



Edited by Dominika Ciesielska, Nicolle Lamerichs, and Agata Zarzycka

Affect in Fandom

Fan Creators and Productivity

Affect in Fandom

Transmedia

This series provides a platform for cutting-edge research in the field of media studies, with a strong focus on the impact of digitization, globalization, and fan culture. The series is dedicated to publishing the highest-quality monographs (and exceptional edited collections) on the developing social, cultural, and economic practices surrounding media convergence and audience participation. The term 'media convergence' relates to the complex ways in which the production, distribution, and consumption of contemporary media are affected by digitization, while 'participatory culture' refers to the changing relationship between media producers and their audiences. Both developments have required substantial (and still ongoing) redefinitions of existing media platforms, as the rapid interactions between technological developments and socio-cultural practices continue to pose challenges as well as offer new opportunities for media scholars from a variety of academic disciplines.

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Introduction

Dominika Ciesielska, Nicolle Lamerichs, and Agata Zarzycka

Creativity, Productivity, and Affect in Fan Cultures

Fans have always been creative, as evidenced by Sherlock Holmes pastiches and early *Star Trek* magazines such as *Spockanalia*. With the rise of digital technologies, fandom grew exponentially. For example, Archive of Our Own hosts more than twelve million fan works and Fanfiction.net features 847K fics in Harry Potter fandom alone (March 2024). YouTube offers countless video essays and fan videos related to fandom, while TikTok is full of impersonations, dances, fanfiction readings, and recipes inspired by beloved stories and characters. Fandom has made a lasting imprint on mainstream digital culture, lifestyles, and ideologies.

Understanding productive consumers, or “prosumers,”¹ has always been a vital part of fan studies. In “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” originally published in 1992, John Fiske describes the unique textual productivity of fans, which allows them to produce not only their own meaning of the original work, but also create their own pieces of media.² The notion of “texts” is understood broadly within Fiske’s essay, as different forms of communication, media, and activities. Textual productivity still defines fan cultures today. From fanfiction to cosplay, fans transform existing stories in numerous ways, leading to new cultures and texts. Within these maker cultures, creators contribute with their personal stories, costumes, illustrations, and merchandise, which are deeply connected to their own identity and emotions.

The creativity of fans is no exception in today’s media landscape. Content creation is important for many users, who express themselves on various platforms through personal content. Fan content can be seen as a part of

¹ Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Morrow, 1980).

² John Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 30–49.

the wider “creator economy.” In *Rise of the Creator Economy*, Richard Florida defines it as follows:

The Creator Economy is the broader economic and social infrastructure that enables the work of Creators. It comprises the technological and economic ecosystem in which Creators do their work and engage their audiences;... the digital tools that Creators use; startup companies; and the broader infrastructure of people and companies that support Creators’ efforts to do their work and generate revenue.³

This definition highlights that content is monetized, for instance by influencers and creators themselves, but also shows that there is a wider platform economy behind this content. Even if users themselves do not make money from their activities, they contribute with their content and data to the profit of big tech companies.

In other words, fan creators contribute to a wider creative economy, both online and offline. However, fan works are set apart in their interest and purpose. Fans often circulate works for their own community. Their works are shared on digital platforms, shown at conventions, and gifted to other fans. While they could potentially monetize their activities, many are not interested in this, nor see it as a vital part of fandom. This subcultural context is highly important, but also raises discussion. How should fans deal with issues around their data and content being monetized by third parties, such as digital platforms or artificial intelligence networks? How should fans deal with social issues, such as sustainability, when they produce their own works? Textual productivity, in other words, is not disconnected from wider socio-economic questions.

Moreover, the textual productivity of fans is shaped by emotion and identity. Fans are driven by affect and can be characterized as engaged and emotional audiences. Feelings shape the identity of fans and their unique creativity. Today’s audiences respond to characters and stories in affective ways. This collection discusses affect in fandom in the context of identity, gender, politics, and characters. Fan cultures are affective spaces, driven by the emotions towards a given product, be it a narrative, a celebrity, or a sports team.⁴ Within fan studies, affect can be described as a form of reception and as a differentiating factor between other audiences. That is

3 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creator Economy* (The Creative Class Group, 2022).

4 Matt Hills, “Virtually Out There: Strategies, Tactics and Affective Spaces in On-line Fandom,” in *Technospaces: Inside the New Media*, ed. Sally Munt (London and New York: Continuum, 2001).

to say, fans are defined by their investment in a product and the intensity with which they engage with it.

These impressions can be plotted through the life course, like nodes on a “mattering map,” as discussed in Lawrence Grossberg’s seminal work on affect in fandom.⁵ These processes have also been described as “affective reception” by Nicolle Lamerichs, which traces the different processes and intensities through which fans make sense of stories and characters. This reception shows, for instance, in practices of collection, which are driven not only by emotional attachment to fandom objects, but also the desire to commemorate specific experiences and situations. Such affective reception is not stable, but evolves throughout one’s life course.⁶

The affective drive of fans is central to their activities and forms of production. Creating fanfiction, recreating a recipe from a beloved show, and collecting merchandise are all ways to engage with a media product on a deeper level. Fan works simulate or deepen the emotions towards a source text. In other words, what characterizes the textual productivity of fans is affect towards an existing text, person, object, or phenomenon. This affective reception sets this form of content creation apart from that of other makers.

The productivity of fans is at the heart of this collection, which examines their roles as creators and producers, as well as the meanings behind their works.

Fan Works and Lived Experiences

In *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington identify three waves of fan studies.⁷ The early fan studies from the 1990s were broad cultural studies of these communities. They often used ethnographic research to investigate these groups, understand their products, and identify what makes fans unique. The second wave emphasized the social and cultural hierarchy within

5 Lawrence Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House? The Affective Sensibility of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

6 Nicolle Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

7 Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, eds, *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1pwtbq2>.

fandom and often reflected on different forms of capital, taste, and status. This collection, finally, is grounded in the third wave of fan studies, which considers fandom as part of everyday life.

In other words, fandom is part of our identity and daily practices. Consumers engage with many different spaces and connect these to fandom. Think of fan cook books,⁸ which allow fans to recreate recipes from their favourite shows, or fan fashion,⁹ where fans wear apparel connected to their favourite characters. This requires an approach in fan studies that pays attention to everyday, individual experiences as well as how fandom contributes to one's identity. This collection pays special attention to productivity within individual contexts and works with the aim of better understanding the lived experience of fans.

It is important to note, however, that the role of identity in today's fan cultures is complex. For example, fans often draw from local and global repertoires in their practices. The concept of transcultural fandom emphasizes how these consumers connect different cultures, countries, communities, and objects of devotion. As Chin and Morimoto write, transcultural fandom is about crossing borders, and deeply relates to the identity of the fan. As opposed to transnationalism, the concept is "flexible enough to allow for a transnational orientation, yet leaves open the possibility of other orientations that may inform, or even drive, cross-border fandom."¹⁰

While many fan studies have focused on English-language fandom, it is important to consider different local traditions. In other words, fan studies is turning towards exploring everyday experiences in their specific cultural contexts. The authors in this collection do just that. They discuss a wide range of cultures and fan practices, which range from Russian fanfiction to Chinese message boards. Furthermore, they explore recent themes and topics in fan cultures, but also go deeper into the challenges within these spaces that result from globalization, digitalization, and mass production.

About this Collection

In this collection, we address the role that fandom has in everyday life and forms of creativity. Transformative fan practices are at the heart of this

8 CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, Julia E. Largent, and Bertha Chin, eds, *Eating Fandom: Intersections between Fans and Food Cultures* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020).

9 Elizabeth Affuso and Suzanne Scott, eds, *Sartorial Fandom: Fashion, Beauty Culture, and Identity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023).

10 Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto, "Towards a Theory of Transcultural Fandom," *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 93.

book. Typically, these practices are associated with female fans and queer fans, while male fans may have a more affirmative approach to fandom, as described by Suzanne Scott, among others.¹¹ However, the importance of affirmative approaches, which show a primary engagement with the existing canon, for instance by collecting autographs or creating wikis, is also recognized in this volume. These gendered divides in fan practices, experiences, and feelings are discussed at great length in the chapters to follow, revealing that fandom is not a monolith.

Moreover, fan productivity is embedded in social communities and values. Fan practices can actively address political issues, digitalization, and climate, among others. By exploring the role of fan cultures in our lives, authors in this collection grapple with questions such as: Who is included and excluded from these conversations and their respective communities? How do local cultures adapt content to their own social and political circumstances? How does fandom contribute to consumerism overall, as well as questions around ecological awareness? This collection explores different forms of productivity within fan culture in relation to lived experiences, emotions, cultural experiences, and social frameworks. We hope to provide an inspiring and relevant impression of fan productivity, and its role within these communities and beyond.

Part 1: Literary Production

Fan productivity is one of the key characteristics of the fan community. To be a fan is to be an active reader, viewer, or listener, who creates something related to their favourite source text. There is also a wide array of fan productions that prove how prolific fan creators may be. From individual posts on social media, through fanfiction, fanart, vidding, to cosplay, crafts, and food art, fans produce countless artefacts of fan culture that show their engagement with the source text, their emotional connection to it, and their creative potential. However, fans must not be confused with content creators. Within fandom, there are also lurkers, who enjoy being in fan spaces and consuming fan content without the need to actively contribute.

It is important to note that fans *participate* in a text, rather than simply consume it. Their participation manifests in various artefacts, which Fiske highlights when describing their textual productivity. As Fiske puts it, “this

11 Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

melding of the team or performer and the fan into a productive community minimizes differences between artist and audience and turns the text into an event, not an art object.”¹² That “event” is celebrated and experienced by many fans globally, resulting in a myriad of fan works that attest to fans’ interests and perspectives. Inspired by De Certeau’s concept of “poaching,” Henry Jenkins originally described fans as “textual poachers” who find their own meaning in art and culture, and pick and choose what is relevant to them.¹³ Those interpretations manifest themselves in many fan texts that are therefore very interesting to study from various sociological and cultural perspectives.

In this section, authors draw from different cultural contexts to better understand literary productions by fans. They consider different cultural backgrounds, media platforms, and localities. The authors illuminate the different forms of creativity involved, which ranges from collaboration and co-creation to individual expression.

In the first chapter, Dominika Ciesielska turns her attention to literary fan works by studying how *Yuri!!! on ICE* characters are re-written in a fanfic by Lucy Camui. *A Siren’s Call* is an alternate universe story that relocates original characters into a widely different setting. Their personalities and physical features are transformed by the author to adapt to the new environment, but they remain recognizable to informed fans. Existing scholarship has examined how fanfiction “files off the serial numbers” to become part of a wider literary economy, but Ciesielska shows that fanfiction can also be sold and popularized within the community, leading to new ecosystems between authors and readers.

Chapter 2, by Elizaveta Kasilova, delves into cultural allusions in *Harry Potter* fanfiction. She studies Russian fan works to identify folklore traditions, such as the “universal hero,” the “snake-like opponent,” and the “magical helper,” that the Russian fans use in their reinterpretations of the British canon text. Kasilova examines how the fans’ experiences of Russian culture accompany them in their understanding of *Harry Potter* and in the production of their own fan works. Through literary theory, Kasilova manages to show unique cultural themes in *Harry Potter* fanfiction, but also shows how archetypes still shape our understanding of fiction today.

Chapter 3 focuses on online fiction in a Chinese context. Peng Qiao studies Chinese internet literature and the communication around this genre in

12 Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” 40.

13 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

specific online fan communities. Focusing on *Ma Dao Zu Shi* fandom, he examines the online behaviour of fans and how it is shaped by external socio-economic and cultural factors.

Overall, the contributions in this section explore the literary production of fans and reveals that these are intimately shaped by cultural experiences and contexts.

Part 2: Characters and Play

Fan works are not just written texts, but can be mediated in many different ways. From costumes to illustrations, fans engage in many material and embodied practices. Digital platforms have made it easier to create and disseminate these works. Inspired by their favourite stories and characters, fans engage in digital and analogue play, from role-playing to cosplay.

Play can be creative and transformative, as noted by Salen and Zimmerman in *Rules of Play*.¹⁴ By playing, we can create new experiences, values, and practices. In his seminal work, *Homo Ludens*, philosopher Johan Huizinga claims that play is

a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious,” but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.¹⁵

The appeal of play, in other words, is its freedom. By contrast, games are more rigid. Games can include goals, rules, and winning conditions which results in a unique system.

Inspired by games and digital culture, fans create many unique works. These practices themselves are a form of *productive play*, which involves the pleasure of producing your own texts, be they art, fiction, or games.¹⁶ Game studies, in particular, explores productive play as a type of play in which players create their own products within or outside the game for

14 Katie Salen and Erik Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

15 Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1970).

16 Celia Pearce, “Productive Play: Game Culture from the Bottom Up,” *Games and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2006): 17–24.

their own enjoyment. Think about fanfiction, but also of the production of machinima, skins or levels, and modifications (“mods”). Many of these practices are expressive, but some are instrumental or practical. For example, players might design mods to make a game more manageable, or write a walkthrough to help out others.¹⁷

In other words, play is not separate from society, but can be used for creativity, sharing knowledge, and creating new social communities. Play is deeply connected to the community, gender, sustainability, the economy, and so much more. To understand these practices better, the scholars in this section draw from different fields, such as fan studies, character studies, platform studies, and game studies. Their interdisciplinary works are an example of how fan studies can relate to other fields, practices, and phenomena.

As this section also illustrates, play in fandom often involves “transmedia characters” whose stories are told across different platforms, systems, and materialities.¹⁸ For example, fans might create a costume from their favourite character in a game or deepen their interpretation of the character through a short story. Characters are often at the heart of fan culture, and the affective relationships that fans build with a franchise.

Ultimately, play has an important role in fandom. It allows fans to contribute to existing storyworlds, learn from each other, and deepen their relationships with characters. Play strengthens our social ties and communities. This section explores the role of play and games in fan culture. How do fans pay homage to their favourite characters through cosplay? How do they create relationships with playable characters (“avatars”)? As the authors in this section show, the interdisciplinary study of play is detrimental to fan studies.

Chapter 4, by Nicolle Lamerichs, discusses sustainable cosplay (“eco-cosplay”), and the crossover between fan practices and the environment. Lamerichs shows how the vibrant practice of cosplay has grown from local maker cultures into a commercial space, dependent on different platforms. This widening of commercially available materials raises concerns of sustainability, which the cosplay community is increasingly addressing and creating awareness around. Through a virtual ethnography on Instagram, Lamerichs explores how a growing number of fans pay attention to the

17 Garry Crawford, *Video Gamers* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Tanja Sihvonen, *Players Unleashed! Modding The Sims and the Culture of Gaming* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

18 Lukas Wilde and Tobias Kunz, *Transmedia Character Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2023); Joleen Blom, *Video Game Characters and Transmedia Storytelling: The Dynamic Game Character* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023).

eco-friendliness of their costumes by upcycling, thrifting, and the use of durable and green materials. Fans use cosplay to deepen their relationships to characters, but also to the world around them.

The affective relationship between fans and characters is also fundamental to the next contribution, chapter 5, by Joleen Blom. Blom critically analyses character relationships as an exploitation of fannish desire. She discusses the mechanics of dating game characters through a case study of *Genshin Impact*. In this free-to-play game, players can buy cards to receive a random character or weapon, a so-called *gacha* mechanic. In *Genshin Impact*, Characters become commodities that fans can buy, which allows designers to capitalize on fannish affect.

Chapter 6, by Agata Zarzycka, discusses the consumable heroes and characters in fanfiction and the affective relationships that writers create with them. Through the lens of biopolitics, Zarzycka tackles questions of identity, authorship, and community within fanfiction. Zarzycka applies these concepts to a close reading of *Mass Effect* fanfiction which centres around the player-character Commander Shepard. This chapter emphasizes the close affective relationships that fans build with their avatar.

Part 3: Affect and Time

This section provides insights on the emotional drive of fans and on how they nourish these feelings and memories. Affect grounds the identity of active audiences and even manifests itself as an emotional and actual ownership over the text and characters. The chapters in this section conceptualize affect on multiple levels. First and foremost, affect is deeply connected to the creation of fan works. Fandom is a form of affective reception. A product such as a fanfic is shaped by the emotions of the fan creator, and how they personalize an existing product or text.

Moreover, affect is deeply related to the ways in which fans engage with characters. Audiences develop emotions for characters, support the relationships that they are in (“shipping”), and identify with them. Different chapters in this collection address how fans explore their emotions for characters through their own fan works, such as fanfiction and cosplay. In particular genres, such as dating sims, these relationships may even be amplified and monetized in new ways. Characters are not neutral, but act as a jumping board for many different affective relationships.

Finally, affect is closely linked to temporality, memory, and archives within fandom. Fans collect objects and knowledge that is meaningful to

them, and their relationships with texts change or grow over time. Abigail De Kosnik has extensively studied the “actual” and “metaphorical” archives in fandom.¹⁹ The knowledge that fans share and archive is valuable and personal to them, but may not be the kind of knowledge that official institutes, such as libraries or museums, are interested in. De Kosnik emphasizes that fans construct “rogue archives,” which may sometimes be on the fringe of society in terms of what is legal or acceptable.

This section brings together a wide range of affective relationships and practices within fandom. In chapter 7, affect is connected to collector practices. In an autoethnographic account of fan curation, Ross Garner demonstrates how fan and academic investments can overlap. Garner curates a unique archive of dinosaur-themed items and draws from his experiences and labour. Garner scrutinizes his role as an “aca-fan archivist” with special regard to regulatory power over the production of the archive-based knowledge which is granted by such a position. He also reflects on the affective conditioning and communal impact of archival practice in the fan and academic contexts.

The next chapter in this section, chapter 8 by Matt Hills, shows how affect is linked to temporality, reception, and new experiences of time in fandom. Hills analyses a Christopher Nolan fan forum during the anticipation around the release of Nolan’s film *Tenet*. Hills links fan reception to archives and time. Reconsidering previous theorizations of fan culture’s temporal dimensions, Hills demonstrates how fan time management operates in a time of streaming and liveness, leading to a form of “fast fandom.”

Time has a different role in chapter 9, by Mélanie Bourdaa, which focuses on the role of memory in fan cultures. Bourdaa investigates different fan archives with a focus on *Battlestar Galactica* and *Westworld*. She explores the ways in which archives are central to objects of fandom, fan production, as well as fan community dynamics. Fan productivity, in other words, is linked to cultural memory and histories of fandom.

While fan culture is often associated with positive emotions, such as appreciation, irony and hate can also play a role. In chapter 10, Agnieszka Urbańczyk focuses on ironic fan practices and trolling—specifically, on shitposting. While shitposting is often associated with negative sentiments, toxic masculinity and the alt-right, she reveals it to be a broader space of play, comedy, and humour. Urbańczyk shows that female fans and queer fans also use this genre to refer to humour, including memes of their favourite pairings.

19 Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2016), 6.

Despite the fact that shitposting is often associated with negative sentiments and conservative audiences, Urbańczyk shows that it is a transformative practice at heart, even though it is not always coded as such.

Overall, affect is understood as a process in this section that develops throughout time. Affect closely relates to identity and memory in fan culture. These concepts connect to time and archives as ways of preserving beloved objects and works.

Part 4: History and Romance

Understanding the history of fan culture is essential to fully comprehend today's media culture and audiences. Contemporary fandom has developed into a wide range of different participatory cultures that take place on different platforms and channels, both online and offline. Henry Jenkins, in particular, has shown that fandom is intimately connected to the development of a mainstream participatory culture in which the industries increasingly share spaces with their audiences and spur them to become co-creators.²⁰ By historicizing reader activities, and transmediality overall, we can gain valuable insights into how fan identity has changed throughout the years.

The history of fandom runs parallel to the history of audiences and mass media. While individual admirers of art and culture have a long history and have arguably always existed in relation to fiction, the history of fan culture as an organized phenomenon is more recent.²¹ The emergence of mass literature and popular culture was crucial in shaping fandom as an institutionalized phenomenon. Genres such as romance fiction and gothic fiction drew avid readers in the nineteenth century. The work of Jane Austen, for instance, was foundational to many female readers.

As Nancy Reagin points out, fan culture slowly formalized in the early twentieth century as engaged fans began to organize and form tight relationships:

Literary fandoms, like early science fiction fan groups and the fandom that organized around Sherlock Holmes stories, are probably among the

²⁰ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

²¹ Vera Keller, "The 'Lover' and Early Modern Fandom," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 7 (2011), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/351/222>.

best known today, but fan communities coalesced around other interests as well during the early twentieth century, including music, dance, and sports.²²

The first traces of fandom as an institutionalized phenomenon can, for example, be found in the 1930s, when several literary societies for the Sherlock Holmes novels were founded.²³

Historically, the fandom of romance fiction especially stood out, as it was driven primarily by female readers and their creativity. In *Performing Jane*, Sarah Glosson writes about the historical and contemporary fandom of Jane Austen, comparing early-nineteenth-century fandom to present-day fandom.²⁴ Glosson discusses practices such as collecting and creating literary pastiche as examples of fan productivity. Early private scrapbooks, newspaper contributions and other creative works are analysed as examples of early fandom, and compared to the contributions that fans make on digital platforms today.

Such identifications of fandom practices in other realms of culture are a reminder that cultural phenomena rarely develop in a vacuum, and entanglements between them may be productive in unexpected ways. Perspectives inspired by fan cultures prove relevant, for instance, in subcultural studies²⁵ or literary scholarship focused on young adults.²⁶ The chapters in this section explore fan practices from angles that enable the recognition of their relevance both within fan cultures and their broader contexts.

The fandom of romance fiction is addressed in chapter 11, by Aldona Kobus. She explores irony, engagement, and fandom in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. In her close reading of the novel, Kobus suggests that its main character, Catherine Morland, acts as a fan prototype. The structure of the novel itself can be seen as derivative writing and an example of fandom

22 Nancy Reagin, "I'm Buffy, and You're History': Putting Fan Studies into History," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 6 (2011), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/272/200>.

23 Francesca Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006).

24 Sarah Glosson, *Performing Jane: A Cultural History of Jane Austen Fandom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020).

25 J. Patrick Williams and Elizabeth Cherry, "Related Fields," in *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2011).

26 Elizabeth Dutro and Monette C. McIver, "Imagining a Writer's Life: Extending the Connection between Readers and Books," in *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, ed. Shelby A. Wolf, Karen Coats, Patricia Enciso, and Christine A. Jenkins (New York and London: Routledge, 2010).

history. While Austen's work seems to criticize the novel craze at first sight, it comments on the anti-novel tropes which were popular at the time.

Romance and literature also play a vital role in chapter 12, by Madeleine Span. She analyses romance readers and their impact on current dynamics on the book market. By organizing reading groups with select fans, Span traces the reception of chick lit, in particular. These readers show an appreciation for the genre, but also a critical awareness of the content and its tropes. Overall, Span argues for a better understanding of fan practices as a way of innovating the book industry.

Finally, chapter 13, by Michał Mochocki, explores fan engagement in historical contexts. In it Mochocki analyses fan communities around texts that have historical settings as well as aficionados of history as such. He focuses on demonstrating the productivity of transmedia theories when applied to cultural inspirations with the past, and particularly of interpreting historical settings as storyworlds. His reasoning undeniably resonates with the archival characteristics of both participatory media culture and history as a narrative inspiration.

Conclusion

Taking a wider look at fan productivity than has been common in media and fan studies, this volume explores different fan practices. It also addresses how fans curate these works and create memories around them through the construction of multiple kinds of archives. The authors in this collection examine the textuality of fan works as well as their materiality, for instance, by examining merchandise or cosplay. Using the creativity of fans as a starting point, these studies foreground agency and the participatory nature of fandom. Furthermore, different concepts are highlighted throughout this book, such as affect, archives, characters, and sustainability, to show the diversity and investment of modern fans.

The collection also stands out in its approaches, which are representative for contemporary fan studies. From close reading to participant observation and auto-ethnography, the contributors to this volume apply different tools and methods to gather deep data on fandom. With its international contributors and studies, this collection offers a diverse exploration of contemporary fan practices. The book seeks to inspire and further new forms of scholarship on fandom, the creator economy, and modern audiences. Overall, we hope that this collection forms a valuable resource for aca-fans, scholars from different fields, and fans themselves.

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Part 1

Literary Production

1. *Yuri!!! on ICE* Fanfiction: Canon and Character-Building in Alternate Universes

Dominika Ciesielska

Abstract: This chapter examines how alternate universe (AU) stories employ canonical texts to tell new stories. Through a close-reading of Lucy Camui's *A Siren's Call*, a *Yuri!!! on ICE* fanfic, this study sheds new light on how affect and characters are shared within fan communities. This particular AU fanfic changes many elements of the original into a fantasy genre, but retains key characteristics of the original of the original, specifically related to the characters. What stays almost unchanged is the core of characters' personalities and the dynamics of the relations between them. This chapter illustrates how fans put beloved characters into a fundamentally different environment without compromising their recognizable personalities. Overall, this study show how alternate universe is an opportunity for fans to explore further the characters they had grown to love already in canon.

Keywords: affect, world-building, fanfiction, adaptation

Introduction

Fanfiction comes in all shapes and sizes, and its sheer range is impressive. As gingersincardiff puts it in one of their Tumblr posts, "it literally caters for [the reader's] every need."¹ There is a huge number of vastly different tropes, genres, and styles, even among works of a single fandom, but there

¹ gingersincardiff, "I Fucking Love...", Tumblr, accessed September 24, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131022224834/https://gingersincardiff.tumblr.com/post/50931784928>.

is also something that links them—in the world of fanfiction characters from the source text may travel through periods and settings, plots and genres, changing physically and mentally, but the core of their selves is still easy to recognize.

This chapter focuses on alternative universes specifically as a genre, where fans depart from the canonical events or world provided in the original text. AU is not necessarily a place; it is a set of rules the world follows, whether it concerns how it is built or the creatures living in it. AUs can be borrowed from another work (e.g., Hogwarts AU placing new characters in the world from J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*), connect a story to the real world and historical periods (e.g., Modern AU, Medieval AU), or follow a distinct trope recognizable for fanfiction readers (e.g., Coffee Shop AU, Soulmate AU, Vampire AU).

World-building is a vital part of creating an alternate universe as well, whether it draws from another work of art (a crossover) or not. According to Natalia Samutina, for fanfiction authors it is of utmost importance to build an alternative universe in a way that leaves the characters recognizable and canonical. Samutina writes: "Sometimes very inventive and even phantasmagoric in relation to world-building and sometimes plain and clumsy, crossovers are in any case built primarily on characters and sealed with characters."² It is the heroes and villains of these stories that are transported through a multitude of universes in fanfiction, undergoing various changes that, however invasive, do not change their core.

In this chapter, I examine Lucy Camui's *A Siren's Call, a Yuri!!! on ICE*³ fanfic, to explore how an alternate universe (AU) story employs canon to tell a new tale. I argue that within AU, key characteristics of the original are maintained, most specifically the characters. A key factor in this fan writing is affect and character. Despite grand transformations fans do on the canon material, especially in AUs, what stays almost unchanged is the core of characters' personalities and the dynamics of the relations between them. *A Siren's Call, a Yuri!!! on ICE* fanfic puts existing characters into a fundamentally different environment without compromising their recognizable personalities.

Overall, I show that alternate universe is an opportunity for fans to explore further the characters that they had grown to love already in canon.

2 Natalia Samutina, "Fan Fiction as World-Building: Transformative Reception in Crossover Writing," *Continuum* 30, no. 4 (2016): 445, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1141863>.

3 Mitsurō Kubo and Sayo Yamamoto, *Yuri!!! on ICE*, 2016.

Variety and Adaptation

Fanfiction allows the readers to repeat or prolong the contact with the characters and the story in a similar way that official adaptations do. Linda Hutcheon argues that they bring pleasure by providing a familiarity with just enough novelty to be exciting. That is also how popularity is gained by retellings of a story of a beloved character such as Batman, as studied by Will Brooker. He examines how Batman is presented in many narratives across various media and notices that in the audience's view the superhero is an amalgamation of all of these stories—a brand rather than a person. It makes Batman stories easy to market; every new one is something that the audience already knows to an extent, but welcomes a fresh perspective.⁴ In Hutcheon's words: "Like ritual, this kind of repetition brings comfort, a fuller understanding, and the confidence that comes with the sense of knowing what is about to happen next,"⁵ while also putting it in a new light—"the real comfort lies in the simple act of almost but not quite repeating, in the revisiting of a theme with variations."⁶

To adapt is not to copy the original story, but to retell it in a new way, which could even involve using a different medium, different time, culture, or language. Most importantly, a story is retold from the perspective of the adaptor, who focuses on the elements of the story that are most meaningful to them and in a way that they understand it. Similarly, to write a fanfic is to show the parts of the source text that are meaningful to the fan author and in a way they understand it. Hutcheon rightfully points out that adaptation is not the same as fanfiction—adaptations aim to tell the same story again, while fanfiction's goal is to prolong the contact with the narrative by extending it.⁷ I would add that fanfiction is not a tool to recreate the original story; rather, it allows a fan to pick whatever they want from the source material and use it in a new way without necessarily having to care about preserving its message or original atmosphere.

Nevertheless, adapting and writing fanfiction are processes that have a lot in common. They both rely on taking something that already exists and using it to create something new in a way that shows the adaptor's or writer's understanding of the source text. In other words, they are both processes

4 See Will Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012).

5 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 114.

6 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 115.

7 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 9.

of “creative reinterpretation and palimpsestic intertextuality.”⁸ Rewriting is also something that shows an entrepreneurial kind of creativity. For some fans, providing unique works based on the source text “can be regarded the human capital of a market which has a high demand for novelty,”⁹ as noted by Sophie Einwächter in her study on fan marketing. Fans in their offers for other fans make use of their attachment to the original story.

The repetition in fanfiction does not come from repeating the original story, but it is abundant regardless; with how important shipping is in fanfiction, one could argue that all fanfics about a pairing are the same love story told over and over again. There are also many motifs and tropes that are used across all fandoms, as well as popular alternate universes. Fan authors, being outside of any institutional bounds of publishing, have an unparalleled freedom in choosing and transforming parts of the original story they want to use. Hutcheon says that the process of adaptation is akin to evolution, “the biological process by which something is fitted to a given environment.”¹⁰

In AU fanfiction, parts of a story are fitted to a new environment and the rules of this universe. Whether in adaptation or fanfiction, as Hutcheon puts it,

[s]tories do get retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments; like genes, they adapt to those new environments by virtue of mutation—in their “offspring” or their adaptations. And the fittest do more than survive; they flourish.¹¹

In this conceptualization, she references Richard Dawkins’ well-known concept of memes. Despite the sometimes complicated ways in which the original story is adapted to those new environments, at the centre of all the transformations are the characters themselves. They are “crucial to the rhetorical and aesthetic effects of both narrative and performance texts because they engage receivers’ imaginations through what he calls recognition, alignment, and allegiance,”¹² as Hutcheon points out,

8 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 22.

9 Sophie G. Einwächter, “Fantastic Fan Marketing—Fantasy Fan Online-Communities and Conventions as Markets of Cultural Goods,” in *Media Economies: Perspectives on American Cultural Practices*, ed. Marcel Hartwig, Evelyne Keitel, and Gunter Süß (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014), 191.

10 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 31.

11 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 32.

12 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 11.

referencing Murray Smith. It is the characters that catch the audience's attention strongly enough to make them want to prolong the contact with the story in fanfiction.

It is no surprise, then, that Jeff Gerke, the author of a writer's manual *Plot versus Character*,¹³ names building a memorable character as the vital part of creating a story. According to him, the first step to create a memorable character is to choose their core personality and then use it as a base to add dimension to the character. This creative process is not, however, "just layering elements on top of this core,"¹⁴ it is "tracking how this core temperament expresses itself through the ensuing layers."¹⁵ According to Gerke's advice, the author needs to create the baseline for the character's personality by using, for example, the help of Myers–Briggs personality types.¹⁶ Then the author can add the character's looks, background, style, and manners, making sure that they grow out of the core and are compatible with it. It is important, as well, to make sure there is an element of likability or relatability to engage the reader, "make her care about [the hero]."¹⁷ Every character should also have some "major events" in their lives that have shaped them, for example, a death of their parent, a tragic accident, an inherited royal title, etc.

In Gerke's opinion, a character that is created in this way can be the centre of an engaging narrative, a good book. Starting a narrative from the creation of the protagonist means that the plot comes later and results from the character's personal story. Of course, not every creator follows Gerke's advice and not all of them can, as it is aimed at literary characters. His description of the character-creation process is, however, useful, to understand and point out what appeals to the fans of any type of media content who follow their favourite characters in fanfiction. If an event from a character's life is repeated in many fanfics, it may be identified as what Gerke calls a major event that shapes the character in the audience's minds and that draws their attention.

13 Jeff Gerke, *Plot versus Character: A Balanced Approach to Writing Great Fiction* (London: Penguin, 2010).

14 Gerke, *Plot versus Character*, 34.

15 Gerke, *Plot versus Character*, 34.

16 Katharine Cook Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers constructed a questionnaire that allows one to categorize people's personalities into sixteen types on the axes of introvert–extrovert, sense–intuition, thinking–feeling, and judging–perceiving. Expressed in four letters, corresponding to the axes markers, personality types are a rather popular tool to describe oneself.

17 Gerke, *Plot versus Character*, 61.

Conceptualizing Alternate Universes

What can be observed in fanfiction is the core personality of the source text's character being used to tell a myriad of different stories. Their variety is the most striking in alternate universes, when a character is found in a fictional world different from the original setting. AU can take place in many diverse settings and lead to interesting cross-overs of genres. There is a plethora of AUs commonly used by fanfic authors in many fandoms. Tumblr user phasered notices:

My favorite thing about fanfiction is the sheer range of it. How like sometimes the tag is like “alternate universe—they're werewolf space pirates in charge of stopping their planet from being blown up by ancient immortal aliens from another realm” and sometimes it's “alternate universe—chefs.”¹⁸

Some AUs are just descriptions of how the canon has been transformed in the given fanfic (for example, a very vague “alternate universe—canon divergence”), others refer to specific universes that are shared by fanfics from many fandoms. One of them is Coffee Shop AU, which Samantha Puc calls “a pillar of a fanfiction community.”¹⁹ Its only rule is that the fanfic plot has to take place in a coffee shop, but fan writers have created a whole genre from it—Coffee Shop AU is usually a romance in which a barista and a patron meet in a café, fall in love, and live happily ever after. Using a format is, on the one hand, restricting for the writer, because they have to follow the widely expected script. On the other hand, it is an opportunity to test the source characters. Authors can see how they would behave in new circumstances or, in Hutcheon's words, how they would adapt to a new environment.

As Deborah Kaplan notices, “rewriting characters for a work of fanfiction is an interpretative act ... in which the text offers one possible understanding of characterization.”²⁰ A creative dialogue between the text of the fanfic and

18 phasered, “My Favourite Thing...,” *DO GOOD, DIE GREAT* (blog), Tumblr, accessed January 9, 2022, <https://phasered.tumblr.com/post/160026673492>.

19 Samantha Puc, “Please, Please, Please Give Me More Coffee Shop AUs,” *The Mary Sue* (blog), July 30, 2018, accessed September 30, 2020, <https://www.themarysue.com/more-coffee-shop-aus-pls/>.

20 Deborah Kaplan, “Construction of Fan Fiction Character through Narrative,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), 136.

the source text allows the fan author to explore the characters in unlimited possible ways: “Characters who were created and who exist outside the fan fiction texts ... become available for complex play and re-creation.”²¹ Anne Kustritz examines how Fairy Tale AU allows *Game of Thrones*’ fans to comfort the battered characters of the cruel world designed by George R. R. Martin. She points out that the combination of the realism of HBO’s adaptation and the wondrousness of fairy tales “may uncover poetic and political possibilities unavailable to either genre in isolation.”²² The AU becomes a tool of critical thought about the ties between TV realism and violence, and also about the quality of life for the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series characters.

In other words, different AUs offer different opportunities and sets of restrictions. Royalty AU can take away mobile phones, but replaces them with gowns and crowns; High School AU requires teenage drama; Superhero AUs show characters struggling with their new superpowers. What these different genres all have in common is that they focus on the source text’s characters and their relationships, and can even deepen them in these new configurations.²³

***Yuri!!! on ICE* Fanfiction**

There is a virtually infinite number of possibilities when it comes to the worlds that fictional characters are taken into by fanfiction authors, yet they still remain identifiable as themselves, regardless of how little they share with the original story. In fanfiction a superhero can become a florist, an old woman can turn into a young boy, and an alien ship can be transformed into a modern high school. Characters can switch names, ages, genders, professions, and species between stories, but they maintain their core personalities throughout. These core characteristics make them who they are and who the audience has connected with in the first place. I want to illustrate that mechanism with the example of *A Siren’s Call*,²⁴ a *Yuri!!! on*

21 Kaplan, “Construction of Fan Fiction Character,” 151.

22 Anne Kustritz, “‘They All Lived Happily Ever After. Obviously.’: Realism and Utopia in *Game of Thrones*-Based Alternate Universe Fairy Tale Fan Fiction,” *Humanities* 5, no. 2 (2016): 43, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h5020043>.

23 See Dominika Ciesielska, “Ta sama historia w innej rzeczywistości—wykorzystanie Alternate Universes w fan fiction,” in *Retelling: strategie przestrzenne*, ed. Dominika Ciesielska, Magdalena Kozyra, and Aleksandra Łozińska (Kraków: WIELE KROPEK, 2019), <https://www.wiele-kropek.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/retelling-strategieprzestrzenne.pdf>.

24 Lucy Camui, *A Siren’s Call* (self-published, 2018).

ICE fanfic that takes the characters from an ice skating show and puts them onto a pirate ship.

Yuri!!! on ICE (YoI) is an anime created by Sayo Yamamoto and Mitsurō Kubo and produced by MAPPA studio. It aired from October to December 2016 and quickly gained a devoted group of fans who proved to be very prolific writers. In centrumlumina's annual collation of most popular pairings (according to the number of fanfics on AO3²⁵), the main ship from this fandom, Victuuri (Victor and Yuuri), was included in top twenty of 2017,²⁶ 2019,²⁷ 2020,²⁸ and 2021.²⁹ One of those Victuuri fanfics is *A Siren's Call* by Lucy Camui, first published as a series of ficlets on their Tumblr³⁰ under the tag #siren au, then under the title *A Siren's Call: Collection* on AO3³¹ and in 2018 self-published as a book.³² In 2019 the sequel, *A Siren's Court*, started being published on AO3³³ and in 2020 it came out as a book.³⁴ Lucy's stories were accompanied by Crimson Chains' art³⁵ and both of their names appear on the covers of *A Siren's Call* and *A Siren's Court*.

Yuri!!! on ICE is a story of figure skaters with two of them as a main focus: Katsuki Yuuri and Victor Nikiforov.³⁶ At the age of twenty-four, Yuuri is one of the best Japanese skaters, but he struggles with anxiety and low self-esteem,

25 Archive of Our Own (AO3) is one of the largest online fanfiction archives; it was created and is run by fans themselves: accessed September 12, 2022, <https://archiveofourown.org/>.

26 centrumlumina, "AO3 Ship Stats 2017," *The Slow Dance of the Infinite Stars* (blog), Tumblr, accessed September 24, 2021, <https://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/163750676579/nw-presenting-the-fifth-annual-a03-ship-stats-top>.

27 centrumlumina, "AO3 Ship Stats 2019," *The Slow Dance of the Infinite Stars* (blog), Tumblr, accessed September 24, 2021, <https://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/186516381034/after-a-year-away-i-can-now-present-the-2019-a03>.

28 centrumlumina, "AO3 Ship Stats 2020," *The Slow Dance of the Infinite Stars* (blog), Tumblr, accessed September 24, 2021, <https://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/625370676425015296/welcome-to-the-2020-a03-ship-stats-top-100-this>.

29 centreoftheselights, "AO3 Ship Stats 2021," Archive of Our Own, accessed September 24, 2021, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/32940190/chapters/81752386>.

30 lucycamui, "Lucy's," Tumblr, accessed September 24, 2021, <https://lucycamui.tumblr.com/>.

31 lucycamui, *Siren's Call: A Collection*, Archive of Our Own, accessed September 24, 2021, https://archiveofourown.org/works/12657330?view_full_work=true.

32 Camui, *A Siren's Call*.

33 lucycamui, *A Siren's Court*, Archive of Our Own, accessed September 25, 2021, https://archiveofourown.org/works/19734235?view_full_work=true.

34 Lucy Camui, *A Siren's Court* (self-published, 2020).

35 crimson-chains, "ALL THE ARTS," Tumblr, accessed September 25, 2021, <https://crimson-chains.tumblr.com/>.

36 The spelling of characters' names differs in fanfics as original Japanese has been adapted to various languages and alphabets in different ways. Throughout this chapter I use spelling consistent with Lucy Camui's.

especially after his poor performance at the ISU Grand Prix Final in Sochi. He might even be considering retirement if it was not for the Russian multiple gold medalist, Victor. This figure-skating superstar comes to the Katsukis' hot spring venue in a small town of Hasetsu to be Yuuri's coach. At first Yuuri is shocked when his childhood idol arrives in his hometown, but he is determined to use this opportunity to improve. This also involves a competition with fifteen-year-old Yuri Plisetsky, who has followed his teammate Victor from Russia to learn from him. Both students make great progress throughout the series as we see them training and competing, and also evolving outside of the rink, growing in their personal lives. In addition to being a student and a coach, Yuuri and Victor become friends and then a romantic couple.

A Siren's Call at first seems to be a completely different narrative—it is about an infamous pirate captain, Victor Nikiforov, who saves the life of a natural enemy of every seaman, a deadly siren. The siren happens to be a gorgeous Yuuri Katsuki, who, against his instincts, makes friends with humans on the pirate ship. However, despite the different setting, different species of the characters and different plot, the two stories—skaters and pirates—maintain some key characteristics. As I will explain, they prove a “family” resemblance between genres, even while disregarding the names of the characters or places.

The original story takes place in a reality resembling the modern real world and the plot focuses on ice skating training and competitions. *A Siren's Call* puts the familiar names into a seventeenth-century-like world where a pirate and a siren join forces to save the siren kind from some greedy humans while running away from the Queen. Those two unlike stories are linked by the same characters and as we, the readers, follow the different storylines, we can see that both narratives relate to the characters in different, but still authentic, ways.

In the anime Victor is a national treasure. He has been winning world competitions since he was a child and he is beautiful and talented—in many ways he is on top of the world. However, he feels lonely and uninspired, and he does not hesitate to drop everything and move across the world in pursuit of the inspiration that he has found in Yuuri, who becomes his soulmate. Pirate!Victor³⁷ used to be the Queen's protégé, a brilliant young navy soldier, and a talented strategist. He could have had an illustrious career, but he decided his love for the sea was too great to be sacrificed for a position of an officer that

37 I am using a format with the exclamation point in the middle that is commonly used in fanfiction to refer to different incarnations of characters. “Pirate!Victor” refers to an AU in which the character of Victor is a pirate instead of canonically being an ice skater.

required more courtroom pleasantries than sailing. He dropped everything that he had worked so hard for and became a captain on a pirate ship.

For me, as a fan of the anime, the motif of being a pirate highlighted the struggle that Victor faced in his career. Lucy Camui's detailed description of Victor's longing for sailing that overcame successes in the navy gave me a deeper understanding of the original Victor's love for skating and how it was stifled by the requirements of the sport at his level. Pirate!Victor has saved Yuuri's life and befriended the deadly creature to whom he eventually gets married. In both worlds Victor is successful and talented, but no longer happy with what he does. He is famous and admired, kind and charming. In both he is beautiful and has silver hair and blue eyes. In both Yakov is his father figure and Chris is his friend. In both he loves Yuuri. Despite the changing surroundings and costumes, the core personality of Victor remains Victor.

In the canon Yuuri is incredibly talented and successful, but riddled with doubt and anxiety. He is also very determined not to let that stop him from working to win the Olympic gold. He has the support of his friends and family back in Japan. He seems shy, but on an occasion when he had too much champagne at a banquet, he wooed everyone (and especially Victor) with his dancing, both on the dance floor and on a pole.

Siren!Yuuri is a skilled ship wrecker, but he does let his nerves get the better of him from time to time—his first hunt ended up with him being paralysed with stress and unable to use his magic voice. Adapting skating into ship wrecking augments how important it is for Yuuri to overcome his anxiety to be successful in what he does. While skating is merely a hobby for many people, ship wrecking can be interpreted as a life or death situation, so it shows how important it is to be excellent at it. Within the fanfic, ship wrecking is also portrayed as a natural need for sirens that Yuuri learns to master despite his mental struggles. He puts a lot of work into learning how to overcome this in order to sink as many ships as possible.

Yuuri is a loner in the fanfic, like many sirens, but has family and friends that he can always count on. On the pirate ship he has learnt to drink with the crew, but he is not good at holding his liquor. He loves dancing and it is the only thing that convinces him to go with Victor to crowded taverns in port towns. However, he prefers to dance with Victor when they are alone, which is shown in the book in the mating dance scene. In both worlds Yuuri has both talent and insecurities; he is very determined, loyal, and he loves his family, friends, and Victor. Similar parallels work also for background characters in both worlds: Chris Giacometti is sexy and flirty, Phichit Chulanot likes to stand out, Yakov is stern and grumpy, Yukko cares about her children, Kenjiro Minami is Yuuri's biggest fan, and the list goes on.

In their story Lucy Camui took *Yuri!!! on ICE* characters and put them into completely new roles, but they stayed mostly the same people that we as fans fell in love with in the first place and we get to learn more about them when they are put in the new circumstances. Writing a new story about characters that come from another one is a way of creating an interpretation embodied in a fanfic text. According to Kaplan, “[n]arrative techniques allow the fan fiction to develop an interpretation of character both wholly within its own text and in dialogue with the extratextual knowledge of the source text and the fanon accessible to the reader”³⁸—fanfic characters have personalities and life stories of their own, but they also palimpsestously carry those from the original narrative. It is also a way of prolonging the contact with the characters that usually disappear from the person’s life when they finish the story. As Tumblr user floating-babies-in-the-dark puts it:

The only thing I hate about reading is I get so attached to the characters. And after I finish the book, that’s it. I will never learn anymore about them or their life or what they ate for breakfast. No matter how many times I reread the book, I will always only know the same amount. And it saddens me. Finishing a book means losing people close to you.³⁹

As Ien Ang points out in her analysis of the source of pleasure in watching the soap opera *Dallas*, “in a fictional text like the television serial the characters are central”⁴⁰ and their genuineness is of the utmost importance for the viewer’s involvement. If seen as realistic, a character

appears for the viewer as a person existing independently of the narrative situations shown in the serial. The character becomes a person appearing to lead an autonomous life outside of the fiction of the serial; she or he becomes a person of flesh and blood, one of us.⁴¹

As such, it is no surprise that the viewer might miss them when the show ends and, as floating-babies-in-the-dark explained, grieves parting with them.

38 Kaplan, “Construction of Fan Fiction Character,” 151.

39 floating-babies-in-the-dark, “The Only Thing....,” *You Think You’ve Got Me Figured Out* (blog), Tumblr, accessed January 6, 2022, <https://floating-babies-in-the-dark.tumblr.com/post/37450892909/the-only-thing-i-hate-about-reading-is-i-get-so>.

40 Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, trans. Della Couling (New York: Methuen, 2005), 29.

41 Ang, *Watching Dallas*, 30.

For many viewers fanfiction is an answer to that problem of closure, providing not only a continued contact with the characters, but also a deeper understanding of them. In each fan story characters are given new experiences that shape them, similarly to serial figures, as examined by Ruth Mayer and Shane Denson. They note that “serial figures are shaped and reshaped through the repetitions, revisions, and reboots of their stories”⁴² and each iteration gives them additional dimension. Unlike serial figures, however, characters in fanfiction are not rewritten because they are malleable, “marked by their openness and indeterminacy”⁴³—they are chosen because of the initial interest and emotional connection the reader or viewer feels.

Stories like *A Siren's Call* give us, the audience, the opportunity to stay with the characters after the show ends and expand our understanding of them. A fanfic can start with analysing the source material, but alternate universes create an infinite number of “what if?” scenarios that challenge the fanfic author’s knowledge of the character. For example, we know what Yuuri will do when he flubs his competition performance because that is what happens in the anime. But how would he behave if he was not even human? What would he do if he was a creature feeding on humans and fell in love with his potential prey? How would he approach a battle between species that he inadvertently caused? Both Lucy Camui and their readers have an opportunity to answer those questions.

Fanfiction scholar Samutina points out that at the base of crossovers is fans’ love for “testing human capabilities” and exploring the characters’ personal and interpersonal developments.⁴⁴ An AU such as the *Siren* AU is a great tool for character development—translating Victor’s decision to take a break from skating into quitting the Queen’s navy may give another dimension to his struggles for finding his freedom. However different the circumstances are, in both cases Victor is the same person that faces similar challenges, but each story puts them in a unique perspective. Samutina argues that “[c]ontemporary communities of imagination not only receive and experience, but also actively transform and co-create imaginary worlds and live their lives in these worlds with great intensity, constantly expanding the spheres of their interests.”⁴⁵

42 Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer, “Border Crossings: Serial Figures and the Evolution of Media,” *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* 7, no. 2 (2018): 68, <https://doi.org/10.25969/MEDIAREP/3460>.

43 Denson and Mayer, “Border Crossings,” 74.

44 Samutina, “Fan Fiction as World-Building,” 445.

45 Samutina, “Fan Fiction as World-Building,” 448.

Fanfiction is thus a way of experiencing a work of art in a creative, productive way. In AUs writers explore not only world-building possibilities, but also how they understand characters, which can be done either by drawing strictly from the canon or diverging from it as far as they see fit.

Character-Shaping Events

In *A Siren's Call* one can notice some parts of the plot that have been translated from the anime into a new story. They are not necessarily the key events that shaped the original story, but the ones that shaped the characters or relationships between them, becoming the major events that, as Gerke argues, are a part of characters' core personalities. I have already mentioned some of the events that shaped Victor and Yuuri both in the anime and in Lucy Camui's book, but there are also a few that are important for both of them together. In my experience, a single viewing or reading of the source text is not enough to identify such events. The best way to recognize the parts of the original story that made the biggest impact on the productive audience is to simply read a lot of fanfics and see what is repeated. Sometimes an event that I have barely noticed in the source text is cited so many times and in so many different ways in fanfiction that I, as a fan reader, learn it by heart and I am convinced to treat it as something that shapes the characters that I love.

Hutcheon, referencing Robert Stam, argues that an adaptation is inherently "palimpsestuous," as it requires the reader or viewer to engage with both the source text and the adapted version of it at the same time:

For the reader, spectator, or listener, adaptation *as adaptation* is unavoidably a kind of intertextuality *if the receiver is acquainted with the adapted text*. It is an ongoing dialogical process, as Mikhail Bakhtin would have said, in which we compare the work we already know with the one we are experiencing.⁴⁶

This dialogical process (which describes reading a fanfic in the same way as it does an adaptation), as Hutcheon says, "make(s) for permanent change."⁴⁷ After I have read hundreds of fanfics that highlight Victor's signature smirk, I can no longer remember whether I had noticed it while watching the anime

⁴⁶ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 21, original italics.

⁴⁷ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 29.

for the first time, but because it was made important to me, I can clearly recall a specific frame where that smirk appears and what it looks like. What I have read makes it impossible for me to watch the original anime with the same fresh eyes; I am bound to see the characters through the fanfiction lens. As easy as it is for me as a fan to name those vital elements of the original story, it might be a challenge to determine what makes them that important for the fan authors.

Some of the motifs are understandable in the context of the original story. Yuuri's anxiety, for example, is hard to miss in the anime and it is one of his key characteristics. There are others that may baffle a non-fan, but I would argue that they play the same role in shaping the characters or relationships between them and that is how they become major events. Yuuri touching the top of Victor's head might not be worthy of attention to some, but, as Tumblr user konohasfox argues, it was a moment that defined their relationship, because it signified a start of destroying the pedestal that Yuuri had put Victor on, which allowed them to get closer as friends and then a romantic couple.⁴⁸ Thus, the simple touch became important enough to inspire stories like darkdarla's *Silverlocks*,⁴⁹ which centres around Victor's alleged baldness (the referenced reason for Yuuri's touch). There are a few of such major events that Lucy Camui borrows from the anime and uses in *A Siren's Call*.

In the anime Yuuri is worried that Victor coaching him is something that benefits only himself and prevents Victor from growing his career. Worried that he is taking Victor's talent away from the public, Yuuri says "Let's end this."⁵⁰ It is disputed in fandom whether he refers to their professional relationship or the personal one, but the ominous words appear in many Victuuri fanfics, including *A Siren's Call*. After the ship is attacked by people pursuing Yuuri and Victor is shot in the ensuing battle, Yuuri thinks that he was selfish to be with Victor and that being with him puts Victor's life in danger, so "it [is] his only choice to protect his love"⁵¹ by ending their relationship. In both cases Victor refuses and soon after they get engaged, although, as some viewers argue, the act of exchanging rings in the anime does not explicitly promise marriage. However, Lucy Camui portrays this promise very clearly: "Human or siren, we have the same

48 konohasfox, "Yuri on Ice and Pedestals," Tumblr, accessed January 16, 2023, <https://www.tumblr.com/konohasfox/636607983143485440/yuri-on-ice-and-pedestals>.

49 darkdarla, "Silverlocks," Archive of Our Own, accessed January 17, 2023, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/10617231/chapters/23480751>.

50 Mitsurō Kubo and Sayo Yamamoto, ep. 11: "Gotta Supercharge It! Pre-Grand Prix Final Special!," *Yuri!!! on ICE*, December 9, 2016.

51 Camui, *A Siren's Call*, 253.

concept in our cultures. Of loving someone so much that you want to be with them, forever.... Will you stay and fight by my side forever?"⁵² asks Victor, and Yuuri replies, "Till death do us part."⁵³

This moment is very significant for their relationship, because it makes both of them re-evaluate what they want and how they feel about each other. The book emphasizes this moment even more clearly than the anime and shows how it eventually solidifies their relationship. It is a major event not only for Victor and Yuuri, but also for the fans. In the anime this scene plays at the very end of the penultimate episode, so there was a week in 2016 when the *Yuri!!! on ICE* fandom talked about nothing else, expressing an abundance of anxiety, heartbreak, hope, and excitement.

Another scene that Lucy Camui translated into the *Siren* AU is Victor cutting his hair short after having it very long for years as a boy. It may not seem very important, but a lot of fans have theories about what it could have meant to him—whether it was a practical move,⁵⁴ an act of rebellion,⁵⁵ or a sign of losing his naivety.⁵⁶ In *A Siren's Call* it is an accident—Victor loses his long braid in a battle, cut by an enemy's sword. It is a loss mourned by Yuuri, but it does not seem as significant as some theories want it to be in the original story—yet, the scene takes place and is recognizable to the readers.

In the anime Victor is Russian and Yuuri is Japanese, so there are bound to be differences in their understanding of some social aspects that have been shaped by different cultures. In *A Siren's Call* they belong to different species and the chance for a misunderstanding is even bigger. When Yuuri starts gifting Victor rocks, as is a custom among birds and sirens, Victor does not appreciate the gesture and only after consulting a bird expert, Minami, does he realize what it means, because "[t]he difference between their cultures and their habits was not always easy to pinpoint. Victor had thought Yuuri had picked up a new hobby. Yuuri had thought Victor was rejecting his gifts."⁵⁷ They both have to learn how to communicate and how to recognize when to challenge their assumptions. *A Siren's Call* thus

52 Camui, *A Siren's Call*, 255.

53 Camui, *A Siren's Call*, 255.

54 spicecapadespresentedbybyps, "Honestly, Anon, Everyone....," *SpiceCapadesPresentedbyPS* (blog), Tumblr, accessed January 8, 2022, <https://spicecapadespresentedbybyps.tumblr.com/post/163642324323/why-do-u-think-viktor-cut-his-hair-alsodid-u>.

55 bushichan, "Why Did Viktor Cut His Hair?," *Snekduh* (blog), Tumblr, accessed January 8, 2022, <https://bushichan.tumblr.com/post/153683870482/why-did-viktor-cut-his-hair>.

56 theshinycrackerjack, "What Broke Victor's Heart?," *Around and around the Merry-go-round* (blog), Tumblr, accessed January 8, 2022, <https://theshinycrackerjack.tumblr.com/post/153691095745/what-broke-victors-heart/amp>.

57 Camui, *A Siren's Call*, 131.

deepens an important theme that already emerged in the multicultural environment of the anime. For me as a reader, the rock bringing inspires wondering about what Japanese customs could confuse Victor and vice versa. The cultural differences which already are implicit in the anime are thus augmented even further in this AU fanfic.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this chapter, the *Yuri!!! on ICE* characters retain their core personalities in fanfiction, but, what is more, the relationships between them are also consistent with the source text—friends, lovers, enemies, families remain in the same relation dynamics even if the names for those relations are different. Like serial figures, fanfiction characters “jump from medium to medium, they adapt to new conditions and make them their own, they mutate, they spread, but still they remain discernable as themselves.”⁵⁸

Among all the adaptations to the AU, the main relationship between Victor and Yuuri remains one built on love. The latter similarity between both texts is not, however, something obvious—fanfiction is known for favouring different romantic relationships than the canon. As I argued elsewhere,⁵⁹ it can lead to conflicts, but it also shows that characters are the centre of fannish affect. Shipping is also an expression of some fans’ interpretation of the source material—an understanding of a character that is so solidified in the ship form that it carries through a plethora of AUs.

A different setting challenges that interpretation in the most productive way, giving it an opportunity to evolve and get stronger. Using an AU allows fanfic writers to explore ideas and options that are not available within the original setting, but still close to the core personalities of the original characters. It is precisely the characters that make the audience emotionally invested in seeking a meaning in the text.

A Siren’s Call is an example of a story that shows characters of a work of art in a completely different setting, while retaining the core of their personalities from the source text. Victor and Yuuri from *Yuri!!! on ICE* have been taken out of the original context and put into new circumstances of a *Siren* AU, which allowed the author of the story, as well as the audience, to

58 Denson and Mayer, “Border Crossings,” 75.

59 Dominika Ciesielska and Maria Rutkowska, “Między interpretacją a moralnością. Antyshiperzy we współczesnym fandomie medialnym,” *Literatura Ludowa: Journal of Folklore and Popular Culture* 65, no. 2 (2021): 53–68, <https://doi.org/10.12775/ll.2.2021.004>.

explore their personalities further. The affective relationship between the viewers and the characters saves the latter from changing into someone else. Their core personalities, relations with others, and major events from their lives are put in a different form required by the setting.

However, regardless of that setting, the characters remain ones that the audience fell in love with and wanted to stay with beyond the original world that they were created in.

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About the Author

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2. Reinterpreting Archetypes in Russian *Harry Potter* Fanfiction

Elizaveta Kasilova

Abstract: This chapter analyzes how Russian fans understand cultural allusions in the *Harry Potter* series, and how they interpret these in their own fanfiction. The chapter explores the folklore traditions in fan texts and their related archetypes in line with Joseph Campbell's theory of "the hero's journey." As the research shows, the "universal hero" archetype is transformed in fanfics into the set of features called "heroism," inherent for Harry Potter as a character. The chapter also reflects on the archetype of Voldemort as the snake-like opponent, as well as Albus Dumbledore as the "magical helper." Notably, Dumbledore has been understood through the lens of "protest interpretation" in Russian fandom. Ultimately, folklore theory helps us understand fanfiction and its characters in new ways.

Keywords: fanfiction, folklore, hero, villain, helper

While fanfiction is arguably a global phenomenon, fans themselves come from different local traditions of reading and writing. Fans also bring their own cultural lenses and understandings into their practices, in this way creating unique transcultural spaces. As stated in the introduction to this book, fandom forges connections between cultures. I consider fanfiction (or "fanfics") to be fundamental texts that help us comprehend reception processes in unique cultural contexts. This belief is my entry point for analysing how Russian fanfiction engages with J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, with Russian fan writers identifying the overarching cultural patterns of the source texts and recasting them by creating and embedding their own cultural allusions in their productions.

The *Harry Potter* novels are regarded as representative of neo-mythological thinking, in which new life experiences are made sense of via myths.¹ Prominent in the twentieth century, the neo-mythological perception of the world is embodied in Rowling's books, where folklore schemes, images, and motifs have a notable part in plotting, characterization, and imagery.² These traditions are duly reflected in fan texts, which play with archetypes such as "the universal hero," "a snake-like opponent," and "a magical helper." In this chapter, I show how these motifs are transformed in the new literary context of modern Russian fanfiction. In particular, I seek to grasp how fan-readers inscribe distinctively Russian contexts in their *Harry Potter*-inspired stories.

Approach

Analysing the ways in which fan authors use mythological images and motifs in their works is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates the role of mythological patterns and archetypes in modern life and especially in modern readers' emotional and thought processes. Secondly, reading fan texts from this perspective can reveal their interpretations of Rowling's use of folklore and show which folklore elements hold a creative potential for readers and which do not. Thirdly, an examination of Russian fanfics can be a starting point for a more comprehensive study of the multicultural reception of folklore material. I argue that Russian fans' interpretations of

1 For neo-mythologism in literature and modern culture, see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957); Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); Juri Lotman, *Works on Semiotics* [Труды по знаковым системам] (Tartu: University of Tartu, 1965–77); Eleazar M. Meletinsky, *The Poetics of Myth*, trans. Guy Lanoue (London: Routledge, 2000 [1976]); Jasmina Vojvodić and Dennis Ioffe, "(Neo)mythologism in Literature: Theories of Myth and Sign" ["К вопросу о (нео)мифологизме в литературе: Теории мифа и знака"], *Russian Literature* 107–8 (2019): 1–29, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345352640_Neomythologism_in_Literature_Theories_of_Myth_and_Sign.

2 For folklore patterns in Rowling's novels, see John Granger, *The Deathly Hallows Lectures* (Allentown, PA: Zossima Press, 2008); John Granger, *How Harry Cast His Spell: The Meaning behind the Mania for J. K. Rowling's Bestselling Books* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008); Julia Boll, *Harry Potter's Archetypal Journey: Heroism in the Harry Potter Series* (New York: Routledge, 2011); David Colbert, *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter: A Treasury of Myths, Legends, and Fascinating Facts* (New York: Berkeley Books, 2002); Geo Athena Trevarthen, *The Seeker's Guide to Harry Potter* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2008); Natalia Vasilyeva, "Folklore Archetypes in Modern Literature: J. K. Rowling's Novels and Their Interpretation in Youth Subculture" ["Фольклорные архетипы в современной массовой литературе: романы Дж. К. Роулинг и их интерпретация в молодежной субкультуре"] (PhD diss., Lobachevsky State University, 2005).

archetypes form a promising research field, not just for fandom and media scholars, but also for language, literature, and culture researchers.

The theoretical and methodological underpinnings of my research are provided by receptive aesthetics and reader-response theory.³ This reception-oriented approach is helpful in exploring how the reading process is constructed by the author and the reader. In this framework, fans' interpretations are considered a natural and salient part of the reading process because, as observed by Wolfgang Iser, there are narrative "gaps" in all texts, and the reader's role is to fill these "gaps" by interpreting the textual structures.⁴ For its part, interpretation is closely associated with the reader's life and reading experience.

In this study, I focus on the texts published on fanfics.me, one of the most popular Russian fan websites. The website hosts around 21,000 *Harry Potter* fanfics.⁵ In my research, I used a special search tool to select the most popular fanfics on the website, with the rating based on the number of hits, likes, readers' comments, and reviews. This method has yielded a sample in which almost all texts are novel-like, having around twenty-five or more chapters.

Harry Potter and Folklore

The theory of myth, one of the most important areas of language, literature and cultural research in the twentieth century, paved the way for a new approach to literature. In Russia, the myth-focused school vigorously developed with and through the now-classic works by Vladimir Propp (*Morphology of the Folktale*, 1958 [1928], and *The Historical Roots of the Wonder Tale* [*Исторические корни волшебной сказки*], 1946), Eleazar Meletinsky (*The Poetics of Myth*, 2000 [1976], and *From Myth to Literature*, 2000), and Juri Lotman (*Works on Semiotics*, 1965–77). In their writings, myths are regarded not only as individual tales (e.g., the labours of Heracles) but also as a typical structure with a more or less fixed set of characters and plotlines. These character types and plots recur everywhere. Literature, cinema, art, and the whole of mass culture can be viewed in terms of a constant reiteration

3 For a brief overview, see Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

4 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

5 Fanfics.me, accessed April 7, 2024.

of these themes and motifs, even if the character names and the settings are different.

Propp's works are of particular relevance to my argument. In *Morphology of the Folktale*,⁶ Propp describes the folktale as a configuration of characters (or role), such as "hero" "villain," "helper," and "donor," and functions (or actions), such as "absentation," "interdiction," and "violation." As demonstrated by Propp, any tale will be composed of such dramatis personae and functions in a fixed order. In his following work, *The Historical Roots of the Wonder Tale*,⁷ Propp shows that essentially all plots are founded on "the hero's journey," which consists of three stages and is linked to the ancient rites of initiation.

This theory has gained currency via Joseph Campbell's now-classic *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell argues along the same lines, unearthing "the hero's journey" (monomyth) as the substance of diverse myths and combining it with psychological patterns (especially Carl Gustav Jung's archetypal concepts). In Campbell's succinct depiction of "the hero's journey,"

[a] hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.⁸

Like Propp, Campbell identifies three structured stages of the journey ("Departure," "Initiation," and "Return") and describes their component actions.

Campbell's theory has become very popular and attracted a lot of followers, from researchers⁹ to educators¹⁰ and pop culture personalities, inspiring scholarship and cultural production alike. The most well-known, and indeed conspicuous, examples of pop-cultural works inspired by "the hero's journey" theory include the *Star Wars* saga by George Lucas and *Avatar* by James Cameron.

6 Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958 [1928]).

7 Vladimir Propp, *The Historical Roots of the Wonder Tale [Исторические корни волшебной сказки]* (Leningrad: Leningrad University Publishing House, 1946).

8 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 23

9 See, e.g., David Adams Leeming, *Mythology: The Voyage of the Hero* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

10 See, e.g., Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, 2nd ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007).

Christopher Vogler, a famous Hollywood screenwriter, has converted the ideas of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* into a guide for filmmakers, though he deems their relevance to extend far beyond that. He insists that this pattern is more than just a popular narrative model:

I came looking for the design principles of storytelling, but on the road I found something more: a set of principles for living. I came to believe that the Hero's Journey is nothing less than a handbook for life, a complete instruction manual in the art of being human.¹¹

The protagonists of Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels tend to be described in reference to these archetypes.¹² Harry Potter himself can be interpreted as a universal myth and folktale hero, a status that involves an ensemble of biographical characteristics and entails a specific life plotline—"the hero's journey"—including a wonderful birth, isolation and oppression in childhood, and entanglement with a primordial enemy.¹³

Heroism in *Harry Potter* Fanfiction

Russian fan readers of the *Harry Potter* novels actively respond to the folk layer of and literary and cultural traditions¹⁴ in the original text. As my research indicates,¹⁵ fan authors focus on the components of the hero's journey which they need to develop their plotlines and/or to highlight their main ideas. For example, the motif of isolation and oppression in childhood can be employed to compose psychological fanfics about traumas, while Harry's altruism and his desire to fight the primordial enemy can be mobilized in a fanfic as a driving force of adventures.

The role of the hero archetype in Harry's life is elucidated in fanfiction in a variety of ways. One popular pattern is to explain Harry's heroism—his

11 Vogler, *Writer's Journey*, ix.

12 See, e.g., Beatrice Groves, *Literary Allusion in Harry Potter* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017); Vasilyeva, *Folklore Archetypes*.

13 Vasilyeva, *Folklore Archetypes*, 30–47.

14 See Natalia Samutina, "The Great Female Readers: Fan Fiction as a Literary Experience" ["Великие читательницы: фанфикшн как форма литературного опыта"], *Russian Sociological Review* [Социологическое обозрение], no 3 (2013): 137–94.

15 Elizaveta Timoshenko (Kasilova), "The Reception of the *Harry Potter* Novels by J. K. Rowling: The Russian Reading Pattern" ["Рецепция романов Дж. К. Роулинг о Гарри Поттере: опыт российского прочтения"], PhD diss., Russian State University for the Humanities, 2018.

being elected and having a mission to pursue—as a heavy burden imposed by one of the following:

- Fate, with Harry closely resembling the classical tragic hero
- Cruel society, unconcerned with people’s broken lives, with Harry’s hero image acquiring certain features of the “small ordinary man”
- Cunning politicians, with Harry coming across as a puppet, a naive idealist, who is sacrificed for one grand idea or another

In the first—tragic—interpretation, Harry is framed as a cultural hero (or a deity) who must sacrifice himself for the global peace and harmony. One reason why this idea is robustly developed in Russian fan texts may be the fact that the concept of self-sacrifice, or the image of life as a process of purification through suffering, is prominent in Russian culture.¹⁶ Christ-like characters or self-sacrificial figures populate Russian classic books and play a powerful role in them, as epitomized, for instance, by Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Idiot* (1867–69). Interestingly, self-sacrificing love is often criticized by fan authors, who blame the tragedy of Harry’s life on his “Christ role” and hero’s mission.

The second interpretation is also closely intertwined with the traditions of Russian classic literature. The “small ordinary man”¹⁷ is a widespread term which has been used in literary studies and social, literary, and political journalism since the nineteenth century to describe a type of characters endemic to Russian literature.¹⁸ The “small ordinary man” is a habitually powerless and ignorant character who cannot change their colourless life because of cruel society, indifferent to people’s broken lives, and ruthlessly exploitative of the “small ordinary man.”

In conjunction with this entrenched character type, Harry is interpreted as a boy who is instrumentally used by adults, specifically by Dumbledore, in a great war, but his own interests and wishes are not taken into account. Dumbledore and other wizards neither inform him about the matters at hand nor grant him the right to choose his strategy. This interpretation is undoubtedly inspired by *The Deathly Hallows*, where Rowling repeatedly describes Harry changing his view of Dumbledore and feeling disappointed and annoyed about the headmaster’s secrets.

16 See, e.g., Juri Stepanov, *The Constants: A Dictionary of Russian Culture* [Константы. Словарь русской культуры] (Moscow: Academic Project [Академический проект], 2004), 417.

17 In Russian: “маленький человек.”

18 The “small ordinary man” is considered to have been first described in Alexander Pushkin’s poem “Bronze Horseman: A Petersburg Tale” (1833) and Nikolai Gogol’s short story “The Overcoat” (1842).

The third interpretation, I believe, is related to the tragic events in Russia's twentieth-century history. Russian readers perfectly remember (about) the propaganda used by Soviet politicians to control people. After the Soviet era, the propagandist strategies were harnessed by other politicians to make big promises and inspire false hopes. As Russians still feel these disappointed expectations, such experiences fuel the understanding of Harry's story as a life of a naive idealist betrayed by cunning politicians, such as Dumbledore, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Arthur Weasley, and others. In this interpretation, the war between the good and the dark wizards is understood as a revolution, reminiscent to Russian readers of the October Revolution (1917) and the Civil War (1918–23).

These three approaches to the hero motif are amply represented in my sample of fanfics, where Harry Potter is rendered as a victim of fate, cruelty, or politics. As for the former notion, heroism is often pictured as a kind of fate or destiny in Russian fanfiction. This is exactly how the concept is interpreted in the very popular Russian fanfic¹⁹ *Another Tale of Beedle the Bard*²⁰ by rain_dog, who constructs a black magic-filled plot pivoting on the search for Horcruxes. The search has a disastrous effect on Harry as he becomes a voluntary victim of shocking sexual rituals. Professor Snape, who performs the functions of a Mentor and a Magical Helper in this story, must involve Harry in sexual rituals in order to furnish him with dark magical powers, which help Harry look for Horcruxes:

Now, he has moved back in his chair as far away from me as possible and crossed his arms over his chest in such a familiar gesture.... He will watch as I begin to shake with fear, horror and disgust. To squirm under his gaze, to back down, to babble something about being ready to do anything, to die saving the whole world, but this ... I can't. But he doesn't know that I'm Batman. Or damn Superman. They would just fly above the roofs, though, and it seems that no one was going to rape them.... I stare at my hands for a long time, which, it turns out, I've clenched (like Snape a few minutes ago) so tightly that they're bruised. And then I look up at him; my eyes are probably half my face now, so big with horror.

"I have no choice, do I, sir?" I say this barely audibly, but I look straight into his face very calmly. "And you knew that right from the start, didn't you?"²¹

19 As of September 1, 2022, the fanfic had 400,000 views and around 600 comments on fanfics.me; see <https://fanfics.me/fic49840/activity>.

20 rain_dog, *Another Tale of Beedle the Bard* [Еще одна сказка барда Бидля], accessed September 1, 2022, <http://fanfics.me/fic49840>.

21 The translations of all quotations from the fanfics in this chapter are mine.

The fan writer focuses on self-sacrifice as one of Harry's important characteristics and reveals the horrible result of self-sacrifice, placed in another context. Interestingly, in this text, Harry is perfectly aware of his cultural genealogy, as implied by his reference to Batman and Superman, who also fit the universal hero model. However, this recognition does not prevent the character (or the author) from interrogating the limits of self-sacrifice and posing a rather subversive question: Is it good for Harry himself to sacrifice himself for the greater good?

Rain_dog makes a psychological experiment on Harry by manoeuvring him into circumstances in which he is forced to sacrifice not only his life, but also his dignity and self-respect. Of course, Harry the hero makes the right choice, as is his wont, but it breaks him psychologically:

I do not react—my world has already completely faded, and the lenses of my glasses look like an optical sight.

It is dawning, and the first sunbeams, gentle and pink, fall on the walls of the castle, which once seemed magical to me. But now I just see grey stones on which the light falls, and nothing more. No magic, my fairy tale is over.... The world I can see around me now has finally come into full alignment with what I have inside—it has become empty, faded, and dark. It's so dark that I can't even make out Hagrid's hut a few feet away, leaving only spectral tree trunks bending in the wind. Darkness creeps inside me, fetters my breath and movements.... He will find me.

Snape appears before me almost instantly, his hair and black robes of the Death Eater fluttering in the wind, a short black wand pointing straight at me.... I feel like I don't feel anything, and I feel like I feel pain. It is somewhere in my heart, in my breast, like a black hole, and there's emptiness and ice in it. He sees this *nothing* in my eyes—but he is completely calm, only his lips curl a little.

In this interpretation, Harry Potter must submit to Fate, because heroes are born to accomplish their feat and die. This raises the problem of free will and the freedom of choice, an issue which is explicitly addressed by Rowling and, likewise, pondered by rain_dog.

Harry Potter readers know that Rowling upheld an explicitly positive notion of "sacrifice" and thus resolved the free-will problem in an optimistic way. Throughout the *Harry Potter* series, the message of the importance of sacrificial love is articulated time and again, along with eulogizing the things superior to money and power. Whenever talking with Harry, Dumbledore emphatically reiterates that Harry and his friends, who cherish love and

friendship as real treasures, are more powerful and happier than Voldemort and his followers. Many good characters sacrifice themselves (e.g., Harry's parents, Dumbledore, and Lupin) to protect Harry and other people and to stop Voldemort. Harry himself decides to die in order to protect people whom he loves and is supported in this venture by his parents and his friends, Sirius and Lupin, who say that they are very proud of him.

The fan writer takes an entirely different position by focusing on the hero as he goes through the excruciating expectations of death, abdicates everything he loves, and perishes emotionally. Harry feels that Fate is unfair to him and resents this injustice:

Am I sorry? Of course, I have to go to any lengths to save the magical world; this is my only use. Nothing else. I've wanted to be loved—I've had seventeen years for that. Apparently this is too much.... I've never had a choice, even though everyone says I have one. If I choose the wrong path,... the world will become a little worse. It is the fate of heroes. They are born to kill the dragon. And to save the princess.... Can the hero just get up and leave? Not care about the unsaved princesses? No, he can't, because if he does, the crowd round the next corner will throw stones and sticks at him. Or he himself, in shame, will throw himself on his sword when children in the villages he will trudge through, no longer in a shining armour and dragging his helmet with a once-luxurious plume in the dust behind him, will laugh at him, saying that he's a fake hero. Not a knight! A coward.... I'm a knight with a toy pike that I should use to break through the wall.... I'm small and fake; the very breath of a dragon will hurl me against the rocks, flattening my armour. Feathers and dust.... Dust....

Interestingly, the fan writer *rain_dog* also draws on the Christian context, which is a relevant framework of reference for Rowling. The hero's sacrificial death is interpreted as a way to defeat the Evil, and indeed the *rain_dog* juxtaposes Harry and St Sebastian, a popular martyr saint in European iconography, who was shot with multiple arrows (and whose story is also based on the hero's journey pattern). In a very emotional episode, Harry has a dream in which he dies the way St Sebastian did, near Hogwarts, as his schoolmates shoot bows at him. Everyday life goes without interruptions while Harry dies, crying in agony. This comparison expresses the idea that saints, as well as heroes, are born to die; there is no other purpose in their lives than to die. Unfortunately, Harry's classmates do not notice his sacrificial death because they are preoccupied with their own daily concerns.

Another of the three prevalent interpretations of heroism, where heroism is framed as connected to the cruelty of society, with the hero bearing others' burdens and his powers being weaponized, is also to be found in fanfiction. *Everything I Am*²² by Serpensortia is an excellent case in point. Serpensortia describes Harry's sixth year at Hogwarts, focusing on the protagonist's emotional state as Harry begins to realize that he is like a weapon for Dumbledore. Weapons are objects and as such cannot feel anything. By the same token, Harry is neither expected nor allowed to feel. Nobody cares about his fears, desires, dreams, or interests.

At the beginning of the fic, Harry experiences a personal tragedy. His love relationship with Seamus Finnigan has ended. Abandoned by Seamus, Harry feels humiliated and betrayed, at the same time understanding that the world does not care about his plight. People only expect self-sacrifice from him:

I don't remember very well how I came here, or, to tell the truth, I don't remember it at all. The last thing in my memory was a distinct desire to do myself in—and the thought that I had no right to do it, because I was the hope of this—damn it!—magical world. I don't know what happened next. And I don't know how many hours I've been here—I must have fainted from the cold....

"We've broken up," I say in an unamenable low voice, lowering my eyes and wishing never to look up again. Now Ron will ask me: "We meaning who?" and then he will look at me with disgust.

As indicated by the last phrase, one of the main themes this fanfic addresses is society's homophobic stereotypes and attitude to same-sex romance. Since the magical world abounds with stereotypes regarding various areas of life, Harry's hero journey in this fan work is associated with self-acceptance and self-discovery.

Consistently with the folktale configuration of functions, Harry has allies in this process. Snape, the only character to treat Harry as a student rather than as a weapon or a legendary hero, supports Harry in his quest of self-discovery. He teaches Harry not to be ashamed of his sexuality and to be unaffected by stereotypes. Their relationship changes from the "mentor/mentee" to a romantic one, and this helps Harry win the last combat with Voldemort.

22 Serpensortia, *Everything I Am*, accessed September 1, 2022, <http://fanfics.me/fic292>. This is another very popular Russian fanfic. As of September 1, 2022, it had around one million views and more or less 600 comments on fanfics.me. See <https://fanfics.me/fic292/activity>.

The third interpretive variant locates the hero in a directly political setting, portraying misuses of heroism harnessed to political agendas. This interpretation is embraced by rain_dog in *Alive*,²³ a fanfic about a civil war between the good and the evil wizards which breaks out after the final battle with Voldemort. Harry kills Voldemort, but the Death Eaters continue the warfare, so the Order of the Phoenix, Harry, his friends and classmates have to become a guerrilla army. The fan text is based on implicit references to the events of the October Revolution and the Civil War (1918–23); and, in this context, Harry's heroism makes him a puppet in the hands of clever politicians.

Historically, writings about the lives and deeds of communist revolutionaries formed a major strand in Soviet literature and evolved into a separate genre in its own right. In children's literature, this genre is best probably embodied by novels such as *School* [Школа] (1930) and *Military Secret* [Военная тайна] (1935) by Arkady Gaidar, *How the Steel Was Tempered* [Как закалялась сталь] (1936; English ed., 1952) by Nikolai Ostrovsky, *Red Devils* [Красные дьяволята] (1923) by Pavel Blyakhin, and *The Street of the Youngest Son* [Улица младшего сына] by Lev Kassil and Max Polyansky (1949). Such books were integral to the Soviet school curricula, children's and young adult literature, and cultural programmes. Their narratives were largely formulaic, featured a set of stock characters, and unfolded in a sequence of typical episodes, with which readers were closely familiar. Writers who tap into the legacy of narrative strategies and customary details of the revolution convention remind the readers (intentionally or otherwise) of this literary tradition.

In depicting the war in the world of magic, Russian fan writers unsurprisingly build on their unique cultural context. For example, Voldemort's propaganda in *The Order of the Phoenix* and in *The Deathly Hallows* cannot but make Russian readers think back to the Soviet propaganda. Such associations encourage Russian fans to interpret the war between the Order of the Phoenix and the Death Eaters as a civil war. In this cultural construal, the Death Eaters are the traditional elite, while the Order of the Phoenix is the revolutionary organization that seeks to overcome and obliterate traditions.

Alive opens with a typical scene that ties in with this interpretation. Harry is in prison, awaiting execution. Suddenly Snape appears, rescues Harry, and takes him to his secret house to tell the boy what is really going

23 rain_dog, *Alive* [Живой], accessed September 1, 2022, http://fanfics.me/fic56278.rain_dog. As of September 1, 2022, the fanfic had around 94,000 views and 240 comments on fanfic.me. See <https://fanfics.me/fic56278/activity>.

on. In the middle of the fic, Harry begins to understand that there is no good or bad army in the civil war, and that adults have been lying to him. The passage from the dialogue between Snape and Harry conveys the fan writer's view of the revolution:

“Yes, Potter, yes! Did it not occur to you that you'd be a perfect innocent victim of the regime? The Death Eaters' government has condemned a young hero to death! Let us close ranks under the banners steeped in the blood of our righteous!” ...

“You... don't you dare to say that!” ...

“I believe that your death would be very useful to your so-called brothers-in-arms, that's all.”

“Why?”

“Revolutions love fresh blood, Potter. They feed on it, swell up like ghouls, devouring your innocent lives.... You're going to die for them, for other people's words.”

While Harry Potter's image is that of a “Martyr” here, heroism is reinterpreted as naivety. The martyr's blood is supposed to nurture the revolution, but there is little to none nobility about it because Harry is simply being used as a symbol of the struggle, as Snape matter-of-factly points out to him. Harry's ingenuous heroism makes him a puppet in the hands of clever politicians, who reap all the benefits. In my view, such a rendering of the hero figure in *Harry Potter* fanfiction speaks to Russian society's disappointment with the revolution itself.

Subverting Dumbledore as a Mentor

In terms of the conceptual structure of the *Harry Potter* cycle and its folktale/myth scaffolding, Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of the Hogwarts wizarding school, is another important character. He can be described as a “Mentor,” that is, a magical helper. A major archetype in the monomyth scheme, the Mentor usually teaches the hero how to defeat the Evil, gives him advice, and inspires him to enter the path of heroism. Vogler underlines the importance of this time-honoured archetype:

For the storyteller, Meeting with the Mentor is a stage rich in potential for conflict, involvement, humor, and tragedy. It's based in an emotional relationship, usually between a hero and a Mentor or advisor of some

kind, and audiences seem to enjoy relationships in which the wisdom and experience of one generation is passed on to the next. Everyone has had a relationship with a Mentor or role model.²⁴

Dumbledore usually appears at the end of each book in the *Harry Potter* series in order to explain the situation to Harry and teach him how to be a good human being. Intriguingly, this archetypal arrangement is dismantled in the last book by the Dumbledore character being transformed so as to bring the ideas of choice and redemption to the fore. Specifically, the Mentor and the magical helper in one morphs into a powerful politician who makes mistakes and then tries to atone for his guilt. Dumbledore is quite often subject to moral realignment and counter-interpretations in fanfiction, where he is portrayed either as a cunning politician or as an old man who has made a lot of mistakes.

In 2005, having examined the build-up of Rowling's books, the Russian fans *anna_y* and Catherine proposed a theory they called The Albus Dumbledore Big Game,²⁵ which holds that many of Harry's adventures are not casual occurrences, but actions planned by the headmaster in his long-standing project. The theory has since been picked up and developed by many Russian readers, as a result influencing the image of the headmaster in fan texts. Fan writers focus on Dumbledore's readiness for sacrifices to achieve his goals, his disregard for others' point of view, his cruel decisions, and similar ambivalences to offer a less than flattering assessment of his character. For example, Dumbledore is considered to have deliberately employed Professor Quirrell in order to give Harry an opportunity to confront Voldemort; or he purposely took the Invisibility Cloak away from Harry's parents to make them die because he wanted to raise a hero in isolation, without parental protection and influence.

This theory lies at the foundation of Tansan's fanfic *The Team*,²⁶ in which Dumbledore is described as an old man in pursuit of a higher purpose. Preoccupied with his mission, he does not hesitate to sacrifice people for his great idea; for instance, he sends Snape to his death, because he thinks this is the only way to defeat Voldemort. Dumbledore's genius makes him inhumane and sometimes frightening. Harry, his friends, and Snape feel betrayed by Dumbledore and want to change that. The passage expressing

24 Vogler, *Writer's Journey*, 39–118.

25 Anna_y and Catherine, *The Albus Dumbledore Big Game*, accessed October 4, 2021, <https://big-game.livejournal.com>.

26 Tansan, *The Team* [Команда], accessed September 1, 2022, <http://fanfics.me/fic1474>.

Snape's emotions on meeting Dumbledore after his rescue is a good illustration of these sentiments:

Perhaps for the first time in decades of interaction, Snape suddenly realized that Albus Dumbledore was a very old man. He stood there, his wrinkled hand leaning against the wall, his beard hanging down, the blue once flickering in his eyes behind the famous glasses gone out, a barely noticeable tremble in his lips. Did he really feel sorry? He had been preparing for this conversation so carefully, afraid that another surge of hurricane emotions would betray him totally, but now ... he felt nothing but indifference. That's it, Albus. You deceived and betrayed a student, sending him to his death. But, surprisingly, the student has survived and acquired a different purpose and meaning of life, which is why your friendship now seems so false and pitiful to him that he doesn't even want to hate you or to feel offended; it's beneath his dignity. From now on, it's not in your power to hurt me, Albus. I'm not alone anymore.²⁷

With Dumbledore divested of his function as a Mentor and a magical helper, these roles can be taken over by other characters. *The Team* assigns this responsibility to Salazar Slytherin, who becomes a magical helper for young wizards. His secret magic works, and the books hidden in the Chamber of Secrets change the team's views about magic.

Such plot twists also occur in other fanfics that feature Dumbledore. Russian fan authors morally reinterpret Dumbledore as a bad guy. Because, structurally speaking, the hero's journey cannot unfold without a Mentor, another character must be appointed to fulfil this function. Morally ambiguous or evil mentors are not unusual in popular culture. As a matter of fact, Rowling's original text itself paints Dumbledore as a complex figure. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that while fanfic mentors can help the protagonists grow, they may transmute into different archetypes altogether.

Reinterpreting Voldemort as a Snake-like Opponent

Some researchers consider Voldemort, or You-Know-Who, to have the function of a snake-like opponent, that is, an archetypal antagonist whom the universal hero has to fight at the end of the adventure. In constructing the

27 Tansan, *The Team*.

image of the dark wizard, Rowling used not only the folktale plot of combat with the dragon but also the opulent British tradition of snake imagery.

This tradition fuses Christian symbolism, English tales about dragons, legends, romances, medieval British narratives, and Anglo-Saxon epic stories. The list of works with the dragon theme is very long indeed: from the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* and medieval chivalric romances to Christian legends about Saint George killing the dragon and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, to a plethora of modern fantasy novels, notably represented by J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. The dragon is mainly described in literature as an evil and sly creature desirous of power and luxury that tempts naive people into a trap. In the Christian tradition, the dragon is an image of the Devil, who seeks the damnation of human souls.

Crucially, researchers believe that the dragon was first an ambivalent creature in folklore.²⁸ Located beyond the good/evil dichotomy, the dragon functioned as a stringent condition of the hero's transformation and resurrection in the folktale. Every hero needed his own dragon to accomplish his journey. However, later, the interpretation of the dragon changed, probably under the influence of Christianity.

The image of Voldemort includes a range of snake features. He studied at Slytherin, the Hogwarts house with snake symbols and snake-like students. After his rebirth in *The Goblet of Fire*, his appearance is intrinsically serpentine: "Whiter than a skull, with wide, livid scarlet eyes, and a nose that was as flat as a snake's, with slits for nostrils."²⁹ Other ophidian attributes are accumulated around him: his voice sounds like the hiss of a snake, his Dark Mark consists of a skull and a snake, and he is often accompanied by the big snake Nagini. Finally, like the mythical three-headed dragon, Voldemort can only be defeated if his Horcruxes are destroyed.

Unlike the ambivalent dragon from folktales, Voldemort is never described as an ambiguous character. Rather, Rowling furnishes him with some inherently devilish features straight from the Christian tradition. Voldemort incarnates a demonic tempter who deceives,³⁰ betrays, and instigates people to sin. He tries to make the good wizards abandon their moral principles in return for power, money, celebrity status, and other rewards he promises them. In this way, he is put in stark contrast with Harry, with whom he

28 For a detailed account, see Propp, *Historical Roots*, 216–63.

29 J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 558.

30 For example, "Voldemort doesn't march up to people's houses and bang on their front doors, Harry," said Sirius. "He tricks, jinxes and blackmails them. He's well-practised at operating in secret. In any case, gathering followers is only one thing he's interested in." J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 88.

shares some features and the vicissitudes of life. Yet despite being alike in some respects, the two embrace entirely different values: Harry takes the way of love, friendship, and sacrifice, while Voldemort chooses power and manipulation. This interplay of similarities and differences serves to weave the religiously informed themes of free choice and redemption into the mythical texture of the clash of the hero/Harry and the snake-like opponent/Voldemort.

Remarkably, Lord Voldemort (or Tom Riddle) rarely appears in fan texts. His snake-like connotations do not escape the attention of Russian fan writers, but the Dark Lord himself is cast as a background character rather than as a protagonist. This marginalization may result from the folklore connotations prompting the readers to perceive the antagonist as abstract evil and not as an individual with his own experiences and life choices. As a nebulous abstraction, he is thus not suitable for the strategy of emotional intensification, which is vital in and to fan literature.

Mentioned above, the fic *Everything I Am* is emblematic of this approach. Its action is set during Harry's sixth year at Hogwarts, and this structural choice brings into relief the differences between Rowling's conception of the *Harry Potter* books and Serpensortia's view. Unlike the original author, who focuses on Harry's attempts to guess what Voldemort will do next and on his struggle with the Dark Lord, the fan writer predominantly fathoms Harry's feelings as the boy tries to understand what he wants, what he should do, and what is going on between him and Snape. Voldemort's presence creates a situation in which Harry and Snape must cooperate against their common foe, and this sets the stage for the older wizard's support, Harry's and Snape's alliance and, ultimately, their friendship and love.

If Voldemort appears in Russian fanfiction as an important protagonist, he tends to be psychologically depicted in terms of a Dostoevskian drama of life. An array of Dostoevsky's literary devices are employed to detail his feelings, the formative impact of his childhood, some of his dreams and the nightmares that haunt him in order to understand why Voldemort committed his crimes. Like Dostoevsky, who scrutinizes Raskolnikov's path from innocence to crime and from crime to repentance³¹ in-depth, fan writers analyse Tom Riddle's childhood and adolescence to recount how the talented boy became a villain.

For example, in *The Dark Lord*, Korell³² relates Voldemort's life from childhood spent in an orphanage to the moment he creates Horcruxes. The

31 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

32 Korell, *The Dark Lord* [Темный Лорд], accessed September 1, 2022, <http://fanfics.me/fic46763>.

fan writer explores Voldemort's feelings, thoughts, and motivations, trying to picture a person of flesh and blood, rather than a generic mythological antagonist. The reasons for Riddle's malevolence are discovered in his unhappy childhood, blighted by whipping, stress, and the lack of love. Instead of being invited to take viciousness at face value as conventionally bound with the opponent function in the fixed mythical/folktale narrative pattern, readers are offered a plausible explanation of behaviour in line with present-day psychological knowledge.

Voldemort's allies are, likewise, often given a psychological developmental arc or are sometimes justified in fanfiction. Another frequent remodelling of the source texts involves moral realignment,³³ which means that fans' interpretations vindicate the characters against the original author's moral judgement and reappraise their deeds in a different light.³⁴ For example, the Death Eaters are often described as people who, unlike Dumbledore's supporters, do not pretend to be good, respectable, amiable, or nice; instead, they want to be honest and to pursue their lives unfettered by standards and stereotypes. In such fanfics, dark magic is not necessarily a despicable or criminal practice; instead, it is a powerful kind of magic capable of affording new opportunities to wizards.

In Hoshi_Murasaki's popular fan comic series *Harry's Story*,³⁵ Harry, a young, extraordinarily talented student, embarks on the study of dark magic accompanied by Hermione in his second year at the wizards' school. They domesticate a basilisk, practise the Unforgivable Curses, communicate with Slytherin students, and revel in dark jokes. In their view, there is no such thing as good or bad magic; there are only good or bad goals. In the fifth story of the series, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Silents*,³⁶ Harry teaches his classmates how to fight against the Dark Arts, which rehearses episodes from the source text, but in a departure from Rowling's narrative, Harry uses dark magic in his lessons to show how this form of magic can be experienced and to make his classmates stronger.³⁷ In other words, some

33 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 171.

34 See Ksenija Prasolova, "Fanfiction: A Literary Phenomenon of the Turn of the 20th Century (Fan Creative Productions of J. K. Rowling's Works)" ["Фанфикшн: литературный феномен конца XX начала XXI века (творчество поклонников Дж. К. Ролинг)"] (PhD diss., Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, 2009).

35 Hoshi_Murasaki, *Harry's Story* [История Гарри], accessed September 1, 2022, <https://ficbook.net/collections/8955644>.

36 Hoshi_Murasaki, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Silents* [Гарри Поттер и Орден Молчаливых], accessed September 1, 2022, <https://ficbook.net/readfic/5285211>.

37 Hoshi_Murasaki, *Harry Potter*.

fanfiction offers moral reinterpretations of the Death Eaters, Voldemort, and the Dark Arts itself.

Conclusion

As this chapter shows, Russian fanfiction writers rework the *Harry Potter* novels from their own cultural contexts. For example, they relate Rowling's plots to aspects of Russia's modern history, canonical texts of Russian literature, and the Russian public's collective memory of the Soviet past. They use folklore motifs to add depth to and flesh out what they deem shallow, underdeveloped, or simplified in the source texts. In this sense, fanfiction is a continuation of and an elaboration on the themes that Rowling herself conceptualized in her work.

My analysis of folklore patterns in Russian fanfiction shows that fanfics profusely employ the folktale character types and myth-based archetypes, reinscribing them in modern contexts. As the universal hero archetype, Harry is transformed into a victim of fate, cruel society, or cunning politicians. Voldemort, the snake-like opponent, is a less popular figure. When Russian fan writers engage with this character as their protagonist, they avail themselves of the strategies and devices typical of psychological novels to offer nuanced portrayals of Voldemort. Finally, Albus Dumbledore, the Mentor figure, is often remade into a negative character. This is in line with how Rowling herself transforms the Mentor archetype in the last volume of her series.

Archetypes help the fan writers to engage with other cultures, understand characters from different backgrounds and reinterpret them in their own ways. By bringing together their vernacular heritage and archetypal thinking, fans produce interesting and insightful works which embody, practise, and foster international dialogue.

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3. Fans and Their Utterances in the Communications Circuit of Chinese Internet Literature

Peng Qiao

Abstract: Increasingly, specific communication processes specific to professional fields are taken over by fans to promote, produce, and comment on online content. In this study, I engage speech acts and Bakhtinian heteroglossia to analyse fans' voices and social roles in and beyond online communities, along with their impact on the lifecycle of Chinese internet literature (CIL). Selected online posts about the internet novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi* and its adaptations in four fan sub-communities show how fans utilize online utterances to participate in the lifecycle of CIL, employ speech acts to construct/assume/adopt different social identities, and achieve various intentions within the heteroglossic context of online fan communities. Therefore, my study contributes to the body of research on non-English-speaking fan communities.

Keywords: Bakhtin, dialogism, heteroglossia, online community

Introduction

Fans are widely regarded as consumers of cultural products, even though they are more affectively engaged with their object of fandom than regular consumers.¹ To communicate about their fandom and daily lives with one another, fans form online and offline communities. The widespread use of

¹ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

social media and the internet further expands fan communities.² As a unique site of fandom, virtual fan communities have become an object of research.³ The complexity of the field is one aspect that makes it attractive to scholars from various disciplines, since the phenomenon has blurred the boundaries between play and labour, production and consumption.⁴ As a result of their communal practices, fans are “neither producers nor consumers in the usual sense,” but are best defined as “prosumers.”⁵

This development is exemplified by fans of Chinese internet literature (CIL), as research into their community has shown the “centralisation of authorship and readership into the core of production and the decentralisation of other agents and institutions.”⁶ Originating in the 1990s, CIL “was born digital as a fan-generated phenomenon”⁷ and denotes Chinese literary productions in existing or new genres that are chiefly meant for reading online, with internet novels accounting for most of the online publishing market.⁸ CIL resembles fanfiction in that it comprises amateur writing, but unlike fanfiction it also features original and independent characters and narratives that do not refer to any prior novels or movies. There have been studies on CIL readers’ prosumer role in contributing to the creation of internet novels and in facilitating CIL translation on the international market, yet there is a dearth of studies on the complex roles of CIL fans other than as CIL writers, readers, sponsors, and translators.⁹

Building on international fan studies on fans’ multiple social roles on the global market, such as promoters, entrepreneurs, and infopreneurs, this chapter aims to provide insights into identifying and exploring the various

2 Cindy Bird, “Phenomenological Realities or ‘Quinntown’: Life in a Cyber Community,” *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 25, no. 1–2 (2002): 32–37.

3 Samantha Groene and Vanessa Hettinger, “Are You ‘Fan’ Enough? The Role of Identity in Media Fandoms,” *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 5, no. 4 (2016): 324–39.

4 Christian Fuchs, “Digital Prosumption Labour on Social Media in the Context of the Capitalist Regime of Time,” *Time & Society* 23, no. 1 (2014): 111.

5 Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Bantam, 1981), 266.

6 Shih-chen Chao, “The Re-institutionalisation of Popular Fiction: The Internet and a New Model of Popular Fiction Prosumption in China,” *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies* 3 (2013): 4.

7 Xiang Ren and Lucy Montgomery, “Chinese Online Literature: Creative Consumers and Evolving Business Models,” *Arts Marketing* 2, no. 2 (2012): 118.

8 Michel Hockx, *Internet Literature in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

9 Xiaoli Tian and Michael Adorjan, “Fandom and Coercive Empowerment: The Commissioned Production of Chinese Online Literature,” *Media, Culture & Society* 38, no. 6 (2016): 881–900; Rachel Suet Kay Chan, “Game of Translations: Virtual Community Doing English Translations of Chinese Online Fiction,” *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts* 9, no. 1 (2017): 39–55.

social roles and functions of CIL fans.¹⁰ Given that the commercialization of the CIL industry has boosted the adaptation of CIL texts into forms such as manga or web series, CIL fans are involved not only in the lifecycle of CIL novels but also in CIL adaptations, including drama, animation, and manga.

Heteroglossia, Speech Acts, and Social Identities in Online Fan Communities

Given that fans' online social behaviours are often represented by their online utterances, this chapter starts by looking into CIL fans' online language use. Languages in new media often represent linguistic and stylistic heteroglossia.¹¹ Coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, the concept of heteroglossia can refer to "the simultaneous use of different kinds of forms and signs," especially "intra-language varieties," in a community. Heteroglossia can also be understood as "the social diversity of speech types."¹²

In the context of heteroglossia, speech acts are important indicators of speakers' social identities.¹³ For instance, the utterances of lawyers unmistakably differ from those of fortune tellers. This also holds for online fan communities, where people construct their identities as fans through fandom-related speech acts, such as expressives and declaratives.¹⁴ Utterances posted on fan social media and portals often employ casual expressions, an informal tone, and/or unconventional wordings, which may sound cryptic to the general public. Despite these characteristics, fan communities should not be simplified into a monologic and homogenous domain dominated by casual and informal speech acts, as this perception

10 Sophie G. Einwächter, "Fantastic Fan Marketing—Fantasy Fan Online-Communities and Conventions as Markets of Cultural Goods," in *Media Economies: Perspectives on American Cultural Practices*, ed. Marcel Hartwig, Evelyne Keitel, and Gunter Süß (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014).

11 Sirpa Leppänen et al., "Young People's Translocal New Media Uses: A Multiperspective Analysis of Language Choice and Heteroglossia," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14, no. 4 (2009): 1080–107.

12 Benjamin Bailey, "Heteroglossia and Boundaries," in *Bilingualism: A Social Approach*, ed. Monica Heller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 257–58.

13 Anna Gralińska-Brawata, "Speech as a Marker of Social Identity: Geordie English," in *Issues in Accents of English*, ed. Ewa Waniek-Klimczak (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 102.

14 Boglárka Fazekas, "Speech Acts in Online Fan Communities," in *Encounters of the Popular Kind: Traditions and Mythologies/Populáris típusú találkozások: Hagymányok és mitológiák*, ed. Judit Anna Bánházi et al. (Budapest: ELTE Bölcsészettudományi Kar, 2021).

ignores the heterogeneity and complexity of the content, ideas, speech acts, and identities of fans.¹⁵

According to Maristella Gatto, textual registers and genres are evolving on the web, so online texts are best examined from an a posteriori perspective.¹⁶ This indicates that fans' online utterances are not bound to any specific and stable registers and tone patterns. Some fans may adapt their speech acts to imitate or align with those of other social groups, thus conveying their intentions. This adaptation occurs because the ways of speaking and forms of speech inherently carry their original social functions. For instance, when fans defend a novel against criticism, they may imitate an academic poster or an attorney's letter, as these specialized speech acts can articulate a serious and formal refutation and formally assess the value of the novel or its adaptations. Examples are provided in the later sections of this chapter.

In the study of fans' social identities as represented by their speech acts within the heteroglossia of online fan communities, their posts as utterances are the "minimal unit of social analysis."¹⁷ Importantly, utterances never function alone, and to make sense of them, they must be investigated in their contexts.¹⁸ Utterances can be interpreted differently by recipients in different contexts, and their types change, depending on the speaker's purpose and their notion of the recipient. In Bakhtin's framework, dialogue is essential in meaning-making as "[t]hrough dialogue the two participants come together in a 'third space,' a new understanding created by changing both participants."¹⁹ Bakhtin insists that both speaker and recipient achieve their social existence in and through dialogic interactions constructed of a diversity of utterances in particular contexts. These multiple utterances are speech acts of various kinds that produce heteroglossia in online and offline societies. Bakhtin also argues that utterances are not constructed passively for the sake of grammatical correctness alone; rather, the speaker's

15 CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, *Fractured Fandoms: Contentious Communication in Fan Communities* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018).

16 Maristella Gatto, *Web as Corpus: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 61–63.

17 Gary Saul Morson, "Who Speaks for Bakhtin? A Dialogic Introduction," *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1983): 231.

18 Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. David Duff (London: Routledge, 2000), 86.

19 Randy Yerrick, Anna Liuzzo, and Janina Brutt-Griffler, "Building Common Language, Experiences, and Learning Spaces with Lower-Track Science Students," in *Second International Handbook of Science Education, Part One*, ed. Barry J. Fraser, Kenneth G. Tobin, and Campbell J. McRobbie (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 1427.

intention is actively invested in their utterances, and they likewise expect an active response from the recipient.

Accordingly, in this study, the utterances of CIL fans are considered to have an internally constructed consciousness “according to voices previously heard and in anticipation of a response.”²⁰ For instance, in their online posts, some fans initially share with their potential audiences the various attractive details of their productions, such as the plot design of a novel, the fabulous background music in an adapted web series, and the meticulously executed character portraits in a manga. Such posts are expected to elicit relatively positive responses from agents outside the fan community to reciprocally confirm the quality of the production and to corroborate the rationality of the fan’s preference in their original posts. This kind of in-between-ness of the “active, productive” utterance ensures “that communication can take place only in society.”²¹ Thus, fans’ utterances, dialogues and speech acts enable them to socially engage in the making of CIL.

Method

In this chapter, I analyse fans’ online utterances and speech acts in order to explore the diverse social identities of fans enacted in their online communities. To this purpose, I present a case study of *Mo Dao Zu Shi (MDZS)* and its online fan (sub-) communities. Written by famous CIL writer Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, *MDZS* is one of the most popular storyworlds on the CIL market. It was published in sequential instalments on Jinjiang (www.jjwxc.net), a major online CIL reading portal, in 2015. The novel tells a love story of two adventurous male cultivators, LAN Wangji and WEI Wuxian, set in a fictional, ancient and mysterious setting. With the success of the novel among fans, the story was subsequently converted into a manga, an animation, a radio drama, and a web series in China. Among them, the web series *Chen Qing Ling/The Untamed* (2019), produced by Tencent, was the most globally influential and commercially successful adaptation. For instance, episode 1 of *Chen Qing Ling* on Tencent’s YouTube channel had more than 13.29 million views in March 2024.

As the story was being promoted and received through various media, the fandom of *MDZS* in its multiple iterations was increasing, which further

20 Karen Krasny, “Dialogic Spaces: Bakhtin’s Social Theory of Utterance in Reader Response” (MA diss., University of Manitoba, 2002), 2.

21 Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1991), 61, 59.

boosted the construction of corresponding fan sub-communities on Weibo, the Chinese counterpart of X (Twitter), where fans could appreciate together their favourite form of the story. Such communities are not rigid, and fans can move flexibly between them or stick to one fan sub-community for their preferred form of adaptation. My argument in this chapter is underpinned by the analysis of four relevant sub-communities for information about Chinese fans' social roles and behaviours. These are the novel fan community, the animation fan community, the radio drama fan community, and the fan community of the adapted web series *Chen Qing Ling*.

Given that fans' social roles are channelled by their utterances in online posts of respective fan sub-community on Weibo, my research employed linguistic and content analysis to examine selected posts. Inspired by Xiaoli Tian and Michael Adorjan's method for studying CIL online communities, I first conducted one-week-long non-interventional online observations of *MDZS* fans' social activities in each fan sub-community in September 2021 and August 2022.²² Over these two weeks, I registered different types of CIL fans' social activities and recorded the first case of each of them I encountered. To analyse my data, linguistic analysis was used to study the styles, registers, and tones used in posts, which helped explain the various social roles of *MDZS* fans, as different roles require the speaker to take on different (socio)linguistic features. Then, content analysis was carried out to describe the actual scenarios where *MDZS* fans utilized posts to perform different social roles.

The online posts used in this chapter were summarized and translated from Chinese into English by myself to contribute to the study of non-English-speaking fan communities. The collected online utterances and dialogues exemplify the ways in which fans participate in and influence the lifecycle of CIL through their posts and acquisition of various social roles. To ensure the anonymity of the fans, their user IDs and original Chinese posts are not revealed. Instead, English letters are used to represent different fans (e.g., Fan A, Fan B), and the corresponding respondents to the posts from other fans are marked with a number (e.g., Fan A1, Fan A2, Fan B1, Fan B2).

Towards the *MDZS* Fannish Communications Circuit

Since the boundaries of utterances "are only marked by a change of speech subject," dialogues in different phases of the lifecycle of *MDZS* must be

22 Tian and Adorjan, "Fandom and Coercive Empowerment," 886–88.

examined and the other party in each dialogue must be identified.²³ Below, I rely on the notion of the communications circuit to offer an overview of the main phases in the lifecycle of *MDZS*.

In his fundamental study on book history, Robert Darnton proposed the model of the communications circuit as “a general model for analysing the way books come into being and spread through society.”²⁴ This model lists the agents involved in each phase of a book lifecycle, including the author, publisher, printers, material suppliers, shippers, booksellers, and readers. Regarding those, Darnton notes the external effects on the agents and groups them in the categories of intellectual influences and publicity, the economic and social conjuncture, and political and legal sanctions, the three main factors affecting the history of books. Since Darnton’s model focuses more on the human participants than the book itself, Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker proposed their modified version of the model, in which the lifecycle of books consists of five phases: publication, manufacture, distribution, reception, and survival (explained in detail in the subsequent sections).²⁵ Like Darnton, Adams and Barker also agree that the lifecycle of books is impacted by the outside world, including political, legal, and religious influences; commercial pressures; social behaviour and taste; and intellectual influences.

The participatory nature of the internet further blurs the lines between agents in the communications circuit. To address this, Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires propose that there are only two main agents in the digital communications circuit: readers and providers, the latter integrating the agency of the author, publishers, retailers, and distributors.²⁶ Notably, in Murray and Squires’ model, readers are not just consumers who buy or borrow cultural products and leave reviews; rather, they form a collective group, a community, to create their own content, fund, and subscribe to book instalments. This epitomizes prosumption behaviour—that is, production plus consumption—which brings into relief the agency of CIL readers as fans.²⁷

23 Caryl Emerson, “Editor’s Preface,” in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* by Mikhail Bakhtin, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), xxxiv.

24 Robert Darnton, “What Is the History of Books?” *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 67.

25 Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker, “A New Model for the Study of the Book,” in *A Potencie of Life: Books in Society*, ed. Nicolas Barker (London: The British Library and Oak Knoll Press, 2001), 11.

26 Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires, “The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit,” *Book 2.0* 3, no. 1 (2013): 3–23.

27 Tian and Adorjan, “Fandom and Coercive Empowerment.”

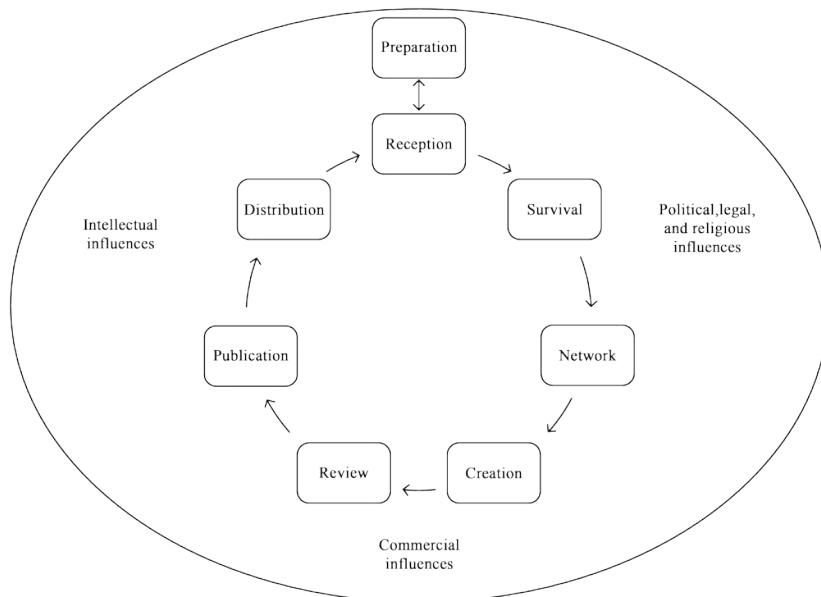


Figure 3.1. The fannish communications circuit of Chinese internet literature.

Based on the previous models, figure 3.1 charts one that is specific to CIL from the fan perspective to support the discussion. The model renders *MDZS* fans as a special group of readers who dedicate themselves to the expansion of the storyworld. Fans-as-audience participated in the making of not only literature as originally studied in book history, but also the entire life of the storyworld. Generally, the *MDZS* lifecycle encompasses eight phases: preparation, reception, survival, network, creation, review, publication, and distribution. In this chapter, I mainly focus on the phases of preparation, reception, survival, and network to showcase the various social roles adopted by fans and the contribution of their speech acts to the storyworld. I discuss the effect of the socio-economic/cultural conjuncture on the circuit when analysing the examples.

Preparation of the Content

The preparation phase refers to the process of content presentation, in which an internet novel is published in small instalments and introduced to fan readers by the Jinjiang website in the initial round of the novel publication, followed by the publication of its adaptations on other platforms. As *MDZS* was released in instalments, fans could reflect on the publication problems

involved and participate in problem-solving. Since the original novel contained adult content, it was blocked by Jinjiang in January 2019 as a result of China's Clean Network Initiative, which aimed to protect youngsters from exposure to pornography. Consequently, fans were unable to access the novel, even though it remained stored on the website. To continue enjoying the original version on Jinjiang, tech-savvy fans explored methods to unblock the novel and taught others how to do the same. For instance, Fan A published a post explaining how to unblock the novel, and other fans, such as Fan A1, Fan A2, and Fan A3, responded by requesting further particulars:

Fan A: If you bought the whole novel before on Jinjiang and want to reread it, you can use your web browser to open Jinjiang, find the purchased chapters in the purchase history, and then click and read it. Tips: 1. The kiss scene was added in the amended version after August 2016. So, if your purchased chapter hasn't got this scene, it must have been bought before this date; 2. Four bonus chapters were published in December 2017; 3. If you did not pay chapter by chapter as they came out, then you must search for them in separate months in your purchase history.

Fan A1: Can I download Jinjiang now and try the above way?

Fan A: No, but you can buy the paper edition instead.

Fan A2: What if I don't remember the purchase date?

Fan A: You can only browse your purchase history entry by entry.

Fan A3: What if I only purchased a few chapters?

Fan A: If so, you can only read those parts now.

In this communication, a screenshot with instructional captions on how to locate the blocked chapters was attached to the verbal post to provide visual step-by-step guidance for other fans. In the screenshot, a red box on the very left highlighted where "purchase history" is in the Jinjiang reading app, and the top-right-hand part showed how to search for entries by purchasing dates. On the bottom, Fan A used a timeline feature to indicate the differences between the various versions of the novel. As shown, the content "Kiss on the Baifeng Mountain" was not included in the original version, but it was added to the amended version between August 2016 and December 2017, so the chapters purchased during this period might contain the kiss scene.

Fan A served as human customer service in dialogues and formatted their original post as a product guide. This speech act carried a certain illocutionary force by informing other fans what they can do. The combination of the verbal and non-verbal signs in this post made the instruction clearer

and easier to follow. The dialogues were between individual fans who had previously heard the announcement *MDZS* being blocked on Jinjiang. Based on their shared knowledge, the fans agreed that they wanted to unlock the content and reread the novel on Jinjiang without challenging the regulations and supporting the genuine edition online. Consequently, they explored ways to achieve the common goal.

Though Fan A was initially a consumer of the content, they performed the social role of human customer service, to some extent representing the content provider by helping other consumers have a satisfying purchasing experience and guiding fans on how to use the functionalities of the website while both should be the responsibility of Jinjiang. Reading the blocked content is actually not allowed, although the content is stored on Jinjiang, so the website could in fact use more advanced IT skills to fix the problem at any time. Crucially, even if fans play the role of content providers, they can anyway have their content entirely blocked or deleted. Thus, while the social identities listed in this study are enacted by fans in fan communities, fans cannot be said to have such social identities in the actual world beyond fan communities in most cases. These social identities are fashioned and manifested in and by fans' speech acts and, as such, they are mainly recognized within fan communities alone.

Reception in a Socialized Context

While the previous section introduces the pre-reading/watching experiences of *MDZS* fans, this section primarily focuses on their dialogues during the reading and watching processes. On Weibo, fans' online receptive behaviours are usually regulated by their respective communities' rules of dos and don'ts. Importantly, as fan sub-communities are formed, organizations and principles are concomitantly established for each of them. In all sub-communities, experienced fans are elected as moderators to review all the posts, delete the rule-breaking ones, and recommend the good ones. When fans visit these sub-communities, the default first post they usually get to see is the "Rules of Membership," an utterance published by moderators in formal writing. Comparing the rules of the four sub-communities in my sample, I concluded that their commonalities include:

- No illegal content (pornography, violence, politics, or piracy)
- No posts on other adapted forms of the same storyworld
- Respect for others and using no offensive language

The ban on illegal content in fan readers' online posts coincides with the Chinese government's Clean Network Initiative to promote healthy space for the public, especially for the young. This rule explicitly shows how political, legal, religious, and intellectual influences in the fannish communications circuit regulate fans' behaviours. Though the internet supports free speech, fans' utterances in posts need to abide by the policies of the Weibo platform and the state regarding pornography, violence, and politics. Should this be construed as passive obedience to social and legal norms, then the prohibition to discuss piracies of the story reveals that fans actively protect authenticity out of love. In a study on fans' arguments on comic book downloads, J. Richard Stevens and Christopher Edward Bell explain that fans' anti-download activity speaks to their notion of downloading either as stealing beyond legal constraints or as immoral for not paying for others' creative work.²⁸ Both attitudes are firmly manifested in the prohibition of *MDZS* piracies, and it compels community members to support and respect authenticity.

The ban on discussing other adapted forms of the same storyworld in respective sub-communities implies that fans of a given adaptation form have a strong territorial consciousness. Emphatically, particular sub-communities are not set up as inclusive of discussions on all adaptations. For instance, in the *MDZS* fan community of the original novel, the adapted web series, the manga, and the animation are all taboo topics, and similar curtailments can be found in the sub-communities for *MDZS* adaptations. The fans' pronounced preference for a given medium form contradicts some of current media scholarship, which suggests that transmedia consumption is increasingly the norm. Henry Jenkins, for instance, has argued that social media can be an ideal domain for participatory culture and the development of diverse media content.²⁹ In Jenkins' work, fans are framed as knowledgeable about entire franchises and different texts. However, the *MDZS* fans draw firm lines between the different multimodal texts and do not consider them to be one unitary storyworld at all.

This observation encourages rethinking the media mix purportedly consumed by users in its entirety.³⁰ Thomas R. Lindlof applies the interpre-

28 J. Richard Stevens and Christopher Edward Bell, "Do Fans Own Digital Comic Books? Examining the Copyright and Intellectual Property Attitudes of Comic Book Fans," *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 751–72.

29 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

30 Marc Steinberg, "Media Mix Mobilization: Social Mobilization and *Yo-Kai Watch*," *Animation* 12, no. 3 (2017): 244–58.

tive community concept in his (social) media research to conclude that fans' consumption of transmedial adaptations can be understood as events mediated by the genre of both the given content and the media.³¹ Interpretive communities of media are underpinned both by their members' shared love or interest and by their shared use of the media. Thus, the platform where fans consume the adaptation is an important factor in its own right. Fans of the adapted web series consume the videos on Tencent, while fans of the original novel read the content on Jinjiang. The two fan groups need not necessarily be familiar with each other's object of fandom because their consumption experience is mediated and circumscribed by the media. As a result, there are clear boundaries between the *MDZS* sub-communities because each of them is a different interpretive community. However, fans then all build their communities on Weibo, which leads to similar behaviours of these fans and communities, specifically to publishing posts to participate in the lifecycle of *MDZS*.

This analysis further suggests that there is a correlation between the differentiation and segmentation of the market around this storyworld and the differentiation and segmentation of the overall fan community. According to Wendell Smith, strategies of differentiation and segmentation are launched by suppliers to diversify their products to "establish a kind of equilibrium in the market" or as "a rational and more precise adjustment of product and marketing effort to consumer or user requirements."³² Thus, the various adaptations produced for different target consumer groups of the same *MDZS* storyworld fuel the differentiation and segmentation of the general fan community and usher taboos into fan sub-communities. When the centripetal force of the storyworld brings fans together to foster the general fandom of a title in the context of CIL and its adaptations, fans' preferences for specific types of adaptation are like the centrifugal force that pulls them apart. The two forces are clinched in perpetual interplay as the market goes on differentiating and segmenting its production lines for variously profiled customer groups.

The third rule underscores the importance of respecting other members, with "respect" being the keyword fundamental to participation in online fan communities on Weibo. While the first rule expresses respect for legal and

31 Thomas R. Lindlof, "Media Audiences as Interpretive Communities," *Annals of the International Communication Association* 11, no. 1 (1988): 81–107; Thomas R. Lindlof, "Interpretive Community: An Approach to Media and Religion," *Journal of Media and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2002): 61–74.

32 Wendell R. Smith, "Product Differentiation and Market Segmentation as Alternative Marketing Strategies," *Journal of Marketing* 21, no. 1 (1956): 5.

moral values and the second rule focuses on respect for specific adaptation works, the third rule highlights the significance of mutual respect among fan community members. For instance, a fanfiction *MDZS* writer posted such suggestions for their readers:

No adaptations to my fiction. I only ship the protagonists [of the novel], you can *quan di zi meng*, it's none of my business, but if you [ship other couples] in front of me, you are in for an insult. Fans of the actors' CP are welcome to read my fiction, but don't *dai can*, please respect each other.

The fan writer expresses their own views in an utterance in colloquial Chinese, using terminology specific to fan culture in China. The post is phrased in an informal tone and includes words *quan di zi meng* ("circle a place for self-entertainment" in literal translation) and *dai can* ("make my novel a meal replacement for your real people CP" in translation), which are commonly used among Chinese fans but may be unfamiliar to the general Chinese public, especially those not familiar with internet culture. The assertive and antagonistic tone of the post reflects the fan writer's rejection of fans of the web series actors, while also calling for mutual respect among fans. By employing this self-confident and warning speech act, the fan writer draws a clear line between the two fan sub-communities and denies the fans of the actors membership in the novel sub-community. Through this post, the fan writer played the role of an indigenous person, casting the fans of the actors in the role of strangers, visitors, or even invaders.

Finally, respect is a pillar that sustains the stability of the general fan community of *MDZS*, along with fans' shared love for the storyworld. In this regard, the fans' subjectivity and territorial consciousness are highlighted since fans are sensitive to their indigenous sub-communities, in which they play the role of moderators to maintain respect. They not only teach others to respect the rules of the platform and the state, but also contribute to rulemaking for sustaining the operations of fans' (sub-)communities and creating a harmonious atmosphere.

Survival of the Content

In post-reading/watching processes, fans collaborate to extend the popularity of the storyworld or to preserve it from possible damages and risks. The survival phase refers to the preservation of *MDZS* content and merchandise on and beyond the web, as they are always susceptible to being damaged,

deleted, or blocked. For instance, the popularity of the adapted web series *Chen Qing Ling* in 2019 made its fans worried that it might be discontinued by an intervention from officials whose attitude to the same-sex love content was (and still is) relatively negative. Explicit descriptions of homosexual love in TV/web series are prohibited in China. In December 2015, the government introduced the “General Regulations on Television Content Production,” which defined homosexuality as abnormal and sexual freedom as unhealthy. As an effect, to continue producing any queer-themed content on the Chinese market, producers often launch opaque strategies to recast explicit queer love motifs into implicit bromance narratives in TV/web series production.³³

As a result of this regulation, *Chen Qing Ling* was subject to revisions because its original *MDZS* novel contained explicit depictions of same-sex romantic relations. No wonder that besides posts celebrating the success of or bidding farewell to the web series during the last few days of its premiere, there were posts that shared concerns about the possible removal of the web series from the streaming portal because of its queer engagement. Fan B’s post conveys this worry:

Hi, it’s me again. Please forgive me for annoying you. In your posts, please don’t mention sensitive words like the National Radio and Television Administration, censorship, bromance, capital, etc. They are not fun and will put our web series in danger. I’ve heard Tencent has been interviewed by officials. I’m not sure if it’s true, but take it seriously and be cautious. I know many of you have already downloaded it, so you’re not afraid of deletion, but there will be more videos of post-credits scenes, don’t let them be censored.

Fan B acted as a protector, and their post expressed worry. To make the post sound like casual talk, Fan B, referred to rumour, using it to reinforce their appeal to fans to be careful about how they behaved. The keywords, such as “censorship” and “bromance,” are all intentionally misspelt in the post to be consistent with Fan B’s plea not to mention sensitive words directly. This post suggests that in their efforts to preserve the existing product, fans rely on two tools: self-discipline for prevention and downloading as backup. This intimate and informal exchange between fans underscores the importance of fan bonding in the fannish communications circuit.

Fan behaviours are thus closely linked to the fate of their beloved products, and this interconnectedness is enhanced when facing threats from external

33 Eve Ng and Xiaomeng Li, “A Queer ‘Socialist Brotherhood’: The *Guardian* Web Series, Boys’ Love Fandom, and the Chinese State,” *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 4 (2020): 479–95.

forces. The intimate tone of Fan B's utterance appears to foster a sense of closeness among the members who confront common risks. In addition, the casual chatting style, marked by phrases such as "I heard..." and "I am not sure..." contributes to the liveliness of speech, making it more acceptable and understandable by other members of the community.

The Network and Hashtags in Action

Along with socializing with other members, fans have also organized themselves collectively to refute rumours around *MDZS* concerning plagiarism. One specific method for the rebuttal of suspected plagiarism involved the fans' dissemination of the hashtags "墨香铜臭 辟谣" and "墨香铜臭 澄清." In these two tags, 墨香铜臭 refers to the name of the author of *MDZS*, and the other two words both mean "refuting rumours." These hashtags accompanied posts that presented evidence disproving the plagiarism accusations. For instance, fans searched for and shared paratextual evidence, such as screenshots of the author, Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's, online notes and Weibo posts, which were timestamped to demonstrate that her original ideas and poetics predated Author X's works the online accusations by other Weibo users alleged Mo Xiang Tong Xiu had plagiarized.

By the beginning of August 2022, 6,444 fans had published posts with the former hashtag, eliciting 430 million views and 773,000 replies; and the latter hashtag got 3,508 posts, with 140 million views and 293,000 replies. These posts often included fan-made defence posters with a screenshot of the Anti-Plagiarism Bar's post in their top part. The Anti-Plagiarism Bar was a Weibo account run by CIL fan volunteers to identify plagiarism in CIL creations. In the case of *MDZS*, the Anti-Plagiarism Bar concluded: "My opinion is that I don't think *MDZS* is plagiarism." This assessment was highlighted in a red box in *MDZS* fans' defence posters. Screenshots of posts from Author X's fans were also displayed to show their dismissal of the plagiarism accusations, saying that "we cannot and will not agree with the [plagiarism] viewpoint." Eventually, the accuser's post of apology was quoted in a screenshot to put an end to the dispute. The post read:

For the untrue charges in my posts, I'd like to apologize to Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, and I hope everyone can be cautiously avoid impetuous anti-plagiarism activities. I am so sorry for the author and her fans; I will mind my behaviour in the future.

Unlike in the cases discussed above, this fan's utterance was addressed not only to fellow fans, but to all Chinese Weibo users. In their campaign to demonstrate the innocence of the author, fans employed argumentative and critical skills, similar to those of lawyers and scholars. They adopted a formal tone and relied on quotations and references to lend credibility to their argument. The fans' defence posters as their utterances exhibited multi-voicedness in two ways. Firstly, they were used by different fans under the shared hashtags to enhance the influence of their argument. Secondly, utterances from third parties were quoted to further support the fans' argument. This approach reflects fans' consideration of the general public when the posters were produced, as plain refutation without supporting evidence might not be sufficient to persuade the general public.

As my discussion above indicates, heteroglossia in the fannish communications circuit has three major aspects to it. Firstly, fans adjust their speech acts to their target recipients and purposes, which requires fans to fulfil the role and imitate the speech acts of other social groups. Serious topics, such as setting community rules or refuting rumours in the public sphere, are typically conveyed through formal speech acts related to critical roles, whereas intimate talks among fans often feature a casual tone or a begging tone for the survival of fan objects. Secondly, fans incorporate quotes from or references to others to introduce multiple voices into their arguments and enhance their credibility. Thirdly, fans collectively engage in discussions under shared hashtags to advocate for their fan objects, which increased their influence and visibility on the internet.

At the same time, fans' behaviours and posts are constrained by external socio-economic and cultural impacts. Given that queer-related themes are sensitive content in mainstream Chinese society, fans may take preventive measures by downloading the existing materials or exercising caution when discussing sensitive topics online. In this case, fans' online social behaviours are associated with the fate of fan objects. Additionally, the differentiation and segmentation strategies implemented in marketing by official producers make the general fan community split into several fan sub-communities, where discussions of alternative adaptation forms are often taboo. This may impose further moral and cultural restrictions on fans' utterances and speech acts, so the keyword "respect" is highlighted to avoid offending individuals inside and outside respective fan sub-communities.

Nevertheless, in the fannish communications circuit, fans employ different speech acts within and beyond online fan (sub-)communities in and through which they enact different social roles, depending on the context and their intentions. Fans' voices vary in form, tone, and content,

and disagreements may arise, particularly among voices from different sub-communities. In view of this variety of voices, fan communities should not be reductively considered monologic spaces, since fans play multiple roles, such as content providers, protectors, and defenders. Through their diverse speech acts and social roles, fans actively and productively participate in the entire lifecycle of CIL, including its adaptations.

Conclusion

In digital space, individual posts serve as the minimum unit of social interaction in online fan communities. Through their posts, CIL fans actively participate in the communications circuit of their beloved storyworlds. At the same time, the general fan community is subject to structural differentiation effected by marketing strategies, such as differentiation and segmentation, that produce adaptations. As fan sub-communities emerge for each type of adaptation of a storyworld, they may not recognize connectedness with each other.

In the case of *MDZS*, fans are actively involved in its digital communications circuit through various activities conducted via online posts. Through their speech acts and the content they share, fans assume roles of other social groups to help other fans, preserve and protect the *MDZS*-related content, and defend the author against scandals. The fans' changing and dynamic speech acts contribute to heteroglossia in online (sub)fan communities of *MDZS*, where fans adeptly adjust their speech acts and take on various social identities to achieve different purposes in interactions with different recipients in diverse contexts. Despite constraints from the outer socio-economic and cultural environment, these diverse fan voices proactively influence the lifecycle of *MDZS*.

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Part 2

Characters and Play

4. Sustainable Fandom: A Virtual Ethnography of Sustainable Cosplay and Material Culture on Instagram

Nicolle Lamerichs

Abstract: Cosplay is a rich and visible part of global fan culture. Fans dress up as existing fictional characters in costumes that they often create themselves. To craft their costumes, fans buy and create many items, from wigs and fabrics to make-up. A growing movement in fandom is concerned with making sustainable, green, and durable consumer choices with regards to costuming, also called “ecocosplay.” Through a virtual ethnography on Instagram, this study provides insights on this growing trend of sustainability, upcycling, and recycling in fan culture. Participants, for instance, make sustainable design choices by reusing particular materials, using sustainable materials, and thrifting parts of their outfits. As this case study shows, sustainability is of growing importance in fan and consumer culture.

Keywords: sustainability, costumes, sustainable consumption, sustainable design

Introduction

Sustainability is an important, global problem. It is deeply connected to corporate social responsibility, international supply chains and scarcity of certain natural resources.¹ These different issues are not just a matter of

¹ Lisa McNeill, “Preface to Transitioning to Responsible Consumption and Production,” in *Transitioning to Responsible Consumption and Production*, ed. Lisa McNeill (Basel: MDPI Books, 2020).

companies, but also affect consumers themselves, who are key stakeholders in these value chains.² In fact, *Sustainable Production and Consumption* is the twelfth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the United Nations,³ which emphasizes the urgency in revising supply chains as well as the possibilities of modifying consumer behaviour: “Innovation and design solutions can both enable and inspire individuals to lead more sustainable lifestyles, reducing impacts and improving well-being.”

This change of lifestyle and consumption patterns also affects fans, who are highly engaged consumers of particular brands and products. Fandom has a carbon footprint, and fans show it by flying to global fan conventions, indulging in plastic Funko pops, and getting new wigs for cosplay. Fandom, in other words, is connected to sustainable consumption, a practice closely connected to individual consumer values as well as collective solutions.⁴ Fans increasingly question the sustainability of their practices. One example of this is the Medium post “Environmentally Friendly Geekdom,” where Kristina M. describes that

in geekdom, collecting emblems of our passion is part of the deal. We must admit that we are responsible for a great deal of clutter, much of it made of plastic, in a practice that is anything but environmentally friendly.⁵

Such practices are also discussed on the Reddit thread “Funko and the Environment,” in which a collector prompted other users to discuss their feelings about buying Funko, considering that they are made out of PVC.⁶

These discourses around sustainable consumption, however, can never fully be separated from corporate social responsibility. Companies increasingly engage in sustainable innovation, and use this as a staple for their brand and even a possibility to draw new customers. For instance, toy brand Lego positions itself as a circular economy of play, and has committed to using sustainable materials by 2030.⁷ These practices inspire fans, but also lead

2 Paul Thompson and Patricia Norris, *Sustainability: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

3 United Nations, “UN Launches Drive to Highlight Environmental Cost of Staying Fashionable,” March 25, 2019, 2, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/03/1035161>.

4 Lucie Middlemiss, *Sustainable Consumption: Key Issues* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018).

5 Kristina M. “Environmentally Friendly Geekdom,” *Medium*, March 25, 2017, https://medium.com/@meek_the_geek/how-to-be-an-environmentally-friendly-geek-131d7f546438.

6 Chris_JF, “Funko and the Environment,” *Reddit*, March 14, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/funkopop/comments/kuq47i/funko_and_the_environment/.

7 Lego, “Sustainable Materials” (n.d.), accessed September 25, 2021, <https://www.lego.com/nl-nl/aboutus/sustainable-materials>.

to discussion on what is the baseline of sustainable production. Moreover, some fans may care more about these practices than others, who worry about availability, pricing, and other factors related to their beloved brands.

The construction of this new space around sustainable issues is what I call “sustainable fandom.” This can be defined as a growing movement and set of practices in which dedicated consumers, brands, and other stakeholders critically work towards a fairer ecosystem in the products that they love. Not only do these different actors create awareness around sustainable issues, they also launch new (bottom-up) initiatives, services, and products. Sustainable fandom, then, involves different acts, including critical discourse around companies, knowledge sharing around production and consumption, and an interest in greening one’s own fan activities.

One increasingly popular example of sustainable fandom is eco-friendly and sustainable cosplay, also known as “ecocosplay” (alternatively spelled as “eco-cosplay”). This critical and circular part of the cosplay scene is best defined as a growing movement in fandom is concerned with sustainable, responsible, and durable consumer choices with regards to costuming. Cosplay, short for “costume play,” is a rich and visible part of global fan culture. It is both creative and performative, in a sense that fans create and wear costumes based on fictional characters from popular culture. Immersion and play in cosplay have been studied in detail.⁸⁹ However, as Crawford and Hancock emphasize, cosplay is also a critical making process.¹⁰ It is part of the fashion and textile industry, where sustainability is an urgent issue related to rapid fashion trends and heavy pollution.¹¹ Cosplay should not be mistaken for fast fashion, but it does have a carbon footprint. To craft different costumes for conventions, fans buy and create many items, from wigs and fabrics to make-up.

This chapter provides a lens for studying sustainable fandom, and it focuses on how consumers tackle sustainable issues in fan practices. Through a virtual ethnography of ecocosplay on Instagram, I argue that cosplayers increasingly reflect on their consumption and production, facilitating

8 Paul Mountfort, Anne Peirson-Smith, and Adam Geczy, *Planet Cosplay: Costume Play, Identity and Global Fandom* (Bristol: Intellect, 2018).

9 Theresa Winge, *Costuming Cosplay: Dressing the Imagination* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

10 Gary Crawford and David Hancock, *Cosplay and the Art of Play: Exploring Sub-culture through Art* (New York: Springer International, 2019).

11 Elaine L. Ritch, “Socially Responsible Fashion Practice: Looking Good and Feeling Good,” in *Transitioning to Responsible Consumption and Production*, ed. Lisa McNeill (Basel: MDPI Books, 2020).

pathways to sustainable design. Moreover, they educate their peers on online platforms as informal learning spaces on sustainable fandom and its potential.¹²

Overall, the focus in this chapter is on how fans navigate sustainability, and think about material fan practices in new ways. Cosplayers engage in practices of sustainable design, such as up-cycling, to innovate their fan practices. The fans in this chapter pioneer as they educate each other on sustainable fan practices, and create their own activism and knowledge communities around these topics. However, these fans must not be mistaken as fully representative of the whole cosplay community. Awareness of sustainability is growing, but not a common staple in fandom yet. This chapter, instead, is indicative of how participatory cultures can work towards change bottom-up, and have the potential to create sustainable pathways and possibilities in consumer culture.

Material Fandom and Critical Consumption

Objects are crucial to fans, especially if they are creatives or collectors.¹³ The nature of these objects, and our interactions with them as consumers, can be studied through critical thing theory.¹⁴ Thing theory suggests that objects are closely connected to postmodern identity and consumption society. Objects are socially inscribed with meaning by humans. An object that loses its meaning or use becomes disposable but also reveals a glimpse of its essence as a thing. For instance, it is not a precious comic book anymore, but paper or trash. The meaning of an object, in other words, varies. This is also the case in fandom, where a paper cup can become something else when incorporated into a cosplay, or how a scrap of fabric can be trash or transformed into an accessory.

Within fan studies, we have studied the importance of material culture in fandom, also conceptualized as object-oriented fandom.¹⁵ Merchandise, fabrics, and resin are not just the backbone of cosplay, but of many other

12 James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

13 Lincoln Geraghty, *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom and Collecting Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2014).

14 Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

15 Bob Rehak, "Materiality and Object-Oriented Fandom," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 16 (2014).

fan activities. In his seminal chapter “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” John Fiske writes that collections matter in fandom but focus on quantity rather than quality:

The individual objects are therefore often cheap, devalued by the official culture, and mass-produced. The distinctiveness lies in the extent of the collection rather than in their uniqueness or authenticity as cultural objects.¹⁶

Mell Stanfill describes in *Exploiting Fandom* how this consumption is a way of managing the desires of fans, as well as domesticating them.¹⁷ Consumption is associated with mass production and the industry then. It is closely connected to our fan identity, but restrained by the industry and what it offers. However, a counterpoint to this is how fans create awareness around objects and materiality and actively try to create their own sustainable practices.

Merchandise, objects, and other stuff are intimately connected to our desires as fans. They can for instance signify the characters that we love. In this sense, materiality is deeply connected to what I describe as affective reception,¹⁸ a process in which fans ground their identity in relation to narratives and their characters. Ergo, there is a rich life beyond the material, connected to imagination and the construction of identity. As a material reading can reveal, these objects can represent memories, and fandom throughout our life course as an affective trajectory. Objects can linger in our lives, and become keepsakes or memorabilia. They allow a story to continue in some form and to be remediated physically, but they can also be put together in highly personal collections, related to our personal histories. In *Comics and Stuff*, Henry Jenkins writes:

Stuff represents feelings, memories, ideas, associations, and identities given material form, objectified so they can be shared with others. Stuff plays a vital role in the construction of identity and the performance of self, shaping how we see ourselves and are seen by others.¹⁹

16 John Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 44.

17 Mel Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 89–91.

18 Nicolle Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

19 Henry Jenkins, *Comics and Stuff* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 18.

Material fandom is deeply connected to feelings then, such as nostalgia, and to processes of identity formation. However, stuff is not just a matter of identity, bodies, and feelings. Mass production and consumption has implications in terms of transport, labour, resources and supply chains. Increasingly, consumers have become aware that stuff has a carbon footprint. Stuff, things, and objects are never neutral but are created, circulated, and sold in certain markets and economies. These global supply chains open larger discussions on sustainability, especially in today's platform economy²⁰ where things can be bought with the click of a button from across the world. The objects that we love (a Lego brick, a custom *Doctor Who* shirt) are created and circulated in complex, global systems.

Sustainability cannot be researched without a systemic perspective to fully understand these different contexts and layers, from political and governmental to educational and civic.²¹ Studying these systems in detail is necessary to get the right insights on sustainable pathways. Jonathan Köhler and colleagues emphasize how necessary it is to consider such consumer practices and questions long-term, and prompt us to think about alternatives: "How can we reduce demand and change prevailing lifestyles and consumption patterns? How can society support transitions to alternative social and economic systems, or embark on fundamentally different pathways to sustainability?"²²

However, working towards sustainable transition is not just a matter of scholarship, but also of activism and awareness. Consumers increasingly ask themselves questions about production and consumption as well and educate each other about thoughtful and responsible consumption. How environment-friendly are particular products really, or are they just "green-washing"? What is the carbon footprint of buying at an online platform like Amazon? Should we worry about trends like clothing hauls on TikTok? These questions matter for fandom and consumer studies, where the focus has often been on lifestyle and identity in favour of discourses of sustainable consumption.

Like other consumers, fans increasingly reflect on their buying behaviour, and the logic of consumer society is also put into question by fans. What is seen to be disposable by others becomes durable in fandom, Jenkins points

20 Marc Steinberg, *The Platform Economy: How Japan Transformed the Consumer Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

21 Paul Thompson and Patricia Norris, *Sustainability: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

22 Jonathan Köhler et al., "An Agenda for Sustainability Transitions Research: State of the Art and Future Directions," *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 31 (2019): 22.

out in the introduction to *Comics and Stuff*.²³ Fans preserve packaging that companies deem as disposable and cherish the toys that their parents deem to be rubbish and trash. These acts of circular fandom also show a unique cultural dynamic in fandom. Collecting is innately tied up with our emotions and can be understood as “affective hoarding,”²⁴ but certain collector practices, such as preserving the packaging, can also be read as a critical move against our “throwaway society.”²⁵

Sustainable Cosplay

Historically, fan subcultures have been about sharing, preserving, collecting, and reusing resources. They developed as gift cultures, where swapping zines, art, commissions, and other things has always been a common practice. Fan cultures developed as DIY cultures in which fans locally created their own fanfiction zines, band shirts, and other items.²⁶ This is one reason why Christine Lundberg and Vassilios Zakias²⁷ conceptualize fandom as “collaborative consumption,”²⁸ prefacing the wider app-based sharing economy. Fandom has developed its own collaborative economy in which participants circulate, trade, and create many objects. This economy still characterizes fandom, but it has become more complex as it entwines with the platform economy of large companies, such as Amazon and Alibaba. Cosplay is an example of this economic complexity which involves different platforms, supply chains, and logistics.

A large part of cosplay culture, then, centres around crafting and creative making.²⁹ However, while cosplay used to be a small-scale DIY hobby in many countries, it has increasingly professionalized. The industry has embraced cosplay and international cosplay competitions draw many participants and visitors. Cosplayers often wear many different outfits to one convention. This has impacted cosplay culture. For instance, cosplayers

23 Jenkins, *Comics and Stuff*, 3–9.

24 Miranda Ruth Larsen, “Guest Post: Affective Hoarding,” *On/OffScreen*, May 15, 2018, <https://onoffscreen.wordpress.com/2018/05/15/guest-post-affective-hoarding/>.

25 Tim Cooper, *Longer Lasting Products: Alternatives to the Throwaway Society* (Aldershot: Gower, 2010).

26 Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

27 Christine Lundberg and Vassilios Ziakas, “Fantrepreneurs in the Sharing Economy,” *Event Management* 22, no. 2 (2018): 287–301.

28 Lundberg and Ziakas, “Fantrepreneurs in the Sharing Economy,” 288.

29 Crawford and Hancock, *Cosplay and the Art of Play*, 163–99.

use more expensive materials that are not always sustainable, such as Worbla thermoplastics. Fans are also increasingly aware of textiles, due to critiques of the wider fashion industry. As the Ellen MacArthur Foundation reported, the textile industry is highly polluting and contributes to water scarcity across the globe.³⁰ Cosplayers increasingly raise concerns about the sustainability of certain materials, textiles, logistics, shipping, and the precarious labour involved in costume creation.

Luckily, cosplayers can make use of materials in a circular and innovative way. They increasingly share these practices. In her undergraduate thesis, Sarah West³¹ proposes a strategy for recycling material in cosplay design to reduce waste. Inspired by trends in sustainable fashion and product development, she argues:

If cosplay culture were to embrace an environmental mindset, like the one behind fashion upcycling, the current strategy for management of textile waste would extend into other recyclable materials, such as plastics, glass, and wood, with a growing population of participants.³²

West rightly points out the sustainable potential in cosplay and combines her research with helpful strategies and tips.

Conventions and championships increasingly connect cosplay with sustainability as well. For example, World Cosplay Summit launched an award in 2020 to create awareness around *umigomi* (ocean debris) with the Nippon Foundation. This award is devoted to “unique activities using cosplay to address the issue of ocean debris.”³³ Indonesia received the grand prize in 2020 for their action “Grebek Plastik” (“Take the Plastic”), which involved picking up trash in cosplay to draw attention to environmental issues. The cosplay award that year went to Mai Mai from Indonesia, who created a beautiful fairy dress out of discarded plastic bottles. Thus, material fandom is not neutral, and fans can make thoughtful choices about which materials to acquire and use.

30 Ellen MacArthur Foundation, *A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion's Future* (Cowes, UK: Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017), 20, <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/a-new-textiles-economy>.

31 Sarah West, “Eco-Cosplay: Upcycling as a Sustainable Method of Costume Construction” (BA thesis, University of Arkansas, 2017).

32 West, “Eco-Cosplay,” 4.

33 Nippon Foundation, “The Nippon Foundation Announces Cosplay de UMIGOMI Zero Award 2020 Winners at World Cosplay Summit 2020,” August 2, 2020, <https://www.nippon-foundation.or.jp/en/news/articles/2020/20200802-48439.html>.

The phenomenon of sustainable cosplay is not an isolated or new one. It brings together economy, access and DIY creation processes. In the 1990s and early 2000s, cosplayers were limited in their resources and budget. Costume creation was an amateur practice and cosplayers had to make do with what they had. There were not many web shops dedicated to costume creation, for instance, and the hobby was grassroots. I remember my own costumes from that time, which incorporated parts of bags, carton, foam, and whatever I could find to create bracelets, belts and armour of anime characters. These low-budget costumes have similarities with the discourse of sustainable cosplay, encouraging consumers to use and recycle local resources. Eco-friendly choices in that sense resemble earlier DIY cosplay practices, motivated by economy and availability.

Sustainable cosplay connects to budget cosplay as well, where fans create minimal and affordable costumes by using cheap resources. For instance, Low Cost Cosplay (Anucha Saengchart) has over six million followers on Facebook with his budget cosplays.³⁴ By using towels, bread, mops, and other daily objects he creates hilarious outfits. While this is done as a parody, and not with the explicit purpose of sustainability, it undoubtedly inspires cosplayers to think outside of the box and use materials in creative ways. In other words, it is possible for sustainable practices to cross over into other practices, for instance for the purpose of play or parody. Sustainable cosplay can also be done for economic reasons, simply because fans cannot afford certain materials or lack access to them. In other words, the practice of creating a sustainable cosplay can be an environmental consideration, but also a by-effect of particular economies or types of play.

Approach

For the purpose of this study, I particularly charted ecocosplay as a movement on Instagram. My approach draws from virtual ethnography,³⁵ combined with platform studies. The first offers me an ethnographic stance that distils deep data and focuses on the human aspect. The latter offers insight into the unique affordances and ways of communicating that respective platforms offer.

The study was conducted by systematically viewing content on Instagram between July and August 2021. Instagram is a photography and video-based

34 Lowcostcosplay, "Home," YouTube, October 8, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/Lowcostcosplay>.

35 Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: SAGE, 2000).

platform launched in 2010. Compared to Facebook and Twitter (X), Instagram is highly visual. Instagram has a unique aesthetic, partly due to its filters which are a key selling point of the platforms.³⁶ These make it easy for users to edit photographs and videos in an accessible way. Unique to Instagram is also that content can only be posted via a mobile device. Users can create regular posts, which show up in their profile and on their follower's feeds. They can also use Instagram Reels for short videos and Instagram Stories for captioned content. Stories disappear after twenty-four hours unless the user makes them into a Highlight. Instagram Live also offers users the chance to broadcast and host streams. For the purpose of this study, only permanent posts were considered and retrieved via the hashtags and profiles of users.

I analysed the following amount of posts per hashtag (July 19, 2021): "sustainable cosplay" (258 posts), "ecocosplay" (170 posts), #upcyclecosplay" (174 posts), and #cosplaythrifting (77 posts). By exploring more generic tags such as #cosplayersofinstagram or #paperdress, I identified creators that combine cosplay and sustainable design, but do not tag themselves as part of these communities. I primarily coded posts that explicitly addressed sustainable issues and techniques. Furthermore, I focused particularly on the content itself, how content was tagged, described, and received by other users in their comments. Within this data set, the most relevant posts were sampled and coded, based on whether the cosplayers explicitly address sustainability, cosplay, and material use. For each type of content, I also categorized the sustainable design techniques themselves, such as reuse, thrifting, and sustainable material use. I also added the purpose of the post, such as sharing awareness, inspiration, or insights.

This virtual ethnography also considered spaces beyond Instagram. When I explored the profiles and content of cosplayers active on these hashtags, I also followed the links to their other socials and stores. Many used Instagram to promote their web shops or their cosplay tutorials on YouTube. Thus, this analysis often went hand-in-hand with other platforms, showing that sustainable cosplay is not an isolated phenomenon on Instagram. The pedagogies of these fans extend into other online and offline spaces, such as conventions.

During this research, I was particularly interested in how cosplayers provide a learning space around sustainability, for instance by teaching each other sustainable and circular hacks. Moreover, I traced how cosplayers create awareness around sustainability and the environment. To provide additional context, and to bring my findings back to the fan community,

36 Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019).

I also initiated fan panels around sustainability. For instance, I presented on the topic at Casacon 2021 with cosplay scholar Karen Heinrich, which created an additional dialogue to deepen this work. These qualitative insights confirmed that the findings of this study can also kickstart a broader conversation with fans on sustainability and related issues, such as global consumerism, sustainable design, and DIY culture. Overall, this chapter provides a temporary snapshot of this growing trend in sustainable fandom.

Sustainable Design and Materials

Cosplayers increasingly reflect on the environment, leading to different sustainable cosplay practices. Ecocosplay involves different making practices, such as using second-hand fashion to create a new costume, or recycling other materials. A great overview is provided by German costume and prop designer Svetlana Quindt (@kamucosplay) in her YouTube vlog “Can Cosplay Be Eco-Friendly?”³⁷ which is promoted on Instagram as follows: “Cosplay is not a very eco-friendly hobby and we all can do a lot of things to save energy, create less waste and produce less CO₂ emissions.”³⁸ In her video, Quindt provides ten tips to make the practice more sustainable. Many of these also involve thought consumption, such as shopping smart and taking fabric samples when shopping to avoid overconsumption. She stresses shopping locally, responsible travel to conventions, and not overproducing costumes. Above all, Quindt emphasizes that sustainable fan practices are part of a lifestyle and deeper commitment.

Others commit to using sustainable materials. Cardboard, paper, wood, and other materials can be sustainable alternatives for props and costume creation. For example, at the start of 2020, Kate Bryant Jill commits to using more sustainable materials, such as cardboard: “One of my goals for 2020 is to incorporate more recyclable materials in my cosplay! I love working with #EVA foam I dont love that it’s not super great for the environment lol.”³⁹ This is a good example of a cosplayer who reflects on materials that are common in cosplay (e.g., foam), and consciously thinks about a more sustainable design.

Another cosplayer devoted to sustainable materials is Amber Reifsteck (amberthewoodlandelf). Among her creations are cardboard duel discs from

37 Svetlana Quindt (KamuiCosplay), “Can Cosplay Be Eco-Friendly?,” YouTube, February 8, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYUIT5Qgpwc>.

38 Svetlana Quindt (@kamucosplay), Instagram, February 8, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B8UtmG_IaXN/.

39 Katebryant Jill (@the_Sunnyj), “One of My Goals for 2020 Is to Incorporate More Recyclable Materials in My Cosplay!,” Instagram, January 5, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B66xo4bDqDJ/>.



Figure 4.1. Cardboard Mace Windu lightsaber by @amberthewoodlandelf (2021).

Yu-Gi-Oh,⁴⁰ lightsabers,⁴¹ and *Power Rangers* props,⁴² and she often links to YouTube tutorials in which she details the making process. Amber describes her sustainable lightsaber from the character Mace Windu as follows: “Like most of my lightsabers, this one is constructed from budget-friendly and eco-friendly upcycled cardboard.” However, sustainable cosplay design is broader than these materials alone. It can also involve the making of new fabrics and material from scratch. A post by Crafter Geek⁴³ shows them hand-weaving their own material, a linen fabric that will be sewn into a costume for the upcoming Dragoncon convention.

These responsible material choices also come with an awareness for what is *not* sustainable. Cosplayers educate each other on materials and sustainable alternatives, thereby creating their own pedagogy. This is a pattern in many fan communities, which can act as sites of mentorship, knowledge, and social justice.⁴⁴ For example, costume store owner Heather

40 Amber Reifsteck (@amberthewoodlandelf), “Yu-Gi-Oh Duel Disc,” Instagram, April 22, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CN8jXpoLbJh/>.

41 Amber Reifsteck (@amberthewoodlandelf), “Mace Windu Lightsaber,” Instagram, July 15, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRVBuccrgAQ/>.

42 Amber Reifsteck (@amberthewoodlandelf), “White Ranger’s Saba Sword,” Instagram, July 1, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQxEKfBoYJx/>.

43 Crafter Geek (@craftergeek), “#weaving My Own Cosplay Fabric,” Instagram, July 1, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQzANwhjg-L/>.

44 Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2016).

uses Instagram regularly to promote her YouTube vlog, which also features a video in which she critically discusses the use of polyester in the communities: “If you’re concerned about plastic and micro plastics, you should be concerned about polyester as well.”⁴⁵ Heather is an example of a cosplayer who encourages others to make a more sustainable choice, and uses platforms like Instagram and YouTube to educate her peers. One way in which fans engage in ecocosplay, then, is by committing to sustainable design and material use choices.

Thrifting and Upcycle Cosplay

Another way in which costumes can be sustainable is by making use of second-hand fashion or accessories. Through “upcycling,” or the repurposing of existing garments and accessories, cosplayers reuse existing materials. A large part of the cosplay posts studied for this chapter (about 80%) dealt with repurposing, upcycling, or recycling products, provided through thrifting, sharing, or gifting by peers or other networks. Cosplayers are often proud of their pieces and their approach. The Eco Cosplayer adds when describing her upcycled *Lunar Chronicles* cosplay: “All of my cosplays are made from 80–100% recycled/secondhand materials!”⁴⁶

Another user nicknamed Steampunk Amaze also engages in upcycling, and showcases her steampunk Belle dress from Disney’s 1991 classic *Beauty and the Beast*. She describes the piece as follows: “The dress was a bridesmaid dress from goodwill, I added on the roses and the darker yellow swoopy things.”⁴⁷ The steampunk corset that Steampunk Amaze wears is also second-hand and adds to her vintage interpretation of Belle. Another example are the costumes by Dutch cosplayer Wendy (@wendowlivesocplay), who regularly creates costumes from second-hand fashion. Her cosplay of Disney’s Cinderella is a good example of her work, and received 222 likes.⁴⁸ She describes the making process as follows: “Costume and wig are completely upcycled by me. Base dress was a second hand Cosrea dress. Completely

45 Heather (@mythroseclothing), “Where the F*&k Did Polyester Come From?,” Instagram, May 25, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CPTXRW6HeTU/>.

46 The Eco Cosplayer (@the_eco_cosplayer), “Lunar Chronicles Cosplay,” Instagram, March 6, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/BgZuwS_HIRP/.

47 Steampunk Amaze (@steampunkamaze), “Steampunk Belle,” Instagram, July 11, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRLJOrkhRFE/>.

48 Wendy (@wendowlivesocplay), “Cinderella Cosplay,” Instagram, December 13, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CiwAWBzDqvy/>.

redid the lining, added boning, lace, sequin fabric, organza, tulle and some iridescent fabric.”

Creative upcycling and sustainable design is also displayed in the Hylian shield by Gwan Cosplay.⁴⁹ She repainted a simple shield from a charity shop and recreated it painstakingly into a shield from *The Legend of Zelda* franchise. She describes the paint job as follows: “I have a friend who found this shield in a common thrift store for peanuts and I thought it would actually be decent after a little paint job!” The result is an excellent replica of a Hylian shield from *The Legend of Zelda*. What these examples show is that second-hand fashion or props are not something cosplayers simply put on or repaint. Instead, they are often retailed and repurposed to a great extent, for instance to make the costume form-fitting or an exact replica for a character.

Donations from friends, charity shops, and online platforms are a goldmine for cosplayers who repurpose second-hand garments. Eco-designer Kate Mac (@bykatymac) thrifts her costumes, but also depends on donations. From Tudor gowns to ball dresses, Mac makes most of her outfits from second-hand fabrics and materials. Her Instagram showcases the buttons that she found in a charity store,⁵⁰ and the second-hand fabrics and masks donated to her by a friend.⁵¹ Mac is eager to educate others in sustainable design. In an interview promoted on the account @upcycled_cloth_collective⁵² Mac helps others with her insights on eco-design, and shares helpful tips.

Raising awareness is important to many cosplayers on #ecocosplay and #upcyclecosplay. The before-mentioned Heather (@mythroseclothing) regularly shares tips on these hashtags, including a post for beginners at thrifting.⁵³ She emphasizes shopping regularly and not being too specific in what you look for:

Shopping for specific things ... needs to be done with flexibility and some knowledge that may not have yet, like knowing what is quality and what is garbage, your skill level when it comes to fixing something or upcycling something.

49 Gwan Cosplay (@gwancosplay), “Upcycled Hylian Shield,” Instagram, June 20, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBp7pdLDpBc/>.

50 Kate Mac (@bykatymac), “Vintage Buttons, Charity Shop Curtains,” Instagram, June 11, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBTRJa4DvVr/>.

51 Kate Mac (@bykatymac), “Donations by Friend,” Instagram, June 1, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CA6BzU8gLoj/>.

52 Kate Mac (@bykatymac), “Interview with Upcycled Cloth Collective,” Instagram, May 28, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CPbZLmcDHOo/>.

53 Heather (@mythroseclothing), “3 Beginner Thrifting Tips,” Instagram, January 6, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJtiekIhvgb/>.

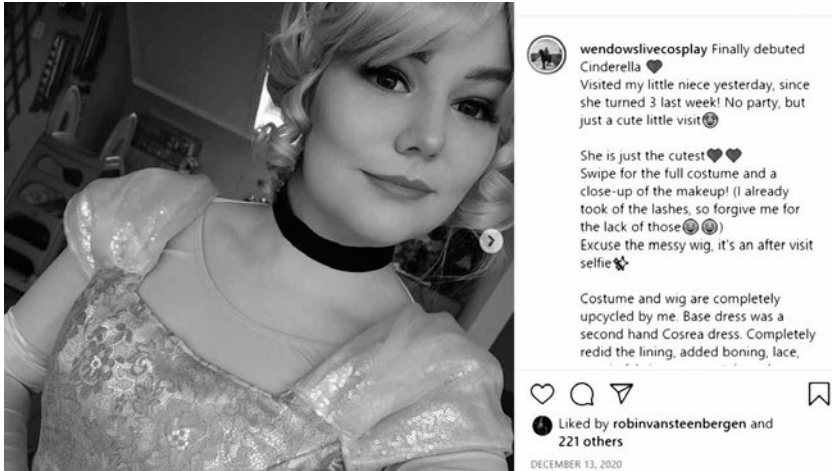


Figure 4.2. Wendy (@wendowlivecosplay) in upcycled Cinderella dress (2020).

Heather also regularly shares inspirational posts around sustainable lifestyles and costuming to motivate others in making responsible choices.

As these examples show, repurposing second-hand outfits and props has sustainable benefits in cosplay. However, it can be difficult to know where to find these items or where to start. Luckily, Instagram functions as an informal space of learning around these sustainable issues and thrifting related to fandom.

Recycling and Waste Reuse

Sustainable creation can extend beyond reusing and repurposing second-hand material. Ecosplayers also recycle materials in a completely new way. What others consider junk or waste, can be a valuable resource for sustainable designers. The influential cosplayer Olivia Mears uses products such as napkins and wrappings to create fantastic outfits, like a Disney's Belle dress from Taco Bell wrappers.⁵⁴ Mears regularly uses napkins, plastic bags, and other unconventional materials in her costumes. She has been a pioneer in showing fans that cosplay and costuming can be circular fashion, too, with an emphasis on using discarded materials in innovative ways.

54 Olivia Mears (@avantgeek), "In 2012 I Won First Prize in the @tacobell Live Mas Contest with This Dress Made of 100+ (Clean) Wrappers and Sauce Packets," Instagram, February 7, 2015, <https://www.instagram.com/p/yzxMoPQowV/?hl=en>.

Waste, trash, and junk can be used in many different ways, both for costumes as well as props. An inspiring example is the Divine Beast Vah Medoh puppet from *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), built by Julie-Chantal, depicted in figure 4.3.⁵⁵ It's entirely made from carton packaging and other recycled materials. The designer emphasizes: "You don't need fancy materials to make awesome stuff. Made all this with stuff from my recycle bin, and I'm so happy with the look."

Cosplayers also share other techniques for upcycling. In an Instagram video,⁵⁶ Kirilee Cosplay shows how to turn bottle caps into gems: "Want to save the planet a little and turn some trash into treasure? Then this is a tutorial about how you can take plastic bottle caps and turn them into some cool looking faux gems." This video clearly shows the creativity of cosplayers in recycling material. The bottle caps are melted, kneaded, put into a mould and cut into a perfect shape. When using waste, such as packaging or bottles, cosplayers have to think outside of the box and use innovative techniques to repurpose existing material.

Through inspirational posts, cosplayers educate each other on reusing and recycling materials in their cosplays. In an Instagram post titled "Hoarding Trash: A Cosplay Story,"⁵⁷ paisleyandglue details her new drawer for fabric scraps, foam and other leftover materials on Instagram. She intends to use her waste more creatively during the pandemic, from medicine bottles to cardboard packaging. She concludes: "I'm also very aware of how wasteful a hobby cosplay (and garment making) is so I'm trying to be thoughtful where I can!" Raising awareness of waste and reuse is an explicit goal of this post. She asks other cosplayers to respond with their creative reuse and inspire each other. Many state they are "craft hoarders" as well, who reuse gift packaging and other material in their costumes already. For instance, calley_macleod comments: "Most of my cosplays are made from junk or scraps my profilenic [profile icon] costume is like 80% landfill salvage XD"

Through different challenges, such as #upcyclecosplaychallenge, cosplayers actively promote sustainable design as well. The ScrapEpic Challenge (#ScrapEpic2020 with 496 posts) is a great example, hosted by Kirilee Cosplay

55 Julie-Chantal (@julie.chantal), "Project: Vah Medoh," Instagram, April 27, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B_fl3lVna_x/.

56 Kirilee Cosplay (@kirileecosplay), "How to Make Gems from Plastic Caps," Instagram, March 8, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9c2lwMjMET/>.

57 Paisleyandglue (@paisleyandglue), "Hoarding Trash: A Cosplay Story," Instagram, April 3, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-h3L6kjiZZ/?next=%2Fpaisleyandglue%2F>.



Figure 4.3. Divine Beast Vah Medoh puppet by @julie.chantal.

and @alanaowlet. In their original prompt,⁵⁸ they encourage cosplayers to use scraps in innovative ways and create full outfits for this online competition. Their challenge led to 496 posts with different costumes, all made from leftovers. By creating prompts, challenges, and inspiring tutorials, cosplayers educate each other on sustainable design and circular cosplay. The sustainable benefit is that waste is rethought and reused in this subculture.

Conclusion

Sustainable fandom is a growing movement, which should be considered in future fan studies. The case study on ecocosplay demonstrated how cosplayers, as consumers and crafters, reflect on these issues and green their own fan practices. They actively strive to make cosplay more environmentally conscious, circular, and sustainable. Thrifting, upcycling, and conscious buying were just a few of the design techniques that they applied, showing an increased awareness of materiality and an effort to consciously minimize their carbon footprint.

As this study shows, cosplayers increasingly focus on sustainable issues and products in informal learning spaces. As a learning space, however, a platform such as Instagram comes with challenges. While sustainable

⁵⁸ Kirilee Cosplay (@kirileecosplay), “#Scrapepic 2020: Make Cosplay during Quarantine,” Instagram, April 1, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-asVkwjpvL/>.

cosplay is growing, it does not have a consistent hashtag or community behind it yet, which sometimes poses challenges for the data collection. Specific hashtags selected for this study (#ecocosplay, #upcyclecosplay) had to be paired with a general look at more common hashtags (#cosplayersofinstagram). Doing a virtual ethnography, however, enabled me to do a systematic close reading of this community. This study cannot be seen as separate from influencers either, who can boost these hashtags and movements. Some cosplayers invested in sustainability have large followings on Instagram, such as @avantgeek (147 k) and @kamuicosplay (751 k). Their sustainable material use and creations make an impression and inspire others to critically reflect on their designs as well.

While consumption by fans can be understood as an affective and narrative practice, it is also tied up with sustainable transitions. It is my hope that fan studies will increasingly address these complicated issues further and examine consumer culture in the context of these wider ecosystems. This also requires a revised understanding of materiality in the field where the focus is not exclusively on lifestyle, but also on the sustainable potential of fan practices.

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5. The Turmoil of Dating Game Characters: False Promises of Agency in *Genshin Impact*

Joleen Blom

Abstract: This chapter concentrates on *Genshin Impact*'s dating simulator and the romantic affective desire it facilitates within its players. Video games, particularly those with dating simulator elements, can be designed to facilitate parasocial relationships between players and game characters, by endowing players with the agency over characters to steer the development of the romantic relationship. At the same time, game characters have become an important means of generating revenue for free-to-play games. This chapter, therefore, closely scrutinizes *Genshin Impact*'s dating simulator, arguing that it only serves to attach players to the game product for monetary reasons by giving the impression that players have agency over the characters, but changes nothing in the game at all.

Keywords: dating simulator, video games, parasocial relationships, agency

Introduction

Our digital society has seen an increase in affection with virtual companions over the last twenty years, ranging from pet-like creatures such as the Tamagotchi, voice assistants such as Alexa and Google Assistant,¹ to fictional characters in comics, films, video games, and more.² The affective desire for fictional characters occupies an increasingly large role for users

1 Yolande Strengers and Jenny Kennedy, *The Smart Wife: Why Siri, Alexa, and Other Smart Home Devices Need a Feminist Reboot* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2020).

2 Jaqueline Burgess and Christian Jones, "I Harbour Strong Feelings for Tali Despite Her Being a Fictional Character': Investigating Videogame Players' Emotional Attachments to Non-player

to engage with contemporary popular media. While a virtual pet like the Tamagotchi might invite a parasocial relationship that resembles caregiving and ownership,³ parasocial relationships with fictional characters of a romantic nature have become increasingly more common.⁴ Video games of the dating simulator genre actively stimulate players to engage in such romantic relationships with characters.⁵

This chapter concentrates on *Genshin Impact's* dating simulator and the romantic affective desire it facilitates within its players. In her work on affective reception within fan cultures, Lamerichs explains affect as an embodied response towards a media text and its characters, generated by the audience themselves.⁶ Different kinds of media texts can prompt audiences to generate an embodied response towards its characters, creating parasocial relationships with the characters. For video games, Waern explains that games can be designed to facilitate affect towards the character(s), where the effect lies in the interplay between the players' preference to indulge in romance and the game's design to endorse such indulgence.⁷ Such interplay particularly applies to video games with dating simulator elements, such as games where the creation of the parasocial relationship is embedded in the main mechanics, like many *bishōjo* games and *otome* games,⁸ or games where parasocial relationships are embedded in the game's secondary mechanics, like many (Japanese) role-playing games like *Persona 5* or even dungeon crawlers like *Hades*.⁹

Characters," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 20, no. 1 (2020), <http://gamestudies.org/2001/articles/burgessjones>.

3 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 167.

4 Veli-Matti Karhulahti and Tanja Väälisalo, "Fictosexuality, Fictoromance, and Fictophilia: A Qualitative Study of Love and Desire for Fictional Characters," *Frontier in Psychology* 11 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.575427>.

5 Susana Tosca and Lisbeth Klastrup, *Transmedial Worlds in Everyday Life: Networked Reception, Social Media and Fictional Worlds* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019); Patrick W. Galbraith, *The Ethics of Affect: Lines and Life in a Tokyo Neighborhood* (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2021).

6 Nicolle Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 30.

7 Annika Waern, "I'm in Love with Someone That Doesn't Exist! Bleed in the Context of a Computer Game," in *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection*, ed. Jessica Enevold and Esther MacCallum-Stewart (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2015), 42.

8 Leticia Andlauer, "Pursuing One's Own Prince: Love's Fantasy in Otome Game Contents and Fan Practice," *Mechademia Second Arc: Childhood* 11, no. 1 (2019): 166–83; Galbraith, *The Ethics of Affect*.

9 Atlus/P-Studio, *Persona 5* (Playstation 4) (2016); Supergiant Games, *Hades* (Nintendo Switch) (2020).

Affect has come to play an important role in contemporary game business models. In this chapter, I examine *Genshin Impact*'s free-to-play monetization model.¹⁰ The business model of this Chinese game stands out because it focuses on the distribution of Japanese manga and anime characters to attract players. *Genshin Impact* is currently one of the highest grossing games on the market. It surpassed a revenue of three billion US dollars from their mobile phone players in the first quarter of 2022.¹¹ It generates most of its revenue in China (ranking number one), but also in Japan (ranking number two), and in the United States (ranking number three).¹² Such free-to-play games are designed as never-ending experiences where, as Alha explains, the “playable content never ends as long as the game continues to be profitable. More content is added constantly, and the speed of progression is limited.”¹³ *Genshin Impact* offers players a continuous stream of new characters, story quests, and other events.

To provide insight on how HoYoverse's business model stimulates affect with new characters, this chapter applies a reader-response aware close playing. I combine the close reading with empirical player experience. Notably, I have included fan responses to the moment that the character Thoma was newly announced on the *Genshin Impact*'s official online forum and their official YouTube channel in the English language.

Agency and affect are closely intertwined in video games. To create a unique parasocial relationship with a character, video games endow players with the affordance to choose between different options, or paths, to steer the direction of the relationship development. This is what Galbraith describes as the main mechanic for players to impact their relationship with the character and encourages them to even develop a certain set of ethics towards their treatment.¹⁴ Waern speaks of *partial agency* to refer to the player's limited ability to decide how romances between player and characters develop, with the games having multiple endings that might surprise players, making them aware of their emotions.¹⁵

10 HoYoverse, *Genshin Impact* (Playstation 4/Playstation 5) (2020).

11 Craig Chapple, “*Genshin Impact* Surpasses \$3 Billion on Mobile, Averages \$1 Billion Every Six Months,” *Sensor Tower* (blog), May 1, 2022, <https://sensortower.com/blog/genshin-impact-three-billion-revenue>.

12 Chapple, “*Genshin Impact* Surpasses \$3 Billion.”

13 Kati Alha, “The Rise of Free-to-Play: How the Revenue Model Changed Games and Playing” (PhD diss., Tampere University, 2020), 79.

14 Galbraith, *The Ethics of Affect*, 120.

15 Waern, “I’m in Love with Someone,” 41.

The chapter originates from my own eight-month gameplay in 2021 during which I played almost daily. By drawing on my own gameplay for this chapter's close playing, I argue that *Genshin Impact* mimics video games with dating simulator elements, like *Persona 5*. Dating simulators (or games with dating-similar elements) usually have game characters that respond according to how players play and the choices players make, which develops the relationship between player and character in a certain way. Thereby, the game invigorates the affect players may feel towards the figure as they experience their own unique parasocial relationship with them, an experience which the game product itself acknowledges. However, *Genshin Impact* gives players a promise of agency, a promise that their choices matter. The co-creation of the relationship in this game is a beautiful falsehood. This falsehood serves to attach players to the product for monetary reasons by giving the impression players have agency over the characters, but changes nothing in the game at all.

The Conditions of Dating Characters in *Genshin Impact*

Genshin Impact is a video game that can be best described as a role-playing game that contains multiple games. After the mandatory introduction, players can roam the world of Teyvat in whatever way they want, ranging from completing the main quest, story quests, traversing dungeons, building their own home base, fishing, fighting monsters, or just wandering through the world exploring. The heart of *Genshin Impact*'s revenue model is occupied by its characters. The developer, HoYoverse, understands the power of affect towards characters well. One form of affect is known as *moe*, a Japanese term to refer to the desire for fictional characters. *Moe*, so Nagayama describes, is the desire to "select and extract a character from a work ... and personalize and possess it."¹⁶ *Genshin Impact* plays into this desire; as typical of a free-to-play game, it advertises new characters (= new content) on a continuous basis, offering these figures in a so-called *wish banner*, a *gacha* mechanic that serves as the game's direct revenue of income.

Gacha is a gambling-like game mechanic commonly used by the game industry from the East Asian region (China, South Korea, and Japan) to monetize their games. The mechanic derives from the *gachapon*, capsule machines in Japan that sell round balls containing different character

16 Kaoru Nagayama, *Erotic Comics in Japan: An Introduction to Eromanga*, trans. Patrick W. Galbraith and Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 104.

figurines and other items. By putting 100–500 yen (about one to five euro) coins in the machine, consumers purchase a capsule ball that may or may not contain the item they desire. *Gacha* fits into the contemporary game monetization trend of free-to-play games which are, in Europe and the USA, associated with loot boxes and in-game purchases.¹⁷ *Gacha* and loot boxes are what we may call random reward mechanics (RRMs), which Nielsen and Grabarczyk define as the “the implementation of random reward procedures for selection and delivery of rewards in video games.”¹⁸

An ethical issue is that *gacha* and loot boxes share a resemblance of gambling, a trait typical of free-to-play games.¹⁹ Loot boxes are, for example, under regulation by law in the Netherlands and Belgium, because they could potentially contribute to gambling addictions.²⁰ While *gacha* seems to be less known by authorities in Europe and the USA, they do bear similarities with gambling as well because of their rare and special items one may obtain.²¹

Genshin Impact's wish banner is a highly lucrative *gacha* mechanic. The game's wish banner offers new and old characters every three weeks in which players can use in-game resources they have accumulated over hours of gameplay—or pay—for the chance to obtain a desired character. The rarity of characters plays an important role in *gacha* games. The game has four-star and five-star characters, of which the chances to get one of the latter tier are low. For example, the banner of the popular five-star tier character Raiden Shogun banner (Reign of Serenity 1) was available between September 1 and 21, 2021.²² Out of over forty million attempts, only 1.69 per cent of those attempts were successful. The same applies to the five-star tier character Kamisato Ayako whose banner (Azure Excursion 1) ran from March 30 to April 19, 2022. Out of over thirty-five million attempts, only

17 Joseph Macey and Mila Bujić, “The Talk of the Town: Community Perspectives on Loot Boxes,” in *Modes of Esports Engagement in Overwatch*, ed. Maria Ruotsalainen, Maria Törhönen, and Veli-Matti Karhulahti (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 199–223.

18 Rune Kristian Lundedal Nielsen and Pawel Grabarczyk, “Are Loot Boxes Gambling? Random Reward Mechanisms in Video Games,” *ToDiGRA* 4, no. 3 (2019): 174.

19 Alha, “The Rise of Free-to-Play.”

20 Kansspelautoriteit, “Sommige Loot Boxes in Strijd Met Kansspelwet,” Kansspelautoriteit, April 19, 2018, <https://kansspelautoriteit.nl/nieuws/2018/april/artikel-o/>; Kansspelcommissie, “Onderzoeksrapport Loot Boxen” (Brussel: FOD Justitie, April 2018), <https://kansspelcommissie.be/sites/default/files/2021-02/2018%20Rapport%20-%20Loot%20boxen%20%28NL%29.pdf>.

21 Akiko Shibuya, Mizuha Teramoto, and Akiyo Shoun, “Systematic Analysis of In-Game Purchases and Social Features of Mobile Social Games in Japan,” in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2015: Diversity of Play: Games—Cultures—Identities*, 2015, 3, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/137_Shibuya_et_al_Systematic-Analysis-of-In-game-Purchases.pdf.

22 Paimon.moe, “Global Wish Stats—Reign of Serenity I,” *Paimon.moe*, N/A, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220815015616/https://paimon.moe/wish/tally?id=300018>.

1.64 per cent of the attempts were successful in obtaining him.²³ Four-star tier characters do not feature as prominent characters in a banner, but the chances of obtaining them are significantly higher.

For example, the chances of obtaining a four-star tier character like Thoma, who became available in the Moment of Bloom 2 banner, was 13.04 per cent.²⁴ The downside is that these characters are usually less strong in gameplay. As a result, players of *gacha* games are constantly faced with a trade-off between either spending their time or their money, and, according to Woods, become strategically calculative to avoid monetary investments in favour of temporal investments.²⁵ They have to grind for hours to accumulate enough resources to obtain characters for free, meaning that time is of real value as a trade-off for monetary investments.²⁶ This means that if players want to obtain a five-star character, they would need to spend a lot of hours for resources to obtain them for free if they manage to obtain any at all.

While there are many ways through which *Genshin Impact* players can engage with the game's characters, one of the outstanding means that figures in a player's desire for a parasocial relationship with the characters is *Genshin Impact*'s "hangout events." These events became a permanent feature in *Genshin Impact*'s version 1.4 on March 17, 2021. The game refers to these hangout events as "Story Quests" in which players can create "memories" with certain four-star characters. There are, at the time of writing, eighteen different characters available for the hangout events. The hangout events replicate dating simulator elements often found as secondary mechanics in role-playing games such as *Persona 5* or *The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III*.²⁷

Hangout events are a separate game segment in the overall game in which players create parasocial relationships between player and character, where their choices steer the character's development to a certain fixed direction, often providing pleasure in the catharsis of the character's personal development. During a hangout event, players will go on quests with the character of their choice, which may consist of helping them to retrieve items for the

23 Paimon.moe, "Global Wish Stats—Azure Excursion 1 & Ballad in Goblets 3," *Paimon.moe*, N/A, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220815021159/https://paimon.moe/wish/tally?id=300028>.

24 Paimon.moe, "Global Wish Stats—Moment of Bloom 2," *Paimon.moe*, N/A, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220815021631/https://paimon.moe/wish/tally?id=300021>.

25 Orlando Woods, "The Economy of Time, the Rationalisation of Resources: Discipline, Desire and Deferred Value in the Playing of *Gacha* Games," *Games and Culture* 17, no. 7–8 (2022): 1088–89.

26 Woods, "The Economy of Time, the Rationalisation of Resources," 1088–89.

27 Nihon Falcom (2017), *The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III* [Playstation 4], NIS America.

character, supporting them to overcome their troubles, or going on dates with them. The outcome of these quests depends on the players' choices during their interaction with the characters. In other words, the hangout events offer players a form of agency in which their choices matter to create a unique parasocial relationship with them that the game acknowledges by a change in the narrative.

Yet, agency in video games is a muddled concept. When describing agency, Galbraith and Waern portray the concept as a set of actions that matter. In her meta-synthesis on the use of the term agency in game studies, Jennings explains that agency is often synonymously used with words such as “freedom, choice, control, autonomy, and action.”²⁸ She finds that many scholars celebrate agency and interactivity in games as “interlocked phenomena that together create the unique experience of gameplay.”²⁹ Although both Waern and Galbraith acknowledge the presence of players' own preferences and imagination in creating romantic parasocial relationships, their use of agency fits within this scholarly eulogy; that is, they refer to agency as choices and control over players' relationships with the characters that impact the game's narrative and character. Jennings calls this type of agency “narrative agency,” a term that refers not only to making choices leading to different outcomes, but also includes players as moral agents by “inviting them to accept their complicity within the ethical dilemmas, character developments, and branching narrative paths of gameworlds.”³⁰ From this perspective, it should be the narrative agency that generates affect with players. However, while the hangout events seemingly offer branched stories in which the outcomes depend on the player's interaction with the character, I will show in my close reading below that these outcomes do not matter since they are actually designed based on replayability and transactional rewards.

Approach

In this chapter, I analyse the hangout event with Thoma, a character introduced in the game's version 2.0, July 21, 2021, when the land of Inazuma was released as a new space. Thoma's hangout event, “A Housekeeper's Daily Chores,” became available on October 13, 2021, with the release of the game's version

28 Stephanie Jennings, “A Meta-Synthesis of Agency in Game Studies: Trends, Troubles, Trajectories,” *GAME: The Italian Journal of Game Studies*, no. 8 (2019): 89.

29 Jennings, “A Meta-Synthesis of Agency in Game Studies,” 89.

30 Jennings, “A Meta-Synthesis of Agency in Game Studies,” 90.

2.2. While the focus is on the close playing, I will supplement it with data of fan responses on HoYoverse's own forum to Thoma's official introduction and of Thoma's "Character Demo" on their English YouTube channel to give insight into what attracts players to the character.³¹ As an aca-fan myself, I became interested in Thoma because he is one of the game's few adult male characters and has a more approachable and friendly attitude than the other adult male characters in the game, who are portrayed as cool and unapproachable.

For the analysis, I provide a reader-response-aware close playing, commonly used in the field of game studies to explain a game's malleability, that is, how a game text is designed to be open to multiple readings by different players.³² I focus particularly on how *Genshin Impact*'s monetization model connects to the game's dating simulator to stimulate affect. For this reason, I partially include my own affective responses to Thoma in the close playing to give a detailed analysis on how *Genshin Impact*'s hangout events encourage affect from player towards the character, and what kind of agency the game gives players in this dating simulator.

In addition, I will explain that the data from HoYoverse's forum and YouTube channel shows that players' affect towards the characters is already roused when the characters are announced, before they even become playable in the game, which presents that the business model is significant in players' desire towards the character. Through this approach, I will argue that the player's agency is unfortunately a redundant feature and serves only to commercialize affect towards characters by giving the *impression* players have agency over the characters but does not change anything in the overall game at all.

Six Dates with Thoma

I went on six dates in total with Thoma. The hangout events attempt to create a sense of intimacy between player and character through several

31 Genshin Impact Official, "A Protector from Afar with a Loyal Heart," HoYoLAB, August 30, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211026091624/https://www.hoyolab.com/article/782370>; "Character Demo—"Thoma: Blazing Defense" | Genshin Impact," YouTube, October 29, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPoeE5PRWTw&t=7s>.

32 See, for example, Espen Aarseth, "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis," in *Melbourne DAC 2003 Streamingworlds: 5th International Digital Arts & Culture Conference*, RMIT University, School of Applied Communication, Melbourne, Australia, May 2003, ed. Adrian Miles (Melbourne: RMIT University, 2003); Astrid Ensslin, *Literary Gaming* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2014); Joleen Blom, *Video Game Characters and Transmedia Storytelling: The Dynamic Game Character* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023).

game design techniques commonly found in dating simulator games. For example, during the hangout events, the game's camera shifts in angle, from third person view to first person, as if directly talking to me, the player. At all times as I was interacting with Thoma, I was presented with a close angle to his face, which allows for a better reading of how he expresses emotions. Such a close angle is common for *bishōjo* and *otome* games, like *LovePlus* or *Hakuoki: Memories of the Shinsengumi*, but we also see them in games where the dating (or friendship) simulator is the secondary mechanic, like *Let's Go Pikachu* and *Eevee!* or *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*.³³ Thoma's face surely was expressive. It struck me that along with the emotions, other symbols to indicate his feelings often appeared next to his face. Following Thoma's good-spirited personality, I was often presented with symbols such as the musical note [♪] or hearts [♥], signs evocative of Japanese manga and anime, which are closely intertwined with video games from Japan.³⁴ These indicated his feelings of when he was overjoyed or really loved something (such as cats and dogs).

The clearest indicator of the hangout events mimicking dating simulators arises from its dialogue options and branching story paths, which are the features through which players steer the relationship between player and character onto a certain path with a specific ending. They are, as both Galbraith and Waern indicate, the most important feature to create an affective impact on players, because they provide player agency.³⁵ When I played Thoma's event, it started with two samurai of the Kamisato clan speaking behind his back. I decided to stand up for Thoma before he interrupted, assuring me he does not really care about his reputation. Shaking off the gossip, he quickly asked me what I wanted to do, which presented me with the dialogue option to either shake off the gossip as well or pursue it—an indication of the branching of the hangout's storyline. I opted to shake it off, so then Thoma asked me what we should do together for our date: go outdoors and pet the stray dogs and cats he likes taking care of or stay indoors and go to a tea house? I decided to go with the first option: pet the cats and dogs.

33 Konami, *LovePlus* (Nintendo DS) (2009); Idea Factory/Rising Star Games, *Hakuoki: Memories of the Shinsengumi* (Nintendo 3DS) (2013); Game Freak, *Let's Go, Pikachu!* and *Let's Go, Eevee!* (Nintendo Switch) (2018); Intelligent Systems/Koei Tecmo, *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (Nintendo Switch) (2018).

34 Martin Picard and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon, "Introduction: *Geemu*, Media Mix, and the State of Japanese Video Game Studies," *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* 5, no. 1 (2015): 1–19.

35 Galbraith, *The Ethics of Affect*; Waern, "I'm in Love with Someone."

For the date, I met Thoma at a big tree in Inazuma City, where he directed me to two cats and a dog. He told me he would come there often to feed them, which we did this time as well. As the animals filled their bellies, Thoma told me of a special type of dog, a ninja dog. He saw one not too long ago. He then proceeded to ask if I wanted to meet it. I accepted and off we went to the beach to find Ninken, a Shiba Inu dog wearing ninja gear, looking at us suspiciously, not trusting us for even a bit. During the interaction between me, Thoma, and Ninken, we discovered that Ninken's owner is on a dangerous mission and will not return, leaving Ninken waiting for him. Thoma decided to give Ninken his owner's *kunai*, a ninja weapon, to remember the owner by. The scene ended with a picture of Thoma, Ninken, and the main character (representing the player) staring off into the sun set, indicating the end of the hangout and showing the precious memory Thoma and I made.

Afterwards the menu screen presented me with a storyline tree with different paths I could have taken and different endings I could have received if I had chosen a different dialogue option. To stimulate players playing through the rest of the branches, the hangout events have an easy replayability; all I needed to do was to click on a checkpoint I had played before where the tree branched, and I was transported to that specific moment and could continue the story from there. For my second playthrough, I returned to the moment Thoma asked me to see the ninja dog. The game marked which answer I had given prior, so this time I opted not to see the ninja dog. The story continued with Thoma talking about his past in Mondstadt. This ending presented me with a picture of the game's main character and Thoma sitting next to the tree surrounded by the stray cats and dog for whom Thoma had knitted sweaters. The rest of the paths are structured in the same way: the player can return to a specific moment in the tree branch, choose another dialogue option, and continue the story from there. In every branch, a new side of Thoma will be brought to light, and the player will receive another picture to memorialize the encounter.

Despite the intimate setting, the player's agency in *Genshin Impact*'s hangout events is only an illusion of choice. Games containing dating simulator mechanics, like those described by Galbraith and Waern, impact the story and its characters, from which affect then derives. The player's narrative agency plays a major role because their choices matter as they influence the degree of narrative catharsis of the character and the progression of the game. However, despite that the hangout events are designed for replayability, the player's choices have no structural impact on the characters or the game's main story at all. There are no consequences, no

matter how the player traverses through the hangout events. There is not even any partial agency in how the relationship between Thoma and the player will develop as all routes end well, there are no surprise endings. Above all, Thoma's attitude towards the player after each ending does not change, and neither does it affect his storyline in the game's main storyline. Unlike dating simulators, the hangout events are not designed to encourage agency through meaningful choices over the game characters.

Fan Responses to Thoma

If the design of the hangout events does not invigorate affect through agency over the characters, then what may? Fan responses may provide some insight as to why players respond affectively towards *Genshin Impact's* characters. When Thoma was announced to appear in the game, HoYoverse published his details, like his personality and background on their official online forum on August 30, 2021.³⁶ This is part of their usual strategy with their new characters: when a character is officially announced through social media (through their official forum, YouTube, and Twitter channels), HoYoverse will post details about them first on their own forum before they will start a full-blown social media campaign months later right before they release the character into the game.³⁷ This way fans of the game become acquainted with the character months before they can use the characters in-game.

The fan responses to Thoma on HoYoverse's forum post were extremely positive. Top comments show that the overwhelming reason why players were so eager about him is because HoYoverse finally released an adult male character, putting him in the same category as male characters like Zhongli, Diluc, Kaeya, and Childe, who are all tall adult men, the same reason why I personally liked this character. This was in reaction to HoYoverse's tendency at the time to predominantly release playable female characters whose aesthetical appearances are commonly found in manga, anime, and video games geared towards straight men. At the time Thoma was advertised for the game, only seventeen out of fifty available characters were men (excluding the player's avatar, also known as the "Traveller"). Additionally, some comments also mention that Thoma is "free-to-play friendly." Unlike Zhongli, Diluc, Kaeya, and Childe, Thoma

36 Genshin Impact Official, "A Protector from Afar with a Loyal Heart."

37 Joleen Blom, "The *Genshin Impact* Media Mix: Free-to-Play Monetization from East Asia," *Mechademia Second Arc: Media Mix* 16, no. 1 (2023): 144–66.

is a four-star character. Players have a reasonable chance to get him from the wish banner, so they do not feel like they have to spend money if they just invest enough time to gather enough primogems (the resource for the wish banner). In short, Thoma's rarity as an adult man and availability as a four-star character gave him an instant popularity boost among players who prefer that type of character.

Other traits that players like are that he is an animal lover (particularly the Shiba Inu dog, with which he is often portrayed), loyal, reliable, and a housekeeper. They were also surprised that he comes from Mondstadt, an in-game city that somewhat resembles Germany and France, while he lives in Inazuma, which resembles Japan. The top comments on his character demo video on YouTube mention that he is liked for his housekeeping skills in combination with his great fighting skills.³⁸

The hangout events seem to be designed to play into the player's desire to get to know different sides of the character, by focusing on the character's traits for which they are advertised. In their exploration of *otome* game players, Tosca and Klastруп discovered that many players desire to explore all the different possible routes of their favourite character.³⁹ They call this phenomenon the players' "gluttonous desire," that is, the wish to explore all the possible character routes, to see different sides of these figures, which provides players pleasure and delight.⁴⁰ Thoma's hangout event mentions his soft masculinity, has a storyline about his love for pets, and another story route delves deeper into his previous life in Mondstadt. By enabling players to smoothly interchange between one path and another in the tree structure, the hangout events facilitate the player's desire to explore as many different sides as possible of the character that they have prior come to know about through HoYoverse's character announcements.

Transactional Dating

That said, the hangout events also fall into the usual trap of many games with dating sim elements: they simplify a parasocial relationship to a systematic and transactional process. Several scholars have pointed out that games tend to frame romantic relationships as something to be won and as something

38 "Character Demo—"Thoma: Blazing Defense" | Genshin Impact."

39 Tosca and Klastруп, *Transmedial Worlds in Everyday Life*.

40 Tosca and Klastруп, *Transmedial Worlds in Everyday Life*, 106.

that the player deserves by performing the right actions or correct strategy.⁴¹ The first problem with the hangout events is that despite the pleasure a player might derive from exploring many different sides of Thoma, the entire relationship falls flat due to the lack of impact of any player choices. Thoma will not have a different attitude in the game's main story towards players regardless of whether they played these events or not. This is not that unusual. Unless they are games of the dating simulator genre, very few games with dating simulator elements deepen the relationship in the main story.

Usually, games frame romantic relationships as achievements that the player can win by playing well. To mention just a few examples, the Japanese role-playing game *Persona 5* gives the player extra cut-scenes with the girl(s) they managed to woo on Valentine's Day, *Dragon Age: Origins* provides the player with extra sex scenes, and dating multiple characters without their consent in *Boyfriend Dungeon* has no consequences. Wooing a character in these games changes nothing about the game's main storyline or the characters' roles in it. The insidious aspect about the hangout events is that they are transactional at their onset until the very end and beyond because of the free-to-play monetization model of the game. Players must temporally invest many hours of labour to unlock a hangout event. There exist several criteria which players must manage before they can start the events: while players do not need to obtain any of the four-star characters through the wish banner, to play any of the hangout events at all, players must reach at least adventure rank 26 in the overall game. Furthermore, depending on the character, players must have completed certain parts of the main story, *and* they must have unlocked the event with two story keys, which they receive by successfully completing sixteen daily tasks in total, of which only four per day can be done. So, unlocking even a single hangout event takes at least four days if players already have the required rank and completed a part of the main story.

The criteria also differ per character. For example, if players want to play Thoma's hangout event, they must be at least adventure rank 30, use two story keys to unlock his event, and must have completed the main story, "Chapter II, Act III: Omnipresence over Mortals." By my own estimate, I

41 Peter Kelly, "Approaching the Digital Courting Process in *Dragon Age 2*," in *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection*, ed. Jessica Enevold and Esther MacCallum-Stewart (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2015); Mark Kretzschmar and Anastasia Salter, "Party Ghosts and Queer Teen Wolves: Monster Prom and Resisting Heteronormativity in Dating Simulators," in *Proceedings of the 15th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG '20)*, Article 33 (New York: Association for Computing Machinery), <https://doi.org/10.1145/3402942.3402975>; Agata Waszkiewicz, *Delicious Pixels: Food in Video Games* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022).

spent close to two hundred hours in the game before I was able to play his hangout event. In other words, being able to even play these events at all is already some sort of an achievement.

The same transactional principles apply to the rest of the hangout events, as any encounter with the character is portrayed as a transactional reward for players who spent their time well in the game. For instance, the picture players receive at each story route serves as a collectible for completing the paths that the player can cherish. The collectible itself is useless in-game, but players also receive several other rewards after each route and by completing the entire storyline tree, which they can use for their gameplay progress: experience points, in-game currency, resources to strengthen the players' player-characters, and primogems. These rewards are not unusual, since the entire game is set up so that any event, quest, or mission the player completes rewards them with these items. This means that as their primary function, the hangout events act as an incentive to continue investing in the game. As such, Thoma's hangout event should not be read as a promise for players to have a unique parasocial relationship with him. It rather commercializes the fans' "gluttonous desires" and uses this desire to stimulate continuous player engagement to keep the game profitable through the wish banners.

Genshin Impact's monetization scheme negatively impacts the design of the game, specifically its hangout events. It commercializes characters at its best and portrays parasocial relationships as transactional at its worst. While fans love Thoma, their desire is highly influenced by the structure of the monetization model, which feeds on fans' desire for characters and the characters' scarcity in-game. Agency, then, is simply a false cover that overpromises impact but fails to deliver. For fields like fan and game studies, which foreground the agency of players and consumers so much, it means that we must be cautious about the business model behind a video game before we elevate player agency in a game to a level it does not deserve.

This question of agency particularly applies to free-to-play monetization models. Does the player have any agency at all when it does not impact the character in the rest of the game? And even if so, is player agency actually the reason that creates affect in a video game? *Genshin Impact* suggests otherwise, since it primes players to desire a character before it is even released in-game. From that perspective, I can only briefly conclude that agency in *Genshin Impact* is a superficial concept that might promise players meaningful choices over the characters but seems mostly a tool to capitalize on their gameplay.

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6. Consumable Heroes: Fanfiction and Biopolitics¹

Agata Zarzycka

Abstract: The chapter argues that, due to its interest in the individuality of fictional protagonists on the one hand, and the fulfilment of the fan community's affective needs on the other, fanfiction approaches its characters in ways that can be inscribed into a biopolitical spectrum stretching from *bíos*—the life of a specific subject, to *zoē*—universalized features of organic life. The presented reasoning considers that aspect of fanfiction in terms of a dynamics between recognition and operationalization of individual identity. The analytical part of the chapter demonstrates the *bíos*–*zoē* interplay on the example of selected fanfics about Commander Shepard from the *Mass Effect* trilogy of digital games.

Keywords: *bíos*, *zoē*, protagonist, affect

Conceptualizations of fan culture as a forge of social and cultural empowerment, progressivism, and democratic practices have been a major driving force in fan studies since the field's emergence. Scholars have identified the power of fans to release textual meanings from authorial control, to liberate audiences and consumers from passivity, to explore marginalized social identities from cultural invisibility. They have described how fans engage in non-normative cultural practices and how they create emotional engagement around texts. They have also interrogated the policies of pleasure and desire from various theoretical perspectives.² Evolving together with the consecutive developments in fandom-oriented scholarship, this

1 I would like to thank Prof. Michał Kłosiński for the fruitful conversation about biopolitical theory. It has greatly helped me to consolidate the framework of this chapter.

2 Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 3–4.

“strong utopian strain,” as Rukmini Pande puts it,³ continues to inspire researchers, be it as a paradigm to embrace⁴ or to challenge, verify, and reshape with the use of various critical lenses.

In other words, scholarship has also contested the idea of fandom as subversive or progressive. Pande addresses racial dynamics, and particularly the dominant anglophone whiteness, in discourses within and around fan culture, including academia.⁵ Bertha Chin, in turn, zooms in on fandom negotiations of power and status to reconsider their compatibility with Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of social and cultural capital that inspired John Fiske and Henry Jenkins in their early characterizations of fan communities.⁶ Mel Stanfill explores yet another zone of potential asymmetry in power relations infiltrating fandom, namely, the increasingly significant and complex role of the concept in media marketing, economic circulation, audience management and consumption engineering.⁷

All those reflections, as well as numerous others that have been developed throughout the decades of fan studies’ growth, affirm, undermine, or double-check the applicability of liberation as an ideal projected on fan culture. These critical investigations often revolve around fandom’s communal dynamics, representations of social identities in fan text, online discourses, or exchanges between media producers and participatory audiences. This chapter, however, takes a more metaphorical approach to the liberating potential of fan practices by considering it with regard not so much to fans themselves as to fictional characters shifting from their original narratives to fanfiction.

Fanfiction tends to set individual characters free from the original plot confines by putting them in relational contexts towards their own complexities, other characters, and readers. At the same time, however, it is a product of “affective reception,” namely, an “embodied and affective” mode of interaction with texts of culture, which, according to Nicolle Lamerichs, leads to “recontextualization and reimagining of the source text.”⁸ As she argues, it is one of the central factors in the ongoing negotiation of fan

3 Pande, *Squee from the Margins*, xi.

4 For example: Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shrestova, eds, *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

5 Pande, *Squee from the Margins*.

6 Bertha Chin, “It’s About Who You Know: Social Capital, Hierarchies and Fandom,” in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* ed. Paul Booth (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018).

7 Mel Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 4–6.

8 Nicolle Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 30.

identity—“a project of self-formation which is constantly enacted in fan practices.”⁹ Put in that context, fanfic practice is partially about turning characters into consumable resources subordinated to the emotional and identity-related needs of the participatory audience, even though that process can be volatile, momentary, and hard to grasp.

As argued in this chapter, the apparently paradoxical emancipation and simultaneous operationalization of fanfic protagonists can be explored by means of biopolitical categories of *bíos* and *zoē*, and their interplay as approaches to the life of a fictional protagonist. The extraordinary engagement of affect in fanfiction brings out the relevance of biopolitical awareness, not to say responsibility, connected with the power of literary text to interfere with the lives of both fictional and extratextual others.

Life and Biopolitics

Defined in Michel Foucault’s philosophy of power as “administration of bodies and the calculated management of life,”¹⁰ and specifically its “mechanics ... serving as the basis of the biological processes,”¹¹ biopolitics has left its imprint on philosophy, the social sciences, economics, and media, cultural, and literary studies. In the context of the three latter fields, preoccupied in their respective ways with communication and texts of culture, biopolitical perspectives may prove helpful on various levels, e.g., content analysis, socio-political dynamics of text production and distribution, or the functioning of reception-driven communities. Stanfill uses the biopolitical frame to explore “fan management” practised by media producers—a process in which “fans are acted on as a population through producing, disseminating, and reinforcing a norm of media use.”¹² The way to achieve it is by “managing desire,” namely, inconspicuously modelling and channelling the participatory attitudes and emotional engagement of the audience to maximize their usability as a resource.¹³

Biopolitics is a complex and multilayered process which revolves, as Stanfill puts it, around the “domestication” of participatory practices, that is, “bringing fan behaviors onto the media industry ranch, to incite fans’ participation and production of value (emotional and monetary), but only

9 Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom*, 31.

10 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 140.

11 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 139.

12 Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom*, 10.

13 Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom*, 9–10.

in particular, circumscribed ways.¹⁴ Taking into account the importance of corporeal identity aspects, such as race, gender, and sexuality in such audience engineering,¹⁵ as well as the overall reliance of fan culture on emotional, and therefore physiologically conditioned, engagement,¹⁶ biopolitics offers a powerful toolset for investigating fandom-related policies.

While fictional characters at the core of this chapter's interest do not constitute an embodied community that could be controlled through its corporeality, it is often by exploring their emotional or physical vulnerabilities that fanfiction expands the relevance of its protagonists. Thus, a biopolitical lens can be helpful in investigating the fragility of boundaries between the agency and exploitability of an individual subject. In order to track down the shifts between and paradoxical coexistence of those two conditions with regard to fanfic protagonists, I turn to the biopolitical spectrum between the notions of *bíos* and *zoē*.

In Giorgio Agamben's employment of the two terms, "qualified life," or the Greek *bíos*, refers to an individual's "particular way of life" and "bare life," or *zoē*, which stands for "the simple fact of living common to all living beings."¹⁷ As observed by Monika Bakke, while some thinkers, including Agamben, consider *zoē* in terms of "weakness," others focus on its "strength."¹⁸ As far as the latter is concerned, Rosi Braidotti's approach to *zoē* is of particular importance for this discussion because it appreciates the unpredictability and productivity of the interconnectedness between the individual subjects and their organic liveness that makes them co-create a life network exceeding the limits of a singular identity. Braidotti defines *bíos* as "a discursive and political discourse about life," and *zoē* as "vitalistic, prehuman, generative life."¹⁹ The concept of *zoē* enables her to stress the uncontrollable, extra-individual quality of being alive:

Zoe—this obscenity, this life in me—is intrinsic to my being and yet is so much "itself" that it is independent of the will, of the demands and

14 Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom*, 11.

15 The factors indicated by Stanfill as crucial in popular conceptualizations and manipulations of fan identity, leading to an ultimate affirmation of white, heterosexual masculinity as a preferable socio-cultural point of reference. Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom*, 48–49.

16 Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom*, 18.

17 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1.

18 Monika Bakke, *Bio-transfiguracje: Sztuka i estetyka posthumanizmu* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, 2015), 38 (translation mine).

19 Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of Life as Bios/Zoe," in *Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience and Technology*, ed. Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 177.

expectations of sovereign consciousness. This zoe makes me tick and yet escapes the control of the supervision of the subject. Zoe carries on relentlessly and gets cast out of the holy precinct of the “I” that demands control and fails to obtain it. Thus zoe ends up being experienced as an alien other. Life is experienced as inhuman because it is all too human, as obscene because it lives on mindlessly.²⁰

However, what is most relevant is not the alienation of *zoē*, but its potential for what Braidotti, after Félix Guattari, calls “transindividuality”: “[T]his diffuse yet grounded subject position achieves a double aim: it critiques individualism and it supports the notion of subjectivity in the sense of qualitative, transversal, group-oriented agency.”²¹ Such continuity between singular subject and multitude constitutes, as shown in the analytical part of this chapter, a useful context for exploring the apparent paradox of the transformations of a fictional character in fanfiction. Both in the case of fanfic protagonists and fan reception in general the connection between individual *bíos* and “transindividual” *zoē* is established mainly through affects and emotions.

While obviously subjective, feelings play, according to Braidotti, a crucial role in the manifestation of the *zoē*-driven, corporeal part of the “embodied subject”.²²

[T]he body ... is not only multifunctional, but also in some ways multilingual: it speaks through temperature, motion, speed, emotions, and excitement that affects the cardiac rhythm and the like—a living piece of meat activated by electric waves of desire.²³

This is why an insight into the *bíos*–*zoē* dynamics may be helpful in understanding the mechanisms and potential implications of affect- and identity-related manipulations as practised in fanfiction.

Life in Fanfiction

The very possibility and limits of considering fictional characters’ status as subjects outside direct narrative contexts are debatable and change

20 Braidotti, “The Politics of Life as Bios/Zoe,” 178.

21 Braidotti, “The Politics of Life as Bios/Zoe,” 182.

22 Braidotti, “The Politics of Life as Bios/Zoe,” 179.

23 Braidotti, “The Politics of Life as Bios/Zoe,” 179.

together with the adapted theoretical perspective.²⁴ Still, the employment of a *bíos*–*zoē* spectrum facilitates the redefinition of relations between the story author, protagonist and reader brought by fanfiction.

To some extent, both approaches to life are formative for fanfic characters. While not all original works that inspire fanfiction must stress the individualities of their protagonists, it is their specific narrative contexts that stimulate fanfiction communities' interest in giving a particular hero or heroine some spotlight. Fascination with, and celebration of, particular characters' *bíos*, embracing their uniqueness and individual significance is, unquestionably, a major force driving fanfic culture.

At the same time, most fanfics' *raison d'être* is to savour or build up characters' affective richness through recontextualizations. Fanfics take their protagonists beyond the original narrative frame and put them in a variety of new contexts which, often being dictated by the main story's erasures and meant to stimulate emotions, tend to embrace casual, slice-of-life scenes, moments of weakness or hesitation, emotional aftermath of challenging situations, erotic activities, personal relationships, and other unlikely circumstances. Such detail-oriented focus on the full spectrum of fictional characters' existence, including its less-than-heroic aspects, and is easily achieved through the appeal to *zoē*: the organic character of life, generating such relatable experiences as physiological processes, emotions, sexual needs, mental or physical health issues, etc.

The mutual complementation of *bíos* and *zoē* in fanfiction may not be obvious on the scale of a single story. Still, fanfics rarely function in isolation, as reflected by the most widespread forms of their online archivization on social media platforms or in big repositories such as Fanfiction.net or Archive of Our Own. Thus, a corpus of fanfics centred around the given protagonist is likely to develop a spectrum stretching from affirmation and reinforcement of their original uniqueness to exploration of all those aspects of their existence that the original work does not consider, including the most mundane or intimate ones. Therefore, the textual network spreading between the canonical text and the fanfiction it inspires has a significant chance to produce a strikingly effective approximation of the character as a fully rounded, individual subject.

However, the archival display of fanfics, facilitating the character spotlight, simultaneously positions it as a result of what Abigail De Kosnik

24 Susan Keen, *Narrative Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 56.

calls “archontic production.” She defines it as both communal and based on ongoing processes of selection:

[M]any readers, filmgoers, gamers and television viewers engage deeply with the “archive” of media culture.... From this archive of source texts, media users select the texts they want to work with, and from those texts, they extract what they like and what they need, using those extractions as the raw materials for their own cultural productions, such as fan fiction.²⁵

The materialization of a fanfic corpus establishing the fictional character’s prominence is enabled by digital archivization which “make[s] visible and accessible multitudes of stories that have been written in a given fandom.”²⁶ Therefore, the centralization and narrative emancipation of such a character is preceded by their communal treatment as a resource to transform. As pointed out by De Kosnik, the community-building dimension of fanfic archivization practices is very important, especially to female and queer fans.²⁷ Regardless of its sociological importance, the collectivity implied by that fact may also, as argued in the next section, influence and complicate the functioning of fanfics as texts.

Life and Feels

The fanfic network which cultivates the character is itself embedded in the overall affective paradigm of fan practices. That, in turn, stimulates the development of protective mechanisms aimed at the distillation and preservation of literary effects dictated by specific sensitivities of authors and readers. Their impact on fanfics’ functioning in culture highlights the operationalization of characters in the process of text production and reception.

As emphasized by Anna Wilson, by establishing a unique cultural space for the exploration of and cognition through feelings, desires, and fantasies, fanfiction becomes “among other things, a heuristic tool: a mental technology that facilitates understanding of a text by means of an affective

25 Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2016), 34.

26 De Kosnik. *Rogue Archives*, 39.

27 De Kosnik. *Rogue Archives*, 12, 16–17, 96.

hermeneutics—a set of ways of gaining knowledge through feeling.”²⁸ However, as noticed by Busse, “clearly some hesitation to share these feelings with the world at large remains.”²⁹ Collective processing of the highly individual and frequently intimate emotionality that accompanies fan engagement with texts is a delicate matter. It requires effective navigation between collective and personal comfort zones to limit the risk of emotional harm, potentially attached to the exposure of one’s sensitivity to rejection, mockery or outright condemnation on the part of a judging or differently attuned community.³⁰

While Wilson focuses first of all on the affects and emotions developing in the receiver’s interaction with the text, Busse takes also their extratextual origins into account: “Fanfiction often tailors to our very own desires, our innermost fantasies, sexual or not.”³¹ She further refers to fanfiction as

the tailored and customized writing that caters to the writers’ and/or readers’ kinks, that creates stories that move us emotionally not only because we already care about the characters but also because they use tropes, characterizations, scenes that appeal viscerally.³²

Both authors acknowledge the importance of sharing emotions in fanfiction culture, they also elaborate on the often very specific methods of sorting, managing, and filtering fanfics, that adapt content selection to “certain kinds of emotional experiences with texts”³³ pursued by particular readers.

That purpose can be achieved thanks to the specific “apparatuses that structure both online fan fiction archives and the most common literary forms and subgenres within fan fiction.”³⁴ They may cover various tools, from search filters to disclaimers or warnings attached to the stories by their authors, to thematic tags, to the specification of pairings and relationships between characters, to the fanfiction-specific narrative labels. Their examples

28 Anna Wilson, “The Role of Affect in Fan Fiction,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 21 (2016), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/684/570>.

29 Kristina Busse, “Intimate Intertextuality and Performative Fragments in Media Fanfiction,” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 55.

30 This chapter is focused on the existence of such regulatory mechanisms on the level of textual production and distribution, not their actual functioning in the social sphere. The topics of fandom toxicity, internal policing, gatekeeping, or shaming, while by all means relevant, are not a subject of this reasoning.

31 Busse, “Intimate Intertextuality,” 54.

32 Busse, “Intimate Intertextuality,” 54.

33 Wilson, “The Role of Affect in Fan Fiction.”

34 Wilson, “The Role of Affect in Fan Fiction.”

listed by Wilson—“PWP (porn without plot), hurt/comfort, deathfic, mpreg, and Mary Sue,”³⁵ along with angst, fluff and some others—highlight “the kind of emotional experience the story offers.”³⁶ What they also make clear is that, in the majority of cases, it is the fictional character that becomes the fuel for the fanfic’s promised effect. In that way, the erased narrative confines of the original work are, to some extent, replaced with the complex regulatory mechanics prioritizing readers’ affective demands. As a result, the character’s “liberation” develops in subordination to the very specific needs and expectations of fanfiction authors and audiences. Affirming characters’ relevance, coherence and uniqueness outside their narrative contexts, fanfiction simultaneously frames them as pleasurable consumables.

Expressing and sharing the sensations evoked by the act of text reception become a part of a fanfic’s cultural and communal function, often accomplished by engaging the *zoē* sphere of the fictional character. Therefore, while on the one hand the individuality of the given fanfic protagonist remains crucial as the object of fan emotional engagement and stimulant of fan practice, the affects encoded in and evoked through it tend to have a “transindividual,” organic dimension.

In other words, a collection of stories representing various fanfic genres and revolving around a specific protagonist may add up to their detailed characterization which includes a rich spectrum of physical or emotional states, from suffering, sickness or other kinds of crisis to arousal, infatuation, or passion, to intimacy, affection, or happiness. At the same time, the exploration and production of specific feelings inscribed in fanfiction genres are likely to reduce the protagonist’s individuality by reaching out to a sphere of life that is not subjugated by the confines of a singular subject. Following Braidotti’s reading of *zoē* as transindividual, such a momentary and volatile affective state may be seen as a factor of continuity between fanfic protagonists (regardless of their particular origins), fanfic authors, and fanfic readers.

Five Lives of Commander Shepard

Rather than pass any kind of judgement on that aspect of fanfiction logic, this chapter reflects on its operation and possible consequences—especially that the proportions between the *subject* and *resource* character status are likely to differ from fanfic to fanfic. The preliminary case study described

35 Wilson, “The Role of Affect in Fan Fiction.”

36 Wilson, “The Role of Affect in Fan Fiction.”

below barely scratches the surface of that dynamics and is meant as a sample application of a biopolitical lens to fanfiction rather than an attempt at a complete analysis of a specific protagonist. For that reason, instead of a close reading of a single text, it covers a survey of fanfic examples obtained from an online search intentionally kept as simple as possible.

As the original work at the heart of fan activity I have chosen the trilogy of *Mass Effect* video games from Bioware (2007, 2010, 2012)³⁷ because it offers a complex and inspiring point of departure for the fan authors' imagination. The games' protagonist and player character, Commander Shepard, meets the demands of a hero or heroine with an impressively strong individuality and personal impact on the world. As a super-skilled, bold, and charismatic soldier, he or she is dedicated to the mission of saving all galactic civilizations from being annihilated by Reapers—self-assigned synthetic supervisors of life development. On the gameplay level, it generates a lot of violent, shooter-based action.

Simultaneously, the series has become famous for its interest in immersive storytelling and character-driven narrative richness. It encourages preliminary customization of Shepard's character, from non-narrative aspects such as appearance and gender to meaningful turning points in the personal backstory. Recognized as one of the groundbreakers in the construction of gameplay centralizing player's choices, the series complicates player experience in the narrative dimension.

Moreover, the game encourages the Commander to develop an active love life, whose prominence and turbulences depend on the player's decisions. Together with an array of diverse non-player characters as potential partners, the games offer the protagonist a spectrum of sexual preferences. While those characteristics of *Mass Effect* games have, in the course of time, been critically scrutinized from various angles, what is important for the current discussion is the narrative and character-focused richness of the original source material, as well as its extraordinary susceptibility to "affective reception," that quickly infiltrated game culture communities, contributing, among others, to a spectacular outburst of fanfiction.

Due to the said multiplicity of *Mass Effect* fanfics on one hand and, on the other, my intention to randomize the sample of primary source material for the consideration below, I tried not to overcomplicate the selection criteria. My goal was not to identify fanfics that would exemplify any specific premises about the functioning of fanfiction biopolitics, apart from the

37 BioWare, *Mass Effect* (Electronic Arts, 2007), PC/Microsoft Windows; BioWare, *Mass Effect 2* (Electronic Arts, 2010), PC/Microsoft Windows; BioWare, *Mass Effect 3* (Electronic Arts, 2012), PC/Microsoft Windows.

premise of its presence in each text. In other words, I expected the dynamics between the *bíos* and *zoē* in the character appropriation spectrum to be observable, though definitely not the same, in all selected fanfics.

As the chapter formula imposes limitation on the reasonable number of analysed examples, I narrowed the sample down to five texts—too few to risk any strong conclusion about the possible universality of the observed dynamics, but at the same time enough to provide a spectrum of its strikingly diverse workings inside the text. As a result, the analysis is based on the first five results which emerged after choosing the “Mass Effect Trilogy” title in the Archive of Our Own during a window of about three hours on August 23, 2022.³⁸ For the sake of the analysis brevity, I excluded stories with more than two chapters at the time of the search. Otherwise, I did not narrow the filtration down with any additional criteria such as the main character, genre convention, relationships between characters, rating, or even language, though all received results turned out to be in English. The five selected stories revolve around Commander Shepard as the protagonist—female in two fanfics and male in three.

Having completed the selection process, I reached out to those authors who were presumably available for private messaging online, asking them for permission to engage their stories in the analysis. The authors of two stories were unavailable, while among the remaining three, one gave me their express permission, and the other two have not responded by the time of this chapter’s publication. Therefore, my decision to use the texts for which I have not obtained authors’ permissions relies on their public availability online, as they could be accessed without logging in onto the Archive of Our Own platform.

As subjective interpretation plays a crucial role in the reception of fanfics, my discussion of particular stories does not strive to argue for fixed proportions between the character centralization and appropriation in particular texts, but rather to identify, in each case, a continuum between the two.

***Bíos* and *Zoē* in Mass Effect Fanfiction**

Just Shepard to You, by SenpaiLorac,³⁹ is set years after the finale of the original games’ narrative and Shepard’s successful confrontation with the

38 New updates kept coming as I was reading the selected fanfics, so the original list of titles has probably been altered by the website traffic since the time of my search.

39 SenpaiLorac, *Just Shepard to You*, August 23, 2022, Archive of Our Own, accessed August 28, 2022, https://archiveofourown.org/works/41229831?view_adult=true.

Reapers. The story depicts the Commander on her deathbed, slowly coming to the end of her life for natural reasons. Shepard's dysfunctional cognition, mixing memories, dreams, and actual interactions with her visitors offers the reader insight into the major points and relationships of her post-war personal life. As the character passes, she is greeted in the afterlife by a friend (whose death is a part of the original game plotline) and then reunites with her lifetime partner, Garrus Vakarian, who, according to the fanfic, died a few months earlier, probably of old age. The romance with Garrus is an available in-game option for the female Shepard character, which the story turns into a lifelong relationship.

Out of all five fanfics included in this analysis, *Just Shepard to You* reads most like a full-blown tribute to the game protagonist, focused on the completion of her biography, providing it with a sense of fullness and leading to a satisfying closure. Shepard is depicted in various relations and social roles, from friend to lover, to foster-mother and grandmother, and after her time has come, she declares: "I have had the *best* life."⁴⁰ While the story begins with an extensive erotic scene, which later turns out to be Shepard's dream about Garrus, it is strongly contextual and character-driven.

It might, therefore, be concluded that, while the story's paratext does acknowledge the reader's sensitivities by including an Archive of Our Own warning about a "major character death," the fanfic's stimulation of emotional response—most likely nostalgic or grief-like—derives from its dedication to the protagonist. Still, it is to be noted that embodied aspects of her identity and experience, such as psycho-physiological deterioration, physical injuries, or sexual arousal, namely, universalized factors of organic life, play a vital role in the character study. The story explores the momentary surrender of Shepard's *bíos* to *zoē*, but also partly subscribes to Braidotti's approach to death as "only another phase in a generative process."⁴¹

Simultaneously, the affects encoded in the fic and directed at its readers might be argued to form an additional, extra-textual dimension in light of the fact that the official ending of the *Mass Effect* trilogy sparked a lot of controversy among the players. While it was a rather complex development, fan complaints about the lack of narrative satisfaction with the closure of Shepard's story played a prominent part in it, as confirmed, among others,

40 SenpaiLorac, *Just Shepard to You*, original emphasis.

41 Braidotti, "The Politics of Life as Bios/Zoe," 181. The fic does not fully respond to Braidotti's affirmation of the continuity of life being independent of "the narcissistic human subject" (181), as, after her death, Shepard preserves her old, coherent self. Still, the story does, in its own way, challenge "the metaphysics of finitude," which, according to Braidotti, is insufficient for the consideration of life in terms of *bíos* and *zoē* (181).

by the official response of BioWare to the situation.⁴² Ten years later, the memory of that incident is still not entirely lost in game culture, so it may potentially add to the significance of the specific target audience for the story's design.

Safe with You, by CaptainBonnet, captures a specific moment between Commander Shepard, this time a male character, and his partner Kaidan Alenko—another romance option enabled by the games. The fanfic addition is the submissive/dominant dynamics between the characters, with Shepard getting emotionally triggered during an erotic interaction, discussing the incident with Kaidan and eventually picking up the activity anew. Kaidan is the focalizing character in the story as well as the dominant partner, which reinforces the narrative focus on the Commander. His strong reaction to being told “You’re safe now” evokes in Kaidan a wave of protective responsibility for Shepard’s well-being, as well as a reflection on the Commander’s burden as the expected “galaxy’s savior.”⁴³

The fanfic’s focus on the protagonist’s love life, emotionality, erotic needs and position within the canon narrative, namely elements that can be seen as enriching his characterization and affirming his individuality, is unquestionable. Simultaneously, the story is displayed in the Archive of Our Own together with a list of “Additional Tags,” directly communicating to the readers what kind of character dynamics and affective stimulation to expect, among others: “Safeword Use,” “Hurt/Comfort,” “Established Relationship,” “Dom!Kaidan,” “Sub!Shepard,” “Happy BDSM,” “No Sex Scene.” Strikingly, intimate aspects of the protagonists’ identities are directly employed in that process, shifting between individual characteristics and labels as the tags list kinds of action covered by the story and emotions it engages with. What emerges from those descriptions is, therefore, a fluid continuum that seems to reflect Braidotti’s employment of the “transindividuality” concept by engaging the embodied and affective characteristics as shareable by the individual characters, their more generic types, and readers’ expectations.

This “transindividuality” is particularly well illustrated by the story’s use of the BDSM practice. On the one hand, depicting Shepard as submissive is useful in exploring his unique psychological burden; the “desperate desire for guidance, for safety, for the chance to let go of his worries and be allowed to

42 Ray Muzyka, “To Mass Effect 3 Players from Dr. Ray Muzyka, Co-founder of Bioware,” BioWare—official blog, March 21, 2012, accessed August 28, 2022, <https://blog.bioware.com/2012/03/21/4108/>.

43 CaptainBonnet, *Safe with You*, August 23, 2022, Archive of Our Own, accessed August 28, 2022, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/41227788>.

just *be*” as a reaction to the responsibilities imposed on him by the original storyline.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the fanfic provides a platform and tools for exploring BDSM in more general terms—an opportunity potentially sought out by the fan readers due to the relatively limited visibility of kink practices in popular culture. That is how a balanced network emerges between the canonic context as a distant but relevant background for the described scene, the elaboration on the moment of intimacy and emotional openness between the characters, the exploration of Shepard’s individuality, and, finally, the broader context of readers’ affective as well as erotic investment.

Moreover, the fic’s narrative revolving around “safeword use” evokes the “ethics of sustainability,” which Braidotti finds on the *bíos–zoē* dynamics.⁴⁵ Upon the acceptance of individual subjects’ connectivity and openness signified by *zoē*, corporeal signals mark the momentary “limits”⁴⁶ of the subject’s “sustainability,” that pertains to “the ability to take shifts without cracking.”⁴⁷ Thus, as the story explores a moment when one of the characters reaches their “limit,” it embraces the *bíos–zoē* ethics: “I can’t take it anymore” spoken in pain as in pleasure is an ethical statement.... [I]t sets the boundary of a subject-in-process who is shot through with waves of intensity.⁴⁸

Subject Zero: Filthy-Mouthed Cuckquean by *tracy_writes*⁴⁹ is another example of fanfic erotica, this time dominated by pornographic descriptions. In the first chapter, a male Shepard, healing at a hospital after his ultimate victory over the Reapers, is visited by his partner, Jack—a female character romantically available to the protagonist in the games. Their meeting quickly turns into an extended session of sophisticated oral sex, secretly watched by another woman from Shepard’s circle of companions—Kasumi, who, canonically, does not show clear interest in the Commander. Her presence eventually disclosed, Kasumi escapes in panic, but Jack follows her home. The second chapter is devoted to another erotic session, this time between Jack and Kasumi.

One of the tags attached to the story says “Porn with Feelings,” which accurately reflects the shifts of the fanfic’s focus from characters’ individualities and narrative contexts to more universalized descriptions of sexual arousal

44 CaptainBonnet, *Safe with You*, original emphasis.

45 Rosi Braidotti, “Between the No Longer and the Not Yet: On Bios/Zoe Ethics,” *Filozofski vestnik* 23, no. 2 (2002): 17.

46 Braidotti, “Between the No Longer and the Not Yet,” 18.

47 Braidotti, “Between the No Longer and the Not Yet,” 19.

48 Braidotti, “Between the No Longer and the Not Yet,” 20.

49 *tracy_writes*, *Subject Zero: Filthy-Mouthed Cuckquean*, August 22, 2022, Archive of Our Own, accessed August 28, 2022, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/41216796/chapters/103330536#workskin>.

and activities in their physical aspect. The narrative definitely explores the emotional depth of Shepard's relationship with Jack, taking into account both characters' personal histories and traumatic experiences. An additional personalizing factor in the erotic dynamics between them is Jack playfully forcing the Commander to verbally humiliate her, as she enjoys it when "[e]veryone's superhero is putting [her] in [her] place."⁵⁰ This particular aspect of their interaction not only acknowledges the relevance of the woman's identity as a rehabilitated criminal and rebellious anarchist, but also alludes to one of the two paths of Shepard's ethical development that the player chooses between while playing the games. The Commander may follow the Renegade path, which involves more violence, ruthlessness and sometimes egoism in problem solving, or the Paragon path, which leans more towards diplomacy, altruism, and protectiveness. The fanfic Shepard is tagged as "Paragon," which, in Jack's eyes, makes him a "boy scout"—an expression she uses both in the story and in-game dialogues. That is how Jack's erotic teasing gains a more in-depth narrative context connected with Shepard's characterization.

Simultaneously, about one-half of each chapter is occupied by detailed descriptions of sexual activities; their potential to stimulate the audience is reflected by the story tags such as "Gratuitous Smut" or "Shameless Smut" and reinforced by the presence of Kasumi's character in the story. The fic's first chapter elaborates on her secretly watching the sex scene, getting aroused and masturbating, which puts her in a position somewhat parallel to that of the reader. In the second chapter Jack offers her a more erotically satisfying experience, but plays on Kasumi's fascination with Shepard while doing it. All in all, the fanfic balances its preoccupation with characters as individuals against constructing the sphere of organic pleasure as accessible to them as well as the readers' bodies.

De Kosnik calls fanfiction a "body medium" that "mediates between bodies that are remote from one another."⁵¹ She refers such mediation both to author–audience exchanges, when the former narrates their behaviour in story comments,⁵² and what she calls "marionetting," that is, using fan text to modify the behaviour of characters materialized in the corporeal performance of actors: "performers' bodies are virtualized and translated into networks; appropriated, replicated and altered ... and then made to play out a range of narratives for other users' entertainment."⁵³ In *Mass Effect* the

50 tracy_writes, *Subject Zero*.

51 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 234.

52 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 234.

53 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 241.

embodied performance comes mainly from voice actors, yet the fanfic's erotic dimension becomes an affective bridge between the "Subject Zero" author, its characters, and its readers if—in accordance with Braidotti's postulates—desire is seen as an attribute of the extra-individual and uncontrollable *zoē*.

The fourth fanfic, *A Taste from Space* by CoversUpDaddysWarCrime and That_one_guy_ME,⁵⁴ is a two-chapter story revolving around a male Shepard's relationship with Tali—another pairing enabled by the games and rather popular among players. Tali belongs to an alien race of Quarians, who, forced to leave their planet, have for centuries been surviving solely in gigantic spaceships. It has weakened their immune systems and forced them to use protective garments at all times. The danger of exposure to foreign microbes is a challenge in erotic interactions between Shepard and Tali, as acknowledged by the games. The fanfic starts with both characters' decision to become a couple, but soon after that, a Quarian scientist named Xen persuades Shepard to have sex with her first, so that she can use that experience to prepare a drug protecting Tali from getting sick after an intimate contact with a human. Tali runs into their sexual encounter, gets over her initial shock and joins in. The fanfic offers an extensive description of the threesome and reconstructs a similar situation in the second chapter, set some time later. This time both Quarian women come across Shepard as he is watching porn and soon all three characters move on to another erotic session.

While the story is rooted in specific circumstances generated by the games' main narrative, it seems more focused on its readers' entertainment than the protagonists. Out of twenty "Additional Tags" attached to the fanfic, only three—"Friends to Lovers," "Alien/Human Relationships," and "Dominant Xen"—get close to acknowledging the characters as individuals. The remaining tags signal the types of emotional atmosphere to be expected from the story or detail the types of sex scenes included. The last tag, "Mass Effect Kink Meme," suggests the fanfic's origin as a part of a broader communal activity in which fan authors write stories in response to specific "prompts," that is, concepts provided by fellow fans. In this type of writing, fictional characters and plot events are all the more operationalized as food for thought for the writers, the story being determined, first of all, by the need to deliver the expected impression.

Such fandom practice⁵⁵ seems to resonate with what De Kosnik calls the "event-ness" of fanfiction, its textual products resulting from the dynamics

54 CoversUpDaddysWarCrime and That_one_guy_ME, *A Taste from Space*, August 9, 2022, Archive of Our Own, accessed August 28, 2022, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/40903809/chapters/102504519>.

55 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 252.

between embodied agents: “It is because fan fiction emerges from the exchange of ideas, desires, and energies between the two groups [authors and readers] that it feels significant and relevant to fans.”⁵⁶ The importance of the erotic factor in the “kink” fanfiction dynamics resonates with Braidotti’s depiction of the body as “a script written by the unfolding of genetic encoding, a text composed by the enfolding of external prompts.”⁵⁷ The parallel between the corporeality of *zoē* forces and the emergence of a fanfic narrative confirms the attachment of “kink” fanfiction to the embodied communities in which it functions. That is why *A Taste from Space* might be seen as far less preoccupied with the coherence of its characters’ identities than the incorporation of their fragments into a complex network of stimuli and exchanges that reach far beyond the text boundaries.

The last among the five selected fan stories—*All the Conversations Say I Should Feel a Way* by xoalenko (spacebarista)⁵⁸—does not turn to erotica. It depicts a casual encounter between a female Shepard and Kaidan Alenko in the mess hall of the Commander’s spaceship. While their conversation includes original exchanges from the game, the fanfic gives them two contexts: both characters developing feelings for each other, and Shepard appreciating Kaidan’s concern about her eating habits. The latter is especially relevant, as in this story the Commander is tagged as “Plus-Size” and the protagonist’s internal monolog addresses the issue of her weight.

On the one hand, the fanfic is very character-focused, offering a slice-of-life addition smoothly incorporated into the original storyline, bringing out the heroine’s internal hesitations and insecurities about her relationship with her subordinates, and exploring the tension between the heroic and human dimensions of the Commander’s identity. On the other hand, the character, and specifically her physicality, is operationalized by the author to address body positivity issues.

Unlike the act of communal appropriation underlying the previous story, this fanfic seems much more personal and takes place between the protagonist and the writer as an individual. As she clarifies in a note preceding the story:

I was enabled into creating a Shepard like me, a beautiful fat woman, to romance Kaidan with. I’ve been using her to work through some of my

56 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 253.

57 Braidotti, “The Politics of Life as Bios/Zoe,” 180.

58 xoalenko (spacebarista), *All the Conversations Say I Should Feel a Way*, August 23, 2022, Archive of Our Own, accessed August 28, 2022, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/41218980>.

history and struggles and see myself in a better light maybe? I will say ...
it's certainly helped a bit so far.⁵⁹

Thus, while the fanfic clearly embraces the *bíos* of both the author and the protagonist, in doing so, it relies to some extent on the acknowledgment of the embodied *zoē* sphere.

Conclusion: Life Lessons

This study has provided different biopolitical and affective insights, based on five diverse character-driven fanfics of *Mass Effect*. Their discussion illustrates the changeability of proportions between the character's cementation and fragmentation, the variety of ways in which fanfics emancipate their protagonists and show appreciation of their complex individualities, as well as the variety of ways in which those protagonists get subordinated to the paradigm of "affective reception."

All five examples illustrate different employments of organic or physiological dimensions of life and identity in both those processes. Because of that, each story inspires a small-scale biopolitical study of how the employments of the *bíos-zoē* dynamics become means of emancipation or objectification of an individual subject. Moreover, the affective and organic continuity between authors, characters, and readers, emergent from the stories, brings out the power of the fanfiction microcosm to interfere with the bodies and identities of others. Combined with the impossibility of discursive control over *zoē* as postulated by Braidotti, the consumption, processing, transformation, and generation of affects in and around fanfic narratives establishes fanfiction as a biopolitically complex and ambiguous territory.

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59 xoalenko (spacebarista), *All the Conversations*.

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Part 3

Affect and Time

7. Curating Popular Dinosaur Ephemera: Reflections on the “Aca-Fan Archivist” and Sub/cultural Capital

Ross Garner

Abstract: Utilizing autoethnography to reflect on the author’s role as an “aca-fan archivist,” this chapter considers what it means to embody a position as both an academic and a collector of fan merchandise (e.g., an “aca-fan”) who uses the material acquired to curate an archive of ephemera dedicated to a particular area of pop culture (in this instance, mediations of dinosaurs). The chapter partly argues for the continued relevance of Bourdieusian approaches to studying (aca-)fan identities and practices, and so introduces the neologism of “sub/cultural capital” to understand the status of cultural artefacts that move between contexts of fan collecting and archival curation. Additionally, reflections are offered on how an aca-fan archive generates exclusions rooted in age-based taste formations.

Keywords: subcultural capital, archives, fandom, collection

Introduction

In 2018, I was part of an invited group of fan studies scholars who visited Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka to better understand Japanese fan cultures and explore transcultural fandom.¹ Part of the trip involved visiting Nakano Broadway, a haven of stores containing almost all imaginable forms of fan-targeting merchandise, both new and pre-owned, relating to both

¹ See Lori Morimoto et al., “Transcultural Fan Studies in Practice: A Conversation,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 35 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2021.1975>.

East Asian and Western popular culture interests. During this visit—and completely unprovoked—two fellow travellers presented me with small gifts related to one of my longest-standing fandoms: dinosaurs, the Mesozoic period, and the *Jurassic Park/World* franchise. One item was a collection of fan-made comics (or *doujinshi*) relating to the characters of *Jurassic World* (Trevorrow, 2015). The other was a double-sided Japanese mini poster for the original *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993). “I’ll look good in your office” was the comment that accompanied receiving the letter. I thought differently, however. This was an item of historical value sourced from a country that I had never visited before. It needed to be looked after and properly preserved.

This anecdote is just one example of how over time I have acquired many promotional texts relating to *Jurassic Park/World* through methods ranging from serendipity to actively seeking out and purchasing items. Irrespective of the method of acquisition, each object has been retained, stored, and logged on an Excel spreadsheet that is stored on my personal laptop; the spreadsheet provides a reference point for resources for future academic research. My disclosures thus reflect how “[f]ans document, catalogue, [and] preserve ... tangible and ephemeral materials” concerning their affective investments in commercial media properties.² However, my behaviour permits fusing this observation with additional debates concerning “aca-fandom” because acquiring this paratextual material has led to establishing what I name the Popular Dinosaur Culture Archive (PDCA hereafter) in my office at Cardiff University’s School of Journalism, Media, and Culture.

The PDCA contains promotional items related to multiple commercial intellectual properties featuring dinosaurian imagery. However, and as expanded upon throughout this chapter, the PDCA is not officially sponsored, nor consecrated by either the school, Cardiff University, or any professional funding body. In fact, if asked, few (if any) of my departmental colleagues would likely be aware of its existence. Thus, partly because of how much of the archive’s contents have been acquired, and partly because of its institutional status, I deem the PDCA an “accidental archive.” That is, it is “an assemblage of items that have come together in a haphazard way and which have been collated partly out of a felt sense of responsibility to preserve the items.”³ The PDCA is thus motivated primarily by fannish

2 Philipp Dominik Keidl and Abby S. Waysdorf, “Fandom Histories: Editorial,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 37 (2022): para. 2.3, <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2022.2299>.

3 Rebekah Ahrendt and David van der Linden, “The Postman’s Piggy-bank: Experiencing the Accidental Archive,” *French Historical Studies* 40, no. 2 (2017): 192.

affect rather than the perceived social, historical, or cultural significance of the objects it contains.

Coterminous to setting up the PDCA, I have taken up the role of what I call an “aca-fan archivist,” and this chapter explores this embodied identity from an academic perspective. Building upon recent theorizations of the “fan-historian”⁴ and integrating relevant insights with debates concerning the eternal “hot-button issue” of “aca-fandom,”⁵ the discussion blends autoethnographic methods with insights from Pierre Bourdieu’s arguments concerning forms of capital to interrogate the “aca-fan archivist” identity.⁶ Much like the observation of Matt Hills that “aca-fan” identities are “necessarily liminal,”⁷ the aca-fan archivist identity that I reflect on is one that illuminates multiple contradictions arising from attempting to interrogate “aspects of our lived experiences.”⁸ In this instance, contradictions arise from hybridizing being a fan-collector of dinosaur-derived media paratexts and an academic and archiver who studies both film and TV branding and fandom’s material cultures.

Indeed, one of the chapter’s central arguments is that reflexively interrogating the “aca-fan archivist” identity requires revisiting and revising the concept of subcultural capital in fan studies. Sarah Thornton coined “subcultural capital” to capture how “‘hip’ or ‘in the know’” individuals were concerning the trends, histories, and behaviours that characterized membership of dance music subcultures.⁹ Also, and crucial for this chapter’s arguments, Thornton recognizes that “what ultimately defines cultural capital as capital is its ‘convertibility’ into economic capital,” but subcultural capital is rarely convertible into other, more recognized forms in the same way.¹⁰

4 See, for example, E. Charlotte Stevens and Nick Webber, “The Fan-Historian,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 37 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2022.2125>, or Tosha R. Taylor, “Historicizing the Fan Archive of Talia al Ghul,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 37 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2022.2115>.

5 Sam Ford, “Fan Studies: Grappling with an ‘Undisciplined Discipline,’” *Journal of Fandom Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014): 58, https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.2.1.53_1.

6 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Oxon: Routledge Classics, 2010 [1984]).

7 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 19.

8 Henry Jenkins, “Coming Soon: Acafandom and Beyond,” *Pop Junctions: Reflections on Entertainment, Pop Culture, Activism, Media Literacy, Fandom, and More* (blog), June 3, 2011, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/06/coming_soon_acafandom_and_beyo.html, para. 4.

9 Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1995), 120.

10 Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 12.

In this chapter, I advance Thornton's arguments by conceptualizing "sub/cultural capital" as a term for understanding what occurs when the aca-fan archivist chooses to acquire, preserve, and store popular (dinosaur) culture ephemera and so integrate their fannish practices into academic settings. "Sub/cultural capital" is a term designed to sit between official cultural capital and the competencies valued by fan communities, capturing the indeterminacy that arises through aca-fan archiving practices. Proposing "sub/cultural capital" thus builds upon how the aca-fan archivist identity reflected upon, like the "aca-fan" more generally, "represents a crucial node" through which fannish behaviours and practices flow into the academy.¹¹ In this instance, the aca-fan archivist bids to convert the subcultural capital derived from owning fan ephemera into more established forms of cultural legitimacy. However, as argued below, these attempts at converting subcultural capital remain unstable and hence necessitates refining existing terminology.

As mentioned, this chapter uses autoethnography to explore my aca-fan archivist identity. This decision is appropriate as autoethnography permits academics to "study their own performance as fan" so that knowledge and visibility of embodied fan practices can be advanced.¹² By reflecting on my practice as collector, curator, and classifier of the PDCA, observations concerning the deeper structures that both enable and contest this identity can be acknowledged.

However, as Simone Driessen and Bethan Jones observe of autoethnography, "[d]ue to the creation of accounts that use self-disclosed and self-interpreted individual experience expressed through first person writing and reporting as data source, questions emerge such as how to ensure rigor, or verify the evidence."¹³ These concerns can partly be offset through requiring "the person undertaking it [the autoethnography] to question their self-account constantly" and so locate their fan practice within social, cultural, and historical discourses.¹⁴ Nevertheless, raised eyebrows may still be directed towards how generalizable the "aca-fan archivist" identity interrogated is.¹⁵ This chapter's arguments should therefore be approached as exploratory and so are designed to encourage future examination and

11 Cécile Cristofari and Matthieu J. Guitton, "Aca-Fans and Fan Communities: An Operative Framework," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 17, no. 3 (2016): 718, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540515623608>.

12 Cristofari and Guitton, "Aca-Fans and Fan Communities," 718.

13 Simone Driessen and Bethan Jones, "Love Me for a Reason: An Autoethnographic Account of Boyzone Fandom," *IASPM Journal* 6, no. 1 (2016): 71, [https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871\(2016\)v6i1.5en](https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871(2016)v6i1.5en).

14 Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 72.

15 See Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 86.

refinement of the resonances and limitations of what I outline concerning fan collecting and archiving. Additionally, discussions of (aca-)fan archiving are presently an emergent area.¹⁶ Autoethnographic reflections can subsequently provide visibility for these practices within the academy that could lead to further discussion.

From “Fan-Historians” to “Aca-Fan Archivists”

Fan history and archival practices have been the subject of different studies. Specifically, E. Charlotte Stevens and Nick Webber have been at the forefront of theorizing the fan-historian.¹⁷ Aligning their position with Hayden White on the narrativity of historical writing and Raphael Samuel on memory-as-history,¹⁸ Stevens and Webber have advanced a broad understanding of fan-historian identities:

[W]e suggest that fan-historians work in a variety of ways—as public historians,... as cultural historians, in their concern with memory; as new historicists, concerned with the textuality and discursive nature of history; as what we might call traditional historians, concerned with chronologies and detail; and, most importantly, as intermediaries, constructing fans’—and fandom’s—relationship with the past.¹⁹

Stevens and Webber subsequently align fan-historian identities with similar debates that have taken place concerning “the aca-fan researcher.”²⁰ These include identifying how “fans” and “historians” demonstrate similar skills and competencies. For example, Stevens and Webber argue that “[w]hile both fan and historian are open terms (in comparison to academic, for example),

16 See Keidl and Waysdorf, “Fandom Histories.” See also Jez Collins and Oliver Carter, “They’re Not Pirates, They’re Archivists: The Role of Fans as Curators and Archivists of Popular Music Heritage,” in *Preserving Popular Music Heritage: Do-It-Yourself, Do-It-Together*, ed. Sarah Baker (London: Routledge, 2015); or Sophie G. Einwächter, “Preserving the Marginal: Or, The Fan as Archivist,” in *At the Borders of (Film) History: Temporality, Archaeology, Theories*, ed. Alberto Beltrame, Giuseppe Fidotta, and Andrea Mariani (Udine: Forum, 2015).

17 Stevens and Webber, “The Fan-Historian.”

18 See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994).

19 Stevens and Webber, “The Fan-Historian,” para. 4.1.

20 See Ross Peter Garner, “Acafan Identity, Communities of Practice, and Vocational Poaching,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 35 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2021.1985>.

they are still bound by expectation” derived from their intended audience.²¹ Their claims echo what Paul Booth calls “[t]he paradox of aca-fandom ... one must keep a foot in each world, but not become wholly subsumed by one identity over another.”²² Whilst Stevens and Webber’s definition is commendable for its ambition, what insights might be gained from adopting a more focused perspective towards individual forms of fan-historian practice? Additionally, what alternative theoretical pathways can be taken towards examining specific fan-historian identities which might lead analysis of “aca-fandom” into less well-trodden territory?

Regarding the first question, Tosha R. Taylor’s autoethnography of operating as “a fan-archivist” on Tumblr demonstrates the advantages of drilling down into specific fan-historian identities.²³ By reflecting on her curation of an online archive relating to the DC Comics character Talia al Ghul, Taylor notes how her fan-archivist identity became intertwined with forms of subcultural power. Further probing the consequences of putting her archive on hiatus, Taylor identifies how this changed her position within online fandom, resulting in a reduction in status: “I was a known fan-archivist; without that role, I am a nondescript fan who also likes a particular character ... I find myself no longer in a place of being cited as an authority in the fandom.”²⁴

In this fragment, Taylor alludes to the connection between the position of “fan-archivist,” what Andrea MacDonald named the “hierarchy of venue” relating to fans who host online spaces where interaction can occur, and the accumulation (and subsequent loss) of subcultural capital.²⁵ What’s more, Taylor recognizes how their fan-archivist identity translated to other forms of subcultural power, such as being “granted ... a gatekeeper role” by which the subcultural capital she embodied could be converted into fan symbolic capital, or status within the fan community, and bestowed upon others through endorsing individual acts of fan creation.²⁶ Addressing individual fan-historian identities can thus highlight issues concerning status and hierarchy that should be further explored.

21 Stevens and Webber, “The Fan-Historian,” para. 2.10.

22 Paul Booth, “Augmenting Fan/Academic Dialogue: New Directions in Fan Research,” *Journal of Fandom Studies* 1, no. 2 (2013): 125, https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.1.2.119_1.

23 Taylor, “Historicizing the Fan Archive,” para. 1.2.

24 Taylor, “Historicizing the Fan Archive,” para. 2.9.

25 Andrea MacDonald, “Uncertain Utopia: Science Fiction Media Fandom and Computer Mediated Communication,” in *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*, ed. Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 1998), 138, original italics.

26 Taylor, “Historicizing the Fan Archive,” para. 2.10.

Returning to Stevens and Weber's definition of the fan-historian, considering the "aca-fan archivist" also demonstrates an oversight in their argument concerning hybrid identities. That is, whilst their discussion notes that fan-historians "sit at the intersection of historical and fan activity," they do not consider how being an academic might be added to these intersections and so complicate the proposed identity positions.²⁷ Stevens and Webber's use of the term "intermediary" provides a useful starting point for developing my point.²⁸ Just as "fan-historian" implies a hybrid identity, "aca-fan" has been usefully defined by Cristofari and Guitton as "a transitional position" through which knowledge about fan interests, practices, and tastes can, hypothetically at least, flow into the academy (and vice versa).²⁹ The implied aca-fan is thus a mediator between cultural sites of "fandom" and "academia," someone who, as Mark Duffett identifies, "speaks from his or her own fan community and uses cultural studies as a vehicle to represent, support and promote it."³⁰ This is undoubtedly an idealized understanding of the "aca-fan"—one that overlooks myriad constraints, not least "the regulative ideal of the rational academic subject."³¹ However, the possibility of the aca-fan archivist not only representing their fan interests within the academy, but also preserving materials related to favoured phenomena by building an archive, permits considering the forms of transition taking place in greater detail.

For now, what is significant to note is that taking up a role as fan-historian might "lift ... certain fans to the role of gatekeepers, who gain fan cultural capital and influence by curating access to the production and cultural history of their object of fandom."³² Thus, if fan-historians can transition historical information regarding a commercial media property to those sharing passion for that property, aca-fans can hypothetically transition knowledge between fan and academic contexts (and vice versa). The "aca-fan archivist," in this instance, can be theorized as a transitional node. That is, through their situated agency material objects of subcultural significance

27 Nick Webber and E. Charlotte Stevens, "History, Fandom, and Online Communities," in *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian*, ed. Alexander von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland, and Pat Cullum (London: Routledge, 2019), 189.

28 Cf. Stevens and Webber, "The Fan-Historian," para. 4.1.

29 Cristofari and Guitton, "Aca-Fans and Fan Communities," 718.

30 Will Brooker, Mark Duffett, and Karen Hellekson, "Fannish Identities and Scholarly Responsibilities: A Conversation," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, ed. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (London: Routledge, 2018), 63.

31 Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 11.

32 Keidl and Waysdorf, "Fandom Histories," para. 2.2.

pertaining to the history of a fan object can flow from fan collecting habits into academia for purposes including research, dissemination of knowledge, and bestowing cultural legitimacy upon the fan object. Before developing some theoretical positions further, though, it is first necessary to reflect on the possibilities offered by a Bourdieusian framework for understanding the “aca-fan archivist” identity.

Returning to Bourdieu: Aca-Fan Archiving and “Sub/Cultural Capital”

Allusions to the concept of subcultural capital were observable throughout the previous section. Yet, Bourdieusian analyses of fandom have been discursively associated with the “second wave of fan studies” during the early-to-mid-2000s, where scholars revised and refined Bourdieu’s sociological arguments to demonstrate how fandoms acted as microcosms of larger social structures by reproducing forms of inequality.³³ These inequalities were sustained by access to subcultural capital as well as factors including disposable income (economic capital) or the scope of a fan’s peer network (fan social capital).³⁴ Whether experienced at an individual level or along broader identity structures such as race or gender, unequal distribution of these forms of capital was demonstrated as both replicating existing forms of social hierarchy at the subcultural level and producing barriers to participation in fan communities.

To an extent, Bourdieusian analyses of fandom have been replaced by questions concerning how “changing communication technologies and media texts contribute to and reflect the increasing entrenchment of fan consumption in the structure of our everyday lives.”³⁵ However, as Hills has argued about constructing conceptual categories as a strategy for managing perceived intradisciplinary shifts, “[n]arratives of transformation are themselves called upon to discursively characterise, and so fix, the earlier

33 Cornel Sandvoss, Jonathan Gray, and C. Lee Harrington, “Introduction: Why Still Study Fans?,” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 5.

34 See Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 20–35. See also Rebecca Williams, “Good Neighbours? Fan/Producer Relationships and the Broadcasting Field,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (2010); Rebecca Williams, *Post-Object Fandom: Television, Fandom and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

35 Sandvoss et al., “Introduction,” 6.

attributes of the object.”³⁶ Thus, whilst discursive attempts to construct discrete “waves” of fan studies are useful for organizing the discipline’s evolution, these should not result in theoretical perspectives such as those derived from Bourdieu becoming understood as outdated. As this interrogation of the aca-fan archivist identity suggests, Bourdieusian perspectives can be usefully employed to analyse fan identities and practices within an era of media convergence and the increasing diffusion of “fannish” practices throughout media(ted) culture.

Despite being mentioned throughout this chapter, I would argue that “subcultural capital” does not adequately capture the nuances of how claims to cultural legitimacy operate when, in this instance, the aca-fan archivist moves cultural objects from contexts of “fan collecting” to those of “academic archiving.” In plain terms, aca-fan archiving as understood in this chapter involves converting subcultural capital into legitimate forms of cultural capital. To achieve these purposes, I leverage the symbolic capital attached to my privileged public identity as an academic to convert the subcultural capital of dino-franchise paratexts into legitimate cultural capital.

However, if the aca-fan (archivist) is a liminal identity, then the status granted to the items chosen for inclusion in an aca-fan archive like the PDCA remains equally contested. That is, the chosen objects may be subculturally significant to their fan community and/or the private fan-collector, but the attempted conversion of this to cultural capital remains open to dismissal by an aca-fan archivist’s peers who might contest the archive’s contents and re-evaluate its contents as worthless (in multiple senses of the word) subcultural curios.³⁷ The aca-fan archivist’s nodal position at the intersection of diverging discourses concerning fan and official culture, as well as “engaged hobbyists” and recognized historical work, transfers to the objects curated by the aca-fan archivist. This, in turn, renders their cultural importance equally untethered.³⁸

I would thus argue that “subcultural capital” cannot adequately capture what is at stake when an aca-fan archivist attempts to transition objects from subcultural settings to official equivalents. Instead, what I would name “sub/cultural capital” better characterizes the liminal status of objects contained within an aca-fan archive. “Sub/cultural capital” is a less secure form of

36 Matt Hills, “From the Box in the Corner to the Box Set on the Shelf,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5, no. 1 (2007): 43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400300601140167>.

37 See also Taylore Nicole Woodhouse, “Digital Archives, Fandom Histories, and the Reproduction of the Hegemony of Play,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 37 (2022): para. 2.2, <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2022.2105>.

38 Stevens and Webber, “The Fan-Historian,” para. 2.7.

cultural capital that characterizes objects which document the history or visibility of a popular culture phenomena whose inclusion in settings like universities remains contestable. Consequently, the symbolic capital used by the aca-fan archivist to convert subcultural capital into cultural capital remains open to negotiation by institutional colleagues and structures. The inclusion of both the prefix “sub” and the “/” in “sub/cultural capital” thus aim to capture the form’s negotiable status. The term is intended to capture how aca-fan archived items have an ambiguous, paradoxical status in that they may be valued by the aca-fan and the community that they represent, but may equally be dismissed as being of less immediate value in the eyes of the aca-fan archivist’s professional peers.

Sub/cultural capital’s relevance for understanding the status of aca-fan archived items can be further demonstrated by comparing the perceived legitimacy of PDCA objects with other dinosaur media mediations that occupy my office space and assist in my day-to-day professional performance of an academic identity. Developing this point requires returning to John Fiske’s argument that any occupied space is readable as “a symbolic environment that is constructed by a social agent out of the socially available resources, and that equally constructs that agent as a social member and marks his (in this case) position in the social space.”³⁹ Whilst Fiske discusses the presentation and organization of his living room, I would argue that this point can be expanded to include spaces like personal offices where the placement of objects within these, and in relation to each other, constitute “the semiotics of ... place.”⁴⁰ Whilst individual objects remain “multi discursive—they mean differently in different discourses,”⁴¹ the interrelationship between where objects are located within these spaces and how they get grouped together by the subject creates meaning concerning their perceived status, value, and relationship to the identity performed within that space.⁴²

Reading the organization of my university office as a symbolic environment, the PDCA is housed within two storage boxes and placed on a bookcase shelf. These bookcases contain other resources denoting a professional academic identity such as media and cultural studies books and journals, and

39 John Fiske, “Ethnosemiotics: Some Personal and Theoretical Reflections,” *Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (1990): 88.

40 Fiske, “Ethnosemiotics,” 88. See also Ross P. Garner, “Mimetic Tangible Nostalgia and Spatial Cosplay: Replica Merchandise and Place in Fandom’s Material Cultures,” in *Was It Yesterday? Nostalgia in Contemporary Film and Television*, ed. Matthew Leggatt (New York: SUNY Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781438483504-007>.

41 Fiske, “Ethnosemiotics,” 88.

42 Fiske, “Ethnosemiotics,” 88.

DVDs and Blu-rays which assist with research and teaching. The audiovisual material is on a different shelf to the PDCA, and on a different bookcase, but consists of many commercial releases of dino-centric films and TV programmes. Yet, rather than being bestowed sub/cultural capital and preserved in the PDCA, the DVDs and Blu-rays have been classified as of a different order, as objects that are associated with the symbolic and cultural capital associated with being a university lecturer such as teaching and producing publications.⁴³

In other words, these titles assist with constructing my professional identity as “academic” by demonstrating my cultural competencies as a lecturer. This is despite many of these aforementioned texts *not* occupying the consecrated cultural canons of cinephiles. Whilst the original *King Kong* (1933) and the first *Jurassic Park* might be the exceptions, neither Disney’s animated *Dinosaur* (2000) movie, or straight-to-video B-movies like *The Dinosaur Project* (2012) or *Jurassic Planet* (2018) would be considered communally agreed upon works of artistic achievement. Nevertheless, the integration of these materials for performing a professional academic identity differentiates the type of capital that I have subjectively bestowed upon these titles to those within the PDCA. To date, PDCA items have not been integrated into my professional practices such as being used to produce publications, for teaching, or being used in public dissemination. In other words, they remain in an indeterminate status between discourses of “culture” and “subculture,” housed within a prestigious academic institution but simply being stored there.

PDCA Contents, Absences, and Affect

Echoing Jacques Derrida’s argument that archives are never complete, the PDCA’s contents are continually expanding.⁴⁴ At the time of writing, the Excel spreadsheet recording the archive’s contents contains over seventy-five individual listings. Although two of the logged items are duplicates, some entries contain multiple objects. For example, the Special Edition DNA Case release of *Jurassic Park* on VHS from 1993 includes a booklet on dinosaurs

43 For example, in Ross Garner, “*Doctor Who* and the Dinosaurs: Spectacle, Monstrosity, Melodrama and Ideology in Dinosaur Mediations,” in *Doctor Who and Science: Essays on Ideas, Identities and Ideologies in the Series*, ed. Marcus K. Harmes and Lindy A. Orthia (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2021).

44 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017 [1995]).

and cloning, a park map, and other objects alongside a VHS copy of the movie. The DNA Case is but one listing that contains multiple objects, meaning that the total number of individual items within the PDCA is currently over a hundred.

Other items include rare pamphlets distributed to members of the film industry to promote the first *Jurassic Park* movie (bought on eBay), a complete set of pre-release press stills for *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (Spielberg 1997; *The Lost World* hereafter) that were purchased from a specialist dealer at London Film and Comic Con, two different original mini posters for *The Lost World* (donated by fellow aca-fen who were clearing out domestic spaces), and various *Jurassic Park*– or *Jurassic World*–themed magazines. These include a complete set of Dark Horse’s five-part comic adaptation of *Jurassic Park* from 1993 and multiple copies of Immediate Media Company’s bimonthly and child-targeting *Lego Jurassic World* magazine. The temporal scope of the archive’s objects thus mirrors Katarina Heljakka’s argument that “collections of contemporary adult toy enthusiasts often include an extensive variety of toys—vintage, retro, and novel designs.”⁴⁵ Although focused around promotional paratexts, the PDCA similarly bestows sub/cultural capital on items spanning the entire history of the *Jurassic Park/World* franchise rather than favouring those from the property’s origins.

Additionally, the PDCA bestows sub/cultural capital on paratexts for other media(ted) dinosaur properties. Also represented are Disney/Pixar’s *The Good Dinosaur* (via a one-sheet cinema poster obtained from an online charity auction), the BBC’s *Walking with Dinosaurs* (represented by an illustrated dinosaur encyclopaedia),⁴⁶ and Sue, the *Tyrannosaurus rex* from Chicago’s Field Museum (via entry tickets and guides to the Sue attraction as well as an empty bottle of “Tooth and Claw” beer that is brewed especially for the Field Museum and available only in its café).

This summary of the PDCA and its contents immediately connotes how the aca-fan identity I have curated is one of privilege. My subjectivity as a white, childless, cishet male who is employed as a full-time and permanent academic at a Russell Group university in the UK grants me the time and freedom (economic and otherwise) to seek out and store these items. However, the summary I have offered also demonstrates how discourses

45 Katriina Heljakka, “Fans, Play Knowledge, and Playful History Management,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 37 (2022): para. 1.14, <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2022.2111>.

46 Steve Brusatte, *Walking with Dinosaurs: The 3D Movie Dinopedia* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Children’s Books, 2013).

of indeterminacy characterize the PDCA's contents in myriad ways. For example, the scope of the objects curated could be read as representing what Taylore Nicole Woodhouse names an "unwieldy archive."⁴⁷ Writing on online fan-archives, Woodhouse argues that idiosyncratic factors frequently motivate the forms and types of content that are preserved and shared in these, resulting in the repositories being evaluated as disorganized to outsiders.⁴⁸

Alternatively, my choice of "archive" over "collection" for naming the PDCA could be questioned. Lincoln Geraghty identifies "the impetus for fans to take action when texts and objects are under threat of disappearing, being cancelled, or taken off the shelves."⁴⁹ This motivation is arguably heightened in the case of the PDCA as much of its contents was never intended for being retained or cultural longevity. Consequently, the PDCA incorporates aspects of "fan collecting" in terms of both what items are acquired and the digital platforms that are used for obtaining these.⁵⁰ The PDCA also lends itself to being classified as an example of what Sarah Baker names "affective archives."⁵¹ These are archives curated by amateurs, unaligned with sanctioned institutions such as museums, and are underpinned by "feelings of love and care directed towards custodianship."⁵² Although I am educated to PhD level, my professional qualifications are in media and cultural studies rather than history and I have no formal training in institutional archiving practices. Thus, whilst the PDCA may demonstrate a centripetal "principle of organization" that guides its growth, its status and expansion is also simultaneously guided by "hobbyist" interests and available levels of economic capital, as well as, and returned to shortly, subjective factors concerning taste.⁵³

Probing Baker's use of the term "affective" further is arguably useful, as doing so highlights significant critical limitations to the aca-fan archivist

47 Woodhouse, "Digital Archives," para. 3.2.

48 Woodhouse, "Digital Archives," para. 3.2.

49 Lincoln Geraghty, "Nostalgia, Fandom and the Remediation of Children's Culture," in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. Paul Booth (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 163.

50 See Lincoln Geraghty, *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom and Collecting Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2014).

51 Sarah Baker, "Affective Archiving and Collective Collecting in Do-It-Yourself Popular Music Archives and Museums," in *Preserving Popular Music Heritage: Do-It-Yourself, Do-It-Together*, ed. Sarah Baker (London: Routledge, 2015), 59.

52 Baker, "Affective Archiving," 47.

53 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 155.

identity under discussion. Writing on affect as a motivator of individual fan identities, Laurence Grossberg argues that

affect is also organised; it operates within and, at the same time, produces maps which direct our investments in and into the world; these maps tell us where and how we can become absorbed—not into the self but into the world—as potential locations for our self-identifications, and with what intensities. This “absorption” or investment constructs the places and events which are, or can become, significant to us.⁵⁴

Our affective investments in popular culture subsequently generate what Grossberg calls “mattering maps” where specific commercial media properties and texts cause “different intensities or degrees of investment.”⁵⁵ Individual fan mattering maps thus demonstrate how “we invest ourselves more in some [media properties] than in others.”⁵⁶ What matters to an individual fan is thus political as what is both favoured and snubbed can be scrutinized as evidence of the deeper identity structures in which they are embedded. As Bourdieu observed, “[t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make.”⁵⁷ These critical approaches to the politics of taste and affect also resonate with analytical attitudes towards archiving concerning processes of selection and exclusion within individual repositories. As David Beer argues, “the archive works ... by shaping memory, it is a particular telling of history and biography as told through the documents it includes or excludes.”⁵⁸ In the case of a fan’s affective aca-fan archive, then, the objects and properties included within this can be read as reflecting the aspects of popular culture that matter the most to that fan and, by extension, what does not.

Applying this perspective to the PDCA illustrates this point. *Jurassic Park/World* is undoubtedly the most heavily represented dinosaur franchise represented, with over three-quarters of the stored material being derived from this property. In comparison, another globally successful

54 Laurence Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House? The Affective Sensibility of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 57.

55 Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House?,” 57.

56 Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House?,” 59.

57 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, xxix.

58 David Beer, *Popular Culture and New Media: The Politics of Circulation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 47.

dinosaur-centric property which emerged parallel to *Jurassic Park*, *Barney & Friends* (1992–2010), does not feature in the PDCA. Associated with “an image of cooperation, love and sharing, which many parents would love to see expressed by their child,”⁵⁹ Elizabeth Tucker notes that “*Barney and Friends* surpassed *Sesame Street* as the highest rated PBS series for children.”⁶⁰ As a cultural phenomenon, *Barney and Friends* was also “big business” for almost twenty years,⁶¹ generating a range of commodity packages “including dolls, slippers, bedsheets, and clothes.”⁶² If it is the case that “*Jurassic Park* (1993) and its sequels,... generated a great deal of dinosaur mania, or ‘dinomania,’” and so has come to emblemize dinosaurs in popular culture, it should not be overlooked that *Barney and Friends* has had a similar impact.⁶³ Why, then, have I denied conferring sub/cultural capital upon Barney through the PDCA?

Reflecting on this question, multiple rationalizations can be offered. One explanation would invoke an economic discourse: as PDCA acquisitions are primarily funded by my disposable income, directing this towards items associated with dinosaur IPs that are not part of my fan identity would be ostentatious. An additional spatial discourse could also be summoned. Barney is not an IP that is visible in places like fan conventions or museums, nor is he part of my saved search filters on eBay. However, Barney’s absence also relates to the property’s dominant cultural meanings pertaining to gender and age and my alignment with these. The purple dinosaur has previously been named both a “saccharine saurian”⁶⁴ and “a bland, sanctimonious authority figure.”⁶⁵ These meanings directly contrast with the “so-called ‘masculine’ traits” of aggression and power which many of *Jurassic Park*’s prehistoric inhabitants demonstrate. Moreover, W. J. T. Mitchell argues that Barney has a cultural reputation of being reviled as “childish” just at the moment the child is becoming interested in “real” dinosaurs, garnering additional associations of immaturity and inauthenticity.⁶⁶ These are all

59 Dianne Sykes, “Finding Ourselves in Each Other: Barney and the Other-Directed Child,” *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology* 24, no. 1 (1996): 90.

60 Elizabeth Tucker, “‘I Hate You, You Hate Me’: Children’s Responses to Barney the Dinosaur,” *Children’s Folklore Review* 22, no. 1 (1999): 25.

61 Sykes, “Finding Ourselves in Each Other,” 90.

62 Tucker, “‘I Hate You, You Hate Me,’” 26.

63 José Luis Sanz, *Starring T.Rex! Dinosaur Mythology and Popular Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 46.

64 W. J. T. Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book: The Life and Times of a Cultural Icon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 232.

65 Tucker, “‘I Hate You, You Hate Me,’” 31.

66 Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 258.

meanings that I associate with Barney, thus indicating how aspects of my subjective fan tastes have structured the choice of objects stored in the PDCA.

These reflections are significant as the rationalizations offered demonstrate how the aca-fan archivist acts as a gatekeeper whose subjectivity places limits on the contents and contours of what they choose to preserve. Just as effective mattering maps direct individual fans towards what does and does not matter in consumer culture, when these investments combine with the privileged, intermediary position occupied by the aca-fan archivist this can lead to situations where properties and items that should align with the archive's intended organizational principle, but diverge from the individual's affective investments, become either consciously or unconsciously overlooked. In the case of the PDCA, then, conferences of sub/cultural capital must align with the long-standing subcultural interests of the aca-fan archivist's subject position.

Conclusions

Undertaking this autoethnography has highlighted how my fandom for dinosaurs (and *Jurassic Park/World* especially) has produced a felt responsibility to act as guardian and custodian for, as well as gatekeeper of, promotional material that is representative of the meanings of prehistoric creatures in popular culture. The PDCA's contents have subjectively been deemed significant materials that demonstrate the historical development of how high-profile dinosaur mediations have evolved and the extent to which processes of commercialization and mediatisation impact upon how we assign meaning to the Mesozoic period. By occupying a privileged position as an academic, my affective investments in *Jurassic Park/World* and other dino-mediations provoke a sense of responsibility to preserve, protect, and represent the importance of these properties within the academy, as well as to speak up for the importance of making these topics visible within these spaces. As I have indicated throughout this chapter, this is not an easy stance to adopt, nor is it value neutral. Curating the PDCA brings with it a felt sense that, in the eyes of my peers, the items I am aggregating might constitute a worthless extravagance.

Additionally, I am aware that the PDCA is largely reflective of my own preferences for dino-mediations, meaning that it contains (unconscious) biases that exclude representations that do not fall into my subjective taste preferences. Whether the absences that have been highlighted because of

writing this chapter will be addressed is uncertain. If I am honest, if it is me making the purchases, then a character like Barney will likely not appear as I could use personal disposable income for other purposes. However, I would have gladly received donations of paratexts featuring this character (or others) from others. Perhaps, though, this conclusion demonstrates one of the limitations of “aca-fandom,” in that our mattering maps draw us away from alternative-yet-relevant examples and, in doing so, create an affront to the assumed objectivity of academic work (whether in media and cultural studies or elsewhere).

However, and as Hills notes, autoethnography requires continually directing reflexivity towards the construction of self-hood provided and asking, “What does this account leave out?”⁶⁷ Whilst reflexive comments concerning my privileged status as a fan, academic, and collector have been made, less has been directed to the spatial privileges occurring at the institutional level. Writing on increasingly digitized workplaces, Lizzie Richardson argues “[g]iven that workers may potentially work in any number of locations, and that real estate is a costly overhead for business, contemporary office space must be adapted to suit a more mobile workforce.”⁶⁸ Such perspectives view private office spaces where personal artefacts can be housed as a costly inefficiency that goes against contemporary discourses of “co-working.” Luckily, the School and institution has, to date, resisted these trajectories. Nevertheless, recognizing this point indicates another privileged set of discourses structuring the PDCA, as it has been allowed to be stored and grown as a result of my institution recognizing the value of individual workspaces. More work is needed on these issues and how they relate to contemporary instances of aca-fan archiving.

I would however continue to argue for the relevance of performing autoethnographies of (aca-)fan practices as, by doing so, particular forms of fan behaviour are granted visibility, become better understood, and, as has been the case in this chapter, can illustrate deeper problems within fan studies that require further debate. Additionally, I would encourage future research into fans’ historical practices to interrogate my account of the aca-fan archivist to test its applicability to other fan objects, especially in relation to those behaviours or fandoms that fall outside of the hegemonic identity positions that I occupy. Finally, I would argue that by highlighting the aca-fan archivist identity, this could give rise to a new area of discussion

67 Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 55.

68 Lizzie Richardson, “Coordinating Office Space: Digital Technologies and the Platformization of Work.” *Society and Space* 39, no. 2 (2021): 349.

within fan studies concerning how individual fans begin engaging in *specific types of fan behaviour*. By undertaking this task, a better understanding of fan identities and the affective motivations behind these practices can potentially be ascertained.

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8. Fan Temporalities in/of the Archive: *Tenet* and Timescapes of “Fast Fandom” among Christopher Nolan Fans

Matt Hills

Abstract: This chapter revisits debates in fan studies over “just-in-time fandom” versus “fan time.” It offers a new approach based on the multiple forms of time layered into digital fan “timescapes.” These timescapes are analysed via the case study of one forum, the Nolanfans.com community, and its collation of film reviews in near-real time. The study also reflects on “countdown time” where a film’s moment of release is anticipated, as well as “experiential time,” based on intensities of “first-time” media consumption. It is argued that these multiple digital timescapes of Christopher Nolan fandom integrate orientations to past, present, and future, and sustain a kind of “fast fandom.”

Keywords: archontic, fan time, media time, timescapes

In this chapter, I revisit key work on the “archontic” structures of fan practice, considering how fans’ “rogue archives” can be understood in relation to sociological and critical theories of time.¹ Temporality might be thought of as crucial to any notion of fan archiving, since the archive itself seemingly represents a resistance to ephemerality and a desire to hold onto information valued by a fandom over time, where fan identity can be defined

¹ Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2016).

via distinctive information behaviours.² Social media platforms such as YouTube³ and Tumblr⁴ have been discussed as possible terrains of vernacular or fan archiving, but here my case study focus will be on an older style of fan archive in the form of a fan forum, namely Nolanfans (Nolanfans.com).

This message board is predominantly structured around British film director Christopher Nolan's various films, up to and including *Oppenheimer* (2023), as well as including more general discussions of "Entertainment" along with focusing on Nolan's recurrent collaborators, especially in terms of his cinematography and soundtracks. It has a supporting Twitter (X) account that posts news updates linked to Nolan's film career, and a lapsed podcast which dates back to July 3, 2009, with its sixty-sixth episode having been uploaded at the end of 2015. Nolanfans includes a "Bio" tab at its home page, though this is not a "biography" of the forum but rather its defining subject, Christopher Nolan. This biography was seemingly last updated prior to the release of the film *Interstellar* and refers to it in the future tense: "Filming is planned to start this August and the film is set for release on November 7, 2014."

Nolanfans is thus an intriguing patchwork of different times—it is both partially out of date, cast back in a directorial past, and yet also precisely up to the moment in terms of enabling its posters to keep track of developments around *Oppenheimer* reviews and responses. The archival values of Nolanfans are apparent in terms of what has been allowed to remain in a state of pastness (there is little need for a biographical update; fans are presumed to know such information and it is readily accessible elsewhere), and what receives very rapid updates, e.g., the forum section focused on Nolan's current filmmaking. At the time of writing (March 2023), Nolanfans had received 1,176,223 total posts across its lifespan, and had hosted 37,506 total members.

My focus will be on how posters to Nolanfans collated and archived professional film critics' reviews of *Tenet* upon its cinema release in 2020. As I will show, fans posted links to major international newspaper, magazine, and blog reviews of *Tenet* as quickly as possible after they had been made available online. This section of the forum, "Tenet Reviews/Reactions [Possible SPOILERS]," consequently became extremely busy in the days

2 Ludi Price and Lyn Robinson, "‘Being in a Knowledge Space’: Information Behaviour of Cult Media Fan Communities," *Journal of Information Science* 43, no. 5 (2017): 649–64.

3 Thomas Elsaesser, *The Mind-Game Film: Distributed Agency, Time Travel, and Productive Pathology* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 267.

4 Anne-Charlotte Mecklenberg, "Tumbling Backward: Scrolling, Temporality, and One Direction Fan Narratives on Tumblr," *Camera Obscura* 37, no. 1 (2022): 149–74.

immediately prior to *Tenet's* release. In effect, critics' discussions of the new Nolan film were being tracked and curated by Nolan's devotees *in near real-time*, as they sought to discover as much as possible about *Tenet* after many months of fan speculation, rumour, and theorizing.

In what follows, I will revisit my own concept of "just-in-time fandom" where fan responses are said to be in thrall to the rhythms and times of media commodity-texts,⁵ i.e., fans respond as soon as a text is accessible; in this case they are responding immediately to the availability of pre-release press reviews. The Nolanfans message board may thus seem to display a "tyranny of real-time,"⁶ with fans linking to Twitter and aiming to post review details as close as possible to the moment of their publication on the web.

However, I will go on to argue that Nolanfans needs to be understood as a practice of fan archiving whose immediacy actually masks the collision and intersection of multiple "timescapes"⁷ within which temporality operates in relation to *Tenet's* publicity/release schedule. By focusing on the markedly plural temporalities of this fan-archiving, I will critique my own prior work, as well as suggest a new approach to the binary of powerful "media time" and resistive "fan time," through which fans are assumed to oppose the scheduling and commercial time frames of media industries.⁸ Rather than reading the "fan time" of fandom archives as inherently oppositional, I will instead suggest that there is no singular or monolithic "fan time" here, and that fannish archiving of information can be analysed as shot through with aspects of both "power-chronography"⁹ and resistance to "temporal doxa."¹⁰ I will conclude by referring to this self-deconstructive blurring of "just-in-time fandom" and "fan time" as a form of *fast fandom*.

I will begin with an opening section aimed at placing work on fan archives in greater dialogue with sociological and critical/cultural theories of temporality. Here, I'll establish my approach to the multiple and layered timescapes of fandom. In the following section, I will then apply this analytical approach to Nolanfans' archiving of *Tenet* reviews in 2020.

5 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 141–42.

6 Rob Kitchin, *Digital Timescapes: Technology, Temporality and Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 156.

7 Kitchin, *Digital Timescapes*.

8 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 155.

9 Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 14.

10 Kitchin, *Digital Timescapes*, 32.

“Fan Time” or “Just-in-time Fandom”? Towards the Multiple Timescapes of Archontic Fan Production

The term “archontic” suggests that any fan archive is marked by generativity and productivity. Fans convert diegetic and extra-diegetic materials into fan-object-specific databases such as Wookieepedia for *Star Wars* or TARDIS Data Core for *Doctor Who*. However, in bringing the “archival turn” of wider cultural theory into fan studies,¹¹ Abigail De Kosnik focused more specifically on archives of fanworks such as Archive of Our Own, a fanfic archive bucking the trends of corporate social media and surveillance capitalism thanks to being run by fans, for fans, funded through fans’ donations. This led De Kosnik, quite rightly, to emphasize the archontic production of fanfiction as an “opening of multivariant paths” through the character relationships and events of a source/canon text, enabling fan readers “to make selections from numerous scenarios and versions of romance, sexuality, connection, bonding, yearning, denial, rejection, and release. From these archives,... [fans] can choose contents that help them understand, tolerate, criticize, or oppose” the cultural politics of representation and desire.¹²

And yet there is a curious mismatch between this archontic emphasis on multiplicity, as the fan archive continues to grow and multiversally split into bundles of pathways and possibilities, and the rather more monolithic way in which De Kosnik brings in a theory of “fan time” to ponder the temporality of the fan archive. This occurs in one of the “breaks” in *Rogue Archives* where the issue of “fan time versus media time” is set out.¹³ This is presented as a binary, with “media time” discussed as follows:

I define “media time” as consisting of the schedules mandated by the culture industries’ production and sales cycles: the time of broadcasting in the network television industry, the time of “drop dates” or release dates ... in the online streaming industry, the time of premieres in the film industry.... But in an age of digital networks, when fan time *can* be ... coincident with media time, can fan time also still sometimes be different from media time?¹⁴

11 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 276.

12 Abigail De Kosnik, “Fifty Shades and the Archive of Women’s Culture,” *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 3 (2015): 121.

13 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 155.

14 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 157–58.

Answering this question very much in the affirmative, De Kosnik argues that fan archives are a crucial site for the assertion and defence of fans' capacity "to determine the temporality of their engagements with media texts."¹⁵ Fan time may be "variant and undecided ... allowing it to be decided entirely by individual fans"¹⁶ who can jump into a fan archive, or discover a particular multiversal pathway through a character relationship, at any moment that works for them—even years after a film's release or a TV series' broadcast if this is when they have entered fandom. But fan time remains, at a cultural-political level, singular rather than multiple—that is, it is defined as resolutely oppositional. In fact, its Others are multiple, even whilst it retains a monolithic status, as it is said to oppose both the "media time" of creative/cultural industries *and* the dominant temporalities of "chrononormativity"¹⁷ such as "what I would call 'work/leisure time,' 'linear time,' and 'self/other time.'"¹⁸ Fan time is driven by fans' pleasure: it is productive but not via wage labour, challenging cultural norms of work/leisure time; it is time spent repeating a focus on specific media texts rather than more normatively and linearly moving on to a "new" text-commodity; and it is time spent on the fan-self, within a community of like-minded folk, rather than on domestic or caring obligations that remain normatively gendered.

In this argument, then, fan time is a form of queered time, and we can think of how "fan time" and "queer time" overlap, as when fans "queer a text," producing online performances (... stories, videos, animated GIFs, commentary/reviews ...) that foreground homoerotic or homosexual relations, or any nonheteronormative romantic and sexual relations, between characters.¹⁹

De Kosnik's summary is that "Internet fan archives not only help fans to refuse any temporal regulation of their performances by media time and the culture industries; fan archives also aid fans' refusal of chrononormativities linked to gender and sexual orientation."²⁰ Singularly, if not monolithically, fan time is thus viewed as a refusal of powerful hegemonic temporalities—fans' Archive of Our Own is also a time of their own.

15 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 158.

16 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 158.

17 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 158.

18 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 159.

19 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 159–60.

20 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 160.

The binary of “media time” and “fan time” would therefore seem to capture something vital about the very different temporal frameworks connected to discourses of industry versus fandom. The posited relative autonomy of “fan time” is also captured by Owain Gwynne’s concept of “fan-made time,” which he uses to theorize how fans fill in the time between a commercial media project’s announcement and its eventual release, posting speculation, fancasting, and rumour.²¹ A great deal of the time spent on Nolanfans.com might, for instance, be thought of as not only “fan time” but also “fan-made time,” as posters await news about the latest Nolan production.

However, by disarticulating “media time” from “fan time,” De Kosnik potentially generates a one-sided version of the latter, i.e., that it is always oppositional. This is not surprising, as she constructs her account partly against my own prior concept of “just-in-fandom,” arguing that this is too hasty in reading fan temporalities as colonized and dominated by industry time frames.²² I used “just-in-time fandom” to highlight the extent to which online fandom seemed to be disciplined by “the specific temporalities of the commodity-text. It is the commodity-text’s delivery of fan responses within specific and highly predictable temporal rhythms that I want to draw attention to.”²³ I was referring to premieres of TV episodes, and how fans in early internet newsgroups would post commentaries on new episodes at the very moment an episode concluded, or even in ad breaks, with fan activity then dropping off relatively shortly afterwards.

In my original conceptualization, just-in-time fandom was described as: “complicit with the commodity-text, functioning ... as an intensification ... of commodification.”²⁴ And although the rhythms of TV and film releases can be argued to be quite different,²⁵ if anything, fandom has only become more intensely invested in performing these kinds of immediate responses and “hot takes” in the era of social media. Rather than “just-in-time fandom,” we might now think of “24/7” fandom²⁶ where fans constantly react to press

21 Owain Gwynne, “Fan-Made Time: *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*,” in *Fan CULTure: Essays on Participatory Fandom in the 21st Century*, ed. Kristin M. Barton and Jonathan Malcolm Lampley (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2014), 79–80.

22 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 156–57.

23 Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 141.

24 Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 142.

25 Chuck Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 136.

26 Matt Hills, “Always-on Fandom, Waiting and Bingeing: Psychoanalysis as an Engagement with Fans’ ‘Infra-Ordinary’ Experiences,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, ed. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 21.

releases, rumours, news stories, trailers, and even teasers for trailers, along with all manner of everyday paratextuality.

The interpenetration of “media time” and “fan time” presupposed by just-in-time fandom has also received some support in more recent work on “geek temporalities.”²⁷ In quite the reverse of De Kosnik’s argument that “fan time” strongly opposes “industry time,” Jordan S. Carroll has suggested that “[w]hile it remains important to recuperate geek practices of resistance, I also think it is critical that we disenchant the wonder and rituals that bind geeks to the spirit of capital.”²⁸ Carroll argues that geek temporalities “entrain media consumers to follow alternative temporalities” of immersion in transmedia storyworlds, repetition of fan pleasures, and blurrings of leisure and labour which prepare these fans for the kinds of focused, detail-oriented paid work required in specific strata of late capitalist corporations.²⁹ In Carroll’s terms, we need to view the “utopian promise” of geek temporality, where past media are held on to *contra* “the precariousness of late capitalism,”³⁰ as something that remains “politically ambiguous”³¹ due to geek temporalities simultaneously being co-opted, and even encouraged, by the spirit of late capitalism and its investment in blurred work/leisure.³²

Permitting a sense of ambiguity, Carroll’s “geek temporalities” ultimately suggest the conceptual limitation of both my “just-in-time fandom” and De Kosnik’s “fan time.” In each case, fan temporalities are insufficiently plural and multiple—fan time is either always-already oppositional, or it is always-already industrially co-opted. Following either approach to the times of fan archiving means reducing these activities to singular narratives of resistance or complicity. By contrast, this chapter argues that we need an approach to temporality and fans’ archontic production that does not rely on monolithic accounts of resistant “fan time” or complicit “just-in-time fandom.” This blurring of “media time” and “fan time” (which does not simply collapse into “just-in-time fandom” as an industrial co-optation) will be referred to, ultimately, as “fast fandom,” following Rob Kitchin’s discussion of “fast activism.”³³

27 See Jordan S. Carroll, “Geek Temporalities and the Spirit of Capital,” *Post45* 3 (August 2019): 1–37; Jordan S. Carroll, “The Lifecycle of Software Engineers: Geek Temporalities and Digital Labor,” in *Practices of Speculation*, ed. Jeanne Cortiel, Christine Hanke, and Colin Milburn (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020).

28 Carroll, “Geek Temporalities,” 28.

29 Carroll, “The Lifecycle,” 211.

30 Carroll, “The Lifecycle,” 215–16.

31 Carroll, “The Lifecycle,” 218.

32 Carroll, “Geek Temporalities,” 6.

33 Kitchin, *Digital Timescapes*, 184.

One way of thinking beyond this impasse would be to draw more fully on the sociology and critical theory of time. For, as Helge Jordheim and Espen Ytreberg have noted:

That time should be considered in the plural, rather than the singular, has become a widely accepted fact in the humanities:... [T]ime in social, cultural and historical settings is always multiple, relative and highly dependent on external factors.... [T]his ... leaves open the question of how and why different temporalities and orders arise.³⁴

One influential theorization of this multiplicity is Barbara Adam's notion of "timescapes."³⁵ A timescape represents

the intricate intersecting of the rhythms, beats, sequences, beginnings and ends, growth and decay, birth and death, night and day, seasonality, memory and so on that constitute the diversity of embedded temporalities.... We are unavoidably immersed and implicated in these constantly shifting timescapes.³⁶

Using the concept, Rob Kitchin has recently centred his analysis of contemporary time not simply on "acceleration"³⁷ or "speed,"³⁸ but instead on the multiplicity and complexity of digital timescapes.³⁹ As Kitchin suggests:

Timescapes are palimpsest in nature, containing the legacy and layers of multiple historical temporal regimes.... Hence, the temporalities of clock time (e.g., defined working hours) persist alongside network time (e.g., organized around the synchronous and asynchronous logics of digitally networked technologies).... Multiple timescapes, with differing temporal features and logics, coexist, sometimes working in concert.⁴⁰

34 Helge Jordheim and Espen Ytreberg, "After Supersynchronisation: How Media Synchronise the Social," *Time & Society* 30, no. 3 (2021): 403.

35 Barbara Adam, *Timescapes of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

36 Robert Hassan, *Empires of Speed: Time and the Acceleration of Politics and Society* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 46.

37 Judy Wajcman, *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

38 Jeff Sugarman and Erin Thrift, "Neoliberalism and the Psychology of Time," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 60, no. 6 (2020): 807–28.

39 Kitchin, *Digital Timescapes*; see also Sharma, *In the Meantime*, 6–7.

40 Kitchin, *Digital Timescapes*, 21.

Following this stance, both resistive “fan time” and disciplined “just-in-time fandom” could alternatively be understood not as singularly resistant/complicit in relation to media-industry powers of temporality, but as inhabiting vigorously multiple timescapes. Through an analysis of Nolanfans, I will argue that fan archiving layers a range of different “temporal regimes,” as Kitchin has suggested. I will show how digital “network time” coexists with the “psychic archive” of biographical/fannish “memory-time,” as well as the “countdown time” of blockbuster release dates⁴¹ intersecting with the “clock time” of press embargos. And the “experiential time” of intense consumer experience⁴² works alongside the openness to the future of “archontic time,” as fans seek to preserve information for the fans who will follow historically after them as “imagined auditors.”⁴³ As such, it cannot make sense to discuss any generalized or single “fan timescape.”

That said, the specifically multiple timescapes of Nolanfans’ reaction threads can be subjected to detailed analysis, and this is what I will explore next. I will examine how this archontic fan production—a case that looks as if it should reinforce a take on “accelerated” digital fandom—can actually be better understood via “the timescape perspective [as this] enables the operations, salience, multiplicity and unfolding of temporal relations to be intricately charted.”⁴⁴ It is precisely because the concept of “timescapes” allows for multiple kinds of temporality (and their layerings) to be considered that I have used it here. I will chart these various temporalities (listed above) as I apply them to Nolanfans’ near-real time archiving of *Tenet* reviews.

Archiving *Tenet* Reviews as Care for the Future: Layering the Temporalities of “Fast Fandom”

The “*Tenet* Reviews/Reactions”⁴⁵ thread was started on Saturday, August 15, 2020 (forum times are recorded in the format of British Summer Time –5 hours, meaning that when the embargo was lifted in the UK at 5 p.m. on

41 Carter Moulton, “‘Announcement’ Trailers and the Inter-temporality of Hollywood Blockbusters,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 3 (2019): 437–38.

42 Tristan Garcia, *The Life Intense: A Modern Obsession* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2018), 91–92.

43 See Geoffrey C. Bowker, *Memory Practices in the Sciences* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2005), 6–7; De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 158; Mecklenberg, “Tumbling Backward,” 157.

44 Kitchin, *Digital Timescapes*, 20.

45 I have italicized *Tenet* in my own usage throughout, but have left the film’s title non-italicized in quoted posts/Tweets where this is the original formatting.

Friday, August 21, 2020, the forum time was set to 12 p.m.). Immediately posters asked when the first press screenings would take place, with one contributor responding that “[s]creenings started for UK media outlets today” (poster 1, August 15, 7:00 p.m.). It was a mere one hour and eleven minutes after the thread had been set up that the first set of unattributed “unofficial reactions” were posted, with another fan warning that “the review embargo gets lifted next Friday. Reactions can be ‘fake’ too, especially if they are anonymous” (poster 2, August 15, 9:02 p.m.). This note of caution continued in the days leading up to the embargo being lifted; one forum member emphasized that the response they’d posted came “from a reliable member from Box Office Forums” (poster 3, August 17, 2:55 a.m.).

These fans combine a sense of being “hyped” (poster 4, August 15, 2020, 11:44 p.m.) with a communal hermeneutics of paratextual suspicion, challenging the reliability of sources and discussing how early reactions can tend to be excessively positive. A highly guarded sense of these early reviewing paratexts is evident, with fans stressing their agency and interpretive autonomy—they do not want to be misled or swayed by reactions that subsequently prove to be exaggeratedly upbeat: “I’m a huge fan (no shit), but I don’t think too much about early reactions of this kind, especially the positive ones.... I try to stay objective” (poster 5, August 17, 5:17 a.m.).

The Nolan fans are also very much aware of the informational control that Warner Brothers’ embargo and non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) can exert, with one observing on August 18 that “I expected more reactions. It looks like they [critics who have signed NDAs] are really afraid to write even a vague” reaction (poster 6, 6:59 a.m.). The hesitancy being shown pre-embargo by critics is subsequently explained when forum members share a tweet from the BBC’s entertainment correspondent, Lizo Mzimba, that is directly critical of Warner Brothers’ attempts to lock down press information about *Tenet*:

With the imminent release of *Tenet* at a time when transparency/trust from studios/cinemas [is] crucial, seems far from ideal Warner Bros making journalists/critics seeing *Tenet* this week sign an agreement not to even publicly admit they’ve been to a cinema and seen the film before Fri (Aug 17, 11:33 a.m.; shared on August 18, 7:17 a.m.).

Tenet’s cinema release during the Covid pandemic therefore repeatedly impinges on these paratexts, raising the question as to why professional film critics would not be able to share any information whatsoever about attending press screenings at a moment when the public are being assured

this is safe to do. The fan forum, perhaps unsurprisingly, does not focus in this thread on Covid-related concerns about going to the cinema while mask-wearing etc., remaining focused on *Tenet* reviews.

Posters also performed their hermeneutics of paratextual suspicion by challenging the pull quotes that had been selected for use in official publicity. These suggested that various media outlets had awarded five stars to *Tenet*, yet the publications concerned remained subject to the press embargo at this stage, and so their reviews had not been published. Fans debated whether the quotes had been especially written for Warner Brothers' promotion and advertising spots, and questioned their legitimacy if they should not prove to correspond with published review material. Fans were particularly cynical about "cherry picked" hyperbolic press quotes (poster 8, August 19, 2020, 4:09 p.m.), not wanting to accept that these offered reasonable assessments of *Tenet*'s qualities as a film. Again, fans remain keen to demarcate their independence from mechanisms of hype here,⁴⁶ even while they archive all such promo material, or as much of it as they can curate on the forum in a timely manner.

On the eve of the Warner Bros embargo being lifted, posters check exactly what time press reviews will become available: the answer is "This Friday morning 9a[m.] PST" (poster 9, August 20, 12:59 a.m.), which corresponds to 5 p.m. UK time, and 12 p.m. on the forum. In the minutes following this precise "clock time," the thread sees a concentrated burst of activity as posters collate reviews from UK press sources and specialist film magazines. It is also noted that the UK press screenings are ahead of comparable US events—the film's release having been staggered due to Covid conditions in different countries—and as a result, some US publications are planning to run reviews from UK-based correspondents. This indicates the commercial and industrial importance of simultaneous day-and-date press/social media coverage that is strongly marked by a globalized "network time"⁴⁷ even though such a cinema release pattern has been contingently disrupted by Covid.

The flurry of archiving, as fans are finally able to post, sort through and evaluate an array of film critics' responses, would seem to suggest the dominance of conventional and industrial "clock time" within the forum's archiving timescape.⁴⁸ However, it is important to recall, again, that timescapes are not singular regimes of time; this approach enables the "multiplex"

46 Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 3.

47 Sugarman and Thrift, "Neoliberalism," 813.

48 Hassan, *Empires of Speed*, 49.

phenomenologies of differently lived and experienced times to displace a scenario where “in the thought traditions of the industrialized West,... our understanding of the temporal dimension of socio-environmental life is pretty much exhausted with knowledge about the time of calendars and clocks.”⁴⁹ And one major aspect of the timescapes inhabited by the Nolanfans forum is the temporal register of the contemporary blockbuster movie:

Contemporary blockbuster franchises ... are best approached ... as *inter-temporal commodities* in which specific temporal structures—personal and collective memories of the past, self-authenticating histories, anticipation for a (better) future, the immediacy of a moment, simultaneous collective viewing—are shaped, shared, commodified, revised, and felt.⁵⁰

Indeed, Carter Moulton characterizes the blockbuster as partaking in a specific mode of time that is not only “clock time,” but is more precisely a sort of *countdown time*:

The circulation of countdown timers is common practice in today’s online blockbuster marketing—literalizing Thomas Elsaesser’s observation that blockbuster events take “place in a kind of countdown time,” which intensifies like a “hurricane gathering force in the mid-Atlantic.”⁵¹

For example, Nolan’s *Oppenheimer* (2023) had an official countdown site which playfully ticked down to the film’s release in thousandths of a second, marking out the period of fan anticipation as a phase of on-brand and scientifically quantified precision.⁵²

It may simultaneously seem as though the archiving of *Tenet* reviews is dominated by what Rob Kitchin terms a new “temporal realism” of digital timescapes. This is said to “have produced a pervasive atmosphere so thoroughly interwoven into our lifeworlds that it is seen as ... the natural order: the ways things are. It ... operates without having to resort to coercion.”⁵³ And it is a commonsensical view of time that encourages “individuals to operate in the moment.... The emphasis on speed and instant

49 Adam, *Timescapes of Modernity*, 8.

50 Moulton, “Announcement’ Trailers,” 437.

51 Moulton, “Announcement’ Trailers,” 437–38.

52 <https://www.oppenheimermovie.co.uk>.

53 Kitchin, *Digital Timescapes*, 155.

reaction means there is no time for reflection, contemplation, slow rational deliberation.”⁵⁴

Such an argument certainly resonates with the archontic collection of *Tenet* reviews I am focusing on—following the lifting of Warner Brothers’ press embargo, one fan posts a range of press reviews in the first minute of their availability (poster 10, August 21, 12:00 p.m.), editing this post to accumulate reviews from the likes of *Empire*, *The Guardian*, *Little White Lies*, and *Variety* six minutes later (poster 10, August 21, 12:06 p.m.). In the space of about ten minutes, multiple critics’ tweets have additionally been shared in multiple fan postings, along with a review from the BBC’s Arts editor, Will Gompertz (poster 10, August 21, 12:11 p.m.).

As further reviews are added to the forum, one fan even monitors the fluctuating Rotten Tomatoes (RT) score for the film in real-time, for example, at twenty-four minutes after the lifting of the embargo—“*The score has jumped up to 81%.... Higher than Interstellar and Prestige rotten rating*” (poster 11, August 21, 12: 24 p.m., emphasis in original)—and again at thirty-two minutes post-embargo, when “Rotten score now at 85%. Nearing inception’s 86%” (poster 11, August 21, 12:32 p.m., emphasis in original). The thread does not pause to dwell in any detail on the reviews that are collected and archived—*contra* influential models of fandom as being centrally concerned with interpretations of popular media⁵⁵ there “is ... ‘an annihilation of interpretation.’”⁵⁶ Fans rapidly evaluate whether reviews are positive or negative, commenting briefly on how mixed the reviews are, and what this could mean for *Tenet*’s complexity and/or intellectualism, but they do not appear to debate interpretations of the film in any depth, at least at this point in time and on this thread. Instead, the emphasis is on adding, at pace, to the accumulating archive of reviews.

That said, the Nolanfans’ collation of professional film reviews and critics’ reactions seems to be strongly coloured by a compound of clock time (the ending of the embargo), network time (fans’ posting reviews within minutes of their publication), and blockbuster countdown time (anticipating and reacting to the sudden availability of professional reviews). But we should not only stress those temporal elements that reinforce an interpretation of fandom being dominated by technological/industrial/cultural norms of

54 Kitchin, *Digital Timescapes*, 156.

55 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

56 Kitchin, *Digital Timescapes*, 157.

time. For, alongside such “layers” of temporal regimes, these Christopher Nolan fans also draw on other temporalities. One additional variant relates to the ambience conveyed by fans’ curation of reviews and its impassioned immediacy. As well as discussing how hyped they are, some fans put a positive spin on the mixed tenor of reviews:

The negative reviews are actually making me excited.... [M]ost of the negativity is reviewers complaining that the plot is too complex for them. That’s just the kind of film I love, a film that forces you to think and doesn’t just offer up a simplistic one-dimensional plot. (poster 12, August 21, 12:28)

Such fan-cultural distinction suggests that *Tenet* will be another Nolan “‘quality’ blockbuster,”⁵⁷ i.e., the kind of movie that can be appreciated via its puzzle-film attributes.⁵⁸ But fan excitement is also explicitly displayed in this genre of post. Repeatedly, there is an intensity and a sense of playfulness to fans’ participation in the pace and rhythm of review-catching, for instance when a couple of fans celebrate that Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic have attained reversible ratings for the film: “*Tenet*’s RT numbers at a palindromic 88%, with 33 reviews. Can they just lock it up and keep it that way?” (poster 13, August 21, 3:10 p.m.), and in relation to Metacritic’s ‘metascore’: “71 from 17 reviews” (poster 14, August 21, 3:52 p.m.).

It might seem obvious that Nolan fans would be “hyped” to finally be able to read reviews of a film they’d been looking forward to for some time. Yet the flurry of excitable posts implies a specific experiential time focused on what Tristan Garcia has called the “intense life” valued within contemporary culture. Garcia argues that an “intensive person triggered in modern culture” aims to self-consciously cultivate “a routine of intensities that permeates most of the areas of ... existence.”⁵⁹ The heightened qualia of such “intensities” enables consumers—occupying routinized, habituated social lives—to feel that they are breaking out of enculturated and/or labour-oriented routines. Garcia analyses how

57 Geoff King, *Quality Hollywood: Markers of Distinction in Contemporary Studio Film* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 81.

58 Seth Friedman, *Are You Watching Closely? Cultural Paranoia, New Technologies, and the Contemporary Hollywood Misdirection Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 154–58; see also Sorcha Ní Fhlainn, “You Keep Telling Yourself What You Know, but What Do You Believe?: Cultural Spin, Puzzle Films and Mind Games in the Cinema of Christopher Nolan,” in *The Cinema of Christopher Nolan: Imagining the Impossible*, ed. Jacqueline Furby and Stuart Joy (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2015).

59 Garcia, *The Life Intense*, 115.

this “intensive” personality attempts to conserve phenomenologies of “intensity,” suggesting that what he terms “primaverism,”⁶⁰ or first-time-ness, can be central to this:

Routine destroys feelings of variation,... but it cannot lay a hand on the superior intensity of the first time; memory conserves that intensity. Even better, the effects of routine on the freshness of an experience can be turned against themselves by the very idea that to each particular moment of life there belongs something singular.... As an intensive person, I am a devotee in the cult of the *prima volta*.... My devotion allows me to defy the inevitability of routine by making the most of the novelty offered to me at every moment.⁶¹

The fact that pages and pages of press reviews and critical reactions were collated at Nolanfans in the first hour of their availability in 2020 suggests that there is a powerful and communal experience of “primaverism” underpinning these acts of fan archontic production. These fans may be anticipating another Nolan film in the sequence of his works but after 5 p.m. BST (British Summer Time) on August 21, 2020, they were able to sift through and appreciate *Tenet* reviews for the very first time. There is indeed a fan-perceived singularity to this “particular moment of life”—an evasion of routine and mundane consumption patterned by repetition, as an unprecedented and novel media text is encountered through specific kinds of paratexts “in the cult of the *prima volta*” for the first time.

Of course, Garcia is alert to how primaverism can itself become routinized by its devotees: “[I]n the end they strengthen routine all the more by fostering an even greater routine of intensities.”⁶² Many of these fans will no doubt have similarly anticipated the release of previous Nolan films, making a routinized ritual of this primaverism. But cultivating and expressing the intensity of primaverism through *Tenet*’s post-embargoed reviews means that these fans are not only reproducing normative temporalities of clock time, network time, and blockbuster countdown time. They are also resisting these specific chrononormativities by performing fannish primaverism, and by elevating this new Nolan film release out of the mundane and into a sacred realm fully deserving of the forum’s close, immediate attention as performed through review-archiving. Rob Kitchin observes with regard to

60 Garcia, *The Life Intense*, 91.

61 Garcia, *The Life Intense*, 110.

62 Garcia, *The Life Intense*, 115.

the legacy of temporal regimes: “Sacred ... time[s] remain important ... [and] have not been usurped and fully replaced by network time, but rather they coexist and inflect each other.”⁶³ The “primaverist” experiential intensities of fan anticipation, excitement, and sacralization of media texts can thus coexist with the industrial and media-technological norms of “temporal doxa,” making this simultaneously a version of “media time” and “fan time.”

But these fans are not simply immersed in the moment of *Tenet*'s press reviews as a novel first time to be experientially valued. They also insistently link these reviews, and aggregator sites' scores, back to their fan knowledge and memories of Nolan's earlier movies and their critical receptions. That is to say, there is also a temporality of fan history/memory, a form of *biographical time*—of the self, but crucially of the forum community—that is at play in the supposedly encapsulating “temporal realism” of these real-time fan responses. Posters pick out the review from Robbie Collin in *The Telegraph*, for instance: “10/10 ... more importantly from Mr. (Robbie) Collins [sic].... OK, now my hype is cautiously rising again” (poster 15, August 21, 12:26 p.m.).

This post causes one contributor to then ask why this reviewer is special: “Why is this Robbie Collin so important? I'm out of the loop here, sorry” (poster 7, August 21, 12:56). One answer is that Collin is known to be “a huge Nolan fan” (poster 16, August 21, 1:10 p.m.), the implication being that the forum values his professional review in particular as he is felt to be “one of them,” and to “get” the filmmaker's work. At the same time as valuing critics known to be Nolan fans, the forum is interested in discounting reviews from those assessed to be anti-Nolan, with one comment suggesting that the term “pretentious” codes this sentiment:

Wanna quickly find the anti-Nolan bias reviewers? Look for that word “pretentious.” There's a lot of legit arguments against Nolan's work, it's a bit colder and more expository than people like. But calling his work pretentious is a joke. He's never pretended to be something he's not.... That's the reviewers bias showing through, that they interpret Nolan to be that way simply because they don't enjoy his films. (poster 17, August 21, 1:31 p.m.)

As *Tenet*'s score on Rotten Tomatoes moves around, posters also compare this to other Nolan film titles, using such comparisons to contextualize how *Tenet*'s numerical value should be understood. Fans discuss whether his previous films started with higher RT scores which declined over time as more lukewarm reviews came in: “Yeah I used to really follow the critical

63 Kitchin, *Digital Timescapes*, 24.

reception.... TDKR [*The Dark Knight Rises*] was mostly doing great at the start and it wasn't an unpopular thing for a critic to call it the best one of the 3 at the time" (poster 16, August 21, 1:11 p.m.). Posters also indicate their knowledge of established Nolan reviewing patterns in sections of the press:

For those wondering, don't expect U.S. reviews for a while. In many cities, critics won't be seeing it until the end of August and, of course, NY/LA press—who are very opinionated on Nolan—won't for months.... The score could go up or *way* down, still. (poster 18, August 21, 1:11 p.m., emphasis in original)

What seems to resemble a very present-oriented and in-the-moment series of near-real-time fan engagements is thus marked by traces of communal and individual fan knowledge, involving memories of how previous films performed on aggregator sites, or the communal recognition of pro-Nolan professional film reviewers such as Robbie Collin. Various biographical fan pasts are sedimented in and through the speedy collection of reviews, again indicating the multi-temporality of digital timescapes.

However, there is also a future-orientation to these archontic posts; each Nolan film has its own section of the Nolanfans forum, and just as it is possible to work sequentially through the curation of press reviews for *Tenet*, one could go back further and do exactly the same for *Dunkirk* or *Interstellar*. Likewise, it is reasonable to assume that fans will collate reviews for Nolan's subsequent films in similar ways. These seemingly accelerated fan responses, reacting at pace to the lifting of a reviews embargo and then progressing alongside the release of additional reviews staggered by UK/US release date, result in a time-stamped archive of information. This resembles a kind of fan list-making,⁶⁴ gathering paratextual press material/reception together under a specific fandom-oriented logic.⁶⁵ Yet the significance that fans attribute to collating reviews suggests a Derridean opening "onto the future" whereby such "archives ... [give] fans a way to join fandoms belatedly,... offering fans sites and content repositories where ... [they] can locate and engage with fan performances made earlier."⁶⁶ Anne-Charlotte

64 Paul Booth, "Fans' List-making: Memory, Influence, and Argument in the 'Event' of Fandom," *Matrizes* 9, no. 2 (2015): 85–107.

65 Liam Cole Young, *List Cultures: Knowledge and Poetics from Mesopotamia to BuzzFeed* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 9.

66 De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 158; and see Matt Hills, "The Expertise of Digital Fandom as a 'Community of Practice': Exploring the Narrative Universe of *Doctor Who*," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 21, no. 3 (2015): 371.

Mecklenberg, in her analysis of One Direction fan narratives on Tumblr, builds on De Kosnik's analysis by emphasizing "the sense of possibility inherent in archiving content for future use" where "the archival may-be ... also offers ... a framework within which to organize a particular relationship between multiple pasts, presents, and futures."⁶⁷ Nolanfans.com may not correspond, as a community, to the marginalized LGBTQ+ users discussed by Mecklenberg, but in their belief in the enduring cultural value of Nolan's films—in their belief that the discussion of these films implicitly deserves to be held in place on the internet—these Christopher Nolan fans also project back into a fan-cultural recent past in order to serve an imagined future through the present-focused curation of paratexts. Nolanfans thus constructs an inter-temporality that connects fragments of the past (the receptions of prior Nolan films), a serialized social media-driven present, and projected futures (imagined future fans who will want to look back at *Tenet's* press coverage), just as Mecklenberg analyses.⁶⁸

This structuring of disparate temporalities, and associated layering of timescapes, resembles what Thomas Derek Robinson, Ela Veresiu, and Ana Babić Rosario term the "[i]ntegrative consumer timework" of "consumption activities that harmonize multiple temporal orientations (past, present, and future) among in-group consumers."⁶⁹ For these authors, "integrative consumer timework is collaborative consumption" which shapes "members' engagement with the past and future in ways unavailable to outsiders,"⁷⁰ such as the ongoing and communal (re-)framing of films undertaken by Nolanfans.com. Caring about critical/reception paratexts and Rotten Tomatoes' scores means that ultimately Nolanfans enacts what Rob Kitchin views as an "ethics of temporal care," with "people treating each other in ways that promote ... co-operation and the accumulation of social capital."⁷¹

In a sense, this fan care can be taken to mirror the care that Christopher Nolan lavishes on his productions—for example, the way in which he insisted that the reverse imageries of *Tenet* had to work if played backwards, so that the film would stand up to repeated, detailed, and even obsessive analyses.⁷² Here, *Tenet* itself becomes visualized as an archive of images

67 Mecklenberg, "Tumbling Backward," 157.

68 Mecklenberg, "Tumbling Backward," 161–63.

69 Thomas Derek Robinson, Ela Veresiu, and Ana Babić Rosario, "Consumer Timework," *Journal of Consumer Research* 49, no. 1 (2022): 99.

70 Robinson et al., "Consumer Timework," 100.

71 Kitchin, *Digital Timescapes*, 170.

72 Christopher Nolan quoted in Tom Shone, *The Nolan Variations: The Movies, Mysteries and Marvels of Christopher Nolan* (London: Faber and Faber, 2020), 328.

to be manipulated and pored over by imagined future audiences—and though Nolan does not directly use the term, as a resource for projected future *fandom*.

Conclusion: The Timescapes of Nolanfans

With both the director and his fans united in specific ways of archontically caring for the futures of *Tenet*, the “real-time” synchronization of social media can be read as sustaining a form of fandom within which fan identity becomes increasingly “fluid, mobile ... and fast.”⁷³ The speed of Nolanfans.com as it reacts to post-embargoed film reviews is notable, with pages 19 through to 30 of its total 101 pages of comments all falling within two hours of the embargo lifting. This fan community’s integrative consumer timework, and the way that it layers clock time, network time, and blockbuster countdown time with biographical fan/community time, experiential intensities of a “first-time,” and an open-ness to the future or a temporal ethics of care, all intersect to define its timescapes as fast fandom. Like fast activism, such fandom seeks to “re-synchronize ... with the pace and tactics of neoliberal capitalism”⁷⁴ without monolithically becoming either “media time” or “fan time,” and without being wholly disciplined and co-opted as “just-in-time fandom.” Fast fandom, instead, testifies to the “multiplex” of its digital timescapes,⁷⁵ carrying the traces of chrononormativities and resistant temporalities.

As I have aimed to demonstrate, the timescapes of Nolanfans.com can therefore be understood as multiple and complex intersections between clock time, blockbuster countdown time, network time/real-time, biographical/fannish time, the experiential time of intensity or sacralization, and archontic openness to the future. Reducing this considerable complexity to either industrially resistant “fan time” or to industrially complicit “just-in-time fandom” fails to consider the multiple layers of digital timescapes within which this strand of Christopher Nolan’s fast fandom—specifically platformized via an old-school forum—negotiates the temporal doxa of “always updating the moment”⁷⁶ in relation to archiving keenly anticipated film reviews.

73 Jack Coffin and Alison M. Joubert, “Theorizing Less Visible Forms of Fandom: Practices, Assemblages, Liquidity, and Other Directions,” in *Handbook of Research on the Impact of Fandom in Society and Consumerism*, ed. Cheng Lu Wang (Hershey: IGI Global, 2020), 220.

74 Kitchin, *Digital Timescapes*, 184.

75 Adam, *Timescapes of Modernity*, 8.

76 Jordheim and Ytreberg, “After Supersynchronisation,” 413.

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9. Archives, Preservation, and Databases: Creating the Cultural Memory of Fandom

Mélanie Bourdaa

Abstract: Among fans' activities, there is one that has no transforming effect, as it does not appeal to imagination or creativity, but is essential for the community: the collection of information about the source text (here *Battlestar Galactica* [Syfy, 2004–9] and *Westworld* [HBO, 2016–22]), often editorialized in the form of encyclopedias. This chapter focuses on the creation of encyclopedias and wikis as a way for fans to build databases around TV series and to act as guardians of fandom's memory of *Battlestar Galactica* and *Westworld*.

Keywords: wikis, digital labour, database, fan curatorship

Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the archival practices around specific fan productions and creations. These practices include curation of archives, fan memory preservation, as well as database creation. Drawing from cases related to *Battlestar Galactica* (BSG) and *Westworld*, I argue that fans act as archivists in two ways. First, in terms of their own fan practices, by creating unique websites such as the BSG Museum. Second, they also archive serial narrative universes, notably through the creation and administration of wikis, such as the *Westworld* Wiki. This preservation of resources allows fans to keep track of their activities and act as custodians of serial memory while mapping narrative universes.

Drawing from the work of Jez Collins and Oliver Carter, I show that the “online fans community can be understood as sites of social history, cultural

and archival practice through the curation of popular cultural heritage.”¹ I will thus be able to highlight the organization of these groups which create their own rules, regulations, and codes, allowing these communities to be compared to work organizations.

To illustrate my points, I analyse emblematic case studies that will help us to dissect and analyse fan practices. I also conducted interviews with fan creators to better understand the motivations that drive them to invest time and emotion in working for the community. Interestingly, both case studies are recent versions of a cult series and a movie. *Battlestar Galactica*, which aired between 2003 and 2009 on the American channel Syfy, is the re-imagined version of a television series that ran for one season in 1978–79. *Westworld* was originally a movie in 1973 and was reimagined as a television show by HBO for four seasons that ran from 2016 to 2022.

Among fan activities, there is one which is not transformative per se, since it does not rely on the imagination or creativity of the fans, but which nevertheless constitutes essential work for the community: the collection of information and facts about *Battlestar Galactica* and *Westworld*, often published in the form of encyclopaedias. As Benoît Berthou underlines: “With these encyclopedias, we are effectively at the antipodes of invention: it is a question of information, that is to say of a writing not built around a subjectivity, nor even around a desire for expression whatever it is.”²

The fan encyclopaedia can take many forms, ranging from a simple list of episodes (episode guides), to indexes, exegeses, or even wikis. Whatever the form, fans play a very specific role in this activity. They are archivists but also curators, who use their skills to recruit other people in the community.³ Curators aim at sharing the facts around these narratives, and thanks to their encyclopaedic knowledge, make these available to other consumers. They use their collective intelligence to pool their knowledge and expertise to create publicly available, factual databases that the fans edit, feed, and amend themselves. In his work on collective intelligence, Pierre Lévy writes:

1 Jez Collins and Oliver Carter, “‘They’re Not Pirates, They’re Archivists’: The Role of Fans as Curators and Archivists of Popular Music Heritage,” in *Preserving Popular Music Heritage: Do-It-Yourself, Do-It-Together*, ed. Sarah Baker (London: Routledge, 2015).

2 Benoît Berthou, “Fictions et formes encyclopédiques: Wookieepedia, Dragon Ball wiki et Cie,” *Strenae. Recherche sur les livres et objets culturels de l'enfance* 2 (2011), <https://journals.openedition.org/strenae/420>, and translation.

3 Derek Kompare, “Fan Curators and the Gateways into Fandom,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, ed. Melissa Click and Susan Scott (London: Routledge, 2018).

[I]f we embarked on the path of collective intelligence, we would gradually invent the techniques, the systems of signs, the forms of social organization and regulation which would allow us to think together, to concentrate our intellectual and spiritual forces, to multiply our imaginations and our experiences, to negotiate in real time and at all scales the practical solutions to the complex problems that we must face.⁴

Lévy's words resonate particularly when we study fan communities in the era of technological and cultural convergence and participatory culture. Communities of fans represent social organizations with their own rules, codes, and sanctions. They are also emblematic of collaborative work and its possibility of mapping serial universes, sometimes dispersed on multiple media platforms. This collective intelligence brings together the collaborative and collective power of human work, shared in a connected world. Michael Lacey, the administrator of the wiki for the American TV show *Westworld*, emphasizes the importance of collaborative work when administering a fan wiki in an interview with me: "A lively wiki with many publishers is my goal; a collaborative environment, in which unexpected results come from contributions from other members, is what interests me."⁵ Clearly, in this specific case, the intellectual emulation created by collective participation and collaboration of community members in a common project contributes to the richness and precision of the content posted online.

In order to bring together all the elements of the narrative scattered on various media platforms, fans create wikis, true encyclopaedias re-mapping serial and narrative universes. The wiki system is predominantly participatory and collaborative, as evidenced by the workings of the best known of them, Wikipedia. Wikipedians work together to build extensive knowledge in wikis. Fan-created wikis work similarly as fans update, edit, and link together the scattered information they have collected to recreate the coherence of the storyworld. These encyclopaedias are similar to databases, as well as archives created to keep the narrative universe alive.

Bruno Bachimont⁶ highlights two properties of archives which seem to fit the definition of encyclopaedias: the conservation of the material trace of the contents and the conservation of the accessibility of these traces.

4 Pierre Lévy, *L'intelligence collective. Pour une anthropologie du cyberspace* (Paris: La découverte, 1994), 14.

5 Michael Lacey, email message to author, July 12, 2018.

6 Bruno Bachimont, "L'archive numérique: entre authenticité et interprétabilité," *Archives*, 32, no. 1 (2000–2001).

When creating wikis and serial encyclopaedias, fans mainly seek to keep the information related to the series in one place accessible to all, while building a suitable reading ergonomics and a simple information architecture. Like archives, these encyclopaedias evolve, are classified and categorized in a specific and original way by fans, are public and easily accessible, and carry with them both the history and the factual memory of the series, its evolution in time and (sometimes) in space.

A relevant parallel can be drawn between wikis and serial encyclopaedias, and the “archontic” character of archives. Indeed, Jacques Derrida, cited by Abigail Derecho, sees archives as evolving inventories which are constantly growing. Serial encyclopaedias are also constantly fed by fans, thus constituting rapidly expanding archives which “allows, or even invites, writers to enter it, select specific items they find useful, make new artifacts using those found objects, and deposit the newly made work back into the source text’s archive.”⁷ Thus, “these data may often be the only easily accessible traces documenting a cultural product and its reception.”⁸

Wikis of TV shows present themselves as aggregators of fan creations and discoveries about the universe. The wiki concentrates on the same platform a detailed reconstruction of the series narrative of the show and its transmedia tie-ins, while offering original creations by fans and their own narrative extensions in the form of fanfiction, for example. Fans use the wiki as an interactive platform to gather information about the series. Paul Booth describes the building of a wiki by fans as the creation of an archive that “represents the way communities of fans come together on a narrative database to inscribe the extant media object itself.”⁹

Setting up a wiki will help fans recreate the universe of the series, archive their knowledge of the narrative world, and introduce the series to potential new fans. They will play the dual role of archaeologists and cartographers. They are archaeologists because they have to browse and “dig” through different media platforms, digital or non-digital, in search of clues to the fictional universe. They are also cartographers because when they have this information, these additional elements, they try to reconstruct the complete universe by re-mapping it.

7 Abigail Derecho, “Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), 65.

8 Sophie G. Einwächter, “Preserving the Marginal: Or, The Fan as Archivist,” in *At the Borders of (Film) History: Temporality, Archaeology, Theories*, ed. Alberto Beltrame, Giuseppe Fidotta, and Andrea Mariani (Udine: Forum, 2015).

9 Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 109.

Approach

To better understand how fan communities create and maintain serial encyclopaedias, I analyse a specific encyclopaedia and a wiki in detail, namely the BSG Museum and the *Westworld* Wiki.

I chose these two websites for several reasons. The first is that the two series, by their genre (broadly understood as science fiction) and their complex narration, offer serial potentialities, thus opening up the possibility of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing their narrative universes. These two series have expanded their storytelling by using transmedia storytelling strategies on other media, in particular, comic books for *Battlestar Galactica* (to explore the past of the Cylon Five, for example) and websites and theme parks for *Westworld* (to discover how the hosts hacked the system).

Furthermore, I wanted to study an encyclopaedic site of a completed series (*Battlestar Galactica*) and a wiki of a series still in production (*Westworld*). I want to clarify that these are American websites and wikis that have caught my attention because they are more extensive than their French counterparts, for example. I was inspired by Jason Mittell's research on wikis, but while he participates in the constitution of wikis,¹⁰ I did not help design or co-create them. They constitute for me a reliable source of the storyworlds, unofficial and rich. I regularly visit these sites to find essential information on both series. Finally, the two sites operate differently. One is administered and controlled by two fans (BSG Museum) and the other is a collaborative space (*Westworld* Wiki). This enables highlighting the work of the fans (translation of fan labour) as a complex work in which they are not officially affiliated with producers or broadcasters but end up creating links with them through their efforts and visibility.

In her analysis of fan sites around the BBC TV show *Sherlock* (2010–17) and *Battlestar Galactica*, Bertha Chin underlines the exploitation of fan labour. Indeed, fans who participate in these collaborations or who manage sites may view their work as not an exploitation but rather a service to the fan community.¹¹

10 Jason Mittell, "Sites of Participation: Wiki Fandoms and the Case of Lostpedia," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 3 (2009), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/118>.

11 Bertha Chin, "Sherlockology and Galactica.tv: Fans Sites as Gifts or Exploited Labor?," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 15 (2014), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/513/416>.

From a methodological point of view, I opted for an analysis of the contents of the sites and wikis in order to understand their internal organization, a textual and ergonomic analysis in order to know which “narratives” the fans wanted to highlight. I also contacted the administrators and creators of these sites to conduct interviews by email in order to shed light on their motivations.

The BSG Museum and the Creation of a Virtual Museum

Battlestar Galactica is a science fiction series that aired between 2003 and 2009 on the American channel Syfy. This four-season series tells the story of how Cylons, robots created and enslaved by men, rebelled and committed genocide. Human survivors, around 48,000 at the start of the series, flee aboard space ships in search of a new Earth, a new dwelling place promised by Admiral Adama to keep hope alive within the distressed fleet. The series ended twelve years ago, but its storytelling continues to develop on new media platforms, including a comic book series focusing on the character of Number 6, for example. The show has a strong fan base who still have a special connection to the series and are keen to keep its memory alive or to make the series known.

To better understand the challenges of the analysed website, the BSG Museum, it seems essential to define a museum, a concept on which my analysis is based. If we refer to the definition of ICOM (International Council of Museums),

the museum is a permanent non-profit institution at the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, preserves, studies, exhibits and transmits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for purposes of study, education and enjoyment.¹²

The museum is a place of conservation, in which there are one or more heritage collections, exhibited according to a specific scenography. In this sense, museums are bearers of cultural and sociological testimonies essential to the preservation of a memory or even an experience. Jean Davallon, in an article in which he poses the question of the museum as a medium, situates the museum at the intersection between exhibition and heritage within an “institutional matrix.”¹³

12 http://archives.icom.museum/hist_def_fr.html.

13 Jean Davallon, “Le musée est-il vraiment un média?,” *Culture et Musées* 1992, no. 2 (1992): 99–123.

In fan practices, the act of collecting material objects such as figurines or models, for example, is akin to building up a museum collection in which the fan acquires, preserves, and exhibits objects. Susan M. Pearce¹⁴ distinguishes three specificities of museum collections that we can apply to fan collections: the souvenir collection, which is the most personal because it allows a fan to relate and refer to events in their life; the fetishist collection, with which fans have a complex and almost fusal relationship; and the systemic collection, which most closely resembles museum exhibitions. Even though it is an integral part of their practices and activities, Dorus Hoebink et al. highlight the ambivalence of the relationship that fans have with museum collections. For them, on the one hand, “[m]useification can result in too categorised and distant a presentation of objects,” and, on the other hand, this museification “can increase the number of people who have access to the objects of interest.”¹⁵

Jessica de Bideran rightly points out that today the preservation of memory and heritage can be done directly on the internet.¹⁶ The internet offers a mediation space for museums conducive to the deployment of collections and objects, in order to build a living memory accessible to all and not frozen in space or time. As Roberta Pearson notes:

While the Internet does not itself possess a memory, its function as a digital repository of the memories of the institutions, groups, and individuals leads me to hypothesize that it may serve as an indication of the current configurations of popular memory.¹⁷

It is interesting to think of the BSG Museum as a site that traces the memory of the series in the sense that few academic studies consider popular cultures and television series as objects of memory. The constitution of this popular memory of the series, like a virtual museum, is made possible thanks to fan practices, their technical skills, and their expertise, but

14 Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992).

15 Dorus Hoebink, Stijn Reijnders, and Abby Waysdorf, “Exhibiting Fandom: A Museological Perspective,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 16 (2014), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/529/433>.

16 Jessica de Bideran, “L’extension numérique du musée,” in *Définir le musée du XXI^e siècle. Matériaux pour une discussion*, edited by François Mairesse (Paris: ICOFOM, 2017), 143-148.

17 Roberta Pearson, “Googling Sherlock Holmes: Popular Memory, Platforms, Protocols and Paratexts,” in *The Politics of Ephemeral Digital Media: Permanence and Obsolescence in Paratexts*, ed. Sara Pesce and Paolo Noto (London: Routledge, 2017), 78.

also their desire to share their passion and act as cultural mediators. The creators of the site, twin sisters who proclaim themselves as fans of the most recent version of the series, insist on this aspect of building up a memory and sharing when they explain why they decided to create this site: “We have decided to rewatch the series in 2014. At that time, there was nothing online to give fans current information, to update and share the latest published articles, to inform fans about the appearances of the actors in conventions and simply connect fans together.”¹⁸ It is at the same time a desire to honour the memory of the series, to make it known after its diffusion and to create a link with and between the fans that pushed them to create a website which they define as a museum dedicated to the series and its universe.

When users log in on the website, the BSG Museum home page announces:

Welcome to the Battlestar Galactica Museum. You will find everything on BSG. This is an online archive of the re-imagined series by Ron D. Moore. We will introduce you to the world of BSG, life aboard Galactica, the 12 colonies, franchises and more.

The terms “museum” and “archives” are used here alongside the terms “series” and “world” (understood in this context as a narrative world). The second home page, accessible automatically or by scrolling to the right, highlights that this archive is constantly evolving. The moderators of the site are constantly looking for new complementary information to add to the existing collection. The BSG Museum is an “archontic” archive, new elements coming to enrich the internet site.

From the outset, when the user visits this website, they understand that they are in the presence of a collection of information on the television series, considered here in its own right as a work of art, and displayed as a virtual museum. The episodes, the narrative, the characters, their relationships are all objects and artefacts gathered and compiled according to a specific categorization and offered for free to visitors who come to inquire about the series or to fans who come to seek details.

The creators of the site highlight three aspects that bring their work closer to that of a museum, giving them the role of curators: the collection and exhibition aspect, the curation and mediation aspect, and the link with the fictional universe. They archive, compile, and annotate

18 BSG Museum creators, email message with author, July 17, 2018.

documents, which is similar to the constitution of archives and museum exhibitions:

We name the website the Battlestar Galactica Museum because, from our perspective, we keep adding material on a specific subject (BSG) in a centralized place, much like museum exhibits.... Just like museums, we welcome everyone's comments and sharing. When users share information with us, like curators, we engage in a dialogue and ask if this matches the criteria and policies established for the site. It's an ongoing process of reflection, and although now we're fine, sometimes it's a difficult process that requires discussion.... Another reason for choosing this name is, of course, a nod to what is behind the project: the *Battlestar Galactica* miniseries. You probably remember that the Galactica had to be turned into a museum, making it, you guessed it, the Battlestar Galactica Museum!¹⁹

The site offers tabs in which users find information on the seasons of the series, the transmedia universe made up of comic books and webisodes, the characters (personal records), the Battlestars of the fleet, the colonies. Moreover the website links to news of the actors, to interviews, and to non-profit organizations launched by the actors or fans of the series. The creators of the site have developed a strict content policy, refraining from posting gossip or private and personal information about the actors or production crew.

For the harvesting of information, which requires constant monitoring of the web by the twin sisters, they have developed and implemented strategies to be more effective. Google alerts allow them to glean articles which they then sort out. They collect direct links sent by teams or actors of the series (with whom they have created a relationship of trust due to their position in the fandom and their expertise) or by other fans. Finally, the social media profiles and accounts they follow allow them to access instant feedback on the latest information.

Maintaining the website requires great organization and a significant investment on the part of the two fans, who are the only ones to manage this project. By their own admission, they spend between an hour and a half and two hours a day each managing the website and its social networks. Their usage of Twitter particularly stands out, which is very active and functions as a relay for the website. These fans also have administrative

19 BSG Museum creators, email message with author, July 17, 2018.

tasks, such as replying to emails. However, this work has enabled them to acquire skills that they reinvest in their daily academic life: web design, information management, and public relations.

In the interview they gave, they insist on this acquisition of skills which they see as beneficial to them and underline the fact that they are not paid for this work and, above all, do not seek to be paid: “Although we do a lot of work on this site, our goal is for the site to be free and easily accessible for everyone. Right now, even if we could, we are not receiving any monetary compensation because we do not want to feel indebted to certain companies.”²⁰ The two creators of the site thus develop an ethic that is often found in fandoms and around fan activities: the refusal of monetary compensation for the work accomplished and the will and pleasure to share their passion even if it requires personal and temporal investment.

The *Westworld* Wiki, and the Collective Creation of Fan Knowledge

Westworld is a science fiction series that aired on the American cable channel HBO for four seasons from 2016 to 2022. The plot is simple: in the near future, the company Delos creates theme parks in which historical periods are reconstructed. Visitors in these parks are greeted by “hosts,” robots that look exactly like humans, down to the feelings they can express. Just like in *Battlestar Galactica*, the robots/hosts revolt at the end of season 1 and kill visitors, administrators, and park security members, causing chaos and a shift in power relations between humans and robots.

As Hélène Bréda underlines, “*Westworld* is a fiction that speaks of fiction,” a kind of “meta-storytelling”²¹ which constructs a narrative universe (the park and its pretences) within a narrative universe (the series). The diegesis then constructs a complete narrative universe, and the characters navigate between reality and fiction (the narratives linked to the theme parks) within the fiction itself (the series). The meta-fictional aspect and meta-storytelling of the series rank it among complex narrative series with strong serial potential, with overlapping temporalities and mysteries that hang over the identities of the hosts. Fans are particularly engaged in this show, especially in their search for clues, spoilers, or the argumentation of theories.

20 BSG Museum creators, email message with author, July 17, 2018.

21 Hélène Bréda, “Les mondes possibles de *Westworld*: du méta-storytelling à l’immersion transmédia,” *Synergies Italie* 13 (2017), <http://gerflint.fr/Base/Italie13/italie13.html>.

Among the many fan activities taking place around *Westworld*, the creation of the wiki acts as an unofficial (because not affiliated to the cable channel) source for the community. The wiki is called *Westworld Wiki* with the subtitle “Better Than Real,” which anchors the site in an almost meta-fictional discourse, too. Fan wikis, modelled after Wikipedia, are collaborative and interactive platforms that aggregate information in the form of written texts, images, or videos accessible to everyone. Their goal is not to become a stable archive, but to continue to grow over time and be enriched by content created by fans. To sum up, “wikis are user-generated archives, which other users can read, add to, change, add pictures or links, revert to an older form, or even delete entirely.”²²

The *Westworld Wiki* offers to make available to fans and users a large amount of factual information on the series (seasons, parks, characters, temporalities, places) but also on paratexts (the literary references that appear in the series) or on transmedia narrative extensions (the many websites that have been created around the series, or the immersive experiences of the park the production company created in the annual South by Southwest [SXSW] conference and festival held in Austin, Texas, for example). In this sense, the wiki functions like many other fan-managed and administered wikis, which is confirmed by Lacey, one of the administrators: “The architectural structure of the wiki is standard and based on the structure of other wikis. In certain aspects, it is better structured than others, for example, on the use of categories, on the automatic generation of image galleries.”²³ Deborah Kaplan also highlights what is essential in a wiki:

The admin team has definitely its own internalised MO of inclusion and completism—our goal is not to assert our own personal point of view promote of piece of fandom or canon over another, or be arbiters of taste or opinion. Our main goal is to document as exhaustively as possible.²⁴

The fans who have contributed to the development of the *Westworld Wiki* provide a comprehensive mapping of the narrative world of the series. They recapitulate the journey, the destinations, and the points of interest to give other fans an overview of the story. This factual rewrite bears a

²² Booth, *Digital Fandom*, 89.

²³ Michael Lacey, email message to author, July 12, 2018.

²⁴ Deborah Kaplan, “Interview with the Super-wiki Admin Team,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 4 (2010), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/200/137>.

multi-authorial imprint, each fan being able to participate in this collaborative writing and edition of the pages of the wiki.

In an interview conducted via email, Lacey explains that he was a fan of the 1973 film and that, when he knew that a series was in production, he asked to join the film's wiki:

The wiki was inactive or at least almost inactive, so I started changing it to accommodate the series. I also contacted the creator of the wiki (Roger Murdoch) to find out what plans he had for a possible overhaul. He was busy with other projects so he gave me administrative rights.²⁵

The administrative rights were transferred from one fan to another who was more available, testifying, on the one hand, to the trust that can exist between two fans regarding the management of resources and information, and, on the other hand, to the personal and temporal investment that this activity can generate.

What stands out especially is that the internal organization, rules and regulations of the wiki are put in place by the fans themselves. A page titled "Policies, Guidelines and Parent Filter" details the site's policies on writing content and use of images. As for the latter, the administrators explain how images should be tagged, especially if they are the property of HBO, according to a system of categories. Sanctions are planned for users who do not respect these rules of good practice and good writing of the wiki: three stages of warnings exist which, if not followed, lead to an exclusion from the site for a minimum period of three months. These "punishments," enacted by the fans themselves, help maintain a positive environment, with administrators reminding participants that "everyone is there to have fun, and we don't want to punish anyone."

When users of the site download images without referring to the proposed guide, they receive a message from the administrators with an icon signifying a warning. All this is recalled in the "User Behavior" section, which lists the prohibited behaviours on the site under penalty of being excluded temporarily or permanently: vandalism, rudeness, disrespect towards other fans, the expression of religious or political opinions. It is also specified that when two fans enter into a confrontation on the wiki, they are advised to move the conversation to their private messages, so as not to tarnish the smooth running of the site and the good relations between other members of

25 Michael Lacey, email message to author, July 12, 2018.

the community. If no settlement to the conflict is found, the administrators decide and judge the case.

Another interesting page is the one on the roles and organizations within the community managing and administering the wiki. These roles inject a form of hierarchy into the fandom, assigning functions and rights to certain members of the community. Some fans are simply looking for some form of power within their community, which seems to go against the functioning of fandoms. That is what Lacey confirms:

It's hard to choose administrators. I have found that many people who express an interest in this task are drawn to the job title and the authority to give orders to others. Avoiding these people and creating a collaborative environment can sometimes be complicated.²⁶

In this organization, there are three main roles assigned to fan archivists. The first role is "staff," which allows users access to the entire wiki. This is the first level in the established hierarchy. The second level is "administrator," which allows them specific functions related to their status. Administrators can delete pages, histories, and download files, block a page so that it remains frozen, block IP addresses in response to sanctions, edit the interface, or change the ergonomics of the wiki. To become administrators, fans must prove their efficiency and productivity on the site. The final role is "bureaucrat." A bureaucrat is usually the creator of a site, and has the power to appoint administrators and other bureaucrats to run the site alongside them. These administrative tasks require much time and effort, as Lacey points out:

During the *Westworld* seasons, I work on the wiki between one and two hours a day. During hiatus, I work on it every month. The platform rules allow editors to take control of the wiki when no administrator has been active for six days. I would recruit administrators, but not those who just want to do the minimum amount of work necessary to obtain the title of administrator.²⁷

Lacey confirms that this work requires a significant personal and time investment since even the rules and ergonomics of the platform provide for "sanctions" against a certain inactivity. The fan is then obliged, if they want to keep their status, to continue to work for the community.

26 Michael Lacey, email message to author, July 12, 2018.

27 Michael Lacey, email message to author, July 12, 2018.

The creation and maintenance of these sites raises the question of free labour by fans on several levels. Not only are their activities unpaid, their labour could also create tension with the industry, which can reclaim these creations. The interviewed fans, however, see it as contributing to their culture: “Fandom runs on fan labour, and this work produces enjoyment, collectivity, and various material and immaterial goods that give fandom shape as a practice community or culture.”²⁸

The case of the BSG Museum and the *Westworld* Wiki show the tremendous labour that fans put into archiving the knowledge around narratives and storyworlds. The creators and administrators of the sites and wikis produce work that requires them to invest time, such as information research, site architecture, administration, and management. They offer these services to the community without asking for financial compensation. For example, Paul Booth explains that fans create and share content without expecting any money or reward in return, other than contributing to their role as fans and being part of a community of practice.²⁹

For fans who participate to varying degrees of involvement and commitment in these activities, the notion of reward takes precedence over that of financial profit: “It sometimes looks more like a job than a hobby, but the Nolans [the creators of the series] are working hard to come up with a compelling series, so it rewards the efforts we make to describe and document the series.”³⁰ There is also a form of tribute from the fans, who through their activity and work, in some way thank the production teams. The writers work to come up with complex and satisfying storytelling, so it is only natural for fans to return the favour, investing personal time in working around and for the series. In this sense, for fans, free labour is not necessarily exploitative labour because the compensation often lies in the exchange and sharing of communications.

Conclusions

Fans create social and symbolic capital in an economy that seems increasingly “hybrid.”³¹ Bertha Chin talks about social capital based on status and reputa-

28 Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis, “Fandom and/as Labor,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 15 (2014), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/593/421>.

29 Booth, *Digital Fandom*.

30 Michael Lacey, email message to author, July 12, 2018.

31 Nole Noppe, “Why We Should Talk about Commodifying Work,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 8 (2011), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/369/240>.

tion. She writes: “Rather than assuming that fans are exploited by media industries when they collaborate with media producers, it is important to highlight their voices in this collaboration, and that there are other motivations in game.”³² A new gift economy—a counter-gift economy, an economy shaped by the dialogue between fans and media producers in which they produce but are socially recognized for this production—is being established. More than being alienated by a work and commercial system that exploits them, fans participate in the construction of a media economy by acquiring social capital and a reputation in the community but also in the public sphere.

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32 Chin, “Sherlockology.”

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10. Crossing the Divide: Shitposting as a Mode of Fan Production

Agnieszka Urbańczyk

Abstract: The historical division between speculative fiction and media fandom, although correlated with many factors like gender and sexual identity, boils down to the practices surrounding the object of interest. The more recent take on this division points out different (and still highly gendered) modes of participation—affirmative and transformative, with the corresponding communities rarely overlapping. I examine an under-researched practice known as fan shitposting. Since the main notion behind this practice is the lack of reverence for canon, shitposting communities lack gatekeeping and serve as melting pots for members of transformative and affirmative fandoms. While the practice itself is not coded as feminine, shitposting is definitely a transformative non-profit activity – one of the first to transcend the aforementioned divisions.

Keywords: transformative fandom, affirmative fandom, gatekeeping, gender

Introduction

In academic literature, shitposting has been conflated almost exclusively with the activities of the male-dominated alt-right. Perhaps due to its derogatory name, shitposting has been treated as something negative and toxic, employed almost solely *against* marginalized groups, not *by* them. In his analysis of the manifesto by the perpetrator of the Christchurch Mosque massacre, Robert Evans defines shitposting as “the act of throwing out huge amounts of content, most of it ironic, low-quality trolling, for the purpose

of provoking an emotional reaction in less Internet-savvy viewers.”¹ Stuart J. Murray and Tad Lemieux claim that “trolling and shitposting is the worm at the core of the joke’s truth-telling, culminating in the liar president Donald Trump.”² Discussing the attack in Christchurch, Beatrice Williamson describes shitposting as a situation “whereby endless posts are flooded onto the forum to mock and confuse; they can desensitise the audience and foster extremism through repetition; they act as recruitment filters.”³ The word appears in a similar context in pieces by Jan Zienkowski,⁴ Geoffrey Lokke,⁵ and Christopher Estep.⁶

In criticism and analysis, shitposting is addressed synonymously with trolling, and is described as a far-right activity. Pierre Voué, Tom De Smedt, and Guy De Pauw make this supposed relationship explicit, defining shitposting as “the toxic discourse that 4chan and 8chan users engage in,”⁷ with 4chan and 8chan being understood as some of the most transgressive far-right spaces on the internet. They also state that that shitposting involves “large amounts of offensive content meant to upset readers, often in combination with edgy memes [and] low-quality satirical images on the border of illegal.”⁸

Shitposting, however, is more diverse than far-right activity. Hundreds of groups for women, LGBTQ+ people, and people of colour use the word “shitposting” or its variants in the names of the communities. Consider the likes of ShitpostBot 5000, an algorithm that posts random content based on pictures treated as templates every thirty minutes. Another example are anti-white-supremacy Facebook profiles, such as Ulysses ‘Shitpost’ Grant

1 Robert Evans, “Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre,” Bellingcat, March 15, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2019/03/15/shitposting-inspirational-terrorism-and-the-christchurch-mosque-massacre/>.

2 Stuart J. Murray and Tad Lemieux, “Combat-Débat: Parataxis and the Unavowable Community; or, The Joke,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 52, no. 1 (2019): 82.

3 Beatrice Williamson, “Brenton Tarrant: The Processes Which Brought Him to Engage in Political Violence,” Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, <https://cstp.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/research/exploring-far-right-terrorism/>.

4 Jan Zienkowski, “Politics and the Political in Critical Discourse Studies: State of the Art and a Call for an Intensified Focus on the Metapolitical Dimension of Discursive Practice,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 16, no. 2 (2019): 131–48.

5 Geoffrey Lokke, “Speak-Trash: Irony for Exterminators,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 126 (2020): 125–31.

6 Christopher Estep, “Prolific, Digital, and Violent: The Far-Right’s Online ‘Republic of Letters,’” *The International Affairs Review*, August 16, 2020, <https://www.iar-gwu.org/print-archive/blog-post-title-one-ftzda>.

7 Pierre Voué, Tom De Smedt, and Guy De Pauw, “4chan & 8chan Embeddings,” *Textgain Technical Reports*, no. 1 (March 2020).

8 Voué et al., “4chan & 8chan Embeddings.”

Finally, there are many shitposting communities dedicated to fandom. Shitposting takes many forms, and many of them are not in the least aligned with the right. It is crucial to present and discuss those aspects of shitposting that do not fit into the stereotype on which the past scholarly definitions have been founded.

As the examples listed above demonstrate, for years, shitposting has been a practice shared across the political spectrum, in varying contexts and for numerous purposes. In most communities dedicated to fan shitposting, the administrators take great care to police actual hate speech, and the rules of the groups state that the use of slurs, mocking people's identities, or treating real-life tragedies as a source of amusement is strictly forbidden. Users who post offensive content (e.g., racist, ableist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic) are shunned by many shitposting communities. In light of these facts, it is very difficult to accept the definitions of shitposting as solely the tool of white cisheterosexual males, and even more difficult to treat the activity as intertwined specifically with the alt-right. Furthermore, it is certainly not synonymous with trolling. While trolling is focused on invading the spaces of other users and causing dissent, most of the shitposting takes place in dedicated communities which people join willingly. The most adequate description of shitposting, I believe, has been offered by Tabitha Fairchild, who explains the meaning of the word as "a colloquialism for the sharing of internet memes."⁹

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the practice of fan shitposting in relation to canon and, thus, to the highly gendered norms surrounding other fan activities. Given that the stereotypical (cis)fanboy is interested mostly in collecting merchandise and cultivating the knowledge derived from canon, while the stereotypical fangirl is more likely to appropriate and transform the canon material,¹⁰ it is surprising to find that transformative and transgressive fan shitposting communities are not dominated by women. I intend to point out the ways in which fan shitposting communities serve as melting pots for members of transformative and affirmational fandoms. While the practice itself is not coded as feminine,¹¹ and it is widely perceived

9 Tabitha Fairchild, "It's Funny Because It's True: The Transmission of Explicit and Implicit Racism in Internet Memes" (MA thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020), 15.

10 Kristina Busse, "Geek Hierarchies, Boundary Policing, and the Gendering of the Good Fan," *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 82–83.

11 When writing about gender coding, I understand it as per the *APA Dictionary of Psychology's* definition, i.e., "assigning particular traits or behaviors exclusively or predominantly to males or females": "Gender Coding," *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, accessed August 5, 2022, <https://dictionary.apa.org/gender-coding>.

as being dominated by the most privileged demographic groups, shitposting is definitely a transformative, non-profit activity—one of the first to discard the aforementioned gender divisions.

The level of privacy in shitposting groups varies, and it would be highly unethical to share the information that I am privy to as a member of the community. As Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson point out, the fact that something has been made public does not always mean that it was intended as such.¹² However, there are rare situations in which the members consciously and intentionally maintain their group's public status. Such is the case with Star Trek Shitposting (STSP)—a community of almost a quarter million Facebook users, created in 2015 and growing by the thousands every month in recent years. STSP's public status causes its content to circulate among various—often non-*Star Trek*-related—fanpages and Tumblr or Twitter accounts. STSP has its own wiki, whose purpose is to document the most popular or absurd memes and their creators. As Sara Lynn Michener explained,

People send me memes all the time that originated in Star Trek Shitposting three years ago—people who are not Trekkies—and they send it to me because they know I like Star Trek, and they have no idea that not only did I see that meme three years ago, but I've seen all 10 memes that reference it ever since.¹³

The STSP community is also well-known by *Star Trek* actors. Robert Picardo (famous for his portrayal of The Doctor in *Star Trek: Voyager*) and John de Lancie (Q from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Voyager*, and *Picard*) have addressed it in their videos numerous times. They have also starred in a video that celebrated 100,000 STSP members, along Gates McFadden (Beverly Crusher in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Picard*), who addressed the most popular STSP memes about her character. Other *Star Trek* actors also appear in the video, such as Nicole de Boer (Ezri Dax), Anthony Rapp (Paul Stamets), Tawny Newsome (Beckett Mariner), and Jeri Ryan (Seven of Nine). Both *Star Trek* actors and writers share STSP content, often crediting it. Some of the actors, like Evan Evagora (Elnor in *Picard*), even claim to be members

12 Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson, "Identity, Ethics, and Fan Privacy," in *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice*, ed. Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 39.

13 Geek's Guide to the Galaxy, "'Star Trek: Lower Decks' Is a Lot Better Than You'd Expect," *Wired*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.wired.com/2021/01/geeks-guide-star-trek-lower-decks/>.

of the group under false names.¹⁴ Others, like the late Aaron Eisenberg (Nog from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*), have been participants of the community. It is a popular belief in the group that the writers of *Star Trek: Lower Decks* are hiding among the members. Michener claimed, “A lot of the jokes [in *Lower Decks*] come directly from Star Trek Shitposting, and the members of the group were very proud of that.”¹⁵ Indeed, in September 2021, one of the shitposters came out as a member of *Lower Decks* staff.

The community and the memes that it creates have been discussed in pieces published on *Wired* or—due to the popularity of pot memes which have started out as the group’s inside joke about Beverly Crusher’s thought process in one of the episodes—a cannabis-centred portal called The Fresh Toast. Because of these public discourses, there is no privacy and no expectation of it among the members. The open status of the group has been discussed numerous times and the consensus stands that the content is meant to be public. While I do not intend to name specific users and quote their posts, in this analysis of the shitposting phenomenon I will refer to the observations made during my participation in this public and influential community. I shall not disclose any details known to me about numerous other, more isolated groups. However, the principles on which they work do not differ significantly from the ones known to me from STSP.

This study is conducted from the position of an aca-fan, based on participatory observation which shares resemblances with autoethnography. I combine my insider knowledge of the practices and social norms with an academic framework. Henry Jenkins rightly points out that there are aspects of popular culture that

are difficult to understand from a stance of contemplative distance. To understand how popular culture works on our emotions, we have to pull it close, get intimate with it, let it work its magic on us, and then write about our own engagement.¹⁶

It seems that is especially the case with shitposting, since—as the reviewed literature demonstrates—the research conducted from an outsider’s perspective ignores numerous aspects of the practice, and the varying context in which it appears.

14 Evagora claimed this in a panel during Chicago Comic & Entertainment Expo 2020.

15 Geek’s Guide to the Galaxy, “Star Trek: Lower Decks.”

16 Henry Jenkins, *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 10.

The Rational and the Affective

The historical division between media fandom and speculative literature fandom, although correlated with many factors, like gender and sexual identity, boils down to the practices surrounding the object of fandom. A compelling argument can be made that the media fandom has emerged due to the gatekeeping in the masculine American SF fandom, and it was not only oriented towards other media (TV series, movies), but also much more feminized.¹⁷ The object of fandom, however, gradually became less important than the gendered practices surrounding it (such as writing fanfiction), and by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the greatest part of activity typical of media fandom in the West was dedicated to the *Harry Potter* series—that is, a piece of literature.¹⁸ In 1992, Henry Jenkins pointed to the “largely female composition of media fandom.”¹⁹ He discussed media fandom as an attempt at creating a fan culture more inclusive of women and referred to it as a “discursive logic that knits together interests across textual and generic boundaries.”²⁰

Thus, this gendered framing of fan practices focuses on the discourse and practices surrounding the fan object, rather than its medium. Today this discourse is still mirrored in the distinction between the transformative and affirmational (also known as curational or curative) fan cultures. These differing modes of participation are strongly related to gender stereotypes perpetuated throughout fandom’s history and enacted by the communities. The more affective and transformative approach is rooted in the feminized community of early media fandom, which valued artistic and emotional expression much more than its androcentric counterpart did, and was more willing to interfere with the established canon in order to create more emotionally satisfying narratives. This approach is nowadays often attributed to minorities, while the acquisition of collectibles and fannish knowledge is treated as typical of (cis) men and can be traced back to the androcentrism of early SF fandom.²¹

17 Francesca Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006).

18 That, of course, does not mean that the franchise was not an object of other modes of fandom as well.

19 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 48.

20 Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 41.

21 Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 17; Jonathan Helland, “C. L. Moore, M. Brundage, and Jirel of Joiry: Women and Gender in the October 1934 *Weird Tales*,” in *The*

Such a distinction has been noted by the members of fandom themselves for over a decade. For example, *obsession_inc* pointed out in their often-quoted post from 2009 that there is a split between “affirmational fandom”—“the *sanctioned* fans,” the more authoritative fans, interested in tending to that which has been established—and “transformational fandom”—which is more grassroots, democratic, and feminized, a fandom focused on “fixing it.”²² An analogical observation was made by *LordByronic* on Reddit, where they pointed out the existence of separate transformative and curatorial sides of large fandoms and the way they correlate with gender (“Find a random male fan, and they’ll probably be in curative fandom. Pick a random transformative fandom-er, and they’ll probably be female.”)²³ Though it might have been created completely independently, Foz Meadows’ famous 2014 post condenses these observations:

The types of fandom that are most often considered traditional and acceptable, and which are often either male-dominated or coded as masculine, tend to be acquisitive, whether in terms of knowledge (obscure trivia) or merchandise (collectibles). Whereas, by contrast, the types of fandom most often considered insincere, non-serious or “unreal,” and which are often either female-dominated or coded as feminine, tend to be creative, such as making costumes, writing fanfic and drawing fanart.²⁴

These diagnoses have also been repeated by fan studies scholars; for instance, Mel Stanfill refers to a complicated relationship between transformative productive practices associated with women, and “consumptive, curatorial fandom” associated with men,²⁵ while Suzanne Scott, borrowing the term from *obsession_inc*, proposes to call the latter “affirmational.” These distinctions are not absolutes, and Scott is right to point out that while

Unique Legacy of Weird Tales: The Evolution of Modern Fantasy and Horror, ed. Justin Everett and Jeffrey H. Shanks (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

22 *obsession_inc*, “Affirmational Fandom vs Transformational Fandom,” Dreamwidth, June 1, 2009, <https://obsession-inc.dreamwidth.org/82589.html>. Original emphasis. I have taken the liberty of quoting this and the following posts since they have been often quoted in papers or on Fanlore, and as such, already have a public status.

23 *LordByronic* (u/LordByronic), “Note: The Following Has Hella Generalization...,” Reddit, accessed June 6, 2021, https://np.reddit.com/r/gallifrey/comments/2u73cg/tumblr_bashing_why_or_why_not/co5ucsk/.

24 Foz Meadows (fozmeadows), “Fandom Thoughts,” June 22, 2014, Tumblr, <https://fozmeadows.tumblr.com/post/89576778116/fandom-thoughts>.

25 Mel Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 80.

fan studies tend to focus on the polar opposites, the phantasm of radical difference should be replaced with a vision of a continuum.²⁶

On the one end of the spectrum, we can place rationalistic discourse and pious reverence for the canon, while on the other end we can place affect and the transformative practices in fandom, such as shipping characters that have never even met in the story.

In theory, fan shitposting should be located somewhere in-between these positions, given that a lot of this practice happens on platforms where people tend to disclose their actual identities. Moreover, shitposting seems to be an activity popular among every gender. Shitposting communities are extremely heterogeneous, welcoming both the diverse transformative fandom and the more masculine, affirmational one. However, I would argue that despite the common belief that shitposting is an emanation of toxic masculinity, it is in fact very often an incarnation of fan practices coded as feminine.

Shitposting Communities as Melting Pots

According to the urban myth, the method of spotting a “fake geek girl”—an insincere woman who is only pretending to be fascinated by geek culture to appear interesting or to attract men—is well-known: you just need to ask her some questions about the canon or the details of production, and she will immediately fail the test. The belief in the existence of fake geek girls is caused by many factors, sexism being the most important one. The need of male fans to subject women to questioning is an obvious gatekeeping strategy.²⁷ The widespread conviction that women are unable to “pass” such an exam in fannishness might, however, be caused also by the historical factors, such as science fiction and media fandoms growing independently for decades. While women and minorities did have contact with the masculine discourse, which was presented as default fan behaviour for years,²⁸ the transformative practices were often forced into the underground. In the fanzine era, women were actively hiding some of their writing and fanart, especially erotica and slash, and many aspects of the female communities were developed away

26 Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

27 Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*. See also Tara Tiger Brown's piece which discusses fake geek girls as an actual phenomenon which needs to be fought against: “Dear Fake Geek Girls: Please Go Away,” *Forbes*, March 26, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tarabrown/2012/03/26/dear-fake-geek-girls-please-go-away/>.

28 Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom*, 32–42.

from the masculine fandom's watchful eye. Because of that, the affective mode of fandom is not necessarily known to all representatives of the more traditional community, and their languages are incompatible. It could be argued that, to a person whose entire fan identity is based on intimate and detailed knowledge of the fan object, the crucial marker of fan engagement is knowledge. To such a person, the affective and transformative modes of fandom might not only seem absolutely alien, but also go unnoticed.

The act of quizzing geek girls may, to some extent, also be a result of expecting women to conform to the only norm of fannishness known to the members of the affirmational fandom, and encountering transformative practices may perhaps change their perspective a bit. The distinction between the affirmational and the transformative, albeit highly correlated with gender and social status, is in essence a division between different approaches to canon, defined as "the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting, and characters."²⁹ In the fandom context, the name "canon" itself was, after all, intended as a joke at first, a result of Ronald A. Knox poking fun at the reverence with which the works of Arthur Conan Doyle were treated by the readers *as if* they were the Holy Scriptures.³⁰ It is not that transformative fandom is not concerned with the text. However, it is certainly more willing to intervene in canon, while the affirmational one guards it with piety.

Shitposting is, by definition, disrespectful and can be understood as an act of refusal to treat anything with the seriousness it might deserve. The shitposting fan communities are some of the very few spaces where people from every point of the affirmational/transformative continuum interact. The description of shitposting as "sharing internet memes," though much more accurate than the takes that equal the practice to hate speech, calls for some stipulation. The definition of shitposting, I believe, should be functional and based on what given communities consider as such. The content treated as shitposting varies from reposting information with a witty comment to crack fiction or long and mock-serious analyses of the most obscure elements of canon (such as the fates of minor characters who appeared in one episode) that end abruptly mid-sentence. Conversely, some instances of crack fic are tagged as shitposting on Archive of Our Own or Tumblr.

29 Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson, "Introduction: Work in Progress," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), 10.

30 Ronald A. Knox, "Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes," *Diogenes Club*, <http://www.diogenes-club.com/studies.htm> (first published in 1911).

In shitposting groups, one can find typical meme formats, absurd polls, selfies in either detailed or purposefully bad cosplay,³¹ discussions of OTPs (one true pairings) and the designs of fictional weapons. People post about the demise of their beloved pets and ask for a list of names for the new ones, or look for names for their skin folds after liposuction. Queer users practise their coming outs in the community before they approach their families, and argue over the genetics and reproductive cycles of alien species. When shipping fanart is posted, it might be presented as “cursed content” in case of ships that are the most outlandish, or that consist of the most universally disliked characters. It might also be framed as an act of defiance of the compulsive heteronormativity of canon. Non-heteronormative ships are rarely criticized by the conservative members of the shitposting community, and while it might in many cases be caused by the homophobic tendency to treat queerness itself as an immediate source of comedy, one might argue that it also normalizes non-heteronormativity by making it visible. Most shitposters use popular non-canonical and non-heteronormative ships as a baseline, the actual joke being a witty comment, invented dialogue, or a pun. It is difficult to either engage in shipping wars or complain about perceived “political correctness” in such a context.

The discussions under shitposts may turn into heated debates about current politics or exchanges of jokes about ugly lingerie, sometimes in the same thread. Snark might be directed at users who fail to adhere to the norms of the community (most often by making racist, queerphobic, or sexist posts) or who repost content already seen by the group on numerous occasions, but it is often directed at the object of fandom itself. While shitposting and anti-fandom are different things, they do share some similarities. Jonathan Gray notes that, contrary to the widespread belief, anti-fandom and fandom work in tandem; fans do not necessarily like or accept the text in its entirety, and the drive behind the transformative works, “that desire to cure and rectify ills may be implicitly fannish, but the seed of dislike is inherently anti-fannish.”³² Thus, it is only natural that in shitposting communities, some instances of snark might not serve as an expression of contempt for the text in its entirety, but “mask sincere fandom.”³³

31 In some communities there are separate groups dedicated to “minimal cosplay,” an euphemism for the exchange of nudes.

32 Jonathan Gray, “How Do I Dislike Thee? Let Me Count the Ways,” in *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*, ed. Melissa Click (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 30.

33 Gray, “How Do I Dislike Thee?,” 37.

Thus, canon remains an important point of reference, and the knowledge of its obscure details is valued—as long as they can be turned into shitpost material. The discussions of canon tend to focus on the minutiae that have not been explored in the original work. They can lead to drawing purposefully absurd conclusions or—in a parody of the fan theory discourse—to redirecting the attention of the audience toward the aspects that were not intended as central to the plot. For instance, after the first *Star Trek: Discovery* season finale, the shitposting community virtually ignored numerous important events (e.g., making peace with the Klingon Empire, establishing Philippa Georgiou as a regular, Voq leaving the crew, encountering the USS *Enterprise*). Instead, they opted for the few seconds of the footage where a Klingon is shown relieving themselves in the background and there are two streams of urine. For weeks, both the memes and the discussion centred on Klingon genitals, their number, arrangement and their supposed canon proofs. The phrase “two dicks” became a meme itself, and was being added to the titles of random episodes and licensed novels.

Memes can grow out of comments deemed foolish by the rest of the users, typos and misspellings, actors’ tweets, commemorative plates and other licensed memorabilia, or similar questions asked one time too many (“What if Patrick Stewart dies in the middle of the series?”). The object of fandom is not lost in the flood of shitposting and, in many cases, it is impossible to understand the jokes without a detailed knowledge of the original text. However, the text itself is no longer considered sacrosanct, which is an unusual arrangement for the members of affirmational fandom.

One of the most interesting aspects of shitposting is the fact that communities formed around the practice serve as melting pots for members of different niches of fandom. There is no gatekeeping based on gender identity nor aggression, which one might expect when cis male fans encounter practices foreign to them. For instance, new members often create polls, trying to establish “the best ship.” In most cases, the prompt answers clearly suggest that the poll creator was asking about favourite starships, but soon enough the USS *Enterprise-D* is running against both the USS *Voyager* and Kirk/Spock or Garak/Bashir, and losing. This way, members of the affirmational fandom are introduced to practices such as shipping, of which they sometimes had no previous knowledge (sic!). The comment section quickly turns into a snarky discussion about the show creators’ executive decisions and LGBTQ+ representation. Often, the original posters might at least consider the queer readings of the text that they have perceived as heteronormative up until that moment. While slash fans might be perceived negatively outside their communities, the shitposting discourse makes it

difficult for people who treat the text as sacrosanct to assert their own reading as the only legitimate one without becoming an object of ridicule.

The “Seriously Gross and Morally Bankrupt” Feminine Side of Shitposting

The instances of anti-fannish behaviours in case of STSP are, of course, not limited to snarky remarks that mask genuine adoration for a text whose faults are being recognized. Gray rightly notes the existence of “anti-fandom that is directed towards *fans* of the nominal anti-fan object, rather than to the *object*.”³⁴ Shitposting communities are not perfectly egalitarian, and they have many shortcomings. While in most groups there is no gatekeeping based on one’s gender, sexuality, race, or identity, the aversion to less tech-savvy users may easily turn into ageism, especially if they fail to follow social conventions specific to the community or misunderstand some of the practices. Shitposting seems to thrive on disdain and ridicule, albeit in most cases it starts out with a user who voices their own distaste with the community.

From time to time, some members of the groups announce their departure, expressing their disgust with the actions of the collective and invoking the authority of the creators of the object of fandom. In case of STSP, such posts most often refer to “Gene’s [Roddenberry] vision” supposedly being betrayed by the constant flow of shitposts. Another popular complaint is that a given shitposting community is “too political.” Such proclamations are not only ridiculed in the comment sections but oftentimes become memes themselves. In the fall of 2020, when one of the aggravated users decided to leave the shitposting group, his comment became the most prominent meme in the community for weeks. While other such comments have circulated in the group for a day or two, this one was still being referenced on the daily basis a year later due to its phrasing. The group has been called out not only for ruining “Gene’s vision,” but also for being “seriously gross and morally bankrupt.” The original context of the meme might have been lost, especially given the influx of new users who were not there when the comment was posted. The phrase “seriously gross and morally bankrupt,” however, has been accepted by the community as a badge of honour and has become a part of the group’s identity.

The interesting part of the story is the fact that both fans and the media rarely call the members of the affirmational fandom *immoral*. They are often

34 Gray, “How Do I Dislike Thee?,” 32.

painted as unsuccessful, socially awkward, and overly focused on things that do not matter—but rarely as “morally bankrupt.” While back in 2003, Gray defined anti-fans as those who “strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel,” and thus, the notion of moral bankruptcy might be linked with the notion of anti-fandom, it is not necessarily the kind of anti-fandom that is opposed to the text. In some cases, this disdain is aimed at a specific niche of fans. The allegation of moral bankruptcy is much more often used in discussions concerning fans who are engaged in the creation of slash and fan erotica or in other transgressive practices. Those things are certainly not reserved for female fans but are more common among them and match their stereotypical depictions. As Abigail Derecho has put it, archontic literature—and she classifies fanfiction as such—“is inherently, structurally, a literature of the subordinate,” which “undermines conventional notions of authority, boundaries, and property.”³⁵

Starting with the second issue of *Spockanalia*, a fanzine founding the media fandom for the original *Star Trek* TV series (aired 1967–70) and created exclusively by women, up to the fifth and final issue, there were special pages dedicated to what has been called “graffiti.” They depicted a wall on the *Enterprise* or, alternatively, some building on the fictional planet of Vulcan. These pages provided space for graffiti that varied from caricatures of Spock portrayed as the devil, to a saga of Ensign Chekov’s love affairs (“CHEKOV LOVES RUTH ALICE MARTHA OLGA ZELDA ANTIGONE LORRAINE”),³⁶ to jabs at the number of the captain’s sexual encounters (“Kirk breeds mono”),³⁷ to Vulcan comments on humans that, in-universe, were outright racist (“Amanda Wierd Eared [sic!] Mind Blind Earth Mirth Bled Red”).³⁸ A lot of the inscriptions were unintelligible, and their sheer number makes it hard to differentiate between messages coming from particular characters. Some of them are silly, some are offensive to fictional heroes, others still make no sense. In some issues, the “graffiti” was created

35 Abigail Derecho, “Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), 72. Derecho’s category describes literature which makes its relation to given works explicit and is not subordinate to the source text but a part of an archive it creates; this focus on material-amassing and numerous but equal variants of a narrative can be easily applied to the notion of meme-making.

36 Sherna Comerford, “Graffiti,” *Spockanalia*, no. 2 (April 1968; 4th printing, March 1976): 27.

37 “Enterprise Graffiti,” *Spockanalia*, no. 4 (April 1969; 3rd printing, May 1975): 81.

38 Sherna C. Burley, “Graffiti,” *Spockanalia*, no. 3 (September 1968; 6th printing, August 1982): 36.

by one fan impersonating numerous crewmembers, in others, it was a result of collective work during a convention. Fan shitposting started long before the internet and I would go as far as to claim that it was initiated by women who loved canon but at the same time were able to disregard it or treat it as merely a resource.

The transgressive nature of shitposting, however, is not the only aspect of the practice that makes it similar to other fan activities considered feminine. Stanfill, following the observations of Kristina Busse³⁹ and Suzanne Scott,⁴⁰ suggests that while some male fans engage in transformative labour, they are more likely to consider it an investment and often create content with the intent of professionalization and joining the industry.⁴¹ Meanwhile, the types of fan production perceived as feminine are unprofitable, and thus considered works of love. As Stanfill, Busse, and Scott show, it is not just idealism and an anti-corporate attitude that stop the creators from profiting off their work, but also the fact that women are much more used to providing valuable work “out of love” and without any form of compensation. Moreover, the effects of this kind of fan labour are most often transgressive and, with regard to their legal status, unsellable. Fan shitposting, albeit not necessarily being a form of “work of love,” is too chaotic and foul-mouthed to be attractive to the industry or the advertisers.

Furthermore, one of its most prominent features is the sheer amount of content. A similar phenomenon has been described by Abigail De Kosnik as typical of fanfiction archives:

[U]niversal archives cultivate an image of impressive abundance. I think that universal archives are far more invested in performing plenitude than in servicing selection because so much selecting-out is already executed by the ephemeral properties of digital data and the proclivity for forgetting in digital culture.... In volume lies their victory.⁴²

While De Kosnik focuses on preservation of the content, and most shitposts are fleeting and get quickly replaced by new ones, in both cases the key aspect is the huge amount of production and the refusal to adhere to any aesthetic or cultural canons. In theory, the same could be said about

39 Kristina Busse, “Introduction,” *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 104–7.

40 Suzanne Scott, “Revenge of the Fanboy: Convergence Culture and the Politics of Incorporation” (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2011).

41 Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom*, 162.

42 Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2016), 95.

the activity on imageboards, such as 4chan and other male-dominated “edgelord” spaces, including the meme production of the alt-right. The term “edgelord” (“someone who intentionally expresses opinions that are likely to shock or offend people, especially on the internet, as a way of making others notice or admire them”⁴³) itself is highly gendered—it is, after all, *edgelords*, never *edgeladies*. If we were to ignore the presence of numerous non-male users, fan shitposting groups could be perceived as direct descendants of edgelord communities. However, the transgressive behaviour of predominantly male alt-right posters, as described by researchers quoted in the initial part of this chapter, does not apply to their object of fandom.

Moreover, the reaction to perceived violations of the canon can be incredibly aggressive in the edgelord milieu. This milieu is best exemplified by the mass trolling and cyberbullying of cast members that followed the premiere of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017), a movie which introduced some significant changes to the *Star Wars* canon. Given the tendency of the shitposting communities to police hate speech and support representatives of marginalized groups, the analogy with the edgelords seems completely inaccurate, just like the conflation of shitposting with trolling.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that shitposting is a transformative practice. While popular discourse aligns the practice with trolling and male-dominated meme communities such as 4chan, I have shown that it is a diverse practice which involves heterogeneous communities. There is a prevalent stereotype of shitposting as an activity of privileged groups, which is exactly the reason why so many male fans reluctant to engage in other transformative practices are willing to join shitposting communities. Fan shitposting is a practice which stems from female activities and production, and displays their most prominent values, such as an interest in non-profit practices and transgressive content, indifferent to canon or any authority. However, shitposting is not coded as feminine.

At the first glance, the heterogeneous fan shitposting communities do not seem significantly different from other male-oriented and male-dominated spaces. One could hypothesize that, because of this male context and the

43 “Edgelord,” *The Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed August 4, 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/pl/dictionary/english/edgelord>.

multiple layers of irony involved in shitposting, cisheteronormative male fans can engage in transformative fan production without any stigma that usually surrounds the feminine-coded fan practices, such as writing fanfiction. If that were the case, they could remain unaware of that specific transgression, and yet they could—in many instances for the first time—encounter and learn about the transformative fan culture that they had rejected or that they did not know existed. Shitposting, in other words, allows male fans to be creative without repercussions.

Of course, I do not mean to downplay the toxic aspects of shitposting in this chapter. People who do not understand the practice and feel lost in the constant flood of shitposts, or who repost content already known to the community, can be turned into an object of ridicule and laughed at by thousands of users. These features do make the shitposting groups similar in some aspects to the 4chan culture. However, if there were a way to reduce animosity that some male fans hold toward “fake geek girls,” minorities, and their models of fan engagement, shitposting would certainly be an important means of achieving this goal. It could be argued that shitposting has already been bridging the gender gap in fandom for years—slowly, unnoticeably, but steadily.

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Part 4

History and Romance

11. In Defence of Popular Culture: Affect and Engagement in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

Aldona Kobus

Abstract: This chapter analyzes Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817) as a documentation of emerging fannish practices and modes of reading, as well as the origin of affective sensibility towards popular culture, interpreting Catherine Morland as a proto-fan(girl), and the structure of the novel itself as a derivative work of fiction. Apparently, *Northanger Abbey*, as a didactic tale about the dangers of popular culture represented by the novel-reading craze, follows the anti-novel discourse of the eighteenth century. However, Austen's use of irony subverts anti-novel tropes, such as the "female Quixote." *Northanger Abbey* could be understood as a great defence of popular culture in the form of novels, presenting it as a source of key social knowledge as well as entertainment.

Keywords: sentimental novel, gothic novel, female Quixote, affective sensibility, mattering maps

Introduction

This chapter aims to analyse Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (completed in 1803, revisited in 1816 and published after the death of the author in 1817) as a documentation of emerging fan practices and modes of reading, as well as the affective sensibility towards popular culture. The discussion's focal points are the main character, Catherine Morland, interpreted as a fan, and the structure of the novel, argued to be a derivative work of fiction. *Northanger Abbey* can be understood as an archive of fandom history at its very inception, that is, the emergence of popular culture in the form of

the novel and its popularity in the late eighteenth century. Practices and behaviours depicted by Austen would later become prominent among her own readers, a community known as Janeites,¹ which can be described as one of the first modern fandoms.²

Northanger Abbey is the coming-of-age story of Catherine, a seventeen-year-old clergyman's daughter, who gets invited by the Allen family for the winter ball season in Bath. There she meets and befriends Isabella and John Thorpe—the adventurous and disingenuous siblings who unreasonably believe that Catherine and her brother will inherit the Allens' fortune. Catherine falls in love with Henry Tilney and befriends his sister, Eleanor. Despite the Thorpes' repeated attempts to undermine her relationship with the Tilneys—whom they see as rivals with regard to Catherine's affection and eventual fortune—Catherine tries to maintain friendships with all of them. The rumours about her inheritance cause General Tilney—Henry and Eleanor's father—to invite Catherine to stay with them for a few weeks at their home, Northanger Abbey, as he is hoping to gain her prospective fortune through marriage between her and Henry. The Gothic surroundings and Catherine's overactive imagination bring her to believe that the General killed or imprisoned his late wife. When Henry discovers her suspicions, it sours their relationship. Meanwhile, the General becomes aware of Catherine's real financial circumstances, which disappoints and angers him, so he forces the girl to go home early the next morning, even though this means she would have to travel alone and unsafely. When Henry hears of it, he visits Catherine in her home to apologize on behalf of his family and propose to her. The Thorpes' multiple lies are discovered and Catherine finds her happy ending.

The novel itself analyses the affects that popular culture installs in readers in a way that is still relevant today, especially for fan and media studies. The didactic aspect of Austen's work—the ability to differentiate between reality and fiction, the power of fiction and its usefulness to navigate real-life situations—is currently at the heart of fandom's inner conflicts, manifesting in online “wars” between pro-shippers and anti-shippers,³ with the latter being a symptom of a wider social trend of “puriteens,” i.e., young persons who use the language of progressive politics to criticize pop-cultural texts

1 Claudia L. Johnson, “Austen Cults and Cultures,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

2 Sheenagh Pugh, *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context* (Glasgow: Seren, 2005), 27–28.

3 Dominika Ciesielska and Maria Rutkowska, “Między interpretacją a moralnością. Antyshiperzy we współczesnym fandomie medialnym,” *Literatura Ludowa: Journal of Folklore and Popular Culture* 65, no. 2 (2021): 53–68, <https://doi.org/10.12775/ll.2.2021.004>.

(and their audience) that do not meet their personal “moral” standards. The common ground for puriteens’ critique is a belief that there is a direct link between a type of consumed fiction and the consumer’s mindset and behaviour, therefore preferred media content is a moral paragon of a person. It is not a new stance in the history of mass media and popular culture as every so often a new moral panic erupts towards some segments of popular culture, claiming that inappropriate content is destroying the morals of the young generation.⁴ Usually moral panic is a symptom of generational conflict, where the interests of the younger generation are incomprehensible for the older one and therefore seen as dangerous. What, however, is puzzling about puriteens is their tendency to police themselves through censorship. It is significant that contemporary (mis)interpretations of *Northanger Abbey*, e.g., movie adaptations, emphasize the didactic aspect of the novel, which itself is a parody of literary conventions of that time. It only demonstrates that the lesson in media literacy—presented in the novel—is still very much needed, especially in the fandom, as the inner-fandom conflict between pro- and anti-shippers could be understood as a symptom of a wider problem with media literacy in contemporary society.

Northanger Abbey could help us to understand the source of moral panic in context of popular culture, as it comes directly from the anti-novel-reading discourse of the eighteenth century that can be defined as social reaction to the popularization of novel reading as leisure practice which “allegedly endangered women-readers.”⁵ Catherine, the main character of *Northanger Abbey*, is a “female Quixote,” a figure used in the eighteenth-century literary discourse to criticize naïve and overemotional reception of fiction attributed to the woman readers.⁶ On the surface, *Northanger Abbey* is a didactic tale about the dangers of popular culture represented by the novel-reading craze,⁷ written in the same fashion as *The Female Quixote; or, The Adventures of Arabella* by Charlotte Lennox from 1752 and *The Heroine* by Eaton Barrett from 1813.

4 Examples of such moral panics are the “Satanic panic” of the 1980s revolving around a suspicion about the RPG game *Dungeons & Dragons*, heavy metal music, and horror films as well as the belief that some youth subcultures worked as Satanic recruitment tools and fears about the negative effects of the exposure of young people to the violence in video games that was reignited by 1999 Columbine High School shooting (as the shooters were avid players of *Doom*).

5 Ana Vogrinčič, “The Novel-Reading Panic in 18th-Century in England: An Outline of an Early Moral Media Panic,” *Medijska istraživanja* 14, no. 12 (2008): 104.

6 Jodi L. Wyatt, “Female Quixotism Refashioned: *Northanger Abbey*, the Engaged Reader, and the Woman Writer,” *The Eighteenth Century* 56, no. 2 (2015): 261.

7 Vogrinčič, “The Novel-Reading Panic.”

The satirical and didactic elements of *Northanger Abbey* are emphasized in its adaptations, most notably the movies from 1986, directed by Giles Foster, and from 2007, directed by Jon Jones. They connect Catherine's shameful confession of her suspicions about General Tilney to the climax of the novel: Catherine being rudely chased away from Northanger Abbey by the General for no reason, and, as a result, being endangered in many ways as a young woman travelling without company. The novel's narration, however, does not draw a connection between these events; even in Catherine's mind there is no direct link between them and she, as well as other characters, finds the General's behaviour inexcusable. The General proves himself to be exactly what Catherine has thought of him: a Gothic villain, with "the air and attitude of a Montoni,"⁸ "[an] evil that does exist in England."⁹ In this indirect way, the narration of the novel subverts the trope of "female Quixotism": Catherine, with her wild imagination, is right, while Henry Tilney, with his satirical and rational approach, is wrong.

Northanger Abbey is clearly divided into two parts: the Bath adventures—a parody of the sentimental novel; and the Abbey misadventures, a parody of the Gothic novel. The contrast between these two parts, considered to be "imperfectly joined," was the main reason for the criticism levied at the novel, starting as early as in 1913 with the publication of *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters* by William Austen-Leigh and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh. They declared the Gothic part of the story unsatisfactory and lacking a clear relation to the sentimental part, a point that was later repeated multiple times by scholars and critics.¹⁰ The obligatory deprecation of the Gothic parody was the main part of the novel's criticism up to the 1980s, when Jan Fergus recognized *Northanger Abbey* as clearly "written in response to contemporary fiction," a "novel about writing novels"¹¹ and featuring not only a parody of literary conventions, but also the successful use of two different literary modes in one novel. Her conclusion was that Austen actually wrote Gothic scenes that were more interesting and emotional than Ann Radcliffe's, even though Austen was simultaneously pointing out the absurdities of Gothic fiction.¹²

8 Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels* (London: BCA, 1998), 897.

9 Waldo S. Glock, "Catherine Morland's Gothic Delusions: A Defense of *Northanger Abbey*," *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 32, no. 1 (1978): 42.

10 Cecil Emden, "The Composition of *Northanger Abbey*," *Review of English Studies* 75, no. 19 (1968): 280.

11 Jan Fergus, *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel: Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, and Pride and Prejudice* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 11.

12 Fergus, *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel*, 30.

Northanger Abbey stands out from Austen's other novels, due to its intertextuality, mixed conventions, and the strong voice of the author presented in the self-aware authorial narration, all of which make it possible to describe *Northanger Abbey* as metafiction. Indeed, the narrator constantly informs us that we are reading a novel, which resonates with the major theme of *Northanger Abbey*: the power of fiction and its influences upon the reader. Moreover, no other of Austen's novels is so engaged in the discourse of gender, which was also the centre of the anti-novel discourse of the eighteenth century, with a clear division between male (critical, intellectual) and female (uncritical, emotional) modes of reading and writing. *Northanger Abbey* thematizes gendered modes of reading through the lance of Austen's irony that provides subtle reevaluation of cultural bias. It is a novel about writing novels, but also about reading them and about being an engaged reader; it conveys a great defence of the novel as a literary genre, well concealed under the obvious satirical element and many layers of irony in the narration.

To consider *Northanger Abbey* only a parody of sentimental and Gothic conventions is a simplification. Austen went beyond parody—and beyond irony. Her work could be understood as a loving tribute to her favourite books, authors, and writing itself, especially to women reading and writing. *Northanger Abbey* was written in defence of the emerging popular culture; various models of reception thereof are major themes of the novel, especially engaged, affective—in other words, fannish—reception. The key concept here is affect, or emotional response, applied to fan studies by Lawrence Grossberg by means of the term “affective sensibility.”¹³ Through affective sensibility, fans construct “mattering maps” of cultural landscape which “direct [their] investments ... tell [them] where and how [they] can become absorbed ... as potential locations for [their] self-identifications and with what intensities.”¹⁴ Affective sensibility lets fans recognize what matters to them, “how to use and how to generate energy, how to navigate [their] way into and through various moods, and how to live within emotional and ideological histories.”¹⁵ Mattering maps, based on affective engagement, determine what elements of popular culture matter and how they matter to fans, and “organize moments of stable identity, sites at which [fans] can, at least temporarily, find [themselves] ‘at home’”¹⁶ as they redefine their identities in relation to those maps.

13 Lawrence Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House? The Affective Sensibility of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 56.

14 Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House?,” 57–59.

15 Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House?,” 57–58.

16 Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House?,” 60.

Northanger Abbey documents the beginning of fandom, a community of affective, engaged readers sharing a specific set of practices that goes beyond reading itself. The novel is a guidebook for Catherine's mattering map but also—via narration—for the affective sensibility of its author. It would be a stretch to call *Northanger Abbey* itself an example of fanfiction (defined as a derivative work of love), but it shares structural characteristics with fan works (like the majority of literary texts before the introduction of copyright), mostly in its derivative structure in relation to other novels and non-fiction texts in the periodic press concerning the anti-novel discourse of the late eighteenth century. Nevertheless, it is still justified to call Catherine Morland a proto-fan(girl), a positive model of fannish reception for young women and girls in the centuries to come, as her affective reception of Gothic novels is not only the major theme of the novel, but also an important part of her identity and a tool for understanding the complicated world of social interactions around her.

Catherine Morland as a Fan(girl)

As Fergus notes, “the credibility and development of Catherine’s character are issues very intimately connected with the problem of unity [of the novel].”¹⁷ Fergus’ critical approach to the novel situates Catherine as an underdeveloped and inconsistent character, which resonates with the incoherence of the novel itself. The main objection is that Catherine does not mature in the Bath sequence and leaves it as she has been before, without any new knowledge or a changed worldview, even though she has gained new experiences in the high society and on the marital market of Bath. The joke of the Bath part is that Catherine is too mundane to be a sentimental heroine, as it is asserted multiple times throughout the narration, starting with the first sentence in the novel: “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be heroine.”¹⁸ This fragment is a realization of the *Evelina* theme, a direct parody of *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World* by Fanny Burney from 1778.¹⁹

The humour of the *Abbey* in part relies on an utterly different aspect of Catherine’s personality: her naivety and innocence, which make her a perfect

17 Fergus, *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel*, 12.

18 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 817.

19 Glock, “Catherine Morland’s Gothic Delusions,” 34.

Gothic heroine to the point of a self-parody of the genre. In the first part of the novel, the circumstances are sentimental and Catherine does not fit into them. This characterization can be contrasted to Isabella Thorpe, who models herself as a heroine of romance. In the second part of the novel, the circumstances are mundane, but this time Catherine fashions herself as a “Radcliffean Romance” heroine, which is a realization of the Emily St Aubert theme and a direct parody of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe from 1794,²⁰ as well as a reference to Eleanor Sleath’s *The Orphan of the Rhine* from 1798.²¹ The abrupt change of convention as well as the main character’s behaviour must be frustrating for a reader expecting realistic conclusions in the novel, an expectation that is justified by the use of parody in the name of literary realism. However, as Fergus summarizes, “Austen is simply not interested in showing a consistent or continuous development in Catherine’s judgment or in her character.”²² Catherine’s role is to “serve themes” of the novel,²³ being more the narrative’s tool than a character. However, there is one consistent feature in Catherine’s personality, that is, her engagement with popular fiction in the form of Gothic novels.

Catherine’s friendship with Isabella is consolidated through the shared reading of novels, especially *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which Catherine declares “the nicest novel in the world.”²⁴ She is “delighted with the book” and wishes to “spend a whole life reading it.”²⁵ The habit of reading novels is cultivated in the Morland household as Catherine’s mother is described as being quite taken with *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* by Samuel Richardson from 1753, a book which Catherine also enjoyed, as it is “amazingly horrid,” even though “not like *Udolpho*.”²⁶ Isabella, being a good friend, gives Catherine a list of seven books that are now commonly referred to as the “Northanger horrid novels,”²⁷ which brings to mind modern fandom practices of making “recommendation lists,” usually containing titles of

20 Glock, “Catherine Morland’s Gothic Delusions,” 38.

21 Tanille Nowak, “The Orphan in the Abbey: Eleanor Sleath’s Influence on Jane Austen’s Composition of *Northanger Abbey*,” *Studies in Gothic Fiction* 2, no. 1 (2011).

22 Fergus, *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel*, 18.

23 Fergus, *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel*, 12.

24 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 862.

25 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 829.

26 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 830.

27 Max Fincher, “I Should Like to Spend My Whole Life in Reading It’: The Resurrection of the Northanger ‘Horrid’ Novels,” *The Gothic Imagination* (blog), March 22, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110326224012/http://www.gothic.stir.ac.uk/guestblog/%E2%80%98i-should-like-to-spend-my-whole-life-in-reading-it%E2%80%99-the-resurrection-of-the-northanger-%E2%80%98horrid%E2%80%99-novels/>.

fanfiction works. Catherine's fannish activity goes beyond reading and enjoying Gothic novels, although she is definitely an avid reader of those, always eager for more, which is proven in her conversation with Henry during the journey to Northanger Abbey. Catherine expects the Abbey to be exotic and frightening, exactly like the Gothic monasteries and castles she has read about. Henry teases her about this, constructing for her a story in which she would experience a true "horrid" adventure, just like Emily St Aubert or Adeline:

No, certainly.—We shall not have to explore our way into a hall dimly lighted by the expiring embers of a wood fire—nor be obliged to spread our beds on the floor of a room without windows, doors, or furniture. But you must be aware that when a young lady is (by whatever means) introduced into a dwelling of this kind, she is always lodged apart from the rest of the family. While they snugly repair to their own end of the house, she is formally conducted by Dorothy the ancient housekeeper up a different staircase, and along many gloomy passages, into an apartment never used since some cousin or kin died in it about twenty years before. Can you stand such a ceremony as this? Will not your mind misgive you, when you find yourself in this gloomy chamber—too lofty and extensive for you, with only the feeble rays of a single lamp to take in its size—its walls hung with tapestry exhibiting figures as large as life, and the bed, of dark green stuff or purple velvet, presenting even a funereal appearance. Will not your heart sink within you?²⁸

Henry's narration quickly changes from an amusing tale of the Abbey and a general Gothic narration about "young ladies" to a story crafted especially for Catherine, in second-person narration, with her as a Gothic heroine. Therefore, Henry is the one who initiates the change of mood and convention in the novel. Catherine starts her journey to the Abbey with realistic expectations, saying "I do not think I should be easily frightened, because there would be so many people in the house—and besides, it has never been uninhabited and left deserted for years, and then the family come back to it unawares, without giving any notice, as generally happens."²⁹ She resists Henry's narration as much as she has enjoyed it: "Oh! Mr. Tilney, how frightful! This is just like a book! But it cannot really happen to me...."

28 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 883–84.

29 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 883.

Well, what then?"³⁰ Catherine knows that Gothic adventures are beyond her but she hopes for one—which is a feeling aroused by Henry's story. For him, it is a parody, undertaken at an emotional distance; for her an experience, exaggerated with affect—for Henry and for Gothic fiction in equal parts. This scene is meaningful not only as a Gothic parody which shifts the mood of the novel, but also as a peak fannish interaction between Catherine and Henry.

Henry Tilney is as much a fan as Catherine is. He confesses to reading *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in two days, unable to put it down, "with the hair standing on end the whole time."³¹ He even admits that he was not able to wait five minutes for his sister, although they had started reading it together aloud. Henry is a fan and a great defender of novels; he says he has read "hundreds of them" and that he does not trust anybody who does not enjoy fiction.³² He definitely takes pleasure in the short Gothic tale he crafts for Catherine; indeed, this story has every attribute of fanfiction: it is clearly derivative, based on Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, motivated by affective reading of Gothic fiction and made purely for their amusement, very alike modern self-insert fanfiction.

The conversation between Henry and Catherine also resembles another modern fandom practice: role-play fanfiction. This is a collaborative writing of fanfiction wherein every writer-player assumes the position and viewpoint of a fictional character to interact with the characters of other writers-players through dialogue. The conversation also marks the moment at which fiction and reality blend for Catherine. When Henry cannot continue the story, he encourages Catherine to "use her own fancy" to finish it,³³ which is exactly what Catherine does later, reading the social interaction in the Abbey through a Gothic lens. Therefore, "[t]he credit for transforming Catherine from a reader to a heroine of romances belongs in large part to Henry."³⁴

Catherine seeks "horrid" adventures in real life; however, earlier in the novel her searches are more moderate than suspicions about General Tilney as a Gothic villain, indirectly inspired by Henry. Catherine centres her social circle around Gothic novels and prefers the company of other engaged readers, such as Isabella, or Henry and Eleanor Tilney, rather than the novel-bashing John Thorpe. Her enjoyment of reading is so great that it can

30 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 884.

31 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 861.

32 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 861.

33 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 885.

34 Tara Ghoshal Wallace, "Northanger Abbey and the Limits of Parody," *Studies in the Novel* 20, no. 3 (1988): 265.

cheer up her broken and insecure heart as she states, “While I have *Udolpho* to read, I feel as nobody could make me miserable.”³⁵ She is excited to go on a carriage ride if it includes a visit to an old, Gothic castle, “a fine old place, just like what one reads about.”³⁶ Her Gothic pleasures are almost as strong as her feelings for Henry, which is noted in the narration: “Her passion for ancient edifices was next to degree to her passion for Henry Tilney, and castles and abbeys made usually the charm of those reveries which his image did not fill.”³⁷ Catherine seeks out the remains of Gothic architecture, actively going after anything that could resemble what she reads about. It is a similar behaviour to what we see today in modern fan tourism: visiting movie sets or locations and landmarks of favourite pop cultural texts. Catherine’s “mattering map” is visibly depicted throughout the novel, with the *Udolpho* as a centre thereof and other novels, country sites and old legends as the outer circles, still connected to Gothic novels. It is also Henry’s appreciation of novels (particularly *Udolpho*) that marks him as a valid object of Catherine’s romantic interest.

Catherine’s fannish conduct could easily be translated into a modern setting, as was done in the web series *The Cate Morland Chronicles*,³⁸ which frames our heroine as a typical modern fangirl. *The Cate Morland Chronicles* is a quite faithful adaptation of Austen’s novel, even though it is a modern retelling that makes Cate Morland a typical fangirl, obsessed with the short-lived cult series *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and its star, Henry Tilney. The web series definitely underlines the engagement in popular culture, while also renouncing the parody aspect of the novel. As shipping replaces matchmaking and popular culture is established as a valid field of interest, the irony and distance provided by parody are no longer necessary and Catherine becomes Cate, a self-proclaimed fangirl.

Gendered Fandom

Catherine is a proto-fangirl as much as Henry is a proto-fanboy—their moods of reading and interpretation are different, with Catherine being an engaged, affective reader and Henry a critical one, operating with irony

35 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 830.

36 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 883.

37 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 876.

38 Amanda Taylor and Kailee Brown, dirs, *The Cate Morland Chronicles* (Apple Juice Productions, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMDOKYyXdSpWh-CKHot5rRw>.

and distance. This distinction is deeply rooted in the gendered anti-novel-reading discourse of the late eighteenth century, which juxtaposed women's reading of fiction—uncritical, naïve and absorptive—with sophisticated men's reading of non-fiction (historical and political texts). The criticism of novel reading, associated with the woman reader, was simultaneously the criticism of the emerging popular culture, seen as a frivolous and trivial field of interest that does not require proper education or critical skills to be consumed.

As the same criticism of popular culture survived into the twentieth century, so did the distinction between women's and men's ways of engagement with it. Since 2009 the division into transformational (perceived as women-dominated) and affirmational (perceived as men-dominated) fandoms has been widely discussed by fans and fan scholars alike.³⁹ Obsession_inc defines transformational fandom in terms of reinterpretation and re-writing (fan works), remix culture, egalitarianism, progressive politics and affect, and in opposition to affirmational fandom, in which “the source material is re-stated, the author's purpose divined to the community's satisfaction, rules established on how the characters are and how the universe works.”⁴⁰

On the surface it presents two different modes of reading: naïve, unsophisticated reception of Gothic novels (popular fiction) by Catherine and elevated, critical reading of Henry, in terms not unlike the opposition between transformational and affirmational fandom. Catherine reads *Udolpho* and applies it to her own life, trying to lessen the distance between fiction and her life, first by visiting the ruins of a castle and then by framing her stay in the Abbey in the fashion of a Gothic adventure, full of secrets and dangers. Henry collects the knowledge and is its gatekeeper, patronizing both Catherine and Eleanor in a discussion, pointing out their mistakes, focusing on the language they use.⁴¹ He maintains the distance between

39 Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York City Press, 2013); Suzanne Scott, “Dawn of the Undead Author: Fanboy Auteursism and Zack Snyder's ‘Vision,’” in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Kristina Busse, “Geek Hierarchies, Boundary Policing, and the Gendering of the Good Fan,” *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 73–91; obsession_inc, “Affirmational Fandom vs Transformational Fandom,” Dreamwidth, June 1, 2009, <https://obsession-inc.dreamwidth.org/82589.html>; Patrexes, “Not to Be Petty but the Divide between ‘Curatorial’ and ‘Transformative’ Fandom Is Completely Arbitrary,” January 14, 2018, <http://web.archive.org/web/20180117105805/https://patrex.es/post/169697759010>.

40 Obsession_inc, “Affirmational vs Transformational Fandom.”

41 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 861–62.

text as source of amusement and his life, stressing the impossibility of experiencing a Gothic adventure in contemporary England.⁴²

Henry is initially presented as “the embodiment of the narrator’s values,”⁴³ playing the part of mentor in “female Quixotism” trope: an experienced, sophisticated man who helps the heroine to abandon her childish, novel-inspired delusions. But his constant mocking of social conventions makes him an insufficient mentor, one who bluntly refuses to share his insights with Catherine, even under direct questioning.⁴⁴ More so, it is Henry who starts to intermingle the social and the literary order, treating social situations as texts that can be read and interpreted in many ways; he is also the one to initiate the change of convention in the novel by crafting a Gothic tale for Catherine.

Northanger Abbey successively subverts readers’ expectations and exercises the emotional impact of fiction,⁴⁵ as well as the mechanics of the author’s control upon the reader (and its limitations). The didacticism in *Northanger Abbey* does not come from the use of the “female Quixotism” trope, which is subverted by making Henry an inadequate mentor for Catherine, precisely because of his ironic, satirical approach⁴⁶ and by proving that Catherine’s awkwardly presented suspicions are justified. The true “female Quixote” of the novel is Isabella, who “gave Catherine a most pleasing remembrance of all the heroines of her acquaintance.”⁴⁷ Waldo S. Glock argues that “[i]t is Isabella, not Catherine, who most convincingly embodies the dangers of romantic illusion in the modern world, and whose transparent insincerity functions as a social equivalent of the equally false reality of sentimental novel.”⁴⁸ Isabella remains unreformed, which is another alternation of the “female Quixote” trope, because her delusions about her self-importance come from social ambitions rather than literary fiction. The novel is a parody of a parody (since the “female Quixotism” trope is a parody of sentimental novel).

The process of reading *Northanger Abbey* is a lesson itself—a lesson in affective, critical, attentive and active (in other words: fannish) reading, as it is noted in the narration at the end of the novel: “I have united for their

42 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 902.

43 Wallace, “*Northanger Abbey* and the Limits of Parody,” 263.

44 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 880–81.

45 Fergus, *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel*.

46 Wyatt, “Female Quixotism Refashioned,” 268.

47 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 867.

48 Glock, “Catherine Morland’s Gothic Delusions,” 37.

[readers'] case what they must divide for mine,"⁴⁹ i.e., the reception of the novel cannot be passive, it demands full attention of its reader, who needs to act as a detective, collecting and connecting the literary tropes and references. Even today *Northanger Abbey* remains a great lesson in media literacy, as it demands from its readers to elevate their reading and interpretive skills. Catherine is a fangirl as a figure of an engaged woman-reader, but also as a narrative tool used to defend popular culture and the affective sensibility of its recipients, as the *Northanger Abbey* deconstructs gender stereotypes of its own age and ours. The case of Henry illustrates that the male, affirmative model of reception is not superior to Catherine's transformative attitude towards Gothic novels—they both have their strengths and limitations.

In Defence of Popular Culture

Ana Vogrinčič sums up the anti-novel discourse of the eighteenth century as follows:

Broadly, one could divide the reproaches into those ascribing to novels the dangerous psychological affects, triggering imitation and inoculating wrong ideas of love and life; and into those referring to the mere habit of novel reading as a physically harmful waste of time, damaging not only the mind and the morale of readers, but also their eyesight and posture.⁵⁰

Vogrinčič states explicitly that the "heavily stigmatized and stereotyped image of a female novel-reader [was] a precursor of a modern couch potato."⁵¹

Thus, the opinions expressed by the eighteenth-century moralists sound familiar to the modern audience, as they would be repeated over the following two centuries towards various forms of popular culture in general and fan culture in particular. Eventually, this approach would be countered by the works of John Fiske (1989), Joli Jensen (1992), Henry Jenkins (1992), and others, especially by those most interested in the subject—woman readers and writers defending their intellectual and emotional capabilities in the face of constant attack from the anti-novel discourse. The anti-shipping movement or "puritanic" discourse in today's fandom can, therefore, be understood as the newest take in a long tradition of moral panic concerning

49 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 925.

50 Vogrinčič, "The Novel-Reading Panic," 109.

51 Vogrinčič, "The Novel-Reading Panic," 111.

intellectual and emotional abilities of women-identifying consumers of popular culture.

Northanger Abbey is also a part of this moral defence of novel reading and writing. Catherine Morland is often cited as a too vulnerable reader of Gothic fiction, whose lacklustre reading abilities must be reformed by a mature reader, Henry Tilney. This is entirely not true, as not only does the plot justify Catherine's suspicions, if not actions, but also the narrator herself speaks out at length in defence of novel reading and writing:

I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding—joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas! if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? I cannot approve of it. Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and over every new novel to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans. Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body.... “I am no novel reader—I seldom look into novels—Do not imagine that I often read novels—It is really very well for a novel.”—Such is the common cant.—“And what are you reading, Miss ——?” “Oh! it is only a novel!” replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame.—“It is only *Cecilia*, or *Camilla*, or *Belinda*”; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.⁵²

This is the most compelling fragment of *Northanger Abbey*. The authorial narration blends into an essay that takes almost half of the chapter, as if chapter 5 were just an excuse to present the narrator's and—by extension—the author's opinions on the subject of reading novels. Indeed, Austen would be deeply interested in promoting the reading of novels for her own financial benefit.⁵³ Yet, many contemporary woman authors used the “female Quixotism” trope as a paradoxical marketing tool: on the one hand, it was

52 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 828–29.

53 Wyatt, “Female Quixotism Refashioned,” 261.

a popular motif that attracted more readers and, on the other, a way to criticize the practice of reading novels itself according to the obligatory anti-novel discourse of the time.⁵⁴ The narrator of *Northanger Abbey* lists the best qualities of a novel, marketing them not only as a source of pleasure and amusement, but also as a vehicle for knowledge of “human nature,” a medium that can provide better understanding of the world and society.

This theme of reading novels is also illustrated in other aspects of the novel. For example, social interactions are treated as texts to be understood and interpreted. This, in turn, proves to be difficult for the inexperienced Catherine, who tries to fix her shortcomings with literary modes of interpretation, applying literary conventions to what she does not understand about people’s behaviour. Catherine is especially puzzled by the situation where the declared intention does not overlap with action, which is mostly the case of Isabella, as she uses hyperbolic language and hides her true intentions; however, it also applies to General Tilney’s behaviour: “[T]he inexplicability of the General’s conduct dwelt much on her thoughts.... [W]hy he should say one thing so positively, and mean another all the while, was most unaccountable! How were people, at that rate, to be understood?”⁵⁵

The question “What does it signify?” appears in many variations throughout the novel,⁵⁶ textualizing human interactions and social conventions as a matter of interpretation. Moreover, the social conventions of Bath are constantly parodied by Henry in the same way as the literary conventions of sentimental and Gothic novels are parodied by the narration. Thus, the social and the literary become intertwined, as they both demand the same set of skills; therefore, reading could be seen as useful in solving social riddles. Reading is also presented as a means of socializing, as it is through their shared interest in novels (which means shared taste) that Catherine befriends Isabella and, later, Eleanor. Austen humorously categorizes *Northanger Abbey*’s characters into two types: those who read novels and those who do not, but the most important question is “How do you read?” The very structure of *Northanger Abbey* provides an answer to this query.

Northanger Abbey is not simply a text engaged with the anti-novel discourse of the eighteenth century; it also performs what it postulates by demanding engaged, “excessive,”⁵⁷ “absorptive”⁵⁸ reading—rapid, vast,

54 Wyett, “Female Quixotism Refashioned,” 262.

55 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 908.

56 Austen, *The Complete Novels*, 830, 838, 853, 858, 867.

57 Vogrinčič, “The Novel-Reading Panic,” 111.

58 Wyett, “Female Quixotism Refashioned,” 261.

not discriminating on material—that was at the heart of the anti-novel discourse.⁵⁹ Austen's novel anticipates a reader well acquainted with contemporary literature, including the periodical press as the main platform of the anti-novel discourse. *Northanger Abbey* is filled with direct and indirect quotes, becoming an intertextual play with the most popular titles of its time and with literary conventions, and its extensive use of irony and meta-textuality gives it almost postmodern qualities. The first chapter parodies the formulaic structure of the same sentimental novels that are praised in chapter 5—Frances Burney's *Cecilia* (1782) and *Camilla* (1796), and Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801)—in a manner identified by Tanille Nowak as “affectionate parody,”⁶⁰ which recognizes literary, aesthetic, and social values of the parodied texts and works toward emulating them. The aim of parody in *Northanger Abbey* is not to ridicule novels or novel readers, as every subsequent layer of irony contradicts the previous one. Tara Ghoshal Wallace notices that “Austen does more than invite her reader to join in a collaborative effort to debunk the conventions of sentimental novels.... She mocks and undermines her own chosen method—parodic discourse—so that both narrative and reader are kept off-balance.”⁶¹

Northanger Abbey proves that excessive reading does not necessarily mean inattentive reading. As Nowak points out, Austen had cleverly hidden references and even direct quotes from *The Orphan of the Rhine* throughout the story, changing the names of characters in discussion of *Udolpho* between Catherine and Isabella from Lady Laurentini and St Aubert to Laurentina and St Aubin, so as to satirize the formulaic structure of Gothic novels that repeat names, scenes, and plots. However, it was also “a mischievous attempt to quiz her readers’ familiarity with the popular novels of the time.”⁶² Nowak concludes that Austen’s gesture of “misremembering the names,” which is how this fragment was understood by criticism for the last two centuries, was indeed “astute recognition of the shift in people’s approach to their reading materials [which] implies an expectation or desire for her readers to demonstrate the same observant and dedicated approach to novels that she ... exhibited.”⁶³

With a deliberate use of irony and the deconstruction of literary conventions, Austen imposed her literary ideas and expectations on readers.

59 Vogrinčič, “The Novel-Reading Panic,” 117.

60 Nowak, “The Orphan in the Abbey,” 46.

61 Wallace, “*Northanger Abbey* and the Limits of Parody,” 262.

62 Nowak, “The Orphan in the Abbey,” 42.

63 Nowak, “The Orphan in the Abbey,” 43.

However, as the history of the reception of *Northanger Abbey* clearly shows, she did so with varying degrees of success. Her model reader would be not only as well-read as she was, but also as clever, able to recognize the many layers of irony that may hinder the reception of the novel, and follow up with the change of conventions and intertextual references. *Northanger Abbey* requires a fannish reading—one that is engaged, repeated, contextual, and accompanied by reaching for every book mentioned or alluded to in the novel—and promotes this type of reading as exemplary for the reception of popular culture.

Conclusion

It is clear that Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey* as a fan (engaged reader)—a beginner writer expressing her love for the genre and meditating upon the power of fiction and the mechanics of writing—for other fans. The novel visibly expresses Austen's mattering map as the author inscribed Catherine's affective sensibility into the story. Austen's interest in contemporary popular culture has already been a subject of studies.⁶⁴ *Northanger Abbey* not only provides elaborate lists of titles and authors Austen had read, but also reveals her attitude towards them, her particular likes and dislikes. The novel is a recommendation list by itself.

The novel is also a testimony of the author's affinity with women writers and readers, as well as her sympathy towards certain types of characters and styles. As her first novel, *Northanger Abbey* expresses Austen's investment in the popular culture of her time and her intensity towards it. The novel also acts as a location of self-identification for Austen as she proudly declared herself a woman author and a woman reader. The defence of popular culture conducted in *Northanger Abbey* is therefore Austen's defence of herself, a manifesto of why and how her affective investments matter: as a source of amusement, distribution of knowledge about social skills, and intellectual challenge of decrypting meanings.

Catherine is not only a proto-fan but also a role model for today's young fans, as her coming of age requires her to master the ability to differentiate between fiction and reality, and, even more importantly, entails the ability to recognize the connection between fiction, phantasm, and the real world. The narration of *Northanger Abbey* underlines that the danger comes from

64 Judy Simons, "Jane Austen and Popular Culture," in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2009).

social structures of patriarchy, not from the Gothic novels themselves, as the “improper,” “horrid” fiction contains a valid lesson the power imbalance in society and thus can be used to navigate social situations.

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About the Author

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12. Fanning the Popular Romance Genre: Readers as Fans on the Contemporary Book Market

Madeleine Span

Abstract: The characteristics of literary fandoms have only sparsely been covered in academic discourse. Considering the vast popularity of some genres on the current book market, this poses a severe shortcoming. This chapter analyses chick lit reading experiences and fan practices as part of the strong-selling popular romance genre. In a qualitative empirical study, participants of a specifically founded reading group were asked to debate their experiences of reading two novels representative of the genre. The material was then analysed for themes and latent structures. The results indicate how chick lit readers as fans engage with their reading in a repetitive, critical, and emotionally engaged fashion, contributing to our understanding of the genre's vast popularity.

Keywords: chick lit, literary fandom, reading group, qualitative research

Introduction

Despite an ever-declared fluctuating reading interest,¹ global mass bestseller phenomena and the fan bases they attract indicate that reading continues to be a highly popular leisure activity. The romance fiction genre's particularly high market share has repeatedly been indicated by both

¹ Katharina Buchholz, "Reading for Pleasure Declines in Popularity," *STATISTA*, April 22, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/chart/27287/average-hours-spent-per-day-by-americans-reading-for-pleasure>.

journalists and scholars.²³⁴ With the rise of digital reading infrastructure, their hegemonial status on the book market became even more apparent, as their readers quickly formed one of the most avid audiences—making them critical clientele for book streaming services like Scribd, who as a result separated romance titles from their general offer to stay competitive on the market.⁵

Chick lit, one prominent genre frequently associated with the romance genre universe, in a variety of subgenres not only focuses on a love interest but instead on the respective heroine's more universal "quest for self-determination and the balancing of work with social activity,"⁶ which represents both readers and authors and seamlessly blends into their everyday world.⁷ That this resonates intensely with readers—and fans—became apparent when Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*⁸ hit bookstores and cinemas, as newspapers "set out to find the 'real' Bridget Jones or sent 'genuine Bridget Joneses' to review the films."⁹

New digital media formats like Instagram or TikTok as well as dedicated reading platforms like Goodreads have further opened innovative possibilities for the formation and practices of highly dynamic communities involving readers, authors, and publishers. The dynamics and demands they create by engaging with each other and sharing their enthusiasm results in titles gaining momentum without constant advertising efforts by publishers or booksellers, as best illustrated by E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey*,¹⁰ which sold 15.2 million copies between 2010 and 2019.¹¹ As for a more recent example,

2 Rachel King, "The Romance Novel Sales Boom Continues," *Fortune*, August 21, 2021, <https://fortune.com/2021/08/21/rom-com-pandemic-book-sales-romance-bookstore-day>.

3 Beth Driscoll et al., "The Publishing Ecosystems of Contemporary Australian Genre Fiction," *Creative Industries Journal* 11, no. 2 (2018): 203–21.

4 Nielsen, "Romance Readers by the Numbers," *Insights*, May 26, 2016, <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2016/romance-readers-by-the-numbers>.

5 John B. Thompson, *Book Wars* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021), 327ff.

6 Stephanie Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (Charlottesville: Virginia University Press, 2011), 28.

7 Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 13.

8 Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, 2nd ed. (London: Picador, 1998).

9 Rocío Montoro, *The Stylistics of Cappuccino Fiction: A Socio-Cognitive Perspective* (London: Continuum, 2007), 133.

10 E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (New York: Random House, 2011).

11 Calvin Reid, "BookScan Reports 'Fifty Shades of Grey' Is Bestselling Book of the Decade," *Publishers Weekly*, December 18, 2019, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/82019-bookscan-reports-fifty-shades-of-grey-is-bestselling-book-of-the-decade.html>.

Ali Hazelwood's *The Love Hypothesis*¹² has acclaimed bestselling status via a TikTok hype before gradually spreading to other media platforms as well. These titles are only two examples of a contemporary highly dynamic culture of reading popular romance fiction which is increasingly reader- (and thus community-) driven.

Romance readers often passionately engage with the texts on numerous levels, displaying profound knowledge of the genre's conventions. For example, they have an in-depth understanding of conventions and stylistics, from detailed studies of characters and plot milieus and personal attachment to specific details. However, any comparison to fandoms with broader recognition, such as those of *Harry Potter* or *Doctor Who*, are still missing from everyday cultural discourse and its academic equivalent in a broader scope. Analysing a case study of chick lit reading in Austria, I will discuss how contemporary romance fiction readers may be understood as fans. Concepts of fan practices distinctly characterize their self-directed activity ranges and greatly impact the interest communities' dynamics. The analysis will thus contribute to our understanding of current fan practices and their roles regarding contemporary reading cultures and the book market.¹³

Background

Over the last years, the romance genre has become one of the most relevant markets in the publishing industry, indicated by increasing market shares for big-five publishers, small emergent indie publishers, and self-publishers. These notions are significantly impacted by the genre's vivid (online) fan

12 Ali Hazelwood, *The Love Hypothesis* (New York: Jove, 2021).

13 While a historically contrasting analysis is not the purpose of the present body of work, I want to point out that the analysis of such (allegedly female) fandoms has sparked considerable controversy and debate over the past decades. Compare exemplary for recent, prominent contributions: Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); Monica Flegel and Jenny Roth, "Mommy Porn and Regurgitated Fiction: The Silencing of Women in Fan Debates about Pulled to Publish Fan Fiction," in *Fan Studies: Researching Popular Audiences*, edited by Alice Chauvel, Nicole Lamerichs, and Jessica Seymour (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2014); Anne Kustritz, "They All Lived Happily Ever After. Obviously.: Realism and Utopia in *Game of Thrones*-Based Alternate Universe Fairy Tale Fan Fiction," *Humanities* 5, no. 2 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.3390/h5020043>. See Daniel Cavicchi, "Fandom before 'Fan': Shaping the History of Enthusiastic Audiences," *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* 6, no. 1 (2014): 52–72, for a more historical take on the concept of fan cultures.

communities, as Tapper indicates.¹⁴ With the broad expanse of online fan communities and their infrastructure network consisting of both publisher- and reader-curated blogs and social media sites, the publishing industry is more involved with audiences than ever before, which Tapper identifies as the ultimate condition for the genre's vast expansion.¹⁵ The fundamental condition for this progression lies in the possibilities of digital communication and new media platforms which facilitate these new dimensions of cultural participation while simultaneously limiting and marginalizing audience participation.¹⁶ Digital media may equip formerly marginalized authors with new possibilities to overcome obstacles like limited resources and insurmountable gatekeeping instances, thus adding to the market's variety.¹⁷ As paid and free reading content may drastically differ in text quality, its availability contributes to a segregation of readers along the lines of income and social class.

Digitalization has profoundly impacted the book industry, as it is no longer dependent on economically risk-bearing mass production—and storage. Instead, flexible small-scale and on-demand production increasingly characterizes its daily business. Digitality has also added a new dimension to books' and general media texts' shelf life, generating an ever-increasing backlist, as periodically—typically biannually—alternating frontlists are replaced by a continuous expansion of the product range.¹⁸ More and more publishers are increasingly utilizing their power to impact the media sphere, be it by using crowdfunding or operating with trial-and-error methods for determining customer base responses to specific publications.¹⁹

Under these circumstances, consumers play an intriguing new role. They are no longer the passive voice of a market echo but instead develop

14 Olivia Tapper, "Romance and Innovation in Twenty-First Century Publishing," *Publishing Research Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2014): 249–59, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12109-014-9363-6>.

15 Tapper, "Romance and Innovation," 256.

16 Compare among others Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, and danah boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), and Bjarki Valtýsson, "Access Culture: Web 2.0 and Cultural Participation," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 16, no. 2 (2010): 200–214.

17 Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo, "Introduction," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2020), 5.

18 Mark McGurl, "Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon," *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2016): 447–71.

19 Francesca Tondi, "Alternative Publishing Models in a Changing Cultural Landscape: The Rise of Crowdfunding," *Logos* 28, no. 4 (2017): 32–37.

increasing decisive power by cultivating exchange and distribution in user (and, not least, fan) communities manifesting on social media platforms like Instagram, Goodreads, or Wattpad. Furthermore, their involvement also contributes to what talent scouts and editors find when looking out for new trends and authors,²⁰ which increasingly urges questions about legitimate content use, copyright concepts, and crediting policies.²¹ We are midst in the “emergence of a global participatory media culture” which is mainly characterized by a merging of producer and consumer cultures, bringing fans as driving forces of these notions as “consumers from the margins of the media industry into the spotlight.”²²

Theory

Jenkins defines fandom as an intensive, repetitive reception format with the potential to create meaning for the individual’s everyday life.²³ In their essence, fans characterize as paying “close and undivided attention” to their consumption of specific cultural texts, while their general standing towards them is “a mixture of emotional proximity and critical distance” as an expression of an underlying “consumer activism.”²⁴ The general semantics of fandom are however still one-sided, as *Star Trek*, the Marvel Universe, Taylor Swift or K-pop band BTS are commonly associated with their fandoms, while enthusiasts of Italian operas or French cuisine have rarely been considered—nor those of popular romance fiction.²⁵

Drawing on Becker’s “art worlds” concept and taking into consideration the thriving online fan communities, Hills argues for an understanding

20 Claire Parnell, “Mapping the Entertainment Ecosystem of Wattpad: Platforms, Publishing and Adaptation,” *Convergence* 27, no. 2 (2021): 524–38.

21 Olivia Tushnet, “Copyright Law, Fan Practices, and the Rights of the Author,” in *Fandom Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

22 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 257.

23 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 44ff.

24 Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 277f.

25 Compare Joli Jensen, *Fandom as Pathology* (New York: Routledge, 2002), on attributing fandom as well as Emilie Hurst, “Worshipping at the Shrine of Wagner: Fandom, Media and Richard Wagner” (PhD diss., York University, 2022), and Matt Hills, “Implicit Fandom in the Fields of Theatre, Art, and Literature: Studying ‘Fans’ beyond Fan Discourses,” in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. Paul Booth (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), on expressions of such high cultural fandom.

of fandoms as “fan worlds,” indicating how currently there still prevails a particular idea of concepts for fan cultural identity expression and the related defining essence of fandom.²⁶ These would no longer be feasible for online networked societies with “a ‘digital habitus’ of social media use,” as they further allow fandoms to “becom[e] explicit and self-identified around forms of theatre, art, and literature.”²⁷ As a solution, he proposes a concept leaving space for individual variation, envisioned as “a set of pathways or branches which can close down what it means to be a fan for any given person”²⁸ that may apply to a wide variety of fan subjects and “people [who] do not self-describe as fans.”²⁹

This reflects the ambivalent discourse on genre—and particularly romance—fiction fandom which only sparsely focuses on the fandoms and their dynamics as a key topic of interest. Radway’s renowned study on practices of romance fiction reading focuses on “avid” readers whom she does not attribute as fans.³⁰ Hermes, in a study on women reading crime novels, describes the reading to “produce a sense of belonging ... as an integral part of one’s identity.”³¹ A few years later, Driscoll considers “fanfiction ... [as] a new mode of popular romance fiction” in her essay on the relations of romance fiction, pornography, and fanfiction, drawing a direct connection between fandoms and genre literature.³² More recent works regard the romance genre more specifically as an object of fandom, which contribute significantly to the characteristics and future development of the genre.

26 Matt Hills, “From Fan Culture/Community to the Fan World: Possible Pathways and Ways of Having Done Fandom,” *Palabra Clave* 20, no. 4 (2017): 856–83.

27 Hills, “Implicit Fandom,” 491

28 Hills, “From Fan Culture/Community to the Fan World,” 878, cf. Hills, “Implicit Fandom,” 491.

29 Hills, “Implicit Fandom,” 477; cf. Hills, “From Fan Culture/Community to the Fan World,” 860; and CarrieLynn Reinhard, Julia E. Largent and Bertha Chin, “Introduction: Food Culture and Fandom,” in *Eating Fandom: Intersections between Fans and Food Cultures*, ed. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, Julia E. Largent, and Bertha Chin (New York and London: Routledge 2020).

30 Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). Comparing Jensen, *Fandom as Pathology*, one could argue, however, that applying Jenkins’ definition from *Textual Poachers*, Radway did describe fans in her study without explicitly attributing them.

31 Joke Hermes, “Cultural Citizenship and Popular Fiction,” in *The Media in Question: Popular Cultures and Public Interests*, ed. Kees Brants, Joke Hermes, and Liesbet van Zoonen (London: Sage, 1997), 164.

32 Catherine Driscoll, “One True Pairing: The Romance of Pornography and the Pornography of Romance,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), 79.

Roach³³ notes how romance fan culture acts as a breeding ground for new generations of authors and Pérez Riú explains how, particularly within digital communities, fandoms would offer “a knowledge hub for the personal and emotionally engaged critical evaluation of target texts.”³⁴

Samutina draws a similarly close relation between romance fiction and fanfiction and explains how both characterize as emotionally highly engaged readings featuring a strong sense of being pulled into a story that would offer “opportunities for respite and self-improvement” and enthusiastic repeated readings.³⁵ Analysing fans’ reading habits, she indicates the complexity of their selective preferences and argues that reading a text could pose unpredictable risks for engaging in a story, both due to the uncertain level of textual quality and its conforming to personal preferences.

Method

The study was based on three loosely structured in-person group interviews based on a joint reading of two chick-lit novels and their discussion via six key plot sequences as conversation impetus. Each interview group featured between two and four participants. I transcribed the material from audio recordings and analysed it using fine-grained and thematic analysis.³⁶ As the discourse on the characteristics of romance fiction reading is still sparse, this approach allowed for a detailed investigation of the phenomenon’s fundamental aspects.

The four study participants were acquired in Vienna in November 2018. As of their ages, the participants formed two groups, with two in their early twenties (20 and 21 years of age) and two in their late twenties (27 and 28 years). All participants identified as female and heterosexual and were Austrian citizens. Remarkably, they had all migrated to the capital from several Austrian states for their studies. Both younger participants

33 Catherine M. Roach, “‘Going Native’: Aca-Fandom and Deep Participant Observation in Popular Romance Studies,” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 47, no. 2 (2014): 33–49.

34 Carmen Pérez Riú, “Romance Reading as Fandom in the Context of Convergence Culture,” in *Romantic Escapes: Post-millennial Trends in Contemporary Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Irene Pérez Fernandes and Carmen Pérez Riú (Bern: Peter Lang, 2021), 171.

35 Natalia Samutina, “Emotional Landscapes of Reading: Fan Fiction in the Context of Contemporary Reading Practices,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 3 (2017): 259.

36 Philipp Mayring, *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Grundlagen und Techniken*, 12th ed. (Weinheim: Beltz, 2015).

were enrolled in bachelor's degrees, while one of the older was pursuing a master's degree and the other worked as a full-time secretary. None of them had previously been or was married, and none had children. All participants stated that they have been reading popular romance fiction since their teen years and identified as frequent readers of the genre. While their overall preferred genres were contemporary romance and chick lit (n=4), there was further interest in erotic and fantasy (n=3) as well as historical novels (n=2).

The books read in the reading groups were Beth O'Leary's *Love to Share*³⁷ and Josie Silver's *One Day in December*,³⁸ two chick lit novels focusing on a female heterosexual protagonist. Both books were read in their German translations (*Liebe ist die halbe Miete* and *Ein Tag im Dezember*, respectively) and unknown beforehand to all study participants. While *Love to Share* tells the story of the protagonist overcoming a tough break-up and falling in love with her new flatmate over a few months, *One Day in December* follows a more unconventional approach and narrates the protagonist's story for ten years, when she and her love interest finally commit to their feelings and start a relationship. Paperback copies of both novels were gifted to the participants as a compensation for participating.

Analysis and Discussion

None of the study participants self-identified as a fan but they did utter phrases like "I wasn't quite a fan of the [plot structure] concept"³⁹ and "I am kind of a fan of it, when you get to know many ... details."⁴⁰ The interview material clearly identifies the participants as what Hills calls "implicit fans,"⁴¹ as they engaged in intensive, repetitive, and closely observed reading of the genre, which Jenkins defines as critical characteristics of fan activity.⁴² In discussing the texts read in the reading group, all participants expressed that they made meaning of the texts for their living circumstances so that their reading would play a central part in their lives. They illustrated individually tailored reading approaches that were applied and adapted to suit personal needs and specific tastes. So,

37 Beth O'Leary, *Love to Share/Liebe ist die halbe Miete*, trans. Pauline Kurbasik and Babette Schröder (Munich: Diana, 2018).

38 Josie Silver, *Ein Tag im Dezember*, trans. Babette Schröder (Munich: Heyne, 2018). Translation of *One Day in December*.

39 Interviewee 1 in interview 3, conducted January 14, 2019, line 605.

40 Interviewee 2 in interview 3, lines 528–30.

41 Hills, "Implicit Fandom," 479.

42 Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 44f. and 277ff.

while no one explicitly described themselves as fans, all participants stated an enthusiastic interest in the genre and indicated how they immersed themselves in their reading.⁴³ Taking further into account that none of the participants stated that they engaged in the creation of fanart, this may further relate to “implicit”⁴⁴ fan identities, as one participant remarked how she perceived cultural differences in people’s expression of their enthusiasm and fandom in her exchange with readers online. She had “already noticed that ... Brits [and Americans] are much stronger fans than people are here [in Austria].”⁴⁵

The group revealed themselves to be picky, highly versed readers who critically examine the quality of a given text related to the genre and the storyworld depicted before approving of it, which resembles what Jenkins describes as a critical issue as the fictional world must remain intact during the fans’ in-depth investigation of even the most miniscule details.⁴⁶ In the interviews, the participants repeatedly engaged in lively debates about details not bearing immediate significance for the plot progression. Besides the characters’ looks and whether they and their actions fitted their character types and attributed preferences, a list of the protagonist’s New Year’s resolutions repeatedly incorporated in *One Day in December* was debated intensely. The participants compared their ideas of whether and how she would have collected and stored them:

Interviewee 1: “Those New Year’s resolutions, they are very Bridget Jones–like ... I mean, she also always has her diaries, so ... I would like to know if she has a notebook, where she collects them all ... or if she generally keeps a journal. Does it become evident somewhere in the text?”

Interviewee 2: “No, I don’t think so.... But I had imagined that she would only think them.”

Interviewee 1: “I had thought that she would write them down somewhere ... thinking that hopefully nobody would find them. I thought, I read that somewhere.”⁴⁷

43 Compare also Elizabeth van Monsjou and Raymond A. Mar, “Interest and Investment in Fictional Romances,” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 13, no. 4 (2018): 431–49, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/aca0000191>.

44 Hills, “Implicit Fandom.” On this note of disparity between self-identity and described identity, compare also: Mike S. Schäfer, Jochen Roose, and Thomas Schmidt-Lux, “Soziologie der Fans. Einleitung,” in *Unsichere Zeiten: Herausforderungen gesellschaftlicher Transformationen: Verhandlungen des 34. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in Jena 2008*, edited by Hans-Georg Soeffner (VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010).

45 Interviewee 1 in interview 3, line 1527.

46 Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 86ff.

47 Interviewees 1 and 2 in interview 3, lines 554–75.

To estimate a novel's quality and how it would fit in the canon, they turned to personal impressions during reading as well as the aesthetics of cover designs and general plot structures representing the genre, comparing them, for example, to *Bridget Jones's Diary*.⁴⁸ They would discuss these aspects with friends and colleagues sharing their interest or they would read and share reviews and comments on social media platforms (Bookstagram) and relevant reading platforms such as LovelyBooks.de. The list of resolutions discussed above illustrates how the coherence of smaller details bore great importance for their overall judgement. This indicates both the readers' particular tastes and their critical stance as fans of the genre.

The two older participants, in particular, said that they engage in the habit of repeatedly reading specific, favourite novels which were chosen consciously and to complement specific emotional states or to soothe stressful or personally challenging situations. This relates to Samutina's observation that reading texts within the fan genre, particularly longer ones, could bear the serious risk of being disappointing reading experiences, which could then result in "considerable emotional strain," leaving the readers intensely wishing for the text "not to be ruined."⁴⁹

By choosing the same novels all over again, they seek to minimize the risk in situations where they needed emotional support as the reading of previously read (that is, familiar) texts would provide a safely satisfying reading experience. As one of them pointed out:

I have a few books, that I like to read, partly because of the setting ... because, I think to myself, the story lives in such a dear space, and ... I like to dive into this space again, so to speak, [the protagonist] lives in such a nice story, that I would like to be in this place again.⁵⁰

The other further stated how she would regularly engage in rereading or rewatching the film of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, particularly as a comforting ritual when sick. Coherent with Samutina's observation of how repeated readings could offer spaces of comfort and opportunities for self-growth,⁵¹ Spacks describes these repeated readings as reassuring opportunities of "rediscovering a past self ... that we may have thought lost"⁵² which would

48 Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

49 Samutina, "Emotional Landscapes," 267.

50 Interviewee 1 in interview 2, conducted January 4, 2019, lines 1408–10.

51 Samutina, "Emotional Landscapes."

52 Patricia Meyer Spacks, *On Rereading* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 53.

give an “impression that [we] had changed and grown.”⁵³ The readings of texts particularly cherished may thus serve as a source for personal introspection and reflecting self-perception—the benefits the group participants also deemed applicable to others outside the immediate fandom.

While discussing *Love to Share*, two participants further explained how reading the novel had played an essential role in their making sense of personal experiences, like a recent break-up. Watching the story unfold had given them opportunities to reflect and thus it contributed to a personally comforting experience of engaging with the genre—an experience Samutina observes in her study on fan readers as well. They create intimate relations with their reading, which she describes as an emotionally intense personal exchange and “engagement with an imaginary world.”⁵⁴ They also thought that their reading experiences were transferable to others. Referring to *Love to Share*, one participant explained: “[i]f there was someone among my friends who would be abused by their partner [like Tiffy in her previous relationship], I would say, I heard you like reading, here, read this.”⁵⁵ This indicates close emotional connections the participants use to draw between their reading and their everyday lives and resembles what Jenkins describes as a “notion of ‘emotional realism,’” which he describes as “the applicability of [a fan canon’s text] to real-world situations.”⁵⁶

Although romance fiction fans’ frequency of engaging in the creation of fanart sparks a controversial debate⁵⁷ and is yet to be explored in further depth, there is a broad consensus on their lively online exchange in respective communities.⁵⁸ While some texts hold the fan readers’ attention more intensely than others and may even become part of a personal go-to kit for emotionally challenging situations or to soothe a need for comfort, the genre itself appears to represent a fan subject. As only two participants reported

53 Spacks, *On Rereading*, 219.

54 Samutina, “Emotional Landscapes,” 259.

55 Interviewee 1 in interview 2, line 2688.

56 Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 116.

57 Compare a spectrum spanning Van Monsjou and Mar, “Interest and Investment,” who conclude that fans of romance fiction would only rarely engage in fanfiction writing, as well as Katherine E. Morrissey, “Fifty Shades of Remix: The Intersecting Pleasures of Commercial and Fan Romances,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 4, no. 1 (2014): 1–17, to Driscoll, “One True Pairing,” and Roach, “Going Native,” who ties close connections between fan activities and professional authorship.

58 Pérez Riú (“Romance Reading,” 154) identifies goodreads.com, smartbitchestrashybooks.com, and allaboutromance.com as well as dedicated channels on Instagram (bookstagram), Youtube (booktube) or TikTok as prominent platforms for exchanging views and engaging in fan practices.

engaging in a habit of repeated reading, the study raises questions about readers' navigating the ever-increasing mass market. The number of titles available particularly on the genre book market is growing steadily and recommender systems are increasingly fine-tuned. Readers thus no longer need to go back to the same title when craving a specific reading experience but have alternative options for consuming more of the same, following the evaluations of like-minded readers and algorithm-based suggestions. This notion provides ample opportunity for considering current fan identity beyond any definite forms of "rules or grammars" as they would manifest in specific artefacts, and instead as general forms of enthusiastic consumption and engagement in specific content concepts with a particular appeal to the individual.⁵⁹

Conclusion

The present analysis indicates that avid readers of romance fiction may be identified as fans regarding the characteristics of their engagement with the reception of the texts, despite not self-identifying as such. It illustrates how closely readers may engage with the texts they read in a critical and emotional fashion, which clearly indicates characteristics of fandom. Applying Hills' concept of "fan worlds" provides room for highly individualized concepts of fan identity,⁶⁰ as the study participants express the meaning their fandom acquires for them in different living circumstances. Regarding our understanding of contemporary dynamics in popular consumer culture, this approach of fanning specific concepts, just like following certain hashtags on social media platforms, may prove valuable for making sense in a mass culture slowly but steadily going overboard with its offers to consumers.

This chapter illustrates the qualities evident in readers who are acquiring a fan identity relative to the chick lit genre, but work on the dynamics of digital communities and the aspects in which they resemble fan communities or differ from them is still required. To attribute readers of genres as fans would thus contribute to our understanding of the current book market's dynamics, along with actions to develop and introduce innovative new formats and practices. Regarding romance fiction fans, this fairly open concept of fan identities allows one to consider them as expressing literary fandom without

59 Hills, "From Fan Culture/Community to the Fan World," 872.

60 Hills, "Implicit Fandom," 491.

the primary condition to compare their practices to characteristics of other fandoms. Apart from exchange with other fans of the genre both online on social media platforms and offline, the texts themselves and their reading are object to the fandom. They clearly “[go] beyond ‘basic’ reading and involve adopting more diverse and active roles.”⁶¹

This not only contributes to our understanding of literary fandoms, but it might further help us determine the driving forces of readers’ interest in specific literary texts—a matter especially pressing against the current backdrop of increasingly diverse alternative entertainment possibilities. Studying readers’ engagement with their favourite texts and genres may thus help us to understand how they navigate the ever-increasing dimensions of the current book market.

Declaration of Interest

Random House Germany kindly provided print copies of both books read for the purposes of the study. However, no claims were made, nor influence posed, on the conduction or presentation of any results.

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61 Pérez Riú, “Romance Reading,” 148.

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13. Historical Settings as Transmedia Storyworlds

Michał Mochocki

Abstract: Historical storyworlds are found in fiction and nonfiction in multiple narrative media, from historical novels and costume dramas to historiography and educational videos. This text interprets historical settings (period and region) as instances of transmedia storyworlds, and reads historical fiction as a mix of factual and fictional components. Nonfiction historiography emerges as the equivalent of official canon or lore, and historical fiction (e.g., film, games) as a counterpart of fanfiction. Storyworlds based on legends and myth, as well as historical fantasy, are excluded from the shared storyworld by their ontological distance from nonfiction. Storyworlds with a relatively high degree of historical accuracy, by contrast, are positioned as “what if?” variants of factual historical settings.

Keywords: historical fiction, narratology, possible worlds, nonfiction

Introduction

One of the recent trends in fan studies is the expansion of its scope. Matt Hills¹ coined the concept of “implicit fandoms” for communities that neither self-identify as fandoms, nor have been studied as such in fan studies—yet, their activities have multiple features characteristic of fannish practices. Hills looks through this lens at highbrow connoisseurs of art, theatre, and literature. This chapter assumes the same is applicable to fannish (quasifannish?) engagements with historical settings—whether

¹ Matt Hills, “Implicit Fandom in the Fields of Theatre, Art, and Literature: Studying ‘Fans’ beyond Fan Discourses,” in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. Paul Booth (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018).

in fiction or nonfiction. This unites the explicit fandoms of historical gaming (e.g., wargaming) and fiction (e.g., *Hamilton* or Sherlock Holmes) with “implicit” fandoms, namely the enthusiasts of nonfiction history and heritage (historical reenactors, collectors, museum-goers, local heritage experts, etc.).

Elsewhere,² I elaborate on the side of community practices: how fandoms of history/heritage-themed media merge and interlock with larger communities for whom that history/heritage is relevant. The manner in which the “implicit fans” of real history collect and discuss lore, join formal and informal clubs, produce, share, and consume narratives, etc., closely resembles the fandoms of fictional transmedia universes (see e.g., “information-seeking behaviour.”³) Analogically, self-named fans of historical fiction expand their knowledge of the fictional storyworld by reading nonfiction sources. It is a very important aspect—not for this chapter, though. Here, I put aside the question of how fans engage with the historical setting. I focus on what they engage *with*. The key thought explored here is the comparison of historical settings to transmedia storyworlds.

It has been well-established in narrative theory that the concepts of storyworlds, narrativity, emplotment, etc., equally apply to fiction and nonfiction (see, e.g., Fludernik and Ryan’s introduction to their edited volume *Narrative Factuality: A Handbook* [2020]; this thought is also reinforced by other chapters therein). Therefore, historical settings as narrative worlds (whether called storyworlds [Ryan] or imaginary worlds [Wolf] or otherwise) have been studied both in historical fiction and in documentary (historiographical) nonfiction. The vision of historiography as narrativization of documentary material, indebted to Hayden White, is a powerful trend in current historical discourse, dominating, e.g., in the *Rethinking History* journal. Fludernik and Ryan⁴ observe that White’s work in historiography also stimulated narratologists to take interest in nonfiction narratives. For instance, Doležel pulls nonfiction history into the realm of possible worlds narrative theory: “History reconstructs the actual past by constructing models of the past, which have the status of

2 Michał Mochocki, *Role-play as a Heritage Practice: Historical LARP, Tabletop RPG and Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2021), section 2.2.

3 Frank Branch and Rebekah Phillips, “An Ontological Approach to Transmedia Worlds,” in *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, ed. Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (New York: Routledge, 2018), 388–89.

4 Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan, “Factual Narrative: An Introduction,” in *Narrative Factuality: A Handbook*, ed. Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 11–12.

possible worlds.”⁵ My explorations lead me in the direction of transmedia storyworlds.

The idea of historical settings as transmedia storyworlds formed in my mind around 2018, as I was exploring historical gaming as engagements with heritage.⁶ Writing this chapter in November 2021, I must take into account two important publications released this year: Lähteenmäki’s *Transmedia History*⁷ and my book *Role-play as a Heritage Practice*. We approach the topic from different angles (history vs heritage studies), yet we come to analogous conclusions (see also my other two publications⁸). In this chapter I discuss the following thoughts:

- The coexistence of fact and fiction in historical storyworlds
- Scalable secondariness and rules for measuring the ontological distance of fiction from nonfiction
- The alethic value (truth/false claims) in transmedia fiction and in factio-fictional storyworlds
- Four ontological dominants of historical storyworlds: history, fabulation, fantasy, legend
- Ontological agnosticism that unites rationalist and spiritualist stories set in one setting

The text moves between possible worlds theory and transmedia narratology, trying to bridge the seemingly incompatible views: multiple autonomous possible worlds versus a single storyworld shared across multiple media. This is an ongoing project: I have solved some of the problems, but there are still questions in need of good answers.

I see two benefits for fan studies in framing historical settings as transmedia storyworlds shared across fiction and nonfiction. Firstly, it expands the scope of fan studies to the “implicit fandoms” of history/heritage buffs. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it helps to understand the complex ontology of historical storyworlds that are the object of adoration by many

5 Lubomir Doležel, *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 33.

6 Michał Mochocki, “A Heritage Studies Approach to Non-digital Role-playing Games in Historical Settings,” presented at the History of Games conference, Copenhagen, August 13, 2018.

7 Ilkka Lähteenmäki, “Transmedia History,” *Rethinking History* 25, no. 3 (2021): 281–306.

8 Michał Mochocki, “Heritage, Authenticity, and the Fiction/Nonfiction Dualism in *Attentat 1942*,” in *Games and Narrative: Theory and Practice*, ed. Barbaros Bostan (Cham: Springer, 2022); Michał Mochocki, “Heritage Sites and Video Games: Questions of Authenticity and Immersion,” *Games and Culture* 16, no. 8 (2021): 951–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211005369>.

explicit fandoms. I mean the fans of historical wargaming, history-themed RPGs, historical genres (e.g., the Western), or of particular works of fiction set in what is now seen as a historical past, from Sherlock Holmes and Jane Austen to *The Three Musketeers* to *Hamilton*.

The Facto-Fictionality Pact

With the growing interest of narratologists in factual/nonfictional narratives, the recent book *Narrative Factuality*⁹ reveals the complexity of the matter, with historical fiction/nonfiction often in the spotlight. A recurrent thought is that fiction and nonfiction may have identical narrative characteristics. This is not a novelty: Ryan's text from 1980 notes that our fact/fiction attributions are shaped by the expectation of fiction from a storyteller, and nonfiction from a historian.¹⁰ Doležel struggles when he tries to segregate cases of counterfactuals, admitting that "the division into fictional and historical narratives is purely provisional."¹¹ Their identification happens through conventionalized "signposts" of factuality or fictionality. Doležel relied "primarily on the vocation of the writer and some paratextual markers."¹² Such signposts (markers) are often located outside of the narrative text: in paratexts or appendices, e.g., historiographical bibliography or footnotes (see Jaeger,¹³ and Lavocat.¹⁴) They help to establish a "factual pact" (or "fictional pact") with the reader,¹⁵ framing the narrative as one or the other.

I am exploring a third possibility: that a narrative may be a mix of both, encouraging the reader to adopt the "fictional pact" for certain elements and the "factual pact" for others. This could be called a facto-fictionality pact. Such ontological hybridization is a growing phenomenon in the twenty-first

9 Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan, eds, *Narrative Factuality: A Handbook* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

10 Marie-Laure Ryan, "Fiction, Non-factuals and the Principle of Minimal Departure," *Poetics* 9 (1980): 403.

11 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 105.

12 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 105.

13 Stephan Jaeger, "Factuality in Historiography/Historical Study," in *Narrative Factuality: A Handbook*, ed. Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 339–40.

14 Françoise Lavocat, "Pseudofactual Narratives and Signposts of Factuality," in *Narrative Factuality: A Handbook*, ed. Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 579–80.

15 Monika Fludernik, "Factual Narration in Narratology," in *Narrative Factuality: A Handbook*, ed. Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 51–74.

century.¹⁶ The award-winning Czech video game *Attentat 1942* (Charles Games, 2017) is a notable example: it displays factual archive material as copies of original black-and-white photographs and film footage, whereas the adventures of fictitious historical characters are shown as comic-book black-and-white drawings. There is also the third layer: full colour video representing the player character's reality in 2001, as s/he is interviewing NPCs to pick up fragments of the historical storyline. I discussed the fact/fiction dualism in *Attentat 1942*,¹⁷ noting how the three-layered visual representation perfectly illustrates the coexistence of historical nonfiction (documentary, encyclopaedia), fact-based historical fiction, and contemporary fiction.

In the *Attentat* paper I demonstrated how fiction and nonfiction coexist within a single digital text. The thoughts I am developing here pertain to storyworlds shared between multiple texts. I am inclined to believe that:

1. The facto-fictionality pact is a common characteristic of historical fiction in any narrative medium,
2. which makes the "facto-" part open to real-world referentiality in establishing truth-values,
3. which automatically pulls this fictional storyworld into transmedial relations with nonfiction historiography.

At this point I am not discussing horizontal transmedial connections between multiple works of fiction. My focus is on transmedial storyworld-sharing between a single work of historical fiction and the multitude of works of nonfiction historiography that covers the same historical setting (region and period). Of course, the ratio of fiction to nonfiction varies drastically between one narrative and another. Wolf's scale of secondariness, Ryan's ontological rules, and my own typology of historical settings allow for relatively precise mappings and classifications.

Secondariness and Ontological Distance

Historical game studies has already postulated a unity between a historical setting presented in popular media and its research-based description in

¹⁶ Irina Rajewsky, "Theories of Fictionality and Their Real Other," in *Narrative Factuality: A Handbook*, ed. Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 42.

¹⁷ Mochocki, "Heritage, Authenticity."

historiography. For instance, Chapman's famous concept of developer-historian¹⁸ describes the designers and developers of historical video games, who "represent history" through fictionalized digital models and narratives. Chapman talks about "history" as content shared between academic and popular media, and between fiction and nonfiction. We find the same approach in Lähteenmäki¹⁹ and Mochocki.²⁰

Further support comes from narrative theory. Ryan's principle of minimal departure,²¹ akin to Walton's "Reality Principle,"²² says that readers assume the storyworld works more or less identically as our real life-world, except for things explicitly contradicted by the text. In the case of historical settings, it means minimal departure from the reader's historical knowledge of the period. This implies that the historical fiction's storyworld will be partially constructed from information obtained from nonfiction sources. This has been a feature of historical fiction since its origins, but the digital age has brought new developments, e.g., in hyperlinked digital narratives studied by Bell. She notes (among other things) the strategies of "ontological flickering" and "ontological merging."²³ The former happens when audiences switch back and forth between narrative fiction and accompanying nonfiction, e.g., footnotes or encyclopaedia entries. The latter happens when the text openly merges the author's creative fictionalizations with nonfiction documentation, such as photographs, video footage, journalistic and legal texts, etc. Bell treats on digital fiction, but she expects it to be a transmedial phenomenon, instantiated, for example, by "the use of quotations and photographs in print fiction."²⁴

Wolf blurs the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, too. He points to the inevitable presence of errors, misrepresentations, or falsehoods (ergo: fictionalizations) even in nonfiction biographies and autobiographies; and to the extensive reliance of historical fiction on nonfictional real-world defaults.²⁵ Instead of two neatly separated boxes labelled "fiction" and

18 Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

19 Lähteenmäki, "Transmedia History."

20 Mochocki, *Role-play as a Heritage Practice*.

21 Ryan, "Fiction, Nonfactuals," 405–6.

22 Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 144–50.

23 Alice Bell, "Digital Fictionality, Possible Worlds Theory, Ontology, and Hyperlinks," in *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*, ed. Alice Bell and Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 249–71.

24 Bell, "Digital Fictionality," 267.

25 Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

“nonfiction,” Wolf proposes a sliding scale of fictionalization (he says: secondariness), with nonfiction autobiography on the lowest end (minimal secondariness), and completely invented fantasy/SF universes on the top end. Historical fictions are somewhere in the middle as “mixed ontologies,” with fictive people and events put in “actual historically verifiable occurrences.”²⁶

Ryan²⁷ provides a set of eleven parameters to measure the “ontological distance” from the nonfictional real world. Historical fiction again emerges as the closest to nonfiction (even closer than “realistic fiction”). It is identical with nonfiction in eight parameters (D through K: natural species; natural laws; technology; cosmology; time; space/geography; spatial dimensions; logic). There are three differences: parameter B: inventory of individuals (historical fiction introduces fictive characters, objects, and places next to nonfictional ones); parameter C: properties of common individuals (those may differ from what historiography claims as factual); and parameter A: alethic value, which concerns truth claims (true/false value) about the storyworld. Parameters B and C are fully compatible with the idea of “mixed ontologies.”²⁸ Parameter A seems inconsistent with this, as it sounds like a general claim assigning the status of fiction or nonfiction to the entirety of the represented storyworld. Alethic value is a complex issue, which needs more consideration.

Alethic Value in Fictional Transmedia Universes

The traditional fact/fiction distinction insists on a fundamental ontological separation. Nonfiction speaks about the actual (real) world, therefore it has real-world referentiality. Historiography builds “historical worlds as models of the actual world. Therefore they are constrained by the requirement of truth valuation.”²⁹ Nonfiction statements may be true or false, and potentially verifiable by experts: “[W]orlds constructed by individual historians enter into a social, increasingly international network of communication, where they are severely tested. The assessment of their adequacy ... is the result of a collective cognitive activity.”³⁰ By contrast: “Possible worlds of

26 Mark J. P. Wolf, “Typology of the Nonfactual,” in *Narrative Factuality: A Handbook*, ed. Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 120.

27 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Ontological Rules,” in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2018).

28 Wolf, “Typology.”

29 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 42.

30 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 35.

fiction are products of *poiesis*. By writing a text the author creates a fictional world that was not available prior to this act.³¹ The possible worlds theory insists that each instance of a fictionalized storyworld be seen as a separate possible world: ontologically autonomous, even if designed as a close copy of another. Viewed from this strict position, historical fiction is like any other fiction, in which “fictional text (sentences) lack truth value: they are neither true nor false.”³² Actually, fictional sentences are “always true” about the storyworld,³³ as the storyworld is directly constituted by its narrative representation, such as the narrator’s statements.

These claims make perfect sense with regard to a single narrative product—but not so much for transmedia storytelling. Large transmedia universes such as *Star Wars*, *The Witcher*, or *Harry Potter* are the opposite of Doležel’s vision of the fiction-writer always creating a new and previously unavailable world. Ryan’s claim of fictional narrative as “always true” of the storyworld does not hold in the case of conflicting variants. Even the copyrighted official canon may exist in several versions, as exemplified by the “Han shot first” controversy. The famous scene of Han Solo killing Greedo has been remade three times, differently staging the list and sequence of actions. Lähteenmäki³⁴ notes that fans of transmedia universes argue about what really happened in a manner similar to historians and history enthusiasts. Moreover, they create online repositories of storyworld lore that function like encyclopaedias, or historiography, for that fictional universe.³⁵ This closely resembles Doležel’s characteristics of historiographical nonfiction being verified by the historian community: “collective cognitive activity” in “a social, increasingly international network of communication,” where new narratives “are severely tested” for “assessment of their adequacy.”³⁶

In conclusion, transmedia storyworlds extended across multiple media products call to be exempt from the rules of fiction-constitutive statements as “always true,” and their storyworld as “always new.” In other words, the creation and consumption of transmedia storyworlds—even purely fictional ones—display some characteristics typical of engagements with nonfiction.

31 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 41.

32 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 41.

33 Ryan, “Ontological Rules.”

34 Lähteenmäki, “Transmedia History,” 16.

35 Maria Lindgren-Leavenworth, “Transmedial Narration and Fan Fiction: The Storyworld of *The Vampire Diaries*,” in *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 322–23.

36 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 35.

Alethic Value in Facto-Fictional Historical Storyworlds

What if we replace fantastic fiction with historical fiction, positioning a specific period setting as a transmedia universe? Take, for instance, the World War II setting in video games, which functions as an established brand.³⁷ Developers and producers expect players to

share a specific notion of history, one they try to reproduce as detailed as possible in their virtual worlds, even though notion of the past behind this is rather vague, quite similar to the image of a James Bond, Sherlock Holmes or even Star Trek or Star Wars setting.³⁸

If we wanted to stick to the traditional either-or choice between fiction and nonfiction, then historical transmedia settings would remain in the realm of “the fictional pact” as fictional storyworlds, next to *Star Trek*, et al. This could also question their transmedial quality. The reappearance of one setting (such as World War II, or the American Old West, or Victorian London) in multiple games, films, and novels could be seen as a genre formula shaping many possible worlds, not as one transmedia storyworld generating many stories. Only if we subscribe to the facto-fictional pact as default for historical fiction, will we find real-world historiography as the transmedially shared lore that binds those fictions together.

To reiterate the idea of facto-fictional pact: it is the coexistence of “factual pact” and “fictional pact” in historical fiction, with some components of the storyworld designated as fictional, and some as factual. Even Doležel, who insists on the fundamental ontological difference between fact and fiction on the level of entire texts, cannot hold this distinction in the case of research-based counterfactual history. He repeatedly asserts that “[a]ll worlds of counterfactual history, whether constructed by historians or by fiction makers ... are semantically fictional.”³⁹ However, he soon contradicts it when he counts “counterfactual history as an integral part of historiography,”⁴⁰ or acknowledges a case where “the historical blends with the fictional: the factual Spanish discoveries and colonization of South America are as much part of his history as the imaginary zenith

37 Läähtenmäki, “Transmedia History,” 8.

38 Angela Schwarz, “History in Video Games and the Craze for the Authentic,” in *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, ed. Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020), 27.

39 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 122, original italics.

40 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 125.

of the kingdom of Granada.”⁴¹ In the light of his often expressed views, he should not have called that Spanish part “historical” and “factual.” Instead, he would speak of reflection of the actual world in its fictionalized counterparts. How do I explain this inconsistency? I think Doležel was not ready to abandon the traditional premises on the level of declarative theorycrafting, but recognized the pragmatic need to do so in analysis of particular cases. Today, ten years later, the acceptance for the ontological mix of factual accuracy and fictional (in)authenticity (see e.g., Saxton⁴²) no longer raises eyebrows.

Ryan’s eleven-parameter framework measuring the ontological distance puts historical fiction as identical with the actual world in eight spheres: natural species; natural laws; technology; cosmology; time; space/geography; spatial dimensions; logic. In those areas the “factual” part of the facto-fictional pact will be in power (also driven by Ryan’s principle of minimal departure). Ficticity and fictionalization appear in two spheres: the inventory of individuals and the properties of common individuals. Some individuals will be fictitious, some will be clones of actual historical figures, some may be their creatively modified counterparts. The ontological triad “accurate–modified–fictitious” also applies to other components of storyworlds listed in Ryan: existents-objects, settings (locations), events, and mental events.⁴³ Factuality and fictitiousness will be distributed across those.

Doležel states:

The cast of agents in the historical world is determined by the set of agents involved in the reconstructed past event(s)... No such restriction applies to ... fictional worlds. Commonly, this set consists of persons who never existed and are assembled to act and interact by the decision of the fiction maker.⁴⁴

Interestingly, in line with his theory of nonfiction history as production of research-based storyworlds, Doležel determines the ontological status of characters in fiction and nonfiction alike as “not real, actual people, but

41 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 112.

42 Laura Saxton, “A True Story: Defining Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Fiction,” *Rethinking History* 24, no. 2 (2020): 127–44.

43 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Story/Worlds/Media: Tuning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology,” in *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 25–49.

44 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 36.

their possible counterparts.⁴⁵ This could become a common denominator bridging the fiction/nonfiction gap. Doležel, however, immediately reiterates the boundary: “A possible world in which counterparts of historical persons cohabit, interact, and communicate with fictional persons is not a historical world.”⁴⁶

This is a radical declaration that demands absolute purity: a world is historical if it includes only historically documented characters and activities. In Doležel’s view, it is enough to introduce fictitious servants next to the factual historical personas to nullify their factual-historical status. Contrary to that, I believe “the mind may actively redirect attention away from the incompleteness and inconsistencies of the storyworld.”⁴⁷ Ryan’s concept of “Swiss cheese strategy” supports such claims. Speaking of storyworlds in general (not only historical), she claims that small-scale local contradictions and inconsistencies that breach the globally established rules of the storyworld do not necessarily cancel those rules. Such problematic “pockets” of discontinuity are tolerable, without rejection of the otherwise solid structure around them. Readers simply “close their eyes on the holes.”⁴⁸

Applying the Swiss cheese metaphor to historical characters, I prefer to think that their factual-historical status is not cancelled, but only temporarily suspended for the moment of interaction with fictitious existents, events, and places. For instance, when a historical king meets fictional characters, it is evident that their interactions are pure fiction. But if we hear news about that same king issuing edicts, having a baby born, etc., and this information is historically accurate, it is not inconceivable to interpret the king as the generally historical figure—with occasional ontological breaks for fictionalized situations. Once we accept that some storyworld components are historically factual and some fictional or fictionalized, the question of alethic value should not be considered globally (the whole text), but locally.⁴⁹ Historically accurate representations of factual existents, settings, events, etc., can be judged as true or false, while fictive existents cannot.

45 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 36.

46 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 36.

47 Mochocki, *Role-play as a Heritage Practice*, 135.

48 Marie-Laure Ryan, “From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds: On the Worldness of Narrative Representation,” in *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*, ed. Alice Bell and Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press: 2019), 66.

49 See Fludernik and Ryan, “Factual Narrative,” 4.

Four Ontological Dominants of Historical Storyworlds

In this section I assume that the mixed-ontology facto-fictional pact correctly describes the nature of historical fiction. I will now focus on the varying proportions of fact and fiction among historical storyworlds, which I classify under four dominants: history, fabulation, legend, and fantasy.⁵⁰

History-dominated storyworlds are research-based, highly accurate models of the past, strongly relying on historiography. They include what Doležel calls counterfactual history: it

has to submit to certain constraints [which] correspond to, or are derived from, the standard principles of historical-knowledge acquisition: the construction of the fictional counterfactual worlds has to approximate as closely as possible the procedures of historical-worlds construction.⁵¹

Doležel's view of counterfactual history accepts fictionalizations of nonfiction history only in the realm of events and storylines. He vehemently refuses to accept a similar mix of fact and fiction in the realm of characters. I do not subscribe to this view. I would rather go with Ryan's metaphor of Swiss cheese and her interpretation of fictitious characters as add-ons to the otherwise historical repertoire of storyworld components.

Fabulation-dominated storyworlds, exemplified by *The Three Musketeers*, sideline factual history in favour of captivating story and dramatic characters. Those worlds are not created with a rigorous adherence to historical knowledge—they may be based primarily on pop-cultural depictions, not nonfiction sources. Therefore, fabulation-dominated worlds are more prone to errors, simplifications, stereotyping, etc. Moreover, the narrator's focus of attention (and screen time) strongly prioritizes the fictional components. Even if the historically factual components were a hundred per cent accurate, the spotlight would still centre on fictive characters and their adventures. But marginalization does not change the ontological level. Counterfactual content notwithstanding, fabulation-dominated storyworlds represent human characters from factually existing social groups. The entire factual-historical background, i.e., the major timeline of events, geography, technology, economy, etc., is not (or rarely) replaced by invented fictions.

This keeps those worlds close enough to history-dominated ones. To repeat Ryan's ontological rules: natural species; natural laws; technology;

50 Mochocki, *Role-play as a Heritage Practice*, section 4.1.1.

51 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 124.

cosmology; time; space/geography; spatial dimensions; and logic will be identical in fabulation-dominated historical fiction, history-dominated historical fiction, and historical nonfiction.⁵² True, fabulation-dominated fiction may be plagued by historical errors, but this is only a question of degree.

Fantasy-dominated storyworlds use the historical setting only as a backdrop for the adventures of superheroes, supernatural creatures, fictional organizations, etc. Such is the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG, whose stories are about human investigators confronting eldritch monsters. The addition of fantasy typically breaches at least one other ontological rule apart from the usual two (inventory of individuals, and properties of individuals). For instance, the introduction of vampires changes natural laws and natural species. Like fabulation-dominated worlds, fantasy-dominated ones marginalize the historical content, giving the most of screen time to fictitious characters and fantastic content. Admittedly, we can find fantasy-dominated worlds created with a surprisingly high attention to the accuracy of their historical detail, e.g., the third edition (2020) of the *Cthulhu Dark Ages* setting to the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG. Those storyworlds are shaped by two dominants: fantasy and history. Still, the introduction of designed fantasy separates the ontological status of that storyworld from what could be potentially shared with nonfiction historiography and history-dominated fiction.

Legend-dominated storyworlds depict the (mythic) past as it was imagined in legends and myths, for instance, King Arthur's Britain. Given the diversity of the world's mythologies, it is impossible to group them all under one set of ontological parameters. It is, however, typical of myths and legends to introduce new and modified (e.g., intelligent) natural species, a different set of natural laws, different cosmology and space/geography. There is also another difference, not ontological but epistemic: myths and legends walk in where documented history is absent. It is possible to claim that a legend-dominated storyworld is not a historical setting at all: if it is legendary, it cannot be historical. I am not ready to firmly stand by this claim, but I am exploring the possibility.

Ontologically Agnostic Concept of Historical Storyworlds

The supernatural realm brings yet another challenge to the unification of storyworld settings between historical fiction and nonfiction. As Doležel

52 Ryan, "Ontological Rules."

observes, “Every period in literary history has its fantastic and its realistic fiction.”⁵³ This I note about history-dominated and fabulation-dominated storyworlds: they come in scientific and magical variants. It is tempting to assume that only the scientific-rationalist versions are in agreement with nonfiction history. Doležel would say: “In historical worlds events cannot be assigned to divine agency (even if the historian is a believer). Historical worlds are worlds of natural agents.”⁵⁴ Indeed, if we measure the ontological status by such parameters as cosmology, natural laws, and natural species,⁵⁵ then the incompatibility of the two orders seems evident. A magical–historical setting (with an actual presence of supernatural entities and interventions) cannot be the same storyworld as scientific models of that setting. It cannot—or can it?

Let us consider the status of supernatural and rational accounts of our own actual world. It is true that scientific rationalism dominates in nonfiction—but by no means is it the only option. Some time ago the belief in the spiritual world was a part of academic knowledge and nonfiction writings, and so was the belief in witchcraft. Now in the Western rationalist civilization this is no longer mainstream—but supernaturalist nonfiction is not entirely gone. Religious journalism, religious teachings, and academic theology all publish nonfiction that routinely makes truth claims about divine and devilish interventions. Yes, we could reassert the claim that the magical and the scientific ontology cannot be united by the same (story) world ... but in our life-world they are.

I find a way out of this conundrum in the “what if?” approach to fictional transmedia storyworlds, which Mittell discusses on the example of TV shows. The “what is?” strategy develops the storyworld through constant expansion, adding more and more narrative content to the ever-growing lore. This strategy leaves no room for incompatible ontologies or conflicting versions. But the “what if?” strategy “poses hypothetical possibilities rather than canonical certainties, inviting viewers to imagine alternative stories and approaches to storytelling that are distinctly not to be treated as potential canon.”⁵⁶ Fanfiction is another example: it may be a smooth “what is?” extension of the canon, or convention-breaking “what if?” experimentation.

53 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 35.

54 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 35.

55 Ryan, “Ontological Rules.”

56 Jason Mittell, “Strategies of Storytelling on Transmedia Television,” in *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 273.

Both strategies “can best be seen as vectors or tendencies rather than as distinct categories, with fluidity and blur between the dual approaches.”⁵⁷ For historical settings, the official canon would be nonfiction historiography (academic publications, documentaries, school textbooks, etc.), with all narrative media fiction akin to fan creations. As Lähteenmäki states, “History can be depicted as an unbalanced transmedia, in which professional historians provide the parent (or ur-) texts through research, and these are then transferred to other media to form a transmedia depiction of ‘our history.’”⁵⁸ Some of the fan texts do strive for full observance of “canonical authenticity,” which in historical storyworlds means historical accuracy. Some of them care less or not at all, taking the storyworld into “the realm of hypothetical variations and transmutations.”⁵⁹

This opens the way for ontological agnosticism: we do not need to decide “what is” the factual ontology of the storyworld once and for all. Instead, we may be entertained by competing versions: scientific and magical. Magical–historical fictions become “what if?” variants of historical settings known from “what is?” historiography. For instance, Arthur Conan Doyle’s version of England in the 1880s seems to have no place for supernatural elements—not even in his novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), in which the supernatural threat is debunked as fake. Bram Stoker’s England in the 1890s, by contrast, introduces vampires as objectively existing in the ontology of the storyworld. Both are fictions based on actual real-world settings (from our point of view—*historical*), but exemplify different ontological designs: scientific in Doyle, magical in Stoker.

My ontological agnosticism can be compared to Lapointe’s “quasi-existence” of transmedial fictional characters and worlds. Between one narrative work and another, “at any one time, at least a few of their defining characteristics can be subject to significant variation,” but “pivotal changes do not necessarily undermine the character’s fictitious identity.”⁶⁰ Hence, Victorian London has a continuous identity between its supernatural version in *Dracula* and rationalist version in the Holmes stories. God and the devil are real in theologian-written history and not real in secular historiography, but the described historical world is identified as the same. As elements of a transmedially shared historical setting, the entire supernatural system is

57 Mittell, “Strategies of Storytelling,” 274.

58 Lähteenmäki, “Transmedia History,” 18.

59 Mittell, “Strategies of Storytelling,” 247.

60 Julien Lapointe, “He Doesn’t Look Like Sherlock Holmes’: The Truth Value and Existential Status of Fictional Worlds and Their Characters,” in *World Building: Transmedia, Fans, Industries*, ed. Marta Boni (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 71.

“quasi-existent.” To Lapointe, real-world people depicted in works of fiction “approach a quasi-existent status.”⁶¹ The same, I argue, can be postulated in the opposite direction: when religious nonfiction depicts gods, demons, and angels as real-world entities. In either case, they would “occupy a middle-position”⁶² between existence in the real world and existence only within the reference framework of a narrative work.

This conceptualization also solves the problem of storyworld merging between multiple fictional narratives. In the “what is?” optics, uniting all fictions in one historical-period storyworld would imply that all fictitious characters from the hundreds of stories would be simultaneously living there (next to historical ones). The “what if?” thinking avoids this trap. The historical storyworld is not the sum of all fictional narratives set in it; it is a shared generator from which multiple stories arise.

Conclusion

The conceptualization of a historical setting as a facto-fictional transmedia storyworld requires several specific choices in the theorization of the fact/fiction divide and storyworld ontologies. My proposition is this:

1. Historical fiction can be read as a mix of factual and fictional components, with the factual part open to truth/false judgements as in nonfiction.
2. Historical fiction that strives for a degree of historical accuracy, and models its ontology on the actual past known from historiography, shares its storyworld with nonfiction media representing the same historical setting.
3. Legend-dominated and fantasy-dominated historical storyworlds are ontologically too distanced from the actual world of nonfictions to qualify as one shared storyworld.
4. The relation of historical fiction to nonfiction historiography is analogous to fanfiction created on the basis of the canonical lore of transmedia universes.
5. Historiography of a specific period setting builds its storyworld in the “what is?” strategy, transmedially sharing all its existents, events, places, etc. (except for those rejected as fake; not unlike non-canonical in fan debates). Historical fiction—fanfiction included—engages with that storyworld selectively, following the “what if?” model of hypothetical variants and speculations, which do not insert their existents and stories into the nonfiction canon.

61 Lapointe, “He Doesn’t Look,” 72.

62 Lapointe, “He Doesn’t Look,” 71.

6. Historical storyworlds that include supernatural/spiritual entities based on actual period-accurate beliefs may be viewed as ontological “what if?” speculations about “quasi-existent” elements (see 5).

The last case is problematic. Assuming the agnosticist position towards the (f)actual life-world, we may accept religious and secular narratives as subjective interpretations or speculations, still maintaining that they are set in the (f)actual world. On the other hand, once we allow for this degree of ontological “what if?,” it is hard to defend the exclusion of legend and fantasy (see 3). This is one of the questions I still need to answer.

The storyworld is not the whole story. The status of historical settings as transmedia storyworlds can also be validated from the side of audience practices, as I mentioned before. Nonetheless, it is the storyworld that generates fannish devotion in the first place, so it warrants investigation on its own terms. In the introduction, I pointed to two benefits of this effort to fan studies: to expand beyond explicit fandoms, and to study historical storyworlds which do have explicit fan following. I can also think of a third one. The transmedia-narratological toolbox for the analysis of fact/fiction ontology and truth value may also become useful for studies on storyworld lore in non-historical transmedia universes. For instance, to Branch and Phillips, the question “how to represent fictional versions of real things?”⁶³ is one of the challenges for mapping the ontological structure of transmedia worlds. My proposition of “what if?” ontological agnosticism may be a working solution.

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63 Branch and Phillips, “An Ontological Approach,” 389.

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Affect in Fandom provides a timely discussion of the creative practices in fandom and media culture. Within their participatory cultures, fans produce a wealth of content, data, and materials. They write fanfiction, curate wikis, and design costumes. This international collection offers a diverse exploration of contemporary fan practices through different cases, such as *Yuri!!! on ICE*, *Harry Potter*, and *Mass Effect*.

This book reveals how expression, emotion, and agency are central to fan activity. Fans are highly adept at transmedia, as well as the critical use of different media and platforms. Fandom can apply to wider concepts within new media, the humanities, and design, as the authors in this collection show. They also rely on different approaches, ranging from textual analysis to different forms of ethnography. Overall, *Affect in Fandom* offers a deliberately diverse exploration of exactly what contemporary fans create and curate, and how.

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