trans boys, like Rubin and me, on the other hand, are often confined to social understandings of feminine behavior and because of this are discouraged from exploring their bodies in similar fashion.

Originally meant to describe an acute medical condition of extreme homesickness requiring clinical intervention, nostalgia has since been depathologized and is no longer associated with the loss of one’s (physical) home (Davis 1979, 1).

As used within the trans community, "passing" refers to an individual’s ability to be consistently read as cisgender. Here the onus is problematically placed on the trans individual to conform to an established social script of acceptable gender presentations and behaviors, rather than pressure being placed on the social collective to dismantle the oppressive conditions of gender and sex in the first place. Additionally, the concept of passing is informed by lengthier histories in relation to race, ethnicity, and nationalism. The term has also been used in colonial and imperialist contexts, and because of these histories, the concept of passing is always tied to larger intersecting axes of identity, including but not limited to race, class, and ability.

For a lengthier investigation on the intersections between this nickname, the eugenic movement, and trans histories, see Vena (2016–17).

Works cited


"When the RP gets in the way of the F": Star Image and Intertextuality in Real Person(a) Fiction

Milena Popova

University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom

Abstract—This article uses a case study from the hockey RPF community to explore textual processes in real person(a) fiction, and particularly the intertextual relationship between different facets of the star image and the RPF character. I argue that the crisis in legitimacy faced by the fandom revealed a dense web of intertextuality between the celebrity's public and official private personas, the imagined real person behind them, and the RPF character, all involved in a side-by-side reading of the similarities and differences between the celebrity fan object and the fan work. I highlight the complex relationship between celebrity persona, RPF character, and other seemingly unrelated elements that may be drawn into an archive by RPF readers and writers and show the collectively created RPF character was overwhelmed by these other elements.

Keywords—Archontic literature; Celebrity; Hockey RPF


I. Introduction

Real person(a) fiction (RPF)—fan fiction based on real life celebrities or historical figures—is a controversial practice within fan fiction communities. Existing academic work on RPF focuses and builds on issues of celebrity and the tensions between a celebrity's public persona and private self. This article is based on the crisis of legitimacy within the hockey RPF fandom following the rape allegations against Patrick Kane—a high-profile National Hockey League player and popular fan object within hockey RPF. I draw on my own membership of this community at the time of the controversy and on the community’s discussions around and outside fan fiction texts in addition to the fan works themselves to suggest that while RPF may frequently build on the public persona of the celebrity, there is ultimately a deep concern with issues of authenticity and the private person. This by extension has implications for what engaging fannishly with a particular celebrity may say about fans themselves. I argue that, as in other works of fan fiction, meaning in RPF is created in a side-by-side reading (Derecho 2006) of the similarities and differences between different textual constructions of the celebrity fan object and the fan work. I build on Derecho’s (2006) concept of archontic literature as well as Stasi’s (2006) concept of intertextuality in the second degree to highlight the complex relationship between celebrity persona, RPF character, and other seemingly unrelated elements that may be drawn into an archive surrounding RPF readers and writers’ impression of the "real" person behind the star image. In a moment of crisis such as the rape allegations against Patrick Kane, this intertextual way of reading the celebrity and the associated RPF character then results in a reevaluation of the legitimacy of the celebrity as a fan object, and one’s own legitimacy as a fan.

2. RPF in the wider fan fiction context

In understanding the textual processes of RPF, Dyer’s (2006) concept of the star image provides a useful link between star (or celebrity) and text. The star image is constructed from publicly available materials, ranging from a celebrity’s public appearances and performances to gossip and, more recently, social media utterances. The star image concept provides a useful distinction between what is effectively a textual construction and an actual person who may
be behind it. Van den Bulck and Claessens (2013) add a further layer between the star image and the private person of the celebrity, distinguishing between the celebrity’s public persona, his or her "official" private persona, and a "real" person behind those (47). This further distinction is useful when considering how RPF manipulates the celebrity text. Busse (2006a) argues that the distinction between canon (the official version of events and characters) and fanon (a fictionalized version of events and characters that is broadly agreed upon by the fan community) in RPF fandoms is often blurred. She dispenses with this distinction in favor of arguing that, unlike in fan fiction based on TV shows, books, or movies, RPF does not have a single unified canon. Instead, a canon, like the star image or the celebrity’s public persona, is constructed out of publicly available information about the celebrity: his or her official media appearances, and reports and gossip available about them in mainstream media, as well as rumors and accounts of encounters with the celebrity circulating in the fan community. In Van den Bulck and Claessens’s (2013) terms, "canon" is predominantly (though loosely) based on the celebrity’s public and official private personas. The canon is constructed through choices around which of these pieces of information to accept and incorporate and which to discard. Not everyone within a community will necessarily agree on the precise combination of such pieces that makes up canon, but a core set of events is still formed. Busse (2006a) argues that authenticity is not necessarily an important factor in whether a given piece of information is incorporated into canon. Drawing parallels between RPF and fans’ online interactions and constructions of personas, she ultimately argues that “any belief in clear separation of the real and fictional are [sic] illusory” (223). Busse also examines RPF as a tool for identity construction—both that of the fan and the star they are writing about. She argues that fan writers "shape and alter the star to their own specification, making him more interesting, intelligent, or vulnerable, and thus more desirable, identifiable, and available" (2006b, 260).

Marshall (2006) accounts for the impact of new media on celebrity, arguing that it poses significant challenges to the traditional economic model of celebrity. As a result, different modes of celebrity engagement emerge: scandal, for instance, becomes a means of generating more media coverage and promoting both the celebrity and his or her work. Moreover, digitization allows audiences to more easily rework the celebrity image for their own purposes and circulate those reworkings. Both social media and, as Holmes (2005) argues, newer types of gossip magazines such as *Heat*, encourage greater consideration of issues of authenticity and the exact relationship between the textual construction of the celebrity and the person behind them. Hagen (2015) examines the effects of this increased proximity to celebrities through social media and search for authenticity in an RPF context. He argues that the immediacy and constant influx of new information through social media caused issues for RPF fans in bandom (a fan community focused on a group of emo rock bands around My Chemical Romance, Fall Out Boy, and Panic! at the Disco). It risked overdetermining the fan object by not leaving enough gaps for fans to fill with their stories. Piper (2015) investigates the parallels between RPF and biopic films such as *The Social Network* (2010) in order to trace the textual processes involved in turning a real person into a fictional character. She argues that “both [RPF and biopics] appropriate elements of celebrity bodies to recontextualize the existing public self through the representation of a fictionalized private self.” She notes, however, that there is a major difference between the two forms in their level of intertextuality and in how audiences interact with them. A biopic, being often the only one of its kind and the first and only time the majority of its audience will engage with the subject, makes a much stronger implicit truth claim than a piece of RPF, which is one of often hundreds or thousands works about that particular celebrity. The circulation of many different, clearly fictional, accounts of the same canon events in RPF communities therefore results in a stronger awareness that the limited information available can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and thereby emphasizes the constructed nature of the star image, highlighting the distinctions between public persona, private person, and fictionalized character.

There is a tension in these analyses between showing audiences as treating the celebrity as purely or predominantly textual (Busse 2006a, Piper 2015) and showing audiences seeking the authenticity of the "private" person behind the celebrity text (Holmes 2005; Van den Bulck and Claessens 2013; Hagen 2015). Examining RPF fandoms and the textual processes behind them, particularly at points of crisis caused by contradictions in the star image, is a fruitful way of understanding and potentially reconciling this tension. The question here becomes, what does the crisis of legitimacy that hockey RPF fandom experienced in the wake of the rape allegations against Kane tell us about the relationships in RPF between different elements of the celebrity persona, a real or imagined private person, and a collectively constructed RPF character?

To approach this question, I build on two key metaphors commonly used when discussing the intertextuality of fan fiction based on fictional works: that of the palimpsest (Stasi 2006) and that of the archive or archontic literature
Both authors acknowledge that fan fiction is not only in dialog with the "originary" (Derecho 2006, 65) text but also with other fan fiction texts, as well as texts not obviously related to the originary text. Stasi calls this "intertextuality in the second degree" (126). In using the metaphor of the archive, Derecho argues against a hierarchical relationship between the originary text and texts based on it. Any new text added to an archive changes the entire archive. Additionally, she highlights a common feature of many fan fiction texts: repetition with a difference; that is, repeating a scene, a setting, or a trope while making subtle variations to some of its constituent parts. She argues that in this way, reading any fan fiction or other archontic text always entails reading the originary text at the same time. Meaning is therefore constructed in this side-by-side reading from both similarities and differences between the two (or more) texts. Using the hockey RPF case study, I trace these processes of intertextual meaning making in RPF to show that RPF, like other fan fiction, relies on different kinds of intertextuality to create meaning, and that some of these types of intertextuality point not to the celebrity as text but rather to the celebrity as a person.

3. The hockey RPF community and the Patrick Kane rape allegations

[3.1] Hockey RPF is fan fiction centered predominantly on the National Hockey League (NHL), which is commonly regarded as the highest professional level in men’s ice hockey. With nearly 11,000 works on the Archive of Our Own as of January 2016, it is the largest sports RPF fandom. Investigating fan fiction based on high-level European football, Waysdorf (2015) identifies key features of football—and more generally of high-level team sports—that make them an attractive source for RPF. There are multiple media narratives surrounding the sport, including official promotional material as well as outsider perspectives such as journalistic reporting. These function as a set of paratexts accompanying the sport itself. Even in team sports like ice hockey and football, individual players are promoted as a way of fostering fans’ personal investment in the sport, and this has the effect of turning star players into star images (Dyer 2006) highly attractive to RPF communities. Additionally, an overarching narrative is created over the course of a season or tournament, so that individual games acquire meaning beyond the 90 (or, in the case of hockey, 60) minutes of play time. It is these individual and team narratives and the interplays between them, as players emerge as stars, are traded, or retire, that provide the starting point for sports-based fan fiction.

[3.2] Patrick Kane—half of the long-term popular Patrick Kane/Jonathan Toews pairing within hockey RPF—is known among sports fans and within the hockey RPF community for off-ice issues: public behavior that does not fit with the role his team, the Chicago Blackhawks, presents him in as a franchise player and role model. While there are several incidents regularly discussed in the hockey RPF community, the one that received the most attention prior to 2015 was Kane’s drunken weekend in Madison, Wisconsin, which included allegations of him attempting to choke a woman at a party (Dickey 2012), though no police report was made and no charges were filed in relation to that incident. After the Madison incident, the media controversy around Patrick Kane faded, and aided by his and the team’s sporting success, he was portrayed by the Blackhawks as having matured and refocused on hockey. Yet on August 6, 2015, a local newspaper in Kane's hometown of Buffalo, New York, broke the story that Kane was subject of a rape investigation (Michel and McCarthy 2015). Over the following 3 months, Kane kept public appearances to a minimum. With media attention on the ongoing rape investigation, the Chicago Blackhawks nonetheless made the decision to let Kane participate in training and games in the early 2015–16 season (Elgas 2015). On November 4, 2015, it was announced that Kane’s accuser had stopped cooperating with the investigation, and 2 days later the investigation was formally closed without charges being filed (Gretz 2015). Almost immediately after this, the NHL and the Chicago Blackhawks resumed their use of Kane in promotional material and events, for instance through prominent coverage of his points streak (NHL.com 2015).

4. Extending the Patrick Kane archive

[4.1] The news about the Patrick Kane rape investigation spread quickly within the Tumblr-based hockey RPF community (note 1). The key question for Patrick Kane fans quickly became whether one could continue to be a fan—and produce fan works about—a celebrity who had been accused of rape. While some fans advocated for ending all involvement with Patrick Kane as a fan object, others sought to justify their continued activity in the fandom. Both approaches to this questioning of legitimacy were strongly informed by considerations of the relationships between the star image, the public private persona, the private person (imagined or real), and the collectively constructed RPF character.
Questioning, suspending, or outright ending involvement and activity in the hockey RPF or Patrick Kane fandoms was a common reaction from many community members early on. Even before any details were known beyond the fact that a rape investigation was being conducted, many readers and writers declared their intent to withdraw from the community. Hockey RPF fan oddish said:

It almost doesn’t matter whether he did this thing or not—I believe he could have, and that realization makes me sick to my stomach. It might not be enough to convict him in any court, but it’s enough to make me put down my pen where he’s concerned.

Oddish’s comment clearly acknowledges the uncertainty around the case, and in fact her full post deals extensively with the problem of uncertainty in rape allegations in general and the Kane case in particular. She also makes a clear distinction between any judgment she as an individual makes based on information she has, and what may or may not be enough to convict a person of rape in a court of law. Most importantly, it is the realization that—from what she knows—she believes that Patrick Kane (the person) is capable of rape that ultimately drives oddish’s decision to no longer write about Patrick Kane (the hockey RPF character). This indicates that a boundary has been crossed where the alleged actions of the real person overshadow any textual construction of a star image—that even if the fictional character based on the celebrity persona showed clear departures from that real person, there is still enough of a link between the two in the minds of community members that the allegations against real-life Kane have an irreversible impact on the RPF character.

This boundary breach can be understood by examining the background against which hockey RPF exists: the sports culture it draws from. Rape and sexual assault allegations against athletes at all levels and from a range of team sports across Western cultures occur with some regularity (Nurka 2013; Toffoletti 2007), though convictions are much rarer (Burke 2015). In the higher education setting, Dempster (2009) finds a strong link between sports and lad cultures at a UK university and identifies three key components present in both: sexualized behaviors (including the indictment of homosexuality), aggression and violence (especially in the sports context when there is a perceived threat to the player’s position and standing within the hierarchy), and heavy drinking. Some of these elements of sports culture—particularly heavy drinking and sexualized behaviors—are often featured in hockey RPF stories. Oddish’s comments reveal that it is these similarities and differences between what hockey RPF readers and writers know of this culture and how they portray it in their fiction that are a key element of the meaning-making process. In Derecho’s (2006) terms, a fictionalized Patrick Kane who drinks heavily and displays sexualized behaviors but is also unashamedly in love with Jonathan Toews can be seen as a “repetition with a difference” of the celebrity athlete Patrick Kane, and it is in part this difference that makes stories about him meaningful to their readers. The rape allegations against Kane, however, change the available meanings, bringing the problematic aspects of sports culture into the foreground for hockey RPF community members. This is what oddish alludes to when she says she believes Kane—the athlete—to be capable of rape.

Kane’s long history of off-ice issues can be read as a history of moments where the private person has publicly been shown to be in conflict with both the public and the official private persona constructed, especially by team and league publicity. Given this history, the question arises of why it is only now that a boundary has been breached, the alleged actions of the private person irredeemably overshadowing the public persona. This was also a key concern for many hockey RPF community members. Oddish elaborates on this in another post:

I need to own that as an RPF writer, I have two very different Patrick Kanes in my mind—one, the character that I see when I read or write who is a flawed but loveable idea that we have cooperatively created. The other is a real human being who for all the media attention he receives is unknowable—and deeply problematic. In fiction, we can create scenarios that suggest favorable interpretations and allow for character development...but those scenarios are clearly fiction.

Where life seemed to be imitating art, and Patrick Kane seemed to be improving himself as a human being, I was selfishly pleased, because it allowed me to enjoy my fiction all the more. But the recent accusation of sexual assault changes things.

This comment echoes Busse’s (2006b) analysis of how RPF writers shape and mold the celebrity persona in their stories. It also clearly references the way RPF constructs canon from selecting, arranging, and interpreting publicly available pieces of information about the celebrity (Busse 2006a). It is precisely the way RPF uses the celebrity’s public
self to create versions of a private self (Piper 2015) that poses a particular problem for oddish and other hockey RPF writers, as that fictional private self is often presented in the most favorable light and is depicted as capable of learning and development, overcoming the celebrity’s publicly known character flaws. As the fan work becomes part of the wider Patrick Kane archive for hockey RPF community members, the fictional Patrick Kane, the celebrity persona, and inferences about the private person are read side by side (Derecho 2006). This in turn leads to a changed perception of the celebrity—both as celebrity persona and as private person—within the fandom community. This perception is now at odds with the new information emerging about the celebrity. In many cases, such new information can be absorbed into a rearranged and reconstructed shared canon, and below I will examine to what extent this happened in Patrick Kane fan fiction after both the Madison incident and the rape allegations. However, there is an indication here that the nature and severity of the allegations against Kane is what ultimately makes an engagement with the real person behind the star image necessary, and continued involvement in a fandom based on the public persona impossible. Rather than reading the fictional character and the celebrity persona side by side, and constructing meaning from the similarities and differences, the knowledge of what Patrick Kane—the private person—is alleged to have done overwhelms any possible fan interpretation and imposes meanings that many hockey RPF fans find distressing. What oddish is effectively suggesting here is that continued involvement with Patrick Kane as a fan object would require either accounting for the rape allegations or a repetition with a difference that would be tantamount to erasure: disbelieving the accuser, and thereby reproducing rape culture. This is supported by a number of community members’ accounts of the highly personal stories they had told through the character of Patrick Kane—including stories about sexual assault survival—and the feeling that in light of the rape allegations against the real-life Kane, the fictional character was now in some ways tainted for them. This conflict is so deep and significant for individuals and the hockey RPF community as a whole that one commenter characterized it as a struggle to "live our values" in light of past involvement with the Patrick Kane fandom and the allegations against Kane.

While this process of reevaluating the meanings of hockey RPF and Patrick Kane stories was common across the community, not all community members reached the same conclusions. An alternative view was given voice in a long post by voltorb:

A huge part (the overwhelming portion, really) of my delight with hockey is rooted in the fantastic irony of a bunch of intelligent, sassy, powerful women taking a hegemonic male structure and turning it on its head: refashioning this world and these people to our purposes. It’s a subversive act.

Here, voltorb is weighing the meanings hockey RPF has accrued for her over time against those imposed by the rape allegations against Patrick Kane—but the outcome of this process is exactly the opposite of oddish’s reevaluations. Rather than finding other meanings overwhelmed by the rape allegations, she constructs a different hierarchy where the subversive meanings she finds in hockey RPF directly challenge rape culture and hegemonic masculinity. A cornerstone of this argument is the observation that hockey RPF characters are better, more compassionate human beings than the celebrity personas they are based on, echoing Busse’s (2006b) observation that RPF writers humanize celebrity personas by giving them an inner life and shaping them to be "more interesting, intelligent, or vulnerable, and thus more desirable, identifiable, and available" (260). Voltorb recognizes that the sports culture depicted in hockey RPF is likely to be a significant departure from real sports cultures (Dempster 2009). For her, however, it is this contrast between hockey culture as perceived by the fandom community and as depicted by them that attracts her to hockey RPF. Effectively, for her, hockey RPF only acquires meaning through a side-by-side reading, and crucially through repetitions with a difference (Derecho 2006), of the sport and media spectacle (Waysdorf 2015) it is based on. Elsewhere in the post, voltorb also acknowledges—in language similar to oddish’s "living our values" comment—the conflict she experiences in deriving enjoyment from a sport so deeply mired in rape culture. Voltorb, however, argues that it is hockey RPF, through what she perceives as its subversiveness, that helps her reconcile some of these tensions. In this case, she is reading hockey as a sport side by side with the meanings she has derived from her engagement in hockey RPF, which in turn alters how she views the sport. Thus, the concept of side-by-side reading is implicated in making meanings within hockey RPF, regardless of which set of meanings—those made by the community or those imposed by, in this case, the rape allegations—community members regard as more important.

At the heart of both sides of this argument is the intertextual nature of fan fiction and how it interacts with the originary work—where in this case the originary work is the media spectacle of ice hockey and the NHL (Waysdorf 2015). There is a disagreement over how far the archive (Derecho 2006) surrounding Patrick Kane’s persona extends, and what the precise relationship is between different items in that archive. Patrick Kane the person and Patrick Kane...
the celebrity clearly alter that archive on a day-to-day basis: a smile, a goal celebration, a particularly emotional postgame interview, a points streak, a public drinking spree, allegations of rape. Fans react to these additions to the archive with additions of their own: stories, GIF sets, cartoons of Patrick Kane as a unicorn, handmade soft toys, authors' notes, and fan discussions. Some fans felt that their own additions to the archive were an empowering way for them to take control of the situation. Many, however, felt that there was, after all, a hierarchy within the archive, and no amount of fan subversiveness and creativity could negate Patrick Kane's alleged and perceived transgressions. The argument here centers on how precisely the different components of the archive interact, rather than on whether they interact at all. This shows that for the majority of hockey RPF community members discussing and reacting to the Kane rape allegations, it was the conflict between the public persona and the allegations against the private person that drove—and ultimately put limits on—their engagement with hockey RPF: the act of side-by-side reading and the making of meaning from similarities and differences between fan fiction, the originary "work," and other elements which over time became part of the archive. Both subject positions established in these arguments are constructed as responses to rape culture: oddish and those arguing for a disengagement from the fandom see continued involvement in it as reproducing it, while voltorb argues that fannish activity is a subversion of it. As I show in the next section, rape culture became a central theme of the continuing controversy within the fandom, and through processes of intertextuality, it became part of the Patrick Kane RPF archive.

5. Rape culture as part of the Patrick Kane archive

[5.1] Ehrlich (2001) provides an overview of the position of the rape complainant within the British and Canadian criminal justice systems. In both cases, the prosecution represents the state, not the victim. Instead, the complainant is relegated to the role of witness for the prosecution, for which they get little to no preparation. Mulla (2014) documents rape victims' experiences within the US legal system and highlights prosecutors' probing of the complainant's character, including criminal record, during the investigation and in the lead-up to the decision on whether to prosecute the case. Lees (1993) also investigates the position and experience of rape complainants in the British criminal justice system, finding that "the victim is put on trial, her reputation is attacked, her credibility doubted” (11). She dubs this experience judicial rape, arguing that it reproduces and amplifies the original violation, leads to low conviction rates for rape, and ultimately serves to protect rapists. This asymmetric treatment of accuser and accused within the criminal justice system is exacerbated when the accused is a public figure, including by measures designed to protect the complainant, such as their right to anonymity. This institutional setup creates a rape complainant who is anonymous, faceless, and voiceless. Where Piper (2015) argues that "the appropriation of the celebrity's physical likeness" (¶2.4) is a key feature of RPF, such a physical likeness is not available here for the alleged victim. In the absence of any details about Kane's accuser, however, the hockey RPF community brought other sources of information to bear on their evaluation of the case, notably accounts and experiences of rape survivors within the community, as well as discourses about rape culture and the inadequacy of the criminal justice system.

[5.2] There were several prominent survivor voices within the community. These individuals shared their own experiences of sexual violence and encounters with rape culture and, where applicable, the criminal justice system. A key focus of these discussions was the rape kit process, which Mulla (2014) documents extensively in her ethnography of forensic nurses. Mulla highlights the discrepancy between the public and forensic practitioner perception of rape kits, where they are viewed as a vital part of evidence corroborating the victim’s account and potentially able to identify an unknown attacker, and their actual role in case dispositions, where they make very little impact, since the vast majority of rapes are committed by an attacker already known to the victim. She argues that this discrepancy between the perception of the importance of rape kits and the reality of their limited usefulness is at the heart of the often traumatic process of forensic evidence collection from a rape complainant. Once it emerged that a rape kit had been performed on Kane’s accuser, community members repeatedly highlighted the physical and mental invasiveness of forensic evidence collection in sexual assault cases, for instance in this anonymous comment:

[5.3] One thing I think tumblr and a lot of people need to learn about is rape kits. The false information being spread of them is painful. But the biggest thing, is if you haven’t been through one or know someone who has (and they have told you about them), they are one of the most demeaning, invasive, embarrassing, and cold things to go through. I speak from personal experience. Anyone who goes through one of those who wasn’t raped...yeesh. (anonymous comment submitted to pidgey's Tumblr)
Here the commenter brings personal experience of forensic evidence collection after sexual assault to bear on the information that Kane’s accuser also underwent a rape kit. The "demeaning, invasive, embarrassing, and cold" nature of the experience is juxtaposed with the experience of rape itself. The implication here is that no one would voluntarily submit to a rape kit if she hadn’t already undergone the more traumatic experience of being raped, and this serves to emphasize the credibility of the complainant’s claims. By weaving in a small piece of publicly available information about Kane’s accuser—that a rape kit had been performed on her—with the considerably more detailed account of the emotional impact of that process provided by the anonymous commenter, an inner life is created for the nameless, faceless, voiceless complainant, making her more human and relatable (Busse 2006b). The alleged victim’s physical likeness (Piper 2015) is not necessary in this process; the reader of this comment and others similar to it is still invited and able to empathize with her. This empathy is produced not through an emotional attachment to the victim herself (as is the case for the emotional attachment to Kane’s celebrity persona) but through the intertextual meanings brought into the discussion. The commenter’s account of her rape kit experience is read side by side with developments in the investigation. While this has the effect of humanizing the complainant to an extent, ultimately this side-by-side reading also—and perhaps primarily—generates meanings in the context of Patrick Kane as a fan object. Stasi (2006) describes this as intertextuality in the second degree, or the way in which a fan fiction text may have intertextual relationships not just with the originary work but with other texts beyond it. For hockey RPF community members with access to these discussions, knowledge about the rape kit experience becomes one such text and thereby becomes part of the Patrick Kane archive, interacting with other elements of that archive to produce new meanings.

Another external piece often brought into the discussions of the rape allegations, and which had a bearing on how Kane’s accuser was perceived, was community members’ understanding of rape culture, and particularly its prevalence within the criminal justice system.

Tags: BASICALLY reblogging because "neutrality" isn’t really neutral in rape culture and I’ve picked my side I’m done with Patrick Kane now. (tags on a Tumblr reblog by snorlax)

Here rape culture is used to construct a dichotomy in cases of sexual assault, where one is either on the side of the accused or of the accuser. In this construction, neutrality is impossible and tantamount to siding with the accused. While this particular quote appears quite abstract, many community members expressed similar sentiments with particular reference to the complainant and how she was likely to be treated by the press, the criminal justice system, Blackhawks fans, and the general public. Like the account of the rape kit experience, these comments also generate a relatable inner life for Kane’s accuser. Yet they also become attached to the Patrick Kane RPF archive. Through these comments and conversations, and their application to the specific allegations against Kane, rape culture becomes part of the intertext against which meanings about Patrick Kane are produced within the hockey RPF community.

Both the accounts of sexual assault survivors and the discussion of rape culture within the hockey RPF community therefore function in ways similar to RPF canon construction to humanize and give an internal life to Kane’s accuser, who is otherwise left faceless, nameless, and voiceless, even by measures intended to protect her. However, because the community’s primary interest continues to be in Patrick Kane and his legitimacy or otherwise as a fan object, these elements also become part of the Patrick Kane RPF archive and become available—for those within the community taking part in or aware of these discussions—as resources for side-by-side reading, intertextuality in the second degree, and ultimately the construction of meanings not just about the complainant but about Patrick Kane himself. This is one of the key mechanisms through which meanings generated by the rape allegations overwhelm other meanings constructed by the community. That in turn makes it untenable for many community members to sustain the subject position of subversion of rape culture through fan fiction, or continue their involvement with Patrick Kane as a fan object.

6. The unfillable gap: Patrick Kane fan fiction in 2012 and 2015

While Patrick Kane’s career does not appear to have suffered as a result of the rape allegations or the previous off-ice incidents, his behavior has been the source of significant challenges for the collective canon formation in hockey RPF (Busse 2006a). His public image as a party boy—in line with Dempster’s (2009) analysis of sports and lad cultures—has, on the one hand, been attractive to RPF writers, particularly in juxtaposition with Jonathan Toews’s more reserved...
public persona. On the other hand, allegations of violence have overshadowed the Patrick Kane RPF canon, and fan fiction writers have at times struggled to negotiate these. Similarly to the endless stream of new social media content that risked overdetermining the bandon fan object (Hagen 2015), the visual evidence of Kane's 2012 drinking spree through Madison as well as the media reporting and fan speculation following the 2015 rape allegations risked directly contradicting much of the collectively negotiated canon that existed at that point. The differences and similarities between ways of managing such tensions after the Madison incident and after the rape allegations are particularly interesting.

[6.2] To understand how the canon construction differed after the two incidents, it is important to understand the basic canon relationship dynamic portrayed in fan fiction about the Patrick Kane/Jonathan Toews pairing. Toews has been dubbed Captain Serious by teammates and media, and the contrast between him and Kane is a common theme of Kane/Toews hockey RPF stories. While there isn’t a single prevalent set of characterizations for the two of them in RPF, there are some elements common across many stories which are worth considering. Lamb and Veith (1986) argue that slash protagonists often acquire androgynous characteristics, and this is certainly true of both Kane and Toews in hockey RPF, where such characterization is used in juxtaposition with the hypermasculine, laddish image of professional athletes (Dempster 2009), making them more vulnerable and identifiable (Busse 2006b). Kane is often portrayed as an extremely skilled hockey player, but writers emphasize his short (for a hockey player) stature. He also tends to be depicted as the more emotional of the two, and the range of emotions he expresses in stories covers both typically feminine-coded ones such as sadness and vulnerability, and more masculine-coded ones such as anger. Toews, on the other hand, is taller and is often written as physically stronger. He tends to be portrayed as more reserved but also as deeply caring. The relationship between them tends be written as one of equals, albeit one where sometimes Kane needs guidance and care that Toews provides. This relationship dynamic is important when it comes to how hockey RPF readers and writers addressed Kane’s various transgressions in their fan fiction.

[6.3] A key approach to reconciling the drunk, possibly violent Kane presented by sports news Web site Deadspin (Dickey 2012) in Madison with the highly skilled athlete presented by the Blackhawks and the loveable rogue of fan fiction was a heavy reliance on the redemption narrative that accompanied much of Patrick Kane's team-issued publicity over the 2013 NHL season. Writers took the Madison incident as the starting point of a number of stories, showing how Kane matured and mellowed, often helped by the fictional relationship with Jonathan Toews. Several of these are written from Toews's point of view, showing his struggle to reconcile the two versions of Kane he sees. One particularly popular work takes the events of May 2012 as the jumping-off point for a fake marriage trope story where Toews marries Kane in order to stop him from being traded to a different team. Real-life events from the 2012 NHL lockout and 2013 season are interwoven with Toews and Kane’s fictional marriage to show Kane's character development and growth. By showing a private, often remorseful, Kane behind the party boy facade, these stories work to rehumanize the star (Busse 2006b) and portray him as a flawed but sympathetic character. In these stories, Toews both provides care for Kane and challenges him to become more mature and grow as a human being. Toews also often expresses anger and frustration with Kane, and his forgiveness is far from certain: it has be to be earned through hard work and genuine change on Kane’s part. Presenting Kane's redemption from Toews’s point of view acts as a proxy for the writer and reader in what Busse (2006b) calls an identification fantasy. By allowing one of the characters to show and process the emotions many fans were feeling and directly demand of Kane to "be better" (a canon Toews catchphrase), the redemption narrative and fans’ renegotiated relationship with Kane as a fan object is anchored in canon. This echoes oddish’s comment quoted above: "Where life seemed to be imitating art, and Patrick Kane seemed to be improving himself as a human being, I was selfishly pleased, because it allowed me to enjoy my fiction all the more." The redemption narrative allowed hockey RPF readers and writers to fit Patrick Kane’s perceived transgressions into the complex web of meanings that had accrued for them around the Patrick Kane archive without necessitating a drastic reevaluation of the relationship of different parts of that archive with each other.

[6.4] Another way to reconcile the contradictory facets of Kane’s public image has been to ignore some of them and be selective in what is included in the collectively constructed canon. The Madison incident, when mentioned, is generally downplayed as a very public drinking spree, leaving out the choking allegations. The third and final strategy has been to attempt to deny or minimize the problematic elements of Kane’s image. Stories falling in this category tend to feature outright denials of the choking allegations by the fictionalized Patrick Kane, as well as attacks on the credibility of sports journalism in general and Deadspin—positioned in these stories as a gossip site—in particular. Stories in this tradition juxtapose real or fictional media reports with close third-person narrative from Kane’s point of
view, highlighting the differences or offering reasons for Kane’s publicly known actions that the reader can sympathize with. Because events are depicted from Kane’s point of view, this approach also works to rehumanize him, though the private person behind the facade shown here tends to be less remorseful and more indignant. Any blame for the incident is externalized onto exploitative media reporting, and the reader is invited to empathize with Kane’s frustration and fears of a trade. In a number of these stories, while there is no direct victim blaming (Anderson and Doherty 2008), Kane’s responsibility for the Madison events is mitigated, diffused, obscured, or eliminated entirely (Ehrlich 2001). Fans’ efforts to minimize Kane’s transgressions in their fiction in these ways can be seen as a conscious effort to map out the relationship between the public celebrity persona and the private person. They highlight the disjunctures between the star as depicted in the media and the (fictionalized) private person, thereby opening a space for speculation about the real private person behind the star image. Yet rather than simply making the celebrity more relatable (Busse 2006b), these strategies render visible the conflicts and differences between canon and fanon Kane and highlight the extent to which meanings in fan fiction rely on such conflicts.

[6.5] The rape allegations of the summer of 2015 have significantly complicated the process of canon negotiation around Patrick Kane. This became evident in the community debates on Tumblr. It is important to note that in the wake of the rape allegations against Patrick Kane, the hockey RPF community, and particularly the community centered around Patrick Kane and the Kane/Toews pairing, experienced significant turnover of membership, with around two-thirds of active authors leaving the community. While new authors joined, particularly after the rape investigation was formally closed, the result was an overall smaller community producing significantly fewer works. The remaining community's fan fiction output, however, also sheds light on intertextual readings of public and official private personas of the celebrity with the RPF character, and thereby on fans’ (in)ability to reconcile some parts of the Patrick Kane archive and their own involvement in the fandom. Ignoring or finding ways to minimize the rape allegations became popular strategies in canon construction after the rape allegations—considerably more popular than in the post-Madison body of work. Redemption narratives, on the other hand, were notable through their complete absence both while the rape investigation was ongoing and in the 3 months after it had been formally concluded. Instead of presenting a redemption narrative, other parts of Patrick Kane's public persona and the 2015–16 NHL season were selected and highlighted, such as his record-breaking points streak, the end of it, and his relationships with new teammates. I want to briefly focus on "Streak" and "Streak End" stories and examine the possible meanings they gain when read side by side with the intertextual knowledge of the rape allegations against Patrick Kane.

[6.6] Kane's streak, where he scored at least one goal in 26 consecutive games, features in the background of several stories written in the early 2015–16 season. Celebrating hockey successes like this in fan fiction is not unusual. Even relatively minor milestones and statistical coincidences such as Kane and Toews briefly having the same number of goals in their NHL careers are reinterpreted as milestones in the two characters’ relationship. Stories focusing on "The Streak," however, read very differently if one takes intertextual knowledge of the rape allegations into account. Juxtaposed with intertextual knowledge of the controversy over Kane’s participation in the Blackhawks’ training camp and his being allowed to play for the team before the rape investigation had been concluded, a clear theme of triumph over adversity emerges. Additionally, the end of the points streak also prompted several hurt/comfort stories where depictions of Kane range from extremely vulnerable to surprisingly (to his fictional teammates) mature. "Streak End" stories are predominantly written from Toews’s point of view, and similar to post-Madison redemption stories, here too Toews stands in for the writer and reader. The predominant emotions in these stories, however, are not disappointment with Kane but an almost excessive caring and protectiveness. In some stories, the intertextual references to Kane’s office issues are both overt and coy at the same time. His teammates’ surprise at the maturity of his reactions to the end of the streak is a direct reference to the Madison incident that followed a playoff loss. Unlike post-Madison stories, however, what is not shown here is the process of character development—the reader is presented with a snapshot that only asserts that Kane is more mature and in control of his emotions. For those community members aware of the controversy around Kane, the streak and its end become a convenient stand-in for the rape allegations and other off-ice issues, and Kane can be shown to be both triumphing over adversity and reacting maturely to situations where in the past he has not. He is thereby given an internal life the reader can relate to and is made more human than the celebrity persona (Busse 2006b).

[6.7] What is notable here is that while "The Streak" is used in a number of ways to show a successful and mature Kane in the wake of a challenging summer, the rape allegations themselves are rarely if ever mentioned in fan fiction. On the few occasions when they are referenced, they are briefly but categorically denied by Kane. Unlike the Madison
events, of which there are several fan fiction accounts, the events of early August 2015 are never featured in fan fiction. No humanizing, relatable account from Kane’s point of view is ever presented nor are there redemption narratives directly related to the rape allegations. The summer of 2015 has become an unfillable gap in the Patrick Kane fan fiction canon, indicating that even those fans who either believed in Kane’s innocence or chose to remain involved in the fandom for other reasons find it difficult to incorporate those elements into canon. For fans aware of the rape allegations, this intertextual knowledge and the meanings created by it—the presence of rape culture as part of the Patrick Kane archive—overshadow the Patrick Kane canon. While they are still able to derive other meanings and pleasures from reading and writing fiction about Kane, the absence of stories that address the rape allegations directly indicates that even among this group there are challenges when it comes to reconciling the allegations about the private person with a public persona or a fictionalized RPF character.

7. Potential for fan activism

[7.1] The crisis in legitimacy the hockey RPF community faced in the wake of the rape allegations against Patrick Kane illustrates the complex relationship between the different textual constructions of the celebrity fan object and fan fiction character in RPF. Both fans arguing for abandoning Kane as a fan object and those seeking to justify continued involvement in the fandom strongly relied on arguments that support a side-by-side reading view of meaning making in RPF. Not only the public persona of the celebrity but also their official private persona and any glimpses afforded at an imagined authentic self strongly inform the fan fiction character through both similarities and differences, and their actions clearly become part of the archive accumulating around the RPF character. The Patrick Kane archive was extended beyond the actions of and the allegations against Kane himself, as hockey RPF fans made use of their knowledge of rape culture and some community members’ personal experiences of sexual assault in their meaning-making processes through an intertextuality in the second degree. These conflicts and extensions of the archive were also reflected in the community’s fan works output, where the period of the rape allegations and investigation became an unfillable gap in the RPF canon: no account of the rape allegations from Kane’s point of view is ever offered. This indicates that while RPF may “shape and alter the star” (Busse 2006b), there are limits to such shaping and altering, imposed by the process of side-by-side reading integral to meaning making within fan fiction. Combined with the mass exodus from the fandom of those fans who saw continued involvement with Kane as a fan object as reproducing rape culture, this unfillable gap indicates that at a point of crisis, the public and official private personas of the star are collapsed with the glimpses of the real private person, imposing meanings that overwhelm any collectively constructed RPF character.

8. Note

1. The data for this article are drawn primarily from two sources: hockey RPF works posted to the Archive of Our Own, and posts by members of the hockey RPF community on Tumblr, drawn predominantly from my personal networks within this community and covering the period from the rape allegations against Kane first becoming public to the formal closure of the criminal investigation. The use of verbatim quotes from such posts in this article is limited in order to minimize the risk of individual discussion contributors being traced through the use of search engines. Where quotes have been used, they have been pseudonymized.

10. Works cited


THEORY

Surrendering authorial agency and practicing transindividualism in Tumblr's role-play communities

K. Shannon Howard

Auburn University at Montgomery, Montgomery, Alabama, United States

[0.1] Abstract—The writer who engages in acts of online role-play or make-believe is often thought to promote him or herself as an individual agent. However, when members of Tumblr’s role-play communities engage in play, they create scenes together that prompt surrender of authorial agency. In doing so, they engage in transindividual work, which allows them to work across, among, and between other entities until the boundaries of the self become porous rather than fixed.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan community; Transindividualism


I. Introduction

[1.1] While the founder of the microblogging network Tumblr, David Karp, created his network in order to allow viewers to share concise bits of texts, film, and images, some users on this network have chosen to compose posts with significant word counts (Howard 2012). Many of these posts are by fans coauthoring narrative threads—threads that act as a hybrid of fan fiction and online gaming—as they transmit responses back and forth. This practice is most commonly known as role-play (also abbreviated rp). While Tumblr role-play has previously been described as a hybrid of fan fiction and online gaming (see McClellan 2013), the unique quality in role-play is the synergy created when strangers surrender authorial agency in favor of the improvisational process of play. This surrender comes, in part, from the divisions of selfhood performed online—divisions labeled as mun, muse, and anon.

[1.2] Tumblr role-play is unique because the players involved differentiate between the mun and muse. A mun, short for the mundane, refers to the author who creates and maintains the Tumblr account. Like a Twitter or LiveJournal user, the mun will select the basic blog design, the information on a short biography, and the handle that will be used to attract other role players on this same interface. The muse is the character(s) portrayed in role-play. Muses are often characters from the mun’s favorite stories from film, television, literature, games, or graphic novels. If the mun is a fan of Grey’s Anatomy (2005–), for example, he or she will select Meredith Grey as muse and then select an icon, or face claim, of Ellen Pompeo, who plays Grey.

[1.3] If another role player wishes to engage someone’s muse, he or she will submit a starter, which launches a dialogue between the characters. This dialogue will be housed primarily on Tumblr’s ongoing dashboard of posts, or its feed. Unlike other role-playing scenarios where the characters and game moderators place most of their energy into world building and clear adherence to canonical interpretations of characters, independent role players on Tumblr create new scenes of interaction between characters, ones that often transcend the canon or established narrative of a given universe. For example, some place characters from different universes into the same dialogue, creating an intertextual moment between the Meredith of Grey’s Anatomy and one of the angels from the television show Supernatural (2005–).

[1.4] Additionally, role players on Tumblr occasionally perform the role of anons, which gives them a third option to consider when they engage in dialogue. When one player wishes to interact with another player without revealing her username, the role player will submit feedback via the inbox in order to share admiration for another person’s writing.
or performance of character. By submitting information anonymously, one player may also ask another player questions without fear of rejection. The anon option acts as an invitation to other players, players who might be too shy to approach a new player outright but who wish to offer narrative challenges or ideas. In allowing anons to communicate with her, the mun shows how willing she is to surrender to the unpredictability of encounters with other players.

2. Current theory and past scholarship

[2.1] Role players on Tumblr, rather than capitalize on individual potential, embrace moments of humility in their encounters with others, allowing them to do what Brian Massumi (2014) and other scholars have referred to as transindividual work. Transindividualism may be defined as a phenomenon during which players work beyond, across, within, and among boundaries of self until such boundaries become porous, although, as in the case of Tumblr, they are not completely erased. As stated above, role players on Tumblr typically refer to themselves (the authors) self-consciously and ironically as the mundane, or mun. When answering questions or prompts as the mun, the readers get a glimpse into the daily lives of the writers who author scenes. Conversely, when executing a fictional exchange among characters, the muses are in charge.

[2.2] A somewhat common description of the mun and muse interaction is one in which the mun acts in opposition to the fictional muse she attempts to control. This phenomenon echoes Latour (2005), who describes the limits of human agency in terms of puppets and the master who holds the strings. He extends the analogy to say that "puppeteers will rarely behave as having total control over their puppets. They will say queer things like ‘their marionettes suggest them to do things they will have never thought possible by themselves’" (59–60). Like the puppeteer, the blogger may originally pull the metaphoric strings on her muse, only to find the muse rebel against her original plan. Once a role-play scene begins, the muse’s spirit prevails.

[2.3] This opposition from the muse acts as a humbling device rather than as an obstacle. Even if users deploy such a bifurcation ironically more than seriously, the desire to involve oneself in a loss of agency is worth examination because this phenomenon suggests that writers are moving beyond selfhood and toward something else. This is important because most descriptions of online character work, whether in gaming or in improvisational writing, have often stressed the value of the individual self as empowered. Michelle Nephew (2006) historicizes role-play in her research on identity and desire, stressing its value in psychology where it helps people "achieve greater self-awareness" (122). According to Nephew, role-play provides players with the chance to create "a dream-world of their own creating that affirms their sense of self-worth and power" (127).

[2.4] Past role-play scenarios in studies of tabletop or live-action role-play also feature a quest for self-empowerment, both in the way they feature leaders and the way certain traits are valued. As Mona (2007) explains, role-play activity in games like Dungeons and Dragons features a dungeon master who emcees the game as it unfolds (29–30). Likewise, in another game, Vampire: The Masquerade, the storyteller is in control of what happens (Hindmarch 2007, 49). Today’s online games build on these experiences, as MacCallum-Stewart (2014) explains. She stresses that online players “have a proactive attitude towards games, which means that they regard them as texts which they have the power to change” (36). Furthermore, she argues that the tabletop gaming traits of “strength, stamina, charisma, intelligence, dexterity, wisdom and constitution” are valued in online scenarios just as they are in Dungeons and Dragons (23). Here again, individual power matters a great deal, even when a player cooperates with a community of others. We return again and again to the idea of “empowering the player-as-creator” (MacCallum-Stewart 2014, 53). Certainly role players, particularly dungeon masters, in such tabletop gaming scenarios are often more concerned with world building than with character development, yet the power required to build a world necessitates a division between the leader and her players.

[2.5] As stated earlier, Tumblr role-play acts as a hybrid of gaming and fan fiction. Therefore, we might find less emphasis on power or self-worth in studies of online character work where narrative is the objective. However, this is not the case. For example, Osborne (2012) studies narrative role-play happening on LiveJournal, where players "improvise written responses in the course of play" and also "partake of the transgressive elements of fan fiction" (¶2.4). Osborne returns to ideas of the author as commander and storyteller, just like in the tabletop gaming examples mentioned above. Although she emphasizes the development of empathy that allows players to connect to others, she
says that such creative work by bloggers is designed ultimately to help players "discover new parts of themselves" (¶5.3). She goes on to explain that partnership, while important, helps individuals overcome "fear and irrational worries" and teaches players how to relate to the world around them (¶5.12). Again, this reinforces the benefits gained by the individual, even when that self enters a community of like-minded players. Likewise, in Louisa Ellen Stein's work (2006), the setup on LiveJournal reinforces this notion of authorial control because comments and threads among characters are hosted on one character's page and subject to deletion at any given time. Characters like the Draco Malfoy of her case study also worry about designing their personal diaries so that the look and feel of the page reflect a character in his own right; for example, he says, "I do hope they have my colours in stock" on LiveJournal so that the Slytherin green and silver are featured prominently when others visit the page (246).

[2.6] Past scholarship in literacy and fan studies has also articulated play as a manifestation of individual agency or self-empowerment. These scholars have taken productive and thorough note of online communities centered on fan fiction writing, role-playing, and the development of avatars (Black 2008; Gee 2007; Johnson 2012; Kaplan 2006; Warren 2013; Williams 2009). Booth's (2008) research is important for documenting early examples of MySpace user profiles that are based on characters from television programming. His article highlights the power of these fans to identify with television characters and "become proprietors of their own textual spaces" (520) as they engage in "identity play" (533). Although Booth (2008) carefully attends to the fluidity of such practices of character impersonation and how such role-play merges "the real and the simulated" (534), the idea of becoming a proprietor of a space suggests a concrete territorialization of online space, of gleefully planting one's flag in a corner of the Web.

[2.7] Role-play on Tumblr does not allow its users to plant flags in selected territories as much as it invites them to transcend any singular moment of Web site creation or character impersonation. Because multiple overlaps of characters and partners occur simultaneously, humility and a lack of agency become essential to the player who moves beyond selfhood toward something greater. In What Animals Teach Us about Politics, Massumi (2014) explains how transindividualism works by describing animals who engage in acts of playful combat, acts that reveal "active potential not only in the animal who executes [them], but also in the other" (35). Massumi explains further, "When I make the kind of gesture that places me in the register of play, you are immediately taken there as well. My gesture transports you with me into a different arena of activity than the one we were just in. You are inducted into play with me. In a single gesture, two individuals are swept up together and move in tandem to a register of existence" (5). When moving in tandem, two beings no longer operate as master storytellers in their own right but as part of a transindividual flow, or channel, that requires complete surrender of the ego in addition to community participation.

3. Methodology

[3.1] In the spirit of Brittany Kelley's (2016) recent work on cultivating goodwill through online research, I hope to stress my presence as a participant in the Tumblr community and not simply a lurker mining data for publications. My experience with role-play there began in 2013 when I wrote scenes with my first writing partner, who was patient enough to help me understand the difference in the mun and muse terms I saw circulating online. From 2013 to 2014, I was an active member of the Hannibal fandom and a participant in Tumblr's role-play communities. Between the years of 2014 and 2016, I role-played more sporadically and continued to archive posts about role-play that interested me. My archive was built around a series of screenshots, which revealed the willingness of players to move beyond ego and work toward transindividual experiences. Over the past 3 years, I have collected approximately 150 to 200 screenshots of moments in which players describe the differences between their mun and muse, articulate what role-play means to them, and/or explain the benefits and drawbacks of anon encounters.

[3.2] Like other members of this community, my blog was public, and the role-play scenes I coauthored with my partner were often archived or reblogged to an even wider audience than our initial followers. Although the materials cited here were publicly shared, I make every effort to secure permission from specific muses when I quote directly from their handle or a role-play scene (I also applied for and received Institutional Review Board exemption for this research through my university). In some cases, Tumblr users will abandon a handle and seek an alternate muse quite frequently, which makes it difficult to maintain contact with the role-playing community, as it is constantly in flux. Some of the work that others and I posted occasionally became fan fiction works that we would later submit to places like Archive of Our Own. Other scenes existed purely for the joy of creating something, even if it was temporary, with someone who shared similar passions for certain stories and worlds. While most work was archived according to a
specific set of hashtags, other examples of role-play acted as fleeting interchanges between strangers who might never complete the scene at hand.

[3.3] In order to analyze the screenshots of role-play activity that follow, I engage in what Clifford Geertz has referred to in his ethnographic work as "thick description." Geertz explains that thickness of data results from considerable investment in a community during which the researcher wallows in a "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and explicit" (1973, 10). In narrowing my data set, I was particularly drawn to moments of role-play that others have referred to as "bleed" (Montola 2010), where "bleeding in" refers to the author's real life influencing the character and "bleeding out" describes the way a character influences the player. Still, I found that such terms alone did not fully account for what was happening on Tumblr, since the act of bleeding itself was compounded by bleeding both in and out of the character while also simultaneously bleeding into one's partner. This led me to consider how role players embrace humility and willingly forsake individual goals to enter into play.

[3.4] Because of my own involvement in role-playing, my perception is, no doubt, influenced by the positive experiences I had in my own corner of the Web. A search of the hashtags role-play, rp, and mun or muse reveal thousands of posts that exist across scores of fandoms on Tumblr. While I frequently engaged in such searches and made preliminary notes on the basis of how many posts contained references to the mun/muse relationship and how role players engaged with their anon readers, I was still frequently drawn to examples that had some connection to the narratives I enjoyed, and in this sense the examples presented here are not meant to represent all of Tumblr or even all of the role players active there. Additionally, not all role-playing communities facilitate a positive experience. In some cases, role players have been bullied and/or threatened by anons. Some role players even turn off the anonymous post function to secure their own composing space and avoid such problems. On a less dramatic level, many role players struggle with feelings of isolation when other players refuse to accept their invitations to play. Likewise, some role-play groups on Tumblr, those established by a moderator, are more like the groups of tabletop gaming participants where one person exercises considerable control over a group of players and establishes what could be considered arbitrary rules of engagement. The examples that follow, then, focus on independent role players whose experiences are largely positive. In doing so, I stress the ways in which authors learn to trust others and to surrender agency.

4. Features and forms of digital role-play

[4.1] In order to begin a study of Tumblr role-play, it helps to look first at common examples of character identification online, examples that often reinforce the fan as a single role player or agent. For instance, character identification activities on Facebook or other networks where quizzes are found online tell us which character from a given story we identify with most. These moments are designed by fans as well as by producers. Just recently, I took a quiz on Facebook that informed me that I did not just identify with Haymitch Abernathy from *The Hunger Games* but that I *was* Haymitch. In this case I am told that I "am principled and independent," a loner," and "have my own way of doing things." This result pleases me, so I share it online with my followers (see Williams 2009). Still, as I share this quiz result, I remain Haymitch without a Katniss Everdeen, and this lack of a mentor-mentee bond, according to Massumi's (2014) terminology, would render my Haymitch somewhat impotent.

[4.2] Other applications also allow users to transform their photos to appear more like a character in the fictional world. Producers behind *The Walking Dead* games and applications also invented a way that fans could "dead themselves." See the result below (figure 1):
By embedding myself in the narrative, I transform my body in a way that is characteristic of zombies in the television show. Here we see the posthuman body (as virtual zombie online) acting as a living text meant to advertise and promote a certain story. However, Massumi (2014) explains that to engage in authentic play, one must offer a "ludic gesture" to another, and this gesture remains "impotent unless it captures the other's attention" and envelopes them in the scene (35). In the image above, I call attention to myself as icon, allowing others to view me as a specific zombie subject, crystallized in time and space. An approach that moves beyond selfhood demands something more from us; it is always, as Morton (2013) explains in his study of ecology and posthumanism," decisively decentering us from a place of pampered privilege in the scheme of things" (47) rather than featuring our mastery of the world around us. Here, for example, I can insert my own head shot into a zombie template, and I may find the effect or result entertaining, but such an effect does not represent the spirit of true play among multiple partners. To engage fully in play, we must accept that we are no longer in control of the outcome. Again, this is different from role players in Stein's (2006) work, where the Draco Malfoy role player, for example, refers to his LiveJournal as "this dratted thing," something to be supervised and shaped by the writer. No one "dratted thing" encapsulates play in the Tumblr examples to follow; all are consistently evolving texts that move beyond and across any one individual’s efforts.

As Petersen (2014) has noted, Tumblr’s layout is more horizontal than vertical since Tumblr as a platform has "a lack of territorial boundaries" across different posts and conversations (101) unlike other sites such as LiveJournal, which feature accumulation of notes and comments on an individual site. Less attention is paid to a role player’s personal page and more attention is paid to the scene of play. Here, for example, a role player explains on the forum roleplayingconfessionsfromrpers (2016) that the elaborate design of a template is a distraction:

I have a default theme on my blog on purpose and I’m not about to change it. The default theme is so much easier to navigate and read through than most of your fancy themes. If I can see your blog have [sic] tiny font, and a small box for text, And only fancy graphics and music and intelligible formatting, I start to question whether you’re in it for the writing or for praise for your first attempt at web design.

Emphasis on personal Web design is distracting for transindividual play rather than helpful. While some muns emphasize design in their presentation of muses, most role-play scenarios feature reblogging alphabetic text from one player to the next without added bells and whistles.

Consider, as an example, part of a role-play exchange between Tumblr users—one role created from Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett’s book Good Omens (1990) and the other from the television show Supernatural. This call-and-response form of writing unfolds as partners build threads that may go on for hours or days at a time. I have placed a part of their script below:

User bibliophileangel’s (2013) archive features a dialogue with role player razielangelofsecrets. Razielangelofsecrets writes:
Linked in arms with Aziraphale, Raz fought to not blush at the contact. What was up with her? Was she falling for this handsome stranger and his beautiful sonorous voice? As he talked about his books, she started to get a silly little grin, enjoying hearing him speak so passionately. "It sounds absolutely wonderful." She commented when he stopped talking. For not much, it was more than she imagined. As he opened the door, she could smell old books on the air and it was only because she was already excited about being around Aziraphale that she didn’t get a sudden rush. When he called her darling, she turned an interesting scarlet color and tried to hide it by ducking her head. "Um, just some tea if you don’t mind."

Aziraphale smiled as he took in her expression. "So…I take it you like books as much as I do. You don’t often see that much enthusiasm in a fellow angel." He quirked an eyebrow at her as he disappeared into the back room to put water in his self boiling kettle, a gift from his demon friend Crowley. He also prepared his favorite tea set, also a gift from Crowley. He poked his head around the corner, smiling as he took her in. "Feel free to look around at anything that catches [the player's] interest."

In such role-play scenes, it is common for one player to, as seen above, "open the door" to a conversation that reveals common interests. As the scene progresses, the players reply specifically to developments conjured by the previous entry, so above we note that Aziraphale “smiled as he took in her expression” and then, in a later comment, encourages the other player to "look around at anything that catches the player’s interest." Such invitational lines suggest a metacommunicative stance: not only is Aziraphale, the fictional character, inviting Raziel into the world of the narrative, but the two writers are inviting each other into a new platform of correspondence, where they may adapt to the other’s needs. What is most significant (as the rest of this project will demonstrate) is how, by the end of the thread, the two writers have become something that is more than just a partnership. Instead they act transindividually, as some form of Aziraphale-Raziel. The two muns are not only bleeding, to use Montola (2010)’s term, into their muses, but they are also simultaneously bleeding into each other. They are being swept up, as Massumi (2014) suggests, into a tandem of existence.

Massumi (2014) also speaks to this level of engagement by explaining that what he proposes is ultimately "a pluralist activist philosophy" that is the product of an "ecological playing out" (90). In other words, the field of play allows for multiple solutions and multiple meanings that may continually be combined or singled out. At first, accepting a role-play invitation means accepting a specific version of an established (or sometimes original) fictional character, represented by the player’s handle. This is important since role players often choose the same character to portray. For example, after the airing of NBC’s *Hannibal* (2013–15) many Hannibal Lecter role-play blogs sprung up on Tumblr as a homage to Mads Mikkelsen’s portrayal of the character. The handle afteryourdeathormine has a different online reputation than the handle lectercollapsingchurches, which bases its text on the backstory of the character’s obsession with the destruction of faith and on the organizing symbol of structural debris. The user explains: "I see this idea of the church collapsing as feeding into the image of a fallen angel. This blog features a journey of transformation rather than a stagnant portrayal of Lecter" (lectercollapsingchurches 2013). This is different from afteryourdeathormine, whose introductory material about the same character features medical disclaimers and attention to the character’s position as a psychiatrist. She says, "I am not a medical professional. I am not certified to offer medical, psychiatric, or personal advice in any way. This is a roleplay blog—based off a manipulative, abusive, charming character, whom I do not own or in any way represent" (afteryourdeathormine 2013). Her page even offers links to various crisis hotlines for those with mental illness.

This malleability and diversity in character development counters what some scholars say is essential to the role-play experience: fidelity to the original narrative and the characters inside it. As McClellan (2013) argues, "To build a convincing world, characters must speak like their source characters, they must interact with other characters from the show in textually appropriate ways, and they must respond to new situations in ways that are consistent with their televisual counterparts" (143). If we take McClellan’s point and apply it to the world of Tumblr, then we must imagine that multiple versions of a canonical character would potentially be frowned upon or dismissed rather than embraced. If fidelity to the original narrative suggests that a singularity is at work and that all players must conform to the verisimilitude of the fictional world at hand, then characters from Gaiman and Pratchett’s novel and the television show *Supernatural* have no reason to engage in dialogue. Massumi (2014) further counters this idea of verisimilitude when he describes a situation in which he might be referring to lectercollapsingchurches and afteryourdeathormine. He says,
“One never simply imitates a form, in the sense of conforming oneself to the given form of another being. One can certainly make as if one were effectively imitating. But something else is really going on, unacknowledged and inexpressibly” (82). He goes on to describe the act of a child imitating an animal, specifically a tiger, and notes that the result is surprising: “The child plays the tiger in situations in which the child has never seen a tiger. More than that, it plays the tiger in situations no tiger has ever seen, in which no earthly tiger has ever set paw. The child immediately launches itself into a movement of surpassing the given” (83). In other words, lectercollapsingchurches is never just Hannibal Lecter but some other creature formed by transindividual work with other characters. The role player becomes the fictional role to start, but the activation of the ludic gesture changes the original design of the muse chosen.

5. Muns, muses, and anons at play

[5.1] Most role players embrace powerlessness when they enact scenes with the muse in charge. While the character he or she adopts may be, at first glance, only an alternate identity, it quickly escalates to become something more, and often that something more means looking beyond traditional notions of self. The handle Muse-room acts as an archive of complaints by muses who wish to defy their muns. In one post, the writer simply says, "Muse Problems #11: Having to do things I don’t want to do in [role-play] threads" (Muse-room 2013). In this example, a role player, acting as a muse, states that the muse’s will operates independently of the author who created her. The muse here expresses frustration because it is trapped inside a system where it must "do things [it] [doesn’t] want to do. “This idea is not new, of course, since many authors have expressed the sentiment that their characters often write themselves after the narrative engine of a fictional world ignites. However, muses and their authors are not always carried away on a tide of narrative energy; rather, the muse and the mun often act at odds when engaged in transindividual play in the same way Latour’s (2005) puppets and their marionettes tolerate each other’s whims.

[5.2] Another meme that circulates on Tumblr and has been reblogged by user alexs-rp-shit (2015) includes a Muppet character in front of a flaming background. In this meme the mun, offstage, cries out "Muse, no!" only to have the Muppet grin evilly and say "Muse, YES!" while the flames rise higher. This would be another example of how the role player perceives the muse acting against the mun’s wishes and wreaking havoc. The humor here reinforces the idea that powerlessness and humility are part of the role-play experience rather than something to be policed or avoided. Additionally, the muse’s refusal to acquiesce to the mun’s demands is a construct that foreshadows the way the scenes among partners will play out.

[5.3] Indeed, players encourage spontaneity rather than shy away from it by inviting others to assist in rupturing the normal life of their muse. User beverlykatzonthecase (2013) reblogged a post in which she asked the following: "In the middle of a conversation, my muse begins to cough up blood. How would your muse respond?" The prompt asks for a specific reaction in which her role-play character and another person’s character will engage in an inciting moment that could lead to a short or long scene. By accepting the challenge, the mun becomes powerless, first, because she cannot alter the inciting incident but must accept it in good faith from another, and second, she must consider how the character would act in such a scenario, and the character often surprises and humbles the player. One post on user gxnevra-archieve’s (2014) site, which generated over 12,000 likes and reblogs, aptly summarizes the dilemma by saying "what the fuck is my muse doing" and signing the line "every rper ever." Role player susie1x1 (2016) reblogged a similar statement—"I'm sorry I have no control over them, I just write the thing." This post was also signed "every rper ever." In a sense, this phenomenon speaks to what Massumi (2014) discusses in terms of play. The muse is not simply part of the writer but something that exceeds her or his control.

[5.4] The ludic act, therefore, moves beyond the individual consciousness and becomes, between two players, a "transindividual" enterprise that "involves -esquing gestures that produce greater degrees of copossibility" (Massumi 2014, 42). Again, with the term transindividual we recognize that selfhood dissolves in the act of play to reveal a different entity altogether. This idea explains how partners may accomplish what individual role players may not experience in isolation. Reference to the term esquing is made to suggest that when one gestures "as a tiger" or "like a tiger," the human act of role-play exceeds the original creature in its design. The same is true when writers take on personalities of their favorite characters and engage in dialogue with others who are esquing or playing in the same fictional world. The role player on Tumblr, unlike the zombie image on Facebook, has the ability to see transindividual work happening among the mun and muse as well as within different threads of role-play with other players.
When working with other players, a few guidelines do apply, despite their love for unpredictable moments at play. Most users abhor godmodding, the act of one player trying to control another in a given scenario. Such a practice leads role players to complain publicly on certain crowdsourced blogs about role-play as a hobby. An anonymous post on the handle roleplayingconfessionsfromrpers (2016) expresses frustration about one of her partners: "I don’t like role playing with this particular mun. They god-modded an entire thread with me, made one of the characters really OOC [out of character] and I feel no connection roleplaying with them as both mun and muse." A set of crowdsourced role-play guidelines from user destinationrpg (2016) provides this advice: "Your character will never know everything and be able to overhear everything. There are no omnipotent characters." Here the role-play does have a set of guidelines established by moderators, which does occur often in more regimented communities of Tumblr role players, where users may solicit applications and cast a group of users. However, even in the most established groups, this tendency to avoid one player’s control over the other reminds us again that one muse does not get to call the shots or act as master over another. Most role players, both the independent ones and the members of groups, shy away from planning and constructing scenes in advance. User thermxdynamicsarchived (2015) has a reblogged post (with a total of 12,668 reblogs and likes) that states:

Plotting RPs like—

Partner: let’s do this!

Me: i’m ready!

Partner: how we startin

Me: i wish i knew

In addition, Tumblr role players invite the participation of a third actor in their solar system of chosen identities: the anonymous writer, or the anon. The ask function on the Tumblr account includes an anonymous option so that even those with identifiable usernames may hide them by checking the option to post information without leaving a name behind. For example, bloggers who wish to receive feedback on their writing will issue calls to anon readers. The user deadatmyfeet (2013) posted the following message as an invitation: "Go on ANON and tell me what you think of me. I do not want to know who it is, at all. Don’t tell me who it is, don’t give me hints, don’t say your screen name. Tell me exactly what you think of me. Don’t sugarcoat things. Don't lie. If you hate me, tell me why. Tell me what I’m doing wrong. If you like me, tell me why." These anons provide valuable writing advice and creative challenges to help the role players engage in scenes. They also expose the player to potential risk, since the absence of a subject’s name or face means that vindictive or hateful messages are sent in addition to productive ones.

Some anon activity circulates in the form of challenges to all members of a certain role-play community. These writing prompts are often referred to as "Magic Anons." In a Magic Anon challenge (often abbreviated as M!A), the player will accept the challenge depending on what the anon asks her or him to do in a future scene. For example, the Supernatural community, in one challenge, lists the various affectations that a muse must confront if they allow the anon to control her or him. The below example is only a partial list of what the entire post offers as prompts.

M!A from SPN Episodes (2013):

Born Under a Bad Sign: muse gets possessed by a demon. It can be a random one or anon can specify who it is (anon tells length).

The Rapture: muse gets possessed by an angel. If they’re already an angel, someone else knocks them out of their vessel and takes their place (anon specifies length).

Mystery Spot—Gabriel put muse into a time loop, anon can specify the place/situation, lasts until a Gabriel muse lets them out.

Torn and Frayed—Muse is under Naomi’s control and will act like a perfect little soldier, including killing any rebels/enemies of Heaven. Lasts until someone breaks them out of it.

Croatoan—muse is trapped in a town with people infected with the virus. Will they survive?
This list complements the theory that play is ideally, as Massumi (2014) suggests with his animal examples, adaptable to new situations. When the role player posts a request that anons choose a writing prompt from lists like the one above, prompts referred to in the community as M!A posts, or Magic Anons, the regular pattern of role-play is disrupted to allow for challenges that the player may not have anticipated. For example, if an anon chooses one of the prompts, she sends the word Croatoan to a role player’s inbox, and the player must then imagine that his or her "muse is trapped in a town with people infected with the virus." These posts typically set up obstacles for the role player to confront, which are usually described in terms of physical harm or disability to the human form. Examples may also include the practice of making the character blind for 24 hours, causing it to suffer an allergy, or having it follow directions of another person because of mind control or hypnosis. In these exercises, the writer must maintain the identifying characteristics of their role while also meeting the request of the M!A task. Sent by an anonymous writer, the commands are taken seriously even when the one sending the request refuses to identify herself, which is a sign in other communities of cowardice or refusal to accept consequences. The faceless user acts as controller over the role player’s fictional persona, thereby creating revelatory moments where the outcome surpasses what could be imagined alone.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Transindividualism suggests that role players on Tumblr are doing more than just empathizing with others when they join their particular fan communities. They are negotiating and disrupting boundaries of self in unique ways, and such acts require great humility and decentering of the individual. Most research on role-play focuses on how community participation and interaction ultimately serves the self, sometimes even as a form of therapy. In the past, role-play represented a way for an individual to work through personal problems and fears in a low-stakes environment, and scholarship about play has mostly followed suit in stressing the benefits of the individual who plays pretend.

6.2 While role-play does offer therapeutic benefits, the recent actions of Tumblr users show fans of certain narratives moving beyond the need to improve one’s own relation to the world. Rather than the world serving the individual, the individual in these cases serves the world by allowing her-- or himself to be swept up in play. A major part of this transindividual work is the acknowledgment that world building and narrative is an unpredictable activity: role players do not control their muses or seek to do so. In celebrating this loss of control, the player also opens him-- or herself up to other players’ needs and strengths while navigating a scene.

6.3 The emphasis on authorial loss of agency and power serves as a model for what kinds of collaboration and community may eventually be formed without the aid of one dungeon master or storyteller. Even though role-play activity, either in online settings or in tabletop gaming, may seem to be a democratic enterprise, experience tells us that someone is often in charge of what unfolds in a ludic moment. The egocentricity associated with such leadership positions limits transindividual work because the structure of power intervenes with the creative efforts of players.

6.4 Considering transindividualism in fan communities helps us recognize that once the act of play begins, the potential of players expands and surpasses the given constraints of any one ego. Rather than champion the traits of an individual’s mind, the energy spent praising the human consciousness may be used to forge meaningful connections across and among ideas and beings. By taking such surprising fields as animal studies into account when approaching fan communities, participants of role-play and researchers of their work have opportunities to decenter human understanding to make room for a world where all living things teach us how play may transform us. It is then possible to imagine a reality in which humility and willingness to cede control become indispensable to play and, consequentially, indispensable to other parts of life as well.

7. Works cited


Transformative (h)activism: Breast cancer awareness and the World of Warcraft Running of the Gnomes

Lauren B. Collister

University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States

Abstract—Players of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game World of Warcraft (WoW) are accustomed to a transformative culture that appropriates off-line events and personas into virtual-world representations inside of the game. Following this culture, players have transformed an off-line event—the Race for the Cure, to benefit breast cancer charities—into an online event called the Running of the Gnomes with parameters and participation properties appropriate for the virtual world. This transformative event is a disruptive form of civil disobedience including elements of hacktivism. Though the event conforms to the game's culture and rules, the mass collective action of the Running of the Gnomes disrupts the player experience by flooding the game’s chat boxes with messages about an off-line concern (breast cancer) and also disrupts the game itself by crashing the server through the sheer volume of player participation. This disruption is embraced as an integral part of the event and is one of the primary causes for the event’s success as a fundraising activity.

Keywords—Fan community; Hacktivism; Video games


I. Introduction

[1.1] Rebecca Carlson (2009) challenged fandom scholars to move beyond concrete creative productions like fan fiction and fan vids by considering digital games as a site of transformative works. She suggested, "Video games, as well as gaming and play more broadly conceived and experienced, demand that as both researchers and fans, we explore questions that continue to challenge our preconceptions—and fears—about the ways people use, negotiate, and appropriate technology and media." In this work, I take up Carlson’s suggestion and explore the ways that players of World of Warcraft (WoW), a massively multiplayer online role-playing game, have appropriated a famous off-line event and transformed it into an online phenomenon that raises awareness for an important cause through collective action and (h)activism.

[1.2] The phenomenon I discuss is the Running of the Gnomes (RotG) event, an in-game charity event hosted by a team of organizers and players of WoW to benefit breast cancer research. I describe its beginnings as a transformation of an off-line event, the Race for the Cure organized by the Susan G. Komen Foundation, and its transformation over seven years into a (h)activist event. The transformative work is not only the event itself, but also the game space during the event; the enactment of a breast cancer charity race in WoW changed the environment from an immersive fantasy-style world to a place with tangible links to real-world issues, where concerns for women and health take center stage and personal stories are needed and valued. The event’s disruption of the game space is transformative, existing at the intersection of collective activism and disruptive hacktivism, or (h)activism.

[1.3] Here I first describe the event itself and its history, then I describe how the event is an example of transformative activism that fits into the ecology of WoW, and finally I describe how its staging in the game acted to transform the game itself, as an act of (h)activism.
2. The history of the Running of the Gnomes

[2.1] The RotG began in 2009. At the time, I was working on my participant-observation ethnography of the WoW guild <SeeD>, the field research site for my dissertation on communication strategies and identity in online games (Collister 2013). The ethnography was done in the style of Boellstorff (2008); I participated in online events and gatherings while conducting interviews with members of the community via Ventrilo, a voice-over-IP program favored by members of the guild. A chat log was recorded using the /chatlog function built into WoW and permission to use it was gained from members of the guild being studied. During my research period, members of the guild decided to participate in Breast Cancer Awareness Month (October) with a symbolic tribute: the changing of the guild’s tabard color from blue to pink. To accompany this change and spread knowledge about the event, guild members posted information about breast cancer screenings and other information on the guild’s Web-based forums. Screenshots were taken of guild members sporting their pink tabards during events, and an in-game giveaway was orchestrated for members who were seen in their pink tabards during the month.

[2.2] In 2010, the race component of the event was founded: guild members created new level 1 characters, pink-haired gnomes sporting pink guild tabards, and raced them from the WoW city of Stormwind through dangerous countryside to Booty Bay. The winner of the event was awarded an in-game prize. The first race had approximately 80 participants. This event was not the first of its kind; level 1 races of many varieties have existed in online games even before WoW. Guilds in the online game EverQuest held level 1 races for a variety of reasons and purposes, and they are mentioned on message boards such as Allakhazam’s EverQuest forum (http://everquest.allakhazam.com/forum.html?forum=1&mid=1088206164119934440). In WoW specifically, many level 1 races predate the RotG. One example is the Hogger raid, in which a 40-person raid group of level 1 characters attempt to defeat the in-game enemy known as Hogger (note 1). Pink-haired gnomes were included in some level 1 races, such as the 2009 event on the Sargeras server that awarded the winner a free pizza (http://seriouslycasual.org/forums/viewtopic.php?p=4136&sid=8feb6754247ed42be118544a3a9c0894). Using level 1 characters to take on a seemingly impossible task was thus a familiar element of the game’s culture.

[2.3] In 2011, the organizers of the event (including myself) decided to go more public with the race and solicit donations in conjunction with it. Modeling the event on the popular Race for the Cure (http://ww5.komen.org/raceforthecure/) organized by the Susan G. Komen Foundation, they suggested a "small change" pledge to the Foundation: players who could afford to pledged an amount that reflected the number of participants. For example, a donor could pledge to donate a nickel for every gnome who raced. In practice, most players capped their pledge at a certain amount. For example, one pledged "ten cents per gnome up to $50," meaning that if 400 gnomes did the run, the donor would give $40, but if 1,000 gnomes did the run, they would give $50.

[2.4] In 2012, after many participants expressed concern over the spending habits of the Komen Foundation, the organizers decided to change the RotG’s charity to the Cleveland Clinic’s "Pink Vaccine" research program to find a preventative vaccine for breast cancer, led by Dr. Vincent Tuohy (http://www.prevention.com/health/health-concerns/coming-breast-cancer-vaccine). Both fans of and participants in the race sent messages to the organizers expressing their appreciation of the event’s direct support of a research project.

[2.5] From 2012 to 2015, attendance at the events and associated donations increased steadily, with at least 2,454 players participating in the 2015 event and raising US$4,107 for the Pink Vaccine. In 2016, Blizzard Entertainment, the game company that owns World of Warcraft, itself promoted the race, with an official Web page about the event (https://worldofwarcraft.com/en-us/news/20324669) and social media posts (https://www.facebook.com/Warcraft/posts/10154505510379034:0). Whether because of this additional "official" marketing or word of mouth from previous participants, in 2016 the total number of participants increased to 2,868 and the donation total rose above US$5,000 (totals available at http://ccf.convio.net/goto/gnomerun2k16). To date, the RotG has raised nearly US$13,000 for the Pink Vaccine. Additionally, the race has spawned other similar events for charity; one such event is the Running of the Trolls, organized by the same team in 2015 in support of the LGBT teen suicide prevention charity the Trevor Project (http://www.thetrevorproject.org/). This particular spin-off event has raised over US$2,000 in two years and drawn approximately 1,000 players to its events.
The participants in the RotG are not just regular WoW players who take a break from their gaming routine to participate; Dravinna, the primary organizer of the RotG, explains,

We get a lot of returning players. I have a lot of friends who don’t normally play on the US realms show up, and friends who haven’t played in a long time resub [i.e., resubscribe to the game]. I also see a lot of people on reddit consider resubbing for the event, as well as twitter and tumblr. People will roll [create] trial accounts, but also a lot of people will buy the game time... to attend the event. Also I’ve noticed that about half of my friends who attend the event who haven’t played for awhile will stick around and play for some time before stopping their play time again... We do get some people who have never played before attending the event. Friends and family members of WoW players most often who hear about the event. (Interview with Dravinna, July 3, 2015)

Two factors help the event reach so many players and succeed in raising both awareness and funds: its transformative nature and the effect of collective action on both the virtual world and the off-line world. These two factors will be explained in depth in the following sections.

3. A transformative event fit for the world (of Warcraft)

The first factor that contributes to the success of the event is the culture of transformative events built into the ecology of WoW. Tisha Turk and Joshua Johnson (2012) described fan practices as an ecology, that is, "a system (or series of systems) within which all fans participate in various ways." Online games like WoW are also an ecology in the way the "various elements—from code to rhetoric to social practices and aesthetics—cohabit and populate the game world" (Salen 2008, 2). The ecology of games like WoW has the "participatory and social nature of gaming at its core," meaning that the players of the game, like fans who participate in a fandom, occupy multiple roles that interact with and influence each other. The developers of World of Warcraft have historically transformed off-line occurrences into online events, and players and fans of the game are familiar with the practice and regularly engage with these events. By following this model, the RotG fit into the ecology of WoW. Like the game's developers, fans were able to transform an off-line occurrence, in this case a charity race, into a popular online event.

I define the RotG as a transformative work under the definition provided by the Organization for Transformative Works: "A transformative work takes something extant and turns it into something with a new purpose, sensibility, or mode of expression" (http://www.transformativeworks.org/faq/). This aligns with the United States Supreme Court's definition of a transformative work as a work that "adds something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the [source] with new expression, meaning, or message" (Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music). This type of transformation is enabled by the culture of transformative events embedded in the ecology of WoW.

Players of WoW are used to having off-line or real-world events brought into their game. Developers are constantly importing events and people from popular culture and the daily news headlines into the game universe. Holidays are held that resemble their off-line counterparts, such as Hallow's End (Halloween) and Lunar Festival (Chinese New Year), even including in-game items and events analogous to those that happen off-line (such as trick-or-treating in Hallow’s End and lighting firecrackers and honoring ancestors during the Lunar Festival). These events were all created by the game's developers, although their success is fueled by player participation. In importing and adapting these real-world events, the developers transformed them to fit them into the culture and setting of the game. For example, one transformative aspect of the in-game holidays is the Achievements list that accompanies each celebration (Bell, Sheth, and Kaiser 2013). Players can accomplish in-game tasks, set by the developers, and receive rewards like in-game pets, costumes, or titles; many players devote considerable energy to these tasks, effectively taking a holiday from their other in-game activities. However, celebrating the Lunar Festival online is not the same thing as celebrating Chinese New Year off-line; although the two share some similarities, the transformative aspect of bringing the event into a virtual world renders it a separate and different experience altogether.

Charity donations are supported by the game itself through in-game purchases; for example, in 2014, Blizzard Entertainment launched a program by which players could purchase an in-game pet and the entire purchase price was donated to the American Red Cross in support of relief efforts for the Ebola crisis (https://worldofwarcraft.com/en-us/news/16655152/coming-soon-adopt-a-pet-for-charity). Players could display this pet as proof of their philanthropy, connecting an off-line charity act to an online display. This transformative incorporation of off-line events and charitable
donations into the game helped make the game ecology friendly to players doing the same. The RotG is one such player-created event. It was originally subtitled “Gnome Race for the Cure,” an obvious reference to the off-line event that inspired it, and it was intended to be accessible to people who could not participate in the Komen Foundation’s Race for the Cure. Dravinna explained, "I was unable to go to my usual Race for the Cure events because I was sick so frequently with migraines. I thought perhaps other members couldn't as well perhaps because of money, illness or time constraints. I've discovered that from what people have told me [at the events] this truly is the case for them."

[3.5] However, bringing this event to the digital world was a transformative process. While participants in the off-line events wear pink clothing and adorn themselves with pink ribbons, the players of WoW created brand new gnome avatars with pink hair and pink tabards with a heart-shaped design. (Participants have used this symbol in more places than just their tabards, for example by forming all the gnomes into a giant heart shape at the end of the race [figure 1].)

![Figure 1. Heart formation created by participants in RotG 2014. World of Warcraft, copyright Blizzard Entertainment. Screenshot by the author.][image]

[3.6] The "small change" pledge system of the RotG is based on the number of participants, not on the distance run. Therefore, a player can increase the total donation just by joining in the race; they need not donate themselves or pay an entrance fee, such as the one required to participate in an off-line Race for the Cure. The fact that an individual can make a difference in this way contributed to the collective nature of the event, which led to the effects outlined in the following section.

[3.7] The parameters of the off-line Race for the Cure were changed enough in its transformation into the Running of the Gnomes that most participants do not immediately see the relationship between the two. The RotG is a transformative event in that it transforms an extant event (the Race for the Cure) into a new mode of expression (a virtual world, with all of its associated distinctions from the physical world) with a new sensibility (collective action by the mass of participants rather than individuals) and, after its initial years, a new message (preventing breast cancer through research into a vaccine, rather than raising funds to cure breast cancer and support victims). Another transformative aspect of the RotG is its disruptive nature; one of its primary effects is to disrupt the game experience for other players, reminding them of off-line concerns and obligations. This disruption requires the collective action that the event is predicated upon as well as the interacting modes of communication and play in the game’s ecology, and creates the (h)activist outcomes of the RotG.

[3.8] The RotG will evolve on October 17, 2017, when it will be formally incorporated into WoW as a one-day event called "The Great Gnomeregan Run" alongside its other holidays (http://www.wowhead.com/news=263333/the-great-gnomeregan-run-7-2-5-early-preview). The holiday will feature a quest to complete the race and nonplayer characters (NPCs) with the iconic pink hair and clothing associated with the RotG. This incorporation was facilitated by Dravvie and the game’s developers; the race event and charity components will remain player-organized with in-game infrastructure to support the event. Whether official incorporation of the event will change the (h)activist nature or the charitable foundation of RotG is a question for future study.
4. (H)activism and collective action

[4.1] Before describing the (h)activist nature of the RotG, I must offer some background in digital activism. Jones (2006), describing mediated citizenship, has argued that a move toward interacting through online media has opened up possibilities for activism that do not involve physical presence. Since fan communities thrive on the use of digital media, the fannish environment is already ripe with potential for digital activism. Zoonen (2005) has described the similarities between the actions of fans who are emotionally invested in their chosen fandom and the actions that underlie democratic citizenship. Fans connect around shared media experiences, and some organizations of fans extend their experience in fandom by taking up activism that speaks to central tenets of their canon. Prior studies of fan activism have centered on the organization of fans around a central celebrity figure and the message of their medium. Examples of this are political engagement by fans of Stephen Colbert (Schulzke 2012) and support of feminist causes by fans of Joss Whedon’s various television shows (Cochran 2012). Jenkins (2012) has studied the activism promoted by the Harry Potter Alliance, a fan-created organization with 501(c)3 nonprofit status in the United States, which has had success by drawing parallels between the stories of the Harry Potter universe and real-world concerns and struggles.

[4.2] These studies show how fan cultures can have an impact on off-line concerns, and vice versa. In 2007, after the death of Du’a Khalil Aswad in Iraq, Joss Whedon encouraged his fans to support Equality Now. Tanya Cochran (2012) showed how fans of Whedon’s television shows felt that their activism was an extension of the themes and messages that they connected to in the shows: "through their activism, many enthusiasts of the Whedonverses extend the worlds of Whedon’s stories by consciously constructing a sociopolitical, feminist identity." Bethan Jones (2012) has shown how fans of The X-Files, particularly of Gillian Anderson and her character Dana Scully, have been similarly motivated to activism, in the form of purchasing fan-made items with their money going to charity. Some fans in Jones’s study said that their mutual adoration of the character was what inspired and motivated them to participate in these charitable events.

[4.3] Digital activism can thus inspire fans to act in the off-line world. It can also be disruptive, and such activist disruptions have been dubbed "hacktivism" or "electronic civil disobedience." Manion and Goodrum (2000, 14) write that electronic civil disobedience "does not condone violent or destructive acts against its enemies, focusing instead on nonviolent means to expose wrongs, raise awareness, and prohibit the implementation of perceived unethical laws by individuals, organizations, corporations or governments." Electronic civil disobedience is distinguished from digital (or electronic) activism in this way:

[4.4] If a US citizen wishes to speak out against the government's actions in Kosovo, it is legal to publish a Web site or host mailing lists or chat rooms for this purpose. This activity does not constitute an act of civil disobedience, electronic or otherwise. These types of activity are usually referred to as "electronic activism," which uses the Internet in fully legitimate ways to publish information, coordinate effective action, and to directly lobby policy makers. Running a program such as FloodNet, however, that posts the reload command to a Web site hundreds of times a minute, constitutes an act of symbolic ECD since the intended aim of such programs is to create an electronic disturbance akin to a sit-in or blockade. (Manion and Goodrum 2000, 15)

[4.5] A more recent term for electronic civil disobedience, hacktivism ("a combination of the terms hacking and activism" [Held 2012, 19]), is a popular term for the act of disrupting an online system of some sort in order to advance a particular cause. Hacktivism is defined by Manion and Goodrum (2000, 14) as the "(sometimes) clandestine use of computer hacking to help advance political causes." Hacktivists are not motivated by financial gain, but rather have political reasons for their civil disobedience—protests against governments and corporations prime among them (McLaurin 2012). An important distinction exists between hacktivism and cyberterrorism, the latter of which can be defined as "highly damaging computer-based attacks...against information systems...to intimidate or coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are political or social" (Denning 2006, 124). One example of cyberterrorism is shutting down critical national infrastructures (e.g., transportation and government operations) (Weimann 2005, 130). One example of a hacktivist group is Anonymous, which originally started as a group of online trolls but then developed into something different and divorced from trolling culture (Phillips 2015). Hacktivist efforts are often positioned as more of a nuisance than a threat, intended to gain attention through calls to action such as
signing petitions, donating money, and sharing information (Lindgren and Lundström 2011). Manion and Goodrum argue that hacktivism is a form of civil disobedience if it displays the following traits:

[4.6]

- No damage done to persons or property
- Non-violent
- Not for personal profit
- Ethical motivation—i.e., the strong conviction that a law is unjust, unfair, or to the extreme detriment of the common good
- Willingness to accept personal responsibility for outcome of actions

(Manion and Goodrum 2000, 15)

[4.7] On the basis of these definitions, I argue that the RotG, while not framed as hacktivism by its organizers, contains aspects of hacktivist culture. The collective nature of the event, with thousands of players convening on one digital space, has a disruptive effect on the gameplay of others, analogous to that of a sit-in or blockade as described by Manion and Goodrum. Players who are not aware of the event are often surprised as a large group of gnomes runs through their area; sometimes they join the event out of curiosity and learn about the charity cause along the way. One example was recounted on Reddit in 2013 (figure 2).

Figure 2. Comment on Reddit in 2014 about the Running of the Gnomes. From https://www.reddit.com/r/wow/comments/1p3z2t/oh_goodness_just_two_more_days_until_running_of/. [View larger image.]

[4.8] As well as concentrating many gnomes in one small space, the participants also disrupt the local conversation in the chat channels. The path of the race leads through two major cities in WoW, Ironforge and Stormwind City, and as players enter these cities they are able to join the large chat channels devoted to them, as well as Trade Chat, a multilocation channel. Many players on the server participate in these channels, and the participants in the race take advantage of this. Messages about the event itself as well as exhortations to have annual check-ups and learn about self-examination for breast cancer flood these chat channels, demonstrating participants' strong conviction that the event is important. Participants also sometimes share personal stories about recovering from breast cancer or about family members who have battled cancer in these chat channels. In an interview about the event, Dravinna said that such stories had the most powerful impact on the online community:

[4.9] At first I wasn’t really certain what it would do, until I had the chance to see what people were yelling as they were running or typing in guild chats. I think for people who have lost someone, or are going through the process of having someone who is sick with any form of cancer, seeing so many people together from so many locations, even the EU realms rolling starter edition accounts can make people feel like they aren’t alone. A lot of people will say that they’ve beat cancer, or shout that they’re there in memory of a person. And for a moment they aren’t shouting into the void. It’s the expression of love and support as a community. We don’t often see it, so seeing it in a large fashion is deeply powerful for people.

(Interview with Dravinna, July 3, 2015)

[4.10] The donation link and information about the vaccine research project are also shared in the chat channels, to direct interested parties to the charity. Players not involved in the RotG are often frustrated by the "spam" in the chat channels, while others complain about the resulting lag on the server. Some cheer on the gnomes or move to join the run themselves. This is one way that the RotG group collects "escorts,” or higher-level players who follow the herd of gnomes to protect them from hostile creatures that may attack and even kill the low-level characters.

[4.11] Beyond disrupting the visual space of the game’s world and the chat channels, the RotG also disrupts the physical infrastructure of the game. Participants in the race, and even the organizers (though they maintain that it is "not our intent"), react with glee as lag increases in the areas where thousands of players overload the servers’ capacity
to handle them. The 2014 RotG event caused the *WoW* server to crash under its strain, which is arguably prohibited by the game’s Terms of Use and can result in account suspensions and other punishments (note 2). In 2016, even with the game’s developers aware of the event and the potential server strain, the game still crashed at least 14 times early in the race, although it eventually stabilized with the assistance of Blizzard’s server engineers (https://twitter.com/Noxychu/status/787418091865018368). This shutdown of infrastructure is an example of hacktivism’s disruptive effects, analogous to the disruption of infrastructure described by Weimann and by Denning in discussing cyberterrorism but targeting noncritical systems. It also embodies another transformative aspect of the event: the off-line race often disrupts infrastructure by shutting down roads to traffic, and this disruption is transformed into a disruption in the digital space, in which the RotG calls attention to itself by interfering with the flow of play and the availability of servers.

[4.12] Both participants in the RotG and players who are not participating may express annoyance at the disruption it causes, but they also often admire its ability to involve so many people as to cause a server shutdown (see, e.g., http://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/18706418268?page=13#post-254). However, no permanent damage is done to the servers, and they are usually easily restarted within a few minutes. The organizers of the event and many of the participants insist that the point of the event is to bring people together, not to shut down the servers, but they have also expressed willingness to “take the ban” if Blizzard decides to enforce its Terms of Use. This has never happened; in fact, in 2016, the engineers who worked on the servers were ready and willing to help and did not fault the participants for the strain levied on the servers (https://twitter.com/SeTec9/status/787464135034277888). But the strain is nonetheless caused by the increasing size of the event, and it has consequences for the game developers and other players. The popularity of the event, along with the strain and server disruption it brings, has led Blizzard Entertainment to officially incorporate the RotG course into *WoW* as a one-day holiday event in October 2017. With in-game infrastructure for the event, the server load may be reduced and the game may not crash, as it has in previous years. The ultimate outcome of the server disruption, then, is the incorporation of the event into the game itself across all game servers rather than its being isolated on one server for one span of time. The impact of this in-game incorporation on the charitable outcome of the event is a subject for future study.

[4.13] One particular component of the event stands out as a signal of its nonviolent nature. After the completion of the run from Stormwind City to Booty Bay, many participants attempt to invade the Horde capital of Orgrimmar (an enemy city) using only these low-level gnomes. Upon entering the city, the gnomes are almost instantly attacked by the high-level nonplayer character (NPC) guards and killed. Yet the purpose of the invasion is not to conquer the enemy city, but rather to approach the NPC leader of the opposing faction and perform an in-game emote. Some players choose the /hug emote (resulting in a display such as “Gnomeracer hugs Thrall”) while others choose other amusing emotes such as /lick (“Gnomeracer licks Thrall”). These players who succeed are inevitably killed by the guards or the enemy players, but the digital corpses and skeletons remain behind as a notice to the enemy players that the event came to their city peacefully.

[4.14] The fact that the disruption is caused by the sheer number of players and not by any actions that could be classified as hacking is the reason that I have described the event as (h)activism. It follows Manion and Goodrum’s definition of hacktivism as a form of electronic civil disobedience by not damaging people or property (the servers, although overloaded, are often easily brought back online), being nonviolent (relying on conversations and presence, even when digitally "attacking" the enemy faction), not involving personal profit (the event is entirely motivated by charitable contributions), and being motivated by ethical considerations (preventing breast cancer), as well as by the participants’ and organizers’ willingness to accept responsibility for its outcomes. It does not go as far as cyberterrorism, following Weimann’s and Denning’s descriptions, because its disruption targets noncritical systems and is a nuisance rather than a danger.

[4.15] However, the event does not rely on the technical skills traditionally involved in hacking. Rather, the disruption it brings is caused by presence, much as off-line activism relies on the bodies of protesters blocking pathways or showing solidarity. The RotG, therefore, also transforms civil disobedience into a disruption that fits within this particular virtual world.

5. Conclusion
The annual RotG in WoW is a transformative (h)activist event, enabled by the game’s transformative ecology and by its players’ propensity for collective action. In this work, I have described how this event is transformative, as well as the aspects of the game’s ecology that have led to its success.

The event is transformative in three ways. First, it transforms an off-line event, the Race for the Cure, into an online event situated in a virtual world with alterations appropriate to a virtual world. It keeps components of the off-line event, such as the idea of running along a defined route, as in a race. The changes made in adapting it to the virtual world align with the capabilities of an online environment that differentiate it from the physical world. They include creating new virtual bodies with specific characteristics (gnomes with pink hair) to participate in the event, and creating digital artifacts of its presence, such as chat channel spam, heart-shaped formations, and corpses and skeletons littering the ground. These changes made to transform the Race for the Cure into the Running of the Gnomes parallel some of the changes made by the game developers as they incorporated off-line holidays and celebrities into the game’s world. By following this model, the RotG fits into the game ecology familiar to players and encourages further transformation, for example the creation of spin-off events like the Running of the Trolls to benefit the LGBT teen charity the Trevor Project. The culmination of this transformation is official incorporation of the RotG event into a WoW holiday in October 2017. The virtual world setting also allows participation by those who are not able to participate in the off-line Race for the Cure events. This increased opportunity for participation is related to the second transformative aspect.

The second transformative aspect is the nature of the fundraising associated with the event. This transformation changed the pledge system to be based on the number of participants, in order to encourage collective action. With this change, individuals can contribute to the fundraising efforts even if they cannot donate themselves. This form of fundraising encourages collective action, which leads to opportunities for the third transformative aspect.

The third transformative aspect is the nature of the activism itself. The disruption caused by the RotG is not due to any one individual or any actual hacking of the WoW servers. Rather, it is enabled by the collective action of the participants and the very nature of the event itself. Because the event takes a large number of players through a virtual world, disruptions happen in the areas where other players are located, in the chat channels where they interact, and in the server infrastructure that crashes after being overloaded by thousands of players occupying the same digital space. Participation in this disruptive activity leads to charitable contributions, whether because a player makes a donation directly or because they are among the masses used to calculate the amount of a donation in the "small change" program. Situated somewhere between activism and hacktivism, the RotG calls attention to itself and its cause by disrupting the playing experience of other WoW players. In 2017, after its official incorporation into WoW as a holiday, requiring special infrastructure spread across all servers, it has disrupted the game itself.

6. Acknowledgements

I would like to gratefully acknowledge Ashleigh Ayn Sult both for her help with supplying details, information, corrections, and inspiration for this paper and for her drive to make this event grow and change every year. And, most effusively, I thank and acknowledge the organizers, volunteers, and participants in the RotG for the annual infusion of meaning and community into the game.

7. Notes


2. Section 7C of the WoW terms of use states that "certain acts...are considered serious violations of these Terms of Use. Those acts include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following: (i) Using or exploiting errors in design, features which have not been documented, and/or 'program bugs' to gain access that is otherwise not available, or to obtain a competitive advantage over other players; (ii) Conduct prohibited by the EULA or elsewhere in these Terms of Use; and (iii) Anything that Blizzard considers contrary to the 'essence' of the Game" (http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/legal/wow_tou.html).
8. Works cited


Fan fiction in the library

Ludi Price and Lyn Robinson

City, University of London, London, United Kingdom

Abstract—Although several notable collections of fan fiction exist in libraries, such as the Sandy Hereld Fanzine Collection at Texas A&M University (http://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/149935) and the digital fanzine archives at the University of Iowa (http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/sc/resources/fandomresources/), not much attention is given to the systematic selection, acquisition, indexing, preservation, and sharing of fan works in the UK, considering the popularity of fandom, the volume of creative work that exists, and the rate at which new texts are produced. Here we present the results of an investigation into the extent to which UK libraries collect and manage fan fiction, and our attempts to ascertain the reasons underlying collection policy in local, public, special, academic, and national institutions. Our report is based on a review of recent literature, an analysis of the collection policies of a selection of UK libraries, and a brief survey of the views of Library & Information Science students. The empirical work was carried out in spring 2016. Results show that there is a little-known and less-understood dark side to fan fiction, in regard to how it is understood and valued in the library sector, which feeds a widening gap in our cultural heritage.

Keywords—Archives; Collection policy; Fan works; Fanzine; UK libraries


1. Introduction

Although several notable collections of fan fiction exist in libraries, such as the Sandy Hereld Fanzine Collection at Texas A&M University (http://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/149935) and the digital fanzine archives at the University of Iowa (http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/sc/resources/fandomresources/), not much attention is given to the systematic selection, acquisition, indexing, preservation, and sharing of fan works, despite the popularity of fandom, the volume of creative work that exists, and the rate at which new texts are produced. That the most significant collections are in the US is likely to be because of the greater number and better resourcing of US research libraries, rather than to any difference in viewpoint between the US and UK library communities. Here we present the results of an investigation into the extent to which UK libraries collect and manage fan fiction, and our attempts to ascertain the reasons underlying collection policy in local, public, special, academic, and national institutions. We take fan fiction to be the specifically creative writing component of the larger area of fan work, which encompasses a variety of document formats, including artwork, video, animation, music, costume, poetry, installations, 3D worlds, and others.

It should be noted at the outset that collecting fan works does not necessarily mean promoting them, storing them with other items in the library’s collection, or making them as easy to access as other items. They may be collected for archival purposes or in support of research and advanced study (as at Texas A&M and the University of Iowa), rather than for the more general entertainment, leisure, or cultural reasons that would be the remit of the public library. They may be kept in special collections or housed in a designated library or department, with different procedures for access and circulation. Conversely, their use may be promoted by special library events and presentations, aimed as much at the general public as at specialists; and even if a library does not collect fan works, its staff may direct users to other collections and sources, including online. These different ways of handling fan works form the backdrop to this study.

Our findings should be relevant to a variety of audiences: fans interested in finding, reading, or otherwise engaging with fan works for enjoyment, reference, or research; archivists and library and information professionals...
wishing to establish, preserve, or refer to collections of fan works; scholars researching fandom, fan studies, or the wider realm of speculative fiction; educators interested in the ways in which engaging with fan works can encourage creativity and intellectual development; fan and professional authors; media and entertainment industry professionals; community leaders interested in the sort of worlds people wish to create; and anyone who is concerned with collecting and preserving a significant part of our cultural heritage.

2. Background and data collection

[2.1] Over the past five years, media reporting on fan-related news and issues has increased, doubtless fueled by the encroaching of a previously niche domain into mainstream concerns, including copyright and publishing. The media, education, library, and policy development industries have all shown interest in fan culture. See, for example, Duan 2015; Evans et al. 2016; Frisbie 2016; Grady 2016; Johnson 2016; Lieu 2016; Miller 2015; and Van der Sar 2016.

[2.2] Together with this expanding reportage, zine or fanzine collections have been established at the London College of Communication (http://www.arts.ac.uk/study-at-ual/library-services/collections-and-archives/london-college-of-communication/), the British Library (http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/news/zines(part1)/zines1.html), and the Glasgow Women’s Library (https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2013/09/04/zine-collection/), as well as elsewhere in the UK and the US. But despite this, memory institutions (mainly libraries and archives) in the UK seem to devote little attention to discussing and engaging with fan works, or to developing fan fiction collections and policies for their management.

[2.3] In order to gather some empirical evidence about the extent to which the library and information science (LIS) discipline and profession considers fan fiction worthy of attention, we carried out a small investigation comprising a literature review, an examination of a sample of collection policies, and a survey of members of our library school cohort.

[2.4] To cover the LIS literature where information on fan fiction collections is likely to be found, we searched the two most relevant databases—Library and Information Science Abstracts and Library and Information Science Technology Abstracts—and supplemented them with searches on Google Scholar. We looked for any use of the terms “fans,” “fan fiction,” “fan works,” “fanzines,” and also the broader “zines,” in the context of “libraries” and “collections.” (We searched for both singular and plural forms, and for both one- and two-word forms, where relevant.) We considered all material mentioning fan fiction to be relevant, and selected representative items from material dealing with zines and with library interaction with fans.

[2.5] Then we searched the Web for collection development and management policies in UK libraries (and also received one in hardcopy that was not available online). We examined a selection of them, representing different sectors of libraries, for references to fan works. This process is biased toward those libraries that have a formal collection policy available online; this is likely to exclude smaller libraries, such as school libraries and smaller special and volunteer libraries. Also, of course, libraries may collect fan works ad hoc without mentioning them in a formal collection policy, and fan works may be subsumed under a more general category, as graphic novels often are (Slater and Kardos 2017). However, an institution’s mentioning a particular kind of material in a collection policy indicates that it acknowledges that material’s importance, and it is the formal acknowledgment and collection of fan fiction that we address here.

[2.6] We see that there is a noticeable body of fan work and interest in it, and yet the LIS community shows little acknowledgment of this in collection policies and internal processes. In order to understand this paradox, we invited both alumni of the Library School at City, University of London, and fellow students there (those registered in the academic year 2015–16) to complete a short online questionnaire about fan fiction, arguably the most well-known type of fan work. Our cohort represents the next generation of library and information professionals, and their views on fan fiction probably indicate future collection policy. We solicited respondents via Twitter—using the department’s Twitter hashtag, #citylis—and via postings on its e-learning environment (Moodle) bulletin board.

[2.7] The questionnaire was conducted through eSurvey Creator (https://www.esurveycreator.com/) and comprised 13 questions, collecting quantitative and qualitative data. The first three questions were demographic, asking about the respondents’ gender, age, and nationality. The rest dealt with their knowledge of fan fiction and their attitude toward libraries’ collecting it. Four of these were to be answered only by respondents who had heard of fan fiction before matriculating at City. Another three were open questions, asking for qualitative data (“Please describe, in your own words, what you understand by the term ‘fan fiction,’” “When did you first hear about fan fiction, or understand what it was?” and “Do you think libraries, archives, or other institutions should collect fan fiction?”).
From 45 current students and the unknown number of alumni who may have seen the survey promoted on Twitter, we garnered 25 respondents. Since the survey was anonymous, it is impossible to say how many were current students and how many alumni; however, since Moodle and the Twitter hashtag are most actively used by current students, it can be assumed that most of the respondents were from the current cohort. Of them, 22 (88%) had heard of fan fiction before beginning their studies. The gender split was even, with 13 women and 12 men. Ages ranged between 20 and 40, with the greatest concentration—11 respondents—between 25 and 30. Most were British, but there were two Americans, one Spaniard, and one Korean.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Neither the literature of fan studies nor that of LIS contains much material on library and archival collection of fan fiction or other fan works. This confirms our belief that the topic is overlooked by the mainstream LIS sector, and that there is little dialogue between the LIS discipline and the fan community.

3.2 In our LIS database searches, we found only a few mentions of fan fiction in library collections, with rather more peripherally relevant items dealing with offering services to fans and with collections of zines in general, rather than fanzines specifically. The only article to deal solely and directly with fan fiction collections is 18 years old (Hart et al. 1999). Its authors noted that many library and information practitioners ignored fan-produced materials on the grounds that much was ephemeral, and that the majority fell outside normal bibliographic control. Our review suggests that this remains true today; Hart et al.'s appeal for information professionals to become better informed about fan literature and its potential as a resource for public and academic libraries seems to have been generally ignored.

3.3 More recent articles focusing on collections that include fan fiction deal with particular collections, such as the Sandy Hereld zine collection (Brett 2013, 2015) and the speculative fiction collection at the University of Iowa (Chant 2015). Hart et al. 1999 is shown as cited once in Web of Science and 12 times in Google Scholar, but none of the citing articles discuss fan fiction collections.

3.4 Betsy Martens (2011) included fan fiction in what is called the "anti-collection," archives and collections not maintained by the main memory institutions. In this case, fan fiction collections form a part of the transformative sector, which Martens describes as a place in which "creative information objects are continuously being reused and renewed" (574). Such collections are organized and maintained by fans themselves. Indeed, fans do an excellent job of collecting and organizing fan works; some online collections, such as the Archive of Our Own (http://archiveofourown.org/), rival professional digital archives. Nonetheless, most such collections rely on ad hoc funding and resources, which are often personal and can disappear overnight. As Abigail de Kosnik puts it, "Digital objects are even more prone to sudden disappearance than physical ones—a hosting company can decide not to host your fan fiction works anymore, or an archivist can ‘flounce’ from their archive and simply shut it down, or a social media platform can opt to delete fanfic stories without notifying anyone, or servers can simply crash" (Jenkins 2016).

3.5 The literature suggests several reasons why fan fiction is largely ignored by libraries, of which the most significant are that fan works are "not proper books" and that they cannot be easily fitted into library structures and processes. These ideas are visible in comments about fan fiction on GoodReads (https://www.goodreads.com/), a book review site:

3.6 I thought this site was for real books. Is there any way to restrict my searches to avoid this stuff?

3.7 I thought this site was for reviews about books that I could get from the library.

3.8 These commenters might, in fact, enjoy fan fiction, but they believe that it is less appealing than commercially published works, particularly if they are not familiar with it. This lack of awareness and understanding is probably shared by many librarians, present and past, including those who created the bulk of existing library collections and collection development practices. This sets up a vicious circle: libraries don’t collect fan fiction because their patrons don’t expect it to be there because they know libraries don’t collect it.

3.9 Furthermore, fan fiction, like other unconventional literature, is not usually formally published. Fan works lack ISBNs and similar identifiers, are not available through the usual acquisition processes, vary in format and quality, are not reviewed in the sources libraries usually refer to, are not provided with metadata by centralized bodies, and so on. It therefore poses problems for the usual library collection and management processes, such as selection, acquisition,
cataloguing, organization, and preservation (Hart et al. 1999). The literature review shows that these issues are being addressed for the zine genre in general (Freedman 2006; Koh 2008; Gardner 2009; Lynn 2013; Brett 2015), and also for media such as graphic novels (Slater and Kardos 2017), and this may influence policy on fan works in the future. Developments in cataloguing practices for such materials should also help (Freedman 2006; Lember, Lipkin, and Lee 2013). Copyright and intellectual property issues are also problematic for fan works, as we discuss below.

[3.10] Despite these difficulties, libraries are becoming increasingly interested in catering to fans as users (Pearson 2006; Brenner 2013), in recommending sources and examples of fan fiction (Griffis and Jones 2008; Philpot 2014), in using fan fiction for literary instruction (Kell 2009), and in running in-library fan events (Rogers-Whitehead 2015; Atkinson 2015). However, the collecting of fan works by libraries remains very limited and underdeveloped.

[3.11] Library collection policies govern all aspects of creating and maintaining a collection, including selection, acquisition, accessioning, preservation, provision of access, and weeding or disposal of items. They are governed by the basic questions of what purpose the collection serves and for whom it is being maintained. Answers to these questions will differ, of course, between types of library, but since fan works have a distinctive nature, we might expect that any library that considers fan works important will mention them specifically in its policies.

[3.12] And yet, the results of our (admittedly small-scale) survey are clear. Fan works are not mentioned in the collection policies of UK libraries, either positively (to be collected) or negatively (to be excluded). Table 1 lists 10 libraries, representing the national, academic (old and new institutions), public, and special library sectors, whose policies we examined; none makes mention of fan works. Nor did any of the other 30 collection policies we examined; the 10 shown here are examples of detailed policies that might be expected to mention fan works if such were included.

Table 1. Links to library policies, none of which mentions fan works

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Library</th>
<th>Policy Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British Library (including Web archive)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bl.uk/aboutus/stratpolprog/coldevpol">http://www.bl.uk/aboutus/stratpolprog/coldevpol</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Library of Scotland</td>
<td><a href="https://www.nls.uk/about/partnerships/rarebooksinscotland/colldev">https://www.nls.uk/about/partnerships/rarebooksinscotland/colldev</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University College London Library</td>
<td><a href="https://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/about/strategies-policies/cmp/policy">https://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/about/strategies-policies/cmp/policy</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of London Libraries and Archives (policy not online; provided by library)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tameside public libraries</td>
<td><a href="http://www.tameside.gov.uk/TamesideMBC/media/libraries/stockpolicy.pdf">http://www.tameside.gov.uk/TamesideMBC/media/libraries/stockpolicy.pdf</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[3.13] Although their policies do not mention fan works, some libraries do have collections of fan works, usually fanzines, or zines in general. The British Library has a large collection of mostly counterculture and niche zines; the Glasgow Women’s Library has a zine collection focusing on zines by, for, and about women; and the Salford Zine Library ([http://www.salfordzinelibrary.co.uk/](http://www.salfordzinelibrary.co.uk/)), which specifically collects zines, is a self-publishing archive. Although we could not find a UK collection focusing specifically on fanzines, it is worth asking how these zine collections, which often include fanzines, are acquired, in the absence of a formal collection policy. We found that the British Library acquired them through legal deposit; zines entered other libraries through donations or because the librarian or archivist was personally interested in them. These acquisition paths account for the rather minimal, and certainly ad hoc, examples of fanzine collections in UK libraries.

[3.14] As noted above, 22 of the respondents had heard of fan fiction before beginning their studies. Of them, 13 had read fan fiction themselves, 7 had written it, and 3 actively collected it. Nevertheless, only 13 of the total 25 respondents
felt that memory institutions such as libraries should collect fan fiction; 11 were unsure, and 1 felt that they should not. Figure 1 depicts responses to 6 of the 13 questions.

![Figure 1. Responses to questions 5, 7, 9, 10, 11 and 12.](View larger image.)

[3.15] This suggests that LIS students tend to be aware of and engaged with fan fiction, even if they do not fully understand its nature. Their awareness may be ascribed to its gradual encroachment into mainstream media. In response to the question "When did you first hear about fan fiction?" participant 19 said,

[3.16] It has been a gradual discovery over the past couple of years. The term seems to be part of our culture now.

[3.17] Yet despite this high level of awareness, opinion on its value as cultural heritage was mixed. Reasons for this correlated with the reasons ascertained from the literature review. One participant admitted,

[3.18] I’m torn on the subject. On the one hand it is an important cultural institution at this point, and provides wonderful insight for those studying fanworks, feminism, LGBT issues among other subjects. On the other hand, part of the reason fanfiction is so diverse and weird and sprawling is its inherent illegality and not-for-profit status. (Participant 4)

[3.19] Some respondents approved of libraries collecting fan fiction:

[3.20] Libraries should preserve fanfiction just as they would any other documents because otherwise the information those documents contain and all the potential uses that information [could] have are lost. (Participant 1)

[3.21] It holds a lot of cultural significance for the way people react to popular culture, and could be an important historical resource for the future. (Participant 3)

[3.22] It is literature, part of the cultural record. It should be preserved so it can be read for pleasure as well as studied as literature and from a social and cultural perspective. Should be available to text mine as well. (Participant 20)

[3.23] Others did not believe it necessary:

[3.24] I think online archives manage themselves well and already have great metadata and information management. (Participant 6)

[3.25] I think fanfiction as an alt representation of fictional universes, should maintain their otherness by being apart from their origin universe. Institution based libraries, archives should be for the origin universe formats, purely because i think fanfiction should be organised or curated by those that create and love it, the fans. (Participants 18)

[3.26] There is far too much of it and it is a waste of resources...And most fanfiction is only of interest to people who belong to that particular fandom and not the wider populace. (Participant 10)
Most took a nuanced stance, willing to countenance the collection of fan fiction by memory institutions with several caveats concerning its relevance, format, copyright, quality and quantity, and expertise.

Some participants felt that fan fiction’s growing cultural importance warranted attention from libraries and archives, but had concerns about its overall relevance to a library collection. Participant 12 thought that "it would need to be relevant to the collections," and participant 15 said that "it depends on the institution whether they feel they can or should collect it, and in what forms—depending on their remit, and its relevance to that, and the requirements of their users." Others made it clear they would have no objections if the collection was "in scope" and "legitimate," and if there were "sufficient grounds" for collection. Participant 23 suggested that "there is no reason to think some special libraries, archives or institution collecting them should not exist, if they have funds and resources...enough to do this job."

Most fan fiction is in digital format, which was a concern for many respondents. Participant 4 thought that a collection of fan fiction would not be viable "unless it were stored in a digital only aspect similar to the Internet Way Back machine." Participant 15 thought that "there should be some kind of formal archiving by national libraries, but would this be done for online content via web archiving?" Participant 25 noted that it "would depend on the format, I don't know how much fanfiction is printed I know a lot is available online so it would be a question of working with site owners over archiving."

Another problem is that much fan fiction is dynamic and ephemeral, often unfinished, and may be deleted at the whim of the author:

"It could be a hard thing to catalogue when it comes to a digital repository. I think it would be cool to be able to check out a physical copy of a fanfiction, but as a fanfiction writer myself, I know I have many unfinished stories out there, and even stories that I finish and then decide to go back years later and revamp. I'm not sure how a library could account for the evolving nature of fanfics." (Participant 8)

One participant offered a solution to this problem:

If free and online, then links in the OPAC [Online Public Access Catalog] (and potentially other promotion) would be required to help users find it. (Participant 12)

This middle ground allows for the digital, dynamic format of most fan fiction. The links could be to online collections, such as fan fiction archives, or to individual items; the latter would be more useful, and are probably what the respondent intended.

Copyright has been a significant obstacle to the recognition of fan fiction, and, as Hart et al. noted in 1999, is a chief reason why memory institutions have ignored it. Fan fiction uses characters and worlds derived from other works, and the authors, publishers, and others who hold copyright over the original works may not consider fan works acceptable. This lack of certainty has discouraged libraries from collecting and promoting fan works (Griffis and Jones 2008; Koulikov 2012; Christian 2013). The issue was indeed mentioned by several participants. Participant 14 asked the obvious question: "how about the copyright of the characters/intellectual property?" Participant 25 also brought up copyright issues in relation to digitally archiving fan fiction. It is interesting to note that although copyright was often mentioned, it was not discussed in depth, possibly because it is a complex issue and not well understood by LIS students. Perhaps it should be taught in LIS programs, if not within wider contexts.

The quality and quantity of fan fiction was also a significant issue. Participant 8 pointed out that "fanfiction is so huge and the quality and type varies so much (half a page songfics vs. larger works, tons of unfinished work, grammatically challenged/hard to read vs. professional level writing)." This was echoed by participant 23: "I don't think it should be necessarily and actively collected at the level of public library due to its nature; quite impromptu, ephemeral, amateurish and numerous"; and participant 5 concluded that "there's a danger it could mushroom and expand as a collection to larger than was controllable."

A few participants noted that expertise was a significant issue. Participant 10 asked, "Who gets to choose which... fanfiction is collected and which isn’t?" Some suggested that information professionals would not know enough about fan fiction to effectively collect it:

Traditional institutions tend to be very procedural in their understanding or organisation of works, I just can't see how they could do justice to the haphazard and democratic nature of fanfiction universes.
Some respondents seemed to feel that the world of LIS and fandom were inherently ill-matched—that fan fiction by its nature makes its collection a thorny issue to tackle. As quoted above, participant 8 worried that it would be difficult to catalogue; participant 4 thought it perhaps too "diverse and weird and sprawling"; and participant 6 thought that fan archives already have "great metadata and information management."

Participant 11, however, noted that if the two parties were willing to work together, both could benefit:

I think libraries being involved in collecting fanfiction would be beneficial for fans, as long as they consulted fans re: metadata, as fanfiction has its own vocabulary that laypeople might not be familiar with (e.g. fluff, AU) but that fans would expect when searching a fanfiction archive.

Overall, the majority of respondents thought that fan fiction was culturally significant enough to warrant further attention from libraries and archives. However, most expressed caution. It is undeniable that the complexity of fan fiction and other fan works is challenging to memory institutions. Yet the future information professionals we surveyed were aware of and engaged with fandom, and they might be able to bridge the gap between the two worlds. Indeed, several of them identified as fans and noted the rich taxonomies and information management strategies that fans have created and adopted. If the discipline of LIS is to turn its attention toward the collection and preservation of fan works in the future, a dialogue with fans themselves would be desirable.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The UK has no national plans or policies for the collection of fan fiction. At the institutional level, some collections of fanzines exist, but the limited extent to which a wider selection of works are collected, indexed, archived, and preserved leaves a growing gap in our cultural heritage. Fan fiction, and indeed all fan works, instantiates a significant body of creative talent across a wide variety of disciplines, including art, creative writing, poetry, and music. The technical skills needed to create fan works can be considerable, involving sound, video, animation, handicrafts, and programming, together with a high degree of Web and social media savvy. Perhaps more should be done to comprehend the scope of fan works, and to at least understand what we are not collecting.

The issues associated with the collection of fan fiction and fan works are inarguably complex. The body of work is enormous, in both digital and print formats, and institutions are pressed for resources. Funding for such collections is minimal to nonexistent. Two other topics that pose particularly significant challenges for the information professions, and that would benefit from further study, can be identified.

First is the set of questions regarding copyright and publishing. Although fan works are challenging limitations on creativity, distribution, and commercial activity, little actual change has been achieved. Moreover, the rights of the authors of the works on which fan fiction is based must be respected. While this concern has not prevented some libraries from including fan works in their collections, the lack of clarity inhibits wider collection. Greater attention should be paid to these issues in professional debates and in library and information education.

Second is the question of how we define a document. Although memory institutions include in their collections both digital media and analog images, audio, and video, the rapid multiplication of digital formats is challenging what we consider a document, and hence what we collect. Many fan works are multimodal texts, and some include video game mods, art installations, or performances. The increasingly available technologies of virtual and augmented reality offer yet more possible formats. The issue is not only whether we should collect and preserve these works, but how. Many fan works are ephemeral, and many are not compatible with the digital content management systems typically employed in libraries. Since no vendors of library systems take fan works into account, libraries wishing to provide access to such materials would have to either collaborate in building management systems for them or provide only basic retrieval and access functions.

The question of the place of fan fiction in libraries may seem simple at first, but we have brought out some of its complexity. Future studies might examine how libraries make fan works available when they do not mention them in their collections policies, particularly smaller school and public libraries, which may not have a formal collection policy. Such questions cannot be answered by either the LIS or fan studies disciplines alone. The two must work together to
more fully understand the issues. We can collaborate to develop library policies and processes that can present this important form of material to best advantage. The field of LIS can learn much from fans' innovative approaches to collecting multimodal and nontraditional documents; and perhaps future collaborative projects can allow fans access to formal institutional technology and expertise in the wider collection, presentation, and preservation of fan works.

5. Acknowledgments

[5.1] Presented in part at the Fan Studies Network Conference, University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom, June 2016.

6. Works cited


Bodies in horrifying hurt/comfort fan fiction: Paying the toll

Rachel Linn

[0.1] Abstract—Hurt/comfort (h/c) fan fiction revels in the malleability of the flesh (changing it, destroying it, manipulating it to new purpose), and some find this fascination baffling and worrisome. At its most extreme, hurt/comfort focuses on the body in pain because it assumes that the destroyed body adds immense value to the narrative. Through the ideas of Elaine Scarry and Julia Kristeva, I move the conversation beyond h/c's uneasy readership and toward the ways pain functions when it takes center stage.

[0.2] Keywords—Abject; Angst; Elaine Scarry; Francesca Coppa; Fullmetal Alchemist; H/c; Horror; Julia Kristeva; Manga; Pain; Torture


I. Introduction

[1.1] The first page of Hiromu Arakawa's manga Fullmetal Alchemist (FMA) (2001) is four panels against a black background (figure 1). In the last and largest panel, a boy kneels with his back to the viewer. Center stage is the stump of his leg, jaggedly severed above the knee. A blood trail streaks across the page and spills into the black gutter. In large, bold letters, the boy (Ed Elric) screams "He's gone...!!" Ed has just realized that his brother Al is trapped on the other side of a metaphysical gate they accidentally opened. Later, readers will learn this is the moment Ed will also give his right arm to the Gate in exchange for his brother's soul. Text scrawled in the gutter's ambiguous between space reads: "Teachings that do not speak of pain have no meaning...because humankind cannot gain anything without first giving something in return" (Arakawa 2002, 5).
This opening leaves no surprise that FMA fan fiction is full of works labeled "hurt/comfort," "angst," and "horror." Despite the popularity of hurt/comfort (h/c), the genre's readers and writers often express anxiety about these works, which Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse define as "stories, which, as the name implies, revolve around a character being injured and another character comforting him" (2006, 10–11). Judith May Fathallah, an h/c reader, documents her anxiety-ridden affection for the genre in a 2011 article.

Surely it wasn’t normal. I justified it to myself by pretending it was only the comfort part I was interested in—the making better, the reparation...That was being a normal human (normal humans shouldn’t be interested in observing pain)...I wasn’t evil. I was just wise enough to see that things had to go horribly wrong in order to get better. (2011, ¶2.1)

This theme of self-recrimination is key to Fathallah’s essay (2011, ¶3.7). Fathallah implies that finding pleasure in a character suffering is morally dubious or maybe even evil. But Arakawa asserts that struggle, pain, and loss are central to all meaningful storytelling (note 1). Narrative art almost always involves the witness of suffering. So why do h/c fans like Fathallah feel compelled to defend their pleasure? One must conclude that disquiet around h/c does not stem from the presence of pain itself but from a certain kind of pain prevalent in h/c. I believe it is the excessive emphasis on bodies, especially on bodies in pain, that drives these anxieties.

In the next section, I will argue that h/c is underresearched because it intensely scrutinizes the body and often that body’s pain. While intimatopik h/c uses pain to create a liminal space in which social constraints are tossed aside so that characters can grow intimate, whump can use it to create a liminal space in which the stability of human subjectivity is questioned. But whether or not an h/c is intimatopik or whump or a mixture of subgenres, all h/c focuses on the body. And while some scholarship has tentatively prodded these bodies, there is still very little about what these bodies are actually doing. This paper not only brings h/c’s bodies to the fore but also shows how they can function within these texts as explorations of power and metaphysical knowledge.

Fan fictions that feature extreme pain are especially useful in illuminating the relationship between writer/reader discomfort and the body in agony. Therefore, I will offer one subgenre of h/c that I call "horrifying h/c" that fixates on the body in extreme agony and (with the aid of Elaine Scarry and Julia Kristeva) explore how those bodies
are used in complicated ways. I borrow from body-centered discourses in performance and film studies to demonstrate ways in which suffering can function in extremely gruesome h/c and posit some reasons why that pain is largely ignored. To support my model of horrifying h/c, I conduct a close reading of one FMA fan fiction by Sevlow, an FMA Big Name Fan. Her archive frequently appears on favorites lists, and Sevlow’s large readership demonstrates horrifying h/c’s popularity in spite of its extreme content. The work that I will use, *Save Me* (2007), is a prototypical example of horrifying h/c.

2. An embarrassing fascination

[2.1] H/c is charged with being, as Joanna Russ puts it, "totally unlike reality" ([1985] 2014, 87). She gives this example:

[2.2] If your beloved appears at your door bleeding and battered in real life, you probably don’t feel the rush of erotic tendresse. In fact, once you’ve called for an ambulance, covered said beloved with a blanket, made sure the patient’s head is lower than the patient’s feet, and administered what medical help you can, you are far more likely to go into your bathroom and throw up. ([1985] 2014, 87)

[2.3] Russ may be right, but deriding a genre because it lacks verisimilitude is a strange art criticism. If we judged all art by this standard, we would never go to the opera. Other common critiques of h/c charge it with turning previously competent characters into sniveling wimps, reveling in the hurt with no comfort, and inventing worlds where everyone and everything is inexplicably out to destroy one character (note 2). But these critiques are not specific to h/c. They are generic criticisms that any reader might bring against any fictional work, questioning its world building, character motivation, consistency, and dramatic structure.

[2.4] None of these critiques address what makes h/c its own genre of fiction. They merely note common tropes and missteps, attributed to many of the genre’s writers. Critics have yet to address any differences between h/c and other kinds of stories that might explain its inferior status. What, then, drives h/c readers to fear their own pleasure? Since much narrative art features pain, it is not taking pleasure in observing pain but in observing a certain kind of pain that causes reader anxiety.

[2.5] The kind of pain is hinted at in Russ’s critique. In h/c, blood, battering, and the erotic are central; intense physical pain and physical need are the focus. The pain that preoccupies h/c (especially h/c labeled whump) is expressed through the body. The focus on the body only amplifies when h/c is linked with its frequent companions horror and angst. This combination creates a subgenre that I call horrifying h/c (note 3). Francesca Coppa proposes that all fan fiction is viewed as a lower class of creative expression because it focuses on bodies and values repetition more than traditional literary works do. Coppa writes, "That may sound like a failure by conventional literary standards, but if we examine fan fiction as a species of performance, the picture changes. Fan fiction’s concern with bodies is often perceived as a problem or flaw, but performance is predicated on the idea of bodies, rather than words, as the storytelling medium" (2014, 222).

[2.6] Film studies offers terminology for works concerned with the body and its excess and aptly calls these "body genres" (Clover 1987). Linda Williams categorizes pornography, melodrama, and (of significant interest to this paper) horror as examples of body genres. She argues that all three genres traditionally display the female body and elicit audience interest and excitement by promising to dissolve the distance between the displayed body and the viewer. For example, the implicit promise of pornography is to give its audience ecstatic release in tandem with the ecstasy performed by the displayed female body. Therefore, "what may especially mark these body genres as low is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen along with the fact that the body displayed is female" (1991, 4). In their excess, body genres seem to spill out over the spectator and penetrate them with sexual ecstasy or (in the case of horror) terrifying violence. In h/c, the majority of these bodies are male, further disrupting assumptions about sensation and mimicry. The controlled gaze wavers as the distance between spectator bodies and the displayed body on screen (or in fan fiction) is questioned by the extreme sensations that spectators experience as they watch.

[2.7] Sara K. Howe builds on Coppa by noting that most fan fiction jumps off from film or television. Howe calls fan creators hijackers "invading and embodying characters" who have already been embodied by actors. Therefore "fan fiction is not just an appropriation of personae or abstract, imagined characters; it is also the appropriation of actual
human bodies and voices" (2013, 74–75). Fan fiction penetrates boundaries between the literary, the performative, and the visual. As Mieke Bal notes in Narratology, there is a pervasive "hierarchical subordination of visuality to language" in the arts (2009, 165) and Linda Williams agrees that body genres in which sensation rivals story with "heavy doses of sex, violence, and emotion are dismissed...as having no logic or reason for existence beyond their power to excite" (1991, 3). Pain is the most opaque of all physical excess—the most dissociated from the reasoning mind. Because h/c emphasizes aspects of fan fiction that demotes its literary prestige, it is viewed as inferior and less deserving of close attention.

In addition to issues of class, another struggle fan fiction studies faces is a "mutual suspicion...between narratology, which emphasizes fine-grained analysis of textual features and patterns, and media and cultural studies, which have traditionally focused more on audiences, reception process, and issues of ideology" (Thomas 2011, 20). Bodies are often subordinate to the intellectual or spiritual in literature (Scarry 1985, 18), but, like performance, fan fiction is equally studied as both act and text. Therefore scholars are still finding methods to address fan fiction's performativity (Thomas 2011). Media and cultural studies view fan fiction from anthropological and sociological disciplines where works are investigated as an act, not as a work. Scholars focus on the why and the how of fan fiction, while not always addressing the what (Hellekson and Busse 2006). Issues of class, combined with issues of academic disciplines, create a scholarly void where no one asks what fan fictions do that distinguishes them from other genres (Gray 2003). Instead, scholarship fixates on the acts of writers and the responding acts of readers, deftly avoiding horrifying h/c's unsavory content. In doing so, unique and inventive attributes of the genre are overlooked.

3. Equivalent exchange

While scholars avoid unsavory bodies in h/c, Japanese anime and manga often foreground gruesome acts and physical suffering in works like Fate/Zero (2006), Berserk (1989), and Tokyo Ghoul (2011). For example, Tokyo Ghoul's protagonist Ken Kaneki is half ghoul and can regenerate parts of his body. Figure 2 shows a ghoul named Yamori cutting off Kaneki's toes and fingers over and over. Yamori tortures for no other reason than his sadistic pleasure. Still, this scene is pivotal to Kaneki's character development and even causes significant changes in his physiognomy, turning his hair white and his nails black. Repeated bodily suffering transforms him inside and out. Perhaps because these sequences are so common in Japanese anime and manga, anime fandoms are especially full of horrifying fictions. Fans of FMA have taken Arakawa's prologue statement—"Teachings that do not speak of pain have no meaning... because humankind cannot gain anything without first giving something in return" (2002, 5)—and applied it to flesh and blood just as she does.
In FMA, alchemy is ruled by certain laws. As Ed Elric explains, "The basics of alchemy is the 'equivalent exchange'! That means that to obtain something, something of equal value must be lost" (Arakawa 2002, 26). While alchemy is often just chemistry, Arakawa’s manga also makes room for exchanging the intangible, the unspeakable, and the undefinable. When the Elric brothers attempt to resurrect their mother by means of human transmutation (a forbidden branch of alchemy), the spell rebounds and pulls them through the Gate of Truth. They float beyond the Gate, all knowledge pouring through them until they are overwhelmed. But the Gate only allows alchemists to keep the amount of knowledge equivalent to the toll they pay. Edward exchanges his left leg, while Al exchanges his entire body. In the world of FMA, pieces of the body can be traded for knowledge and power. Pain can be currency. Like Arakawa’s manga, horrifying h/c fan fictions explore the exchange of pain, flesh, and blood as objects of value and power. Writers and readers of FMA horrifying h/c borrow anime and manga’s assumption that there is value in an intense focus on the body in pain. But how do these strategies work in fan fiction?

In most h/c models, the hurt comes early. This may seem obvious, but order is important. The great, earth-shattering hurt is often the inciting incident or even backstory. The fiction is built around saving the hurt character from abstractions (from fear, anger, self-loathing, and despair), not from the hurt itself. A lot of h/c takes place in locations associated with safety like hospitals, homes, or remote havens. The danger comes from within, not without. But it is the way pain influences characters that divides h/c into subgenres.

There is plenty of h/c that follows Elizabeth Woledge’s model of intimatopic slash where "it is used to enhance the eroticization of intimacy. H/c provides a plausible way for any author to depict increasing closeness between two men, because when the hero is hurt, he is at his most vulnerable. The element of hurt permits him to share intimacies that would otherwise be kept private" (2006, 110). In intimatopic h/c, the hurt can be something as trivial as the flu or something as serious as death. The vulnerable state of the (typically male) hurt character opens an opportunity for two characters to share intimate moments they would not have under other circumstances. Variations of intimatopic h/c’s have received some academic interest in relation to slash (a much more popular topic) and romantic h/c’s have received some interest in relation to erotic fan fiction (also a more popular topic). Scholarship that mentions h/c tends to focus on intimatopic, romantic h/c. Because fan fiction is still considered women’s work, exploring h/c bodies as erotic, sensual creations with sentimental tones is comfortable. Discussing the body in extreme pain without eroticizing that pain is ground less trodden.

Horrifying h/c is less discussed than are other subgenres of whump because it uses pain and suffering differently than does intimatopic h/c. Unlike intimatopic h/c, the plot does not revolve around two characters coming together but in the hurt character coming back to themselves. In a way, horrifying h/c mirrors FMA alchemy. Another alchemist in FMA, Major Armstrong, says "Deconstruction and creation are two sides of the same coin! We must tear down in order to build! That is the great law of the cosmos!" (Arakawa 2002, 303). Like alchemy, many horrifying h/c’s begin with total destruction while the fiction itself is about reconstruction. The hurt character is pushed to annihilation—taken to the Gate, their toll of flesh paid—and then they return to bear witness. As a result of this scholarly void, there isn’t language to discuss h/c where the body in pain is the focus. In the next section I will borrow language from scholars who tangle with the ambiguity of the body (whole/permeable, mortal/immortal, subject/object) in order to delve into the black gutters of horrifying h/c.

Elaine Scarry’s (1985) study on pain has been foundational in addressing extreme pain’s political use; it strives to give a coherent account of pain’s opaque structure. Scarry argues that pain is difficult to put into language because it has no language. Literary psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva’s (1982) concept of abjection partners well with Scarry’s analysis, as it addresses human responses when faced with horror. While both theorists discuss real pain and physical phenomena, they borrow heavily from art and literature to bolster their arguments. For this article, I simply ask them to return the favor and lend their discourse to illuminate how horrifying h/c literature uses the body in pain.

4. The structure of pain

Scarry proposes that one element of extreme pain is "its obliteration of the contents of consciousness. Pain annihilates not only the objects of complex thought and emotion but also the objects of the most elemental acts of
The more profoundly present a body seems, the more likely an abjected character will return with secret knowledge. They can bear witness to life’s truth, even if that truth is futile. Scarry calls the extreme position in which pain overtakes all else in the world “obliteration.” She writes, “Pain...eventually occupies the entire body and spills out into the realm beyond the body, takes over all that is inside and outside, makes the two obscenely indistinguishable, and systematically destroys anything like language or world extension” (1985, 54–55). Scarry’s narrative map gives pain a direction and an eventual position in which pain is everything.

[4.2] Kristeva gives that position a name and imagines the consequences of occupying that position. In obliteration, the hurt character becomes what Kristeva might call an unwilling “deject,” straying into the realm of abjection or the "land of oblivion" (1982, 8). FMA might call the land of oblivion the Gate of Truth. The sensation of the abject (where the subject is repulsed by a smell, the sight of blood, or a corpse in a way that cannot be positioned into the symbolic order) causes a "breaking down of a world that has erased its borders" in “the place where meaning collapses” (1982, 4). The destruction that Scarry (1985) describes in torture works with Kristeva’s concept of abjection to form the narrative structure in horrifying h/c. In horrifying h/c, the hurt character loses all boundaries as their world is swallowed by pain. The hurt character is violently forced to face the stench of infection, the taste of blood, the corpses of friends, or even his own corpse while lingering on death’s edges. It becomes increasingly difficult for the deject to constitute borders that define a position in space and time. He cannot determine what is within and what is without. For example, in the FMA horrifying h/c *Bury It Forward* (2008), Ed fills the hurt role. In the first chapter, he is mentally absent from his body. The most complicated task that he can accomplish is shelving books at random in a library. He is even incapable of speech. Ed has lost his position as a subject. Another character comments that Ed’s mindless existence is "just an extension of the torture" (KawasakiTriple 2008). Lost in the liminal space of abjection, the hurt character is boundless. Pain, along with the dissolution of the body’s supposed boundaries through abjections, has melted away subjectivity.

[4.3] The hurt character is in chaos and floats anchorless until he encounters the comforter. The comforter accepts responsibility to care for the hurt character, physically and mentally. With the comforter’s help, the hurt character must rename his obliterated world to give it meaning: for example, re instituting ideas like "this is a bed," "this is a friend," "this is not blood in my mouth." Newly forged boundaries allow the hurt character to lay claim: "this is my body"; "this is my voice." The abstractions that previously overwhelmed him are marked and therefore visible: "this is my guilt," "this is my terror," "this is my shame." The comforter acts as a sounding board that sends back the world s/he wants the hurt character to assemble (“yes, I am your friend,” "no, it is not your fault”). Complete trust in the comforter becomes an urgent need for the hurt character, and any small breach of that trust is a world-shattering betrayal.

[4.4] Some FMA fan fictions take this dissolution a step further by melding a human character with an animal, which is another forbidden branch of alchemy. In Sevlow’s *Number Twenty Eight* (2008) and Arathe’s *Dichotomy* (2007), Ed is a half dog who wars with his animal side for control of his mind and instincts. In both fictions, Roy must keep Ed from succumbing to his animal self, where he would lose language and subjectivity entirely. In *Dichotomy*, Roy repeats Ed’s name until he remembers it.

[4.5] He snatched at the knowledge, drawing it close to him. He was Edward, and that was Roy. With slow, steadfast determination he plucked bits of himself from the wreckage of the flood and held on tightly. It was by no means everything, but just enough to restore a little of his sense of self; something that had been buried deeply beneath the alien mind that was now a part of his.

[4.6] In *Dichotomy*, Ed is still himself, but he is also something more. In addition to what is lost and reconstituted, the hurt character often brings back secret knowledge from oblivion just as canon Ed Elric brings back incredible alchemic skills from the Gate. This knowledge may enlighten the hurt character, the comforter, other characters, or the reader. Jennifer Ballengee argues that the use of torture in literature as a truth-finding mechanism is an ancient and pervasive device. For Aristotle, testimony wrought through torture is indisputable. "The 'givenness' of proof gained by torture... seems to derive from its physical presence" (2009, 2). In h/c, the more profoundly present a body seems, the more likely an abjected character will return with secret knowledge. They can bear witness to life’s truth, even if that truth is futile and barren. The power of the wounded body to divulge truth in horrifying h/c can extend to other characters who witness that body. When faced with the seemingly irrefutable body of evidence, characters are forced to question their own core values. For example, in the *Tokyo Ghoul* fan fiction *The Black Tapes* by Timeless Tears (2016), ghoul hunter Amon questions whether all ghouls are evil after watching a taped session of Kaneki’s torture. Kaneki’s body in pain becomes irrefutable evidence to Amon that his worldview is wrong. The more overwhelmingly sensational that horrifying h/c’s bodies are, the more convincing the body of evidence becomes.
Coppa’s observation that fan fiction is “too narrowly focused on bodies and character” (2014, 222) is celebrated by horrifying h/c. In h/c, relationships and healing are more important than events. But a certain kind of pain is needed to fulfill horrifying h/c’s structural model. For example, a broken arm will not bring about the unmooring that detaches the hurt character from their position as a subject that Scarry and Kristeva describe. Horrifying h/c that follows this model depends on painful experiences so violently world-shattering that they propel the hurt character into another dimension and send him beyond the Gate. To reach that extreme, the agony must be physical and psychological, which is why horrifying h/c often includes taboo scenes of domestic abuse, battlefields, torture, and rape.

5. Save me, Maes

To demonstrate how extreme pain functions in an actual fan fiction and provide examples of how the reader is affected by continual reassertion of the exploded body, I will take a close look at one horrifying h/c from FMA fandom by Sevlow. Sevlow’s work shows a range of ways in which pain and the body can function in horrifying h/c (note 4). Her fictions often revolve around the popular FMA character Colonel Roy Mustang, his best friend Maes Hughes, and titular Fullmetal Alchemist Edward Elric. In her work Save Me (2007), Mustang and 60 soldiers under his command are captured by rebels in the Liore uprising. The fiction begins when Maes Hughes rescues Colonel Mustang with a wave of reinforcements 2 months later. Sevlow dedicates multiple paragraphs to describing his appearance when he’s found. His long list of injuries, his excessive weight loss, and his pale, bloodless pallor render Roy “scarcely recognizable.”

Sevlow even engages the reader’s olfactory sense, writing “he smelled like a slaughterhouse.” Mustang is awake when Maes’s rescue party finds him, but “every soldier crowded around him could see that he wasn’t really there anymore and had probably been absent for a long time, now. His dull eyes were not just blank, they were empty as if he had forgotten everything except for what it means to be in pain.” Before the fiction even begins, Colonel Mustang’s body as well as his mind have been tortured to obliteration.

Throughout the scene, Mustang’s physical agony usurps his mental state and takes center stage. Maes tries to rouse Roy but gets no response, so he slaps Roy in an attempt to bring him back. Roy responds to this physical contact by quoting the periodic table—his strategy for getting through interrogation. Even though he is no longer being tortured, Roy still responds to contact as though he were. His mind is still in the presence of his captors. Maes is distressed over his friend’s catatonic state, but his focus is drawn back to the body when he notices Roy’s fingers are broken and his fingernails bent back or removed. The body demands Maes’s attention and therefore the reader’s as well. While Roy’s catatonic state might conjure pity, the description of his bloody, mangled nail beds inspire abject disgust.

Sevlow pushes the characters as well as the reader as far as possible to abject repulsion by writing about Roy’s body in overwhelming detail. Sevlow takes time to describe Roy’s spine, fingernails, mouth, eyelids, wrists, and nose as though in extreme close-up. Readers of the manga or viewers of FMA’s shows can instantly conjure the image of Roy’s body in detail, and “when the image competes with the word, it overwhelms and dominates it, slamming against the viewer/reader’s sense before the image can be fully processed as fiction” (Keisner 2008, 413). Film theorist Laura Mulvey argues in her influential manifesto “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” that a close-up of the sexualized female body in cinema “destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative, it gives a flatness” that undermines verisimilitude (1999, 838). Here, that flatness destroys the illusion of narrative logic. It reinforces abjection’s excess and destruction of reason. Sevlow’s intense close-ups of the Colonel are reminiscent of how manga is drawn: chopped pieces of hand-rendered flesh separated by gutters. Those slim gutters can dissolve into nothing or cross vast time and space that questions borders (Gallacher 2011). Roy’s mangled pieces defy symbolic order.

Save Me’s Colonel Roy Mustang is transported to a hospital and the Liore rebels who held him are arrested by the end of the first chapter. When Maes Hughes meets with the doctor in charge of his care, a repetitious list of injuries delivered in a clinical voice reinforces and legitimizes the obliteration of Roy’s body (note 5). Once Maes takes in this information, the doctor asks Maes to formally take on the role of comforter. The doctor cautions “as his medical proxy, he needs you to help him through. Can you do it?” Of course, Maes emphatically agrees.

When Roy awakens, his mind is completely divorced from the relative physical safety of his hospital room. He hallucinates that he is still in Liore with such convincing vividness that he attacks Maes Hughes. The objects and people
that surround Roy are meaningless in the narrowness of his overwhelming pain. Subjectivity's delusions of order have been systematically stripped away. Roy cannot reinstitute boundaries between himself and the rest of the world. His pain has trapped him in the boundless abject. While Sevlow will spend a great deal of time detailing Roy's descent to this liminal position, the fiction itself revolves around Roy's fight to return from abjection and how the experience has changed him. It is less about the pain itself and more about that pain's power over him.

6. The theater of pain

[6.1] As the fiction progresses, the reader learns through flashbacks and character revelations how Roy Mustang arrived at a state of obliteration. Roy's memories follow the structure of pain as Scarry (1985) envisions it to mimic the act of creation and simulate plot. While torture often features interrogation, its purpose is rarely to extract information. A theater of power manipulates the victim's pain into a show of the totalitarian regime's dominance. Scarry argues that this use of torture is effective because pain resists translation into language. Pain is therefore ripe for manipulation by those who understand its use to the regime. Compounding this issue, the difficulty of translating pain into language keeps it hidden from the verbal world, rendering its structure and its uses invisible. Horrifying h/c exposes that structure through a relentless focus on the tortured body in agony.

[6.2] Roy's imprisonment and torture transforms his pain into a spectacular fiction of power for the Liore rebels. Their leader Jenkins cleverly builds that fiction on a partial truth. In FMA canon, Ed and Al stir unrest in Liore when they reveal that a local bishop is a charlatan. This divide becomes a citywide civil war when the bishop's followers rebel. In Save Me, Jenkins wants Roy to tell him where Ed is so that they can torture and kill him for revenge. But Jenkins is less interested in an answer than he is in torturing Roy. Roy's torture is a performance meant to bolster the rebels' confidence in their cause. Understanding this, Roy creates his own performance, disrespecting, goading, and undermining Jenkins's authority. The battle of wills between them is both personal and political. Jenkins performs for the benefit of his fighters, while Roy performs for the benefit of his fellow captured soldiers. The performative nature of Jenkins's interrogation is reinforced by their surroundings. Roy and his fellow soldiers are held in an auditorium, and the stage is his torture chamber. Jenkins grows frustrated when Roy gives him no answers after weeks of abuse. He takes a new tactic and forces Roy to choose: either tell him where Ed is or he will shoot another boy, Private Zane, in the head.

[6.3] By this point in his imprisonment, Jenkins has created a fiction of power through pain and deprivation so consuming that Roy cannot see how paper-thin the rebel hold on Liore is. If Mustang reveals Ed's location, it would be his location of weeks ago, and the Elrics are (according to canon) always on the move and essentially homeless. It's unlikely they would be there. Even if Mustang gave away that much, how would the rebels escape the city's barricades? The pain has obliterated so much of Mustang's universe that he cannot conceive of a world where Jenkins is a minor player. Roy's world has narrowed to include only his immediate surroundings, and in that context Jenkins is the most powerful being alive. In this narrowed universe, Scarry proposes, "the absence of pain is a presence of world; the presence of pain is the absence of world. Across this set of inversions pain becomes power" (Scarry 1985, 37).

[6.4] Jenkins's questioning is not meant to retrieve information. It is the excuse he needs to inflict pain. Jenkins's perpetual demand creates the illusion that the question motivates the pain, and its answer is somehow crucial, even though the reader knows the question is irrelevant (Scarry 1985). In the end Roy chooses Ed. Private Zane's death is then described in vivid detail:

[6.5] The gunshot was impossibly loud. The side of Zane's head caved in from the trauma of the entrance wound and Jenkins let him go. The body pitched forward and slumped against Roy's leg, the pulpy remains of Zane's head coming to a rest against the Colonel's thigh and coating his leg with the chunks of damaged flesh and brain tissue leaking from Zane's nose.

[6.6] Bile and horror rose in the back of Roy's throat as he feebly jerked his leg away. Overbalanced, the body slid to the floor with a wet thud.

[6.7] Sevlow bookends this section with brutal sounds. Between them is a lengthy description of Zane's corpse: its movement, look, and feel. The corpse, according to Kristeva, is the ultimate abjection. She writes, "In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away" (1982, 4). By overwhelming
the reader with body parts, Sevlow conjures up as much repulsion and abjection as she can through language. The corpse is also the ultimate evidence, and its legitimacy as evidence is brought firmly home by its accompanying horror. Roy’s guilt over Zane’s death is the hardest burden for him to settle in *Save Me*. Whether living or dead, the body has authority and weight. The more vivid the body becomes, the more that language written on that body resembles truth. As he does with all forms of Roy’s torture, Jenkins uses the power of Zane’s body to write his regime’s story and Roy’s complicity. Private Zane’s body and blood occupy Roy’s vision as it occupies the reader’s mind, pushing them both to parallel abjection.

[6.8] Violence underpins Jenkins’s performance and transforms the body’s pain into power. It does not matter that Jenkins’s power is fiction to Roy Mustang’s obliterated body. Even after his rescue, the power of Jenkins’s regime still holds Roy prisoner because his performance was bolstered by Roy’s real and vivid pain. Whenever Roy experiences physical pain under Maes’s care, his mind is immediately thrust back onto that stage. Jenkins’s fiction of power endures because Roy’s body can no longer tell the difference between torture and other stimuli.

[6.9] *Save Me* spends much of its word count in flashbacks documenting Jenkins’s constructed fiction in which he converts pain into power. He maims and controls Roy’s body, then he converts that pain into power through language and narrative. Jenkins builds his fiction through interrogation, verbal degradation, accusation and even the written word (in the final chapter, Roy realizes that Jenkins has seared his name into his back with cigarette burns). By the time Roy is rescued, he is saturated by this performance and believes it. While Jenkins performs his own theater, Sevlow assaults the reader with a "Theatre of Cruelty" in the vein of Artaud’s ([1958] 1994) ideal art by detailing every barbaric act visited on Roy’s body.

[6.10] Roy is not the only one whose universe is shaken by evidence wrought from pain. Just like Amon’s opinion of ghouls changed in *The Black Tapes*, characters in *Save Me* are awakened from their illusions by facing Roy. Lifelong military man General Hakuro is stunned by Mustang’s physical transformation as Mustang delivers a report on Liore to their military’s head, Fuhrer Bradley. The evidence of Mustang’s mutilated body alongside his firsthand account shakes Hakuro’s core beliefs.

[6.11] At first, Hakuro couldn’t believe his ears as he listened to Mustang speak. Surely the man was mistaken…but then he realized that Mustang was speaking terrible truths. The man didn’t speak them bitterly; he was not pointing fingers…just stating facts in a way that made the General’s blood turn cold.

[6.12] The Fuhrer listened quietly, his face like stone; none of this was a surprise to him.

[6.13] And then, for the first time ever in his distinguished career, Hakuro began to doubt the military in which he served.

[6.14] Mustang’s intimate horror becomes public evidence as he expresses what fraction of his horror he can put into language. It is the articulation of Roy’s experience in language, reinforced by his maimed body, that allows Hakuro to glimpse the truth about the government he serves. FMA fans reading Sevlow’s fan fiction already know that Fuhrer Bradley is bent on global destruction. Even though Hakuro cannot know the whole truth, Roy’s body testifies that something in the government is amiss.

[6.15] Jenkins’s performance and Hakuro’s new knowledge demonstrate that pain, flesh, and blood in *h/c* are tradable and malleable, so pain’s meaning can be redirected by characters. While many other narrative forms obscure the power of pain (Scarry 1985), *h/c* brings that power into focus. The comforting character acts as an anchor through which the hurt character can recognize how pain is shaping their world and change that power’s direction. Maes Hughes’s role as the comfort character, then, isn’t to undo the pain itself, but to reestablish Roy’s power over it.

7. An erasure of limits

[7.1] Bodies, especially bodies in pain, are laden objects. The body produces both too little meaning (as the body resists translation into language and narrative) and an excess of meaning (as the body is read in infinite ways) (Ballengee 2009, 9). The body can seem like more than its flesh can contain, trembling on the edge of limitlessness. It is the threshold of horrifying abjection. It is exhilarating and terrifying.
The same fears about emotional excess that Linda Williams (1991) says plague body genres in film can be found in h/c readership as well. Just as film body genres ignite fears that the clear boundaries between spectators and filmed bodies have been breached, excessive bodies in h/c obscure boundaries between h/c bodies and readers. As the line between character and reader emotions is perceived to diminish, this blurring creates anxieties that readers are sadistic or masochistic. Meanwhile, readers who indulge in narratives that deemphasize the body are spared such accusations. The perceived loss of aesthetic distance, coupled with the body in pain’s excessive and overwhelming presence, creates the anxieties that swirl around h/c, especially horrifying h/c.

Horrifying h/c vehemently argues that there is a point to the pain. H/c’s use of pain borrows from the "view of suffering, of the pain of others that is rooted in religious thinking, which links pain to sacrifice, and sacrifice to exaltation" (Sontag 2003, 99). Scarry posits, "The very temptation to invoke analogies to remote cosmologies (and there is a long tradition of such analogies) is itself a sign of pain's triumph, for it achieves its aversiveness in part by bringing about, even within the radius of several feet, this absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons" (1985, 4). But just as Aristotle did, we imbue these language-less odysseys into oblivion with almost sacred value. Hurt characters transcend through their sacrifice. Like a cadaver splayed open in the morgue, the fictional body in pain stands witness to death’s abjection that is always at our door. Howe believes that those who dwell in fandoms live "the abject, repeatedly experiencing the border between self and other" (2013, 151–52). Fans revel in the dissolution of boundaries, and they write characters who experience this dissolution at its most extreme where they dare not go, then draw those characters back from obliteration through the anchor of language.

Mercifully, hurt characters are rarely left in abject madness, and readers breathe easier when hurt characters claw their way back to subjectivity. It is comforting to believe that life can be given meaning through language even after all boundaries have been stripped away. It is the ultimate image of human resilience. In Save Me’s last chapter, Maes tries to convince Roy to go back to the hospital after he intentionally burns the skin off his back, but Roy accuses Maes of lying when he says it will be temporary.

"You aren’t crazy, Roy, but this does prove that you need help. You don’t have a choice now. Do you understand?"

"But...but how do I know that? How do I know anything?"

"...You’re just going to have to trust me," Maes rasped, battling hard against the tightness in his throat, "...Do you still trust me?"

Roy can believe in Jenkins’s performance or Maes’s performance, or a mixture of both. There is a lingering, eerie suspicion in Save Me that Roy's mind will continue to stray into the abject where the boundaries he has erected between his position as a subject and as an object dissolve. He is not the man he was, and his body will carry the scars.

Whether hurting or healing, horrifying h/c focuses on the body in distress. The uncomfortable and relentless focus on the body in agony, not the focus on suffering in general, produces feelings of discomfort in readers. The abject is, after all, an uncomfortable place. This in no way exempts h/c from critique for its use of bodies (dubious and liberal use of sexual healing in fictions that include rape springs to mind). The question is whether critics and scholars have addressed what makes h/c its own genre, or whether they have been so fascinated by the abundance of flesh that they stop short of interrogating how that flesh functions.

In much horrifying h/c, pain defies the boundaries of the body. The infliction of pain (as well as dismemberment and penetration) obliterates the hurt character, positioning him as a deject in a state of constant abjection, swallowed by madness. The character’s vivid body becomes evidence that the language of fiction can repel and disgust, and it therefore might just be possible to move in the other direction and transform abjection into language. Horror—with its blood, hysteria, and monsters—can "point out the limits of cultural knowledge. Indeed, the thrill of horror fiction may very well be a response to that liminal space between what we know and what we need to know, but haven’t yet acquired" (Arnzen 2008, ¶1.4). Like other horror genres, horrifying h/c can be a response to the metaphysical unknown.

Horrifying h/c is no place for the squeamish. Its ambitions leave no room for the faint of heart. These fictions are embarrassingly excessive. They are out of control. Critics and theorists alike are baffled by these repulsive bodies spilling out of their pages and therefore never ask what those bodies are actually doing. Horrifying h/c splays open the
body in every way imaginable and for every use imaginable, to see what, if anything, is returned from the abyss of abjection. In h/c, the hurt and comforting characters reconstruct the universe in light of a horrible new knowledge that they are subject and object, person and corpse. The struggle to find meaning in light of this knowledge fuels horrifying h/c and draws in readers who want to see whether words can tear apart the world and remake it. They want to see whether pain’s crushing power and the resulting abjection can be breached and remolded. It is this optimistic promise that one can face the void and return that gives horrifying h/c its strange fascination.

8. Notes

1. In Elaine Scarry’s definitive work on the subject of pain, she writes “The rarity with which physical pain is represented in literature is most striking when seen within the framing fact of how consistently art confers visibility on other forms of distress (the thoughts of Hamlet, the tragedy of Lear, the heartache of Woolf’s ‘merest schoolgirl’). Psychological suffering, though often difficult for any one person to express, does have referential content, is susceptible to verbal objectification, and is so habitually depicted in art that, as Thomas Mann’s Settembrini reminds us, there is virtually no piece of literature that is not about suffering, no piece of literature that does not stand by ready to assist us” (1985, 11).

2. These three criticisms are explored at greater length in Gillam (n.d.).


4. Some other horrifying h/c fics in FMA are Sevlow’s Number Twenty Eight (2008), Arathe’s Dichotomy (2007), KawasakiTriple’s Bury It Forward (2008), and DarkAngel555’s Darkness to Dawn (2013).

5. A slightly abbreviated version of Doctor Jacob’s injury list is as follows: “He’s malnourished, dehydrated, and anemic...His leg was the worst of it, though. It’s broken in three places and we had to put in some pins to hold it together. There was a bone protruding from the wound just below the knee and the area was festering badly...His pelvis is fractured...And his jaw. He has three broken ribs, a cracked skull, and six broken fingers. His left shoulder was dislocated, but we aren’t too worried about that...He has some nasty burns on his back and some lacerations...There was some bad anal tearing...He’s covered in bruises and other superficial wounds, but I’m sure you knew that.”

9. Works cited


Theme park as interface to the wizarding (story) world of Harry Potter

Victoria Godwin

Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas, United States

Abstract—Theme parks such as Universal Orlando’s Wizarding World of Harry Potter (WWoHP) offer material interfaces that engage multiple senses (touch, taste, and smell, as well as the sight and sound of more conventional narrative forms) to facilitate immersion in imaginary story worlds. They thus offer new aspects of both fan tourism and material fan practices to explore. Both fan studies and current scholarship on theme parks emphasize active participatory conceptions, countering oversimplifications and misrepresentations of both audiences and theme park visitors as passive spectators or consumers. Corporate-created and -controlled theme parks frame and market fan activities to encourage consumption. Yet fans often use merchandise as additional interfaces to participate actively and to facilitate immersion. For example, in WWoHP, interactive wands use technology to create specific physical "spell" effects in specific locations. Both wands and spells act as a synecdoche for the story world’s magic, enabling immersion.

Keywords—Fan studies; Fan tourism; Immersion; Interfaces; Material fan practices; Universal Orlando Wizarding World of Harry Potter


I. Introduction

Universal Orlando’s Wizarding World of Harry Potter (WWoHP) technically could be classified as a themeland, an area conveying a single idea or theme within a larger theme park (Lukas 2013, 80). However, common usage, including much of Universal Orlando’s own publicity material, refers to WWoHP as a theme park. As of 2017, major components of WWoHP include Hogwarts castle (home of the Forbidden Journey ride) within Hogsmeade. The Hogwarts Express train ride connects to Harry Potter’s version of London, which leads to Diagon Alley, which includes Knockturn Alley and the Escape from Gringotts ride. Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, and Knockturn Alley all include shops and opportunities to cast "spells" using interactive wands sold within WWoHP. Specific locations require specific movements for RFID chips to trigger practical special effects that produce material changes in the environment, such as splashing water and moving various physical props. Theme parks such as WWoHP offer material interfaces that engage multiple senses to facilitate immersion in imaginary story worlds. Thus, they present new aspects of both fan tourism and of material fan practices to explore.

First, a few definitions are in order. Story worlds are defined as "places people can visit and live in for a time" (Lancaster 2001, 163). Alternative terms include "subcreated worlds," "secondary worlds," "diegetic worlds," 'constructed worlds,' and 'imaginary worlds'" (Wolf 2012, 13), media worlds, and many others. Such "imaginary worlds invite audience participation in the form of speculation and fantasies, which depend more on the fullness and richness of the world itself than on any particular storyline or character within it; quite a shift from the traditional narrative film or novel" (2012, 13). Using media studies as a theoretical framework shifts the "focus on the worlds themselves, rather than on the individual narratives occurring within them or the various media windows through which those narratives are seen and heard" (2012, 12). Using fan studies as a theoretical framework allows exploration of fan desires to access those worlds, and also exploration of some of the material practices, such as interfaces, fans use to access those worlds.
Kurt Lancaster’s conception of the interface used within media studies and fan studies scholarship offers a productive means to examine theme parks. "The interface is a concrete material object that helps open the door to another’s imaginary universe. It makes concrete the imaginary" (Lancaster 2001, 32). Through interfaces such as "toys, games," and other material objects, such as collectible card games, "the imaginary, the virtual images of film and television, can now be touched and manipulated," offering "haptic dominance to the previously singular scopic representation of fantasy" (2001, 103). Interfaces involve touch, not just sight. Potentially, interfaces allow fans to see, hear, touch, taste, smell, and interact with story worlds. It is important not to confuse Lancaster’s use of the term "interface," a material object allowing physical interaction with story worlds, with computer, new media, or other electronic interfaces that allow virtual interaction with story worlds. Such virtual interfaces are more similar to the "various media windows" used to access "an imaginary world" (Wolf 2012, 9), such as video games, books, films, and television.

Immersion ranges from "the physical immersion of [the] user, as in a theme park ride or walk in video installation; the user is physically surrounded by the constructed experience" to "conceptual immersion, which relies on the user's imagination; for example, engaging books...are considered ‘immersive’ if they supply sufficient detail and description for the reader to vicariously enter the imagined world" (Wolf 2012, 48). This article specifically uses Lancaster’s definition of immersion, because of its relevance to material interfaces:

- Immersion is the process by which participants break the frame of their actual "everyday" world, allowing them to interact in some way within the fantasy environment. An interface provides this immersion. When people engage the interface, the imaginary world or universe represented by the environment envelops the real-world perspective, and, as a consequence, players become immersed in the fantasy universe. (Lancaster 2001, 31)

Via multisensory material interfaces, theme parks enable not only the most basic physical immersion of rides or attractions but also conceptual immersion in story worlds that inspire those forms of entertainment.

The material environments of theme parks offer entry to and interaction with imaginary story worlds. Within theme park design, "all of the material things—the streets, the bricks, the tables and chairs, the lights, the fountains, etc.—that make up the themed or immersive space" can be "used to tell immersive stories and/or create specific feelings or moods in guests" (Lukas 2013, 208). In contrast to the visual or aural emphasis of reading or watching media texts, or fan fiction or fan vids inspired by them, visitors are able to immerse themselves within physical versions of story worlds that engage multiple senses simultaneously: not only sight and sound, but also touch, taste, and smell. Both fan studies and current scholarship on theme parks emphasize active participatory conceptions, countering popular oversimplifications and misrepresentations of both audiences and theme park visitors as passive spectators or consumers. For example, corporate-created and -controlled theme parks frame and market fan activities to encourage consumption. Yet fans and other visitors, active as always, often use such merchandise as additional interfaces to participate in WWoHP’s attractions and to facilitate immersion in the wizarding story world. In WWoHP, interactive wands enable visitors to create specific physical "spell" effects in specific locations via technology. These wands and their spells serve as a synecdoche for the story world’s magic, assisting immersion.

Like spells and wands, the narratives that inspire many theme parks are fictional and do not exist in the everyday world. Thus, "real" and "authentic" obviously become problematic terms. Fan studies scholarship offers context-specific definitions, such as the use of "‘authentic’...to denote the official licensing of WWoHP, and...to capture a visceral connection many fans...feel to the wizarding world" (Gilbert 2015, 25). For theme park design, authenticity involves no truth claims, only perception: "a space that seemed real or believable to the guest" (Lukas 2013, 238). Environments within theme parks seem "real" if they offer accurate recreations of film props and sets to create a sense of immersion within these recreations of fictional worlds. Fans are willing to suspend disbelief when interfaces such as theme parks create a sense that this is what it felt like to watch the movies or to read the books. The story world already captures the fan’s imagination, and it feels real enough inside their mind to suspend disbelief. It offers conceptual immersion. If a theme park captures what a fan imagines this story world to be like, then interacting with a theme park’s physical manifestations of this story world makes that story world seem more real or authentic. In contrast, the framing device for the Warner Bros. Studio "Making of Harry Potter" tour in London foregrounds the fictional nature of the story world. Publicity material invites visitors to see sets, props, and costumes used to make the films, and learn how special effects create the illusion of magic. Meanwhile, the framing device of WWoHP encourages the suspension of disbelief. Instead
of seeing Diagon Alley sets in a movie studio, promotional materials characterize WWoHP visitors as walking down Diagon Alley itself, and performing their own magic by casting spells with interactive wands.

[1.9] Suspension of disbelief, "the willingness to accept the world of the imagination as real...which allows [fans] to renew and...extend their belief in the imaginary beyond the confines of the book or film" (Reijnders 2011, 241) is part of the process of immersion, as well as an aspect of fan tourism. The field of fan tourism allows for discussions of extending the suspension of disbelief required for enjoying fiction into the physical world. Fans suspend disbelief not only while reading books or watching screens but also when they experience a theme park's rides and attractions: physical manifestations of story worlds previously encountered in books, films, video games, and other media windows. Not only a fan’s mind but also a fan’s body experiences immersion in a story world via such suspension of disbelief: both conceptual and physical immersion. Now a story world tastes, smells, and otherwise feels real to a fan’s physical senses as well as within their imagination.

[1.10] The story worlds of theme parks do not necessarily have an essential connection to films or other mass media, or even to branded versions of fairy tales such as those which appear within Disney theme parks. For example, with Sinbad’s Bazaar and Poseidon’s Fury, Universal Orlando’s Lost Continent draws upon ancient legends and mythology instead of upon licensed mass media retellings of those stories. Both the former Wet 'n Wild Orlando and the forthcoming Volcano Bay are themed simply as water parks. Versions of famous cities such as New York, Hollywood, and San Francisco receive far less active publicity than their licensed neighbors, Harry Potter’s London and The Simpsons attractions in Springfield. However, as part of our media-saturated culture, theme parks often draw their "inspiration from particular films, exploiting characters created for the movies, and even functioning after the fashion of our popular films" (Telotte 2011, 171). Theme parks "are the multi-dimensional descendant of the book, film, and epic" in which "rides are mechanisms designed to position the visitor’s point of view, much as the camera lens is aligned, moving riders past a series of meticulously focused vignettes to advance the narrative" (King and O'Boyle 2011, 6). However, theme parks have changed their emphasis from rides perceived as "spectacles where guests passively view wonders" (Baker 2016, ¶6.1), letting "a story unfold around them" to understandings of "rides...featuring interactivity and immersion," allowing visitors active participation "or even taking the lead role in the adventure" (2016, ¶1.2). Theme parks function as storytelling devices—material interfaces simultaneously engaging multiple senses to immerse visitors in a variety of story worlds.

2. Fan tourism and theme parks

[2.1] Fan tourism scholarship offers useful insights into how visitors interact with theme parks. Rather than detailing the nuances of fan tourism, fan pilgrimage, media tourism, pop culture tourism, teletourism, literary tourism, and other related phenomena, this article focuses on commonalities of these experiences, referred to generally as fan tourism for the sake of internal consistency. People engaging in such tourism report a sense of being "closer to the story" or "making a ‘connection’" (Reijnders 2011, 242). They also describe "traveling into your imagination in real life" or a desire "to ‘touch the feeling’ of [the story] in a bodily, all-encompassing way" (Erzen 2011, 11), with obvious parallels to immersion via material interfaces. Fans characterize visiting a location mentioned in a story world as "not their first encounter with the [place], but rather a renewed encounter, the realisation of a journey which they have already taken many times in their imagination" (Reijnders 2011, 238). Although visitors engage in "a rational comparison of reality and imagination," they emphasize "the intention of deepening their emotional connection with the story...Both modes are based on a tangible experience of the local environment. Being right there, present at the location, rather than experiencing it at a distance via the media" (2011, 242). Visitors "experience the story anew thanks to these sensory stimuli" (2011, 246). Material interfaces offer different pleasures than experiencing story worlds via media windows. For Twilight fans, the actual town of Forks offers a focus "for fans' collective fantasy that they might momentarily" enter the story world (Erzen 2011, 12). WWoHP offers a similar fantasy, the playful suspension of disbelief that turning a corner could lead from a theme park into a magical wizarding world. It is an interface offering immersion in a story world.

[2.2] Theme parks offer travel into specially constructed imaginary locations such as Hogwarts, Hogsmeade, and Diagon Alley, or to versions of real places such as New York, Hollywood, San Francisco, and London as filtered through media texts and the popular imagination. For some, they offer more affordable alternatives than travel to existing physical locations where stories are set or filmed, such as Transylvania or London, or Vancouver or New Zealand. Yet fan texts "have been rendered largely invisible in tourist debates due to the notion that since fantasy and science fiction
texts are based on imaginary spaces that they can possess no real-life geographical referents" (Hills 2002, 147). Nonetheless, fans still exhibit "the extratexual impulse to inhabit the world of the text" (2002, 166). Settings, filming locations, and theme parks all offer geographical referents to facilitate such visits. Some of this fan desire to explore is due to hyperdiagesis, or "the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension" (2002, 137). Both the story world and Diagon Alley seem internally consistent and "real" enough to offer the fantasy that the street extends much further than the buildings described in books or glimpsed on screen. Fans enjoy opportunities to explore additional details of this and other story worlds, whether via material interfaces such as WWOHP or the additional media windows offered by fan practices such as fan fiction or fan vids.

[2.3] The same tendency is noted from early fan studies scholarship onward. Fans enter a "realm of the fiction as if it were a tangible place they can inhabit and explore" (Jenkins 1992, 18) and are "active producers and manipulators of meanings" (1992, 23). Even if elements of these imaginary story worlds are built in the everyday world, "these objects necessarily remain divided, split between physical instantiation and an immaterial story world that is affectively or mnemonically carried for the fan" (Hills 2014, ¶2.11). Although "the mediated ‘reality’...and the reality of the physical space or place...cannot be fused...it is rather the permeable boundaries between these two realms which are redefined and recontextualised by cult geography" (Hills 2002, 146), which is defined as sites associated with beloved narratives or story worlds such as filming locations or settings for stories (2002, 144). Such places facilitate "fantasies of ‘entering’ into the cult text, as well as allowing the ‘text’ to leak out into spatial and cultural practices via fans’ creative transpositions" (2002, 151). Theme parks like WWOHP occupy such liminal spaces. They also offer interfaces by means of which fans are able to immerse themselves in story worlds. Indeed, "theme parks have long been in the world-building business. They offer us a chance to immerse ourselves within the fiction, to have a total sensory experience of the places of our imaginations" (Jenkins qtd. in Lukas 2013, 247).

[2.4] Fan studies scholarship already addresses familiar storytelling techniques such as fan fiction or fan vids (Jenkins 1992). Created by fans for fans, these are more obvious forms of active participatory culture than theme park visitors who physically and conceptually immerse themselves within corporate-created and controlled versions of story worlds drawn from favorite texts. However, WWOHP, Disney theme parks, and many others offer multisensory opportunities to actively engage with familiar story worlds. In Disney theme parks, rides such as "Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride and Snow White’s Adventures...used material from the films to create what were essentially new stories" (Rahn 2011, 89). Rides such as Escape from Gringotts and the Forbidden Journey in WWOHP continue this tradition of using familiar material to expand existing narratives. Established settings and monsters appear, including replicas of film versions of dragons and giant spiders. Actors from the films deliver new lines to lend a sense of authenticity to the creation of new narratives. Familiar characters address those on rides as Muggles, people unable to use magic. Although Bellatrix Lestrange and Voldemort never encounter Muggles in the wizarding bank on screen or in the books, their new dialogue and actions in the Escape from Gringotts ride are consistent and believable. Characters’ dialogue positions the ride’s events within existing narratives from the books and films. These framing devices contribute a sense of authenticity to new stories. Reproductions of such familiar elements enable these rides to function as new narratives for fans. Such aspects of theme park design invite every person on these rides to participate as a character in the story, the "you" addressed by Voldemort and others. It is an established storytelling device to address an urge for interactivity and immersion, as is the first-person perspective.

[2.5] From its earliest examples, fan studies scholarship consistently emphasizes the active role of fans specifically and audiences in general. It thus offers a useful theoretical framework to examine theme parks. Fans are not "simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meaning" (Jenkins 1992, 27). Indeed, "there are no such things as passive consumers" (Jenkins qtd. in Lukas 2013, 246). Likewise, making "theme parks...sites for...hypermediated play and participatory culture" positions "guests and fans" as "the marketers, interpreters, culture creators, heroines, heroes" (Baker 2016, ¶6.1). For example, the Men in Black Alien Attack ride casts visitors as new recruits, shooting at villains and competing against other visitors for the highest score. There are rumors that future additions to WWOHP will incorporate similar interactivity (Shapiro 2016). These rumors are based on Universal City Studio’s application for a patent for a wizard-themed game where guests can compete with each other or even work together to accomplish tasks by using character wands to score points in puzzle rooms where the actions that the
players take within each scene or puzzle change the environment and allow different paths to be activated or different physical effects to take place. (Harrington 2016)

[2.7] Visitors will be active participants, characters whose choices and actions define the characteristics and perhaps even the route this ride will take. Modern-day "theme parks are...designed as much as evocative spaces onto which fans may project their own fantasies as rides which take them through a directed path" (Jenkins qtd. in Lukas 2013, 246). As with rides in which familiar characters address visitors, theme park design likewise invites "you" to actively participate as a character in the story world, encouraging interactivity and immersion.

[2.8] A theme park functions by "evoking impressions of places and times, real and imaginary" (King 2007, 837). In other words, it offers a connection to story worlds. Although a theme park visit "averages eight hours...as little as ten or fifteen minutes" of that time is "spent on rides." Indeed, it is possible to have "a theme park experience without ever setting foot on a ride," instead viewing "architecture, design, animated and live performance, video, sound and music, light and water technics." Simply walking "within and among the artfully landscaped themed 'worlds'" can be enjoyable (King and O'Boyle 2011, 7). This enjoyment is planned carefully. At Disneyland, a 20-foot berm blocks the view outside because Walt Disney did not "want the public to see the real world they live in while they're in the park. I want them to feel they are in another world" (qtd. in Sklar 1969). Within Diagon Alley at WWoHP, building facades block out the view not only of the world outside, but also any sight of the rest of the park, allowing even more complete immersion within the wizarding world.

3. Interfaces: Exploring the wizarding world, wands at the ready

[3.1] Furthering that immersion, wands, robes, foods, beverages, environments, and other concrete objects within WWoHP function as interfaces, allowing fans to physically interact with and thus experience aspects of a story world. Interface objects such as magic wands offer "concrete physicalization of the fantasy world" (Lancaster 2001, 83) and "represent the imaginary...for no such objects actually exist" (2001, 17). Interfaces include "material objects," through which "participants interact with the environment" and thus "experience the fantasy in a certain way" (2001, 32). In WWoHP, interactive wands offer illustrative examples of interfaces. Promotional material encourages fans to purchase interactive wands, offering them opportunities to cast "spells" via technology. Yet such merchandise does not limit fans to supposedly passive roles as consumers. Instead, interactive wands enable active participation via material interfaces. Instead of only seeing wands on screen, now fans can touch, select, and wield wands of their own in WWoHP, then take these interfaces home with them as souvenirs of their trip into this story world. In addition to character wands seen on screen, visitors also can choose "unclaimed" wands created for the park itself. Promotional materials and costumed store personnel both reference the story world concept "the wand chooses the wizard" to encourage visitors to wave display models or to personalize their wand by choosing one linked via the Celtic tree calendar with certain character traits or important dates such as birthdays or anniversaries.

[3.2] Selections made, fans can wave interactive wands in specific patterns so their RFID chips trigger specific effects at specific locations. Spells include activating a mermaid fountain that can squirt people with water, starting and silencing the singing of shrunken heads, and prompting suits of armor to assemble or collapse. Each spell involves practical special effects to produce material changes in the environment, rather than virtual effects or superimpositions that must be viewed on a computer or smartphone screen, as in augmented reality games such as Pokémon Go (2016). More importantly, both spells and the wands that activate them act as a synecdoche for the story world's magic, further enabling immersion. Wands and spells are parts that stand for the whole: all of the wizarding world and all of the magical effects that cannot fit into a theme park, but exist within fans' imaginations. Since they indicate the existence of a much larger internally consistent story world, they contribute to hyperdiagesis (Hills 2002, 137), allowing fans to fill in the gaps beyond the grounds of a theme park or the pages of a book or the scenes in a film. Multisensory magical effects happen live in the physical environment instead of being confined to sights and sounds on film, television, computer, or smartphone screens. Wands act as interfaces that make theme park environments seem real by contributing to a sense that this is what it felt like to watch the movies or to read the books. Wands and their spell effects facilitate suspension of disbelief and immersion in a story world for both wielders and observers.

[3.3] By using a material interface, an element of a media text "previously viewed from a distance" is removed "from its original context," so "one can now touch and reconfigure it" (Lancaster 2001, 100). Interactive wands allow obvious
reconfiguration, as spell effects tip over cauldrons or send a tiny wizard and dragon racing around a miniature Hogwards castle in a window display. In addition, instead of brief descriptions or glimpses during a few scenes in the books or films, fans now are able to spend hours or days exploring Diagon Alley, Knockturn Alley, Hogsmeade, and Hogwards, peering closely at all the sights, looking where and when they please, instead of where and when and only so long as an author or director decrees. Furthermore, WWoHP’s physicalization of this imaginary environment engages multiple senses, compared to more conventional media texts. Theme park visitors "use all of their senses to interact with" a "themed or immersive space" (Lukas 2013, 102). Such "multisensory and multiexperiential" space more closely approximates "what a real space (or in the case of a re-creation of a fictional world, the imagined space) is like" since the everyday world also "connects with all of the senses" and involves people "in more than one thing" (2013, 107). On the Escape from Gringotts ride, hot air blasts riders when a dragon breathes fire. On the Forbidden Journey ride, water hits visitors when Aragog and other giant spiders spit venom, and cold air accompanies a Dementor’s attack. Knockturn Alley is not only permanently shrouded in darkness but also kept noticeably cooler than Diagon Alley, to contribute to the ambience of dark wizardry. Multiple sensory inputs reinforce immersive experiences.

[3.4] Many visible items are meant to be touched—especially merchandise, thanks to the corporate emphasis on consumption. Fans taste and smell butterbeer, chocolate frogs, and other food and drink. To fully enjoy their immersive effects, many of these interfaces must be purchased. Even the sights, sounds, and smells of the park itself, like the roar of the dragon atop Gringotts and the heat from its fiery breath, or the stench of a noxious plant in a window display must be bought, included in the admission price. However, even when fans do purchase items, their choice often is an active statement of identity. Obvious examples include whether fans identify as Ravenclaw, Slytherin, Gryffindor, or Hufflepuff. Which personality traits do fans see in themselves: wise, shrewd, brave, or loyal? Souvenir T-shirts link each House with each attribute. Online stores and displays within the Ollivanders shop also market the "unclaimed" interactive wands via association not only with birthdays or anniversaries but also with personal attributes, such as the birch wand for people with an "ability to see through to the heart of any matter" or ivy for people "with tenacity, stamina and endless patience...strong and determined; they set goals and achieve them." Wand selections thus provide material manifestations of how visitors perceive themselves, or function as physical reminders of important events or aspirational goals.

[3.5] Stores also double as exhibits, displaying props and costumes from films as well as souvenirs for sale. For example, in addition to the House robes, sweaters, scarves, and ties for sale in Madame Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions store, there also is a display of costumes, including robes for professors Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, and Gilderoy Lockhart. These complete outfits are not for sale, although fans can purchase limited elements of some of them, such as Dumbledore’s hat. Orreries in Wiseacre’s Wizarding Equipment (figure 1),miscellanea in the Borgin and Burkes shop in Knockturn Alley (figure 2), and themed decorations in other shops all contribute to the atmosphere but are not for sale. Many visitors minutely examine and photograph environments without buying any merchandise, enjoying stores as museums, exhibits, or displays of items from the fictional wizarding world. Fans redefine commercial spaces, their stock, and their decor as interfaces to immerse themselves in the story world. Similarly, the line for the Forbidden Journey winds through the gates, greenhouse, hallways, and classrooms of Hogwards, offering detailed recreations of film sets and props to view during the hours it can take to reach the ride. Yet visitors also have the option to enter a parallel line to view the interior of Hogwards without boarding the ride, enjoying the environment as an attraction in and of itself instead of solely as a distraction from long wait times.

Figure 1. Fans redefine commercial spaces as interfaces to immerse themselves in the story world. In Wiseacre’s Wizarding Equipment, both decor such as orreries, globes, and telescopes, and merchandise such as themed T-shirts on
Mannequins are framed as part of the story world. [View larger image.]

Figure 2. Many visitors thoroughly examine and photograph displays without buying anything, enjoying stores as exhibits. The Borgin and Burkes shop in Knockturn Alley features more decor than merchandise. Displays include film-related props such as a vanishing cabinet and Death Eater masks, as well as skulls and other miscellanea that contribute to an atmosphere of Dark Wizardry but are not for sale. [View larger image.]

[3.6] Material interfaces allow haptic dominance and the discovery of minutiae that could pass unnoticed or unrecorded onscreen. Umberto Eco discussed the appeal of "a completely furnished world," details of which can be learned and memorized (1986, 198). Lancaster explores fan activities through which "participants can exert a certain amount of control over an environment that once could be experienced only on its own terms" (2001, 163), typically fleeting images on a screen. An urge to explore a story world and master it parallels an urge to explore a theme park and master it. For example, behind-the-scenes tours at Disney theme parks fulfill fan desires for "mastering the space" and insider knowledge (Bartkowiak 2012, 952). WWOHP incorporates out-of-the-way details to reward exploration, such as an ad for the Daily Prophet painted on the wall in a narrow dead-end alley hidden behind Gregorovitch's Wand Shop. Theme park design deliberately incorporates such hidden elements in order to generate a "sense of excitement and discovery in guests who, upon finding one, have the sense of seeing something that no one else has" (Lukas 2013, 234). Design encourages and rewards exploration of and further immersion in a story world. Purchase of an interactive wand includes a map to different locations where you can cast spells, but visitors can choose in which order they proceed and choose whether to skip or to revisit any locations. They also choose whether to compete or to cooperate with any companions. With no corporate-generated framing device, visitors can create their own narratives around why they cast each spell. They create their own performance and define their own participation.

[3.7] Even without one of the maps included with a wand purchase, it is possible to notice runes inscribed on walkways and other visitors waving wands in different patterns at different locations. Although many details can be discovered during solo explorations, fans compile and share information either on Web sites consulted before park visits, or by talking to other fans once on site. Fans thus engage in collective intelligence (Jenkins 2006, 26). Holding interactive wands identifies fellow fans, often prompting strangers to interact with each other. For example, various fans showed me spell-casting locations they said were not listed on official WWOHP maps, and demonstrated the simple wand movements required to trigger certain effects at those hidden locations, such as getting a plant to emit a foul stench or getting eyes to open and track a wand's motion. Later, when another fan noticed me casting a spell at a location he hadn't spotted, I showed him how to view the map's hidden symbols visible only under black light, available in Knockturn Alley. I also passed on the claims I'd heard from other fans about hidden locations not marked on the map. There is a parallel with the liminal space of the convention, where people feel more comfortable greeting and interacting with strangers. After all, they have some degree of affection for this story world in common, so they are not complete strangers. They are fellow fans.

4. Interfaces: Active immersion via consumer merchandise

[4.1] Such interactions with WWOHP’s material interfaces illustrate the evolution of theme park rides and attractions noted by Carissa Ann Baker (2016, ¶6.1, ¶1.2), moving from designing for supposedly passive viewing of spectacles to acknowledging and incorporating the desire for active participation. This dovetails with the emphasis from the beginning of fan studies scholarship through to today on fans as active participants, which helps to correct misperceptions of audiences as passive viewers and consumers. With "conventional" visual and aural media, fans "participate vicariously through another’s performance. They cannot control the plot or the dramatic action" (Lancaster...
Theme parks and other interfaces have multiple meanings to different visitors, or even within individual visitors. During prompted and enabled by the corporations that create and control the theme park. Windows and doors on the Hogwarts Express ride. These and other interactions with WWoHP attractions are both with their own adventures running parallel to or intersecting with narrative fragments glimpsed and overheard through immersion and active performances. Visitors can cast themselves as students or alumni traveling to or from Hogwarts, 

"you" directly, and refers to visitors as either Muggles or witches and wizards within the story world, encouraging could be oversimplified as sitting passively and watching the sights. Yet dialogue here and elsewhere still addresses that misperceived visitors as passive viewers of spectacles. Once on the Hogwarts Express ride, visitors' official role by the theme park's own design, active participants in the attraction, in contrast to earlier models of theme park design for their own enjoyment and for the amusement of others behind them. Visitors become, and are encouraged to become, by the theme park's own design, active participants in the attraction, in contrast to earlier models of theme park design that misperceived visitors as passive viewers of spectacles. Once on the Hogwarts Express ride, visitors' official role could be oversimplified as sitting passively and watching the sights. Yet dialogue here and elsewhere still addresses "you" directly, and refers to visitors as either Muggles or witches and wizards within the story world, encouraging immersion and active performances. Visitors can cast themselves as students or alumni traveling to or from Hogwarts, with their own adventures running parallel to or intersecting with narrative fragments glimpsed and overheard through windows and doors on the Hogwarts Express ride. These and other interactions with WWoHP attractions are both prompted and enabled by the corporations that create and control the theme park.

Fans are more than capable of finding or creating their own sites for affective play. For example, fans interacted with a particular wall in the King's Cross Station in London in the everyday world as if it were the fictional Platform 9¾ resulting in a plaque marking that spot. Eventually a new sign and a luggage cart partially embedded in the wall directed fans to a new location, where Warner Bros. now offers formalized and corporatized versions of those original fan interactions. Official attendants sell photo opportunities with a selection of props and assistance with defined action poses. There also is a shop nearby selling licensed merchandise, officially designated as "The Harry Potter Shop at Platform 9¾" and commercializing the space even further. When media producers create destinations for fans, they "are poaching this type of affective play" (Booth 2015, 22) and "both enable and constrain fan audiences" (2015, 23). Of course, not every fan joins the long lines for the official photo opportunities. Fans still perform their own activities. They also claim some of the corporatized space for their own, as with the addition of a shrine after the death of Severus Snape actor Alan Rickman. Fan relationships with corporate sanctioned spaces are more complex than simple binaries of active or passive. Tourists can visit King's Cross Station in the everyday world, to interact with either the official corporate Platform 9¾, or to find their own version of that location and create their own experiences with it.
my own trip to WWoHP, I insisted on photographs of myself standing next to one of the lampposts, much to the bemusement of my friends, since the lampposts were neither important nor prominent in any of the films. I had to explain that these were recreations of lampposts that line the river Thames opposite the Houses of Parliament. Their sculptures of stylized dolphins had captured my interest when I visited London as a teenager, so seeing them appealed to me as an Anglophile and brought back a wave of nostalgia from adolescence, as well as memories of spotting the lampposts in multiple films and television episodes since then. Recognizing familiar landmarks added to the verisimilitude of those media texts. Recreations of those lampposts in WWoHP's version of London also made it seem more believable to me, aiding both suspension of disbelief and immersion.

On a related note, one fan notes that fan tourism, "with its blurring of borders...actually makes the film feel more real. After seeing that many of the locations in the movie are firmly anchored in reality, the locations are that much more believable" (Brooker 2006, 28). Walking through physical recreations of sets from the film franchise makes those fictional locations seem and feel more real. After fans walk down Diagon Alley in WWoHP, viewing Diagon Alley on a screen or reading about it in a book enables fans to revisit their memories of their own experiences and physical sensations within that "real" physical location, and thus make the fictional versions seem more believable.

5. Fan tourism to the wizarding (story) world, or I went to Hogwarts today!

Related to immersion, fan tourism involves "multiple mapping," in which fan tourism sites "evoke other imaginary maps that have to be held in a double, triple, multiple vision alongside the real" (Brooker 2007, 430). WWoHP's Hogsmeade features snow-covered roofs, but even in early December, Orlando's bright sun and warm weather requires a related form of multiple vision: substituting cold for warmth, and snow-covered streets instead of hot pavement. Fans imagine and remember Diagon Alley filled with eccentrically garbed wizards and witches instead of throngs of tourists in T-shirts and shorts. Fan tourism uses human imagination to superimpose a story world onto our everyday world. Material interfaces enable fans to interact with and immerse themselves in story worlds, and fans actively participate in the process via such multiple mapping.

Like fan tourism, theme parks enable fans to travel to the story world and back again to the everyday world. Rides offer "the sense that we can pass through and immerse ourselves in that experience—but also pass back, play at playing along" (Telotte 2011, 175), similar to the permeable boundary of cult geography Hills describes (2002, 146). Visitors enjoy playing at being Muggles or wizards, versions of themselves existing in a story world accessed via the material interface of a theme park and its attractions, but there is always that self-awareness of playing along. Visitors are not fooled. They return a knowing wink or nod. The crowds shopping for souvenirs slip through that permeable boundary to become the crowds in Diagon Alley shopping for magical supplies. There is an element of playfulness and an attitude of make-believe, even as WWoHP uses fans' imaginative practices as a framing device in an attempt to encourage consumption. Fans choose to suspend disbelief in order to immerse physically as well as mentally in beloved story worlds. The concrete material interfaces of theme parks provide permeable boundaries that allow interaction with and immersion in fictional story worlds.

WWoHP and other attractions at Universal Orlando facilitate such immersion, with attendants in shops and queues dressing, speaking, and acting in ways consistent with each story world throughout the entire theme park. Line attendants for the Shrek ride wear pseudo-medieval film-peasant garb, and knowingly include a few "thee's" and "ye's" and other medieval vocabulary touches to their scripted interactions with visitors. Whether for Shrek, Minions, or any other themed area, employees remain in character. Fans choose to accept some elements, such as the scenic design of building facades or the presence of specific shops or the spells triggered by interactive wands, as interfaces to facilitate immersion in a beloved story world, despite the obvious fact that such magic doesn't exist in our everyday world. Fan tourists choose to willingly suspend disbelief and play along. Sometimes they board rides. Sometimes they buy souvenirs. Mostly they actively explore and interact with WWoHP's material environments and items. Fan studies offers understanding of fans and theme park visitors as far more than supposedly passive viewers of spectacles and consumers of merchandise.

Fans interact with tangible recreations of familiar settings and props, creating their own original narratives in which they enter the wizarding world. Decades ago, Walt Disney "made the invisible and abstract concrete, in a form that can be experienced directly. Disneyland made the popular imagination visible" (King 2011, 225). Theme parks
continue to offer concrete physicalizations of fiction: film or television images or written descriptions of buildings, clothing, food, drink, costumes, and other aspects of various story worlds. They offer material interfaces into imaginary story worlds. Interfaces offer immersive experiences in physical versions of story worlds. The concepts of interfaces and immersion could be applied to further fan studies examinations of other physical and material fan practices, such as cosplay, tabletop and live-action role-playing games, and Quidditch tournaments.

[5.5] In conclusion, theme parks function as material interfaces for visitors to immerse themselves within multisensory physical versions of story worlds. Such immersive performances require active engagement as performers, in contrast to conventional visual or written narratives, in which authors control plots, or directors and actors control images on screen, and viewers vicariously experience those offerings (Lancaster 2001, 32–33). Material interfaces enable visitors to become characters within new narratives. Universal Orlando’s Wizarding World of Harry Potter and other theme parks continue this tradition. Countering misperceptions of visitors as supposedly passive viewers of visible spectacles and consumers of merchandise created and controlled by corporations, using fan studies as a theoretical framework illustrates how theme parks offer interactive, participatory, immersive experiences.

6. Works cited


How digital remix and fan culture helped the Lego comeback

Sophie Gwendolyn Einwächter
Philipps-Universität Marburg, Marburg, Germany
Felix M. Simon
University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

Abstract—The LEGO Movie, the highest-grossing animation film of 2014, surprised and impressed children, adults, and critics worldwide. The film’s transfranchial approach and its clever merchandising helped the Lego Group become the world’s biggest toymaker in the following year. In order to provide context for understanding the Lego comeback, we first address the corporate history of the Lego Group and how its product range has developed over the years. Next, we take a closer look at adult fans of Lego (AFOL), in particular a German fan club that considers Lego building to be a form of art. The final part of our paper deals with brickfilming as a cultural practice bringing together fans, the brand, Lego-building, and filmmaking. Taking The LEGO Movie and the overwhelmingly positive response to it as a starting point for cultural analysis helps to deepen our understanding of contemporary media production and resulting (trans)formations of fan phenomena. Furthermore, investigating Lego allows us to tackle some of the key rules and mechanisms underlying cultural participation and creativity today. Ultimately, the difficult past and current success of the Lego brick may attest to the often challenged yet sometimes reaffirmed status of tangible objects in a now predominantly digitally mediated era.

Keywords—Analog culture; Digital culture; Fandom; Film industry; German fan culture; Hollywood; Lego franchise; Media franchise; Toy industry


I. Introduction

When The LEGO Movie was released in 2014, some wondered why anybody would go to the cinema to see a film about plastic bricks, and many expected it to be barely more than a feature film–length commercial (note 1). However, cinemagoers were in for a surprise, because—in the words of Susan Wloszczyna (2014) of RogerEbert.com—the film proved to be "a smartly subversive satire," "a highly entertaining and, most surprisingly, a thoughtful one with in-jokes that snap, crackle and zoom by at warp speed." Wloszczyna’s formulation bears references to a breakfast cereal’s cartoon mascots (Kellogg’s Snap, Crackle, and Pop) and the Star Trek franchise (with the faster-than-light warp speed), a very fitting choice of words for a film itself full of references to everyday consumer culture and other media franchises. As we will explain in the following, the case of The LEGO Movie is an interesting example of popular branding and media culture, catering to and profiting from various kinds of user engagement.

In this paper, we present our thoughts and findings concerning a number of factors and phenomena tied to the Lego success, which peaked unprecedentedly in 2014 and is still going strong in 2017. First, we will explain our methodological approach. Then, the paper is structured into four sections: In order to provide context for understanding the Lego comeback, we address the corporate history of the Lego Group and how its product range has developed over the years. In a second step, we take a closer look at adult fans of Lego (AFOL), in particular a German fan club that considers Lego building as a form of art. After assessing motivational and institutional factors that shape these fans’ practices, we consider Lego as the ultimate analog pixel that invites endless recombination, a notion that
the film’s visual style and its underlying message about cultural production and copyright seem to support. The final part of our paper deals with brickfilming as a core reference of The LEGO Movie and a cultural practice that potentially involves all aforementioned aspects: the company and brand, the fans, the bricks, and filmmaking.

[1.3] We chose some of our examples from German Lego fandom to shed light on cultures less investigated and less represented in fan studies and studies of LEGO-related phenomena. However, although they may represent niche culture, this does not mean that we consider them culturally marginal. On the contrary, they represent exactly the kind of niches that corporations like the Lego Group invite and actively sponsor. Taking The LEGO Movie and the overwhelmingly positive response to it as a starting point for cultural analyses of user engagement and brand communication, we argue, helps to deepen our understanding of contemporary media production and resulting (trans)formations of fan phenomena. Ultimately, investigating Lego allows us to tackle some of the key rules and mechanisms underlying cultural participation and creativity today.

2. Methodology

[2.1] While bibliographic research brought to light many of the historical and industrial facets of the success of The LEGO Movie, we used a blended ethnographic/netnographic approach in order to gain more insight into cultural and social contexts, investigating fan cultural phenomena tied to Lego. For this part of our research we drew largely on the guidelines formulated in Robert Kozinets’s book Netnography. Doing Ethnographic Research Online. Netnography is an ethnographic approach “based in online fieldwork” (2010, 60), a method that “uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon” (2010, 60). Kozinets stresses the importance of a blended approach toward certain social phenomena, namely whether meaningful interactions in focus are taking place both in digital and in face-to-face surroundings: “A 'blended' ethnography/netnography would be a combination of approaches, including data gathered in-face-to-face as well as online interaction” (2010, 65).

[2.2] The social spheres we encountered were blended worlds, indeed: members of the Lego forum Brickboard.de mainly interacted online, yet there was also occasional offline interaction, for example at annual brickfilming festivals. Equally, the German Lego fan club we investigated, Schwabenstein 2x4 e.V. (e.V. means registered association)—like many German fan clubs—has a strong tradition of meeting face-to-face on a monthly basis. German Stammtisch-culture is an important factor here, meaning an established group of people (German: Stamm) meeting regularly at a table (Tisch) in a bar where they drink and discuss matters of common interest. Yet, Schwabenstein also hosts a Web site and a Facebook page that document their offline activities on a regular basis.

[2.3] Our respective entries to the research field differed. During his teenage years, Felix had been a brick filmer and frequent contributor to Lego fan sites like Brickboard.de, gaining experience he could draw on throughout our research. Sophie had written her PhD thesis on online fantasy fan cultures. Through her new Lego-related research, she came across one of her former interviewees, Daniel, who used to be very active in the fandom for the works of J. R. R. Tolkien back in 2012 and had in the meantime turned to Lego. We observed his fan club’s Web site Schwabenstein.com and its Facebook group closely over a period of several months, from July to November 2015. They had only recently been founded, and we were interested in them as social sites where crucial interaction happened in an emerging German fan group. We also visited the blog Brickverse.com, the German Lego forum Brickboard.de, and a number of YouTube channels featuring brickfilms over the same period, yet less regularly, often leaning on the archival function of these sites when trying to understand the social phenomena that the reaction to The LEGO Movie represented. Apart from our interviewee, we did not interact online with any of the Web sites’ participants (though Felix later did a full participant observation with Brickboard.de for a university course assignment). Instead, we used information gained through lurking for identifying and understanding frequent topics, terms, and practices.

[2.4] As we had many questions that the Web sites and documented online interactions could not answer, we decided to interview Daniel, who has been active in fandom for many years and can be seen as a key gatekeeper in German Lego fandom as well as an expert on the legal and organizational matters concerning German fan club organization. We were very interested to get more background information on Schwabenstein 2x4, which had caused a bit of a media stir in 2015. We interviewed Daniel on July 17 in a face-to-face setting regarding his Lego-related fan cultural activities. We obtained his written consent to use his statements in our scholarly work and have kept in touch with him regarding
his fan cultural engagement. Our interview with Daniel was semistructured; prepared questions concerned the purpose and structure of the fan club, the implications of its legal nonprofit status, and the cooperation with LEGO and other fan groups, as well as Daniel's and his fan group's assessments of The LEGO Movie. From Daniel's answers, a couple of further questions arose, which we followed up during the interview, and we also talked about his previous fan cultural engagements in fantasy fandom. In addition, we analyzed a couple of interviews that he and his cofounder Andreas had given on television, interviews that were posted on the Schwabenstein 2x4 Facebook page.

3. The company: Hitting the bottom, breaking the ceiling, bringing the analog to the digital sphere

3.1 The last 15 years have seen many successful film and transmedial franchises, and it seems reasonable to place and analyze the Lego success alongside them, because like the producers of Star Trek or Harry Potter, the Lego Group has opened up numerous strands of revenue. However, with Lego it is important to keep in mind that—like with the Transformers franchise—the toy came before the film, and thus official production and related cultural practices unfolded differently than with franchises that were built around a book series or film adaptations.

3.2 While Lego’s plastic bricks have become big players in multimedia entertainment, the brand was not always as successful as it is today. In the following section we will take a look at the development of the brand and its product range over the years in order to help understand the changes that were necessary to achieve its current standing, changes that also attest to the often challenged yet sometimes reaffirmed status of tangible objects in a predominantly digitally mediated era.

3.3 2014 was without doubt a year of resounding success for the Lego Group. While the Danish company made a total profit of 7 billion Danish kroner (roughly 940 million Euro) (note 2), a rise of approximately 15 percent in comparison to 2013, what really blew the framework was the outstanding performance of The LEGO Movie in theaters worldwide. The film returned a worldwide gross of $469,160,692 (Box Office Mojo 2015). Notable critics positively reviewed Lego’s latest brainchild, overtly lauding its complexity and richness of (at times self-mocking) references (see e.g., Lane 2014; Berardinelli 2014; Orr 2014; Travers 2014). Audiences also clearly loved the film. Successful film-related merchandising helped Lego to finally triumph over fellow toymaker Mattel, making the company the world’s most valuable toymaker that very same year (Koch 2014).

3.4 Fifteen years earlier, however, the situation could not have been more different. At the turn of the millennium, Lego had hit the bottom in every conceivable way—drowning in debt and with a less than promising outlook. The company was an investor’s nightmare for several reasons. In 1998 the last patents of the Lego Group had expired, which resulted in the company losing its monopoly position. Multiple copycats swamped the toy market with cheaper imitations—like Mattel Inc.’s Mega Bloks or Korean toymaker Oxford’s Kre-o construction toys—that were compatible with Lego bricks, and these imitators claimed significant market share. Lego lost several lawsuits in different countries trying to defend its copyright (Robertson and Breen 2013, 52). Also, when the era of computer games dawned, providing exciting and interactive alternatives to existing analog toys, Lego seemed to become redundant in children’s rooms around the world (Konzack 2014, 5). Against the sparkling digital wonders on the screens, Lego’s analog toys, so it seemed, could only lose out. The company’s management attempted to face the crisis head on. From 1994 to 1998, the toymaker tripled its product portfolio, but to no avail. As the expansion increased, so did production costs for new sets, eating away financial reserves while profits still staggered (Robertson and Breen 2013, 53). It became quite clear that if Lego wanted to thrive again, profound changes would be necessary.

3.5 Lego’s survival mainly depended on two major business decisions, which helped bring the bricks to the digital sphere: Licensing and selling transmedial stories. In 1999, despite strong resistance from some members of its board of directors (note 3), Lego closed a deal with Lucasfilm, acquiring the licensing rights for Star Wars—just in time for the release of Star Wars: Episode 1—The Phantom Menace. In his study Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture, Dan Fleming raises the important issue of narrativization within the toy industry. From a historical perspective, he traces how in “the 1960s the toy industry became increasingly dependent on cinema and, especially, on television for play-worthy objects that could borrow the popularity of a screen character or story. Such objects then came with a narrative attached” (1996, 102). Naming Star Wars, G. I. Joe, Transformers, and the Ninja Turtles as prominent examples, Fleming states that while earlier marketing of narrativized toys had “encouraged children to play out scenes and stories from the originals,” the
"new narrative contexts had multiple narrative possibilities deliberately built into them from the beginning," such as a basic set of characters and story structures that invited playful extensions with children's "own variations" (102). Licensing the hugely successful series was Lego's first attempt to achieve higher recognition through cooperation with other brands, a strategy that would prove successful on all levels. While the Star Wars franchise had faltered after the release of The Return of the Jedi in 1983, entering what has become known in Star Wars fandom as the dark ages between 1985 and 1991, the franchise entered a "second phase" of success when Bantam Books was granted the license to publish Star Wars novels that extended the existing storyline (Proctor and Freeman 2016, 225) and breathed new life into the ailing franchise. The Star Wars renaissance gained traction with further merchandising deals (227), all of which culminated in Lucas's decision to film the prequels.

[3.6] In Lego's product portfolio, Star Wars sets became what one would call long runners—products that would sell even in times when no installment of the Star Wars reboot featured in cinemas. Not only could Lego draw on children as potential consumers, adult fans of both Star Wars and Lego could be relied upon as customers too, indulging in their fandom with yet another product (note 4). Thus, acquiring the rights for Star Wars equipped Lego with a powerful weapon in the competition for market share. Lucas's saga was a presold property in the best sense and "the best way to predict new success," as Jenkins, Ford, and Green formulated it in Spreadable Media, "is to build on past success" (2013, 199), an observation reminiscent of Merton's (1968) Matthew Effect. Exciting audiences since its first release in 1977, the Star Wars franchise had built a strong international fan base, and Lego was ready to skim off the profits.

[3.7] The approach was an intergenerational one: Children could play and reenact the films; adult fans could collect. Every subsequent licensing agreement, be it of Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, or The Simpsons franchises, was built upon this formula (note 5). Yet, while licensing was a clever idea in increasing sales and fostering Lego's reputation, a considerable sum of the revenue created with licensed products returned to the license owners. In 2004, the first year in which Lego disclosed such figures, turnover proceeds amounted to DKK 6.7 billion, while Lego had to pay DKK 224 million for using intellectual property—4 percent of the total revenue (note 6).

[3.8] Although licensing existing franchises had proven successful, Lego was also in need of a strategy that would see them ready for an increasingly digitizing world while yielding a profit larger than the one they could achieve with licensing deals. The firm had learned from their experiences with Star Wars that creating toys bound up with a good story would increase their appeal with customers and in turn boost sales. Capitalizing on an existing transmedial phenomenon did indeed work. So why not come up with a world of their own, redeeming them from the necessity to buy themselves into the intellectual property of others? The Bionicle line was born.

[3.9] While thematic sets had existed before, the idea behind Bionicle was, according to Fonnesbaek and Andersen, "to create an ongoing epic story in which the Lego products could act as the lead characters" (2005, 32). With Bionicle, Lego created its own mythical storyworld of heroic biomechanical beings, based on the universal theme of good versus evil. The Danish company developed a product that held appeal across cultural boundaries, ensuring its potential to sell internationally with a strategy often used with cultural products, namely by further reducing, in terms of design and narrative characteristics, "any traits that could be perceived as culturally specific and as markers of identity" (Hediger 2013). What is more, however, with Bionicle, Lego bridged the gap between analog and digital.

[3.10] While not being their first attempt at creating a product that was integrated digitally, Bionicle was strongly tied up with digital products as no other product line had ever been before. Four animation movies and five video games complemented the transmedial approach (Fonnesbaek and Andersen 2005, 35–36; Wolf 2014, 283–84). Yet, the centerpiece of Bionicle was a custom-made Web site that published new chapters of the story each month, a piecemeal tactic binding customers to the product, while Lego's marketing division kept a close eye on all marketing media referring exclusively to the online presence (Fonnesbaek and Andersen 2005, 36–38). Eventually, Lego also turned the tables on the intellectual property front. Becoming a licensor in its own right, the company huddled with businesses like Nestlé and McDonald's, allowing them to buy into their property, hence increasing awareness for the Bionicle campaign (Fonnesbaek and Andersen 2005, 38). The new line would become a huge success and a sheet anchor in turbulent times (Robertson and Breen 2013). Subsequent product lines such as Ninjago: Masters of Spinjitzu and Legends of Chima have followed in the Bionicle campaign's footsteps.

[3.11] With Bionicle, Lego had also realized for the first time that the key to survival in the digital age was selling transmedial stories rather than simple toys. In a sense, The LEGO Movie was the direct result of this insight. Numerous
franchises were woven into a coherent and unique narrative of its own, killing two birds with one stone, so to speak. Against this backdrop, *The LEGO Movie* can be theorized with Dan Hassler-Forest’s concept of transmedia world-building. According to Hassler-Forest, the following principles are key to the concept: It "takes place across media," it "involves audience participation," and it "is a process that defers narrative closure" (2016, 5, emphasis in original). All three are represented in *The LEGO Movie*: In 2017, the initial film has already made way for a sequel, focused on one of the main characters (Batman), with another spin-off already in the making. Games and analog toy-sets and the ensuing and ongoing discussions on fan Web sites and forums are testimony to the emergence of a world across media in which audience participation is not only a driving force behind this genesis but subsequently may act as inspirational fodder for the corporate producers to extend this universe even further. Finally, *The LEGO Movie* defers narrative closure not only by ending with a cliffhanger but much more so thanks to the fact that the world in which the events of *The LEGO Movie* unfold knows no such thing as a closure. Hassler-Forest notes that "world-building shifts focus from the linear narrative to the environment that surrounds and sustains it" (2016, 8). In the case of *The LEGO Movie*, this environment is partially made up of the numerous franchises, which themselves verge on the edge of narrative infinity, thus defying attempts to draw clear, closing borders.

[3.12] Lego’s other franchises are then pivotal when it comes to understanding *The LEGO Movie*. As Wolf notes, "Lego isn’t just transmedial, it is also transfranchisal" (2014, xxi), a concept in line with Hills’s definition of transbranding, the grouping of "multiple intellectual properties…all of them mediated through LEGO as a unifying dimension" (Hills 2016, 8). Addressing both adult fans and children, the film became a hotbed for a transmedial franchise of unprecedented scale, stretching into the realm of the digital with an interactive Web site and a video game (note 7). Nevertheless, *The LEGO Movie* also represents a partial rectification of the company’s orientation as a toymaker, as it turned away from the “play over construction” objective that Lego had introduced with the Bionicle line (note 8) and now concentrated again on the idea of systemic play, which had been the company’s philosophy from the beginning.

[3.13] It should be pointed out, however, that while the Lego Group obviously has found functioning and profitable strategies for making the leap into the digital age and to thrive under intensifying market conditions, they seem to have adopted a waiting attitude as regards a full embrace of the digital world in terms of bringing systemic play fully to the digital sphere. While various video games pervade their product portfolio, Lego has only one “virtual manifestation” aimed at digital constructing, the *LEGO Digital Designer*, which can hardly be considered a game and which is mainly used by fans (Schut 2014, 233). Interestingly, it was not Lego but the eminently successful *Minecraft* franchise that demonstrated that a translation of systemic play to the digital world is indeed possible, a move that was then answered by the Lego Group acquisition of licenses for their very own *Minecraft* toy lines (see LEGO Minecraft) (https://www.lego.com/en-gb/minecraft).

[3.14] Having examined Lego’s product range and marketing strategies, we will now turn our attention to the people addressed by the mentioned sets, games, and *The LEGO Movie*. The following section will concentrate on Lego fans, those users who invest more time and money into Lego building, playing, or collecting than does the average Lego user, aiming to gain insight into common forms of engagement with the brick and its brand.

4. The fans: A kidult brand community

[4.1] Looking at Lego’s variety of products over the years, it becomes clear that the customers envisioned seem to have elaborate taste and more than just pocket money to spend. Some Lego sets are so complicated, with up to several thousand pieces, or very expensive, like the *London Tower Bridge* model or the *Ultimate Collector’s Edition Millennium Falcon*, that it seems obvious they address adults rather than children. And, in fact, in organized Lego fandom, adult fans are the most active. Drawing on an example from German Lego fandom, the following section will present a number of key AFOL activities and discuss organizational and motivational factors of such engagement.

[4.2] There are a number of registered German Lego fan clubs, in Berlin, Cologne, Munich, and Stuttgart. When referring to them as registered Lego fan clubs, the word registered can mean two different things that attest to different kinds of institutionalization: One is the international registration with Lego as an (R)LUG—a registered Lego user group. The other is the registration as an association in accordance with the German civil code. Both are important factors of German Lego fans’ activities. We had the opportunity to interview Daniel, the founder of the Stuttgart fan club
Schwabenstein 2x4 (which translates into Swabian Brick 2 times 4, referring to the studs of the most popular Lego brick) who provided insight into organizational matters.

[4.3] Daniel explained to us that in order to be recognized as a Lego user group, it is necessary to meet certain demands, for example, to have a minimum of 20 group members and to organize at least three Lego-related events over the course of a year. According to the company, these groups can appear in the form of a "Physical LEGO User Group" or an "Online LEGO User Group" (Lego 2014, 3). "Becoming a Recognized LEGO User Group qualifies the group to gain access to various community support programs" (Lego 2014, 3), such as, for example, an extensive and yearly allotted free package of Lego bricks or free sets, as Daniel reported. In April 2015, together with his friend Andreas, he founded Schwabenstein 2x4, at the same time applying for LUG status, which was granted in 2016.

[4.4] Even before applying for LUG-status, Schwabenstein’s founders made sure to register the group as a legal association, a German Verein, in a step the group considered necessary in order to reduce liability risk. From his engagement with other fan groups, Daniel knew that with larger projects, the risk of failures and resulting disputes over financial or legal responsibilities could increase, all too easily resulting in a decrease of members’ commitment. German fan clubs often get registered by their members under the Law of Associations, which implies that the Verein itself is a legal actor. In cases of legal prosecution, only the organization’s financial means can be touched; no individual will be held responsible or have to cover any costs. As German copyright (Urheberrecht), for example, does not have an exemption as clearly phrased as the American concept of fair use or English fair dealing, German fans in general are concerned about possible legal prosecution (see Einwächter 2015a, 23). Registering a Verein makes it necessary to formulate statutes explaining the organization’s aims and to follow a protocol that requires a steering committee, official membership meetings for decision making, and a thorough form of legal documentation. Having established all of the aforementioned, Daniel went to great lengths to achieve nonprofit status for the group now legally registered.

[4.5] In Germany, being nonprofit means that an association can accept tax-free donations and only needs to file their tax declaration every third year, which is a great administrative relief. Nonprofit organizations can also claim tax exemption for certain kinds of services or buyable objects (Burhoff 2014). To meet the demands of the Associations Act, Daniel and his friends had to carry out a formal founding meeting, in which they agreed on carefully phrased statutes. They also negotiated with the local fiscal authorities concerning their group’s purpose. The reason why no other German Lego fan group had achieved nonprofit status before was that the fiscal authorities would normally interpret Lego collecting, building, and showcasing as a commercial activity, opposing the very idea of nonprofit. The Lego Group, however, is very open about the fact that they want LUGs to be promoters of their brand. In the online application form for Lego User Groups, Lego describes one of the events that it expects registered user groups to organize, as follows: "a formal assembly of AFOLs and TFOLs [Teen Fans of Lego] that spans across multiple days to allow discussion about, and action on, promoting the LEGO® hobby. In addition to offering various activities to registered attendees (such as presentations, workshops, and seminars) time is allocated to promote the LEGO® hobby to a public audience" (2017, 9).

[4.6] Such openly addressed commercial orientation and marketing goals would normally have hindered a LUG from achieving nonprofit recognition in Germany. However, Daniel was lucky and was able to talk to a tax inspector who actually showed an interest in what the group did. They had recently built a miniature of the Stuttgart city library with Lego bricks, as well as the parliament of Baden-Württemberg. The tax inspector concluded that such portrayal could be considered art and that under this label, it would not be difficult to receive the wanted status as an association furthering artistic culture and expression. Even more welcome, the inspector stated, was the national, often even regional focus of their projects. Daniel took this advice to heart very much. So much, in fact, that the group’s Web site presents art-related quotes by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche ("Kunst ist mehr wert als die Wahrheit."—"Art is more important than the truth," translated by S. E. www.schwabenstein.com) and artist Peter Weibel ("Die Aufgabe der Kunst besteht darin, Türen zu öffnen, wo sie keiner sieht."—"Art has the task of opening doors where nobody saw there were any," translated by S. E.). Also Daniel himself has become quite accustomed to using the rhetoric of a curator and promoter of the arts. Asked about his group’s goals, he says, "The fact that LEGO is art and culture has not yet sunk in with people. And that is why I consider it important and the right thing to do that we founded this association, in order to make people aware of the fact that Lego is not just a toy, it is a means to transform your thoughts into buildings" (translated by S. E.).
With this proposition, Daniel found his unique selling point, his marker of distinction with regard to other German Lego fan organizations like the Munich group that successfully organizes the large and very popular convention Bricking Bavaria. "They want to make money," he says, "and that is not necessarily the case with us. We'd rather raise awareness that you can express emotion and ideas not only with music, film, with a novel, or with painting, but just as well with Lego bricks" (transl. by S.E.).

Over the last 10 years, formats of cooperation between the Lego Group and educational institutions, like the LEGO Learning Institute or LEGO Serious Play, have emerged, promoting "LEGO as kind of tool to support thinking and collaboration" (Gauntlett 2014, 189). There are also artists like Nathan Sawaya of BrickArtist.com whose preferred art tool is the Lego brick, praising its potential to "evoke emotion" as well as its "clean" and "neat" features and reusability compared to other, "messier" art tools (2014, 207). It is thus not quite clear whether the fan group picked up this rhetoric or came to a similar conclusion by themselves, when stressing the merits of Lego as an expressive medium.

Considering the great administrative efforts by fans like Daniel and Andreas, dealing with tiresome legal and organizational issues, how can we explain the motivation underlying adult Lego engagement and investment? Motivational psychology differentiates between extrinsic and intrinsic forms of motivation that can be brought to bear in the Lego fan community as well: Motivation is extrinsic; if one does something for a certain outcome of an activity, a reward, gratification, or recognition, something external to the self (Deci and Ryan 1985, 5). An activity is intrinsically motivated if a person does it for its own sake, when enjoyment or perceived success does not hinge on a certain outcome (5). Playing or building with Lego certainly has such an effect on many who like getting lost in playing, winding down after a hard day of work. For many AFOLs, thus, engaging with Lego is an intrinsically motivated, private matter. However, whenever collecting or building assumes a public dimension, extrinsic forms of motivation play an important role as well. As an extrinsic factor of active Lego fandom, we can consider the community-related status gain that some fans achieve by building and showcasing complex architectures, demonstrating their skills and vast knowledge in the presence of their peers and an interested public. With the official LUG status and the German nonprofit status that fan clubs can apply for and that each grant certain rewards, we also discussed two extrinsic factors of Lego fan activity that we think critically shape fans’ activities on a pragmatic level. Furthermore, these factors influence how fans approach Lego and how they conceive of themselves as fans.

Adult fans of Lego (AFOL) invest a lot of time and money in their hobby; some possess unbelievably large collections of bricks, which can cause storage problems. Andreas, the cofounder of Schwabenstein 2x4, for example, rents an extra apartment solely for Lego storage and building (note 9). His wife rarely sees him when he is occupied with his Lego MOCs (my own creations), and he jokingly uses the abbreviation LSP—Lego-stressed-partner—when talking about the social side effects of his fan cultural engagement. It is apparently a rather known term in his smaller community of Southern German Lego AFOLs (note 10), but it also represents a playful extension of fan cultural slang. Abbreviations play an important role within Lego fandom; AFOLs are especially fond of acronyms (some official, some unofficial), ranging from ABB (automatic binding brick) to BURP (big ugly rock piece) to SHIP (significantly huge investment in parts) to the very necessary WIP (work in progress) (“List of LEGO Abbreviations” n.d.). Within a fan cultural context, we can consider the knowledge of such terms and their meaning to represent a form of fan cultural capital. Sirpa Leppänen has pointed out—albeit in the context of fan fiction communities—that the "acquisition of the appropriate uses of language...[is crucial to] becoming a legitimate participant" in certain fan cultural activities (2009, 79), an observation that certainly also holds true for Lego fandom. Like in other fan communities, common slang is also of bonding value here; specific terms get invented, played with, jokingly altered, or abandoned in the Lego fan community.

Among the intrinsic factors of Lego engagement, nostalgia and sentiment play an important role. For many adult fans—even if they never stopped engaging with Lego—plastic bricks are associated with their childhood because
that was often when they first encountered them. Lincoln Geraghty notes in his book *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom, and Collecting Popular Culture* that it is an important aspect of adult fan collecting that keeping things that were liked in the past helps the collector to preserve and perpetuate a younger identity, to relive and remember fond memories (2014, 137). He suggests describing the personal dimension of collecting in the words of Baudrillard: "what you really collect is always yourself" (Baudrillard 2005, 97). Geraghty also stresses the transformative aspect of Lego-related nostalgia: "transforming the original use for Lego, from childhood to adulthood, and transforming the experience of the toy as it passes from one generation to the next" (2014, 164). While Geraghty’s nostalgic reading of fan collecting may certainly not apply to every AFOL (also collecting, playing, and constructing may be perceived as quite different activities by many fans in the first place), the notion of emulating a younger self through acts of consumption and play has been driving marketing campaigns for a long time; selling products that make people feel younger is certainly not a new but a reliable strategy. In her article "Nothing Sells Like Teen Spirit," Karen Brooks noted that through "particular modes of production and imagery, corporate society harnesses the essence of youth and sells back to the adult culture an anti-aging formula. By targeting those euphemistically referred to as the young at heart, a range of products is skewed towards the 25-50-year-old demographic so that they may relive their youth" (2003, 3). While Lego may not make the same promises as lifestyle products like makeup and fashion, it certainly speaks to the consumer’s inner child (and with the AFOL that means a child with an income to spend) (note 11). Furthermore, Daniel mentions intergenerational exchange through Lego as an important factor of his engagement with the toy and brand. One of the reasons that he is now less involved within fantasy fandom and more occupied with Lego is that he perceives it to open up more possibilities of interacting with his own child. It is also important to note that in fan cultural collecting, archival practices and social practices often come together productively, as individuals and communities of interest actively preserve what matters to them and what may not be kept and represented by official heritage institutions (see Einwächter 2015b).

[4.13] Throughout our article we have been zooming in from the larger economic framework of Lego production to organizational and cultural endeavors by fans, and now we will take a look at the brick itself, as it will lead us back to a discussion of *The LEGO Movie*.

5. The brick: Open innovation with "analog pixels"?

[5.1] We consider the Lego brick an interesting subject for discussions about aspects of today's media culture as it possesses both analog and digital features—features that in public discourse, especially in technology product marketing, often get addressed as opposing qualities with the digital being regarded as superior (Schröter 2004, 7–8). German media professor Jens Schröter points out that with the advent of the CD, dichotomies like real/analog versus hyperreal/digital (meaning more-than-real, but, potentially also nonreal) proliferated (16). The actual Lego brick is undoubtedly a physical and tangible object accounting for certain degrees of realness. It is built from plastic that gets warmed up until elastic (to a temperature of 230 to 310° Celsius) which is then pressed into form (LEGO Education n.d.). Schröter has noted that media historiography often presents the analog as predigital and in some form indexical (2004, 25), as a causal reference to a real object (note 12). If we were to accept the Lego brick as some form of medium or mediating object conveying meaning, the bricks’ molded status would be in line with such an argumentation.

[5.2] However, even physical Lego possesses digital qualities that can be addressed in reference to another important dichotomy, namely that of continuous/analog versus cascaded/digital as used in data transmission. Like pixels, bricks represent the smallest discrete units of a cultural object, and every digital picture could be translated into a Lego representation (given that the bricks of the needed colors were available) (note 13). Understanding the Lego brick as the smallest discrete unit within a range of larger, composed objects stimulates further musings, as the smallest unit—be it pixel or brick—can be put together in myriads of combinations, each time resulting in something completely new. Novelty, here, and quite in accordance with economic innovation theory (Schumpeter 2006, 158), comes not from creating something new from scratch but from the arrangement of already existing resources to new ends.

[5.3] Another analogy between Lego and digital media content is that in remixing the digital, there is hardly any quality loss. Analog remixing—think of a paper collage, a celluloid film roll glued together from individual film strips, or an old VCR fan video—often physically harms the involved original media (e.g., paper) or works with copies that already differ slightly from the originals (e.g., VCR). However, in remixing digital content—because of the possibility of identical reproduction—the original versions of the mixed material do not get destroyed or altered—they are just reproduced in...
another shape. Lego bricks possess this digital feature as well. Every construction consists of many separate pieces, but the shape is usually not bound to persist. It can be disassembled and given an entirely new form as often as one pleases, without a perceivable loss of material taking place (except, perhaps, for the situation where one vacuums up a brick with the vacuum cleaner or chews on a brick—as children sometimes do—leaving bite marks). What is more, in the Lego universe it is not only single bricks that are being constantly remixed—it is wholly different sets, entire narrative universes that are thrown together to create something new, a principle that was also played out in The LEGO Movie. In Lego’s franchised world, it is possible that Darth Vader meets Lord Voldemort over tea at Homer Simpson’s house to discuss how they could get rid of Gandalf, while Batman indulges in a round of hide-and-go-seek with the folks from Bionicle who hang out on a pirate ship. The potential combinations are nearly infinite.

It requires a certain cultural expertise and freedom to be able to arrange cultural fragments skillfully to new ends. This is reflected in The LEGO Movie, where the most prestigious characters are so-called masterbuilders, people who have the actual ideas for new arrangements and who can build their own creations (MOCs) without instructions. Interestingly, the crime of the film’s villain consists of gluing Lego bricks together so they can no longer be used by someone else or for different purposes. The narrative can thus be read alongside popular critiques of copyright like the one undertaken by Lawrence Lessig (2008) in his book Remix where he states that cultural production has always depended on the usage of existing material and that current copyright and trademark legislations increasingly hinder cultural participation. The glue in the Lego film’s narrative can thus be interpreted as a copyright not flexible enough for creative and out-of-the-box-thinking, a threat to the masterbuilders of our culture (note 14). While subtly criticizing a copyright not fit for the digital age of remixing, The LEGO Movie pays homage to older media and to the tangibility of Lego bricks through analog cues.

It is, however, difficult to determine whether the film’s message is merely the result of a progressive script written by cunning industry-scriptwriters or whether the Lego Group explicitly asked for specific aspects to be included in the story in order to shape their public image, perhaps to avoid a negative portrayal of their brand. Only hints are available, but they suggest a strong influence of the Lego Group: Jill Weifert, at the time of the film’s release Lego’s vice president for global licensing and entertainment, emphasized that the Lego Group always kept a close eye on the film’s development. "For us," Weifert said, "this was always about building the Lego brand." (quoted in Gillette 2014). The film was financed by Warner Bros. in cooperation with Village Roadshow, but the Lego Group acted as a producer with seemingly considerable influence on the final outcome. Although the Group was, according to Gillette, contractually not entitled to enforce changes, the filmmakers seem to have granted them substantial latitude in shaping nearly every aspect of the filmmaking process.

The film: Analog reminiscences

Arguably, one of the many reasons why the film was so successful with adult Lego fans was its visual style. For instance, users on the German brickfilm forum Brickboard.de explicitly praised its visual qualities and adherence to typical Lego qualities (2013). Daniel took a lot of enjoyment in a scene that showed gunfire in the form of a flower stem piece that had been recolored from green to red and emerged from pistols. So much attention had obviously been paid to detail, like the broken helmet of the spaceman figure or its overall scratched front that made it look tangible, like an item that had been touched and fallen to the floor many, many times. In online forums, people enthusiastically reported how they used to have this Lego spaceman figure and how its helmet would always break in exactly that place.

When the trailer came out in 2013, Lego fan blogs like Brickverse dissected it frame by frame, quickly noting that in the scene showing Emmet getting dressed, "in four consecutive frames, parts are switched around as if it being done with real Lego pieces" (2013). In some shots, there are fingerprints marking the figures’ surfaces, inspiring further musings about the film’s supposed computer-generated imagery. The film’s lighting further added to this confusion because, if these images were computer generated, why would there be lens flares that normally originate from light falling on an actual camera lens in a certain angle? (note 15). Craig Welsh, the film’s supervisor of virtual lighting, confirmed in an interview that this buzz was consciously stimulated and carefully monitored:

as evidenced by the many comments out there on the internet...[there were] sometimes furious debates over whether or not the film was filmed stop motion or was fully or partially CG, with all sorts of theories buzzing around. To generate that level of debate and to have people genuinely question the
The film, in fact, was produced digitally and is a hybrid—apart from the final scenes, in which human actors take to the scene, most of it is computer animated. Visually mimicking stop-motion technology (Welsh 2014), Warner Bros. picked up a practice long in use with Lego fans: brickfilming. A still rather underresearched aspect of Lego fan culture (a history of brickfilming remains to be written), brickfilms constitute a genre of films whose mise-en-scène, that is, its visual design, is—to a greater or lesser extent—solely created with Lego bricks. While brickfilmers, as those active in brickfilming refer to themselves, unanimously agree that a brickfilm needs to be created with Lego and should generally not include any other objects, the line between what still counts as a brickfilm and what does not is blurry and a continual topic of fierce debate among those involved. Mostly created with the traditional stop-motion technique, brickfilms are not limited to certain topics or genres but largely mirror what is available in contemporary cinema, starting with thrillers through to experimental films and in some cases even porn (although this category is normally disliked by a majority of brickfilmers). While the bulk of available brickfilms orientates itself along mainstream lines, there are frequent exceptions, and varieties are endless. Today, stop-motion animation remains the prime mode of production; however, just as other amateur filmmakers have, brickfilmers have in recent years, thanks to the greater availability of the necessary technology, increasingly relied on computer-generated imagery (CGI) and quite sophisticated visual effects to create and improve their films.

Brickfilming as a fan activity intersects with other aspects of Lego fan culture. However, boundaries between brickfilmers and creators of MOCs are fluid. Some of them are actively involved in typical Lego fan activities, while others create brickfilms without having a close connection to other fans of Lego. It should also be noted that while brickfilmers are often Lego fans, not all brickfilms are necessarily Lego fan films. Sometimes Lego is just used for pragmatic reasons, as a handy tool for stop-motion animation, as it is easier to handle than other materials. Since the early 2000s, the field has also seen a trend of increasing professionalization. Successful brickfilmers have cooperated with the Lego Group to create promotional films for new product lines (e.g., BrotherhoodWorkshop) (https://www.youtube.com/user/BrotherhoodWorkshop), a development received with mixed feelings by many brickfilmers. While some greeted the increased attention from both the media and the Lego Group with enthusiasm, others despised a perceived mainstreamization of their activity. As the animation of brickfilms is incredibly time consuming, the number of active brickfilmers is, as far as we can tell from our observations, comparatively small. Larger local or regional networks of brickfilmers or the association of individual brickfilmers in clubs or other registered groups is rare. Given their widespread dispersion, brickfilmers heavily rely on the Internet to organize themselves, to learn from each other, and to bond with likeminded individuals. Social platforms, above all YouTube, play an important role for showcasing their work.

With its digitally produced, deliberately placed imperfections, The LEGO Movie thus pays tribute to two important sections of its audience: to anyone engaged in the field of brickfilming, and to nostalgic Lego fans who still care about Lego in its tangible form, presenting Lego as a brand that is well aware of its analog and digital components. The Lego comeback has profited a lot from kidults and grassroots brickfilm-making, and it received a boost from platforms like YouTube, where people from various fandoms turned to Lego as an expressive medium. The film seems to praise their creativity, but the message of free cultural exchange is not necessarily consistent with the company’s own policy.

The company’s way of dealing with fan creativity has sparked controversy in the fan cultural sphere. In early 2015, fan Sergio shared his disappointment online because Lego was producing the design of a Ghostbusters firehouse he had handed in at the Lego ideas Web site, a customer innovation platform, and did not give any credit to him (TheBrickPal 2015). Lego responded that the design in question had already been in the pipeline when the fan handed in his idea of it and stressed that overlaps like this were likely to happen under the given circumstances. The designs do look strikingly similar. And of course this could be because the Ghostbusters films served as a common reference to both official and unofficial creators while the possibilities to represent such an iconic architecture with simplifying means like Lego bricks may necessarily be limited, thus leading to unavoidable similarities in the firehouse representations. Still, the fan’s irritation with this incident is understandable given the timing of the two creations, and the unequal distribution of power underlying any fan-corporate interaction becomes obvious. In order to find out more about the independent, subversive potential of Lego-related fandom (and to check whether it is in general more brandon than fandom), we may need to more actively seek out such clashes and fan activities that contradict the brand community logic, activities that find and promote ways to uncouple play from purchase.
7. Conclusion

[7.1] When, in January 2015, The LEGO Movie did not receive an Oscar nomination in the animation category, people were surprised; after all, the film had been the highest-grossing animated movie of the year! Phil Lord, codirector and cowriter of the film, finally reacted by tweeting a photo of an Oscar built of simple yellow Lego bricks, stating: "It's okay. Made my own!" picking up the rhetoric of individualistic do-it-yourself counterculture he had also helped write into the film. In addition to being a fitting and charming reaction to a perceived setback, this combination of almost-defiant individual creativity in the context of an undeniably large-scale economic success is an important ingredient of the film and of Lego fans’ self-perception; however, in none of these cases does it necessarily represent a subversive act. Heather Havrilesky of the New York Times sarcastically sums up the film’s message that also seems to reverberate in Phil Lord’s statement: “All of those sophisticated constructions and celebrity minifigures and universes within universes are nothing…compared to a simple box of (non-cross-platform promotional) colorful plastic blocks…That box of blocks proves that, even though you might feel average and empty-headed, in fact you are ‘the most important, most talented, most interesting, most extraordinary person in the universe’” (2014).

[7.2] Lego hands to its diverse following of users a long list of reasons to engage with the brand, an engagement in which mainstream and counterculture, art and commerce, the winner and the underdog are invited to find a place. While with multimedia products, like Bionicle or the recently introduced video game Lego Dimensions, the corporation appeals to Web- and gaming-savvy audiences, Ben Fogle rightfully stresses that Lego still resembles “the antithesis of the high tech world” to parents who are “desperate to wean [their]…little ones away from the tablets and into the bricks” (Espinoza 2016). One could also attest a strategy known from investment banking: In simplified terms, Lego’s method of addressing different audiences is a form of portfolio diversification (note 16). To hedge against potential losses and to spread risk, investment funds often acquire a range of different assets, assuming that they will never default at the same time.

[7.3] In addition to being a very entertaining postmodern film, The LEGO Movie proves an interesting case for discussions about contemporary transfanchial film production and marketing, about analog and digital aspects of animated filmmaking, and about convergence between niche and mainstream culture(s). The film can be read as homage to fan cultural practices and to the cultural conditions necessary for free cultural participation (for example, a copyright flexible enough to allow individual creativity instead of fixing original works into place).

[7.4] Through a skeptical lens, however, it cannot go unnoticed that many of the film’s clever visual and narratological decisions (introducing the characters of Superwoman, Batman, and Green Lantern as masterbuilders, for example, and mimicking the aesthetics of brickfilming) can just as well be read as appropriations of fan cultural practices. To repeat Henry Jenkins’s warning in his essay "Afterword: The Future of Fandom" (2007): “We should certainly avoid celebrating a process that commodifies fan cultural production and sells it back to us with a considerable markup” (362). The LEGO Movie has shown how, when corporate interests become a little too obvious, just the right amount of satire and self-reflexivity will save the day and silence most of the critics who would usually be quick to point out that the brand still represents an internationally operating corporation selling an ever-expanding range of expensive products that are largely addressed not to people who make their own constructions but to consumers who stick to instructions and packaged sets. The satiric and postmodern narrative approach also allows knowledgeable, Lego-savvy fans to distinguish between themselves and other, more average Lego users who do not get the numerous cross-references in the film and who do not have insight into how and where to receive free bricks and special conditions.

[7.5] The Lego Group’s brand community-building efforts are no different from other corporations’ strategies like Apple’s or Ikea’s in that they provide incentives for acquiring a seemingly fan cultural knowledge about the brand and its products. A detailed knowledge of products and regulations is ultimately a knowledge of how to work best within the rules set by corporate culture. Fans criticize an increasing commercialization: Daniel notes a tendency that nowadays Lego sets include fewer and bigger pieces (as if they had already been glued together). This reduces complexity but also leaves less room for straying from the original instructions and for building MOCs.

[7.6] Furthermore, we consider it likely that Lego will receive positive feedback on its endeavors to become an umbrella-fandom that incorporates—quite literally—all kinds of active media fandoms into one large brand community. With reference to the company’s protection of its own corporate interests, which shows in the deliberate outsourcing of
promotion activities to fans (in RLUGs) and mining of fan-generated creative content, we may ultimately have to read the liberal message of The LEGO Movie as a conscious strategy of appeasement, a clever piece of PR, rather than a cultural critique or an honest declaration of political or ethical intent.

8. Notes

1. Low expectations were mentioned by fans in forums but also in several early reviews, such as the ones by Hartlaub (2014) and Coyle (2014), the latter referring to a "dim reputation of toy movies."

2. The Lego Group reported a profit of DKK 7.0 billion in comparison to 2013 where the profit, deducting all charges, amounted to DKK 6.1 billion. According to the annual report, revenue numbers increased by 13.0% in 2014 to DKK 28.6 billion against DKK 25.3 billion the year before ("Annual Report" 2014, 5).

3. The main argument against Star Wars was Lego’s promise that war should never feature as a part of their toy world. However, Star Wars already included war in the wording and was mainly based on action and fights. Though the film is neither a classical war film nor outrageously brutal, executives feared that a deal with Lucasfilm over Star Wars would undermine their reputation as a child-friendly toymaker (Robertson and Breen 2013, 51).

4. Consumption is seen as a core activity of fans. In his article "Hitching a Ride on a Star," Charles Soukup writes that "in a capitalist, media-dominated society, the fan is encouraged to collect, to produce, and to consume media and media-related products" (2006, 323). In 2005, Sandvoss published a whole book about this relationship.

5. For a more detailed overview of the different licensed product lines see Konzack 2014, 5.

6. A total revenue of 901,984,527 Euro (at that time) compared to expenses of 32,290,615 Euro equals 4 percent ("Annual Report" 2004). What this figure does not tell us is how much the license costs account for of the actual product revenue for licensed product lines (Lego does not disclose such figures).

7. Thus far, a video game based on the film (The LEGO Movie video game) was released for various platforms, and over 20 sets based on the film were sold in stores. Again, as had happened with Bionicle, a Web site was created allowing fans to interact (http://www.thelegomovie.com). The page was online between 2013 and 2016 and can be accessed via The Wayback Machine: (www.archive.org) (Purchese 2013).

8. While Fonnesbaek and Andersen (2005) look upon this approach from a positive, insider perspective, Robertson and Breen describe the strategy of the Bionicle line as damaging to the brand as a whole: "The LEGO Group’s ambitious push to pursue an entirely new set of consumers—the two-thirds of kids who told researchers they’d rather plug into an Xbox (and the like) than play with construction toys—led to that all-out effort to think beyond the brick and fan out in entirely new directions, not only with digital toys but also with physical toys that were easier to build with because they had bigger, chunkier pieces. Above all, LEGO set its sights on developing turn-on toys featuring amped-up, good-versus-evil story lines" (2013, 94).

9. We did not speak with Andreas personally; he gave a number of interviews on regional television about his Lego collecting. We are paraphrasing an interview that was broadcast as part of the news format Landesschau Baden-Württemberg on September 3, 2015, on the regional TV channel SWR (Gotovac 2015).


11. Christopher Noxon (2006) discusses the phenomenon of adults taking part in activities usually associated with children in Rejuvenile: Kickball, Cartoons, Cupcakes, and the Reinvention of the American Grown-up, using a number of examples from sports to collecting items.

12. The author also stresses that such readings, especially those of predigitality and realness, are too simple to fully account for the relationship between analog and digital aspects of media or technology. Still, they represent widely held notions on the subject.

13. In cooperation with a digital photographer, Lego artist Nathan Sawaya explicitly addressed this effect; here the bricks in Sawaya’s "sculptures acted as pixels, which played with themes of pixels in the digital photography" (2014,
Interestingly, most reviews of the film left out this aspect; however, a number of vlog and blog posts picked it up, such as Rob Dean’s (2015) "Is The LEGO Movie Anti-Copyright?" (April 17) and Greg Epstein’s (2014) "How The LEGO Movie is Really about Copyright" (August 15).

Lens flares for a long time were considered unwanted light effects in film because they drew attention to the presence of a camera—only in recent times and after a process of conventualization are they consciously placed as they are considered beautiful and atmospheric (J. J. Abrams makes abundant use of them in his films and once even apologized for having fallen in love with this effect).

In finance, diversification is generally defined as "the reduction of risk achieved by replacing a single risk with a large number of smaller, unrelated risks" (Mankiw 2008, 850). One could also describe it with a more colloquial saying: "Don’t put all your eggs in one basket."

9. Works cited


https://doi.org/10.1126/science.159.3810.56.


Subversive drinking: Remixing copyright with free beer

Seth M. Walker

University of Denver, Denver, Colorado, United States

Abstract—Over the past decade, the Free Beer movement has provided producers, consumers, and hobbyists in the craft beer industry with a way to uniquely engage issues related to innovation and creativity: an "open source" beer that is encouraged to be uniquely transformed in the production of each subsequent batch. While contemporary conversations regarding copyright law and the legal protection of one's work increasingly take place in digital contexts, Free Beer allows these conversations to (re)emerge outside of these settings, in an analog format, and inform those who are not engaged in the production of software or other digital media of the broader ramifications associated with excessive restriction and control. This article examines how Free Beer functions as a critique of both copyright law and the suppression of creativity and innovation, and as a demonstration of alternative models of information protection and exchange.

Keywords—Activism; Collaborative brewing; Creative Commons; Culture jamming Deep remixability; Détournement; Free software; Intellectual Property; Open source; Semiotic disobedience

1. Introduction

As an "open source" project, Free Beer is much more than just a display of tangible open licensing. It is an example of the subversion of traditional forms of commodification and branding, and a reaction against the now-ubiquitous proprietary models of information and the strict parameters exerted by contemporary copyright laws. The past decade has seen several critics challenging current intellectual copyright norms—from the struggle related to accounting for digital works, to the increasing strain it places on creativity and innovation. This article, by examining some of these voices in the context of Free Beer, aims to place various views related to alternative understandings of ownership and accessibility into dialogue with one another—and with those not typically involved in conversations revolving around copyright (i.e., beer producers, consumers, and hobbyists)—in order to see how Free Beer uniquely engages the issues being raised and if any further implications can be discerned. On the one hand, Free Beer is about a particular campaign involving a popular alcoholic beverage; on the other hand, it is part of a broader conversation about innovation and transformation, along with the legal strictures that impede these processes. Thus, this article examines Free Beer in light of several related legal, technological, and cultural phenomena, including Creative Commons (CC)—the licensing suite providing the particular license used by Free Beer—free and open source movements, and remix studies.

2. Free as in beer

The Free Beer movement emerged from a 2004 collaborative project between the IT University of Copenhagen and the artist-activist collective known as Superflex. Their aim was to apply concepts associated with Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) to a tangible product outside the digital world: beer. An "open source beer" was produced ("version 1.0") and its recipe published under a CC license. Superflex has since continued the project—transitioning to the "Free Beer" brand from the original "Vores Øl" ("Our Beer")—regularly releasing new versions of the recipe with the movement's official Web site (freebeer.org), based on public feedback and revisions to the original; the Free Beer
The web site reports that "version 4.0" (brewed by Skands Brewery in Denmark) is the most recent "official" version of the recipe. The production of Free Beer, using the artwork and branding made available by Superflex and freebeer.org, however, comes with the caveat of its particular licensing. As indicated by the bottle label for version 3.2 (figure 1): "This license gives anyone the permission to use the recipe or create a derivative of the recipe to brew their own FREE BEER and to use and modify the design and branding elements. Anyone is free to earn money from FREE BEER, but they must publish the changes and results under the same license and credit our work." Established breweries, for instance, could produce and sell the beer if they wanted to, as some do (figure 2), but they would be required to make the recipe, and any modifications, available to the public with the same stipulations.

Figure 1. Free Beer version 3.2. Design by Superflex, 2007. CC BY-SA 2.5. [View larger image.]

[2.2] Beer, as a widely appreciated and culturally pervasive social product, allows concerns over copyright and proprietary information to reach audiences that would be unlikely to be involved in software-inspired conversations. "Recognizing that beer consumption is—and beer brewing could be—a popular social activity that forms part of what one could consider culturally fundamental," Troels Degn Johansson (2009, 8) suggests that Free Beer might "facilitate social gatherings where ideas and creative communities could be celebrated and inspired to engage in further involvement." In "Free Beer and Engaging Tools: Chains of Analogies in Superflex," Johansson outlines the birth of the project and how it relates to Superflex's other work and guiding philosophical principles. According to Johansson (2009, 1), "FREE BEER is a beer brand that seeks to communicate the principles of free software, free creativity, and intellectual property rights as an urgent political issue by comparing a beer recipe with a piece of software." Unnecessary restrictions on creativity and innovation, Superflex maintains, are an impediment to both the creative process and to attempts to improve cultural works and activity. Framed as a work of art, Johansson (2009) places Superflex's Free Beer project into the context of political action and cultural critique, drawing on what he calls a lineage of "socially engaged artists"—including groups such as the French Situationist International: mid-20th-century political and cultural revolutionaries who regularly engaged artwork in their tactics. Johansson (2009) classifies Superflex's work—in Free Beer and across other projects—as "design art": art that is meant to create "tools" for people to effect change in the world around them. Indeed, the original name of the project, Johansson (2009, 6) notes, captures this sentiment: as an appropriation of an old Carlsberg Beer slogan ("Our Beer"), Vores Øl evokes the beer’s "social dimension" through its inherent emphasis on everyone having the ability to brew the beer themselves (i.e., ours, not theirs) and "modify the original Our Beer recipe and its visual identity." But both names, Johansson points out, also signal a reclaiming of sorts—a reclaiming of products and ideas from large corporations that often exert copyright and proprietary ownership for the sake of monetary security and reward, not innovation and the bettering of society and its cultural works.
The Free Beer brand also signals a phrase associated with the Free Software movement, attributed to the founder of the Free Software Foundation (FSF), Richard Stallman: "To understand the concept [free], you should think of 'free' as in 'free speech,' not as in 'free beer'" (i.e., free as in liberty, not free as in gift). For the Free Software movement, "free" means the freedom to do whatever one wants with the software or code in question, including the redistribution of it in a potentially modified form, and even the sale of it for monetary purposes. Stallman argues that proprietary software perpetuates "instrument[s] of unjust power." Users, he claims, should "have the freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software"; anything short of this is considered unethical and rejected by the FSF [https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.en.html]. While many use "free software" and "open source" interchangeably, Stallman and the FSF remain adamant about the differences between the two. Generally speaking, the latter is said to lack the ethical foundation of the former, and is more of a practical position related to the creation of a better program or product; without communal involvement, proprietary software is considered insufficient and inadequately equipped to handle the perfectionist task [https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/open-source-misses-the-point.en.html]. Free and open source typically amount to the same outward appearance; the emphasis associated with each is what usually separates them. "Open source," however, has a rhetorical salience that can be applied to creative and cultural works as a whole in a way that surpasses the more limited nomenclature of "free software." It is important to consider the distinctions made by the FSF so that Free Beer can be properly situated in discussions revolving around alternative licensing schemes and criticisms of proprietary models. The majority of the licenses in the CC suite, for instance, tend to preserve the proprietary model, and end up falling short of what the FSF would consider "free" [note 1]. Cultural works in both categories, however, facilitate transformation—when "something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the first with new expression, meaning, or message" is done to change a previously created work—in ways that proprietary models do not [http://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/510/569.html]. Indeed, this broader recognition of the freedom to "remix" aligns with the aims of various "free culture" movements (such as Students for Free Culture and QuestionCopyright.org), and law professor Lawrence Lessig’s 2004 book Free Culture has served as a foundational resource for much of the ideology continuing to drive these types of campaigns and organizations.

Lessig, a famous proponent of remix culture and of transforming the legal restraints inhibiting it, launched the CC license suite in 2003 in an effort to make it easier—in terms of monetary cost, time, and energy—for work to be both licensed for use and used by others (Lessig 2012). While preserving the proprietary model of information through most of its licenses, CC does relax inherent restrictions by offering a "Some Rights Reserved" framework as opposed to copyright’s "All Rights Reserved." Moreover, Lessig’s understanding of copyright might sound a bit paradoxical at first glance: it actually facilitates creation instead of restricting it. Lessig views copyright as giving people the incentive to create: if they cannot freely produce copies of protected works and reap monetary reward from them, for instance, then they will be encouraged to create something new instead. Creative repurposing, according to Lessig, should not be held to the same restrictions as copied, that is, plagiarized, works (Lessig 2012). The notion of “fair use,” summed up by a statute in the 1976 United States Copyright Act, would seem to accommodate this position, but its application in legal matters can be a bit ambiguous—largely relying on the use, extent, and effect of the transformative works in question, which is obviously open to much interpretation and deliberation. According to Section 107 of the Copyright Act, use of copyrighted work under the following conditions does not constitute an infringement: “for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use), scholarship, or research” [https://www.copyright.gov/title17/92chap1.html#107]. In theory, this sounds great, and court rulings have been shown to lean in this direction when ruling otherwise would hamper the creativity these types of statutes are meant to
facilitate and protect in the first place. One of the main problems encountered in real life, however, is when large companies that are not keen on sharing their copyrighted work overwhelm those they are accusing of illegally using or transforming it with litigation fees, thus creating unfair courtroom scenarios—and future legal hurdles if the accused are forced to fold (McLeod 2005). While fair use might help create "a space for artists to freely use elements of copyrighted works as long as the derivative work is transformative or doesn't freely ride on the presence of the original" (McLeod 2005, 155), for Lessig, that is simply not enough: "Fair use isn't freedom. It only means you have the right to hire a lawyer to fight for your right to create... Fuck fair use... We want free use" (McLeod 2005, 329). Lessig is more concerned with copyright law protecting against the exploitative copying of works without appropriate credit given to the authors and creators of those works upon which one is building—an ideal that aligns with the aims of CC. Quoting from the work of others, for example, citing them as sources in repurposed work, is perfectly fine, and something with which copyright should not interfere (Lessig 2012). Lessig is calling, then, for nothing short of the freedom for remixers to create.

Niva Elkin-Koren (2006, 327), in "Exploring Creative Commons: A Skeptical View of a Worthy Pursuit," notes the two main "barriers" to accessibility and use of information and cultural works: the legal right to restrict it, and the high costs associated with gaining it. CC, she explains, "accepts the first and focuses on the latter." CC does this by making multiple (and free) licensing options, which can be mixed and matched, available on their Web site (creativecommons.org) for users looking to license their work in a way that takes advantage of its aims (figure 3). Attribution (BY) accompanies all CC licenses, requiring users to credit/cite the creator of the work they are using; ShareAlike (SA) requires users who might modify the work to use the same licensing terms of the original if they choose to distribute it (Free Beer is under a CC BY-SA license, which is one of the least restrictive); NonCommercial (NC) prohibits the distribution of work for commercial/monetary purposes; and NoDerivatives (ND) allows only the exact replication of the work, with no modifications allowed. CC also employs its own mark for works users wish to place in the public domain ("No Rights Reserved"): CC0. As systematic and structured as it appears, however, CC does have its critics. Elkin-Koren (2006), for example, argues that the multiple options CC provides might end up causing the headache and monetary burden for both licensor and licensee—in trying to figure out which license is best, what the legal extent of use actually is, and what, exactly, is covered—it was meant to avoid. Another potential issue she raises is that since there is still such a focus on a proprietary model, CC might perpetuate the obsession with copyright and ownership/exclusionary authorship that free and open source movements are reacting to in the first place.
Among the authors surveyed in this article, Lessig is, perhaps, unique in his persistence that copyright should be preserved against the “control-obsessed individuals and corporations that believe the single objective of copyright law is to control use, rather than thinking about the objective of copyright law as to create incentives for creation” (Lessig 2012, 165–66). He openly confesses a belief that it is “an essential part of a creative economy” (Lessig 2012, 167). The problem, however, is that the digital world has engendered a confusing citation scheme where one must get permission for use prior to any actual creation (Lessig 2012). "Imagine how absurd it would be to write the Hemingway estate and ask for permission to include three lines in an essay about Hemingway for your English class," Lessig (2012, 157) bemoans. And he is right; but it would not just be absurd: it would be incredibly tedious and would likely result in fewer people committing to the production of what he calls "meaningful activity" (Lessig 2012, 164).

An additional difficulty preventing the production of "meaningful activity" is that nontextual, multimedia works are difficult to "cite" in the traditional sense of the term, which makes the terrain difficult to navigate, both legally and creatively. For example, compared to citing an author in a research article, it is not as clear how to cite a video when creating a mashup that draws on previous productions. Lessig’s main point is that current laws governing the use of work are inadequate and are progressively focusing more and more on the wrong side of production. The laws need to start making distinctions between copying and repurposing; the former amounts to plagiarism (an act Lessig facetiously argues is the only crime worthy of the death penalty) and unfairly benefiting from someone else’s work, while the latter acknowledges the lineage of creation and gives previous creators and innovators the credit they deserve (Lessig 2012).

Elkin-Koren (2006, 332) refers to the CC project as "a form of political activism" that is "best understood as a social movement seeking to bring about a social change." Thus, amid her criticism of the reliance upon the "proprietary
regime," and considering the overall aims of CC—coupled with the underlying assumptions Lessig advocates—her assessment may actually support the critical dimensions of projects like Free Beer in a way that a complete dismantling of proprietary models might not. CC, she notes, is not replacing copyright with something else; it is transforming—remixing—copyright "in a rather subversive way" that changes its meaning and how it is exercised. And this—the exercising of copyright in an alternative and subversive way—CC advocates claim, is what allows for the emergence of a culture characterized by "meaningful activity" (Elkin-Koren 2006, 325).

Figure 4. DIY DOG. BrewDog, 2016. [View larger image.]

Figure 5. Recipe for Punk IPA. BrewDog, 2016. [View larger image.]

[2.9] Reflecting on BrewDog’s (Ellon, Scotland) recent release of their entire recipe catalog online (figures 4 and 5) (https://6303ffd34a16b1ca5276-a9447b7dfa4ae38e337b359963d557c4.ssl.cf3.rackcdn.com/DIY%20DOG.pdf), Guardian writer Paul Mason (2016) demonstrates how such tactics within the beer industry play their part in reworking the taken-
for-granted guiding principles of capitalist economies: “The idea that the basic tools of modern life should be free, shareable and collaboratively improved, with nobody allowed to make them private property, was born in the free-software movement, spread via the Creative Commons movement and is gaining traction in the world of physical products. It doesn’t destroy capitalism, but it does challenge its dynamics.” Indeed, a subversive practice itself necessarily builds upon the work, institution, ideology, and so on, that is perceived to be problematic, and a complete dismantling of copyright law is not only unrealistic, but, following Lessig, not exactly the point, or even the preferred outcome to be advocating: it is a beneficial framework that simply needs to be amended to fit the current digital, multimedia milieu. While Elkin-Koren’s criticism does hold some merit, it functions best as a conversation piece—instead of fodder for abandoning CC entirely—for the wider discussion of freedom, open source, transformation, and licensing schemes that aim to subvert the extremism associated with contemporary understandings of copyright law and notions of intellectual property.

3. The default way of doing things

[3.1] In "Open Source as Culture/Culture as Open Source," Siva Vaidhyanathan (2012, 24) asserts that open source "used to be the default way of doing things," but since the 1970s and 1980s, when proprietary information models become much more prominent and influential amid rapidly developing technologies, it has become sort of countercultural, and any sort of affront to the system perpetuating these newer models is perceived as "radical, idealistic, or dangerous." But, the idea of community being inherently beneficial to production and innovation is what stands out most in Vaidhyanathan’s work. Proprietary models can clearly contribute to the success of corporations and industries, but that does not mean open source models cannot help achieve the same thing. Vaidhyanathan (2012) argues that the latter might hold the potential to become even more beneficial, since the encouragement of communal development equates to more minds working together on a project’s progress and goals.

[3.2] Owen Gallagher (2013), in "The Assault on Creative Culture: Politics of Cultural Ownership," argues that artists should be free to adapt and repurpose work—to remix it as they see fit—since creative expression involves the production of works that ultimately benefit society and increase everyone’s knowledge and the quality of their experiences. Indeed, this is the guiding aesthetic and satiating principle behind Free Beer: the production of the best beer possible by encouraging the participation of anyone willing. The craft beer industry is always remixing prescribed styles—maintained by organizations such as the Brewers Association and the Beer Judge Certification Program—molded by the creative whims of brewers playing with unique flavor combinations, quoting the guidelines as new variations are produced; American versions of traditional English styles, for instance (browns, pales, IPAs, etc.), have become remixed staples within the industry whose very existence depended upon the transformation of extant styles. While breweries and homebrewers regularly compete in competitions to see how well their versions adhere to the categories in these guidelines, standing out is largely the point, and continuing to transform previously prescribed frameworks is how they do so (for better or worse). The New England IPA, for example, is one such trend among American brewers that may result in a new style guideline (Moorhead 2016). Indeed, the continuing growth of the craft beer industry (figure 6) is evidence of the fact that variation in style is an inherent feature.
Another recent trend is the production of "foraged beers"—beers made with ingredients that were actually foraged by the brewers in their immediate vicinity. This type of practice takes the repurposing and transformation of style guidelines to a completely different level: alternative and nonconformist compared to "official" styles. Homebrewers regularly engage in remixing commercial productions, too; the sale of "clone" homebrew kits and the proliferation of "clone" recipes across online homebrew forums are clear examples of this practice. Ballast Point Brewing Company (San Diego, California) interestingly adds to this hobbyist engagement through the release of its Homework Series: a series of bottled beers that feature a homebrew recipe (i.e., scaled down from typical production volumes) of the beer on the label to facilitate its recreation (https://www.ballastpoint.com/beers/homework-series/). MadTree Brewing Company (Cincinnati, Ohio) does the same thing, though under a CC BY-NC license, which indirectly encourages the remixing of the recipe for one’s own enjoyment (http://www.madtreebrewing.com/beer-categories). Craft and homebrew communities inherently embrace remix and "meaningful activity" as standard features of their practice, which is what makes Free Beer a fitting vehicle to illustrate issues related to proprietary information models.

Any craft beer aficionado will confess the same thing when it comes to appreciation, desire, and taste: they want to experience the best of the best. With a CC license, Free Beer emphasizes this point: the recipe can and should be built upon so drinkers can have the best beer possible. When as many minds, palates, and mash paddles as possible are joining forces to realize this vision, the industry and its corresponding culture arguably stand to benefit; though too many voices could add more confusion than construction, a carefully organized crowdsourcing of sorts could yield enormous qualitative potential. In 2007, tapping into this understanding, Flying Dog Brewery (Frederick, Maryland) released its Wild Dog Collaborator Doppelbock as part of its Open Source Beer Project: the recipe was posted on its Web site for others to comment on and make suggestions that would ultimately shape the final product (Harris 2007). Though it was only a one-time production, the beer successfully demonstrated how crowdsourcing a recipe could have mutually beneficial results. The industry itself, while still a player in a capitalistic system, is largely communal and cooperative; collaborations between breweries, and even festivals held in celebration of this, are regular occurrences. Rarely do breweries noticeably compete at the expense of each other. Denver, Colorado, has been hosting Collaboration Beer Fest since 2014, bringing together breweries from across the country to collaborate on special beers that showcase these communal and cooperative qualities to their fans. Cause-related brewing projects have also proliferated—especially since the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th president of the United States. As a recent example, "Makin’ Noise: A Pussy Riot Beer" (http://makinnoisebeer.com/) brought together five different Colorado breweries, represented by the women running them, to produce a beer that would benefit organizations related to women’s and LGBTQ rights. The first beer in the continuing series was tapped on Inauguration Day (figure 7), raising over $6,500 for local nonprofits (https://www.collaborationfest.com/blog/2017/3/13/makin-noise-a-pussy-riot-beer). Granted, care should be taken when engaging in broad, sweeping praise for collaborative beers within the industry. In other words, they are not always inherently better; Patrick Dawson (2016) reminds readers in The Beer Geek Handbook that compromise, an overdose of creativity, and a preoccupation with camaraderie rather than attention to production can overshadow the final product, which might result in not just a very mediocre beer, but a poor representation of the parties involved as well. Free Beer, however, is predicated on a "tried-and-true" ideological positioning, rather than a meeting-of-minds end result, emphasizing the ongoing (re)creation and transformation of something among those involved in order to make it better.
Michael Mandiberg (2012), in "Giving Things Away Is Hard Work: Three Creative Commons Case Studies," emphasizes the benefits of collaboration and communal involvement as well—specifically in regard to tangible creations. The underlying concern in his analysis is whether open source models help or hinder works that are not digital. Arguing for the former, through various examples, Mandiberg (2012, 191) concludes that being open and accessible invites more participation and involvement, which assists in the development and innovation of whatever is being created: "participation breeds creative mutation, and creative mutation leads to better ideas through this collaborative process." Responses from homebrewing communities and beer aficionados, weighing in on the earlier incarnations of Free Beer, were responsible for pointing out shortcomings in the recipe and its instructions—both in terms of its reproducibility and in its utilization of ingredients. While it would be impossible to definitively maintain that perceived flaws would not have been worked out on their own by producers of subsequent batches, the benefit of having that involvement and dialogue in fine-tuning the recipe is undeniable.

4. Plagiarism is the only crime for which the death penalty is appropriate

A important question to consider, however, is whether or not everyone wants, or should want, to allow others to freely do anything they please with their work. This is a major concern taken up by Fred Benenson in "On the Fungibility and Necessity of Cultural Freedom." Benenson (2012, 180), while sharing the view of others mentioned above that "culture depends on original work being shared, reused, and remixed," notes the clash between those advocating for totally free licensing and those who use licenses offered by CC that are arguably still too restrictive, such as NonCommercial and NoDerivatives (figure 3). Free proponents, Benenson (2012, 181) notes, tend to embrace a "fundamentalist perspective of user-generated utopianism"; that is, the belief that all cultural works "should be able to be peer produced and should be licensed, released, and distributed in ways that facilitate derivatives and sharing." While the free software camp notices the potential to bridge the utilitarian and fungible nature of software tools such as operating systems and drivers to works in the physical world, the assertion that all cultural works should be free in the same way becomes problematic: a blurring of sorts between the work of art and the tools used to create it can occur (Benenson 2012). Benenson argues that while the freedom of fungible works makes sense, it is too extreme—and possibly counterproductive—to apply that same perspective to all culture, because it can upset the integrity of certain
cultural productions. Worse, if creators start to believe that there is no difference between their tools and the products made by these tools, "we might end up disincentivizing them to create in the first place" (Benenson 2012, 185).

[4.2] To illustrate the difficulty in trying to apply this understanding to all cultural work, Benenson describes the experience of one user who used CC to protect his writings about his own medical condition. Fearing commercial exploitation, the author leaned toward a CC BY-NC-ND—one of the most restrictive licenses—but received quite a bit of pushback from members in the CC discussion forum where he was raising his concerns. Though the story ends without resolve (at the time of Benenson’s publication, the author still had not assigned a CC license), it does demonstrate some of the important differences between software and other cultural works (Benenson 2012). Elkin-Koren (2006) notes that asserting rights obviously allows owners to exercise control, which can help them prevent others from taking freely produced work and selling it for profit without contributing to the community effort for creativity and innovation, or getting picked up by a third party and bundled into something restrictive. A personal, medical story being out in the world for free does not prevent companies from adapting it, or portions of it, for their own purposes (such as pharmaceutical advertisements), which can tarnish the very personal and creative work itself. In other words, Benenson’s conclusion is that not all cultural works are meant to be directly built upon and revised by others—especially works that are considered nonfungible, such as the narrative in this example.

[4.3] Producers of works in capitalist economies do, however, need to make enough money to thrive and continue creating; ingredients used to brew and package a batch of beer, for instance, are not free, even if the recipe and marketing materials are. In other words, freedom to create does not equal freedom to exploit. Artists—and, by extension, artisans—Gallagher (2013) argues, should not be working for free, even if the work is freely available; there needs to be some sort of compromise between excessive limitations and stealing the work of others. Since the digital world has totally changed how all sorts of business models have functioned up to this point (e.g., hard copy products did not succumb to the extreme ease of reproducibility), Gallagher suggests the possibility of a type of collective patronage, or gift-giving scenario: artists give and fans return the gesture in order to actively help support them; in other words, an artist is funded by a network of fans to keep producing for their benefit. While arguably similar to brand loyalty, collective patronage is more than just a demonstration of support; it is more dialogic and dynamic than it is associative—"everyone becomes a beneficiary," Gallagher (2013, 91) states. But the point is that just because an object is open source does not mean that it has to be monetarily free: one can certainly sell work that is permitted to be adapted for reuse (such as Free Beer), as financial support and reward are essential components of socioeconomic interaction. BrewDog’s catalog release, noted above, is a great example of this, since they continue to successfully sell their beer, despite the means to reproduce those products being in the hands of those fans purchasing it.

[4.4] Various critics also call for the criminal associations with "meaningful activity" to be abandoned. Gallagher (2013) argues that it does a disservice to both society and creativity when the remixing of works is criminalized. It is a flawed criminalization anyway, he states, since the argument that typically guides accusations is based on an infringement of intellectual property. According to Gallagher (2013), such property is not actually property in the technical sense of the term, since neither scarcity (borderline irrelevant in the digital world) nor effort (digital reproducibility is often as simple and effortless as a mere click of a button), the two most common justifications for property, are easily applied to cultural works. Elkin-Koren (2006) notes that part of this misunderstanding and misapplication has to do with the commodification of creative works: an associative blurring between physical, boundary-oriented property and self-expression has occurred, which confusingly attempts to apply physical barriers to abstract ideas and expressions. Such an understanding perpetuates a "reliance on property rights in creative works" that "reinforces the belief that sharing these works is always prohibited unless authorized" (Elkin-Koren 2006, 337). This is why CC is arguably so useful: it allows for access and lighter restrictions in a way that copyright does not, but it can also preserve the integrity of those cultural works that exist as exceptions to the fundamentalist perspective Benenson notes.
[4.5] The fact of the matter, Gallagher (2013) states, is that people are going to adapt, transform, and build off of work that came before them. That is how creative works work. Indeed, one of the shortcomings in Benenson’s analysis is the failure to mention that just because a work is “terminal” and meant to stand on its own without being revised by others does not mean it cannot also be engaged to inform future work; for example, a particular sort of medical narrative might inspire others to reflect on their experiences in a similar way or model their own narratives after it. In other words, all work necessarily builds upon what came before it, even if the influence is seemingly indirect. According to Lessig (2012), trying to stop such inherent activity simply amounts to forcing unlawful behavior, not the prevention of creative expression. Criminalizing creativity, which results in driving that creativity underground, since it will continue to occur regardless of legal restraints, is both “extraordinarily corrosive” and corrupts “the premise of a democracy” (Lessig 2012, 168). The law itself, then, must shed its antiquated framework so that, rather than criminalize these artists for the sake of preserving some remnant of copyright models that equate ideas and expressions with property, it allows for creative repurposing. Free Beer, understood as a critical response to laws dictating how works are restricted and governed, uniquely engages this message both as an example of an alternate scheme of access and control and, being a tangible instance of remix, by bringing these issues outside of the digital realm to further emphasize the democratic dimensions that are currently at risk.

5. That which is always already remixed

[5.1] Jean Baudrillard (1993, 73), in a rather bleak and dismal qualification of reality as we know it, once claimed that “the real is not only that which can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: the hyperreal.” As emphasized throughout this article, underlying the conceptual framework of remix is a similar claim, though lacking Baudrillard’s depressing characterization: everything is remix—everything, from ideas and expressions to tangible works and social processes, is always building upon what has been thought, created, and practiced prior to it. It may not always be blatant or obvious, but individuals and groups are necessarily inserting their own voices into conversations that have already been taking place. Vito Campanelli (2015, 72), in "Toward a Remix Culture: An Existential Perspective," notes that remix "involves all domains of human action" and is "an evolutionary duty essential to the progress of the human species"; the minor variations and fluctuations in biological evolutionary processes, for instance, even involve the repetition and innovation of previous genetic patterns. The use of "fragments of previous works is simply what human beings have always done in arts, in sciences, and in all fields of the intellect," Campanelli (2015, 72) notes, which is indicative of a state of "deep remixability": a condition in which everything—"not just the content of different media but also languages, techniques, metaphors, interfaces, etc."—can be remixed with everything (Campanelli 2015, 73–74).

[5.2] Campanelli (2015) also reminds readers that nothing is created from nothing. Humans do not create ex nihilo; they play with prior information for the purpose of producing new information. Such a perspective informs his understanding of "remix culture": a culture wherein "a work is never completed" but "functions rather as a relay that is
passed to others so that they can contribute to the process with the production of new works" (Campanelli 2015, 68). Campanelli (2015, 79) refers to remixes from this perspective as never-ending "dialogic" processes, in that they "enrich the information already existing in the world so that others can creatively continue the game"—the *dialogue*. For Campanelli (2015, 77), remix culture becomes "the final destination of that process of disintegration of the modernist myth of originality." This is not to deny, of course, that individuals function as authors and creators of works; shedding this obvious fact would render even CC licensing schemes irrelevant by their very inception. Rather, what scholars like Campanelli are arguing is that if *everything* is remix, and if nothing is created from nothing, then the notion of *original* authorship—authorship that is entirely and systematically unique and self-contained, without reference or inspiration from anything else—is conceptually detrimental to how knowledge is advanced, especially when extreme protection and restrictions are placed on new information, severing that cord of accessibility through which others may also play with it. Both of these ideas, however—deep remixability and informed understandings of authorship and originality—are not so much revolutionary as they are stark reminders that creation is communal and social, and that any attempts to disregard or purge those defining attributes impede the very innovative practices that lead to the production of creative work.

[5.3] As a clear example of dialogical remix, Free Beer might be best conceived as what Byron Russell (2015) calls a "critical remix,"—a remix that focuses on a critical perspective. In "Apropiation is Activism," Russell (2015) notes that remix is capable of being critical of corporate, economic, and political power through its engagement and appropriation of original material. Through their critique of original forms, these types of remixes have the power to break the "codes and context of consumption" and use "the power of media to redress injustice, intolerance, and hegemony of discourse" in a "hacking," of sorts, of "the messages of corporate media" (Russell 2015, 219–21). A remix artist can "point to a trope, harness its power, reverse the message, and stimulate a moment of insight, all in a single action" (Russell 2015, 218). Critical forms of remix have a historical foundation in practices of détournement—"the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble" (Debord 1981, 55)—among the Situationists, who manipulated the original, underlying messages of cultural works and reapplied them in subversive ways (Russell 2011). While the Free Beer recipe is being remixed with each subsequent batch, it is also critically remixing proprietary models of information by employing an alternative "Some Rights Reserved" licensing scheme. Kalle Lasn, the founder of the Canadian "subvertising" magazine *Adbusters*, has made the subversion of mainstream advertisements and logos his specialty. Lasn (2000) argues that subversive tactics can help people see how things might be different, providing a glimpse of an alternative reality; in this case, an alternative to copyright laws that help keep media representations standardized and exempt from being hijacked and used outside of their preferred contexts and readings. Every time an interruption takes place—of the flow of images and information—there is a glimpse of "enlightenment," Lasn (2000) claims; those glimpses add up, and after enough people have had their eyes opened, a mass awakening can help dismantle the system. "Interrupting the stupefyingly comfortable patterns we’ve fallen into isn’t pleasant or easy" (Lasn 2000, 107). "It shocks the system. But sometimes shock is what a system needs. It’s certainly what our bloated, self-absorbed consumer culture needs." Revolution begins, he says, when "a few people start slipping out of old patterns, daydreaming, questioning, rebelling" (Lasn 2000, 108). If sitting around, drinking a few oddly labeled beers leads to this sort of revolutionary realization, then the project will certainly stand as a success.

[5.4] Nadine Wanono (2015, 389) takes the Situationist practice of détournement and reframes it as more than just an act of subversion: it "became a mindset, a dynamic, a loyalty to a revolutionary dimension outside of any political movement." In "Détournement as a Premise of the Remix from Political, Aesthetic, and Technical Perspectives," she indicates that the main goal of détournement is the destabilization of mainstream culture (Wanono 2015). Free Beer, then, might be thought of as a destabilizer of mainstream beer production, in particular, or of production, in general, when applied outside of its immediate context. But as noted above, it is about much more than just making great beer: through its engagement of alternative licensing schemes and its subversion of copyright, it is also about resistance against the impediment of creativity and innovation, and of the overall bettering of society, counter to the aims and ambitions of mainstream economic and exclusionary models. "The Situationists maintained that ordinary people have all the tools they need for revolution" (Lasn 2000, 109). "The only thing missing is a perceptual shift—a tantalizing glimpse of a new way of being—that suddenly brings everything into focus."

[5.5] Sonia K. Katyal (2012) argues that this sort of "perceptual shift" might involve a re-thinking of how we interact with and respond to cultural symbols and their meanings. In "Between Semiotic Democracy and Disobedience: Two Views of Branding, Culture and Intellectual Property," she outlines a remixed version of John Fiske’s "semiotic
democracy": what she calls "semiotic disobedience." The former, Katyal (2012, 50) indicates, refers to the engagement and use of cultural symbols in response to the forces of media." Engaging and using cultural symbols in their own way, audiences are free to subvert and resist intended messages, which obviously conflicts with ideas related to exclusive ownership. But by drawing on historic forms of civil disobedience, Katyal (2012) offers a supplemental framework to Fiske's democracy: instead of just engaging the symbols of our culture—symbols that are owned and protected by corporate entities—semiotic disobedience aims to occupy corporate spaces, which includes consumer products—as forms of corporate property—in order to question and critique the symbols and their ownership. There is a specific emphasis throughout Katyal's analysis on interruption and occupation, over mere appropriation, which supplements critical dimensions of remix with a more activist edge. A semiotic act of disobedience takes place when "an individual actively transgresses the private, sovereign boundary of corporate property—a billboard, a domain name, an identity or a tangible product—and transforms it into a sort of 'public' property open for dialogue and discussion, an entity that is non-sovereign, borderless and thus incapable of excluding alternative meanings" (Katyal 2012, 59).

5.6 It is easy to see how Free Beer relates to this as a critical and subversive campaign—one actively contributing to a conversation about far more than just allowing others to build on one’s work in an easier, less costly sort of way. Critical remix and semiotic disobedience both aim to alter intellectual property by interrupting and occupying it, and then ultimately replacing it in the democratic way Fiske had envisioned (Katyal 2012). Brands, Katyal (2012, 53) notes, not only "help construct our identities, our expressions, our desires and our language"; they also become "important vessel[s] of corporate identity and property." Since brands also have commercial and political dimensions, they are perfectly suited to act as "powerful organizing principle[s] for political action" (Katyal 2012, 53). Anti-branding problematizes these aspects, using particular products to convey much larger questions and issues. Lasn’s Adbusters delights in these techniques; and while Free Beer is not explicitly jamming up cultural symbols in the same way as Lasn and his devotees, it is still actively participating in a jam on current copyright law—and capitalist modes of production, more broadly—in order to subvert and shift the manner in which it is exercised. Occupying the space of a widespread consumer product, and inviting others to join in to engage with it in a democratic way, Free Beer becomes a "powerful organizing principle" as part of a much larger conversation and movement regarding action against information restriction and control.

6. A shift in perspective

6.1 As indicated throughout this article, Free Beer, through its licensing and engagement of free and open source movements, participates in conversations and debates regarding current copyright law and its obvious shortcomings—which have become even more obvious alongside the rise of digital media and interaction. Framed as a critical remix on copyright law, the Free Beer brand demonstrates, in a semiotic disobedient way, that restrictions and prohibitions on not just creativity, but access and the ability to innovate and ultimately make the world—in a rhetorically pithy sort of way—a better place, can be lifted, dismantled, and repurposed to better suit contemporary circumstances. Probing and hacking the economic structures that have been in place, and that have pervaded commonsensical understandings of reality for an incredibly long time—challenging the dynamics of capitalism, Mason (2016) would say—is not an easy or painless task. And given some of the criticisms of both CC and free licensing schemes, the ambition does not even present a definitive or entirely clear path for doing so. But, as Lasn (2000) argues, sometimes what is not easy or clear is what is most necessary.

6.2 One of the deeper implications of this analysis, however—and one that underlies the rhetoric and emphasis among those writing in this area—is the conceptual positioning of remix, as both a discursive framework and creative perspective. If an everything-as-remix understanding and non-<i>ex nihilo</i> basis for interaction and production is accepted, then remix practices are no longer just about certain works—critical or not—just as Free Beer is not merely about beer, but also about freedom and accessibility. Wanono (2015) stresses the revolutionary mentality and impulse associated with détournement over its particular acts; perhaps remix might be thought of in a similar way: as a guiding rubric for how artists, activists, scholars, scientists, and all other categories of creators and innovators should approach the work they do. By situating their work squarely in the context of the larger revolution against copyright and intellectual property, creators can, through the very act of creating, contribute to the project of pushing our collective perceptions of production, and the laws that govern and protect products, into a realm more in line with the realities of the digital, and approaching postcapitalist, era.
7. Acknowledgments

[7.1] I would like to thank Adrienne Russell for her insight, guidance, and feedback while brainstorming and working on this project. The article would not have materialized without the invaluable direction and encouragement she provided.

8. Note

1. Creative Commons also embraces an appropriation (i.e., a remix) of Stallman’s Free Software Definition created by Freedom Defined that aims to bridge the gap between software and all cultural works. See “Understanding Free Cultural Works,” on the Creative Commons Web site: https://creativecommons.org/share-your-work/public-domain/freeworks/.

9. Works cited


Symposium

Fan labor, speculative fiction, and video game lore in the Bloodborne community

Kevin D. Ball

Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, United States

[0.1] Abstract—This essay engages fans of the PlayStation 4 video game Bloodborne (FromSoftware, 2015), focusing on the ways in which fans of the game craft its abstract lore into new threads of narrative via online texts and videos, and a related controversy pertaining to the originality and authorship of those media texts that fans share as records of their lore hunts.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan community; FromSoftware; Lore hunt; Paratext; PlayStation 4; PS4


I. Introduction

[1.1] This essay explores the video game Bloodborne (FromSoftware, 2015) and the range of relevant paratextual and transformative acts that its fans have termed "lore hunting." It investigates the interweaving of game play and narrative in the video game's design and provides an account of a plagiarism controversy in the Bloodborne community that centers the economic and authorial dimensions of the lore hunt among fans. Bloodborne is a PlayStation 4–exclusive video game developed by FromSoftware, a Japanese studio that also produced the cult classic Demon's Souls (2009), followed by Dark Souls (2011), Dark Souls 2 (2014), and Dark Souls 3 (2016). Bloodborne is a Lovecraftian take on the Souls series' fantasy medieval settings and action role-playing style. In both Souls and Bloodborne, players implement an arsenal of melee and long-range weaponry and heavy and light attacks, and they make use of status upgrades to combat hordes of enemies often bound by mechanics similar to that of the player character.

[1.2] Bloodborne continues the cryptic and diffuse approach to narrative—or lore—familiar to fans of the Souls series. This sparse style of narration reveals sprawling fictional histories full of ambiguities that rely on players’ interstitial and imaginative efforts for further elaboration. Close readings of item descriptions, environmental designs, and locations of objects in the game world yield a confounding tangle of mythology for dedicated fans to unravel. A robust fan discourse engaged in these lore hunts has emerged in which fans, across various Internet platforms, collate in-game and intertextual resources to theorize Bloodborne's story (note 1). These conversations often take the shape of speculative fiction; at times they generate conflicting territories of authorship and agency within the fan community.

2. Identification, depth, and narrative
In the spaces of gaming journalism and online discussion boards, the SoulsBorne (Dark Souls and Bloodborne) series is known for its considerable difficulty, a trait that holds a distinction among fans in a landscape that they think is cluttered with easier, more transparent games. The SoulsBorne games lack adjustable difficulty settings, and slight miscalculations are frequently punished with death, to the degree that their fail-state message—a bleakly centered, pithily stated “You Died” in crimson type—has become a popular fixture in the series’ iconography. Players must time their dodge-roll maneuvers with precision, and the study of enemy animations and environmental details is necessary to avoid the loss of large swaths of health points (HP) at the hands of relentless enemies and hidden traps. Shuhei Yoshida, president of Sony Computer Entertainment when it published Bloodborne, used the intense challenge of FromSoftware’s games to invoke nostalgia for retro games in a promotional “Making Of…” video for Bloodborne: “Games used to be challenging...back in the days. But over time, games have become kind of easier and more 'hand-holding' for consumers. That’s great for [attracting] casual players, but there are always the consumers who remember the time we spent trying to understand the more challenging games” (note 2). This bifurcation of casual and hard-core players often resonates in fans’ identification with the series, where completion indicates dedication and skill. As I will show, the unyielding nature of Bloodborne’s game play and its reception in the fan community extends to the identificatory and affective play of the lore hunt in the narrative space.

Yoshida’s account of the temporality of “challenging games,” in which a commitment of hours yields buried features, positions Bloodborne as a game that contains a substantial amount of depth—that is, the game is "difficult to master" and requires that "players...continually expand their repertoire of skills in order to progress“ (Juul 2012, 41). Skill acquisition, however, does not fully account for the way in which FromSoftware obfuscates game mechanics to encourage speculative play. Daniel Vella (2015) argues that the Souls series—and by extension Bloodborne—weaves a certain precariousness into its game play as key mechanics are tucked away and intentionally withheld from the player’s immediate grasp. All games, Vella notes, are complex in the sense that no single experience can encapsulate all of the dynamism they offer. The SoulsBorne games, however, work "to actively remind the player of the limits and the inadequacy of her perceptual opening onto the milieu of the game world, the computational systems underlying it, and the space of possibilities they structure." For instance, Vella identifies the "Peculiar Doll" item from Dark Souls as an "undefined entity" that intentionally omits its purpose and function from the text description associated with it. Concerning Bloodborne, there are optional areas locked behind nebulous conditions, well-hidden secret endings, and items like the Yharnam Stone, which, apart from their implications in the lore, appear to lack any ludic utility.

Bloodborne’s extension of the ludic text beyond the contours of mastery is consistent with the laconic and elusive style of its narrative. For fans of the series, the dense game play is commensurate with the narrative’s dearth of exposition and its concomitant appeal to player agency. The appeal of this marriage of ludonarrative depth is clear in this fan’s assessment of the overall attraction of the series:

The SoulsBorne games [force] you to reevaluate your expectations of gaming. If you go in expecting exposition heavy cut scenes explaining the plot to you and big white arrows explaining how to have fun, you’re shit out of luck...You are thrust into worlds full of mystery that you—the player—have to solve for yourself. (note 3)

Cut scenes (prerendered cinematics inserted to communicate story information) are read here as a distraction from autonomous play. Similarly, "big white arrows" (most likely in reference to waypoint indicators that guide players to important objectives) in other games are criticized as didactic elements that imply a distrust of the player’s ability to parse the game. Bloodborne’s story and game play are framed here as parts of a broader mystery that the player must solve, which suggests that the two share a certain latticed integrity that is unlike other exposition-heavy games in which story content is divested of interpretive trespassing. The lore hunt is the work of solving the narrative half of this puzzle: an effort that manifests as a network of creative acts put forth by devoted fans.

3. Plagiarism and celebrity fans

Hidetaka Miyazaki, Bloodborne’s lead developer and respected auteur of the SoulsBorne series, supports the idea that the SoulsBorne games’ stories and mechanics are designed in a way that embraces innovation from players: "I try to make a game that has beautiful open spaces, gaps, room for players to enjoy it in ways that were not
authored” (Blain 2015). Many fans of the series express an appreciation of this point, but there is also a tendency to view the lore hunt as a recovery effort through which Miyazaki’s original vision is laid bare. The latter characterization, however, is at odds with lore hunters’ claims to authorship as they pursue audiences and funding for their individual projects.

[3.2] Redgrave, a Redditor and noted SoulsBorne fan, is celebrated for having written a 120-page speculative fiction/lore hunt of Bloodborne entitled The Paleblood Hunt (2015). The text was released for free as a Google document and was announced on Reddit as a deeper elaboration of the sporadic posts Redgrave had written there. Paleblood is an expansion of Bloodborne that draws from H. P. Lovecraft’s mythos to fill the gaps in the lore. In the book’s preface, Redgrave positions the work as an evolving open-source text that offers theories that will later be revised as the fannish episteme evolves:

[3.3] I don’t think I’ve found [all of] the answers…I find it very likely that some, if not all, of my theories will be supplanted with better [theories]…I write this…to show what an evolving process our understanding of Bloodborne’s lore has become…There is a truth out there…a real, singular truth that we can find. We just have to put the pieces of the puzzle together. (note 4)

[3.4] On the one hand, this statement modestly submits Paleblood to its community, framing the lore hunt as an almost altruistic and myopic pursuit of an official canon extrinsic to that community: the lore is Miyazaki’s “puzzle,” and it can be put together. On the other hand, it becomes clear that individual lore hunts hold their own authorial charge within the Bloodborne fan community when another highly visible lore hunter is accused of borrowing aspects of The Paleblood Hunt.

[3.5] On May 22, 2015, VaatiVidya, a SoulsBorne celebrity fan on YouTube, released a 30-minute video entitled “Bloodborne’s Story Explained!” a month after Redgrave’s The Paleblood Hunt was released. Consistent with VaatiVidya’s style, the video uses composed game play footage to animate its voice-over narration as Bloodborne lore is dissected. Like Redgrave’s Paleblood Hunt, “Story Explained!” begins with an epigraph from Lovecraft: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.” This was apparently the
red flag that led Redgrave to suspect that features of his work had directly and problematically influenced the video. On May 23, Redgrave started a new thread on the Reddit hub for Bloodborne discourse, r/bloodborne, entitled "VaatiVidya’s lore analysis and my Paleblood Hunt thesis, am I justified in being upset or simply being paranoid?" The original post and most of Redgrave’s responses have since been deleted, but this thread was the first of several to accuse VaatiVidya of appropriating elements of The Paleblood Hunt.

Some of the interlocutors in Redgrave’s thread defended VaatiVidya, contending that the redundancies in their interpretations were coincidental to the fact that they were lore hunts of the same object. One user wrote, "Lore is lore, mate. If you get it right, and VaatiVidya decided the same thing at the end of his lore hunt, you both just interpreted the same story the same way" (note 5). Other users pointed to previous instances in which similar grievances had come up against VaatiVidya to lend credence to Redgrave’s suspicions. The allegations took the form of a grassroots uprising on Reddit in the sense that VaatiVidya’s unimpeachable position in the SoulsBorne hierarchy was under threat. Furthermore, the assertion of Paleblood’s originality elucidates the personal and professional stakes lore hunters have in their work beyond the dialogical norms of the discourse writ large.

Complicating matters is the fact that VaatiVidya’s YouTube platform has many subscribers and he receives monthly remuneration via Patreon. As a result, to say that VaatiVidya plagiarized The Paleblood Hunt is to suggest that one fan’s free labor was monetized by a fan with celebrity status. VaatiVidya owns a Patreon account that pays $5,166 a month based on regular contributions from 1,132 patrons. His YouTube account has 926,112 subscribers, with over 127 million views in total. Aegon of Astora, another lore hunter and Redgrave collaborator, published the thread "VaatiVidya: Patreon-supported plagiarist? An investigative analysis" on July 7, 2015, reenergizing the plagiarism controversy. The thread linked to a video that analyzed the linguistic and conceptual similarities between Paleblood and "Story Explained!" Crucially, Aegon indicted VaatiVidya’s celebrity status in the fan community, identifying it as a mode of difference that he leverages to aggressively overrepresent his contributions to the lore hunt: "VaatiVidya represents himself as existing outside of or apart from the community, and he represents [our] understanding of [these games] as beginning and ending with himself" (note 6). This line of attack highlights what is at stake in the dilemma: that VaatiVidya’s vast influence and resources could reify and/or diminish the resonance of Redgrave’s work, as has allegedly been the case elsewhere.

In a published response to Aegon and Redgrave’s claims, VaatiVidya denied plagiarizing Paleblood and rejected the idea that he presents his work as superior to the efforts of other fans. He recalled a previous incident early in his career in which he had borrowed aspects of another lore hunter’s work as precedent for the thoroughness with which he has cited his inspirations since. While VaatiVidya did admit to having read parts of Paleblood before crafting "Story Explained!," he claimed that he had stopped reading the text early on to prevent it from "coloring his opinions" on the lore. On Aegon’s criticism of his celebrity status in the community, VaatiVidya wrote, "I’ve never made myself out to be a community representative, nor this amazing artist who does an incredible service…I exist within this community just like everybody else does" (note 7). What is significant here is the competitive spaces of authorship in which these paratexts exist, and the notion that the lore hunt is not simply a collective organized holistically by shared interest. Partly as a result of FromSoftware’s leaving the hermeneutics of lore to the discretion of players, luminaries in the SoulsBorne community gain a larger say in the canon as the community works to construct it; thus it becomes crucial that celebrity fans highlight the efforts of those working at the grassroots level, lest they invite similar charges of exploitation.

4. Conclusion

Ultimately, the Redgrave-VaatiVidya controversy reached a swift and neutral, if not amicable, conclusion, with Redgrave starting a YouTube channel to address the disagreement and to continue producing lore in video form and VaatiVidya falling silent regarding the incident. Yet the controversy stands as a pivotal moment in the history of the SoulsBorne community that foregrounded questions of authorship and fan labor.

It is not unusual to portray the instability of authorial control as an antagonism between proprietary interests and the fans who read against or subvert them. However, in the lore hunt, Miyazaki and FromSoftware have given way to fans, who are left to reconstitute the stories among themselves. In this way, the fissures and arguments within the Bloodborne community pertain not only to compensation but also to the resources that allow prominent fans to
potentially marginalize the contributions of less visible fans engaged in the hunt (which is not to say that this was VaatiVidya's explicit intention). The need to celebrate the uniqueness and style of individual lore hunts means that the act itself is not derivative of an overriding vision owned by the game's developers. Rather, each lore hunt is a creative act of inspired analysis existing in a hierarchy of related, shareable, and marketable ideas.

5. Notes

1. Similar lore communities preexist Bloodborne in the Souls series’ tradition. Fans derived the concept of lore hunting from the Night of the Hunt, in which Bloodborne’s story takes place.


6. Works cited


Milk and mythology in Singin' in the Rain

Kelli Marshall

DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, United States

[0.1] Abstract—I debunk one of the most widely disseminated myths about the film musical Singin' in the Rain (1952): that set designers added milk (or ink) to the water so that raindrops would show up on screen. In so doing, I also attempt to locate the milk myth’s origin and explain why this falsehood has intensified over the last 20 years.

[0.2] Keyword—Fan studies; Film; IMDb; Musical


1. Introduction

[1.1] Virtually every fan of the film musical Singin' in the Rain (1952) knows at least three behind-the-scenes facts: Gene Kelly was a merciless choreographer and worked poor Debbie Reynolds until her feet bled. Kelly had a 103-degree fever while filming the title number. And set designers added milk to the water so that raindrops would show up on camera ("Trivia for Singin' in the Rain" 2004).

[1.2] The first two statements are true, or at least true-ish. The third one, however? Not so much.

2. Separating facts from fiction

[2.1] First, at the age of 83, Debbie Reynolds was still telling the story about how Fred Astaire found her sobbing underneath a piano, a victim of Gene Kelly’s taskmaster ways. The dancing was so difficult that 19-year-old Reynolds thought she’d surely die. Coaxing her out of hiding, Astaire assured her she wouldn’t and advised, "That’s what it’s like to learn dance. If you’re not sweating, you’re not doing it right" (2013, 205-6).

[2.2] Speaking to the second fact, Kelly tells his biographer that he had "a very bad cold" on the day of filming and was concerned he’d "catch pneumonia with all that water pouring down" on him (Hirschhorn 1985, 215). So while fever is not mentioned, the song-and-dance man was apparently sick.

[2.3] The third fact, however, is false. Even though the milk story has been featured on virtually every site, anniversary tribute, and listicle that mentions Singin’ in the Rain—Turner Classic Movies (TCM) and the Internet Movie Data Base (IMDb) included—it is, by all accounts, a myth.

[2.4] Gene Kelly himself described what happened in several interviews, including one with the American Film Institute (1978): "Shooting the title number was just terrible for the photographer Hal Rossen. He had to backlight all the rain and then he had to put frontlight on the performer. That was as tough a job as I’ve ever seen, because you can’t photograph in rain and see it" (quoted in Stevens 2009, 525).

[2.5] Furthermore, Kelly’s codirector on the film, Stanley Donen, dispels this milky rain business in his Private Screenings interview with Robert Osbourne (2006) and in a Directors Guild Association column by Robert Abele:

[2.6] When you’re shooting rain, it has to be backlit, or you may not see it very well. There have been a lot of stories about how we put milk in the water so you could see the rain. It's not true. You have to put the
3. Origins of the milk myth: Universal Studios and powdered milk?

[3.1] One of the earliest written references I can find to milk's being used in *Singin' in the Rain* comes from a column in the *Chicago Tribune*, published August 29, 1976. The reporter, Marilynn Preston (1976), is describing a tour of Universal Studios: "we learned about why fake movie set rain has powdered milk added to it—so it shows up at night" (7). Her source for this information is a guide named Amanda, "young and lovely, the sort of girl who never threw away her go-go boots" (6).

[3.2] Preston continues, "Next time you see Gene Kelly, think of that famous tune 'Singin' in the Milk'" (7). From the text, it appears that the reporter forced this powdered milk connection with *Singin' in the Rain*, not necessarily the tour guide (figure 1).

Figure 1. Excerpt from Marilynn Preston’s column in the *Chicago Tribune*, August 29, 1976. [View larger image.]

[3.3] If Amanda’s general anecdote is true, powdered milk may have been warranted for on-location or open-air backlot shooting. After all, filmmaker Akira Kurosawa recalls adding ink to water when he filmed *Rashomon* (1950): "the sprinkle of the rain couldn’t be seen against [the cloudy sky], so we made rainfall with black ink in it" (1983, 185).

[3.4] But Gene Kelly’s musical number was shot on a backlot underneath a huge tarp (Abele 2009), where both weather and lighting could be controlled. In essence, powdered milk would not have been necessary here, just creative backlighting, as Stanley Donen explains (quoted in Abele 2009).

[3.5] A few other newspapers in the 1980s and 1990s mention *Singin' in the Rain*’s milky water: the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (October 1986), the *Des Moines Register* (April 1992), and London’s *Evening Standard* (August 1992). But the myth doesn’t seem to start circulating broadly in popular culture until about the year 2000. Why this uptick? In short, Web 2.0 and most likely, the Internet Movie Database IMDb (http://www.imdb.com/).

4. Laying the blame: I'm looking at you, IMDb

[4.1] Around the beginning of the 21st century, the way in which users interacted with the World Wide Web began to change. The static pages of Web 1.0 (composed of mostly text and hyperlinks) gave way to the dynamic, participatory sites of Web 2.0 (blogs, wikis, image and video hosting, social media). Now, even film buffs who weren’t all that tech-savvy could create their own online spaces with ease as well as interact with information on movie-focused Web sites like the IMDb and TCM (http://tcm.turner.com/).

[4.2] Since the mid-1990s, IMDb has encouraged contributors "to add, refine, and correct the data on its pages" ("Contributor Zone" n.d.). This includes star biographies, plot summaries, genre categories, and trivia. But the way to supply information then wasn’t necessarily intuitive. For instance, in 1996, if one wanted to add a piece of trivia to *Singin' in the Rain’s* profile, one would need to email the mailbox (figure 2).
It makes sense, then, that the top contributors of data around the mid-1990s were the site’s owner, Col Needham, and others who worked at IMDb (“Top Contributors: 1995” n.d).

But by the year 2000, IMDb’s submission process was simpler. Now, the contributor clicked a button to update information and then submitted additions or corrections by using the online interface (figure 3). In fact, by 2000, IMDb “recommend[s] most contributors stick to using the online additions interface” as the convoluted method seen above is "of a very technical nature" (“IMDb Submission Guides” 2000).

Here’s what we know about *Singin' in the Rain*’s IMDb trivia page, which I think is the driving force behind this milk-water myth, at least for the 21st century.

First, the film’s trivia page has been there since at least 1996. Unfortunately, we can only see its listing in IMDb’s Trivia Index and cannot access the page itself (“Trivia Index: S” 1996). To this end, we cannot tell for certain if the milk myth is a featured piece of trivia that year.

But knowing that newspapers in the 1980s and 1990s reported the myth and that Universal Studios’ tour guides were presumably still relaying the powdered milk story, it is likely that an IMDb employee or contributor added it around this time. And why should she not? The *Chicago Tribune*, *Evening Standard*, and *Universal Studios* would be considered legitimate sources.

Second, while it’s likely that the myth was on IMDb before the turn of the 21st century, we can be confident it was there by 2001. Two personal Web pages from that year mention *Singin’ in the Rain*’s water-milk mix as they attribute IMDb trivia (Anonymous [2001] and Carothers [2001]). It is also likely that reporters from *The Guardian* used IMDb’s trivia page to flesh out their columns “This Movie Changed My Life” (French 2000) and “100 Top Film Moments” (2000), both of which reference *Singin’ in the Rain*’s "blend of water and milk."

Third, the milk myth remains on *Singin’ in the Rain*’s IMDb trivia page until roughly 2012. In 2015, it is replaced with another falsehood: "Ink was added to the water for the title number to make the rain appear more visible" (figure 4). To date, this statement is still present on IMDb.
Theoretically, then, for 15 years (1996–2012), *Singin’ in the Rain*’s milk myth was featured on “the most comprehensive free source of movie information on the Internet”—where everyone, including Roger Ebert, the *New York Times*, and Edinburgh University’s Film Society, apparently retrieved film-related information (“Reviews and Comments” 1996). It’s no wonder that the legend begins to show up elsewhere.

5. And the myth grows: TCM and Filmsite.org

Around the turn of the 21st century, TCM also began interacting with its fans. Forums like Reel Time Chat and Between the Scenes, for example, encouraged viewers to watch a film on TCM’s cable channel while simultaneously interacting online with "fun bits of trivia and behind the scenes info" of said film. In 1999, TCM also featured The Writer’s Hat, a contest in which contributors would review upcoming films, which would be rewarded with online publication and prize packages (figure 5).

![Figure 5. TCM's "Writer's Hat" 1998. Screenshot, TCM via the Wayback Machine.](view_larger_image)

That said, most of TCM’s *Singin’ in the Rain* trivia was compiled not by a random contributor (like at IMDb) but by an employee, Scott McGee. His articles "Behind the Camera: *Singin’ in the Rain*" (2002a) and "*Singin’ in the Rain*: Trivia and Other Fun Stuff" (2002b) carry on the milk myth.

In one column, McGee writes, "milk was added to the water to make it more visible to the camera," (2002a) and in the other, "the rain, consisting of water and a touch of milk, also caused Kelly’s wool suit to shrink" (2002b). Oddly, this information is still on TCM, despite Stanley Donen’s debunking of it on the network’s interview series *Private Screenings* (quoted in Osbourne 2006).

A third well-traveled Web site of this period is Filmsite.org, also known as "The Greatest Films: The 'Greatest' and the 'Best' in Cinematic History." Specializing in classic Hollywood and American films, Filmsite.org has featured a write-up on *Singin’ in the Rain* since its 1996 inception.

But like TCM, Filmsite.org did not begin perpetuating the milk myth until 2002: "It is well-known that milk was mixed in with the water" (Dirks 2002). This statement remains on Filmsite.org until 2011, when it’s replaced with this aside: "It is a widespread—but bogus film fact—that milk was mixed in with the water, fed by long lengths of pipes leading to overhead sprays, to make the liquid more visible" (Dirks 2011).

At this point, the milk myth has been featured for more than a decade not only on IMDb but also on two of the best-known Web sites devoted to classic Hollywood movies.

6. Conclusions

After 2002, *Singin’ in the Rain*’s online milk references grow exponentially, as a quick Google search indicates. While it’s debatable who started the rumor—maybe Universal Studios’ tour guides? —it’s pretty obvious that shifts in technology, along with the way in which we (and media companies) use the Internet, have helped to perpetuate it.
Now you know: the only milk featured in *Singin' in the Rain* sits in a glass bottle, right before Gene Kelly, Debbie Reynolds, and Donald O'Connor joyfully break into the number "Good Morning" (video 1).


7. Works cited


Can I take your picture?—Privacy in cosplay

Babak Zarin

Abstract—In this piece I examine the privacy concerns faced by costume players, or cosplayers, as a means of beginning to examine the question of how privacy can still exist in an increasingly public world. I first offer a brief overview of philosophical and current legal approaches to the concept of privacy, and then discuss the cosplay community and its concerns regarding harassment at conventions. I conclude by demonstrating how these concerns are actually privacy concerns and what this suggests regarding attempts to address these concerns both presently and in the future.

Keywords—Convention harassment; Economic discrimination; Law; Legal studies; Privacy


1. Introduction

1.1 Widespread use of sharing technology in recent years has prompted questions about how privacy can still exist in a world where publicly signaling your identity is all but required. Here I begin to look at this question by looking at the concerns of costume players, or cosplayers. Cosplay occurs in public, but cosplayers themselves increasingly seek privacy protections. Why are they doing this, and what are the means and implications of addressing cosplay concerns as privacy concerns?

2. Privacy and privacy law

2.1 There is no single definition of privacy, but people have always recognized a difference between "public" and "private." Historically, "public" space has been viewed as that within which people's interactions directly impact society, which authorizes society to encourage or restrain their interactions as it deems appropriate. In contrast, "private" space has been viewed as that within which a person's actions impact society indirectly or not at all, because they are carried out in the presence of no, or nearly no, other people.

2.2 However, defining "private" as "not public" isn't satisfying, and others have attempted to define it by focusing on personal privacy: a person's right or ability to decide whether and to what extent to disclose personal information. These attempts agree that privacy allows people to experiment with ideas and conduct safely, without fear of disruption by physical sensation (e.g., being hit, shouted at, or exposed to noxious odors as a means of shaming), identification, or surveillance, and thus to develop, as Alan Westin says in Privacy and Freedom (1967), "close, relaxed, and frank relationship[s]"; opportunities for "emotional release"; and "qualities of independent thought, diversity of views, and non-conformity," all of which are vital for healthy human development (quoted in Solove and Shwartz 2015, 26–29).

2.3 There is also no single law or clearly defined body of law covering privacy in the United States. Instead, privacy law is based on interpretations of the Bill of Rights, state tort laws, and laws that enforce measures like confidentiality clauses in contracts (Solove and Shwartz 2015, 14; see also the Supreme Court's 1965 ruling in Griswold v. Connecticut that a constitutional right to privacy includes a married couple's right to receive contraceptive advice). These all ensure that a person has the right to determine when, and how much, information appears about them publicly. Still, those who are skeptical of privacy law and its efficacy question how much privacy really exists in a world where people regularly consent to the public broadcast of their private behavior on reality television (Solove and Shwartz 2015, 38–48). Yet reality television has existed for decades: why is there concern now?
The answer is technology. As noted by Scott Peppet, "The Internet and digitization are decreasing the transaction costs of signaling by making verifiable signals more readily available throughout the economy, and one can therefore expect signaling to become more and more important and ubiquitous as a response to information asymmetries" (2011, 1156). Put more simply, technology has made sharing information so easy that people who choose not to do so face a greater likelihood of social and economic discrimination, because people wonder why they refuse.

3. The cosplay community and its concerns

Modern-day cosplay originated as a hobby among science fiction and fantasy enthusiasts, and has been a regular feature at conventions internationally since the 1970s (Galbraith 2013). Cosplayers regularly participate in masquerade competitions and fashion shows, where they may receive awards for character portrayal (Lamerichs 2011).

Making a successful cosplay costume is immensely difficult. Cosplayers spend hours studying whatever source material depicting their character they can find. This is followed by weeks creating the costume, which requires them to develop a host of fashion, arts, and craft skills in everything from choosing textiles to building fake weaponry. The difficulty has resulted in the establishment of online communities offering cosplaying advice and a $400-million cosplay industry (Lamerichs 2011; Galbraith 2013).

Demographic information on cosplayers is scarce. One survey undertaken in 2013 describes the average cosplayer as a 28-year-old cisgender woman of Caucasian or Asian descent who possesses a four-year university degree, resides in the United States, and likely cosplays between one to five times annually while spending roughly $100–$400 and 44 hours per year on creating her costumes (Rosenberg and Letamendi 2015). Cosplayer motivations vary widely and include entertainment, parody, and exploration of some aspect of their identity, such as gender or sexuality. Some cosplay as a career; professional cosplayers often make as much as they would in a part-time job through paid appearances and sales of their costumes or photos (Lamerichs 2011; Rosenberg and Letamendi 2015; Galbraith 2013).

4. Cosplay concerns as privacy concerns

Cosplayers tend to come from historically underprivileged groups (e.g., gender, age, and ethnic minorities). It is unsurprising that they have concerns about their safety while cosplaying. Cosplayers face an almost constant stream of harassment. Audiences—convention goers, photographers, judges, and industry heads—take photos for adult use without asking permission, and often fetishize, fat-shame, and slut-shame cosplayers. The underprivileged groups of which cosplayers are often members are also underrepresented in the media (Nigatu 2013; also see many articles in the Escapist’s Cosplay Dossier, http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/comicsandcosplay/columns/cosplaydossier). Harassment can be worsened by the fact that audience members are often older men in positions of power, meaning that a cosplayer who resists or speaks out against their behavior may lose connections and employment opportunities (Galbraith 2013, 5, 6).

These forms of social and economic harassment are legitimate concerns, but at this point it is worthwhile to ask why they are privacy concerns. Cosplay occurs in public, after all: the cosplayers are usually at a public convention held in a public venue, and they engage with the public, allowing people to see and interact with them as the characters they depict. Why treat the accompanying difficulties as privacy concerns?

They are privacy concerns because cosplayers are choosing and trying out attributes of a particular narrative, often as a way to develop and explore parts of their own identities. They do this prior to appearing before an observing public. As noted above, this type of exploration is a benefit of privacy, and the ability to explore and experiment without facing public penalty or harassment is what privacy legislation aims to protect. Furthermore, harassment of cosplayers is partly enabled by the ease with which audiences can access or share their images online. Cosplayer concerns over harassment, then, are privacy concerns because the pressure to adapt a cosplay to the viewer’s desires or face harassment suggests that the cosplaying "market" is beginning to shift to Peppet’s (2011) signal economy: players in the market (cosplayers) are being forced to signal information they want to keep private (e.g., their image while cosplaying) in order to meet the desires of the consumer (the viewing audience). If they do not do so, they face social
and economic discrimination. Cosplayers who say that they cannot cosplay safely are saying that their privacy—that is, their ability to develop their identities by choosing, depicting, and experimenting with a narrative—is being violated.

[4.4] Cosplayers’ concerns regarding harassment must be addressed, but only a few attempts to do this have been made. For example, most conventions have rules limiting access to and photography of cosplayers, but these rules can be difficult to enforce and are often brought to bear only after harm has been done. Cosplayers themselves have begun to issue guidelines to the etiquette of interacting with them, offering to pose for photographs in exchange for fans and photographers obeying certain rules, such as not following cosplayers around the convention hall, taking unauthorized photographs, or pressing them for personal information (Everett 2013; Liana 2013). However, while etiquette can be more readily and easily enforced than the convention rules, it can take time for attendees to learn it, meaning that it does not necessarily prevent harm as cosplayers could still face harassment by the uninformed.

[4.5] Since cosplayer concerns are also privacy concerns, perhaps attempts to address them should look to privacy laws. Unfortunately, many privacy laws are variations of "don’t ask, don’t tell, don’t use" limits and restrictions, which both convention rules and cosplayer etiquette already include (Peppet 2011, 1197–1200). While cosplayers could certainly use these laws to protect themselves, such use carries with it the same challenges cosplayers already face: the law does not prevent harm but only responds to it, and navigating the legal system is difficult. And it is unlikely that newer, stronger laws would be passed to protect them specifically.

[4.6] This suggests that, for better or worse, cosplayers’ privacy concerns in the face of harassment are being addressed the best way possible: through a combination of convention rules, social etiquette, and privacy laws that allow them to define the manner in which people may interact with them and seek redress when their privacy is violated. Still, all of these controls on behavior have only a limited ability to prevent harm from being done by those who don’t know (or don’t care) about them.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] How can privacy be preserved in a world where people are increasingly being pushed to share more information publicly or face social and economic harm? I have tried to address this question through examining cosplayer concerns. What has been gained by this attempt?

[5.2] I have shown that cosplayer concerns about harassment while cosplaying are privacy concerns. This fact has several implications for greater fandom. First, if the best protections are difficult to implement and often apply only after the fact, should fandom just accept that cosplaying will always involve some risk—that there can be no completely safe space for cosplayers? Second, what does the fact that harassment often involves social or economic discrimination imply about future attempts to strengthen etiquette or convention rules? Should cosplayers carry responsibility for protecting themselves, or should their audience (which likely includes potential harassers) be asked to do so? Third, how can protections for cosplayers effectively engage with the growing ease of sharing technology: should cosplayers and conventions grant tacit permission for audiences to take and share photos, or should photography be further restricted, even to the point of requiring audience members to give up cameras and cellphones at the door?

[5.3] These are complicated questions, to be sure, ones that are likely to be discussed at great length in many places, and I don’t pretend to have answers to them. Yet my conclusions, and the questions they raise, do show that cosplayers need greater privacy protections, as nothing less than their ability to grow and develop will be hindered without them.

6. Works cited


A case of Sherlockian identity: Irregulars, feminists, and millennials

Liza Potts

Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, United States

Abstract—This essay describes a study of how fans participate in memory-making activities. I call this activity participatory memory, blending theories from collective memory and participatory culture. Interestingly, while studying spaces of memory for Sherlock Holmes (the Canon) and BBC’s Sherlock (2010–), I began to realize that these spaces have much to do with gender, generations, class, and cultural differences that helped regulate (and even segregate) different ways in which people were allowed to participate in the Sherlockian fandom.

Keywords—Fan community; Gender; Generations; Sherlock; Sherlock Holmes


I. Introduction, or "There is nothing like first-hand evidence" (A Study in Scarlet)

While I have been a fan of Sherlock Holmes since I first read the collected Adventures as a child and sat with my father as we watched the classics (here I mean Basil Rathbone and Jeremy Brett as our dear detective), I did not start to look for other fans until I was older. When I first started this project on fandom and memory, I thought I could chalk this up to never imagining I had somewhere (or someones) to share my love of all things Sherlock Holmes. Nothing could be further from the truth—there are many organizations, conventions, and groups available for those of us who identify as Sherlockians. Entering the fandom in two distinct ways (as a scholar fan and a fan scholar), I am now in the midst of a research project examining the complex history, hierarchy, and structure that often comes with being part of any fandom, much less one as old and established as the Sherlock Holmes community.

This project began as a study of how fans participate in memory-making activities. I call this activity participatory memory, blending theories from collective memory and participatory culture. While doing this work, I set out to learn more about fan-led conferences and how participants tell the stories of their fandoms. I found 221B Con (http://www.221bcon.com/), a fan-led conference, through contacts I had made in London while studying spaces of memory for Sherlock Holmes (the Canon) and BBC’s Sherlock (2010–). I joined my local group, the Greek Interpreters. I listened to podcasts from the Baker Street Babes and I Hear of Sherlock Everywhere. I consulted with Sherlockian.net, an established, well-known portal with links to groups and information about the canon and community (and one I am now the caretaker of). As I began to learn more about the community and their experiences, I realized that some of the issues and concerns across groups had to do with gender, generations, class, and cultural differences that marked the different ways in which people were able and encouraged to participate.

While the larger project to understand the Sherlockian community is still underway, I expect to find further evidence of organizational changes that are part of a much larger societal pull toward a participatory, engaged, and remixing culture. The differences in the ways in which these fans perform their fandoms is much more interesting and complicated than an outsider might expect. More recently, the ways in which these fandoms are rethinking their structures and welcoming new members is providing case studies for understanding how organizations grow and change. In that way, studying, learning, examining, and participating in these spaces has provided a wealth of learnings and materials for those of us looking specifically at fan societies and groups, as well as those of us looking at larger cultural movements.
2. On the many ways to be a fan such that "I make a point of never having any prejudices" ("The Reigate Squires")

[2.1] In this section, I discuss the more popular ways in which people can participate in this community. For nearly 100 years, community organizations on Sherlock Holmes have mirrored many societal issues, struggles, and differences. The leading organization for Sherlock Holmes is the Baker Street Irregulars (BSI), named after a group of "street children" who help Holmes solve his cases. Their leader is referred to as Wiggins, a nod to the leader of the street children in Holmes’s world. Other organizations, called scions, were created as offshoots of the BSI (http://www.bakerstreetirregulars.com/). Some of these groups are organized by geographical location, while other groups are focused on Dr. Watson, shared professions, or other aspects of the community. Some of these organizations have only existed for a few years, while others have operated for decades. The BSI sponsors an annual dinner in New York City every January. Many other Sherlockian events have grown around the BSI dinner, leading to a long weekend of celebrations in the city.

[2.2] Up until 1991, all members of the BSI were men. And while a separate organization was created by women and for women (The Adventuresses of Sherlock Holmes, founded in the 1960s), before 1991, the BSI was not a co-ed organization. In 1991, several members of ASH (https://ash-nyc.com/) were inducted into the BSI, although ASH did not become fully co-ed until 2008 (McKay 2016). Both organizations provide membership on an invite-only basis, and much of the history written about the BSI points to its long tradition as a literary society.

[2.3] Scions all have their own rules about memberships and meetings, although most of them carry on a tradition of giving nicknames or "investitures" to their members. Their Web sites often list their members and their investitures, as a sign of membership and possibly status in the group. Many of these scions conduct meetings that are rich in tradition, including toasts to specific characters and historic figures, as well as a quiz of that meeting’s selected story. There is also a conference called A Scintillation of Scions (http://www.scintillation.org/), whose leaders situate it as a "Sherlockian family reunion," inviting old and encouraging new participants on its Web site. A more traditional event is the Sherlock Holmes conference, sponsored by the Norwegian Explorers scion with the Friends of the Sherlock Holmes Collections at the University of Minnesota and the University of Minnesota Libraries. Held every other year since 1995, this conference includes long-form presentations and discussion.

[2.4] 221B Con is a fan-founded, fan-led conference that has run since 2013. The founders of this organization are all women, and the majority of their attendees are also women. Only expecting 100 or so participants the first year, the founders were surprised to have 680 Sherlockians in attendance (Noll 2016). Their numbers have increased each year, with over 1,000 in attendance during their 2015 event. Rather than a literary society, which is how the BSI and some of the scions situate themselves, the Con focuses on the many variations of Sherlock Holmes—film, television show, fan fiction/pastiche, and theater. (While I do not have much of an opinion on the fan fiction vs. pastiche discussion, there is an interesting argument made by Amy Thomas that pastiche is a subset of fan fiction (http://bakerstreetbabes.com/pastiche-vs-fanfiction-the-debate-that-wouldnt-die/).

[2.5] Meanwhile, the Internet is a space where activity can take place year-round. Fan celebrations, fan fiction, fan speculation, and more can be found on spaces such as Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and various archives. The Hounds of the Internet (http://www.sherlockian.net/hounds/) has existed as an e-mail list since 1992, spun off from an earlier mail list. Some groups use Meetup to help traditional scions reach new members. The various Tumblr spaces are very active for this fandom, with participation particularly rising out of the Sherlock television show. The Baker Street Babes have a popular podcast and Web site (http://bakerstreetbabes.com/), as does I Hear of Sherlock Everywhere (http://www.ihearofsherlock.com/). More recently, some of the scions have also tried out these spaces as ways to engage millennial fandoms. Some of these transitions have meant opening up their groups to more diverse voices and reaching out to those whose inclusion may have not been as obvious to outsiders. More on that below, where I briefly discuss issues of diversity and equality in the community.

3. On equality, or not as simple as "I am a brain, Watson. The rest of me is a mere appendix" ("The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone")
What began as an ethnographic project, studying how fans participate in memory-making activities, evolved into an autoethnographic experience in learning how different groups within this fandom worked to sustain communities, nurture (or not) diverse leaders, and grow (or shrink). While working on this project, activities at the recent BSI dinner in January 2016 have given me pause and helped me reflect on this research. I will discuss these activities below, as they relate to different issues of equality and diversity within these fan spaces.

Diversity of gender. On the surface, it might look as if the fandom has serious issues in terms of diversity. The majority of individual scions are co-ed, except for a few that seem to remain all-male. ASH’s history is rich with discussions on gender, feminism, and equality. Their members picketed a BSI dinner in 1968, asking for them to consider adding “feminine irregulars.” As one of the ASH founders, Evelyn Herzog, states, "any chat about the history of ASH or the spirit of ASH has to include the picket" while at the same time calling for the need of a reality check due to issues in the world, where war and racial tensions abounded (2010). ASH is not a scion of the BSI. While it wasn’t until 1991 that the BSI leadership decided to invest women members, it took until 2008 for ASH to invest men. The gentlemen of the BSI have recognized these changes through their own acknowledgments, celebrating 25 years of women in the BSI during their 2016 event in January. There, they celebrated women members, toasting them, and singing their songs—while Betsy Rosenblatt, a member of both ASH and BSI, sang "At Last." These are significant moves for these organizations and the fandom (or literary societies) themselves, mirroring similar feminist movements during our present day. Recent debate online about the Speckled Band’s membership vote to accept "non-male" members has pushed these discussions further beyond the binary of men/women, leading to celebration, accolades, and anger at the slowness of change. Many established community leaders worked to contextualize this decision within the larger history of Sherlockian scions, suggesting that support should be given to groups willing to move forward in such positive, inclusive directions.

Generational differences. In learning about my local scion, I was told by one of the leaders that the average age was "ancient" and that they were interested in including "young people." They spoke of knowing of several scions in a similar predicament, where their group was "dying out." At the same time, 221B Con is going from strength to strength in terms of attendance numbers. Their participants are largely made up of millennials and Gen X'ers. Of course, attending a scion dinner at a country club and attending a three-day con are very different experiences. However, that might be the point. And there seems to be a place for both for now. An insightful piece in Serpentine Muse, the publication of ASH, is aptly titled "On the Care and Feeding of Millennials: Bringing a New Generation of Sherlockians in the Fold" (Holloway and Blumenberg 2015). This article makes several strong arguments for reaching out to the younger generation of Sherlockians and how scions might positively engage them. It should not go unnoticed that this piece was written by two cofounders of 221B Con, one of whom is part of the Baker Street Babes.

Diversity. In terms of diversity, 221B Con might be the most mixed in diversity of gender, race, sexuality, and class. In order to be of service to the community, we agreed to help our local scion to upgrade their Web site. Part of this work included conducting what is known in Web design as a landscape analysis, which works to understand how competing or partnering organizations (the landscape) represent themselves online (typically through their Web sites). During that analysis, we did not notice many people of color on other scion Web sites. It will be interesting to see what audiences may engage with the wider community because of the recent publication of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar’s Sherlockian pastiche written with Anna Waterhouse. This work is an engaging novel about a young Mycroft Holmes and his adventures untangling a slavery ring in the Caribbean. More on his visit to the BSI in 2015 can be read here: http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/02/elementary.

Membership attainment. It is said that membership in the BSI and ASH requires "toiling in the vineyards"—attending dinners, engaging with others, and supporting local scions in different ways. Membership in either group can be seen as exclusive, but both seem eager to broaden their membership. This move was evidenced by the BSI’s response at the January 2016 dinner and by online discussions around the Speckled Band scion, both mentioned above. Although the attendees of 221B Con might be the most mixed in diversity of gender, race, sexuality, and class, they too have an exclusive membership through their own Diogenes Club. That said, general membership in 221B Con is as simple as paying for your weekend registration, much as it is for other fan conventions.

Diversity of thought. In some quarters, to say you are a “fan” of Sherlock Holmes is a blasphemy. This reaction may seem dramatic, and certainly would be to those of us who consider fandoms to be spaces of imagination, participation, and community. However, some Sherlockians consider themselves guardians of a literary society, rather...
than fans of characters, stories, movies, and television shows. Fandom in general has had similar debates, as have Sherlockians (Faye 2012). Some of these spaces can feel more exclusive or participatory than others. Being able to code-switch in these spaces can be important, although I have found the majority of spaces I have visited to be welcoming of both kinds of thought. Again, delving into this issue requires more research, but this nuance of interest can speak to issues of high and low culture that the fandom/societies will need to work through as/if they grow.

[3.7] Welcoming behaviors. Panels at 221B Con are focused on the audience, more so than on the speakers. By which I mean, there is almost a call and response dialogue back and forth between the speakers and the attendees in the audience. Such a rhetorical move creates a space in which the community members are allowed, or even expected to participate. They hold a special session for newcomers to the fandom where free copies of the Canon are eagerly distributed by the panelists to audience members as way to welcome them and encourage them to engage with the texts. 221B Con seems to overflow with a welcoming manner in terms of accessibility and membership. The founders have even gone as far as appointing someone as a welcomer, whose job it is to seek out participants on the boundaries of the Con to encourage them to join in and feel part of the community.

4. Onward, for "it is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data" ("A Scandal in Bohemia")

[4.1] From more traditional groups such as co-ed BSI and their offshoot scions to the women-founded, fan-led 221B Con, these different spaces and ways in which fans can participate are as varied as the Canon. As I continue to investigate the fandoms and the ways in which they organize themselves, celebrate the many kinds of media produced, and negotiate space and place, I have the following research questions in mind.

[4.2] How will 221B Con evolve over time? It is difficult for an organization to grow so much and so quickly. Often, this shift can mean a change of culture, expectations, and structure. With the founders still involved and in tune with their community, it will be interesting to see where they go next in terms of access, policy, and stability.

[4.3] Will the lines between the BSI, ASH, 221B Con, and local scions become more porous? How will they welcome millennials, or even Gen-Xers, into their memberships? Can they build spaces that can scale to these different generations? How will these moves change these organizations?

[4.4] A related question, but more specific to the local: Will these scions sustain themselves, long-term? And if so, how? What will scion meetings look like five, 10, 20 years into the future? Will they change in form and format?

[4.5] I am sure there are more questions I should be considering. I welcome others studying similar (or even the same!) areas of research to contact me. As ACD speaking through Holmes said in "The Adventure of Silver Blaze": "Nothing clears up a case so much as stating it to another person."

5. Works cited


McKay, Marilynne. 2016. Personal interview.

Post-object fandom: Television, identity and self-narrative, by Rebecca Williams

Bethan Jones

University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, United Kingdom

Keywords—Audience studies; Endings; Ontological security; Transitions


[1] Recent years have seen numerous revivals in film and television. January 2016 saw The X-Files (1993–2002) return to our screens after a 9-year absence, while the release of Ghostbusters during the summer of 2016 saw hosts of blog posts and articles about the original films and their impact on the authors’ childhoods. With this resurgence of older texts has come much discussion about fandoms: when people first became fans, what the texts mean to them, and how they will introduce their children to the fandoms. These "becoming a fan" stories have been analyzed by scholars interested in the moment that everything changes (Hills 2002; Cavicchi 1998), significantly less work has been done on fannish endings and the impact that these have on fans. Rebecca William’s Post-object Fandom is thus a timely intervention into the field, offering an acute analysis of a range of case studies and drawing on research conducted with fans of texts from Doctor Who (1963–89, 1996, 2005–) to Firefly (2002).

[2] Williams opens by noting that it is the final scenes of shows that perhaps stick most clearly in the viewers’ minds, from the divisive ending of Lost (2004–10) to the premature conclusion of Twin Peaks (1990–91). Williams argues that the endings of these shows, and programs like them, offer scholars an opportunity to examine key moment of fandom, transition, and endings, as well as offer a rich examination of the role that industry and transmedia products play in these. Key to Williams’s analysis is the concept of postobject fandom, which she articulates as being "the specific moment when a fan object moves from being an ongoing text into a dormant one which yields no new instalments" (266). She deftly links this to Anthony Giddens’s concepts of ontological security and pure relationships, and this theoretical approach informs the case studies chosen.

[3] The book itself is divided into nine chapters. After a short introduction that encompasses a discussion on methods, Williams offers an overview of ontological security, self-identity, and postobject fandom. She highlights the ways in which fan studies has previously conceptualized fans and fandom, from textual poachers to transitional objects, and furthers the notion of fandom as a transitional object by drawing on Giddens’s work. In particular, she proposes that "at the core of fandom lie two types of ‘fan pure-relationship’: fan/object pure relationships (fan attachment to fan objects) and fan-fan pure relationships (fan attachment to fellow fans)” (21). Fans perform identity work through finding points of identification with televisual texts, yet when those televisual texts end fans may struggle to negotiate their identity as a fan. Fans’ self-narratives can change over time as their fandom ebbs and flows, and their relationship to their fan object can similarly grow or lessen. These self-narratives can be affected by the ending of a televisual text when the fan is not prepared for the show’s conclusion (as well as when they are), and the following chapters examine these reactions in more detail.

[4] Chapter 3 focuses on specific aspects of a show ending, rather than the show as a whole. Williams uses examples from cult and drama series, rather than soaps, pointing out that “character departures are not always as expected as in long-running soaps and that the loss of specific points of identification may be more shocking or surprising” (47). In
particular, she focuses on *Angel* (1999–2004), *The West Wing* (1999–2006), and *Doctor Who*, and analyzes the responses of fans to characters leaving the show, characters being written out thanks to actors’ off-screen deaths, and the same character being played by a different actor. Each of these cases includes comments from fans drawn from message boards, forums, or surveys, and these supporting comments serve to illustrate the depth of feeling fans have toward characters and texts. Williams argues that each of these examples demonstrates shifts in ontological security and self-identity, and these little endings can be just as significant for fans as big endings.

[5] Williams examines these big endings in chapters 4, 5, and 6, and outlines three different discourses that fans may draw on in dealing with the ending of a show: the reiteration discourse, the rejection discourse, and the renegotiation discourse. The reiteration discourse, Williams argues, is where fans “offer lengthy stories about their involvement in shows and post goodbyes to them at online forums” (79). The author examines this using *The West Wing* and *Lost* as case studies, providing a wealth of fan reactions with which to support the analysis. Williams argues that the reiteration discourse reiterates the importance of the show to fans’ sense of self-identity and ontological security, as well as the importance of fan forums to fans’ relationships with their fandom. The chapter on the rejection discourse continues with the case studies of *The West Wing* and *Lost* but demonstrates the approach taken by fans who actively sought the end of the shows rather than see a decrease in quality. These fans argue that shows are past their golden age and contend they are glad to see them end—a discourse that, Williams notes, “allows fans to distance themselves from a show, discursively positioning themselves as critical and non-emotionally involved” (104). Williams suggests that these fans are similar to the antifans whom Jonathan Gray (2003) examines, and that this offers fans a way to cope with potential ruptures to a sense of identity that comes with the cancellation of a series.

[6] The reiteration and rejection discourses are positioned as opposite ends of a spectrum, and Williams examines the middle ground of the renegotiation discourse in chapter 6. Here the notion of multifandom is explored to consider how being a fan can provide security in identity, even when one fan object is canceled, and the ways in which fans move from one text to another are discussed. In particular, Williams focuses on fans who move to a new text because of its links to those associated with the show that is ending, such as specific actors (John Barrowman), writers (Aaron Sorkin), and producers (Joss Whedon). *The West Wing* is again utilized as one of the case studies, with comments from fans demonstrating their intention to watch Sorkin’s new series because he, rather than the show, is the fan object. Williams also argues that examining the ways in which fans move on after shows end through the renegotiation discourse sheds light on how fan objects are found and on the multiple intersecting interests that fans have. Survey data are again drawn on in depth to illustrate why, where, and how fans find new objects of fandom.

[7] Chapters 7 and 8 move away from fan reactions to the ends of programs to examine how fans continue to engage with the shows after their cancellation. Chapter 7 focuses on why fans rewatch on DVD and Blu-ray, and why watching reruns may provide fans with as much if not more pleasure. Williams engages here with debates about new and old media platforms and types of access that viewers have. The chapter opens with a discussion of how fans of *The West Wing* watch the DVDs as well as how the box set functions as an aesthetic object. The box set was met with disappointment because of its lack of special features, which Williams suggests was compounded by the show’s status as a dormant text; she argues that box sets released after a text becomes dormant can fail to provide fans with the ability to fully maintain their fandom. Despite this, however, fans do watch episodes or full seasons on DVD, but this is a different form of fandom to that of watching a live show. Yet the ability to watch on DVD is complicated by the desire of some fans to watch reruns, considering such watching better than watching the DVDs of a box set. Here Williams suggests that fans seek to replicate the experience of first viewing by watching reruns, and she draws parallels to some music fans’ desire to experience an authentic first listen of a new album by a band. This section of the chapter, as well as that on streaming services, felt brief compared to the detailed analysis elsewhere in the book, but Williams does note the data used come from 2013, when streaming services were less frequently used. This would certainly be an area worth examining further in future work, however.

[8] Chapter 7 closes with an analysis of fan practices, which is taken up and further examined in chapter 8. Here Williams focuses on official and unofficial resurrections of TV shows; she notes that over 50 percent of fans had interacted with official paratexts, yet less than a quarter had created their own fan works. Williams suggests that these findings “appear to indicate a preference among respondents for official continuation of the program universe over fan-created works” (165). The case studies offered in this chapter include *Firefly*, 24 (2001–10), and *The X-Files* and draw on fan discussions to examine how scholars understand fans of returning shows when they return in a different medium; how fans themselves keep a text alive in the postobject era; and *Torchwood* (2006–11) as an example of a text...
that has not been officially canceled but is not returning to television. Examining cinematic and TV revivals, as well as fan works and interim fandom, this chapter strives to cover a wealth of data, and, as with chapter 7, Williams could easily have written more on each of these areas. The concept of interim fandom, however, forges new ground in examining texts which are neither dead or alive and the effect of this on fans. Williams makes a strong case for programs whose status is not clearly defined to be examined by TV studies and not to fall through the cracks. Indeed, examining programs like this can also afford us the opportunity to engage more closely with industry and production contexts as well as fan reactions.

[9]  Post-object Fandom's focus on fans places it firmly within the field of fan studies, but Williams covers an array of issues that would also appeal to those working in TV studies and those with an interest in the industry. As I have suggested, there are areas where further examination could have been provided; although Williams notes in her introduction that "favoured bands split up [and] movie franchises come to an end" (2), Post-object Fandom focuses solely on television shows. Further exploration of the ways in which these endings affect fans would be productive and add to the field of fan studies. This is, however, a minor complaint about what is an otherwise excellent book, and one that pushes the field to engage with old texts and new ways that fans interact. There is much to recommend in Post-object Fandom, and scholars will gain much from its incisive analysis. Williams's plea to rethink the ways in which we view older texts and to integrate approaches to self-narrative identity with postobject fandom will resonate with scholars working in the field, and her work opens up doors to previously underexamined aspects of fandom and fannish identity.

10. Works cited


**Role playing materials, by Rafael Bienia**

Amanda D. Odom

Front Range Community College, Westminster, Colorado, United States

[0.1] Keywords—Games; LARP; Live-action role-play; Tabletop games; Video games


1. Introduction

[1.1] Rafael Bienia’s *Role Playing Materials* focuses on three forms of gaming: live-action role-playing (LARPing), mixed reality games, and tabletop games. As a game designer, player, and member of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), Bienia has significant experience in these areas of gaming. Bienia begins *Role Playing Materials* by deconstructing the terminology of play, starting with the idea that “role playing is a hobby for people who enjoy imagining and exploring characters who are challenged with invented tasks in fictional worlds” (13). He points out, however, that any time people imagine they are someone else and consider how they would act or react as that character, they are role-playing. According to Bienia, “gaming” is a construct of games, players, and practical materials. In *Role Playing Materials*, the interconnectedness of games, player culture, and game studies is evident across the text. Bienia sees the research process itself as a role-playing process, which lends nuance to the discussion.

2. Analysis

[2.1] Ontological and epistemological categorization inform Bienia's larger discussion of role-playing and the role-playing process. Central to his research are Latour's concepts of action and actor. Bienia examines human, nonhuman, and material actors and actions in role-playing. In chapter 2, "Methodology and Theory," he notes that action is observable when a network of actors work together: “The pencil does not write without paper or hand, the paper does not show traces of words without pencil or hand, the hand does not write without a writing device or a piece of paper” (23). Rather than defining role-playing materials as single objects or components, Bienia provides a network-based definition that allows him to evaluate the concept across media.

[2.2] Insights in this text open up further interesting discussion of the permanence of perspective. For example, time restrictions as he worked to inhabit varying perspectives also changed his practices (such as making new or wearing old costumes) (32). His reiteration of Markus Montola's (2005) suggestion that players define game spaces and that they realize the power to do so through character agency makes compelling the juxtaposition and blending of his statuses as participant and observer, player and researcher.

[2.3] In chapter 4, "Mixed Reality Role-Playing Games," Bienia briefly details the history of merging real and virtual spaces from the 1960s on and explores the 40-year history of tabletop games. Building these histories, Bienia argues that the meaning of role-play is fluid and depends on a range of factors, including individuals, communities, sessions, and games. Given this fluidity, Bienia focuses his work on an exploration of “how...materials (actors) make role playing (agency) work in role-playing games (network)” (37). While Bienia recognizes the classic elements of role-play noted in previous scholarship (narratives, goals, and rules), his focus on role-playing’s network of material actors emphasizes
the ways that role-playing works. Thus, rather than offering a historical accounting of these games, he engages the games’ materials as collaborative elements with narrative features.

[2.4] Bienia positions *Role Playing Materials* as a bridge between past and future research. According to Bienia, "Mixed reality technology pushes game development towards a vanishing of a dividing line between the digital and non-digital" (164). He argues that "actor-network theory provides one toolbox to understand these changes" (164). In studying role-playing, Bienia seeks to complement but not duplicate game studies’ previously mapped territories and patterns. *Role Playing Materials* is "a dissertation about role playing and materials" and "about materials that are role playing" (169). In key moments, the writing alternates between the perspectives of human and nonhuman materials. In an effort to change *how* we know about role-playing, Bienia both shares his game-playing experience and speculates on what the game experience might be like from the perspective of other materials within the network. During a tabletop game, he personifies nonhuman elements (a lamp, a pencil, and a table) in order to examine the various places and contexts engaged in role-playing.

[2.5] Bienia argues that the symbolic facilitates play in all role-playing scenarios. Fake blood might be used to represent wounds in LARPs, avatars represent the players in video games, and a map can represent a castle in a blighted kingdom in a tabletop campaign. Detailing his experiences with an Alcyon LARP, Bienia shows how real-life significances inform player decisions. He notes that cosplayers often wear lighter garb for brief indoor events, while LARPers may select different gear to be worn outdoors. Game preparation occurs well before a LARP. During the preparation process, sleep, food, and necessary game items become part of the game’s material network, expanding and aiding in the fulfillment of the game’s narrative. To this end, the players dirty their new, store-bought clothes, place their canned food in earthenware bowls to make the game feel more realistic, and modify their materials to incorporate aspects of their characters, worlds, and story lines. Thus, human and nonhuman actors are interrelational collaborators and "this distribution of work makes a dichotomy between human and non-human irrelevant as a precondition to know larp" (88–89).

[2.6] Analyzing the mobile game *Obscurus 2*, Bienia shifts focus to address how role-playing works in mixed reality games (and those augmented to be based in virtual reality) that use smartphones and computers. Bienia touches on game modification and the cost of materials, but focuses most on smartphones. According to him, smartphones allow access to a world beyond the game and are less stable as collaborative actors within role-playing scenarios. For example, the indoor location of one player of the mobile game *Obscurus 2* made it difficult for that player to receive transmissions and game updates. Consequently, all the players had to integrate the technical problems into their role-playing. Eventually they decided to all move outside. Although the material-material relation required only this small change, the example highlights ways that role-playing’s material actors work with narrative actors to construct the game experience (100–101).

[2.7] Studying the single-player online role-playing game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), Bienia explores the differences between instrumental and "pretend" play. He argues that the game’s prerendered landscape and plot limit the player’s possible actions and as a result require more work of the player. The prescribed responses in computer gaming are similar to those in tabletop games. However, in *Skyrim*, "characters can swim through icy water without effect. Interacting with the cold world does not connect the actor water to character play" (110). Modding, the modification of hardware, software, or game-operating functions, is also covered here. Player communities create and add elements to the core game to enhance the experience of playing. For example, in *Skyrim*, the Hypothermia mod allows weather to be a significant factor affecting armor use and actions like jumping into rivers.

[2.8] Bienia argues that players define game spaces, but that they realize this power through their interactions with game materials. For example, he describes his view of *Skyrim* when using the Oculus Rift virtual reality headset:

```plaintext
[2.9] Every part of the game world falls into the "right place." However, the mushrooms on the tunnel floor are surprisingly big. When playing Skyrim with an LCD monitor, the mushrooms were small and I barely noticed them...Replacing the LCD with the virtual reality display, everything is still in proportion to the body of my character, but as the proportion between the character’s body and my body changes...the environment grows and the mushrooms designed for an LCD become larger than life. (116)
```

[2.10] Another physical actor, the band holding the virtual reality headset on the player’s head, prevents long-term game play because of the discomfort it causes. In this virtual context, the avatar’s clothes do not reflect the player’s
actual clothing. These minor elements are key, Bienia notes, because a "larp network becomes stable when narrative, ludic, and material actors collaborate" (99). When "role-playing games integrate more and more mixed reality technology, these combined networks become more ubiquitous" (121).

3. Assessment

[3.1] Time is one boundary in a game, and all play includes edges and landscapes, from a physical map in a tabletop game to the edges of the realm past which an avatar cannot navigate in a video game. Role Playing Materials compellingly examines a range of game boundaries, as well as the places where these boundaries are thin. Throughout, Bienia acknowledges the limitations inherent in observing the fluid nature of game play through static moments. He argues that that new game scenarios and changes in materials will inevitably produce different forms of play and game study each time. He concludes that research on any "stable mixed reality role-playing game network has to include more work on relations" because "when materials collaborate in a tabletop role-playing game, materials role-play, too... Researchers who want to understand materials as collaborators in role playing need to expand their understanding of role playing as a process that includes non-human actors" (159–60).

[3.2] Role Playing Materials argues that in order to understand the complexity of role-playing games, future research must acknowledge relations between narrative, ludic, and material actors. More importantly, these interrelations must be studied without giving any one actor a preferred position. This text prepares the ground for those interested in actor-network theories, game studies, games research methods, the process of play, and even ethical considerations of game materials and manufacture.

4. Work cited

Anime fan communities: Transcultural flows and frictions, by Sandra Annett

Kathryn Hemmann

George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, United States

[0.1] Keywords—America; Animation; Astro Boy; Canada; Cinema; Cowboy Bebop; Hetalia; Japan; Online communities; Online fandom; There She Is!!; Transcultural flow


[1] Sandra Annett’s Anime Fan Communities is an exploration of the evolving economies of fans and fannish cultures from the early 20th century through the present, with a special emphasis on representations of the technological mediations of animation. The focus of Annett’s work is the theme presented by its subtitle, Transcultural Flows and Frictions, with the “anime fan communities” of the main title providing a more dispersed set of reference points for her discussion. The challenge that Anime Fan Communities presents to scholars of Japanese animation and popular culture lies in the nuances that arise in understandings of fandoms as “transnational,” a term that is repeatedly problematized throughout the text. Instead of “transnational,” Annett prefers “transcultural,” defining a “transcultural fan community” as “a group in which people from many national, cultural, ethnic, gendered, and other personal backgrounds find a sense of connection across difference, engaging with each other through a shared interest” (6).

[2] Anime Fan Communities consists of an introduction, a conclusion, and six chapters that are divided into three parts, structured according to their focus on a specific era of transcultural audience receptions of cinema, television, and online animation. Part 1, “Animation and the Miraculous Cinema,” details animation in Japan during the first half of the 20th century and investigates the imperialist drives in both the animation exported from America to Japan and in Japanese wartime animated propaganda. Part 2, “After These Messages: Television Animation in the Age of ‘Posts,’” handles the theme of cultural nostalgia in the postwar animation of North America and Japan. Part 3, “Online Conversations across Difference,” explores the intersections between animation and online communities in the 21st century.

[3] Chapter 1, “Cartoon Internationale,” outlines the interwar animated exchanges between the United States and Japan. Annett demonstrates that, even as early animation (such as the Disney short “The Autograph Hound”) encouraged audiences to participate in cinematic fan culture, rising imperialist tensions made it difficult for true transnational cinematic cultures to arise from animation. In this chapter, Annett highlights the Fleischer Brothers’ animated Betty Boop short “A Language All My Own,” which was produced in America for a Japanese audience. This audience was not merely passive, however, and Japanese cinema critics, artists, and manufacturers were happy to appropriate Betty Boop’s kimono-clad likeness for their own agendas.

[4] Chapter 2, “World War Cute,” is devoted to an overview of how animated propaganda during the 1940s used the visual stylizations of cuteness to endow portrayals of imperialist expansion with a positive affect, even as these films reveal anxieties regarding multinational communities of “allies” and “citizens.” In this chapter, Annett discusses the 1944 Disney film The Three Caballeros, which premiered in Rio de Janeiro as an attempt to foster cross-cultural communication, and director Mitsuyo Seo’s Momotarō’s Sea Eagles, shown in Japan in 1943 at a crucial moment of the
Pacific War. Annett analyzes the figure of the "cute ethnic Other," which was used "to address causes where enmity and friendship were not clear-cut" (66).

Chapter 3, "Kid Vid: Children and Science Fiction TV Fandom," is about the creation of children as an audience for animation in Canada and the United States. Annett begins with a discussion of televised animation programs as a broad genre shaped by limited production budgets, organizational surveillance, and marketing forces directed toward younger viewers. Annett's positionality as someone who grew up watching Saturday morning cartoons in Canada allows her to incorporate her specific personal experiences into broader academic discussions of television as a medium, especially in relation to theories of cultural odorlessness as a facilitation of the transmission of media across national borders. Just as the 1960s Hanna Barbera cartoon The Jetsons contains scenes and storylines that effectively teach its audience how to integrate themselves into network-sanctioned American television fan cultures, so too did the Canadian broadcasts of the various iterations of Astro Boy during the 1980s teach viewers to look for "educational" messages within the cartoons. "In this way," Annett writes, "changes to the Astro Boy program due to specific Canadian approaches to children's broadcasting can be seen as both removing and adding 'odors,' evoking a set of physical practices, and so different bodies in the act of spectatorship" (104). Although it may be difficult to label localized broadcast practices as postnational, Annett demonstrates that the deliberate construction of child viewers as media consumers is an ongoing project that occurs at multiple levels of media transmission, regardless of time and place.

Chapter 4, "Channel Surfers: Cowboy Bebop's Postnational Fans," overlays a conversation surrounding technology and nostalgia onto the 1998 television anime Cowboy Bebop, which functions as a landmark in contemporary anime fandom cultures in North America, where the show was broadcast on cable television. Annett begins the chapter with a discussion of fandom and affect, which is followed by a brief literature review of work exploring television as a medium for the spread of fandom. The chapter ends with an argument that "Cowboy Bebop...speaks to a tension between anxieties over the lack of genuine connection in mediated, diasporic communication, and continuing desires to generate that crucial affective movement between media technologies, audiences, and contexts" (131). Between the beginning and end of the chapter lies an abbreviated overview of an online survey of self-identified anime fans that Annett conducted in 2010. She loosely connects this survey to a brief history of anime fandom outside of Japan. Both topics would have benefited from a more detailed discussion, and the methodology and results of the survey in particular deserve a lengthier treatment.

Chapter 5, "'Love at First Site,'" stands out as one of the stronger chapters in Anime Fan Communities. This chapter examines the Korean cartoon There She Is!!, which was created using Adobe Flash software by a user called SamBakZa on the Web site Albino Blacksheep, a formerly thriving hub of Internet activity known for hosting Flash cartoons. Annett is concerned with the multicultural and multilingual user base of the site, whose interactions in the comments on the episodes of There She Is!! resulted in various manifestations of the "frictions" accompanying transnational flows. Because the kawaii (cute) stylizations associated with Japanese animation and character design facilitated the message conveyed by the wordless narrative, users from various global territories were able to enjoy and appreciate the cartoon. Although the comments on its message boards were largely written in Korean when the first episode was posted in 2006, by 2010 English had come to dominate the conversation, with Japanese and Spanish also being commonly used. Annett documents the conflict that arose from the multilingual environment, which at times deteriorated into flame wars over issues related to race and nationality, an ironic development given the themes of friendship and tolerance celebrated by There She Is!!. This chapter therefore provides a cogent critical intervention into discussions concerning fandom as a utopian space. The self-contained and accessible nature of "'Love at First Site'" recommends the chapter as a suitable choice of assigned reading for undergraduate classes.

Chapter 6, "World Conflict/World Conference: Axis Powers Hetalia," continues the investigation into the more problematic activities of fandom communities. Using the Hetalia transmedia franchise as a case study, Annett argues that it served as a locus of fan activity that "illustrates the kind of transnational media economies and social ecologies that have developed around the Internet at specific junctures in the first decade of the twenty-first century" (168). Along the way, she considers the question of whether online communities unite people across borders or whether they simply reproduce preexisting societal divisions, such as those that separate different genders, nationalities, ethnicities, and generations. Unfortunately, this question is quickly discarded in favor of an extended literature review concerning a number of disparate topics relating to the consumption of media within Japan. Only in the last few pages does Annett return to Hetalia and its audience, skimming over the controversy the manga and animated Web series created in Korea and among Korean fans, not to mention the objections regarding the problematic portrayals and omissions of certain
nationalities, Web pages devoted to critiques of the franchise, and irresponsible behavior by cosplayers at American anime conventions. Knotting these divergent threads together is a focus on fujoshi, female fans who enjoy male/male pairings. Unfortunately, the connections between Japanese fandom cultures, international fandom disputes, and American fandom practices are not as well articulated as perhaps they could be.

The primary weakness of Anime Fan Communities lies in its lack of a clear structure, as the guiding argument of each chapter is not easily discernable in the content that follows the chapter’s introduction. While the recurring academic literature review sections demonstrate sound scholarship, their positioning frequently interrupts the flow of the author’s presentation of her own work. Furthermore, these theoretical asides are often expanded at the expense of a more comprehensive treatment of the source material under discussion. For example, in the fifth chapter, "'Love at First Site,'" the author dwells on what well-known English-language scholars such as Henry Jenkins and Matt Hills have written on fandom as an abstract construct while neglecting to describe and explain the characteristics of Flash animation or communities like Albino Blacksheep. Annett seems to take it as a given that her reader is familiar with these online phenomena, despite the fact that they are specific moments in the larger history of Internet culture and may be unknown to many readers. Every chapter evinces an uncertainty regarding its objectives, as the author’s focus frequently shifts from narrative analysis to ethnographic accounts of fandom activity to broader discussions of transcultural flows, with few signposts helping the reader to navigate the direction of her argument.

One of the most important goals that Fan Studies can achieve as a discipline is to record watershed moments in online cultural history that often pass under the notice of more mainstream analysis. Annett’s treatment of Internet-based communities preserves snapshots of many such hotspots of transcultural communication during the 1990s and 2000s, while associating these online societies with earlier precedents of international media exchanges. Anime Fan Communities will be particularly useful for scholars researching the interactions between media, text, and audience at various points in the 20th and 21st centuries. For English-language scholars unfamiliar with fandoms centered around Japanese entertainment properties, Annett’s work will serve as a gateway to discourses surrounding diverse patterns of media consumption that have spread from Japan across the globe.
Boys love manga and beyond: History, culture, and community in Japan, edited by Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaike, Katsuhiko Suganuma, and James Welker

Sandra Annett

Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada

Keywords—Gender; Japanese fan culture; Sexuality


[1] Boys Love Manga and Beyond is quite literally a defining volume in the study of Japanese fan subcultures. Like many academic works on emerging topics, its main task is to define and categorize its subject, in this case boys’ love (BL), a popular Japanese multimedia genre focusing on male-male romantic/sexual relationships, generally thought to be written by and for women. This essay collection takes an international, interdisciplinary approach, with authors from Australia, Tasmania, Japan, and the United States working in a range of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, comparative literature, and gender studies departments. They are all united, however, by a common set of questions that concern scholars working in a relatively new area.

[2] In the volume’s introduction, McLelland and Welker pose questions such as, "What genres of BL have emerged in the course of its 40-year history?" and "What kind of girls and women actually create and consume BL works?" (4). Basically they are asking, "What is this thing, who likes it, and why should we study it?" In answering these questions, the authors run into a few of the problems that tend to crop up in early fan studies: a dry dissection of fannish pleasures, for instance, and an insistence on basic definitions that become confused in practical use. (Should all homoerotic manga for girls be lumped together under the umbrella term "BL," or is the general term yaoi? Different terms are offered up as common parlance in different chapters, depending on whom each author was speaking to at the time of writing.) That said, the editors of this volume have deliberately selected their approach to meet a real need for more academic work on BL media in its Japanese social, cultural, and historical context. Researchers and students looking for a solid introduction to BL and its fans in Japan will find this volume invaluable.

[3] One of the most useful aspects of this book is its inclusion of both English-language essays and essays translated from Japanese. Those who have researched BL in English will likely recognize the names of contributors like Mark McLelland, James Welker, and Patrick Galbraith, who have published a fair bit on the topic in essay collections and journals such as Mechademia. In addition, readers of Transformative Works and Cultures will recognize Kazumi Nagaike and Katsuhiko Suganuma, who guest edited an issue on “Transnational Boys' Love Fan Studies” in 2013. This collection also includes work by pioneering Japanese scholars of BL such as Fujimoto Yukari and Ishida Hitoshi, whose chapters were originally published in a seminal 2007 issue of the literary journal Eureka (Yuriika) that introduced Japanese readers to the newly minted field of BL studies (Aoyama 2009). The preponderance of essays by scholars who were born in Japan or who have extensively lived and worked there provides valuable insight and information that was previously unavailable or not easily accessible to Anglophone readers.
While presenting a variety of perspectives, the editors have arranged the chapters into a coherent volume that flows well from start to finish. They avoid the common tactic of grouping chapters into chunky thematic sections. Instead, they order the 12 essays sequentially to create a smooth chronological transition from earlier to later BL works. Along the way, they also segue from production-oriented essays on historical genres and authors to consumer-oriented essays on BL readers and fans in the 21st century. The effect is like that of a book with two halves, the first asking, "What is BL?" and the second asking, "Who are the fans of BL?" However, because the editors do not make a strict division between the halves, readers are free to pick up the threads of reception in the earlier essays, weaving them into an ongoing concern with genres and authors in some of the later essays.

The first half of the volume comprises an introduction and five chapters that look at BL's historical roots in the early to mid-20th century. In the first chapter, Barbara Hartley introduces one of the earliest examples of "beautiful boy" (bishōnen) imagery with queer undertones in modern Japanese popular culture: the 1920s serial literature illustrations of Takabatake Kashô. Hartley provides valuable background on the ways in which love between men was historically viewed in Japan and the impact of shifting gender relations on Japanese literature and art through the ages. This chapter dovetails neatly with James Welker's essay on the development of manga featuring bishōnen characters in love from the 1970s to the 1990s. Welker traces a fairly well-known course from the highly aestheticized shōnen-ai (boy love) tales of 1970s girls' manga magazines, to the "mildly pornographic" JUNE magazine for women (59), and finally to the fan-created parodies of popular anime and manga known as yaoi. In his account, yaoi began to spread between fans at the Comic Market conventions of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and it continues today alongside the mainstream commercial genre that bookstores label "BL" or "boys' love." Welker's contribution paves the way for a new translation of Fujimoto's 2007 Eureka essay on shōnen-ai and yaoi. Fujimoto argues that reading shōnen-ai manga allows female readers to escape oppressive gender roles, while fan-created yaoi works reveal how they play with gender by freely adopting various sexual roles and power dynamics. This argument is now well worn and contested in feminist studies of slash, but it was influential in the Japanese context at the time. Complementing Fujimoto's analysis of BL readers, Kazuko Suzuki's contribution asks, "What can we learn from Japanese professional BL writers?" Using firsthand accounts from interviews, Suzuki analyzes how professional BL authors today perceive such categories as shōnen-ai, JUNE, and yaoi as subgenres. Kazumi Nagaie and Tomoko Aoyama round out the historical half of the volume with their overview of the Japanese academic field of BL studies. This essay provides a useful summary of how BL and its fans have been seen in academic and mass media discourse at the end of the 20th century and into the start of the 21st century.

Along with historical context, some of the essays from the first part of the volume also provide information on the early reception of BL, notably those by Fujimoto and by Nagaie and Aoyama. But it is in the second half of the volume that readers of BL manga truly become the main focus. Though the volume does not deal much in Western fan studies concepts that might be familiar to readers of Transformativ Works and Cultures, it does spend the remaining six essays and the conclusion addressing BL's specific audience and its more general social reception. Rio Otomo enters the fray with a polemical essay on BL as a form of pornography that "counteracts the misogyny historically attached to the genre" of porn (142). Drawing on the queer theory of Judith Butler and the literature of Angela Carter and Yukio Mishima, she makes a strong case for BL as a source of autoerotic fantasy that also interrogates the social relations of power. Next, Patrick Galbraith provides some real-world examples of such fantasies in his chapter based on a year's worth of fieldwork with female fans of yaoi in Japan. As Galbraith notes, these fans have ironically named themselves fujoshi, "rotten girls," a term that has also been picked up in the Japanese media. Jeffrey T. Hester's "Fujoshi Emergent" traces how fujoshi have entered into popular representation through meta manga and anime that depict avid female BL fans and their beleaguered boyfriends. Hester is rightly critical of such narratives, often written by men and featuring male point-of-view characters, which create a "double move...by which women's power is acknowledged, but then recaptured within more-or-less conventional trajectories of heterosexual romance" (181). However, not all men involved with BL automatically reaffirm a conventional heterosexual viewpoint. Kazumi Nagaie examines the phenomenon of heterosexual male fans of BL, nicknamed fudanshi, who view BL's romantic narratives as a form of "salvation" (193) that allows them to explore androgynous or feminine sides of their psyches. Surprisingly, Nagaie does not focus much on the responses of actual gay, bisexual, and asexual men, who, according to the survey data she quotes, make up the majority of male BL fans. Also, she does little to address the critiques of gay men who dislike BL. Rather, it falls to Ishida Hitoshi to take up the fascinating case of the 1992 yaoi debate (yaoi rondsō), in which feminist authors and BL fans responded to criticisms from gay men that BL is at best overidealized and at worst outright homophobic, particularly when it stars male lovers who deny being gay, with self-identified gay characters relegated to
the role of sidekick. Ishida comes to a balanced conclusion, neither defending nor condemning fujoshi, but rather recognizing that BL is foundationally structured by both an appropriation of gay male imagery and the self-projections of independent women's fantasies.

[7] The final essay by Tomoko Aoyama and the conclusion by Mark McLelland likewise touch on cases where celebrations of freedom and community must be balanced with recognitions of responsibility and reactions to social constraints. Aoyama provides a nuanced reading of manga by feminist author and artist Yoshinaga Fumi, who grapples with the distinctions between idealized fantasies of bishōnen in love and more realistic portrayals of ordinary gay men in caring, committed relationships, often represented by their skill at domestic cooking or baking. McLelland concludes the volume by addressing issues that future scholars and fans must face, such as the increasing amount of regulation and censorship being leveled by conservative elements in Japanese society and government as the BL genre gains mainstream visibility. McLelland’s conclusion returns us once again to the central question: What is BL? Is it pornography? Is it pure fantasy? Is it feminist? Queer? Homophobic? Revolutionary? Commercially co-opted? As always, each author defends his or her own stance, most often on the side of defending BL. The best essays, however, don’t just pick a side but rather show how the definition of BL is being discursively constructed (and contested) by everyone from passionate fans and defensive authors to critical activists and censorious citizens.

[8] Given its strong focus on definitions, Boys Love Manga and Beyond may read like a first-ever introduction to the field. In fact, it is not the first essay collection published on BL in English. That distinction goes to the 2010 volume Boys’ Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-Cultural Fandom of the Genre, edited by Antonia Levi, Mark McHarry, and Dru Pagliassotti (reviewed in Transformative Works and Cultures by Nele Noppe in 2011). A comparison between these two volumes is instructive. Whereas the volume under review here stakes out its titular territory in Japan, Levi, McHarry, and Pagliassotti’s earlier book is clearly labeled a cross-cultural study. This means that the 2010 Boys’ Love Manga authors employ more concepts from Western fan studies theory, such as the gift economy, and provide more links to Western fan bases, including two essays that directly compare yaoi and slash fandom. The complete lack of such comparisons in Boys Love Manga and Beyond may create a sense of disconnect or a feeling of something missing for international readers and scholars. Simon Turner, in his review of Boys Love Manga and Beyond, points out, “Although we can locate the Japanese origins of Boys’ Love, it is becoming ever more difficult to isolate its production and fandom to the Japanese archipelago.” He goes on to ask, “Can we truly say that Boys’ Love is still the privilege of only Japanese fans?” (2016, 257). The volume’s authors, of course, say nothing to suggest that BL is the privilege of only Japanese fans. But neither do they say much to indicate an awareness of the transnational nature of BL. This gap can be chalked up to the limitations of their Japan-centric approach. That said, because Levi, McHarry, and Pagliassotti had already published a more cross-culturally oriented volume on BL, it may have been a better decision for the editors of this second volume not to retread the same territory, and instead present essays that give international readers insight into materials and cultural perspectives they may not be familiar with already. In the future, it would be wonderful to see a dedicated volume on BL that explores even further international perspectives—for instance, by looking not only at BL readers in Japan and/or North America, but also in East Asia, Europe, Latin America, and other emerging global fan bases.

[9] Ultimately, Boys Love Manga and Beyond does exactly what its subtitle promises in introducing readers to BL’s "history, culture, and community in Japan." Any limitations it has are largely the result of its deliberate focus on a very particular target area. While it is becoming fashionable in fan studies to write more accessible crossover volumes that appeal to both scholars and general readers or fans, this book bucks the trend. Though interdisciplinary, it is still solidly academic in approach and Japan-centered in focus. However, it contains a great deal of useful information for scholars who want to get the inside scoop on BL, including detailed accounts regarding the beginnings of the genre, nuanced discussions of key terms in Japanese, essays based on interviews with BL creators and fans, and overviews of key debates in the Japanese media. It gives insight into the growth of BL as an academic subject of study, and while it is certainly not the final word, it is a definitive work that paves the way for future studies of manga on boys who love boys, and the women (and men, and nonbinary folks!) who love them.

Works cited


