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Imagining Virtual Community

*Online Media Fandom and the Construction of
Virtual Collectivity*

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Abstract

This thesis uses ethnographic research into online media fandom, focusing on self-reflexive analytical documents that fans call *meta*, to investigate longstanding questions about the nature of virtual community. It argues that virtual documents should be seen as complete and complex interactions *in their original form* and as social contexts in their own right, and presents a new approach to ethnographic methodology and ethics suited to working in this context. Fans have incorporated various technologies into the infrastructure that constitutes their community, and these have had various effects on the structure and substance of fannish documents and interactions – and on the character of the community as a whole. The stability and visibility of the digital archive is an important feature of virtual community – one that makes fandom more visible, accessible, and historically grounded for both old and new members.

This research also deals with conflict, not as a necessarily divisive force but as a natural and important part of how communities evolve and how members negotiate and articulate what their community should be. It discusses fanfiction as a controversial and sometimes problematic genre, and considers trigger warnings as the solution fans have developed to protect vulnerable members of their community from potentially harmful content (such as rape). It also examines conflict with outside authorities, like creators and the administrators who control the virtual spaces that fans inhabit. These conflicts illuminate creativity and feminism as fannish values, presenting fandom as a community that embraces sex-positive female sexuality. More importantly, they suggest that the creation and maintenance of a ‘safe space’ where all members feel respected and comfortable is a key feature of online community. In addition, fannish storytelling (particularly the creation of what fans call *fanon*) is part of the production of local knowledge, of boundary mechanisms that mark and separate members of the community from outsiders. These stories as part of the process by which fans position themselves within the broader community – and in so doing, locate themselves within smaller cohorts of fans who affirm and support aspects of their personal experiences and marginalised identities (e.g. as women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, or people of colour) through the reorientation and appropriation of story.

Declaration

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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Introduction

Fandom is the most personal, most dedicated form of media consumption and production – articulating a sense of who we are and strive to be through our...engagement with the object of fandom... (Sandvoss 2013: 260)

This thesis is about fandom and community; terms that are easy to explain and relate to, yet difficult to establish definite boundaries for. More specifically, it is a work of digital and archival ethnography that engages with media fandom and its longstanding tradition of unprompted reflexive self-analysis to illuminate the everyday experiences of creating, transforming, and participating in virtual community. In order to explain what that means, some definitions are required. *Fandom* is a general term that can apply to enthusiasts of a wide variety of objects, from sports to celebrities to particular varieties of media. These objects are unified by the fact that they tend to have low cultural capital, meaning they are easily dismissed as ‘common’, ‘vulgar’, or ‘worthless’ (see Bourdieu 1984, 1986; Fiske 1992; Grossberg 1992; Jenson 1992; Hills 2002). Thus, it is appropriate to refer to ‘comic book fandom’ or ‘football fandom’, but fans of ‘high’ culture such as opera or literature escape this label. This thesis focuses on fans who identify as part of *media fandom*, a term that traditionally refers to particular genres of television show. It should be noted that the word *fandom*, both in this thesis and among fans, refers to media fandom as a whole and to specific individual fandoms formed around particular media (e.g. *Harry Potter fandom*). In keeping with ethnographic tradition, this thesis follows my informants in redefining media fandom as a category that encompasses multiple genres of literature, cartoons, anime, and comics, as well as television. This shift is due in part to the fact that it is increasingly common for stories to span multiple genres and formats, and for fans to participate in several fandoms at once, drifting between fandoms as their interests shift (FL: ‘media fandom’, ‘multifannish’). This also explains in part why my research is not confined to a single fandom, but is rather concerned with the knowledges, assumptions and practices that transcend fannish boundaries and shape the experience and conception of media fandom as a whole.

Another important distinction is that being a fan *of media* is not the same as being involved *in media fandom*,¹ although the two are points on the same spectrum. Jenkins (1992: 1),

¹ I refer to the former as *casual fans* and the latter simply as *fans*. Other scholars use terms like *follower* to denote fans who do not participate in fandom (Tulloch & Jenkins 1995), and *cult fans* to refer to those who do (Brooker & Brooker 1996, Hills 2002). However, the passive implications of *follower* conflict with my understanding of all audiences as active, engaged entities (see Hall 1980; Fish 1980; Fiske 1987, 1992; Ang 1996; Livingstone 2013), and I reject the religious and obsessive connotations of *cult*. I prefer *casual* for its connotations of leisure and relaxation, and because it implies enthusiasm ‘without formality of style, manner, or procedure’ (*casual*, *adj.* 4), as opposed to the more standardised conventions of fandom.

in a book that became the foundation of fan studies, proposes that media fandom is distinguished by its ‘styles of consumption’ and ‘forms of cultural preference’, which is to say particular genres and practices of reception and consumption. Ordinary fans of media that is, after all, defined as ‘popular’ are often distinguished from fandom in the cultural imagination by an association with deviance. Instead of being characterised as a subgroup of media enthusiasts who prefer works that are considered less artistic or valuable, fans are presented as brainless consumers whose obsession with worthless media precludes their capacity to pursue adult social relationships, achieve material success and, in extreme cases, dangerously inhibits their ability to distinguish fantasy from reality (see Becker 1963; Bourdieu 1984, 1986; Grossberg 1992; Jenson 1992; Hills 2002).

In fact, most fans are relatively ordinary, though their demographics are skewed towards white, educated women who identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community (Fig. 0.1; melannen 2010a, b; Sendlor 2010; OTW 2012; Lulu 2013a, b). Grossberg (1992) suggests they are best defined by their investment in particular practices of consumption and production; an ‘affective sensibility’ by which they bring

LISA JUST SEEMS LIKE A
PERFECTLY NICE,
EDUCATED,
MIDDLE CLASS WOMAN.

meaning(s) to a text that can be used to empower themselves and others. Fiske (1992: 30) adds that although

WHO WRITES
HOMOEROTIC FANFICTION
ABOUT WIZARDS

all popular audiences engage in varying degrees of semiotic productivity, producing meanings and pleasures that pertain to their social situation out of [stories]...fans often turn this semiotic productivity into some form of textual production that can circulate among – and help to define – the fan community

Fig. 0.1: LJ
Icon by archon

Thus, fandom is most accurately defined by the collectively constructed semiotic practices fans use to engage with media, the *fanworks*² they produce, and the economy and structures of valuation that have developed to facilitate the dissemination of the products, practices, and analytical lenses that define fandom (Jenkins 1992, 2008; Baym 2000; Hellekson & Busse 2006; Booth 2010). Like fandom itself, fanworks are often portrayed as illegitimate, both for their expression of feminine sexuality and for their disruptive relationship to extant structures of copyright, intellectual property, and storytelling – despite the fact that fanworks are produced almost exclusively for and by fans, and are

² See Glossary for more detailed definitions of all technical terms and fannish jargon. *Fanworks* is the term for all creative products that fans generate as part of participating in fandom. *Fanfiction* (original, often erotic stories written by fans using borrowed characters or settings) is the most notorious and popular variety of fanwork (OTW 2012); other varieties include *fanart*, *fanvids*, and *filk* (respectively images, short films, and songs that similarly take extant texts as their point of departure), and *meta* texts.

by definition almost always non-profit endeavours with their own discrete systems of capital, reputation, and legitimacy (see Chapters 4 & 5). However, while fans certainly understand that their community is defined by its status as a semi-autonomous and restricted field of cultural production, they usually describe themselves like this:

Fandom is a community. It only exists as a community. It's incredibly hard (I would personally say impossible) to sustain a fandom of one. You need other people. You need to build off other people and grow and talk about things and get excited and share things. That's how fandom works. And like any community, fandom has its own rules and guidelines and etiquette. These things are important because for so many (I'd say all) of us fandom is our safe space. It's a hobby. A thing we do for fun in our spare time
(Tori 2014)

That quote represents a non-fictional variety of fanwork called *meta*, in which fans discuss and interrogate media, present personal accounts of fannish history and analyse the nature and practices of fandom. Meta texts, and the insightful, self-reflexive analysis they represent, inspired this thesis. It fascinated me that meta had developed as an organic and unprompted aspect of fan exchange: fans do not analyse themselves at the behest of outside researchers, but because they are interested in understanding how they work and actively engaging with the social evolution of their community. I was further fascinated by how central the word *community* is to these analyses, and how deliberately fans use the term, as Tori (2014) does, to depict fandom as a social, supportive, collaborative, and safe space, defined in part by awareness of and adherence to certain standards of polite behaviour. Fans have sustained their attachment to the word *community* from the early 1970s (see Southard 1982) up until the present day. This is particularly interesting because fans also demonstrate a detailed and nuanced awareness of the academic literature pertaining to this concept, including the lengthy debates about the meaning of *community* and whether the term remains a useful analytical tool, and whether computer-mediated communication can be 'real' or 'authentic' enough to produce the depth of meaning and emotional connection implied by the word. Thus, fandom asserts its status as a virtual community in full awareness of the significance of this claim.

Thus, this thesis began with a methodological question: What can fandom – particularly the unsolicited, self-reflexive emic analyses represented by fannish meta texts – tell us about the nature and function of virtual community, and of modern community more generally? Therefore, I take a broadly symbolic and social constructionist approach to the topic of how fans conceptualise, articulate, and engage

with their conception of the online fan community, and meta texts are my primary source of data. My theoretical framework and critical literature review in Chapter 1 contextualise the fan experience and assertion of community within previous attempts to grapple with the concepts of virtual and fannish community, including the considerable body of scholarly criticism. It sets out the constructionist framework of this thesis, arguing that the debate about whether fandom or virtual groups are communities is immaterial: what matters is their lived experience and consistent claim that they are a community, and the ways that their meta accounts can be used to further the academic conversation about the shifting nature of community.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the methodology, and begins by explaining my decision to use an ethnographic approach to investigate how online fandom conceptualises and constructs itself as a community, and by positioning myself as a researcher, examining the impact that my identity and experiences had on conducting and framing this research. Because meta documents are my most significant source of data, I establish my primary methods as document analysis, participant observation, and email interviews, and my 'field site' as the fan-maintained websites, wikis, and blogs (particularly LiveJournal, Dreamwidth, and Tumblr) that host such texts. I draw on the literature pertaining to archival ethnography, qualitative virtual methods, and traditional participant observation to discuss the philosophical and practical implications of conducting online ethnography. Notably, I understand virtual documents not as entextualised fragments of exchange, but as social contexts and interactions that constitute and reflect valid and emotionally freighted identities and relationships. I conclude by drawing on academic guidelines and fan texts to construct a framework for the ethical use of virtual documents as well as a process for using semi-structured email interviews in an ongoing negotiation of informed consent, which can also help researchers access the documents' elusive 'context of use' (Mackay 2005).

Chapter 3 considers the technological dimensions of online fandom; specifically, how technologies can influence the format and content of the interactions they mediate and facilitate, and how this can affect the character of the community constituted by and within these exchanges. It begins by examining historic fan technologies (fanzines, Usenet newsgroups, and online message boards), which frames the discussion of modern technologies, particularly the blogging platforms LiveJournal and Tumblr;

how these technologies were adapted to fannish use, and how their technical mechanics not only affected how fans participated in fandom and interacted with each other but also how they understood these relationships, exchanges, and the textual records and online spaces they produced. This chapter furthers the argument that virtual documents are not merely records or byproducts of deeper social interactions, but are the actual interactions themselves *and* the social context in which they occur. Chapter 3 presents fandom as a community founded not only on a shared enthusiasm for the same media, but on a deep hunger to *discuss* that media, to interact with others who ‘feel and think as we do’ (Maffesoli 1996: 13), and to use that as a foundation for their relationships, collective identity, and sense of belonging.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss conflict as an integral and ordinary aspect of community experience; a force that can be constructive as well as divisive, helping communities to establish boundaries, build a sense of belonging and solidarity, and assist in the natural processes of social change. Chapter 4 deals with internal conflict between fans, and uses the discussion of trigger warnings and controversial fanfiction to explore how fans understand and negotiate the question of whether and how they are responsible to each other, and the notion of fandom as a safe space. Chapter 5 is about conflict between fans and external forces; it examines attempts by authors and blog administrators to police fannish content and behaviour, and to assert their ownership of creative texts and online spaces.

Chapter 6 is about how storytelling can be part of constructing, affirming, or altering the character and boundaries of collective fannish identity, and the position of individual fans to each other and the community as a whole. It begins with a discussion of fanfiction as a collective, intertextual process of rewriting stories by engaging with, embellishing and reorienting the original story (*canon*) and the body of fanworks that came before it. Over the course of decades, fannish storytelling has collaboratively produced a set of genres, tropes, and expectations about the content and style of fanworks. Individual fandoms likewise create a body of shared assumptions (*fanons*) relevant to their story. Both sets of these collective knowledges serve as boundary mechanisms that mark newcomers and outsiders as uninitiated, and which further allow individual fans to position themselves *within* a fandom among people who share their experiences and priorities. These supportive identity- and interest-based

networks can become the main point of contact for individual fans, the interface that mediates their interaction with other fans and the concept of fandom, which perhaps accounts for the growing perception of fandom as a community.

As a whole, this thesis challenges presumptions about the nature of virtual space and virtual interaction, and their capacity to foster emotional intimacy and communal feeling. It presents analyses and observations that suggest new possibilities for human interaction in the modern world, and about the character and potential of virtual community.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework — Fandom & Community

On May 3rd 2010, Diana Gabaldon, author of the *Outlander* series of novels, made a blog post on her official website expressing opposition to and distaste for the practice of writing fanfiction (*fanfic* or *fic* for short); that is, original stories written by fans using borrowed characters or settings. Gabaldon (2010a) described *fic* as ‘immoral’ and ‘skin-crawling’, equated it with Internet piracy, and likened it to attempts to seduce her husband or verbally violate her children. Within hours, her post had collected several pages of comments supporting and opposing her views. Some of these were left by regular participants in *Outlander* fandom, others by fans of the books who did not usually engage with fandom as a collective institution. However, many comments were made by people from other fandoms who had never read an *Outlander* book, but had heard about Gabaldon’s remarks from friends or through various fan-related networks. This controversy occupied the fan-related corners of the Internet for the next week. Gabaldon herself made three more posts about fandom and fanfiction, and several other authors felt prompted to clarify the positions on *fic* stated on their websites, or to officially express solidarity or disagreement with Gabaldon. Meanwhile, fans proclaimed their opinions using every virtual soap box available, including Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and myriad blog platforms, newsgroups, message boards, and email mass mailing lists (see Glossary). Most of the fan response consisted of replies to the specific accusations Gabaldon had levied: they discussed the legality of fan fiction, defended it as a historical literary form or as a harmless hobby, and debated the nature of intellectual property and the morality of Internet pornography.

Such exchanges are so common in fandom that there is a word for them: *meta*. Aside from the fact that in fan parlance this can be an adjective, verb or noun, fan and academic use of this term largely coincide: *meta* denotes discussions about the nature and implications of a given text, conversation, or process. Among fans, ‘meta...is usually used to describe the analysis of a show, its characters, or Fandom itself. Very often, people create meta that is almost academic in nature, citing multiple resources and defending their point of view’ (Teenwolffmeta 2014). The former variety of meta, which deals with texts or characters, is largely indistinguishable from traditional literary analysis, as it frequently involves analysing media texts using academic lenses like gender, sexuality or ethnicity (neomenclature 2013). Apriki (2014) explains,

Meta is the idea of taking something...and looking at the meaning and purpose behind it through the study of its plot, context, characterization – all the elements that make up a whole... Meta can focus on a particular value, moral, or issue being expressed in a text, or just look at a text and its significance overall.

The second category of meta mentioned above deals with fan analyses *of fandom* – their practices, assumptions, behaviours, and the implications these are seen to have for fans as individuals and audience members, for fandom and society as a whole, and for the bodies that produce media. These exchanges closely resemble sociological or methodological analysis, and often borrow academic concepts that fans find useful for explaining or shaping their thoughts; for example, meta texts frequently use the word *reflexivity* (see thelastgoodname 2005a, Wong 2013, Apriki 2014). Similarly, Romano (in Nepveu 2010) draws on Bourdieu's (1986) theories of cultural capital in her analysis of fandom's relationship with media texts, while many others (Angua 2006, Collective Blog 2014, Meejaleibling 2014, theafictionado 2014) use theories about the Death of the Author or readerly agency (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946; Barthes 1975, 1977) to frame or justify the production of fanworks. Analytical meta can also be understood in terms of *articulation*, as 'any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 105). Thus, meta discourse and the practices of articulation it represents are both constitutive of fandom and integral to participation in it.

The controversy surrounding Gabaldon's posts incited articulatory meta: fans engaged with an author about the nature of fandom and attempted morally and practically to justify their existence and activities. However, there was a theme underlying the arguments advanced that did not fit with the direct rebuttals of Gabaldon's position: this is the idea of a fan community. This is particularly notable because it is not an isolated occurrence, but rather indicative of a trend. Conversations about the nature of the fan community are an established part of meta discourse, and the theme frequently turns up in discussions where it might seem irrelevant or incongruous to outsiders. As the Gabaldon controversy illustrates, these arguments function on one of two analytical levels. The most basic ones simply emphasise the collective nature of fan production: they explain that their fellow fans enrich their lives and contribute to fandom as a whole. They told Gabaldon about fans who translated fics into other languages, artists who illustrated their fics or inspired new ones, and beta readers (the fan term for editors,

though the social practices surrounding betas are incredibly complex; Karpovich 2006) who worked to improve their writing. They describe how fandom acquaintances became friends and spouses and business partners, supported them through endeavours in both fandom and the real world, became sources of emotional strength and intellectual challenge in ways their ‘real’ lives did not always provide. The more complicated arguments, however, take the next intellectual step into true reflexive analysis. They claim these social connections represent something larger than just friendship and support: they are a cohesive network of interactions, with established patterns and procedures, and tacit but definite behavioural standards – in other words, a community. One of Gabaldon’s interlocutors, for example, used Bourdieu (1986) to argue that fandom is a network which operates on a system of cultural rather than monetary capital to collectively apply literary theory to a common story, thereby enhancing the value of the original creative property by creating an audience that is emotionally and creatively invested in the work and in each other (Romano in Nepveu 2010).

Perhaps as a result of this investment and the tradition of articulatory meta discourse dating to at least the mid-1980s (see Green, Jenkins & Jenkins 1998), fans have called themselves ‘the fan community’ since the early 1970s, shortly after fandom began to develop into its current form. This continues in the modern era, where descriptions or defences of fandom or fanfiction frequently read like Schaffner’s article for *Horn Book Magazine* (2009: 614):

Community and friendship come naturally in fandom, because the fan world is both free and reciprocal. It is ingrained with practices of sharing and responding, of reviewing what you read, of giving fanfics as gifts, making reading recommendations to friends (and recommendations, not automated searches, are the final word in finding good stuff), and ‘beta reading’ friends’ stories before they’re posted. Although, as with any community, fighting can occur, fandom at its best allows every member to add to the collective enthusiasm, analysis, and creativity

Kass (2012), in a popular blog entry (see FL: ‘Kass’), describes participation in fandom as an affirmation of her self:

[It says] that I love my friends and my community and our shared pastimes. It says that I derive tremendous joy and pleasure from hanging out with y’all (online and in person), from the stories and vids I make for you and the stories and vids you make for me. It says that I know my own needs are important... That I aspire to keep myself connected with people I love and with the activities we share. It says that I know my pleasure and my joy matter, even though my world is filled with subtle and pervasive messages which argue otherwise.

That’s the biggest gift fandom has given me. A deeper and more nuanced understanding of the stories, the tropes, the characters, the visuals, the ideas which

bring me joy...and a community of others with whom to share said stories...and the joy which arises out of them...

Fandom is, at its best, a kind of perpetual motion joy machine.

Not only is the word *community* a recurrent part of these assertions, fans often place it at the centre of their conception of fandom. Even those increasingly rare fans who do not consider fandom a community must engage with the term in order to argue against the group's prevailing understanding of the concept as inclusive of them (see tea-and-liminality 2015, Wanenchak 2014, carolyn-claire 2011, vee_fic 2006). Further, even most dissenters concede that fandom is characterised by activities that endow it with some measure of cohesion and collective identity; carolyn-claire (2011), for example, acknowledges that most fans believe fandom is a community and are motivated by a desire to belong to it. Regardless, arguments about the nature of fandom – including debate about whether or not it can be considered a community – are a consistent and pervasive feature of fan meta conversations, and meta texts comprise a significant proportion of the exchanges that constitute fandom. It is also important to note that since the 1980s these exchanges have included the work of aca-fans³, and these scholars carried the term *community* into the academic discourse surrounding fandom. Fans have, in turn, used academic studies to guide and shape their exchanges and self-reflexive analyses.

Thus, not only have fans asserted and debated their status as a community for decades, they are also among the earliest groups to self-identify as a *virtual* community (Baym 2000). Fans have continually used articulatory practices to define and re-define what it means to be a part of their community and also what it means to be part of a modern or virtual community – all topics of intense academic disagreement, as discussed below. Fan perspectives on their community, and the practices by which they articulate it, are consistent with recent theories that consider *all* modern identities, individual and collective, to be the result of such social or internal negotiations (Mead 1934, 1987; Cooley 1956; Goffman 1959; Tajfel 1981, 1982; Cohen 1982, 1985, 1986; Giddens 1991; Hall 1992, 1997; Wiley 1994; Maffesoli 1996; Holstein & Gubrium 2000; King 2000; Ashton, Deaux & McLaughlin-Volpe 2004; Brewer & Hewstone 2004; Brown & Capozza 2006; Taylor & Spencer 2004; Jenkins 2008). However, most communities

³*Aca-fan*: From *academic* and *fan*. Scholars who identify as both use the term to acknowledge the complex and sometimes problematic effect that dual identity can have on their participation in both spheres. It has been criticised in recent years (Stein et al. 2011), but remains relevant to understanding early fan scholarship.

do not reflexively and obsessively self-analyse this creative process in the way that fans do, nor do most construct such an exhaustive and contextualised record of their constitutive and articulatory process in the way that online fan meta discourse does.

One purpose of this thesis is to use this extensive record, and the unique self-reflection it embodies, to further analysis and understanding of the shape and function of virtual community in the modern world, and of the processes by which people negotiate their participation in and understanding of the idea of community. I do not proceed from the presumption that fandom is the community that so many fans claim, nor was it my intention to merely reflect or duplicate their perceptions of themselves as reflected in meta texts. Rather, I believed that fans have reasons for making these assertions, and that there is something of value to be gained from studying the form and content of those claims as well as the everyday activities that go into making them. Following Strathern's work on auto-anthropology (1987), these meta texts and constitutive conversations can contribute to the production of academic knowledge, and can be helpfully studied in relation to more traditional academic definitions of *community*, which can provide some of the focus, structure, and outside perspective they lack. To that end, this chapter begins with an overview of the academic debate regarding the validity and usefulness of community as an analytical tool, particularly in Internet studies. The middle section examines previous attempts to engage with the idea of fandom as a community as well as alternate approaches to understanding fan collectivity from a subcultural perspective. The final part draws on theories of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism to establish a framework for analysing online fandom through the lens of virtual community.

The Idea of Community

'Community' called up an imagined past in which horizons were local, the meaning of life was relatively consensual, co-operation prevailed, and everyone knew everyone else and 'knew their place'

(Jenkins 2008: 133)

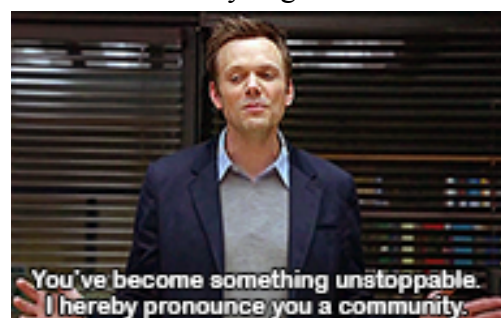


Fig. 1.1: Screenshot from *Community* (Harmon & Aust 2010)

There are several persuasive arguments against using community in academic discourse at all. To begin with, it is difficult to define; social scientists were using over 90 different definitions of the term in the 1950s (Hamilton 1985: 7; Plant 1974), with commentators proposing that this gave an imprecise

character to any debate using the word, rendering it useless as an analytical tool (Amit & Rapport 2002: 13; Fernback 1997: 35, 2007). It has also been suggested that ‘warmly persuasive’ terms like *community* (Williams 1983: 76; Bauman 2001) persist in use not because they remain relevant but because ‘they evoke a thick assortment of meanings, presumptions and images...which [ensure] that the invocation of *community* is likely to have far more emotional resonance than a more utilitarian term like *group*’ (Amit & Rapport 2002: 13). The effect is to imply imagined literal and emotional connections that actually do not exist, to assume a unified outlook where none is present, and to ascribe collective motivations or characteristics to whole groups that are only relevant to smaller subsets of the population (Hamilton 1985; Amit & Rapport 2002; Shumar & Renninger 2002; Watts 2006). There are some fans who share these reservations, or feel they are specifically applicable to fandom. Carolyn-claire (2011) argues that fandom is ‘both too broad and too specific to be considered one single community, or a community at all, really’ (see also vee_fic 2006). Aca-fan Catherine Driscoll (2006: 93) writes ‘There is no homogenous fan fiction community, and it is difficult to discern through the variety of groups, let alone the flames, kerfuffles, and wanks [varieties of conflict], anything like the coherence of an “interpretive community”.’ Other fans fear that a homogenising term like *community* will obscure the diversity and specificity of fandom, or erase conflict and disagreement by over-emphasising the positive and cohesive aspects of fandom (Wanenchak 2014, tea-and-liminality 2015).

However, most fans intentionally embrace the term and comprehend its academic nuances. It can be sociologically important to consider the terms preferred by members of a group, and the semiotic or situational meanings and uses of a word can be more important to sociological understanding than its lexical definition (Wittgenstein 1953, Whorf 1956, Geertz 1973, Habermas 1979, Kristeva 1980, Atkinson 1990, Hill & Mannheim 1992). Cohen’s (1985) definition of community addresses many of the deficiencies of *community* as an analytical tool by drawing on that ethnomethodological argument, and on theories of symbolic interactionism which hold that people construct particular meanings and uses of words through social negotiation within a group (Perinbanayagam 1985; Plummer 1991, 2000; Denzin 1992; Herman & Reynolds 1994; Atkinson & Housley 2003; Carter & Fuller 2015), to argue that each community

produces its own unique meanings and associations with the term (Cohen 1985, 1982, 1986). Not only does this model help explain the myriad definitions, because each community's 'actual social experience is always included in the category system which therefore becomes marked by irregularities of meaning and particular semantic densities' (Hastrup 1995: 152) and can therefore only articulate itself, it transforms them into a strength. They became a way of writing 'against' culture by acknowledging and investigating the particular, rather than searching for homogenous generalisations (Abu-Lughod 1991); locating all of those definitions within a symbolic paradigm allows the analysis of meaning, use, local context, and relationship between similar symbolic systems without the need for a core definition (Hamilton 1985: 9; Cohen 1985; Geertz 1973). Cohen also establishes 'warmth' and 'resonance' as valid aspects of investigating community, since associations and emotional connotations are an important part of how certain communities use and understand the concept.

In other words, if a group expresses, in words or behaviour, a social dynamic indicative of the emotional resonance and presumptions associated with community, this suggests the word *group* is insufficient to depict the reality of their experience. It is also important to recognise that, despite decades of criticism, the term still persists in use among both academics and laypersons. Fandom itself, with its peculiar conglomeration of professionals and amateurs who are proficient with the academic literature, provides a microcosm of this attachment: when such a group lays claim to a word like *community*, this means something. Their meaning might not be consistent with academic definitions, but it is still highly relevant to how people now, in this context, understand the concept. Consequently, I conceptualise community as a material and symbolic system, created by and for a particular group, with a character particular to the community that constructed it and in the context in which it operates. Although every community must be studied and understood on its own terms, this does not mean that each particular definition and process of construction cannot further general academic understanding.

The idea of virtual community – the notion that community can exist online, beyond face-to-face interaction, or that the Internet might engender new varieties and manifestations of community – is, if possible, even more contested than the original concept (Kozinets 2010: 7-8). This debate extends back to the classic sociological

assertion that modernity ‘atomised’ individuals by moving them from the support and intimacy of the small town and large family – what Tönnies (1957) called *gemeinschaft* (tr. *community*) – to the relative loneliness and isolation of the big city and nuclear family, or *gesellschaft* (tr. *society, association*; Shumar & Renninger 2002). Where community offered support, protection, and traditional bonds of family, religion, and ethnicity, it has been proposed that modern people have only isolation and uncertainty (Hamilton 2001: 7-16). Furthermore, *gemeinschaft* is seen as ‘a social contract embedded in place and made durable by face-to-face [interaction]’ (Bell 2001: 95), which raises questions about how ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ online interaction can be, including whether it is possible for community (or even meaningful relationships) to develop online, or whether the parameters of technological mediation preclude or inhibit this (Putnam 2000, Hayles 2001, Ronell 2001, Barwell & Bowles 2002, Willson 2002, Norris 2004). In this context, *gemeinschaft* ‘comes to represent...something lost [and] impossible...the implicit yardstick against which all versions of sociality and human interactions are judged’ (Studdert 2005: 29).

However, early proponents of virtual community took a more optimistic view. For example, Rheingold (1994) and Negroponte (1995) advanced a theory of the Internet as a free and boundless medium that would merge disparate technologies and activities to bring humanity together into something like McLuhan’s (1962, 1964) ‘global village’: a conglomeration of disparate yet connected communities organised around shared interests (e.g. fandom), identities (religion, ethnicity), or functions (information access, democratic participation). Rheingold (1994: 6) especially saw community as the ‘inevitable’ result of Internet technologies, and the task of Internet research as demonstrating that computer-mediated interactions could create ties as deep and meaningful as the traditional bonds of *gemeinschaft*, or at least *gesellschaft*. However, Bell (2001: 92) observes, the idea of virtual community was controversial ‘because it has at its heart an argument about the relationship between online life and offline “real life”...[and] because it involves making arguments about the status of [real life] communities as well as online communities’.

Much early Internet research tried simultaneously to theorise about virtual community in relation to a reality that was not yet as complex as it would become and to set boundaries for the concept that could withstand critical scrutiny. Studies from that era

defend their subject and stake out a legitimate place for their research: they champion the authenticity of computer-mediated social connections, debate how to define and measure community; they explore whether virtual communities are ‘imagined’ or ‘real’, whether they occur organically or are consciously constructed, and where the boundaries between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ communities exist in people’s lives, and they critique the perceived artificial accentuation of those boundaries (see Rheingold 1994; Baym 1998, 2000; Jones 1998; Smith & Kollock 1999; Wellman & Giulia 1999; Zizek 2001; Robins 2002, Watt, Lea, & Spears 2002; Nettleton et al. 2002; Wittel, Lury, & Lash 2002; Norris 2004). Defining virtual community and defending its existence were primary concerns during this period, but as Jones observed, ‘scholars [were] still too focused on ourselves [and the academic framework of our debate] and insufficiently attentive to the ways in which others [members of virtual communities] value and define community’ (Jones 2002: 372). What they needed was to ‘examine what types of interaction and associations make for a community’ (Haythornwaite 2002: 160).

Instead, virtual community research often tends to focus on the interrelation of new technologies and familiar real world communities or activities (e.g. Miller & Slater 2000, Sanders 2005, Zheng 2007, Dixon & Panteli 2010, Hartzband & Groopman 2010), how the Internet affects society as a whole (Bakardjieva 2005, Rainie & Wellman 2012), or technology use among subgroups of particular interest, like adolescents (Lenhart & Madden 2007, Thomas 2007, Gasser et al. 2012, boyd 2014, Kim & Amna 2015). Alternatively, Internet research emphasises specific themes or contexts pertaining to virtual groups; for example, focusing on the use of a particular website, application or technology (Bortree 2005, Bean 2010, Ammann 2011, Garton & Wellman 2012); the effect of technological mediation on language practices (Danet & Herring 2007, Baron 2008, Thurlow & Poff 2011, Herring 2013) or conceptions of friendship (Mesch & Talmud 2007, Buote, Wood & Pratt 2009; Zioviiev & Duong 2009; Baym 2010; Gaudeal & Gianetti 2013; boyd 2014); themes such as privacy (Acquisti & Gross 2006; boyd 2008; Fogel & Nehmad 2009, Taddei & Contena 2013); the virtual presentation and performance of identity and characteristics like gender, race or sexuality (Haraway 1997; Wilbur 2002; Woodland 2002; Bortree 2005, Busse 2006b, Nowson & Oberlander 2006; Lampe, Ellison & Steinfeld 2007; Thomas 2007; Bean 2010; de Koster 2010; Turkle 2011; Kapidzic & Herring 2014, 2015). There

were also some holistic studies of virtual community that considered various aspects of online communication, including qualitative examination of interaction and the processes of association (e.g. Baym 2000, Boellstorff 2008), but these are seen as a small minority (Hine 2000: 26, 2005; Feenberg & Bakardjieva 2004; Beneito-Montagut 2011; Ellison & boyd 2013: 163).

However, recent research has largely shifted to a network theory approach (Kendall 2011). Community remains a prominent idea, but the focus has become conceptualising individuals at the centre of a web of social relations, being part of many communities both online and off, with each meeting different social, emotional and material needs (Bakardjieva 2005, van Dijk 2012, Rainie & Wellman 2012, boyd 2014). However, this approach is also susceptible to the pitfalls Jones (2002) and Haythornwaite (2002) discussed, because it encourages conceptualising communities in terms of their effect on individuals, rather than how they operate as a social network. For example, Rodgers and Chen's study (2006) of a cancer support board describes itself as an analysis of 'Internet Community Group Participation', but is actually more concerned with the positive benefits of the board on participants' lives and well-being than the shape or function of that community. While this approach is entirely valid and valuable, it is not a study of virtual community; Fernback (2007: 66) observes, 'If scholars continue to paint Internet studies with the broad brush of community, they dilute the potential of the research to understand how online communities are constituted, how they operate, how they are integrated into offline social life, or what they provide'. Some scholars separate the two concepts, examining the construction and internal social dynamics of online groups but without calling them communities (e.g. Hine 2002). This is important because it enables scholars to study the social dimensions of online groups or sites of computer-mediated interaction that do not meet any definition of *community* without subjecting them to that label or set of expectations. Many online fans *do* consider themselves part of a community, however, which presented me with a choice: accept the paradigm chosen by my informants (or at least consider its implications) or abandon it for network theory, with fandom suited to addressing some of the problems of studying virtual community in both approaches. However, before discussing methodological aspects of my approach, it is important to discuss in more detail the ways that community has been used in fan studies.

Fandom & Community

Modern media fandom originated in the 1960s. Its roots are in science fiction and fantasy fandom, and the letters column of Hugo Gernsback's pulp fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, first published in 1926. Gernsback's readers were not the first media enthusiasts, of course, nor even the first to be called *fans* or to exhibit traits that would come to characterise fandom (see below). However, the *Amazing* column is treated as unprecedented in a key respect:

Those who wanted to be more than readers couldn't do much while books remained the main delivery vehicle for science fiction. It's hard to interact with a book...but the large letter column, copied by most of *Amazing's* competitors, gave readers plenty of space to talk to the editor, and ultimately, to each other (Katz n.d.: 3.2)



Fig. 1.2: First issue of *Amazing Stories* (Gernsback & Paul 1926)

Gernsback's readers conversed with each other in private letters as well as publicly through the printed columns. They discussed authors and stories, critiqued their scientific plausibility and literary merit, lobbied for favourite writers, and engaged in philosophical debates relevant to the stories or to contemporary scientific advances (Coppa 2006, Katz n.d.). This ability to engage was so important to fandom that when fans began producing magazines⁴ of their own, the earliest genres of fanzine included *letterzines* and *amateur press association zines* which, as extensions of the pulp magazine letters pages, were whole publications dedicated to fan meta analysis and debate (Coppa 2006, Wertham 1973). Zines were a key site of fan interaction for decades; although face-to-face interactions like conventions⁵ and mentor-novice relationships were integral to fandom, these were by nature occasional events. By contrast, zines were continuous mechanisms for dialogue and distribution of fan materials, as well as being more logistically and monetarily feasible. Although zines have now been largely superseded by Internet texts, they had a profound influence on the development of online fandom (Bacon-Smith 1992, Jenkins 1992, Verba 1996, Marr 1999, Stoneman 2001, Coppa 2006), particularly on the style and format of fan conversation, and the character of fandom as a whole. As this

⁴ *Fanzines* (*zines*): Amateur magazines published by fans for fan consumption; usually had multiple contributors and were commonly produced and edited in groups (Bacon-Smith 1992). Depending on their genre, zines contained original stories and fanfiction, pictures, articles, and discussions relevant to specific media texts.

⁵ *Conventions*, physical gatherings of fans for weekends of media-themed activity, were invented in the 1930s.

indicates, discursive meta texts, with an emphasis on communication and critique, have always been integral to how fans conceptualise and participate in their community.

Fan studies, however, has a less positive origin. The word *fan*, derived from *fanatic*, was coined in the nineteenth century to denigrate the interests and styles of enjoyment of certain people and groups by calling them ‘frantic, furious...Characterised... by excessive and mistaken enthusiasm’ (‘fanatic’, *n.1*, 2’; Auster 1989, Jenkins 1992, Hills 2002). Representations of fandom in popular culture, news media, and academic literature are haunted by ‘images of deviance’ or ‘characterisations of pathology’ (Jenson 1992). Perhaps the most famous fans in recent history are John Hinckley, who tried to assassinate President Reagan to gain the attention of



Fig. 1.4: Poster for a horror film (Bianchi 1981) about a fan who kidnaps a Broadway actress and threatens to murder her unless she acknowledges the personal bond he believes they share. **Image Source:** The Fan (1981)

actress Jodie Foster, and Mark David Chapman, the *Catcher in the Rye* fan who shot and killed John Lennon (Jenson 1992: 11; Jenkins 1992: 12-15; Hills 2002). Even moderate stereotypes depict fans as brainless consumers, usually men,⁶ who devote their lives and money to collecting worthless information and products, or as



Fig. 1.3: Comic Book Guy ‘is based on every comic-bookstore guy in America’ (Groening 2000) and epitomises this stereotype. **Image Source:** Simpsons wiki: ‘CBG’

maladjusted adults who never outgrew childhood obsessions, have trouble separating fantasy from reality, live in their parents’ basements, and have never kissed a girl (Jenkins 1992: 10; Jenson 1992; Lewis 1992). Early fan studies were based on this image of fans as dysfunctional, potentially dangerous and, most importantly, unsociable to the point of pathology (Adorno 1938, Burchill 1986, Jenson 1992, Caughey 1978, Horton & Wohl 1982, Axthelm 1989).

⁶ The popular imagination has traditionally ignored female fans, except to acknowledge (or invent) mobs of hysterical women fighting about male ‘sex symbols’, both performers and characters (Burchill 1986, Auster 1989, Jenson 1992); for example, conflict between *Twilight*’s Teams Edward and Jacob. Modern stereotypes are starting to acknowledge that the majority of cosplayers (fans who dress up as characters in complex, well-researched, and often handmade or expensive costumes) are women, and that female fans are the primary produces of fanfiction and its attendant practices.

The 1980s brought what Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007) term the ‘first wave’ of fandom studies: a generation of scholars who were fans themselves offered a dissenting perspective, placing community at the heart of their argument (see also Hills & Jenkins 2006, Booth 2010: 36). They redefined fandom as ‘more than the mere act of being a fan of something: it was a collective strategy, a communal effort to form interpretive communities that in their subcultural cohesion evaded the preferred and intended meanings of the “power bloc” (Fiske 1989) represented by popular media’ and the common, deviant stereotypes of fans (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 2007: 2). First wave scholars refuted the assumption that fandom beguiles dysfunctional recluses by providing ‘artificial social relations’ (Caughey 1978, Horton & Wohl 1982) with accounts of the relationships and social empowerment that fan interaction can entail (e.g. D’Acci 1988, Bacon-Smith 1992). Fandom already identified as a community, which made it natural for aca-fans to adopt a term that was familiar to them in both fan and academic pursuits. The second wave of fandom studies also emphasised the communal nature of fandom, though it ‘highlighted the replication of social and cultural hierarchies within fan- and subcultures...as a reflection and further manifestation of social, cultural, and economic capital’ (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 2007: 6). Or, as Booth (2013: 125) puts it, ‘fandom moved from an analysis of an individual’s consumption to the larger issues of the fan community’s social dynamics’.

Thus, community is a key aspect most significant early fan research, with some works entirely devoted to the idea (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 2007; Booth 2013; see Busse 2006 for a bibliography). Their dual status as fans and academics put aca-fans in a similar position to that of feminist scholars or researchers who share their informants’ ethnic or cultural heritage: they were responsible to multiple academic disciplines and theoretical approaches ‘whose relationship to their subject matter is at odds and who hold [scholars] accountable in different ways’ as well as to educated members of their own community and, as fans themselves, ‘when they present the Other they are presenting themselves, they speak with a complex awareness of and investment in reception’ (Abu-Lughod 1991: 469; Strathern 1987). This investment and accountability informed their opposition to the then-accepted theories about fans, but it also made many aca-fans feel it was necessary to defend their professionalism and the validity of their subject and works, as well as their capacity to think objectively

about fandom at all, which hampered their ability to make any greater claims about it (Hills & Jenkins 2006: 12); again, like feminist scholars (Abu-Lughod 1991: 475).

Consequently, early attempts to define and use the idea of ‘fan community’ come across as simultaneously timid and revolutionary. It is significant that Henry Jenkins presented the primary task of his book, *Textual Poachers*, which became the cornerstone of fan studies, as being to ‘make a case for fandom as having any degree of coherence and stability *at all*’ and described fandom as ‘a social group struggling to define its own culture and to construct its own community’ (Jenkins 1992: 2-3; emphasis mine). He persistently calls fandom a ‘community’ throughout the book, but his case is founded on the assertion that fandom is recognisable by its ‘styles of consumption’ and ‘forms of cultural preference’ (Jenkins 1992: 1). This approach is common in fan studies, partly due to the influence of *Textual Poachers*, but primarily because fandom *is* largely distinguishable from other audiences by differences in how fans engage with and appropriate media, by the effect these practices have on how they ascribe value and meaning to a product, and by the systems of interaction, exchange, and behaviour they have established for facilitating these activities. Consequently, it is unsurprising that Nancy Baym (2000) built what is perhaps the most coherent and widely accepted model for defining fandom as a community around *praxis* theory. Her approach is similar to Jenkins’s (1992), except that she actively articulates a framework for arguing that fan practices combine to create something greater than the sum of their parts, rather than asserting that those practices *are* a coherent collective entity. Baym (2000) draws on Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and his adherents (especially Hanks 1996), and her own work with soap opera fans on Usenet, to argue that fandom is a community of practice based on ‘the assumption that a community’s structures are instantiated and recreated in habitual and recurrent ways of acting or *practices*’ (Baym 2000: 22). Friere’s (1970: 33) definition of *praxis* as ‘a reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it’ is a useful reminder here, as it allows for both the contemplative practices of fandom and the active ones, and explicitly focuses on the capacity for both to shape reality.

Not all fan scholars use the term *community*; indeed, the third wave of fandom studies is more individual, being concerned with ‘the investigation of fandom as part of the fabric of our everyday lives, third wave work aims to capture fundamental insights into modern life’ (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 2007: 9; see Hills 2000, 2002; Sandvoss

2005; Pearson 2007; Bennett & Booth 2016; Williams 2016). There are distinct parallels to be drawn with modern Internet studies' effort to eschew the 'fuzzy' concept of community in favour of a network model, with individuals' relationships, practices, and experiences as the central focus of the effort to gain insight into modern life.

However, community remains a central theme even in modern fandom studies, and most academics who engage with it follow Baym and Jenkins in adopting a *praxis* approach. This is because, as noted above, practice is primarily what defines and identifies fandom, though, of course, each particular fandom is defined by its own set of identifying practices, priorities, and idiosyncrasies (see Hellekson & Busse 2006; Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington 2007; Bennett 2014; Booth 2010). Some fan scholars, including Jenkins (2006, 2008; also Nellis 2002, Hellekson & Busse 2006, Driscoll 2006), elaborate on the *praxis* foundation using the concepts of imagined community, discourse community or interpretive community (see Anderson 1986; Borg 2003, Swales 2011; Fish 1980), but these are largely extensions rather than departures from the concept. For example, the interpretive community paradigm implies the existence of a group of readers who share particular interpretive strategies and conceptions of a text – that is to say a community, like fandom, built on shared practices of media consumption and reception – but the term *interpretive community* actually refers not to a collection of people and social relationships but to the set of interpretive strategies (Fish 1980; c.f. Stein & Busse 2009).

However, shared practices, interpretations and styles of consumption and preference do not add up to the social and emotional sense of community that is articulated by many fans – but they do fit within theories of subculture. This is deliberate; Jenkins relied heavily on the theoretical models presented in Hebdige's (1979) and Hall and Jefferson's (1975) influential study of subculture and deviance to make his case (Jenkins 1992: 35-43). This research is based on the classic definition of *culture* as 'the ways in which...particular activities [combine] into a way of thinking and living' which '[express] certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour' (Williams 1965: 63, 57), and also on Becker's (1963) proposition that deviance is not an *a priori* corruption, but rather a social construct used to label particular persons and behaviours as 'offenders' against the status quo. Hall and Jefferson's *Resistance Through Rituals* (1975) dovetails with *praxis* theory in that it focuses on the role that action plays in creating these alternative

meanings, spaces, and power relations (Hall 1997). From there, Hebdige (1979) presents subculture as the active rejection of the meaning and values supported by the dominant way of life, and the related formation of a shared identity and a style based on the common subversion of the authorised significance of common objects and actions (see also Becker 1963, Cohen 1980, Edgar & Sedgwick 2005, Benjamin 2006).

In addition to complementing the *praxis*-based approach to fandom, early subcultural theory allowed research like Cohen's (1980) study of mods and rockers to consider outsiders through a paradigm of resistance and difference rather than deviance. Aca-fans used this lens to rehabilitate fandom's image, although most followed Jenkins in substituting de Certeau's (1984) use of the word *appropriation* for Hebdige's *subversion*. However, both the subcultural paradigm and the *praxis* model of community marginalised the role that emotional and interpersonal bonds can play in such groups; indeed, Baym explicitly chose *praxis* theory because it was the most 'emotion-stripped' and 'minimalist' paradigm available (2000: 21). This is not precisely a flaw, and it is arguable that Hebdige's punks, Hall and Jefferson's British teens, and Cohen's mods and rockers did not require emotional support or even direct interaction to develop their distinctive styles of subversion. More recent scholars have commented that, as with arguments about the nature of community, the emphasis on subcultures as styles of consumption and signification can lead researchers to ignore what those subcultures mean to their own members (Atkinson & Housely 2003, Muggleton 1997, Widdicombe & Woofit 1995). Nevertheless, some fan scholars continue to use *praxis* theory to argue that fandom is better understood in terms of worldview, identity, or activity – as a subculture (Hills 2002, Jancovich 2002, Bennett & Booth 2016, Williams 2016). Indeed, in many ways the *praxis* framework is better suited to this task than to defending the idea of fandom as a community. This is not limited to academics; carolyn-claire (2011), who considers fandom too broad and variable to be a community, finds a middle ground by conceptualising fandom as a subculture, but with the understanding that many of her fellow fans perceive and experience fandom as a community:

Fandom, as a subculture...has its own codes, patterns of behavior, expectations and currency... [The] creation of fanworks is inspired by an intertwined love of the source and the community, and sometimes more by the desire to belong to the community and participate in the social exchange of that community, speak that language and create ties to other members of the community that extend beyond discussion of the source, than with the source itself.

Although carolyn-claire defines fandom as a subculture by its practices and patterns, she does not subscribe to Baym's (2000) notion that this is an 'emotion-stripped' paradigm. This fits with a longstanding trend among social interactionists, who propose that subcultures are better understood as interactive networks of affiliation, communication, and lived practice (see Fine & Kleinman 1979). This is particularly relevant to fan studies (Atkinson & Housley 2003: 79-80), because many of the characteristic styles of consumption and signification that define the fan subculture are collective and interactional. This is partly because many of the practices and formats favoured by fans are inherently social or interactive, like meta discourse and zine publication, and partly because fandom practices were too specific and the subculture too obscure and misrepresented for individuals in the pre-Internet era to teach themselves. Instead, most fans entered fandom through a complicated system of gatekeeping and mentorship that inducted them simultaneously into fandom's traditions and practices and into a pre-existing network of social relationships (Bacon-Smith 1992, Arduinna 2012b). Participation then led fans to adapt many practices that might seem to lend themselves more naturally to individual pursuits, such as writing or editing, into social activities (see Bacon-Smith 1992, Karpovich 2006). Even now, when the Internet allows interested outsiders to bypass the gatekeepers and teach themselves the rules of fannish etiquette and the internal linguistic systems which Wittgenstein (1953) might call 'language games' that allow them to comprehend and engage with fannish discourse, the social dimension of fan creativity has been transferred and adapted to the new medium (Hellekson & Busse 2006, Booth 2010) rather than discarded with the older practices that generated it. Furthermore, although awareness of the community's established traditions and practices has always been considered an important indicator of a fan's authenticity – even or perhaps especially online, where such grounding is not practically linked to the capacity to participate in fandom – there is a presumption that these cannot simply be learned through observation, but must be mastered through experience, interaction, and participation (Arduinna 2012b, vee_fic 2006, fail-fandomanon 2012a; FL: 'feral', 'Fandom and the Internet'). Similarly, fans tend to emphasise and value the social experience and emotional support of their community (see Arduinna 2012a, b, c; Kaiz 2003, Ang 2012, Kass 2012, Pearwaldorf 2012), well beyond the subcultural paradigm. Beta readers are often more than editors; they can be cheerleaders and midwives who pester, encourage,

criticise, and flatter a writer until her fic is done. It is not uncommon for fans to mark each other's birthdays with celebratory posts or fanworks, or to write fic tailored to a friend's tastes to cheer her up after a difficult day or to express appreciation and friendship. Even anonymous comments or 'kudos' (similar to the Facebook 'Like' function, but for fic on AO3) can play a part – many ficcers attribute their ability to complete chapters to such expressions of support. At the other extreme, fans are often careful to circulate information on social networks' policies for getting help to suicidal members (for example, Emotiontechnology 2011), or to reach out to fandom friends for support when dealing with actual-world problems related to issues like health, family, and relationships (see femmequixotic 2007c; Musgrove 2012, 2013a).

Recent scholarship has begun to catch up with the fan assertion that emotion as well as structure is instantiated and created by participation in the (largely social) practices of fandom' (see Booth 2010, Hellekson & Busse 2006). Sandvoss (2005: 8) defines 'fandom as the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text', though this somewhat problematically privileges the relationship of reader to text over the social relationship between readers. Accordingly, further attempts to grapple with and define *community* as used and understood by online fandom – and perhaps the broader notion of community in relation to the virtual world – should not be limited to an emotion-stripped practice-based paradigm. It must include a space for considering how the practices that engender and articulate community also create and support social, interpersonal, and emotional relationships that members understand as inherent to the existence, experience, and participation in such a community.

The Social Construction of (Virtual) Community

This thesis does not put forward a single, concrete definition of *community*, nor does it attempt to prove or disprove the assertion that online fandom is truly a community. Doing so would be another ultimately unsatisfactory effort to demarcate and confine the concept, another insufficient claim in the conversation about the nature of virtual community (see Castells 2001, Jankowski 2002, Fernback 2007). Instead, it is more productive to develop an analytical framework in which to locate fan meta discourse and investigate the idea of community by exploring fans' experiences and perceptions of 'the online fan community' through ethnographic observation and textual analysis of the practices, documents, and artefacts that represent and constitute online fandom.

It is useful to conceptualise virtual community as a ‘multilayered communicative space’ that is re/constructed and changed by its members, and which changes them and their expectations in turn (Shumar & Renninger 2002: 12-13). Even fans who are concerned that using the word *community* will homogenise fandom or over-emphasise its positive features propose terms like *contact zones*, ‘social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power’ (Pratt 1991: 34 quoted in Wanenchak 2014 and tea-and-liminality 2015), as alternative paradigms or concepts that can help elucidate the particularities of fannish practice and conceptions of community. Interacting within these spaces, these contact zones, allows individuals to participate in the collaborative creation and alteration of those spaces and what it means to be an insider in these virtual spaces – a member of the community that creates them. Participating in this collaboration allows individuals to ‘accrue knowledge about the possibilities for community participation that differs radically from what they once understood the components of community (e.g. group, boundaries, participation, identity) to include’ (Shumar & Renninger 2002: 13). To rephrase, ‘participants... cultivate attitudes about community based on the meaning of community in their lives. Their understanding...is influenced by their interactions in online and offline environments and by their interpretation of those interactions’ (Fernback 2007: 56). This has two benefits: First, by emphasising the agency of those who participate in a virtual community and their informed perspective on the nature and workings of this phenomenon, the framework helps to separate virtual community from any preconceived notions about community that a researcher might have. In this model, *community* is effectively what people say, it is the context they say it in, and how they conceptualise community – which additionally addresses the criticism that community and subcultural research do not give enough credence to members’ experience and perceptions of groups they participate in. Second, the emphasis on communication, participation, and the collective and highly intellectual construction of meaning is particularly well suited to the study of fandom, especially meta discourse – which is my interest.

Bregman and Haythornwaite (2003) propose that virtual communication creates a genre of persistent conversation, which can be understood in terms of three key features: visibility, relation, and co-presence. *Conversation*, because the majority of social interaction in online communities is linguistic in character (Cherny 1999,

Bregman & Haythornwaite 2003), something that is particularly true of fandom. *Persistent*, because virtual conversation is more permanent than speech: it can be saved, ‘searched, browsed, replayed, annotated, visualised, restructured, and recontextualised’, and *Visibility* refers to the ‘means, methods, and opportunities for presentation’ by which an individual may present herself online (Erickson 1999: 4113). *Relation* indicates the group or network that comprises a community, the number and identity of the participants, the social relationships between individual participants, and between individuals and the community as a whole, and the history of those associations. *Co-presence* concerns temporal and physical proximity: near-simultaneous conversation (e.g. instant messages) is different from time-delayed conversation (email) (Bregman & Haythornwaite 2003: 126). Another way to think about this is by considering how participants in virtual communities conceptualise the ‘space’ in which they interact, and the limits it places on their actions (see Bishop 2007, Fernback 2007, Beneito-Montagut 2011). Internet and technology as context and mechanism for communication will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. This chapter considers how discourse helps create community, conceptually and functionally, emphasising the profound effect of technological mediation on the nature of virtual communication and therefore on the manner of community that may develop within it.

I propose, then, that both fandom and virtual communities should be understood in terms of interaction and conversation, usually conducted through the medium of text. Although face-to-face and individual activities – such as convention attendance or media consumption⁷ – are an important part of fan participation, the vast majority of fan activity has always been conducted at a distance and in writing – first in fanzines and then online. So, if fandom is defined by its styles of signification and practices of consumption, production, and reception, then most of these either govern textual exchanges or were invented within and shaped by such discourse. Similarly, although not all online activity or virtual content is textual, if there is a single factor that sets participation in virtual communities apart from other forms of online pursuit, it is

⁷ Significantly, although media consumption *can* be solitary, fans have developed numerous techniques that allow them to turn consuming and analysing media into a social activity, even in the absence of physical proximity. For example, they Tweet and liveblog responses to media in real time; organise mass readings, where everyone reads and discusses the same book chapter each week; use livestreaming services to produce a living room style experience where all parties view and discuss the same media simultaneously.

persistent and consistent exchanges between a particular set of people – and, although voice and video technologies are advancing, the easiest and most common mechanisms for such interactions are still textual (Bregman & Haythornwaite 2003, Fernback 2007). Many fan scholars (see Lancaster 2001, Gatson & Zweerink 2004, Bury 2005, Parrish 2007, Wright 2009) have argued that fandom should be understood as a discourse community, a group ‘organised around the discussion of particular matters in particular ways (Berlin 1987: 166; see also Bizzell 1992, Kaltenbach 2000, Swales 2011), or in terms of fans’ proficiency with what Wittgenstein (1953) terms language games – idiosyncrasies of speech and meaning-making developed within particular contexts and peculiar to their inhabitants. Likewise, there are scholars (see Nellis 2002, Stein & Busse 2009) who find it useful to define fandom as an interpretive community (Fish 1980) identifiable by its shared collection of interpretive practices and patterns of consumption; indeed, Chapter 6 of this thesis uses this as a lens with which to explore the boundary mechanisms that separate fandom from outsiders, and divide fans within fandom into smaller subgroups based on the variety of stories and interpretive practices they prefer.

However, although it is possible to consider fandom and virtual communities solely in terms of their practices of communication and signification, fans’ conceptions of their community go further than shared interests, vocabulary, and mechanisms of participation and conversation. Instead, although I retain a focus on ‘conversation’ and exchange, Cohen’s (1985) aforementioned model of the symbolic construction of community and the underlying symbolic interactionist and social constructionist approach, is a significantly more useful framework for analysing how patterns and mechanisms of communication are constructed and developed, and how they shape and help create fans’ understandings of community. Cohen (1985) grounds his theory of community in symbolic interactionism, premising that knowledge is a subjective, collaborative, and social project; that meaning is not a fixed, intrinsic property of an object, idea, or activity, but is rather a subjective, evolving set of interpretations that are created, modified, reinforced, and transformed by people through interaction and communication with other people and with society. Further, the meanings associated with a thing shape how people may understand and therefore act towards other people, things, and behaviours, which in a sense means that people do not so much inhabit material reality as interact with their

perceptions of it, as ‘interpreted and given sense through a dense web of symbols which are themselves historically produced’ (Plummer 1982: 224; see also Plummer 1991, 2000; Fine 1983, 1993; Perinbanayagam 1985; Denzin 1989, 1992; Becker & McCall 1990; Wiley 1994; Atkinson & Housley 2003). This is the basic premise of social constructionism which holds that while certain categories and aspects of reality are empirical facts, others – like money, ownership, or the rules of a game – are artificial creations that ‘exist only because people tacitly agree to act as if they exist’ (Pinker 2003: 202; Berger & Luckman 1966, Musolf 2003, Sandvoss 2006). Interactionist and constructionist thinking emphasises the *social* nature of reality, the validity of which is derived from an eventuating consensus about this. Therefore, although people may have their own subjective perceptions of reality, their understanding is also reflective and constitutive of broader social relationships and meanings, and negotiated collectively with other social actors and institutions (Wittgenstein 1953; Bauman 1973; Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Gumperz 1982, 2001; Saussure 1983; Sherzer 1987; Haraway 1991, 1997; Miller & Hoogstra 1992; Prins 1995; Hanks 1996; Silverstein & Urban 1996; Heller 2001; Shegloff 2001, Atkinson & Housley 2003, Holstein & Gubrium 2005).

Drawing on these ideas, Cohen sees *community* as one of those constructed social realities. However, given the complicated character of community, Cohen treats it as a *system* or *web* of symbols that establish norms, beliefs, attitudes and patterns of behaviour – rather like symbolic approaches to religion (Geertz 1973) or kinship (Schneider 1980, Carsten 2004). Also central to this notion of community is a sense of identity or belonging; community is what establishes ‘that the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups’ (Cohen 1985: 12). It is what Cohen calls a *relational* idea, one that establishes boundaries, defines identities, and establishes norms and attitudes in contrast to what other people outside the community do and who they are. As already noted, this neatly circumvents the need for a core definition of *community*; symbolic meanings are primarily the result of internal negotiation within a group – and since *community* is a concept particularly intended to create boundaries and distinctions between members and outsiders, it follows that each community must necessarily produce its own unique conceptualisation of the term (Hamilton 1985: 9; Cohen 1982, 1985, 1986). Fernback (2007) notes that this is

consistent with the approach to virtual community as an ongoing, articulatory exchange and a technical, conceptual, and interpretational structure for facilitating and shaping that interaction, and is therefore an excellent foundation for arguing that virtual communities are real and valid entities, and for exploring their construction (see also Shumar & Renninger 2002, Markham 2004b, Bregman & Haythornwaite 2007).

This approach to symbolic community is also consistent with the subcultural approach to fandom as an identity and style of signification that brings meaning to artefacts and actions and sets members apart from the dominant cultural norms (Becker 1963, Hall 1996, Woodward 1997). However, it has been emphasised that people are complex, multi-dimensional entities who are possessed of multiple individual and collective identities, which may be expressed congruently or donned and doffed like masks (Maffesoli 1996; Ashton, Deaux & McLaughlin-Volpe 2004; Brewer & Hewstone 2004; Brown & Capozza 2006; Jenkins 2008). Drawing on symbolic interactionist conceptions of people's identities as a creative reflection and internalisation of people's responses to them (Mead 1934, 1982; Cooley 1956; Goffman 1959; Wiley 1994; Williams 2000), Jenkins (2008: 18) asserts that each 'social identity is our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us)'. For him, individual and collective identity (or identities) are two halves of a whole: both result from the same ongoing dialectical interaction with society, but the former emphasises the difference between self and others whereas the later highlights the similarities (Jenkins 2008: 19-20). This is similar to how Cohen sees community as a relational identity that creates commonality and belonging among members by simultaneously establishing boundaries and differences between them and those who do not belong. Fans have long embraced similar notions of fandom as a community that is part of a network of communities or collective identities that inform the construction of their individual identities; a community that is created, defined, and entered into through ongoing dialectical interaction with other fans and society so as to establish boundaries and commonalities that identify outsiders and insiders:

Community is a complicated thing. The best comparison I've come up with is the slash fiction community is kind of like the Jewish community. There are Jews all over the world; there are slash fen all over the world. I'm similar to some Jews and dissimilar to others; likewise with slash fen. The ideas and stories and beliefs of

some Jews delight me, and those of others frustrate me; again, likewise with slash fen. Sometimes I interact with Jews in person...other times I interact with Jews online or through phone calls or letters. Again, (surprise), likewise with slash fen.

I also think it's possible to belong to several different communities, and several different kinds of communities, without conflict. I belong to a RL community where I live, and I like that. I sing in a local chorus. I work for a local paper. I also belong to a Jewish community, RL and virtual. And I belong to a community of scattered college friends...And a community of slash fen (Kass 1999)

Maffesoli uses Durkheim's ideas about the 'social nature of sentiments' and Weber's about 'emotional community' to argue that people are engaged in a search for 'those who *feel and think as we do*' (Maffesoli 1996: 13), which leads them to cultivate membership in multiple communities or 'tribes'. In Jenkins' terms, Maffesoli is arguing that people have numerous social identities, and their meaning is similar: modern identities are formed through the continual individual and collective construction of a story about what it means to be part of a set of communities. Maffesoli describes it thus: 'My personal history...is a myth in which I am an active participant' (1996: 10). This approach to identity as story is particularly helpful given the central role that storytelling plays in fan culture and participation. Drawing on Stanley (2008: 3), I define *story* as

an account of things that have happened...which has a beginning, middle and end, although not necessarily in this order; which involves some form of emplotment so that the story develops or at least has an end; it is produced for an audience, whether implicitly or explicitly; and it is a motivated or moral account because it represents a particular point of view or encourages a measure of understanding or empathy from the audience; and it works by being metaphorically and/or analogically connected (tacitly or explicitly) with the lives of its audience.

Riessman (2001) argues that storytelling is an act of collective creation in which the teller organises scenes and takes on various roles to facilitate the collaborative construction of the story with her listeners – and in so doing the storyteller performs her identity, revealing her self as she wishes it to be known, and reaffirming or altering that identity and her place in the community. Storytelling may also serve the same function for collective identities; the act of telling and 'the stories told...continue to construct and reaffirm identity within the group whose members do the telling' (Nadel-Klein 1991: 513), and confirm or confer that membership, as well as transmitting values and instilling emotional investment in a community (Tonkin 1992, Wolf 1992, Norrick 1997, Maffesoli 1996, Rappaport 2000).

Participation and interaction between community members pursuing shared interests, including storytelling, helps foster identification and collectivity; sometimes simply possessing membership, even in an artificially assigned group, is in itself sufficient to precipitate identification and favouritism (Barth 1969, Tajfel 1981). However, not all the interactions that generate the stories that help comprise community are necessarily interpersonal; they can also be the result of encounters with artefacts, technologies, institutions, other collectivities, or other stories. Pertinent here is Benedict Anderson's (1986) notion of 'imagined communities', which are also connected with myths of identity (see also Levy 1997, A. Smith 1999, Kapferer 2011). Anderson (1986: 6-7) describes the nation as an imagined community:

Imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion...*Limited* because even the largest [nation] ...has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations...*Community*, because...the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship

Anderson's concept is intended to theorise and investigate connections between people who have never met, substituting spatial distance for a feeling of 'togetherness' and shared identity, and it is relational, predicated on establishing commonality between those who share this identity by creating a boundary between those who are excluded (Anderson 1986; Cohen 1985; Meyer 2009: 3-5). Significantly, that identity is more than just a word: it is an active narrative, a story each citizen must *tell herself* about what it means to belong to a specific group, and an awareness that there are others who tell themselves the same story, and that this shared identity stretches back into the past and forward into the future. Rappaport (2000: 6) suggests, 'People who hold common stories about where they come from, who they are, and who they will or want to be, are a community. A community cannot be a community without a shared narrative. Levy (1997) even argues that the processes of self-definition, articulation, and knowledge exchange can produce a sense of affiliation, the final product of which he terms an 'imagining community'.

The narrative of 'the fan community' is also similar to that of a nation-community in that it possesses a peculiar variety of agency. The *idea* of 'America', for example, cannot take actions as such – at least, not in the sense that the American *government* can, or individuals acting on behalf of the nation – and yet people have a definite and specific conception of what that idea is, of what *is* and *is not* American. More

importantly, although there is often significant disagreement about how to interpret the core American values – for example, partisan conflict over the role that the government should play in regulating access to ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ – those conceptions still affect how people think and behave with regard to America, Americans, and ‘American-ness’. Likewise, although fans do not always agree about what it means to be a fan, or how fans should behave, there is often an overarching narrative of ‘fandom’ that exerts agency over how they behave, interact, and conceptualise their community.

The imagined community approach is popular among fan scholars because it allows for a continued emphasis on praxis, on the processes, exchanges, and relationships that create and articulate community (see MJ Smith 1999, Saarinen 2002, Jenkins 2006, Pearson 2010); Hills (2001: 157) even describes fandom as a ‘community of imagination rather than as an imagined community’. It is especially notable that association with deep comradeship was integral to the construction of the nation myth, but in many cases actually predated the existence of such feelings (Anderson 1986, A. Smith 1999). This suggests that emotional investment in computer-mediated connections or virtual community can develop *after* the presumption of their existence and its use in the creation of an emotion-laden communal structure. Finally, many of the processes that support feelings of togetherness in national communities are relevant to fandom and to virtual communities, albeit updated for another context. For example, Anderson’s discussion of the role played by newspapers, the printing press, and print-capitalism in inventing the nation-community is relevant to Chapter 3, which discusses the relationship between technology and the community within it.

Kapferer (2011) further suggests that regular and public performances of fantastical tales and remembered histories, both in media and in person, ‘is a key event in the discovery and reformation of a coherent identity’ and that such stories can be symbolic embodiments of the national imagination that establish a collective identity grounded in historic, literary and religious tradition. This is particularly relevant to fandom because of the close relationship between fans’ collective identity and publicly sharing fantastical stories, from the original media that brought them together to the fanfiction that rewrites and reorients those stories. Furthermore, as Chapter 3 discusses, historical tales – accounts of fandom history and of the tellers’ personal history with fandom – play a

significant role in establishing the stability and accessibility of the fannish collective identity. Halbwachs (1992) also links the creation and transmission of ‘collective memory’ – shared public myth-making and storytelling – with the construction of and participation in making social and national identities in a manner not dissimilar to the symbolic or constructionist paradigms discussed above (see Geertz 1973; Plummer 1991; Cohen 1985; Perinbanayagam 1985; Denzin 1989, 1992; Atkinson & Housely 2003). Critics argue that Halbwachs over-emphasises the role of a generalised ‘society’, and the homogeneity of any such group (see Tonkin 1992, Becker 2005, Stanley 2006, Kosicki & Jasinska-Kania 2007). Sontag (2003: 76) rejects the notion of collective memory altogether, arguing that ‘All memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened...’

The relationship between fannish memory and collectivity falls between the two: public performances of history and fantastic tales are part of the discursive exchanges through which fans construct collective and individual identities, and they create a sense of shared history and continuity of purpose that contribute to the stability of the fannish collective identity. These stories, and attendant acts of collective remembering, produce ‘invented traditions’, which are ‘a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules...which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’, and ‘all invented traditions, so far as possible, use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion’ (Hobsbawm & Ranger 2002: 1, 9-12). Participating in collective storytelling can be part of group assimilation, and of how groups strengthen existing bonds, because acts of recollection render the collective identity of that people more coherent and enduring (Halbwachs 1992: 25; also Nadel-Klein 1991, Maffesoli 1996, King 2000). Not only is storytelling integral to the process by which a community is invented and maintained, it is also one of the primary practices a community may use to adapt, reinvent, or restructure itself to suit a new context, era, or audience (see Chapter 6; also Nadel-Klein 1991, Tonkin 1992, Wolf 1992, Norrick 1997, Riessman 2001, Laslett 1999, Stanley 2006, Pinder 2007).

Conclusion

Fandom is no longer an object of study in and for itself. Instead, through the investigation of fandom as part of the fabric of our everyday lives...[we] capture fundamental insights into modern life (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 2007: 9)

For decades, community has been a central component of fan studies and Internet research and a significant part of fan discussions about their own community. However, there is little consensus about how to define or use the concept, or whether it remains a helpful tool at all. Even in fan studies, which often presents fandom as a community as part of the effort to rescue it from the paradigms of deviance used by historical scholarship, little effort has been taken in recent years to articulate what precisely is meant by ‘the fan community’ or to engage with the implications of using community as an analytical tool. Despite these problems, the concept has considerable strengths and I have elected to use *community* in framing my thesis for three key reasons: First, it is the term that fans prefer; consequently, there is something of significant value to be gained from investigating their practices in using the word, their reasons for doing so, and the terms of that lexical use. Second, *community* is a prominent if controversial theme in Internet research as well as fandom studies, and discarding the term obscures the close links between the two and impairs rather than enhances the analytical possibilities for research. Third, *community* remains a concept that people in general widely use and identify with, regardless of academic criticisms (Cohen 1985, Bauman 2001, Hamilton 2001, Jankowski 2002).

This thesis therefore engages with community, as a concept and an analytical tool. It uses meta documents, fans’ own analyses and unprompted utterances, to explore how fans construct an experience and conception of community through contemplative and actual practices. In particular, it explores how the idea of community and feelings of belonging or relatedness are articulated, expressed, or embedded in fans’ stories and textual exchanges. Drawing on subcultural theory, I understand fandom in terms of resistance and appropriation rather than deviance, while symbolic interactionism allows me to examine both fandom and virtual community in terms of meaning and use, and the social exchanges through which significance is produced. My intention is to use these insider accounts and preserved textual negotiations of significance to address some of the oversights in current academic conversations about the fan community and virtual community more generally, with regard to how these groups are defined and how they are studied.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 3)

I think of ethnography as a kind of logic rather than any specific method or any particular unit of study. Ethnography names an epistemology – a way of knowing and a kind of knowledge that result – rather than a recipe or a particular focus (Agar 2006: 16)

The scholar is...recognizably engaged in a double process of engagement with the field. First, she...is engaged in a protracted series of transactions and explorations with informants. In and of themselves, these engagements are far from innocent. The cultures and social realities reported in the course of fieldwork are dependent on the active explorations, and the joint negotiations, that the investigator undertakes in conjunction with her hosts and informants. Secondly, there are further acts of interpretation when the scholar acts as author...[Ethnographies] are not the revelations of an independent social reality, but are *fictions* – in the sense that they are created and crafted products (Delamont 2007: 214)

There is still not much of a technique to ethnography despite the last twenty plus years of trying to develop a standard methodology (Van Maanen 2010: 251)

As these epigraphs illustrate, ethnography is a fluid, flexible approach to research that encompasses many different practices. The simplest, most mechanical definitions are similar to the first quote above: Ethnography is a variety of qualitative research that is usually centred around participant observation, though it may incorporate other data collection methods, meaning that ethnographers go 'into the field' to study a particular group or culture by taking part in ordinary activities in their everyday context, rather than in artificial research conditions (Delamont 2007, Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). Its value as a method is often founded on the presumption that living among one's research subjects, taking part in their everyday activities as they do, and observing cultural practices in their natural context, grants access to types of information and levels of comprehension inaccessible through most other methods (Coffey 1999). Traditional ethnographic research usually involves long term, fully immersive participant observation by a single researcher in a location that is culturally and geographically removed from her personal experience. However, it can also be short term, concern itself with subjects closer to home, be a subsidiary or parallel method used to corroborate or enrich information collected using other techniques, involve multiple researchers, or be 'partially immersive', meaning that ethnographers visit and return from the field each day (Delamont 2007: 206-7; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 1-2; Atkinson et al. 2007).

However, as the second epigraph illustrates, some scholars reject a methods-based conception of ethnography, preferring to see it as more of a perspective or philosophical approach. This is based on the theoretical assertion that ethnography is about studying, understanding, and participating in a community ‘in their own terms’, and on the belief that if a researcher is to achieve this local understanding then her research design must incorporate a wide range of methods and analytical techniques that suit and reflect the specific context and topic (Rofel 1994, Marcus 1998, Abu-Lughod 2000, Willis & Trondman 2000, Agar 2006, Delamont 2007, Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, Boellstorff 2008, Davies 2008). The subjective and flexible nature of ethnography has engendered bodies of literature that focus on particular methodological variations suited to specific contexts, topics, or varieties of data, some of which are so removed from traditional ethnography that they do not involve participant observation at all. For example, the two variants most relevant to this thesis are archival ethnography, which deals primarily with documents, artefacts, and the infrastructure in which they are stored (Stocking 1991; Comaroff & Comaroff 1992; Dirks 1993, 2002; Pels & Salemink 1994; Axel 2002), and virtual ethnography, which is the study of online social groups (Baym 2000; Hine 2000, 2005, 2007, 2008; Markham 2004a, b, 2011; Boellstorff 2008; Markham & Baym 2009, Beneito-Montagut 2011; Beaulieu & Estalella 2012; Steinmetz 2012; Vittadini & Pasquali 2013). As will be discussed below, both varieties are founded on the epistemological conception of ethnography as a way of analysing and understanding data, rather than on the presumption of particular methods or on practices of social interaction.

Finally, the third epigraph (Delamont 2007) presents ethnography as both process and product: it refers to the ongoing act of doing fieldwork by which the ethnographer seeks to understand the people, practices, and knowledges present in her field site, and it refers to the writings in which the ethnographer seeks to represent the understandings she has gained in language that will be engaging and comprehensible to audiences from vastly different backgrounds. It is significant that these are representations; ‘the idea that ethnographic accounts are simply descriptions of reality “as it is”, is just as misleading as the notion that historical accounts simply represent past events’ (Hammersley 1992: 25). Some use this to make the postmodernist critique that, by its descriptive and subjective nature, ethnography is the ‘inventing’ or ‘fashioning’ of culture – of fictions that are not necessarily fictitious but which are still merely representations or ‘partial truths’,

though others suggest that this can be mitigated by writing ‘against’ culture as a monolithic, homogenising concept and instead writing ‘ethnographies of the particular’ that focus on practice, local contexts and discourse, and on the role of the ethnographer as author, researcher, and individual (Geertz 1973, 1988; Marcus & Cushman 1982; Clifford & Marcus 1986; van Maanen 1988; Atkinson 1990; Abu-Lughod 1991, 2000; Hastrup 1992; Behar & Gordon 1996; Marcus 1998; Coffey 1999; Willis 2000; Willis & Trondman 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007; Atkinson et al. 2007; Cunliffe 2010).

Regardless, ethnographic engagement exists not only between researcher, field, and written work, but also the academy (Stanley 2008a). An ethnographer does not merely seek to represent her experience of the field, she draws on academic theory to inform how she does fieldwork and how she understands, interprets, and describes the things she has seen; so an ethnography is not merely a written account but a scholarly one, intended to occupy a certain place in the literature, to represent data and interpretations in the expected style and format, and to interact in specific ways with academic texts that come before and after it (Clifford 1983, Strathern 1987, Clifford & Marcus 1986, Atkinson 1990, Abu-Lughod 1991). This is further complicated when there are additional expected audiences, particularly when the ethnographer has a personal stake in such a group, as when ethnographers write about a culture to which they have personal ties (see Jackson 1987, Strathern 1987, Abu-Lughod 1991, Narayan 1993, Caputo 2000, Norman 2000, Macdonald 2001), or with the intent of having a certain effect on the field (like Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ [2000] ‘militant’ activist anthropology), or with the expectation that informants will read or be directly affected by an ethnography (see Brettell 1996, Becker 1967). These expectations and intentions can affect not only the style of writing, but also the focus, content, and variety of analysis, as the author attempts to use their representation to further their socio-political or personal goals, or simply because her perspective and relationship to her work and her field site can change according to her development as an academic and an individual, as Wolf (1992) illustrates in *A Thrice Told Tale*.

With the above in mind, the purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, in keeping with the traditions of reflexivity, I attempt to position myself as a researcher, explaining some of the personal and social dynamics that affected my theoretical, practical, and methodological decisions. The second section concerns the methodology: my aims, the

theoretical and philosophical framework underlying my choices regarding data collection and analysis, and the practical and methodological considerations of conducting ethnography in virtual and archival contexts. Finally, I discuss the practical and empirical aspects of my research design: my field site, the variety of data gathered, and the methods and ethical approach used to collect and analyse information.

Situating Researcher & Research

How can one be both subject and object, the one who acts and the one who, as it were, watches himself acting? (Bourdieu 2003: 281)

Standing on shifting ground makes it clear that every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking a speaking from somewhere (Abu-Lughod 1991: 141)

The subjective nature of ethnographic research can be seen as both advantage and flaw. On one level, a researcher's lived experience of a culture can act as a source of data in itself and as a foundation of shared understanding upon which to establish rapport with particular individuals or communities, which in turn can translate into deeper and more accurate comprehension of that society, and enable her to make more insightful or sensitive inquiries (Geertz 1973, 1988; Rabinow 1977; Clifford 1983; van Maanen 1988; Atkinson 1990; Abu-Lughod 1991, 2000; Hastrup 1995; Marcus 1998; Coffey 1999; Willis & Trondman 2000; Collins & Gallinat 2013). Conversely, however, ethnographic observations rarely have high reliability or validity: they are difficult to repeat or generalise from, because they represent personal and qualitative observations made in specific, unique circumstances that cannot be replicated (Hammersley 1998; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007; Vogt, Gardner, & Haffele 2012).

However, the variety of information produced by ethnography remains interesting, useful, and often inaccessible through other methods. Researchers have developed the concept of reflexivity⁸ to address standards of scientific reliability without compromising the strengths and value of ethnographic data by acknowledging that the ethnographer is inherently 'part of the situation studied' (Powdermaker 1967: 287). Further, she is part of the product and process of ethnography; her identity, behaviour, and individual relationships, as well as the particular circumstances of her research and social location in the field may significantly affect the information she can gather

⁸ The term *reflexivity* has many meanings, uses, and problems (Stanley & Wise 1993, Troyna 1994, Lynch 2000, Adkins 2002, Davies 2008). I use it to 'acknowledge that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them' (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 15).

and the levels of meaning available to her. Indeed, her very presence in the field alters the context and her informants' behaviours within it (Abu-Lughod 1991, Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, Davies 2008). Her identity also informs her theoretical and methodological decisions, thereby affecting the analytical and constitutive process of representing the field by writing an ethnography. Narayan (1993: 671-72) suggests that instead of understanding the ethnographer as an objective outside observer,

We might more profitably view each [ethnographer] in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations. The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux. Factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status.

Therefore, I will now subject myself to critical scrutiny and reflexive self-analysis, with regard to my position within the field and the methodological and theoretical decisions I made during the process of writing this thesis, and regarding the effect my identity and position may have had on the direction and meaning of the work (see Strathern 1987, Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, Ellis & Bochner 2000, Bourdieu 2003, Anderson 2006, Atkinson 2006, Vyran 2006, Delamont 2009). Particularly relevant is the concept of *positionality*, which was developed to consider how aspects of a researcher's identity, the loci of alignment or division with people, might act as lenses for interpretation (Hastrup 1992, England 1994, Rose 1997, Salzman 2002, Stanley 2008a).

I am sensitive to critiques of what Geertz (1998) calls the 'diary disease', the tendency for self-reflexive ethnographic texts to become 'solipsistic' (Young & Meneley 2005: 7), and the related criticism that humanistic methodologies over-emphasise description and interpretation at the expense of analysis and theory (Snow et al. 2003). However, this thesis is profoundly shaped by my own experiences on a practical and theoretical level. Like Lovell (2007), I found that 'getting personal' was an essential part of doing this research; unwillingness to reveal something of my history and values would have impeded my capacity to establish a mutual and respectful relationship with research subjects, and the potential for deeper communication and understanding (see also McLean & Leibing 2007). This is particularly relevant to research in digitally mediated spaces, because negotiating informed consent online 'poses an ongoing ethical challenge which demands reflexive attention to the role and identity of the researcher

and to relationships with research participants and other users of the online space(s)' (Orton-Johnson 2010: 4.1). Thus, it is important to include some aspect of what van Maanen (1988) calls 'confessional tales' following a scholarly tradition that understands storytelling and identity as performed and narrative actions (Atkinson 1990, Denzin 1997, Riessman 2001, Barber 2007, Jenkins 2008). This thesis attempts to combine elements of the descriptive and theoretical approaches to doing ethnography, to be 'self-reflexive but not self-obsessed' (Denzin 2006: 421; Stanley & Wise 2006, Wacquant 2003), and so avoid the pitfalls of auto-ethnography.

Chapter 1 notes that most fan scholars are Complete Member Researchers: they began as or became full participants in the group they study (Adler & Adler 1987, Anderson 2006, Dwyer & Buckle 2009). Unlike the fans who became scholars to study the social and literary dimensions of their own community, or to defend their fellow fans from the assumptions of popular culture and mainstream academia (Hills & Jenkins 2006), I started as an anthropologist who came to fan studies as a relative outsider. My position has changed somewhat, but I still consider this thesis not a work of insider or member research, but more related to what Strathern (1987: 17) calls 'auto-anthropology', ethnography 'carried out in the social context which produced it'. I have always been a fan of the relevant media, and I had friends who were involved in fandom for years, but I never wanted to take the final step into organised fandom myself. I was knowledgeable enough to subscribe to the more benevolent fandom stereotypes (see Chapter 1; also Jenson 1992, Jenkins 1992, Hills 2002): I understood it to be a group largely defined by shared interest in soft-core literary pornography starring fictional characters, usually of a homoerotic nature. I was enough of a fan myself not to presume that such an investment – even what some might call over-investment – in media was necessarily deviant, but I could not imagine what people got out of the experience that could not be better achieved by returning to the original material.

This question was answered for me in July 2009, when I was in India conducting undergraduate fieldwork. I felt very isolated by my deficient language skills and outsider status, so my friends helped me combat homesickness with long email conversations and links to, among other things, fanfiction they thought would transcend my general disinterest in fandom. This proved to be the perfect solution: fics were fun, engaging, required little of the mental energy my academic reading did, provided unchallenging

conversational topics – and they reminded me of the times my friends and I had spent together, discussing books or watching this media. My informants later taught me that although my experience was somewhat unusual in the details, its general shape was very familiar to them; they used fandom to fill similar gaps in their own lives.

Most of the fic I read that summer was hosted on the blogging website LiveJournal (LJ), alongside personal posts and meta essays. Literary meta texts (critical analyses of characters, story, and craft) showed me that fandom could be about more than pornography; that fans understand fic as an *appropriative* (Jenkins 1992) and *transformative* genre that ‘adds something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the [source] with new expression, meaning, or message’ (OTW 2014 citing Campbell v. Acuff-Rose 1994) by filling *syntagmatic gaps* in the original story. Fans use fic and meta to make social commentary about both the original text and society in general, or to ‘make space’ for themselves, for aspects of their identity they feel are excluded, marginalised, or misrepresented by the text (see Chapter 6; Derecho 2006, Willis 2006). Given that the majority of fandom looks like me – a white, American, English-speaking, college-educated queer cis-woman⁹ in her 20s (melannen 2010a, b; Sendlor 2010; OTW 2012; Lulu 2013a, b) – it is unsurprising that their essays resonated with me, that their attempts to reconcile texts produced for mass consumption (and therefore with a majority bias) with their own experiences spoke to dissatisfactions and frustrations I hadn’t yet realised I shared.

However, fandom never became my hobby or community in the way it was theirs. I acknowledge a significant amount of sympathy and common ground with fans, and I lay claim to a certain degree of the insider researcher’s capacity to ‘come closest of all...to approximating the emotional stance of the people they study’ (Adler & Adler 1987: 67). Similarly, my familiarity with fannish media, jargon, communication technologies, and the virtual spaces they inhabit allowed me to achieve greater understanding and swifter rapport than I might have otherwise, because I had fewer linguistic, cultural, and practical barriers to overcome (Strathern 1987, Anderson 2006, Delamont 2007, Davies



Fig. 2.1: LJ icon by gossymer about ‘fixing’ the Harry Potter epilogue.

⁹ *Cis*: From the Latin meaning ‘this side of’, as opposed to *trans*, meaning ‘across’, it describes a person whose gender and sex remain and are largely perceived to be the same as those assigned at birth, and thus fit primarily within normative expectations and experiences of gender (Valentine 2007, Enke 2012: 20).

2008, Dwyer & Buckle 2009). However, even true insider researchers stand apart from their informants and community because they are also members of the social science community and actively engaged in doing research – in documenting, analysing, recording. As a result, this lens or orientation filters all of their participation in social activities to some degree (Strathern 1987, Anderson 2006, Dwyer & Buckle 2009). Furthermore, conducting ethnography ‘at home’ requires a heightened degree of reflexivity. If the subject, the Other, in any ethnography is filtered through and constituted by the researcher’s knowledge of herself and the practices of her discipline, then her grasp of herself, her history, and her scholarly practice must be critically examined and analysed if they are to meaningfully render themselves (Marcus & Cushman 1982; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Strathern 1987; Atkinson 1990; Abu-Lughod 1991, 2000; Boellstorff 2008; Davies 2008). I found this incredibly beneficial; the constant need to question my motivations and assumptions, the reasons I found certain activities intuitive and others confounding suggested many lines of enquiry, particularly about the use and perception of certain practices and technologies. This was the basis for many fruitful conversations, and helped me establish the similarities and differences between my experiences and those of fan insiders. Indeed, it also helped me discern differences in fan experiences and to avoid homogenising their perspective in a way that particular methods of analysis and generalisation are given to.

However, my novitiate confusion about fan practices and perspectives, combined with my outsider status and the vast quantities of social theory I consumed as a researcher, ensured that I began analysing fandom long before I considered participating in it. This was also evident in the focus of my interests: although fanfiction was my gateway into fandom, it was neither fic nor literary meta that held my attention. Instead, my growing interest centred on the practices, relationships, and culture that developed around the production and dissemination of fic. It began with the comments posted below each story on LiveJournal, which was somewhat unusual because it publicly displayed comments below the body of each post and allowed everyone to read and respond to any comment. I was particularly intrigued by the friendship and camaraderie these exchanges displayed; it seemed incongruous given that I still understood fandom as largely defined by a shared interest in the production and consumption of literary pornography – and reading, writing, and intimacy seemed to me relatively private or solitary endeavours. Yet these comments

and the relationships they represented, as well as my own largely social experience of fandom, suggested otherwise. LiveJournal also fascinated me on a more general level. It was a blogging site, and clearly not intended for use as a fanfiction archive; every journal or Community¹⁰ that hosted fic had to develop its own system for displaying and organising those stories. As a relative outsider, I was baffled by the collective choice to use LJ, especially since purpose-built archives like FanFiction.net had existed for over a decade. As a social scientist, however, I was intrigued; there must be a reason that fans had adopted a technology that seemed to me frustrating and unsuited to their needs. I began to notice patterns in fandom's linguistic, social, and technological practices that not only explained how certain aspects of these applications met certain of their needs, but also helped foster familiarity, communication and the development of social bonds.

Intriguing as I found the puzzle of fan sociability and technology use, however, it was the sociological genre of fan meta that inspired this thesis. As already stated, fandom is an incredibly self-reflexive community; fans had noticed many of these patterns, and meta texts were their venue for discussing these issues, their probable meanings and potential impact on fan practices and culture. Further, unlike most emic accounts (see Harris 1976, 1999; Feleppa 1986; Korobov 2004; McGinty 2012; Srivastava 2012), the fan point of view would not have to be prompted, constructed, or transcribed by myself. As a result, I concluded that meta texts were a singularly interesting and useful source of data for academic study. Meta texts are further distinguishable and intriguing in that they are consciously and intentionally closer to being ethnographic works in their own right than many other emic accounts. Strathern (1987: 18) observes that when informants and researcher share a cultural background,

it could be assumed that the villagers broadly participated in the worldview also held by the [ethnographer]. Yet what started out as continuity ended as disjunction. The ethnographic text was hardly contiguous with indigenous narrative form; one was not rendering back to the residents of the village an account immediately contiguous with those they had given...Simply being a 'member' of the overarching culture or society does not mean that the anthropologist will adopt appropriate cultural genres. On the contrary he/she may well produce something quite unrecognizable...Indigenous reflection is incorporated as part of the data to be explained, and cannot itself be taken as the framing of it, so that there is always a discontinuity between indigenous understanding and the analytical concepts which frame the ethnography itself.

¹⁰ *Community* here refers not to the social and conceptual structure at the analytical core of this thesis, but to an LJ feature whereby members can participate in interest-based discussion groups (see Glossary). Examples of fandom communities include those dedicated to meta discourse, specific fandoms, beloved couples, fic recommendations, roleplaying games, and creative writing support.

Such disjunction is less relevant to this thesis, primarily due to the nature of meta texts. Many fans have degrees in fields relevant to literary or social analysis (Kustritz 2003; melannen 2010a, b; Sendlor 2010; OTW 2012; Lulu 2013a, b), and they actively seek out, promote the use of, and educate each other about relevant academic research and analytical concepts. Fans frequently incorporate this information into their creative works (particularly fics that are written as social commentary or represent particular experiences; see Derecho 2006, Willis 2006), discourse (including everyday conversations between fans and arguments between fans and outsiders), and in their meta analyses. For example, when discussing fic as a therapeutic tool, femmequixotic (2007c) directly referenced a Duke study about the importance of ‘survivors’ own words about their trauma-related emotions, as well as the impact of writing on their recovery’ (see Hines 2000; Krause, DeRosa & Roth 2002). Similarly, thelastgoodname (2005a, b) used academic studies of blogging as foundations for her own analysis of LiveJournal and its impact on the character and practices of fandom (see Viégas 2004).

Thus, fans often frame their reflections in terms of academic concepts, and the result frequently resembles academic analyses. This thesis is not, however, a ‘joint text’ written in conjunction with my informants or with a notion of shared authorship. Such endeavours are usually predicated on an optimistic view of the subject-researcher power dynamic, and deceptive either in their claims to accurately represent the voices of a community or in their attempts to present dialogic interchange between informants and researcher as an accurate depiction of reality (Rabinow 1977; Clifford 1983; Strathern 1987; Atkinson 1990; Hastrup 1992; Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Davies 2008). I view my informants’ accounts – both their own, unsolicited meta texts and those related to my research – as data to be incorporated, explained, analysed and framed. Thus I consider this work closer to what Fabian (2008: 10) calls an ‘ethnography of commentary’, which ‘requires the co-presence of a substantial text, and the interpretive, analytic, or historical writings based on that text’. Further, the continuity of fan accounts with academic texts (including this one) is important because, unlike some informants who may feel exploited when ethnographers ‘turn data into materials whose value cannot be shared or yielded back to them in return’ (Strathern 1987: 20), fans see and understand the value of academic texts about their community and they know how to use them, both of which significantly reduced any feelings of exploitation. This has

also proved useful for obtaining informed consent, as most fans I approached understood many of the ways my research might be used and how their participation could benefit both parties. For example, Chapter 5 involves fans using fan scholarship (Jenkins 1992, Tushnet 1997, Baym 2000) to defend themselves from outside attacks.

This continuity is also relevant because the analytical concepts fans adopted have also influenced my attempts to establish a core set of ideas to give my analyses shape and purpose. Again, although I allowed fan framings to suggest avenues of thought, their theoretical choices did not dictate my own, and this work does not perfectly reproduce their accounts. Thus, my theoretical framework developed through an organic, gradual, and continuous interaction between my data, my informants' interpretations and conceptual categories, my own ideas, and the theoretical and empirical literature, in the manner of grounded theorising (Dey 2004, Charmaz & Mitchell 2001, Glaser 2002, Clarke 2005, Charmaz 2006). A common method of doing ethnography begins with a set of what Malinowski (1922) called 'foreshadowed problems' or subjects of interest, and allows the data to suggest the appropriate theoretical and analytical tools (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 23-24, 158-190). My particular interest was in meta texts, in understanding the articulatory practices by which fans constructed, transformed and participated in fandom, with a secondary interest in exploring how those exchanges were shaped by the use and perception of the technologies, mechanisms and 'spaces' in which they occurred. Further, I was interested in investigating fans' reasons in choosing the particular concepts and framings they favoured. Thus, it was fan framings and grounded methods of theorising that helped me identify *community* as a key analytical concept. I was struck by how constant and consistent discussions of community were, even in contexts that seemed irrelevant to me, like the Gabaldon incident discussed in Chapter 1. Further, I found that the term *community* was similarly ubiquitous in the academic literature, even in early studies that struggled to qualify or justify its use (Jenkins 1992, Baym 2000).

As described in Chapter 1, when I attempted to situate fandom and fan scholars' assertions about the nature of the fan community within the wider literature on community and virtual identity, I discovered confusion and disagreement. It seemed to me that the best approach was to study the practices and assumptions regarding fan understandings of community, for this was built on my interest in studying fan exchanges that articulated community, and also incorporated debates about the concept

into the terms of the research. The iterative interaction of these foreshadowed problems and my continuing engagement with fan texts and ethnographic data, yielded important analytical questions: What do meta texts and archived meta exchanges say about how fans understand ‘the online fan community’? What are the practices by which fans articulate, participate in, and transform that understanding, and how are these practices and conceptions influenced by the technologies and virtual spaces in which they exist?

Digital & Archival Ethnography

Ethnographers typically employ a relatively open-ended approach...their orientation is an exploratory one. The task is to investigate some aspect of the lives of the people who are being studied, and this includes finding out how these people view the situations they face, how they regard one another, and also how they see themselves. It is expected that the initial interests and questions that motivated the research will be refined, and perhaps even transformed, over the course of the research; and that this may take a considerable amount of time
(Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 3)

Boellstorff’s study of Second Life (SL), one of the few full-length ethnographies of an exclusively online community, started not with a question about SL or its denizens, but with a methodological question: ‘What can ethnography tell us about virtual worlds?’ His methodology was founded upon the assertion that to study virtual societies ethnographically is to study them ‘in their own terms’ (Boellstorff 2008: 61). This is consistent with the characterisation of ethnography as a perspective or analytical lens; an exploratory approach suited to yielding ‘deep’, richly textured qualitative knowledge of social experience and mutual understanding rather than testing theories or cause-effect relationships, or providing mass data for generalisations (Geertz 1973, Willis & Trondman 2000, Maxwell 2004, Agar 2006, Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). Making this philosophy the core of his endeavour allowed Boellstorff to discard or adapt ethnographic methods established for use in the ‘actual’ world¹¹ in favour of those better suited to the virtual context and his particular field site. For example, instead of attempting to ‘live’ in the virtual world,¹² as if it were Margaret Mead’s Samoa (1928)

¹¹ Following Boellstorff, I use the word *actual* to denote the world outside of computers, as distinct from virtual, online spaces (see Glossary). This distinction does not indicate that the virtual and actual are discrete, independent contexts; they are contiguous and interdependent entities that influence and alter each other as well as individual experience and social reality. Furthermore, an acknowledgement of difference does not imply that the virtual is less real, important, or possessed of less practical or emotional impact.

¹² For one thing, Second Life is a particular and bounded social context; although it is active at all times, even most members who are continuously logged on do not participate constantly. Thus, attempting to ‘live’ in SL in the manner of fully immersive ethnographers is akin to attempting to conduct an ethnography of a school or office by taking up residence with a sleeping bag and a mini-fridge: it necessitates the artificial invention of such a lifestyle, and represents a failure to participate on local terms.

or Malinowski's Trobriand Islands (1922), he participated in SL activities on the same terms as his informants; i.e. when it suited his life and schedule.¹³

This thesis began with a similarly exploratory question: 'What can these unsolicited first-hand accounts of the nature and function of community online tell us about fandom as a modern, virtual community?' Two aspects of this question must be unpacked. First, the 'unsolicited' and 'first-hand' nature of these accounts should be emphasised: discussion and analysis of their own community is an important and natural part of everyday fan interaction, and is usually intended only for an audience of other fans. Second, the majority of fan accounts are textual. However, as Chapter 3 discusses in greater detail, these documents should not be understood as transcriptions or entextualisations of interactions that occurred in other contexts (see Silverstein & Urban 1996: 21; Silverstein 1998; Barber 2007: 74-76), nor are they the by-products of broader exchanges. Rather, because the majority of fan interaction occurs in a context that is textual and mediated *by nature*, and because each utterance must exist in recorded, visible text in order for other participants to engage with it, these documents *are* the social exchanges in their original form and context. Thus, these accounts seemed to me an interesting and unusual opportunity to study the way a virtual community interacts with, perceives, and articulates itself while minimising the impact that a researcher's presence and inquiries will have on her informants' behaviours, accounts, and on the field as a whole (Atkinson 1990, Abu-Lughod 1991, Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, Davies 2008, Stanley 2008). The textual nature of fan interaction further suggests that an ethnography of online fandom must be conducted primarily through the textual mechanisms they favour.

Thus, my primary interest was less in eliciting new data – new accounts and analyses of fandom – than in achieving the degree of understanding and familiarity necessary to engage with and interpret the extant texts. Ethnography is a method defined by 'attention to the contingent way in which all social categories emerge, become naturalized, and intersect in people's conception of themselves and their world, and further, an emphasis on how these categories are produced through everyday practice'

¹³ Because researching SL was professional, Boellstorff's motivation for logging on was different from that of his informants, and his schedule was probably more permissive of participation than theirs as well, which arguably constitutes a failure to engage on their terms. However, ethnographers in traditional contexts have always had different reasons for participating in their informants' activities, and the demands of fieldwork have always affected the schedule and timing of their participation (Coffey 1999, Anderson 2006, Hammersley & Atkinson 2007).

(Rofel 1994: 703) which is predicated on understanding cultures ‘in their own terms’. This seemed to me a helpful approach to the study of meta texts. To construct my research design, I drew on virtual ethnography, which attempts to update the methods associated with more traditional ethnography (e.g. participant observation, interviews) for use in a virtual context, and archival ethnography, which is concerned with the study of documents and the context in which they are stored.

After choosing an ethnographic approach, it was necessary to define the scope of my enquiry (Garcia et al. 2009, Beneito-Montagut 2011). My primary methods (documentary analysis and participant observation, with email interviews as secondary tools for corroborating accounts) are discussed below. Given my focus on meta texts, the ‘field’ of my enquiry is in effect the network of persons, texts, and technologies that constitute and are constituted by fandom, so my fieldwork was necessarily multi-sited because modern online fans do not confine their activities to a single platform, or even a few (see Chapter 3). This is a departure from the general trend in virtual community research: most study community *only* on Second Life, or *only* on one message board or Social Network Site, or *only* in relation to specific themes such as protecting adolescents’ privacy online (see Nellis 2002; Lenhart & Madden 2007; Dwyer, Hiltz & Passerini 2007; boyd 2008; Boellstorff 2008; Walther et al. 2008; Hernández-García et al. 2014). Boellstorff (2008: 7) justifies limiting his fieldwork to SL by arguing that ‘The engagement ethnographic research demands makes it impossible for me to conduct...research in Thailand [and simultaneously]...in Indonesia’. However, such imposed divisions often create the problematic impression that these worlds are discrete and self-contained (Beneito-Montagut 2011). To borrow the metaphor, trying to study fandom in one virtual space would have been like trying to study a community that lived concurrently in Indonesia *and* Thailand in only one of those locations. Indeed, not even Boellstorff’s (2008: 75, 79) research is actually so limited: he uses ‘approximately ten thousand additional pages of blogs, newsletters, and other websites’. This is because those other sites are not ‘other virtual worlds’ (Boellstorf 2008: 7), but *extensions* of Second Life: places where users read about others’ SL activities and write about their own, connect with SL acquaintances, or acquire news that will affect their in-game experience. Thus, multi-sited ethnography can help researchers establish some of the social context of an exchange or the broader social dynamics of a society that might

otherwise be inaccessible in virtual contexts (see Marcus 1995, Hine 2007, Coleman & von Hellerman 2011, Beneito-Montagut 2011, Cornwall 2011, Falzon 2012).

Practically speaking, expanding into multi-sited research required limiting it in other ways, so this thesis focuses on online activities, primarily interaction within and through texts. I do not follow those who characterise virtual worlds as discrete, self-contained contexts (see Helmreich 2004); I acknowledge that fandom predates the Internet and continues to straddle the virtual/actual divide, both as a whole community and as part of individuals' lives. However, many fans can and do limit their participation in fandom to the virtual sphere without qualifying or compromising the legitimacy of their status as fans. So, when approached on its own terms, online fandom should be understood as a complete context in its own right *and* a venue for participating or expressing membership in broader fandom, if not as a self-contained community. I chose to engage with online fandom as a discrete context for three reasons. First, holistic, multi-sited ethnographies of virtual community are uncommon. Second, meta texts that shed light on the intersection of people's virtual- and actual-world activities must necessarily include information about the author's actual identity, which many fans consider a violation of privacy and potentially of their safety as well. Finally, although Zheleva and Getoor (2009) demonstrate that it is often possible to confirm online informants' actual identities using the information available in public profiles (as advocated by Murthy 2008, Orgad 2009), it is more difficult to confirm informants' personal stories or to study the effect of online behaviours on offline lives without relying on self-reports (Utz 2010a, b; Kearon & Harison 2011).

Like others before me, I resolved this dilemma by reframing it: my incapacity to verify identities or personal accounts is only problematic if my ultimate purpose relies on their factual accuracy (Boellstorff 2008, Hookway 2008). Riessman argues that researchers who take a social constructionist or performative approach (as this thesis does; see Chapter 1) in understanding reality as a subjective entity that community members collectively negotiate together, then 'the issue of truth' acquires a different significance:

Verification of the "facts" of lives is less salient than understanding the changing meanings of events for the individuals involved, and how these, in turn, are located in history and culture. Personal narratives are, at core, meaning-making units of discourse. They are of interest precisely because narrators interpret the past in stories rather than reproduce the past as it was (Riessman 2001: 340-41)

Nadel-Klein (1991: 509) suggests, ‘the issue is not whether these stories are true, but what meaning they hold for those who tell them’. This is consistent with Numerato’s (2015: 5) observation, based on a study of sports fans both online and off, that ‘Although some online claims can be inaccurate and incorrect in terms of their factual value when compared to the offline social reality...they still have their place in the construction and reproduction of social reality’. Likewise, if identity is understood as a performative entity, created through storytelling and interaction (see Maffesoli 1996, Riessman 2001, Jenkins 2008), then the ‘truth’ of a person’s virtual identity, or its resemblance to her actual-world identity, is less relevant than the perceptions of her audience.¹⁴ This is particularly true since other members of online communities have no more capacity than a researcher to reliably or ethically evaluate such claims. Boellstorff (2008: 61) and Hookway (2008: 97) use this to argue that any attempt to verify informant’s identities or claims constitutes a failure to interact on their terms, and is therefore a failure of ethnography. Furthermore, although it has been consistently demonstrated that people carefully design the identities they present online¹⁵ (Turkle 1997; Mazur 2010; Steinel, Utz & Koning 2010), this is no less true of identities displayed in the actual world (Goffman 1959; Bruner 1987; Stanley 1992; Holstein & Gubrium 2000; King 2000; Brewer & Hewstone 2004; Brown & Capozza 2006; Jenkins 2008). Thus, in keeping with the terms recognised by fandom, I accepted people’s accounts of themselves in their own words and interacted with informants using technologies they identified as customarily fannish, rather than attempting to verify their identities or arrange interviews in the actual world. As a methodological decision, this reinforced my commitment to using a local, ethnographic lens to explore the ways that fans understand, relate to, and participate in the online fan community.

¹⁴ This is the predominant approach to identity in Internet studies; Williams & Cope (2005), locate identity at the intersection of biography, subculture and technology (also Maratea & Kavanaugh 2012, Farquar 2009, Hammersley & Treseder 2007, Thomas 2007, Busse 2006b, Bortree 2005, Gatson & Zweerink 2004).

¹⁵ Among my informants this usually manifested not in the presentation of false identities (which most regarded as too confusing and taxing to be worth the effort, if they saw any purpose at all), but in control. Most had carefully considered opinions about the variety and quantity of personal information they were comfortable sharing in public and private environments (e.g. blogs vs. email), and presumed as a matter of etiquette and security that if they respected other fans’ boundaries, their own would be respected in return. The voluntary and reciprocal nature of such exchanges encourages honesty and discourages attempts to verify or coerce other fans into revealing personal information by sanctioning nondisclosure and making it a more socially acceptable option than lying. They acknowledge that such things happen, but they are widely seen as aberrant violations of etiquette (see charlotelennox 2006).

Returning to the meta analyses of fandom at the core of this thesis, it is helpful to understand such documents as stories in the sense discussed above; as Tonkin (1992: 97) writes, ‘narratives [should] be seen as social actions, situated in particular times, and directed by individual tellers to specific audiences’ (see also Smith 1974; Nadel-Klein 1991; Wolf 1992; Plummer 1995, 2001; Norrick 1997; Riessman 2001; Stanley 2008b, 2013). The documents used in this thesis are varied; they include histories of fandom, fictional works, literary and sociological analyses, etiquette guides, and records of everyday interactions or contemporary responses to historical events. In all cases, they seek to articulate the author’s perspective on particular aspect(s) of fandom, which can be incredibly divergent. If one takes a social constructionist approach in conceptualising reality, meaning, and identity as collectively manufactured through interpersonal exchange and discourse, then stories should be understood as a significant aspect of establishing and negotiating those meanings. Stanley (2006: 4) further argues that ‘memory, in the sense of a direct recall of events in the past both is and is not involved in what “the facts” are now understood to be’. Thus, memories are better understood as constantly reconstructed claims about history that are shaped and informed by the contemporary concerns and social context of the ongoing present in which the memory is articulated (see Anderson 1986: 205; Bruner 1987, 1993; Halbwachs 1992; Plummer 2001, Riessman 2001, McCormack 2002, Stanley 2002). This is especially relevant to fan texts because even the most superficial fan exchanges often produce lasting documents that become part of the archived and accessible record that comprises and reflects fan history.

Therefore, accepting fan stories on local terms cannot entail accepting them uncritically or even as necessarily factual; rather, they should be treated as valuable but subjective forms of knowledge (Smith 1974; Stanley 1992, 2006, 2008; Tonkin 1992; Atkinson 1998; Riessman 2001; McCormack 2004, Tilly 2006). Conversely, treating stories critically and accepting that their primary value lies in their subjectivity and their capacity to convey perception rather than ‘truth’ does not mean they *cannot* serve as sources of fact. Van Maanen (1988: 119) argues that ‘stories, by their ability to condense, exemplify, and evoke a world, are as valid a device for transmitting cultural understanding as any other researcher-produced concoction’. Likewise, Bertaux (1995: 2) acknowledges that informants do not ‘tell us the whole truth and nothing but the truth’, but proposes that collecting and analysing many stories produced by a culture can enable the researcher

to discern ‘recurrent patterns concerning collective phenomena or shared collective experience in a particular milieu’ (see also Smith 1974, Rappaport 2000, Riessman 2001, Fine 2002, Glover 2003, Barber 2007). Thus, this thesis uses fan documents as qualitative, anecdotal sources of evidence that constitute and instantiate the individual and community that produced them, and as a body of collective works in which patterns and broader truths may be discerned. Accordingly, this thesis does not quote texts or make claims that are not substantiated by multiple fan accounts. To that end, archival ethnography, which is concerned with discerning patterns in vast quantities of artefacts that represent and preserve a culture, can provide useful tools for engaging with the body of fan documents. John and Jean Comaroff (1992: 33) write that

To conduct an ethnography of an archive is to discern the processes by which the past and present had constructed each other, an ethnography that among other things entailed scouring the record-images, inventories, accounts, material shards, documents, linguistic residue, silences and absences for the consolidation of practices passion and interest that produced and reproduced the site as empirical fact

Like traditional ethnography, archival ethnography is a creative, ‘multi-dimensional exercise, a coproduction of social fact and sociological imagining, an engagement of deductive with inductive, real with virtual, the already known with surprises’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992: 24). In one sense, the Internet itself can be seen as an archive, or possessed of what Derrida (1996) terms ‘archontic’ properties: it collects, stores, and disseminates materials, and organises or categorises them to some degree. Individual websites can also serve as discrete archives with their own internal structure and consignment mechanisms. In both cases, the archive functions almost automatically and by default; for example, a blog stores posts until the author (or host service) deletes them or the entire blog is erased, while Facebook users can download the complete history of their account (FB Help 2014). Further, services like the Wayback Machine or Topsy¹⁶ often render online material accessible long after the original owner has erased, abandoned, or forgotten it. However, historians caution that the materials in archives contain only a fraction of the experiences, lives, and information they record, and can serve only as a poor representation of that knowledge (Steedman 1998, 2001, 2008; Osborne 1999) – an observation that is also generally true of ethnography (see above).

¹⁶ The Wayback Machine is a digital library of ‘Internet sites and other cultural artifacts in digital form’, including multiple incarnations of the same site on different dates, to provide an evolving record (Internet Archive: ‘FAQ’). Topsy is a social analytics program and searchable archive of all Tweets since 2006.

Fan meta texts are, like many documents, artefacts of their culture, with meanings available for extraction and analysis (Barthes 1977; Comaroff & Comaroff 1992; Plummer 2001; Prior 2003, 2004, 2011; Riles 2006; Barber 2007; Stanley 2013). Ethnographers are therefore engaged in an attempt to understand the relevant culture on its own terms, in the actions and articulations of its members. This entails the reconstruction and reimagination of cultures, persons, and institutions through the analysis of stored materials in a manner that is almost archaeological in its process of discovery and interpretation (see Foucault 1972; Dirks 1993, 2002; Pels & Salemink 1994; Plummer 2001; Steedman 2001; Prior 2003, 2011; Fabian 2007; Stanley 2013). Ethnographies of the virtual must have a slightly different relationship with the past than ethnographies of more traditional archives, many of which are historic collections with relatively fixed contents, whereas the virtual archive is contemporary and constantly expanding. Thus, the imaginative enterprise of virtual ethnography is not located exclusively in the researcher's engagement with data, context, and the academy, (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992: 24; Delamont 2007; Stanley 2008), but can also involve engagement with the actors who produced those texts – as they are often still active in the community and available for interview (see below) – which shifts the enterprise back towards participant observation-style ethnography.

Ethnographers in colonial archives often characterise them not as neutral repositories for texts but as sites of struggle that are owned, controlled, and maintained by persons or entities – which can have a definite effect on the archive's content, and the conventions and conditions of its use (Pels 1997: 166; Pels & Salemink 1994, Stocking 1991; Dirks 1996, 2002). This lens is useful for examining conflicts between fans and website administrators regarding the balance of power between users and platforms that rely on user-generated content for their continued existence, and who owns that content (see Chapter 5). However, Steedman (1998, 2001, 2008) suggests that, for many historians, archives are not sites of struggle but rather un-catalogued or poorly organised and dusty collections of endless documents, artefacts, and records. By contrast, Derrida (1996: 3) sees the 'archontic' nature of the archive as predicated upon the principle of consignment, of gathering together all the relevant materials in a legitimising, coordinating system.

The reality of my research more closely resembles the picture painted by Steedman. As noted above, online data is often stored long after its creator needs or remembers it, and this enduring record is both inherent and irrelevant to the function of many websites and applications; most people don't Tweet, update their Facebook status, or even make blog posts with the intent of recording their thoughts for posterity – they post as a form of communication, of social interaction, so that others will see and respond to what they are thinking *right now* (Swan 2002, Milstein et al. 2008, Jansen et al. 2009, Milne 2010, Baudinette 2012, Konstam 2015). Because this record is often a natural by-product of users' everyday activities, and because its creation is attended by less struggle than that of colonial archives, it lacks much of the bias caused by artificial environments or intrusion by researchers. However, online documents frequently lack the organisational or indexical structures present in archives, which is a barrier to conducting comprehensive overviews and selecting sampling data (Jankowski & van Selm 2005, Herring 2010, Mazur 2010, Mehl & Gil 2010, Mahrt & Sharkow 2013). This is further exacerbated by the fact that the boundaries of the virtual archive are less definite those of a physical archive. Derrida (1996) considers expansion to be a normal facet of archontic structure, as an archive should theoretically expand to fit other relevant materials, but the virtual record grows at an unmanageable pace, with no comprehensive system for organising or even quantifying that data (Levy 2001, Gladney 2007, Fabian 2007, Markham & Baym 2009: 181).

Although the quantity and variation of online documents can make it difficult to sample, organise, and categorise data, the archival nature of the Internet has also been described as one of the greatest advantages of Internet research: 'the newsgroup as a record, an archive, is the ultimate field recorder' (Hine 2000: 22). The quantity and complexity of metadata¹⁷ stored and represented alongside archived exchanges can add detailed context to each interaction, helping researchers to recreate the flow of an exchange: the date and time of specific interactions, whether a particular comment was edited after posting and by whom, other conversational threads generated by the same text,

¹⁷ *Metadata*: 'Structured information that describes, explains, locates, or otherwise makes it easier to retrieve, use, or manage an information resource...data about data or information about information' (Guenther & Radebaugh 2004: 1). For example, the blogs and discussion boards frequented by fans usually state the username of a poster, when the post or comment was made (date, time, time zone), if and when it was edited. They may also include the user's IP address and geo-location. Additionally, threaded comments reflect the pattern and flow of responses; they show who commented, when, and in response to whom (see Chapter 3).

the geographic location of posters, the interactive history of individual users. This in turn can be used to explore broader patterns of conversation, interaction, and exchange (Dodge 2005, Mackay 2005, Utz 2010b). The enduring nature of virtual records can also disadvantage efforts to ethically protect informants' privacy and anonymity (see below). Further, bibliographies that cite publicly available documents expose the authors to a potentially significant increase in unwanted visitors – and even if a document is anonymised and the citation removed, it may still be detectable by Internet search.

Belief in the completeness of the Internet record can also be misleading: even the contextual information metadata provides is not the whole of what Mackay (2005) calls 'context of use', which includes social dimensions of an exchange that are absent from the textual record (also McMillan 2000, Herring 2010b, boyd & Crawford 2012). For example, fan interactions can extend across multiple venues, involve both public and private technologies for communication and storage, and span the virtual and actual divide. Thus, even if it were possible to collect all the public data on a particular site, it is unlikely to comprise even a fraction of the social context relevant to any of the recorded exchanges. This is a reminder that ethnography can only represent 'partial' and 'positioned' truths (Clifford 1986, Clifford & Marcus 1986, Aub-Lughod 1991, Behar & Gordon 1996, Cunliffe 2010), and that online ethnography must often be multi-sited (see Marcus 1995, Hine 2007, Coleman & von Hellerman 2011, Beneito-Montagut 2011, Cornwall 2011, Falzon 2012) if it is to approach understanding the social context of an exchange or the broader social dynamics of a community.

Data: Collection, Analysis & Ethics

[Ethnographers have] always had an intuition, sometimes an uneasy one, that verbal texts have the capacity to shed light, in a way nothing else can, on the inner life of societies. Locally-produced texts, composed and transmitted according to people's own conventions, in their own language, encapsulating their own concerns, do seem to speak as if from "within" (Barber 2007: 2)

The majority of my data is textual because the majority of fandom's online presence is textual. Fanworks can take various forms, including images, movies, and songs, and fan communication can involve visual components; most notable in my research were reaction gifs (Fig.2.2) and journal icons (Figs. 2.1, 2.4). However, written fanfiction is the most common fanwork type, and most fan interaction online is also textual, or embedded in textual exchanges: Gifs are usually used to punctuate conversations or to convey emotional responses when words are inadequate, while icons are always attached to written posts or comments by that journal. Images, both fan art and canon materials (e.g. screencaps, promotional posters), are also an important part of fan exchange. With those exceptions, non-textual fanworks were largely irrelevant to my informants' involvement in fandom, perhaps because images and textual exchanges can be shared using many of the same mechanisms. I used the terms of their experiences to shape my fieldwork, which is one reason for my focus on written data.

The other reason is that the primary concern of this thesis is not analysing fanworks (textual or otherwise), but meta documents and how they reflect and embody the practices and exchanges that constitute fan community. Sharing, gifting, and responding to fanworks can be an important part of establishing community (fic especially reflects trends in fan tastes), but the content of fanworks is often less relevant than the practices of production, consumption, and dissemination surrounding them. Thus, meta documents form the core of my data: these are works that articulate a particular experience, opinion, or perspective about fandom, individual



Fig. 2.2: Screencapped gif from *Arrested Development*. Often used to express suspicion or rejection.



Fig. 2.3: Elsa from Disney's *Frozen*. Contrast the official movie poster (left) with the artistic re-imagination of the character's race and powers (right). **Source:** Ticktoast (2014)

fans, or certain media. Meta commentary does not always need to be written to be eloquent (see *racebent!Elsa* above), but it is most common for meta discourse to take textual form. Chapter 1 distinguishes between literary and sociological meta: the former encompasses critiques or discussion of stories and media producers while the latter refers to analyses of fandom, its character, practices, history, and their implications for its future, as well as the author's own experiences of fandom. There is some overlap between the two; for example, Figure 2.3 is a critique of whitewashing and under-representing people of colour in media, and part of a broader conversation about racism in fandom and pernicious preferences for white characters and relationships (see *rydra_wong* 2006, Baker-Whitelaw 2013, Jemisin 2014). This thesis primarily uses sociological meta, because that is where explicit analyses of how fandom works and articulations of fan perceptions of the fan community are located. I also use literary meta that incorporates individuals' personal experiences into the analysis, or that illustrates particular trends, practices, or preferences that have permeated fan consciousness.

I conducted research between May 2012 and April 2015, using document analysis, participant observation, and interviews. As discussed above, I attempted to interact with my informants 'on their own terms', using only technologies and mechanisms they use to interact with each other. Chapter 3 considers fan technologies in greater detail, but their methodological implications should be discussed here, especially the three sites that served as my primary source of meta documents: Blog platforms, including personal blogs and discussion Communities (see Glossary); Tumblr, a micro-blogging platform; and fan-maintained wikis.



Fig. 2.4: LJ Icon (gif excerpts) by ainbarad-icons

Blogs, especially LiveJournal (LJ), are perhaps the most influential technology ever adopted by fandom. Even today, despite numerous disputes between LJ and fans, when fans' predominant sentiment towards the company is one of mistrust and weariness (see Chapter 5; elke-tanzer 2007; randomnessel 2007; femmequixotic 2008; Romano 2012; FL: 'LJ', 'Strikethrough'), it remains the single most popular site of fan activity.¹⁸ Many fans who abandoned LiveJournal continue to use blog platforms based on LJ's code; Dreamwidth (DW) was the most prominent of these during my research. DW allows fans to 'link' or 'mirror' their LJ accounts, enabling them to import the entire contents of their LJs, including comments and features like tags, keywords, and security settings (DW: 2011). These platforms' traditional blog format is particularly suited to facilitating and archiving meta exchanges (see Chapter 3), which is highlighted by the numerous Communities that exist on blog sites specifically to host meta conversations, or to provide links to meta essays posted on people's personal blogs (e.g. fanthropology, ship-manifesto, metafiction). Meta documents derived from all such blogging platforms are largely similar for methodological purposes. They are dynamic venues for textual interaction that are primarily associated with and controlled by the personal blog or community hosting the original post.

However, individual comments or contributions to the post are often attributable to the blogs – and thus to the virtual identity of the bloggers – that posted each response. Further, like many social interactions, these embedded exchanges can subvert, transform, or substantiate the original utterance (see Chapter 3).

¹⁸ 4,404 fans (78.5% of informants) told the OTW (2012) that LJ was their primary site for fandom activity. Fandom-counts, an LJ community created to quantify all fans on LJ for use as leverage in negotiations with LJ staff, has over 30,000 members out of LJ's 20 million (fandom-counts 2007; LJ: 'FAQ'). The fandom-counts data is not scientific, reliable, or verifiable, and is used only as a rough indication of the number of fans on LJ who felt motivated to join the community during the 2007 conflict with the LJ administration (see Chapter 5). The fandom-counts figures are likely low; the community was only promoted by word of mouth when it was first created (see jacyevans 2007, danceswithgary 2007). Thus, the number should also be contextualised with the fact that in June 2014, searching LiveJournal.com for 'fandom' yields nearly 3 million results.

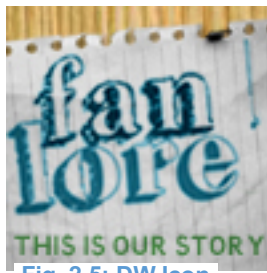


Fig. 2.5: DW Icon incorporating the FL logo, by Esskay

Fan-maintained wikis were another significant source of meta documents. I drew on three in particular: Fanlore (FL), run by the Organisation for Transformative Works (OTW), discusses fandom history, practices, trends, and notable persons; Fan History (FH) does the same, though it is associated with controversial practices like not appropriately crediting sources or protecting fans' privacy, and trying to monetize fandom (see cofax7 2008, Talis 2008a; FL: 'Fan History'); TVTropes (TVT) catalogues storytelling conventions and their uses in media and fandom, complete with examples and history. Unlike most blog entries, wiki documents are collectively created works in which the original author is often impossible to identify and the original text is not necessarily evident or intact (Leuf & Cunningham 2001, Wagner 2004, Ebersbach et al. 2008). Indeed, users with conflicting views sometimes engage in 'Edit wars' in which all parties attempt to change the content of a wiki page to reflect their opinion and erase others' contributions (Sumi et al. 2012), making wikis literal forums in which speakers 'compete...to have their own version of events accepted' (Tonkin 1992: 7). The resultant, ever-changing documents both constitute and are constituted by the currently accepted version of history. Stanley's (2006) conception of the past as a constantly evolving narrative that is constructed in the present moment(s), informed by contemporary concerns and events that occurred in the intervening time, is also a useful analytic tool for engaging with history as it is constituted in wiki documents.

Tumblr, the microblogging platform, was my third major source of meta documents. Unlike earlier blogs, Tumblr is optimised for multimedia content like pictures, videos, and gifsets (short, moving clips; see Fig. 2.2), so it is especially popular among fans of visual media like movies, comics, and anime. Microblogs are intended to host shorter content, and while they can certainly facilitate meaningful exchanges, the mechanisms they use are often less elaborate than those of other platforms. Twitter, with its 140-character limit is an extreme example of the type, and Tumblr uses a similar 'reblog' mechanic whereby users duplicate the entirety of a document on their own blog and add a response at the bottom. Thus, social interactions on Tumblr and the format of resultant documents are somewhat different from other blogs (see Chapter 3, Figs. 3.7-.8; Romano 2012; fail-fandomanon 2012a, 2013; FL: 'Tumblr'). Other sources of meta

documents include message boards (online discussion sites that host publicly viewable conversations), personal websites, fic archives, and websites like *The Daily Dot* or *The Mary Sue*, which host news relevant to media, technology, and fandom. The Archive of Our Own (AO3), a fic archive maintained by the OTW, is also used as a source of documents that illustrate fanfiction trends. AO3 is not ‘merely’ a fic archive: it is the first purpose-built multi-fandom archive run by fans to meet fan needs, address fan concerns, and free fandom from the censorship and strife of hostile webhosts (FL: ‘AO3’; OTW 2009), and it has already profoundly affected the practices, outlook and expectations of fandom (see Lothian 2011, 2012; Dalton 2012, Lawrence 2013).

Wikis and blog communities that publicised meta documents were incredibly useful methodological tools. As discussed above, the Internet can be viewed as a poorly-indexed, ever-expanding archive containing potentially infinite quantities of data. Selecting appropriate documents or data thus poses an especially difficult challenge, and considerable effort has therefore been devoted to developing random sampling techniques (Mitra & Cohen 1999; McMillan 2000; Herring 2010b; Mazur 2010; Vogt, Gardner & Haefele 2012; Mahrt & Sharkow 2013). However, my research focus was not suited to random sampling. I was interested in documents with historical significance (e.g. fics that engendered literary trends, posts that sparked debates that impacted broader fannish practices), that dealt with the topics and events relevant to my research themes (community, conflict, technology, story), or that articulated common experiences or analyses of fandom in particularly clear, resonant, or memorable prose. Following Bertaux’s (1995) assertion that it is by discerning ‘recurrent patterns’ in multiple stories that researchers may construct an understanding of a community, this thesis does not quote documents or draw on particular fan analyses of their community unless I could locate multiple sources that made similar assertions.

Therefore, blog Communities dedicated to indexing and publicising meta texts that fan administrators deemed significant were useful tools for helping identify the documents that fans within the community deemed important, representative, or interesting. ‘Fan Wank’ blog Communities dedicated to fandom controversies also provided an interesting contemporary record of disputed history. Wiki pages about topics relevant to my research themes also served as helpful starting points. This was especially true of Fanlore entries, because they are primarily comprised of quotes and links to fan blog

posts on the subject (many of which were also archived by the LJ Communities, thus corroborating their significance), which enabled me to investigate the author and context of the wiki text to a greater degree than is usually possible with wiki documents. It is also significant that fan wikis try to take a balanced view on controversial topics, providing explanations, quotations and links for all sides of an issue – and when they fail, the resulting conflict is usually documented in the wank communities. However, this is not infallible; as Stanley (2006) observes, attempts to articulate or reconstruct memories of the past are informed by the intervening events and the concerns of the present. This is especially evident in wiki pages dedicated to ongoing controversies, like the trigger warnings dispute, which try to represent each side equally – whereas conflicts that are largely resolved, like the debate about the degeneracy of slash fic, tend to favour the victorious perspective (see Chapter 4; FL: ‘slash’, ‘slash controversies’, ‘warnings’).

I also used interviews to help me locate new informants and significant meta documents via ‘snowball sampling’ (Baltar & Brunet 2012). I conducted semi-structured interviews (see below), which always included a question about other fans whose meta texts they found especially resonant, or particular documents (fics, meta essays, images) that stood out in the informant’s memory as relevant to the topics we had discussed, or to their experience of fandom. Once again, the subjective and permeable nature of memory is such that a document’s presence in a wiki page or blog community may inform their memory of which texts are notable or historically significant (see Stanley 2006, Fabian 2007). However, that does not make such recommendations any less important or valid, particularly given that a document’s significance in the present narrative of history increases the probability that it will fill the notable role attributed to it in the future, regardless of its past effect. In addition, my dedication to corroborating accounts necessitated that I occasionally use Google searches to locate substantiating documents. I did this only when informants or texts made claims that I had not seen elsewhere, and I tried only to use documents published on fannish sites like LJ or Tumblr.

In keeping with the ethnographic approach articulated above, I allowed my informants’ practices to guide the location and format of my participant observation. Thus, in acknowledgement of the site’s popularity, I began by starting a blog on LiveJournal, with a Dreamwidth to mirror its content. I created Tumblr and AO3 accounts after about a month, because my early informants unanimously insisted that those sites were important

components of modern fan participation, and very different in character, content, and user experience from fandom on traditional blogs – though they were divided on whether the differences were positive, especially with regard to Tumblr. Early informants also directed me to fan wikis as resources they consulted for other fans’ perspectives on particular topics. I originally intended to post fragments of my thesis in my blogs; almost a hypermedia ethnography in the sense described by Dicks et al. (2005), incorporating my analyses as well as selected raw data, documents, artefacts, and annotated links. I wanted to use the blogs as the basis of my participant observation: as places to start discussions, ask questions, establish a presence in fandom, and give informants the opportunity to comment on my work before I finalised my analyses. I had marginal success; my blogs generated interest from several people who became informants, and they proved a convenient archive of limited selections of my work that demonstrated integrity and benign intent. Otherwise, this approach was a failure; I discovered that ‘engaging in sustained data analysis alongside data collection is often very difficult in practice’, as both are very demanding and time consuming activities (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 160). Further, I could not maintain a blogging schedule that would generate the large audience I had envisioned, and any attempt to do so distracted from more fruitful activities.

I abandoned my blogs after a year, focusing on other field sites and methods. This was not problematic because my primary focus was always on the wealth of meta texts that fans produce for their own internal purposes, without the prompting of a researcher. However, using such texts raises the problem of consent; of which virtual documents it is ethically permissible to use in academic research, how they may be used, and to what extent it is necessary for a researcher to obtain permission from the original author to quote or cite their words. The ESRC (2012: 11) suggests that

Information provided for use in forums or spaces on the Internet...that are intentionally public would be valid to consider ‘in the public domain’, but the public nature of any communication or information on the Internet should always be critically examined, and the identity of individuals protected.

Several fan scholars agreed that they felt free to use anything they ‘could access...online without passwords’ (Rebaza 2014). However, Markham and Buchanan (2012: 6-7) observe in their ethical guidelines for the Association of Internet Researchers that

Individual and cultural definitions and expectations of privacy are ambiguous, contested, and changing. People may operate in public spaces but maintain strong perceptions or expectations of privacy. Or, they may acknowledge that the substance

of their communication is public, but that the specific context in which it appears implies restrictions on how that information is – or ought to be – used by other parties

Fans are keenly aware of these issues, and grapple with them not only in relation to academic research but in terms of their own practices. Ithiliana (2005) discusses the blurring of the public/private divide online in relation to shifting perceptions about how safe, personal, and protected an individual's journal is or should be. Musgrove (2013b) argues that all fans should consider it imperative to ask permission of other ficcers before borrowing characters they invented or before posting links to others' fanworks in particularly public spaces, like a celebrity's Twitter account. Artists on Tumblr consider it theft when another user 'reposts' their artwork rather than 'reblogging' it with a link back to the creator's account (see mishasminions 2012). Conversely, many fans contend that podficcers (who turn written fics into audio plays) should not have to get permission from the original ficcer before turning her story into a podfic (fire-juggler 2012, jedusaur 2013, FL: 'podfic', 'podfic permission'). Melusina (2005b) similarly argues that Metafandom, an LJ community that publicises meta essays published in individual blogs, should not have to seek prior permission from authors to link to their journals – though she notes that Metafandom honours all requests not to link to particular journals or posts. Finally, Morgan Dawn (2014) responded to the above fan scholars' assertion that all non-password protected fanworks are fair use (Rebaza 2014) by making a blog post publicising this trend, and encouraging all fans to be aware of the choices they make about privacy protections and technology with regard to both the development of fandom and their own personal safety.

I used these fannish discussions of etiquette, ownership, and privacy to help me navigate my informants' cultural expectations, and to help me construct an appropriately respectful and ethical guide for negotiating consent and using fan texts in this thesis. I established several categories of document and their attendant ethical implications, as defined by sensitivity of content¹⁹ and format-specific methodological concerns. Documents that are quoted directly or summarised explicitly entail greater ethical responsibilities than texts that are merely referenced as parenthetical citations to provide examples or evidence of a general trend. The resulting standard may seem overly harsh given the

¹⁹ I use 'sensitive' to denote the potential harm that could result from the use of a document in my thesis; in particular, whether this would constitute a violation of privacy or make the author feel unsafe. I used fannish conventions and personal judgment to guide my classification of each document.

relatively permissive position of the relevant ethical bodies and scholarly consensus (ESRC 2012, Markham & Buchanan 2012, Rebaza 2014). However, maintaining this ethical standard was not an unsustainable hindrance in this case, as the vast quantities of meta documents ensured that when a particular document was unavailable, I could usually find another to take its place – and if I could not, this indicated that its contents were not as common or generalizable as I had believed. The categories are as follows:

1. Texts with no discernable author; e.g. wiki entries and anonymous blog comments. anatsuno (2012) argues that when fanworks are posted anonymously, the author is ‘protected in [her] anonymity, but...also **cannot** claim ownership. Hence there is no reason that [her]...non-existent ownership be socially acknowledged or respected’ (see also jedusaur 2013). Likewise, I held that anonymity protected authors sufficiently and made securing permission impossible, so I considered Category 1 documents fair use.

2a. Documents published in unambiguously public or official forums (e.g. webzines, newspapers), or in contexts explicitly intended to allow authors to disseminate their words to a broad audience (e.g. open LJ communities, certain web archives).

2b. Ambiguously public texts (i.e. those not protected by passwords or firewalls, but lacking the implicit permission of 2a), that contain no personal or sensitive information. This includes but is not limited to fanfiction, message board posts, images, personal websites, and posts in explicitly non-personal blogs.

I considered all Category 2 documents fair use for citation, as they were publicly available, contained no significant personal information, and 2a authors had consensually submitted their work to the public domain. I did not request permission to quote Category 2 posts, but rather informed authors of my intention to use their texts in this thesis. This was a compromise between the dominant ethical consensus among scholars based on the practicalities of doing Internet research and the fact that not everyone online necessarily agrees about what constitutes a public forum, whether participating in public exchanges necessarily confers consent, and how researchers should use publicly available data (Barnes 2006; McKee & Porter 2009; Orton-Johnson 2010; Zimmer 2010; boyd & Marwick 2011; Markham & Buchanan 2012). I made two attempts to contact the authors of quoted Category 2 texts: once after completing the first draft of the relevant chapter and once before finalising it. I offered them the same options with regard to negotiating consent, use, and protections afforded to Category 4 authors (below), and I respected the wishes of those who asked me to refrain from using their work. However, if I received no response after two attempts, I considered the use of such public documents ethically sustainable.

3. Multi-author exchanges and formats that made it difficult to determine which contributor(s) had the right to grant permission. For example, on Tumblr the original entry often comprises only a fraction of the total document, and the text's meaning can change dramatically as new contributions are added (see Chapter 3; Figs 3.7-.8). Similarly, locating individual participants in blog and message board exchanges was difficult, time consuming and futile; many authors had forgotten the comment(s) in question, and the nature of these technological exchanges was such that commenters' accounts were more likely to be defunct, and attempts to track down their owners were usually met with error messages and silence.

Ultimately, I found it most productive to summarise the contents of the discussion or to identify a single quote that encapsulated the substance of the exchange. In the former case I negotiated consent with the author whose original post had prompted the exchange, while in the latter I contacted the author of the relevant comment – and in both cases I used the sensitivity of the contents to determine whether the text qualified as Category 2 or 4. When representing Tumblr posts in their entirety, I contacted all authors who substantively contributed to the document (when denied permission I either found another example or omitted their portion of the text), but in the case of non-substantive contributions (e.g. 'Wow!'), I simply anonymised the authors.

- 4a. Documents containing personal or potentially sensitive information, in any venue.
- 4b. All texts posted in personal blogs, even those containing no sensitive information and published without privacy protections. These might seem better suited to Category 2, however, there is an explicit connection between blogs and their authors' virtual and actual identities, making them intensely personal spaces embedded in a social network that can seem bounded and secure (see Chapter 3); thus increasing the likelihood that they were published with an expectation of privacy or a limited audience. Further, posts that are not sensitive remain embedded in the broader blog, which often contains personal information; therefore, citing even impersonal entries can compromise an individual's privacy.
- 4c. Documents that should be designated 4a or b, but which have been quoted verbatim and linked to in multiple public venues, such as wikis, webzines, or news sites.
- 4d. Texts posted on personal blogs that the authors clearly and explicitly intended as public statements, general resources, or venues for public debate – particularly those publicised by Metafandom and similar Communities.

I tried to contact the authors of Category 4 documents three times: after completing the first draft of the relevant chapter, a month later, and before finalising the chapter. Regarding the latter two categories, I deemed that the individual's privacy had already been waived or compromised to such a degree that being cited in academic works was unlikely to have a significant effect. In these cases, if I did not receive a response from the author after the third attempt, I made a personal judgement about whether and how I could ethically use these texts given their potential to cause harm and their already

public status. In some cases, particularly 4d texts, I considered it ethically justifiable to quote and reference as per Category 2; in others, particularly 4c, I preferred to anonymise or summarise for the author's protection; and in many cases I considered it necessary to omit reference to the document altogether. I do not quote, cite, or mention any Category 4a or b texts in this thesis without explicit, ongoing, and informed authorial consent.

Following Orton-Johnson (2010: 4.5), I understood 'informed consent as an ongoing negotiation rather than a signature on a form at the start of the research process'. My initial request for permission usually served as a starting point for more in-depth interviews, so consent negotiation served as a tool for interacting with informants and acquiring data. I discovered through trial and error that fans often preferred to have a clear understanding of how I intended to use their work before they were comfortable discussing permissions, so I found it most productive to finish the first draft of each chapter before initiating contact. After completing each draft, I approached the authors of all documents used in that chapter, as determined by ethical classification. I introduced myself and my research, apprised them of my interest in their work, and attached an excerpt from the chapter that included their text. I asked if they approved of my use and interpretation of their words, if there was anything they wanted to add or clarify, and requested their permission to use their texts in this specific way. I made it clear that they had the right to refuse, and outlined a number of methods I could use to protect their privacy and anonymity if they agreed.

Anonymity is an especially complex issue in Internet research. Scholars in the actual world can use pseudonyms to protect their informants' identities and shield them from attention, but the online public/private divide is significantly more permeable and difficult to protect (Markham & Buchanan 2012, Orton-Johnson 2010, Markham & Baym 2009). As noted above (fn. 15), many experienced members of online communities take steps to obscure their legal identities, so their virtual identities act as *de facto* pseudonyms that hide much of the information an ethnographer would normally seek to protect. However, there is another level of identity involved. A fan's virtual identity may be the accumulation of several years' worth of exchanges, spanning multiple platforms. It is common for individuals to use the same screenname for email, blog, and fic archive accounts, so using such screennames in this thesis or linking to posts made under a name can direct readers not only to the text in question but to a whole network of personal documents and exchanges. Alternate pseudonyms are not an

effective solution: a web search for direct quotes will usually yield the original document, complete with screenname and attendant context. Many blog sites have features that help protect journals from being indexed by search engines, but this only minimises rather than prevents posts from being discovered in this way (DW 2009).

Markham (2012) suggests ‘fabrication’ as a potential solution: using data from multiple sources to create ‘bricolage-style’ composite accounts that do not directly quote any source to the extent that it will be searchable or definitely recognisable. There has been considerable resistance to this method for being disingenuous or outright false (Markham 2012: 338-341), but as Karp (2011: 349) observes ‘Everything we write is, in fact, a story we are telling...but it is a story disciplined by your data. I mean, you can’t just tell *any* story.’ However, this does not address the fact that many fans are proud of their works and want to be credited for them in all contexts, as demonstrated by the debates about podfic permissions and appropriately attributing art on Tumblr (mishasminions 2012, fire-juggler 2012, jedusaur 2013, thefourthvine 2013; FL: ‘podfic’, ‘podfic permission’). Thus, I considered it necessary to attempt to negotiate the terms of use for each document individually through interviews. Most fans preferred to be cited and linked as I would any academic source. I offered more reticent authors two options: Fabrication or summarisation, in which I approximated their text without including enough of their words for an Internet search, and anonymisation, whereby I quoted them directly but did not reference their screenname or link to their blog directly. I explained each option and its associated risks, and worked with them to develop a unique solution that they were comfortable with.

Once we had negotiated acceptable terms of use for the document, I asked if the author was willing to discuss it further. If they agreed, this precipitated an interview exchange. The initial interaction was usually conducted through whatever mechanism the platform technology provided; often ‘private message’ systems that enable blog users to interact with each other directly rather than through public posts. Most of my interviews were conducted via email, as the asynchronous format of such exchanges allowed my informants and myself to reply as it suited both of our schedules (Kivits 2005; James & Busher 2009: 93). If both of us were available at the same time, I conducted some interviews using synchronous technologies, usually GoogleChat. Some contend that email can produce a comfortable one-to-one relationship between researcher and respondent

(Kivits 2005: 35), while others believe that the unfamiliarity of the field means that the interview must build that relationship before an exchange can yield meaningful data (Markham 2004a, Kivits 2005; James 2007; James & Busher 2009: 79). I found that chats were better for building such a rapport, as the synchronous format was suited to facilitating short exchanges of personal information, and was also the venue my informants most commonly used for getting to know each other as friends rather than familiar presences in their online activities. However, I found email preferable for the substantive portions of the interview, as it allowed me to carefully structure my questions and ensure that I had gathered all the necessary information before concluding the interview. I frequently used a combination of email and chat to achieve the best possible results. For the reasons discussed above, I did not use other technologies or attempt to contact informants in person because that would have exceeded the boundaries of ordinary fan interaction.

Interviews allowed me to access some of the document's 'context of use' (Mackay 2005). They were semi-structured (Ayres 2008; Hanna 2012; James & Busher 2009: 24), meaning that I usually touched on a number of topics, but the phrasing of my questions varied, and sometimes I omitted or added topics as needed. Generally, I asked why the author had written the account, what experiences they believed had contributed to it, whether it was relevant to any other texts written by themselves or others, and how they believed it related to their fannish and/or broader online identity or their position in fandom. I explained my interpretation of the text, checked that it was correct and asked if they wanted to add anything to it, and inquired whether they still held the position expressed in the text, how their position had evolved since its publication and whether they had had any subsequent experiences that reinforced or altered their perspective. If I had not addressed the topic before, I usually concluded interviews on the procedural note discussed above, by asking informants if they could think of any documents relevant to our discussions, or if they knew other fans (personally or by reputation) who were interested in these subjects. This not only helped me locate new potential sources (both informants and documents), it helped me visualise the network by which information and accounts were disseminated, to locate the flow of discourse and exchange, and the sites that were most popular or influential.

I am aware that interviews are no more or less reliable or subjective than meta texts; 'Interviews are, by their very nature, social encounters where speakers collaborate in

producing retrospective (and prospective) *accounts* or *versions* of their past (or future) actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts' (Rapley 2004: 16; see also Atkinson 1990, James 2007). Further, memories and accounts of the past are informed and influenced by subsequent events and the contemporary social context in which they are produced (Stanley 2006; Atkinson & Silverman 1997; Atkinson 2005, Hammersley & Atkinson 2007; Silverman 2011). This is especially difficult to control for since we are still coming to understand the Internet as a social context (Markham 2004b, Hine 2005, Boellstorff 2008, James & Busher 2009, Markham & Baym 2009). As discussed above, these criticisms are valid, but their relevance is diminished by my focus on exploring and analysing the ways people understand, represent, and position themselves within their online communities, and the patterns and details of that performance, rather than in the relationship of that performance to their 'actual' lives.

It is impossible to definitively quantify the fan documents that informed this thesis. Some were read and forgotten long before I began formal research, many I did not save because they were not relevant to my research themes, and some early records were lost to the vagaries of time and technology. However, I have over 1,500 documents bookmarked, and I estimate that I easily read twenty times that number while researching this thesis. Not all of those texts were substantive or relevant, nor did I receive permission to use all of them in this thesis, but they all played a part in shaping my understanding of the character and practices of fandom. The fan-produced meta documents quoted in this thesis include: 90 entries, comments, and images posted on traditional blogs (with an additional 9 posts or comments quoted or archived in other journals); 32 Tumblr documents (including images); 7 wiki entries; 11 LJ icons; 10 other images (e.g. gifs, meta, fanart); and 30 miscellaneous documents (e.g. fanfiction; message board posts; digitized fanzines; texts posted on personal websites, news sites, and other archives). The rest of my data is derived from 22 in-depth interviews conducted by myself between May 2012 and April 2015. Because my primary interest is in unprompted meta documents, most of my data is derived from blog posts, as that format is best-suited to facilitating such exchanges (see Chapter 3). I therefore consider this the default, and do not specify when quoting blog entries or Tumblr posts; all other document types are noted in the text.

Conclusion

This thesis explores the question of how fans understand, articulate, and participate in ‘the online fan community’ from several perspectives. It rests on the dual foundation of meta texts, fans’ reflexive self-analyses and depictions of the character and function of fandom, and my own analyses as a participant observer in fandom and an ethnographer working in an archive of sorts to construct a picture of online fandom by interpreting and analysing documents. This focus on personal accounts and understandings highlights Stanley and Wise’s (2006: 1.4) observation that ‘social life is both founded in a material factual reality and also involves disagreements and disjunctures between people’s views of “the facts”’. Further, stories and other personal accounts allow the teller to confirm, alter, or deny existing claims about identity, and these claims will vary depending on the audience, context, and the passage of time (see Nadel-Klein 1991, Stanley 1992, 2006; Tonkin 1992, Norrick 1997, Reissman 2001). This is equally true of ethnographic accounts, which are at best partial representations of a culture, informed and influenced by the researcher’s biography, identity, and position in the field (Clifford 1986, Clifford & Marcus 1986, Abu-Lughod 1991, Behar & Gordon 1996, Willis & Trondman 2000, Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, Cunliffe 2010). However, these disparate and contradictory accounts are also a reflection of a truth, a reality that exists in a particular historic and cultural context (Mills 2000, Stanley & Wise 2006). As such, they can be analysed and interpreted, providing the ethnographer draws on an appropriate range of accounts, keeps their local context in mind, and carefully selects the theoretical framework used to navigate disparate perspectives and construct a broader picture (Abu-Lughod 1991, Behar & Gordon 1996, Hammersley & Atkinson 2007).

As a whole, the approach in this chapter fills an important gap in qualitative digital research, by presenting a new method of engaging with online documents as reflections and locations of online social lives and identities. This forms the basis for a discussion, in the next chapter, of virtual documents as living, dynamic social spaces that do not merely capture interactions but also constitute and facilitate them in much the same manner as a physical space. This methodology also addresses a set of specific concerns in fan studies, which has recently been grappling with the need to return to its ethnographic roots, and to find ways to incorporate and reflect fannish experiences and voices into academic scholarship (Booth 2013, Bennett 2014, Evans & Stasi 2014).

Chapter 3: Built on a Foundation of Words?

Fan Community, Technology & Infrastructure

The physical facts of the infrastructure dictate the direction and shape of the discourse, determine access and capacity. Infrastructure in the conceptual sense is about connotation and history; it is the associations we make when we hear the relevant word, the ways in which the physical facts of a thing change our own mental processes, the ways in which our previous experiences (as individuals or societies) dictate the ways in which we can think about or understand the thing (Larkin 2008: 244-250)

This chapter examines the question ‘How do fans understand the nature and function of the fan community?’ through the lens of technology and infrastructure. It evaluates the mechanisms that media fans use to interact, which facilitate the construction of fan community and influence how it is conceptualised. To begin with, fandom is built on a foundation of words – and, more specifically, of textual communication. Images, music, or movies can play a vital role in fan interaction, but they are usually embedded in or contextualised by written exchanges. Furthermore, although much has been made of the Internet as an environment in which all communication must be mediated through technological channels and the way that this sets virtual contexts and interactions apart from actual-world experiences (see Lysloff 2003; Baym, Zhang, & Lin 2004; Herring 2010a; Beneito-Montagut 2011), the fact is that mediated exchanges within the pages of fan-produced magazines (*zines*), were an integral part of fannish interaction even before the Internet. Although zine exchanges cannot be divorced from the face-to-face interactions and actual-world relationships of the fans who participated in their creation, they also represent a significant and distinct genre of pre-Internet fan interaction. Thus, fandom’s migration online did not represent a departure from previous unmediated actual-world interactions; if anything, online technologies removed a level of mediation by allowing fans to communicate more swiftly, directly, and intimately. My research demonstrates that fans are aware of this, and of the influence that various mediating technologies can and have had upon the nature and character of their community. This is perhaps best reflected in the periods of panic and debate that occur each time the majority of fan activity seems to be transferring to a new technological platform.

In order to analyse these technologies, I draw on Larkin’s theory of infrastructure, which he ‘understands as the totality of both technical and cultural systems that create institutionalized structures whereby goods of all sorts circulate, connecting and binding people into collectivities’ (Larkin 2008: 6). His emphasis on infrastructure as a means

of facilitating and shaping discourse is congruent with the central role that conversation plays in fan practice, and with fan concerns about the effect that each new technology will have on the shape and character of their community. Similarly, the suggestion that both infrastructure and the exchanges it facilitates and influences can bind people into collectivities aligns with this thesis's themes of community and symbolic interactionism, which are concerned with the ways that fan exchanges can create, modify, or transform fans' collective understanding of what 'the fan community' means, and can facilitate the adoption of individual members into that group.

Establishing this social context is one reason this chapter begins with a discussion of technologies that were largely abandoned by the time my fieldwork began. Because participation in fandom, and therefore in the discourse that shapes conceptions of fandom, is intrinsically tied to the technologies that mediate and facilitate these exchanges, many of the preceding technologies (virtual and analogue) had a profound effect on the style and format of later fan practices, and on the character of fandom as a whole. Therefore, despite my primary focus on contemporary online fandom, this chapter begins with an analytical overview of historical technologies like zines, the fan-produced magazines that were fans' primary communicative technology for decades, and early online technologies like Usenet newsgroups and email mass mailing lists. The second section is about the broader patterns of fan use of online technologies, and its effect on the constitutive practices and discourse of the community. It highlights the fact that fan activity is rarely confined to a single platform, but is rather a vast infrastructure, a network in which each technology has its own place and its own (variable) uses, which are navigated and inhabited by individual fans or subsections of fandom. Section three deals with blogs, particularly the function and conceptualisation of LiveJournal (LJ) and its impact on fandom practices, exchanges, and character. Section four examines the inherently textual and mediated nature of fan discourse; it argues that written records of fan exchanges are not entextualised transcripts but actual interactions, archived but ever-shifting artefacts, and considers the implications of this assertion for understanding and analysing fan texts and fan use and adaptation of technology. Section five discusses the micro-blog Tumblr, and the modern, multimedia reshaping of fan discourse. This chapter overall engages with the development of the idea of 'the fan community' over time, particularly with respect to the influence of the various technologies that mediated the exchanges through which that conception was constituted.

The data in this chapter is derived from contemporary and retrospective fan discussions of various technologies, and from accounts of the history, development, and transformation of fandom as a whole. Most of the quoted documents are cited in wiki entries about specific platforms, collected bibliographies of fan meta, or relevant tags in fan-maintained discussion Communities on various blog platforms (cathexys 2005a-c, Fanfic Symposium 2006, Fanthropology 2005, metafiction 2015; FL: ‘APA’, ‘Fandom and the Internet’, ‘History of Media Fanzines’, ‘Letterzine’, LJ, ‘The Impact of Blogging on Fandom’, ‘Tumblr’, ‘Zines and the Internet’).

For Those in the Know:

The Early Days of Fandom (1930-2000)

Although it is possible to draw connections between modern media fandom and historic enthusiasts, its current form only began to take recognisable shape in the 1960s, around the time that *Star Trek* debuted on American television – and, more importantly, when media fanzines were invented. Fanzines (or *zines*) are ‘non-commercial, non-professional magazines



Fig. 3.1: First issue of *The Comet* (Palmer & Bennis 1930)

which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves’ produced by and for a community using the cheapest and most accessible technologies available (Duncombe 1997: 6; Dykeman 2009, Cooper 2007, Wertham 1973). Science fiction fans began conversing with each other in the letters pages of pulp magazines like Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories*, but their desire to interact quickly exceeded the capacities of such columns. The fan solution to this problem was zines, and there are three genres most relevant to the present topic: *SF fanzines*, created in the 1930s, *media fanzines*, from the 1960s, and *Amateur Press Association zines* (APAs) or *letterzines* (Coppa 2006, Katz n.d.). SF and media zines might both contain stories, art, editorials, author interviews, discussions and reviews of recent publications, and reports about conventions (fannish gatherings). However, SF zines only allowed original fiction, though non-textual fanworks were permitted, whereas media zines were primarily concerned with fanfiction, or with non-fiction content that pertained to reading and writing fic (Bacon-Smith 1992: 112; Coppa 2006; Lichtenberg 2006).

Many APAs were direct extensions of magazine letters pages, so they were often dedicated to meta analysis of particular media or of fandom (FL: 'APA', 'letterzine'). The split between media and SF zines also marks a division in the community: media fandom was lower in cultural capital, being associated with erotic fanfiction, female fans, and TV shows and movies, while science fiction and fantasy fandom was characterised by concern with literature or more 'serious' cinematic works, and even today there are those who erroneously consider SF/F the province of straight white men (see Bacon-Smith 1992, Cox 2015, Hurley 2015, VanDerWeff 2015).

Zine content was created, edited, photocopied, and disseminated by fans, usually for a nominal fee to cover production and shipping costs (Wertham 1973; Bacon-Smith 1992; Perkins 2002; Green, Jenkins & Jenkins 2006; Lichtenberg 2006; FL: 'History of Media Fanzines', 'zine'). In his definitive study of zine culture, Frederick Wertham²⁰ (1973) suggests that zines provided an important physical link for geographically separated communities. Anderson (1986: 33-35) makes a similar observation about the everyday function of newspapers in imagining the nation-community. In addition to their official role as disseminators of information, newspapers reinforce a community's sense of connection and continuity. When a person buys a newspaper, she does so with the knowledge that people across the country are buying the same paper at almost the same time; they are folding it the same way, reading the same articles, learning the same facts. The newspaper is a physical reminder that everyone in the nation-community is living in the same world with the same news. The act of reading is what Anderson (1986: 35) calls a 'mass ceremony' and Hegel 'a kind of realistic morning prayer' (in Descombes 1993: 3): collective practices that bring groups together. Zines were never as widespread as newspapers, but they did give fans a similar physical representation of their connection and a corresponding sense of continuity, as one fan describes:

²⁰ One cannot reference Wertham in fan studies without noting that he was an anti-comics crusader whose book, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), incited a moral panic that ruined 24 out of 29 publishers of crime comics, including the only contemporary company that dealt with adult themes, EC comics. Surviving companies instated the Comics Code Authority to enforce 'family friendly' content before outside bodies could censor them. Comics fans still hold Wertham responsible for decades of juvenile and uncontroversial comics. Wertham, however, repented when a comics fan, Dwight Decker, sent him samples of several fanzines and challenged his assumptions about fans, comics, and the fan community. The resultant book, *The World of Fanzines: A Special Form of Communication* (Wertham 1973), is the first academic text that attempted to deal analytically and fairly with zines and their place in fandom (Decker 1987).

First, I just sit a minute with the zine in my lap and feel its weight. I turn the table of contents and read that, plus any comments...[from] the editors...Then I page through the entire zine...just looking at the illos and imagining the stories that they are illustrating. Only then comes the serious business: THE FIRST READING. I read right through each page in order...I like to get the feel of a zine, the momentum, because I feel that every editor puts a lot of thought and energy into the distribution and order of the material. You can tell a little of the personality of a zine ed[itor] by the way they arrange things (Liebold & Biggs 1984)

Wertham (1973) also found that the cheap and informal nature of zine production meant that distribution to people who were not subscribers or participants was often irregular and idiosyncratic; some were not for sale at all, or could only be acquired by barter or at personal request. Among other things, this limited circulation to those in the community, which in turn made editors more comfortable with publishing contributors' addresses, even at a time of growing personal privacy and security concerns. Comfort was important because fanzines worked on what Wertham (1973) describes as an 'open system', meaning that (as with most applications that rely on user-generated content) interaction and reader participation was indispensable – and he considered publishing contributors' personal addresses integral to establishing and maintaining 'openness'. Zines were fandom's primary interactive technology for decades, and their significance is attributable partly to this sense of openness and partly to the fact that they were more practically and fiscally feasible than conventions and fan clubs,²¹ the other contemporary options for participation. In addition, conventions have historically been more masculine spaces, frequently overtly hostile towards others, which further encouraged non-male fans to participate via zines or designated media fandom spaces (see Bacon-Smith 1992, Trota 2014, Figa 2015 Nicki 2015). Despite this, women have always attended conventions in vast numbers and actual-world relationships were an essential part of media fandom; as cupidssbow told me, 'Zines are really important, but they arose not only from technology which made copying possible, but because networks were already being forged in face-to-face interactions'. Although the importance of actual-world contact in online fandom is variable, the point about social relationships in an open system holds true in any technology: The primary reason my informants reported

²¹ Conventions are physical gatherings of fans, usually held annually. This schedule, and the fact that attendees must pay for accommodation and transportation, makes cons a poor basis for consistent fandom participation, so attendance was often supplemented or replaced by zine subscriptions. Fan clubs are local societies, usually found in colleges or large urban centres. They meet more frequently, sometimes once a week, but their fixed locations make them an untenable option for fans living in remote areas. This was less true for non-American fans, as international postage is more comparable to the cost of travelling to local meetings.



Fig. 3.2: LJ Icon by mary_greenman

for their continued engagement with fandom, for logging on each day, or for changing technological platforms, was creating and maintaining friendships with other fans (see Fig. 3.2).

However, the zine format had certain limitations, many of which transferred to fandom as a whole because of how important zines

were in early eras. Significantly, although zines could be delivered to anyone with a postal address and a small disposable income, insular circulation made zines almost inaccessible to new fans, especially those from isolated areas who were unlikely to stumble across fan clubs, conventions, or other fans who could initiate them into fan practices. The easiest way to gain access was through a ‘gatekeeper system’ of mentors who guided new fans through the idiosyncrasies of zine culture and participation in the fan community, simultaneously installing them into a built-in social network of fannish acquaintances (Bacon-Smith 1992, Lichtenberg 2006). However, mentors could be difficult to locate; fans were aware that they were perceived as deviant and undesirable, and for media fans, Cupidsbow asserted, secrecy is ‘very much about women being frightened of real world violence and repercussions if their involvement gets out’ (see Chapter 1, Bacon-Smith 1992: 203-215, Jenson 1992, Hills 2002, Arduinna 2012b). Zines also had limited print runs, so it was difficult for fans to access stories or discussions from before their time. An economy developed around borrowing or photocopying old zines for new members, which helped foster fandom friendships, but limits were still imposed by printing and posting costs. Also, zines had to be paid for, stored physically, and either bought in-person (at conventions) or posted, which restricted the access of fans without independent income and transportation, particularly those who lived with disapproving parents or partners (Bacon-Smith 1992).

When fans began establishing an online presence, Usenet and mass mailing lists were among the first technologies they adopted. These both operate in a manner that mirrored many of the functions of zines, and possess many of the strengths and weaknesses of that format. Indeed, one zine advised contemporary fans to ‘Think of them as online letterzines, only with an instantaneous turnaround’ (FL: ‘mailing list’). Usenet (from *Users’ Network*) ran on UNIX, which was designed to be an operating ‘system around which fellowship would form’ (Ritchie 1980). Users could join *newsgroups* dedicated to particular topics, including specific TV shows or genres. Participants made posts that were

delivered to the inboxes of all other members of that newsgroup, who could then respond to that post or to start a new topic. Kaltenbach (2000: 3) describes newsgroups as ‘unique discourse communities’ with an established body of regular participants, their own jargon, and distinctive traditions of conversation and interaction that were explicitly designed to foster community around textual discourse and shared interests (see also Baym 2000, Jenkins 2006a). From the users’ perspective, mass mailing lists operated like newsgroups, except that they received posts in their email rather than Usenet inboxes (Fletcher 2008).

Like zines, the historic content of mailing lists and Usenet groups was difficult for non-members to access. Neither technology originally possessed archiving features, leading Versaphile (2001: 4) to describe Usenet as ‘possibly the most ephemeral platform of all’; outside bodies began systematically storing Usenet posts in 1995, and the service that operated most fan mailing lists started archiving in 2001 (Harris 2001, Yahoo! n.d.). Some individuals saved messages in personal archives, which produced extensive but inconsistent results. Because new subscribers could not see exchanges from before they joined, they had to rely on older members to contextualise conversations, educate them in fan practices and the history of both fandom and the newsgroup. As it had with zines, this passively enforced gatekeeper traditions and encouraged the development of social ties, by compelling fans who wanted access to older texts to reach out.

The Internet provided unprecedented solutions to fandom’s accessibility and visibility problems. Society began moving online, bringing whole new groups only an Internet search away from discovering fandom. In particular, younger fans whose activities had been limited by their parents were now able to access fandom on their own (Hellekson & Busse 2006: 13). General participation became more convenient and easier to hide: it only required an email address, and incriminating web histories were swiftly erased. Physical storage was irrelevant, and hard copies of zines could no longer ‘out’ their owners (Coppa 2006). However, not all fans were impressed by the changes wrought by the Internet; some complained that ‘netfen’ were ‘solitary’, that their disinclination to pay for zines when they could read fic online for free proved their disregard for community, conventions, ethics, or fandom history (Verba 1988). In addition, the increased visibility and broader population of potential fans eroded the gatekeeper system, despite the ways that the technical infrastructure of newsgroups and mailing lists encouraged it. Veteran fans still remember the ‘Eternal September’ of 1993, when AOL added newsgroups to

its services, drastically increasing Usenet's population. It was dubbed 'Eternal' because regulars were so outnumbered that it was almost impossible to acclimate 'newbies' to pre-existing Usenet culture, so the experience was one of unending invasion (FL: 'Fandom and the Internet'; Arduinna 2012b). Though the term is controversial, many at the time dubbed these newcomers *feral* fans because they had not entered fandom through the traditional gatekeeper route. Feral fans were considered a consequence of the Internet; in later days whole fandoms were so labelled for their collective ignorance of fan traditions (FL: 'feral'; vee_fic 2006, fail_fandomanon 2012b).

By contrast, the phrase 'fan community' gained traction in the 1970s, the decade immediately following the genesis of modern fandom in the pages of media fanzines. Notably, the phrase was particularly used in context of establishing rules to govern social behaviour within the community (Southard 1982: 20). That notion of community being defined by a set of behavioural standards and membership as predicated on adherence to those standards is one that has persisted throughout fandom history; it can be seen in veteran fans' consternation at the Eternal September, and in more recent debates about the validity and relevance of terms like *feral* in contemporary fan discourse. This emphasises the importance of social interaction; my informants frequently identified the distinction between casual fans and fandom fans as participation in fandom activities and awareness of the rules for doing so.²² Furthermore, as already noted, most of these exchanges are textual, or revolve around the production of written works. However, there was always a tension between the centrality of interaction, particularly the need for active fans to induct new members into the standards of behaviour that defined 'the fan community', and the fact that many veteran fans were frightened of being exposed as deviants in their professional and personal lives (Arduinna 2012a, cupidssbow interviews). Participation in fandom was therefore confined to discrete and hidden spaces, which perpetuated and reinforced the gatekeeper and mentorship system.

Thus, the hidden record produced by all early fan technologies, virtual and analogue, encouraged interaction and social connections between fans who wanted to access historic

²² This is especially interesting because the Internet uniquely enables the existence of *lurkers* who read fic and observe fan exchanges but do not participate. It is impossible to determine the quantity or proportion of lurkers to active fans because they are inherently difficult to identify and recruit into studies, so the resulting statistics display self-selection bias (Fu, Winship & Mare 2004). Despite viewing lurkers as part of their community, my informants still considered participation an important distinguishing feature of fandom.

documents, which in turn encouraged adherence to community standards of behaviour. However, the invisibility or inaccessibility of records also contributed to a sense that fandom existed almost entirely in the present; the notion of fan history was ephemeral, extant only in the minds and memories of experienced fans (Versaphile 2011), which are as much products of the present as the past (see Stanley 1992, 2006), as a semi-textual oral history. More anecdotally, when Joan Marie Verba attempted to write a history of *Star Trek* fandom in the early 1990s, she was stunned by her fellow fans' lack of interest in accurate records or in fandom history more generally (1996: viii). Today, the opposite is true: archives, caches, and stored records are an intrinsic part of fan discourse (Versaphile 2011), especially with regard to conflict or controversy, as are personal and general accounts of fan history – as this and later chapters will demonstrate. This is due in large part to the technologies that facilitate fan exchanges; the modern virtual archive is significantly more visible, accessible, and permanent than its predecessors, which has had a profound effect on fannish practices and the character of modern fandom.

The Growth of Online Fandom (1990-2005)

It is best to understand the modern online fan community as comprised of (and within) a vast multi-sited but interconnected technological network. That is to say, online fans do not limit their participation to a single platform, or even a small handful. They often identify a single core site of their fannish activity (usually a blog like LiveJournal, Dreamwidth or Tumblr), which is supplemented by numerous other platforms. Other core technologies include zines, Usenet groups, mass mailing lists, and message boards (below), and the properties that made them so essential will be discussed later in this section. Furthermore, although the period of their ascendancy can overlap, transitions from one core technology to another are usually accompanied by a period of crisis and controversy, similar to the debate that surrounded fan migration online, during which some insist that fandom as they know it is changing forever and for the worst – which they believe is demonstrated by declining sociability, cohesiveness, sense of community, and adherence to traditional practices (FL: 'feral', 'Fandom and the Internet', 'The Impact of Blogging on Fandom'; julad 2002; rusty-halo 2003; Arduinna 2012b, c; affectingly 2013; see cathexys 2005).

Certain supplementary technologies were nearly universal among fans, largely because of how effective they were at facilitating specific varieties of communication

or social connection. For example, all of my informants reported using synchronous chat programs (e.g. GoogleChat) for time sensitive or intimate communications. They explained that real-time conversations were more efficient and allowed them to interact directly with others, which sped up the process of getting to know other fans and enabled the immediate correction of miscommunications, making them ideal for developing or facilitating closer friendships. Email was also common, though less frequent; many of my informants used it for long, private correspondence, or for auxiliary communication with friends who were unavailable for real-time conversations. GoogleDocs are a tool for sharing and editing fanworks in a way that allows multiple beta readers and authors to collaborate on a document simultaneously. Beyond that, the use of supplementary technologies varies depending on individuals' particular social and media interests. YouTube and Tumblr both have the capacity to host *vlogs* (video blogs) with media-related content. Fan Podcasts often operate like radio news shows, with hosts, interviews and panel discussions (e.g. Slashcast 2013). General fic archives, like FanFiction.net and Archive of Our Own, host fanfiction based on any media; AO3 even archives podfics (audio recordings of fics). Fans use Twitter for short interactions, particularly with actors and creators, or to follow current news from official sources. Sites like deviantART allow artists to share fanart and original works. There are also fandom-specific venues: official creator websites, fansites, news and resource sites (see Glossary), wikis, message boards, and fic archives dedicated to fandoms, characters, or relationships.

These technologies often have multiple, overlapping uses; this native redundancy makes it easier for fans to communicate with each other, facilitating the development and sense of community. Most blogs, message boards and fic archives have Private Message capability, which allows members to send long, asynchronous messages to each other – effectively emails, but without the security risk of personal email addresses. Many chat programmes have associated email services; Gmail even archives GoogleChat logs, GoogleDocs, and email correspondence together. Technologies can also compensate for each others' deficiencies: public and semi-permanent venues like forums, websites, and blogs can be used to archive and publicise conversations that took place in private or impermanent mediums (see Elkins 2003), and fannish websites and wikis often have built-in message boards that allow members to converse with

each other. Furthermore, in keeping with fandom's appropriative, transformative character, fans often modify technologies for unintended purposes. Perhaps the most significant example of this is LiveJournal: fans adapted the blog platform for use as a fic archive, which function was instrumental in popularising fans' use of the site and therefore for LJ's subsequent impact on fandom (see below).

Most fans do not use all or even most of the sites relevant to fandom as a whole. Instead, they position themselves within the fannish infrastructure according to their own interests and needs. Their preferred fandom(s) have a significant effect; for example, AO3 was launched in 2009, so it over-represents recent media like *Sherlock* and Marvel, while other groups prefer fandom-specific archives (e.g. *Doctor Who* and Jane Austen fans; see Morrissey 2014). The use of particular venues can also be affected by which portion of a fandom the fan prefers; for example, Harry Potter archive The Sugar Quill (2005) only hosts fic that is canon-compliant – which means that although Harry/Draco and Harry/Hermione shippers (people who support two non-canon HP relationships) are part of HP fandom, they must look elsewhere for relevant fic. The variety of media a fandom favours can also have an effect: Tumblr is a multimedia platform, so fans of visual media (comics, movies, TV shows) often gravitate there, whereas fans of literary works often profess to be more content with text-based mediums like LJ or DW – though this is more of a tendency than a rule. Similarly, fans who dislike meta discourse have little interest in the technologies that facilitate it, while those who prefer books to movie adaptations shun websites that feature casting news and set pictures.

Additionally, time constraints prompt fans to limit the number of similar platforms they frequent: all chat programmes serve the same basic function and most fannish news sites have similar news, so my informants found the ones they preferred and only used the others when their primary site failed them. A fan's friends, acquaintances, and favourite ficcers can have a significant impact here: if, for example, they prefer GoogleChat, or begin migrating from LJ to Tumblr, then it is often best for the fan to move with them, as the nature of user-generated content means that there will little for her to interact with in other venues. This can also contribute to immobility; many fans with established patterns of participation and groups of friends who share their preferences will continue using older technologies, even as newer fans move on to

other venues (Chin 2011, Bury et al. 2013). I spoke to a number of fans who reluctantly moved from LiveJournal to Dreamwidth, a similar blog platform, but swore they would never use Tumblr, ‘at least as long as I have friends here’. This was particularly true of Harry Potter fans, who have perhaps the longest history with blog fandom.



Fig. 3.3: Image
by Kellatrix

All of this again highlights the social and interactive character of fandom, and the Internet more generally. Even venues that lack conversational technologies in their native design (e.g. websites, wikis, and fic archives) often take efforts to import forums²³ because of how important such capacities are to fans. Core technologies in particular must excel at communication, as central hubs of the fan experience around which other fan technology use revolves. Julad (2002) writes, ‘The fundamental element of a mailing list is replies...the community is in the replies, and it consists of those who make them’, while other fans assert that blog comments are central to forging the friendships that are integral to establishing a sense of community (see Fig. 3.3). Core technologies also tend to be asynchronic, enabling fans to participate at their leisure, rather than having to coordinate everyone being online at once for a massive real-time conversation. This also makes it possible, though not necessarily easy, for fans in multiple time zones to contribute on an equal footing. Core technologies are usually the cheapest, most convenient, user-friendly, and generally accessible technology that is optimised to facilitate collective discourse on a massive scale. As technology advances, its capacity to meet these standards increases and so, despite the trepidation of older fans, fandom moves from one technology to the next. Online technology subsumed the cost of participation in the price of Internet access and made fandom available to people without the means to travel or receive personal mail unremarked.

Mass mailing lists had one especially notable effect on community building. Before the service ONELIST was launched in 1997, mailing lists could only be hosted on private or university servers by individuals with access to that technology. As such, the number of lists was limited; most fandoms were lucky to have one list, which often became the hub for an entire fandom. Thus, they tended to be general discussion lists, largely

²³ The official website for the movie *Pacific Rim* (2015) the Harry Potter fansite MuggleNet (2006), and the comic book wiki and news site ComicVine (2015) all operate fan forums, to provide examples from three entirely different types of website devoted to three entirely different varieties of media.

comprised of meta conversations, though some populous fandoms had secondary lists that revolved around fic (Arduinna 2012b; FL: 'mailing list'). Even when more were possible, fans usually preferred the cohesive effect of a single list: they gave each fandom a single place to congregate, where everyone's disparate interests and interpretations of canon were shared, and a second general discussion list implied tension or dysfunction. Multi-fandom lists were also rare, and usually met specific needs. For example, Virgule, the first slash (homoerotic) mailing list was a safe space where slashers in all fandoms could share their interest, away from the often-hostile attention of the general lists (FL: 'mailing lists', 'Virgule'). This contrasts with modern fandom, where it is possible to surround oneself with like-minded fans. Arduinna (2012b) recalls, lists 'really did make for a sense of community...People expected to hear different opinions; people were expected to behave civilly...The main list in most fandoms was a place where everyone had a voice, equal to everyone else's voice'. The ascendancy of central lists also provided an incentive to get along, since there was often nowhere else to go. Tea-and-liminality (2015) furthers this assertion, and the argument that fans consider awareness of and adherence to behavioural standards an essential component of their community, by suggesting that when fandom existed in 'closed or close-able settings', such as mailing lists and blogs,

It was a relatively straightforward thing to create and maintain a sense of community. Regular contributors got to know each other, certain standards of communication were slowly set into place and adhered to, like minds met like minds, and differences...were generally kept localized and limited because participants were more or less coming from roughly the same place

Message boards (also *discussion boards*, *Internet forums*) are the most prominent example of unbounded fannish venues, partly because in addition to being independent venues in their own right they are the simplest way to integrate a discussion community into other websites (Nellis 2002, Black 2008). Unlike newsgroups and mailing lists, which fans also adopted in the early 1990s, message boards remain popular in modern fandom; a further testament to the importance fans ascribe to being able to communicate with each other in all contexts. However, the continued popularity of boards is primarily attributable to the fact that they were the first core technology for which archiving and visibility were an inherent component of their functionality.

Most forums are open to the public, thereby increasing their accessibility to outsiders and new users. Posts are stored on a host server, not on members' hard drives or in limited-capacity inboxes, as with newsgroups or email. Some boards archive posts permanently, others for only a set time, but there is a sense among fans that boards are equivalent to more permanent storage. This is true to such a degree that moderators of forums and fic archives often try to find alternate ways to make the material available on other websites or file sharing sites when they shut down their forums (like Martinez 2009). This suggests that participation in forum conversations entails *some* prior awareness of the public and permanent status of the conversation, although the extent of this awareness is debatable.²⁴ This can inspire a greater demand for identity protection, which forums also meet: in order to participate, fans must register a unique username and sign in. This requires an email address, but that usually remains private; other users can only see members' forum ID, which might not bear any relation to their email address or other screennames.



Fig. 3.4: Threaded Forum Replies. The original post is displayed above the schematic and the responses are below it. Each comment is listed along with its author (blurred for anonymity), publication, and number (how many replies to this thread preceded it).

However, the particular strength of boards is their capacity to organise and contextualise conversations and participants. Users converse by exchanging messages, as they would in mailing lists or newsgroups, but forums collect the entirety of their discussion into a single *thread* or *topic*. Further, although some boards display comments in chronological

order, they also originated threaded viewing (above), which visually depicts the reply structure. Thus, each topic not only represents the totality of an exchange, it also conveys more of its nuance and context than other programs. This allows people who did not participate in the exchange, or who return to it later, to follow the flow of the

²⁴ Users frequently misunderstand the nature and extent of the risks posed by a given technology, or the more general ways that online information is stored, located, and protected. The focus of users' concern is also variable, with priorities often skewed towards protecting social rather than institutional privacy (Acquisti & Gross 2006, Cassell & Cramer 2008, boyd 2008, Ibrahim 2008, Tufekci 2008, Debatin et al. 2009, Fogel & Nehmad 2009, Raynes-Goldie 2010).

conversation with ease.²⁵ Within the forum's wider structure threads are also divided by subject, so similar conversations are archived and displayed near each other.

Forums render visible many of the interpersonal and dialogic connections that users of older systems had to figure out and keep track of for themselves. They contextualise members in ways that earlier technologies did not by allowing users to choose a profile picture (like a journal icon), which is displayed next to each of their posts along with their membership statistics (date of registration, number of posts, etc.). This helps other members to distinguish them visually, and contextualises their comments within their other forum activity. Further, each username links to a profile page, which displays the personal and contact information that user chooses to share publicly; e.g. links to blogs, websites, or fanworks; screennames in other fan venues; lists of favourite fanworks, published authors and media. Thus, forum profiles can contextualise users not only on that board, but in fandom more generally.

Thus, if community resides in replies and comments as Julad (2002) suggests, then community on Usenet and mass mailing lists was virtually impermanent and invisible: archiving depended on the vagaries of a new technology and the whims of individual participants, and access to those exchanges or to the social context they created relied upon social interaction and the memories (technological and biological) of older members. Starting with forums, Internet technologies made fan discourse visible and accessible; allowing fans to teach themselves fannish jargon, and how to locate and participate in fan discourse, which continued eroding the traditional gatekeeper system. As already noted, making exchanges visible and semi-permanent created the expectation that fan documents could and should remain available in perpetuity. Chapter 5 details how this expectation plays an important role in fan notions of social responsibility and in fannish conflict, where such records are used as proofs. The connection fans make between archiving and social responsibility is further demonstrated by the fact that moderators of forums and fic archives often try to find

²⁵ Threaded comments do this better than preceding technologies. For example, email and newsgroup replies duplicate previous comments below each new response, but this only extends to replies that exist in a direct line back to the original post. So if post A receives responses B and C, and post B gets response D, while C gets responses E and F, then an email replying to post D will only replicate the text of posts A, B, and D, which might lead a later reader to believe the other posts never existed. Non-threaded forums collect all replies, but do so in chronological order, which can make it difficult to reply to the earliest comments in a post (which might be buried behind pages of later comments), or for a later reader to discern which posts are replies to which other posts.

alternate ways to make the material available when they shut down their sites, and if this is impossible they attempt to give their members sufficient warning to save documents themselves. If this is not done, members who had no administrative role often create public archives anyway (Talis 2008b), sometimes even if this is contrary to the wishes of the moderator, as in the case of the Harry Potter archive Azkaban's Lair (see R/S Library 2013). Of course, technological failure or personal disinvestment cannot always be avoided, and many early forums and fic archives have been lost (see Versaphile 2011; FL: 'GeoCities'). Despite this, the increasingly permanent and accessible nature of fan archives coincides with a general increased interest in fan history that would have shocked fandom historian Verba (1996) just years earlier.

Furthermore, the capacity of new fans to induct themselves into fannish practices, allowed fan discourse to move from the procedural – explaining to new fans 'This is how we behave, this is how you participate' – to more philosophical questions about the nature and character of the fan community. It also broadened the scope of such meta analysis by making it possible to draw data from outside their own experience; so, for example, when fans want to analyse the effects of LiveJournal on the character of fandom (which they do frequently; see Thamiris 2002, 2005; Kass 2002; sistermagpie 2004; sophia-helix 2004; butterfly 2005; prillalar 2005; semiasin 2005; thelastgoodname 2005a, b²⁶), they can begin with their own perceptions, and check the textual record present on others' blogs – in their everyday exchanges and meta analyses – before making claims about how common and generalizable their experiences are.

²⁶ Many of the meta analyses of LiveJournal used here are not modern, which this might be considered a flaw given the rapid rate of change virtual environments exhibit (Haythornwaite & Wellman 2002, Beneito-Montagut 2011). However, the period between 2002-2006 is the height of LJ-related meta: it represents the time after which a significant fannish population had become accustomed to using LJ but before they began feuding with the LJ administration, after which posts are largely geared towards contributing to the conflict.

LiveJournal: 'A Global Community of Friends Who Share Your Unique Passions and Interests'

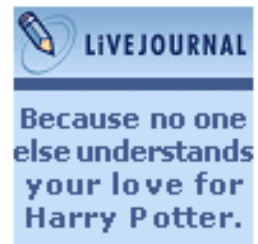


Fig. 3.5: LJ Icon by ainbarad_icons

First there were people I knew in RL visiting my LJ. Then I started posting my stories onto the communities, and suddenly there are all these strangers coming through my LJ and leaving nice comments. Some of these strangers came back for the next story, and the next. And then they weren't so strange anymore, and I started to recognise names, and respond, and friend...I'll probably never know them in RL, but they're still real to me. [Some] would say there's no way to have real intimacy there – it's all superficial...

They're wrong on two counts. First, our conversations may be brief, but they are often. Every week, every day, sometimes more than once a day. We build up detailed picture[s] of each other, even though we've never met... Second, we have this really strong common interest (cupidsbow 2004)

LiveJournal (LJ), a blog²⁷ and social network platform, served as a central hub of fan interaction for over a decade (FH & FL: 'LiveJournal'; Hale 2008), during which time LJ was instrumental in revolutionising fan practice on many levels. LiveJournal's popularity might seem counterintuitive, given that it was a tool for publicly chronicling people's daily lives and thoughts, while fans had been conditioned by years of outsiders' contempt to keep their identities and fannish activities as separate as possible, especially in public contexts (Bacon-Smith 1992: 203-215; Arduina 2012b; *DiL* 23; Jenson 1992; Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005). However, blogs are an incredibly flexible platform, and the massive variation in purpose, operation, and context they are capable of indicates that their technical infrastructure does not determine specific content or use, but allows for a wide range of functions (see Blood 2000, 2004; Herring, Scheidt et al. 2005; Schmidt 2007; Garden 2011; Rettberg 2013). Thus, blogs were infinitely adaptable to fan purposes; Larkin's (2008) theory of infrastructure, discussed above, is a useful analytical tool for exploring this appropriative process and the subsequent impact of LJ on fandom, because it allows examination to be separated into distinct but intrinsically related technical and conceptual dimensions.

When fandom began using LJ in the early 2000s, blogs were primarily presented as public journals: mechanisms for sharing information about people's lives, thoughts, and interests,

²⁷ There was some historical resistance to the word *blog* among LJ users (Havalais 2004), including fans. However, this seems to be a dated perspective among my informants, who happily discuss *liveblogging* and refer to their Tumblrs as *tumbleblogs*. I use the term *blog* here because it is appropriate to the contextual and analytical framework in which LJ users existed if not to their linguistic preferences, but I do so with appropriate caution. Further, LJ's additional features (see below) make it a Social Networking Site (boyd & Ellison 2008) with a blogging system at its core, not a pure blog.

and for facilitating social communication (see Booth 2010, Garden 2011, Rettberg 2013).²⁸ This was particularly true of LiveJournal, which was founded as a way to keep in touch with distant friends, and which lists *community* and *creativity* among its core values (LJ: ‘About’, ‘FAQ 4’). Accordingly, the site’s technical and conceptual infrastructure was designed to support its use as a public journal, and to reinforce its capacity to facilitate and engender a sense of community; this is evident in the revolutionary *Friend* and *Community* mechanics LiveJournal pioneered (discussed below). Interestingly, despite long investment in the notion of community, contemporary and retrospective fan accounts of migrating to LJ do not focus on this aspect of the site, but instead emphasise its creative dimension. They also mention concurrent legal and social conflicts between individual fans and various fic archives which prompted them to seek out alternative methods of sharing and archiving fic that shifted the balance of power towards creators and away from faceless and arbitrary administrators or by feuding moderators (see charlottelennox 2006; FL: ‘Cassandra Claire’, ‘FFN’, ‘StalkerGate’, ‘Timeline of HP Fandom’; FL & FH: ‘Gryffindor Tower’). Although not built for fic archiving, LiveJournal possessed technical capacities that could be adapted to this purpose, and other features with fannish appeal, and had technical capacities that could be adapted for archiving.

Like previous core technologies, LJ is a medium for facilitating swift, asynchronous, textual conversations in which images and other content can be inserted. Indeed, blogs are defined by their interactivity, reciprocity, dialogic nature, and capacity to build social relationship between author and readers, which is primarily attributable to their inextricable use of embedded comments (Blood 2004, Schmidt 2007, Lessig 2008, Booth 2010: 43-49, Ammann 2011, Gaudeul & Peroni 2010, Gaudeul & Gianetti 2013). ‘Embedded’ comments are appended below the specific post they are responding to. Most blogs including LJ use a threaded comment structure (see Fig. 3.4); as with message boards, this reproduces the shape, flow, and timeline of the conversation, visually contextualising the discussion and compartmentalising it into accessible sections. This made LJ an ideal space for fannish discussions, and allowed them to respond to fanworks in a conversational and collective manner; cupidssbow

²⁸ Blog scholars and lay historians are quick to point out the close relationship between this conception of blogs and zines; journal-style blogs evoke the individual content of perzines (written by one person about her life; Gunderloy 1988: 8), while other blogs’ mixture of commentary, resource and fact resemble more classic zine styles. Some early writers even called their journals *zines* before the word *blog* was coined (Havalais 2004, Tewksbury 2006, Agrawal & Liu 2008, Dykeman 2009, Williams-Hawkins 2010).

(2007) writes, 'I have always thought of LJ as a discussion space because of the easy commenting system' (also musesfool 2003a, sistermagpie 2004, Booth 2010).

Comments are also part of how blogs and social networks establish visible, tangible links between members, thereby rendering the broader community more substantial: non-anonymous commenters are identified by the username and icon beside their remark, which also act as hyperlinks that interested readers can follow back to the commenter's journal (boyd & Ellison 2008, Booth 2010). Some scholars perceive a deeper and more constitutive relationship with community. Lovink (2008: 38) believes comments are part of why 'Bloggers need each other', while Booth (2010: 48) argues that 'to comment on a blog is to assert not only that you have read the post, but also that you care enough about the post [and by extension the poster] to *act* in some manner'. However, sophia-helix (2004) observes, the opposite effect occurs when commenters establish a tangential exchange that 'can become not just irritating to the writer but downright offensive' rather than affirming their interest in the blogger.

The second feature of blogs that appealed to fandom was their archive capacity: while LJ limits the size of individual entries, the number of overall posts is unlimited. The duration of this storage is similarly broad. Users can delete their journals and all content within (to the extent that it is possible to eradicate virtual records; see McCown 2007; Marshall, McCown & Nelson 2007, 2009; Klein 2011). However, LiveJournal (2000, 2001, 2010) has long promised not to delete any journals, and assured users that the company retains extensive backups, though it disavows legal responsibility for lost data. LJ promises to honour every account that abides by its Terms of Service for the duration of the company's existence (LJ: 'About'). Thus, the entries on LiveJournal are a permanent primary source archive of the history of fandom, one that new fans can use to orient themselves and old fans can draw on in their meta discussions and analyses. Furthermore, collective history – and the sharing of that history – is a defining feature of community; part of how a group establishes its traditions, character, and sense of belonging (see Chapters 1 & 6; Anderson 1986, Halbwachs 1992, Norrick 1997, Rappaport 2000, Riessman 2001, Hobspawm & Ranger 2002).

The archiving effect of blogs was enabled and reinforced by integrating permalinks into their technical framework (Hourihan 2002). Permalinks gave each entry a unique

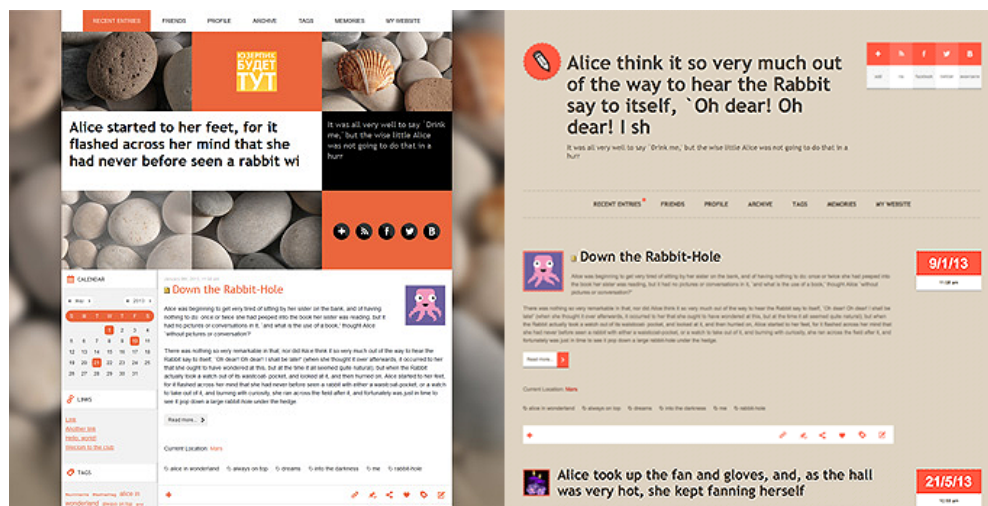


Fig. 3.6: Example of 2 LJ custom options

and (relatively) stable URL where it could be found, decreasing the frequency of broken links and allowing people to reference a specific post without describing its location on the blog (e.g. ‘Follow *back* links to the third entry on 6th June, 2001’). Furthermore, embedded comments are an inherent part of this permanent record; linking to a post necessarily means linking to the discussion inspired by it. Blood (2004: 55) argues that permalinks democratised publication and ‘elevated Weblog commentary to a legitimate form of discourse’, by setting them on equal footing with Web pages or syndicated columns, at least in the context of the browser page. Coates (2003) considers permalinks ‘the device that turned weblogs from an ease-of-publishing phenomenon into a conversational mess of overlapping communities’. He suggests that permalinks did more than add history and navigability to blogs; by archiving posts they ‘built in memory’, created a sense that blog content was not disposable, that one’s own words and those of others had worth and weight – cultivating an environment in which both complex discussion and friendly chat had greater depth and significance.

Finally, LiveJournal appealed to fans because it was free, incredibly customisable, and required no technical skills, thus enabling wider participation in the community, particularly among younger fans who previously had no access to fandom. Users could make dramatic changes to the colour and style of their blogs, upload several user icons (see Figs. 3.2, 3.4), and change the basic text of their journal (for example, ‘Leave a comment’ might become ‘Send an owl’). Thus, each account reflected the user’s aesthetic tastes, shifting moods, interests, and personality, which became an important part of their presence online (see Fig. 3.6). The user experience was also customisable: by choosing to follow specific journals, Communities, and RSS feeds, members

influenced the content that appeared on their Friends List for them to read. One fan wrote ‘The LJs I read daily...are the LJs of people I like. That’s why I read them...Whatever they want to post, that’s what I want to see, because I’m here for a social visit. I’m here to see them’. Similarly, one informant described her Tumblr dashboard, in a manner that holds true of LJ friends lists, as ‘sort of an art project. I follow people who say things I like, or who are interested in things I’m interested in. So my dash becomes a...collage that we create together of all these things I like...’

Thus, part of what drew fans to LiveJournal is that blogs are what Herring et al. (2005) call a ‘bridging genre’: they combine features of other technologies – notably newsgroups, message boards, and personal websites – into a more dynamic hybrid form that better enables interaction. Höflich’s (2003) adequacy rules propose that people select technology based on how well it can be used to meet their needs in relation to the capacity and characteristics of other similar technologies, and this was certainly the case for fandom. LJ incorporated the sensibilities and the social and interactive capacities of every previous core technology into a single, integrated whole – and it did so with greater stability, permanence, visibility, interactivity, customisability, and navigability than its predecessors. It enabled fans who were tired of the factionalism, controversy and unreliability of fanfiction archives to take control of their stories on every level: storage, aesthetics, and mechanics of access. Embedded comments and permalinks rendered blogs an ideal format for interactions and meta analysis: one person could start the conversation by posting an opinion that others could build upon, disagree with, and clarify in dialogue with each other. The whole thing was then saved as a single document, preserved for at least as long as the original poster desired, which could be more easily located and linked to than forum posts (which were subject to the archiving policy of the host), and which used threaded comments, making the conversation accessible and comprehensible to future readers.

Thus, LiveJournal was adequate to meet fandom’s needs on a conceptual and technical level: it prioritised community and social interaction just as they did and it was a single, flexible venue that could be used for multiple purposes that previously required a network of other technologies to fulfil. However, it is significant that these were appropriative and adaptive uses, that LiveJournal’s priorities and capacities aligned with fandom’s by accident. This is evident in the early texts collected in fan meta

archives, where most of the documents in this section are indexed (see cathexys 2005c; meta fandom 2015, fanthropology 2005, FL, & FH: 'LJ'). LJ was built as an online journal, and its technical and conceptual infrastructure was designed to support and encourage this use. Fans do use it in this capacity; although the majority of posts in fannish journals might be dedicated to fannish topics, prillalar (2005) observes

LJ is personal. ... Your journal is your space, to do with what you will. Your fanfic, your art, your work news, your pictures of your cat, your comments on politics and TV shows. It's about you, like my journal is about me.

Some of my informants concurred, saying that their journals were their own and they felt free to post about anything, while others said that they kept separate fannish and personal journals or tried to limit the number of 'personal' posts they made, for fear of boring their readers (see sitermagpie 2004 & comments, Thamistris 2005, elipie 2011 & comments). However, all agreed that even exclusively fannish journals were intensely personal spaces that reflected the authors as people, and they speculated that this was because fans' relationships with media also tends to be intensely personal, to the point of blurring the boundaries between 'personal' and 'fannish' content. Butterfly (2005) explains, 'LJ shows us a hint of the infinite complexity of people. It reminds us of the many reasons that people have for watching shows.' Musesfool (2003a) writes,

The good part of LJ is that you can get a sense of a person, and put both their opinions and their tone in context... That's more than we got on mailing lists or usenet, where you'd have to search a person's back posts to get a sense of where they're coming from and how they got there.

Early blog scholar Serfaty (2004: 58) suggests that the personal nature of blogs was also an important community-building mechanic, that by

seductively opening up their lives for scrutiny, one of the expectations of [bloggers] is not only meeting other people, but enlisting their active cooperation in the creation of an inner circle, a small group of people gathered around certain characteristics... a rivalry-free, ideal community of equals.

Fans certainly found that the conceptual association of blogs with journals and personal content added an emotional layer to their exchanges, because each LJ was not merely a forum for discussion or archiving but an actual reflection of the person – which some considered their virtual 'home' or 'living room', while others vehemently did not (see prillalar 2005, Morgan Dawn 2007, gabriellabelle 2009). This engendered confusion and debate about the appropriate etiquette of discussion on LJ, particularly in the early days of this transition. Rusty-halo (2003) comments that in mailing list culture

You just jump in anywhere with your opinion and you can have vehement debates with someone without it ever getting personal...Whereas I get this feeling on LJ that it's kind of questionable whether you should disagree with someone at all. Debate becomes really personal; you don't have a moderator stepping in saying 'Debate the post, not the poster!'

This convergence of fannish, personal, and social content was reinforced by the *Friend* and *Community* mechanics, which LiveJournal invented as part of its commitment to fostering community. *Friending* is the choice to follow another journal on LJ. This is a public action, as those journals will be listed as *Friends* on the original user's profile page (see below), but it is not necessarily a mutual one, as a person can follow someone who does not follow them. All posts made by friended journals are collected on the original user's Friends List (*flist*) in reverse-chronological order, allowing her to catch up with recent posts at her leisure. The Friend mechanic invested LiveJournal with a new level of privacy protections: users could *Friends Lock* certain posts, rendering them visible only to those the author designated as friends. Later, LJ allowed users to sort friended journals into categories (e.g. 'school friends', 'HP fandom', 'beta readers'), and to make posts visible only to people on specific lists (LJ: 'FAQ 24'). Similarly, an *LJ Community* is a discussion group dedicated to a specific topic (e.g. writing, childcare, celebrity watching). Any user can create a Community, and other members can *join* (which allows them to post entries in the Community) or *watch* (meaning they can only comment on others' entries) that group. Entries posted to a Community that a user has joined or watches are also displayed on her flist.

The words *friend* and *community* have important conceptual implications, and were clearly chosen in accord with LiveJournal's community-oriented ethos. Boyd (2006) notes, 'friends' on Social Network Sites (SNS) are not the same as 'friends' in the traditional sense; indeed, the public display of social connections represented by SNS requires users to renegotiate the meaning of that word and those relationships (Donath & boyd 2004, Zinoviev & Duong 2009). Fono and Raynes-Goldie (2006: 3-4) argue that since the choice to 'friend' a stranger on LiveJournal is largely based on the content of their journal, an LJ friend could be understood as a person with similar interests or 'someone I like to read'. Fans regularly discuss the implications of LJ's terminology, and their criticisms and conclusions strongly resemble those of academics. Eliade (2003) writes 'I view my friends list as a reading list and I'd rename it if I could' and

Jae (2002) agrees 'it's called *friends*, a term that has real world meaning that has little or nothing to do with either *people whose journals I want to read* or *people who I want to share my protected journal entries with*' (also heresluck 2003, sophia-helix 2004, entrenous 2005, Melusina 2005, swmbo 2005, thelastgoodname 2005, azurelunatic 2008b).

However, some LJ relationships do exhibit trust, companionship, and reciprocity that is similar but not identical in character to more traditional friendships (Fono & Raynes-Goldie 2006: 6) – a finding consistent with other studies of online friendship (see Chan & Cheng 2004; Mesch & Talmud 2006, 2007; Buote, Wood & Pratt 2009). Researchers suggest that what Derrida (1976) would call a 'slippage of meaning' has occurred: the significance of the word *friendship* on LJ has caused it to 'be replaced with multiple meanings specific to LiveJournal, many of which emphasize and exaggerate isolated aspects of conventional friendship' (Fono & Raynes-Goldie 2006: 10; also Zinoviev & Duong 2009). Jae (2002) similarly notes that '*friends lists* have taken on added social meaning at least in some arenas in the big wide world of livejournal', adding that *LJ friends* and *friends lists* mean different things to different people, partly due to the different needs, interests, and backgrounds of fans on LJ. This was evident in my interviews as well; my informants all had different perspectives on blogging and appropriate content, and two of them even related stories of conflict with other fans that they attributed to differing philosophies of LJ use and etiquette.

In addition to the aforementioned debate about the appropriateness of personal posts on fannish blogs, the second major disagreement was whether LJ friends constituted 'real' friends. Many of my informants viewed their LJ friends on a scale like this one:

- People I've known for years, am close with personally or socially, many of whom I've met: 35%
- People I friended because I kept running across them in LJ and they hooked my attention for whatever reason (fiction, posts, comments): 19%
- People who notably have a lot of slashy content, like QAF or X/S: 13%
- People I've gotten to know pretty well online during the last year or so in Buffy fandom: 12%
- People I feel oddly familiar with but know only through LJ: 8%
- People I don't really know well yet, whom I've friended rather randomly: 5%
- People I've known for years online, dating back to Sentinel fandom and mailing lists: 4%
- Communities: 4%

(eliade 2003)

My informants' categories were unique to them, but they all made a distinction between different degrees of friendship. 'Which,' one informant observed, 'is not so different from RL friendship', noting that even the work colleagues she considers 'friends' are not people she relies on for emotional support, and that she prefers to discuss media only with her fannish friends rather than the people she is closer to in the actual world. As Adams and Allan (1998: 12) point out, 'the contexts within which friendships form influence the forms which friendships take', and those forms have always been multifarious, which they argue should cause us to broaden rather than limit our conception of friendship.

In addition, as linguistic theory has posited for decades, words do not merely *have* meaning, they can also *give* meaning to thought and action, and imbue practices with significance beyond that of mere activity (Whorf 1956; Foucault 1972; Hill & Mannheim 1992; Gumperz & Levinson 1996). Fans mostly discuss this element of friending in relation to the way it complicates their lives. For example, many of my informants reported feelings of distress or confusion upon being 'unfriended' and a corresponding sense of anxiety about causing distress by unfriending others – which was an important factor in their aforementioned desire to rename the 'friends list.' Similarly, Fono and Raynes-Goldie (2006) found that conflicts about unfriending LJ acquaintances were imbued with greater emotional weight by the word *friend* and the confusion about what exactly that meant. However, my informants noted that such effects could be diminished by posting a 'Friending Policy' (e.g. stakebait 2003) on their journal profile that clearly articulated their definition of *LJ friend* and their standard reasons for unfriending a journal – usually due to divergent interests.

Not only does the terminology imbue these relationships with unwarranted significance, some fans felt that it pressured them to *create* that significance. Swmbo (2005) writes, 'I rarely to never seek out new journals any more, almost out of fear I will find the person interesting and friend them, because of lack of time to devote to nurturing a new friendship'. Many of my informants on LJ articulated a similar feeling of responsibility towards 'getting to know', if not 'befriending', people whose journals they followed – though some believed direct interaction was a necessary part of this process while others considered perusing archived journal entries an adequate effort at familiarity. However, not everyone experiences this. Sistermagpie (2004) writes, 'I don't feel like anybody who friends me wants to be my friend. I mean, maybe some of them will

become my friend through discussions that lead to other things etc...and that would be great'. My informants likewise usually welcomed new LJ friends but did not presume that each new connection would lead to deeper friendship. This highlights the final and perhaps most important point: Fans distinguish between *LJ friends* and '*real*' friends, but this boundary does not necessarily correspond to the boundary between the virtual and actual world. Instead, the defining feature is interaction; Sistermagpie (2004) emphasises that in-depth discussions are more likely to 'lead to other things', though cupidsbow (2004) observes that even fleeting exchanges can accumulate into a 'detailed picture of each other' (see also musesfool 2003, Booth 2010). Prillalar (2005) writes:

We post, by and large, hoping to receive responses, those little strokes that let us know that people care about what we say... And by replying to those comments, we build relationships and community with our readers, just as we build relationships and community by commenting on the entries of others.

Living Documents, Inscribed Selves: Online Text as Interaction

The Internet's not written in pencil, Mark. It's written in ink.

(*The Social Network*; Brunetti et al. 2010)

It is significant that all fandom core technologies are mechanisms for facilitating and mediating textual interaction, and furthermore that creating records of such exchanges is an intrinsic part of the communicative process – and therefore of community building. To rephrase, geographic separation makes face-to-face interaction impossible for many fans, so in order to converse they must commit their thoughts to (literal or metaphoric) paper and disseminate them via appropriate mechanisms so that other fans can read and reply to them in the same way. Thus, for at least the interval between reading and response, the textual record is integral to the existence of that interaction, and in most cases virtual records remain after that purpose has been served. They might be difficult to access and preserve, as zines and other paper documents can be, and the conditions of their storage can be nebulous, impermanent, and idiosyncratic, as it was for many early online technologies, but as an inherent part of the interactive process that record must always exist at least briefly, and it often endures far beyond the expected limits.²⁹

²⁹ For example, although Usenet originally stored exchanges for only a few weeks, DejaNews instated public, searchable, web-based archives in 1995. When Google Groups bought the company in 2001 it began supplementing that record with the personal collections of several longstanding members, thereby retroactively rendering random selections of ancient conversations public without warning – though Google promises to delete any post at the author's request (Google n.d., Mieszowski 2002).

In one sense, it is accurate to treat these preserved exchanges as documents or artefacts: (usually) textual records of information and human activity that are produced by, reflect, create, signify, disclose and affect their author(s) and the wider cultural and societal relationships in which they originated (Smith 1974, 1990; Plummer 2001; Hanks 1989; Buckland 1997; Harris 1998; Prior 2003, 2004, 2011; Baron 2004; Cooren 2004; Riles 2006; Barber 2007; Frohmann 2009; Stanley 2013). Certainly, the archived conversations and publicly viewable life stories produced by fans can be understood as *human documents*, ‘accounts(s) of individual experience which reveal the individual’s actions as a human agent and as a participant in human life’ (Blumer 1979: 29; Plummer 2001; Stanley 2013). It is not even unusual that fannish documents are automatic by-products of fannish activity; many settings studied by social scientists (government departments, for example) are ‘self-documenting, in the sense that their members are engaged in the production and circulation of various kinds of written material’ (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 121; also Prior 2011).

Human documents are traditionally understood as products of *entextualisation*, the ‘process of rendering a given instance of discourse as text, detachable from its local context’ (Silverstein & Urban 1996: 21; Barber 2007: 74-76; Silverstein 1998). Similarly, orthodox linguistics tends to privilege speech over writing on the basis that only speech is equivalent to language (Harris 1998, Baron 2004). However, documents are not merely passive, static, disconnected records that signify individuals, societies, or exchanges. They can be ‘autonomous speech acts’ (Barber 2007: 3), ‘things that act back on their creators’ (Prior 2004: 77), or what Latour (1996) calls *actants*: things possessed of agency and effect in their own right, which capacity may be derived from the nature of the document, its content, perceptions of it, or all three. For example, airplane pre-flight checklists are not simply a list of conditions that must be met before departure: they are a set of injunctions that not only remind flight crew to meet these conditions but actually *causes* them to do so by structuring and regulating the crew’s actions and talk, and ‘the perception and inspection of instruments and the physical environment, and the manipulation of aircraft and controls’ (Bazerman 1997: 296). Thus, checklists are more than simply the compilation and embodiment of many pilots’ expertise, they are also entities that *act on* the pilots and flight crew, increasing the consistency with which they adhere to their own knowledge.

Dorothy Smith's (1990) discussion of 'active texts' is also a useful tool for analysing how actual world conflict may be carried out through the medium of text, and the ways that text and textual conflict can alter readers' minds and perceptions of the world. Smith uses two documents: a Berkeley professor's eyewitness account of an altercation between police and citizens, which accuses the police of attempting to provoke the crowd and using excessive force, and a response by the Mayor of Berkeley, which asserts that an internal investigation found that the police behaved appropriately. The first text presents a story, a set of facts and an interpretive narrative chosen by the author, while the second contains excerpts from the professor's letter so as to refute or provide alternate interpretations for each specific event. Smith (1990) argues that the second text *acts on* both the reader and the first text: it literally rewrites the professor's letter by editorialising and abridging it, and in so doing it seeks to change the reader's perceptions of that text, its author, and the facts and narrative it represents – it seeks to discredit the earlier account and supplant it with the Mayor's official narrative.

Because virtual documents are primarily textual, or embedded in a textual environment (see Chapter 2), the literature about documents is a helpful foundation from which to build an understanding of how these texts reflect and constitute their authors, and the ways they may relate to and act upon each other and on readers. However, as Prior (2004: 3) observes, documentary studies 'are more directly concerned with the role of inscription than of speech and conversation, and...the ways in which aspects of social organisation and social interaction have been represented in inscription, influenced and sometimes structured by inscription'. This is problematic because even the broadest conceptualisation of traditional texts as 'active' and possessed of agency still presumes that they are entextualised or inscribed to some extent. Framing virtual documents in this way is a fundamental mistake: they are not detached from their original form and social context and rendered as text. Rather, they exist in a context that is primarily textual and mediated *by nature*, which means that text *is* the original and natural form of these exchanges. These documents *are* the discourse, the social reality, the interactions that produced the values, practices, and beliefs that they signify and depict *in their original form and context* – no transcript, diagram, summary, or supporting text is required.

For example, consider the blog post in which author Diana Gabaldon (2010a-c) described fanfiction as 'immoral', 'unethical', and 'illegal' (see Chapter 5). That initial

post is an uncomplicated and unambiguous condemnation of fic. Using the active text model (Smith 1990), the hundreds of comments defending and opposing Gabaldon's position comprise a discrete but linked set of texts (or single text, if this framing is more useful) that seek to act on the original document by persuasively refuting or supporting the interpretation it proposes in such a way that readers' perceptions of the original text – the legitimacy of its argument, author, and worldview – are permanently altered. Booth (2010: 43) describes blog posts as *intra-textual*, meaning that the process by which discrete *intertextual* documents respond to, alter, extend, and are informed by previous texts occurs *within* these multi-authored transmediated texts. Comments are *not* discrete texts in this paradigm: they are embedded below Gabaldon's post and archived on her website under the same permalink. Even when Gabaldon erased the entry, fans salvaged the comments along with the post, strengthening their bond by making them available for download only as a single file (Nepveu 2010). Comments and posts are so intrinsically linked by the technology that they are best understood as one text; comments may be 'subordinate' to the original text (sophia-helix 2004), but 'by adding a way to talk back, blogs changed how they were read' (Lessig 2008: 59).

Returning to the example, although the original text by Gabaldon remains unchanged, the quantity and prominence of pro-fanfiction comments is so great, the refutations they present so thorough and so much a part of the textual fabric, that the document as a whole no longer stands as a vilification of fanfiction, but as a balanced *discussion* of the philosophical and moral issues associated with fic. This demonstrates the fluidity of meaning, authorship, and control over virtual texts: it is possible for a single convincing response to alter a document's message, and often the putative 'owner' has very little influence over this effect. The blog format allowed Gabaldon to edit her original post, to make new posts, to disallow further comments, or to respond to specific replies, but none of this could return the document's overall meaning to a straightforward condemnation of fic. Even erasing the post did not reassert Gabaldon's ownership, but rather ceded control entirely to the fans who salvaged and archived its contents. The example also illustrates the multi-authored nature of online documents: each person who participated in the discussion, who helped shift its meaning away from the monologic assertions of the original text and towards a polyphonic, heteroglossic conversation about fanfiction can be considered to have co-authored the document.

This illuminates some of the reasons it is necessary to reframe our understanding of virtual documents, particularly those that are equipped with direct communicative capacities. It is not enough to acknowledge that such documents are complex, multi-authored, intratextual entities, nor is it enough to say that they read like conversations or that the experience of contributing to them is similar to participating in a discussion. Rather, these documents must be understood as whole conversations, and also as the social context in which these conversations take place, though it should also be acknowledged that coming to them later is a different experience that is more akin to reading rather than participating in an exchange. Critics of virtual community compare online exchanges to transcripts, arguing that they are at best only partial reflections of the event. In particular, they point out that no transcript can convey all the meanings implied by meta-communicative signals like body language and tone of voice (see Bauman 1975, Basso 1992, Gumperz 1992). Ricoeur (1996: 56) encapsulates these ‘difficulties of interpretation’ with the observation that ‘in face-to-face interaction [interpretive] problems are solved through a form of exchange we call conversation. In texts discourse has to speak for itself’. However, just as text is no less constitutive of language than speech (Harris 1998, Baron 2004), the Internet as a social textual environment has developed mechanisms of exchange that communicate such information.

These methods are similar to what Wittgenstein (1953: 2, 18-20) called *language games*: systems in which particular words or actions can stand for whole concepts or sentences. These are not complete languages in and of themselves, but are rather adaptations (or *appropriations*, to use more fannish parlance) of an extant language system in order to convey specialised meanings or refer to activities or understandings that the broader language has no need for or has not adopted yet. Each fannish context has developed distinct yet similar language games, as each has particular features and capacities unique to the technology that affect communication and which must sometimes be discussed or named by participants. It is also noting that users must gain proficiency in a language game in order to decipher its meanings, and readers who lack digital fluency can only read virtual documents at a basic level, stripped of many layers of meaning. Fluency in the general fandom language games, as well as the ones particular to the technological context each user favours, serves as a boundary mechanism (see Strathern 1982; Cohen 1985; Lamont & Molnar 2002; Zimmer 2003;

Tilly 2004, 2005; Jones 2009) that allows insiders to identify outsiders and to interact with other members of their community on shared terms.

One key similarity that many virtual language games share is a suite of practices for conveying emotional, social, and conversational nuances; re-inserting the information that meta-communicative signals and context convey in face-to-face conversations. However, a person who wishes to express such information online must do so within the limits of the medium: it must be rendered in text or be interpretable in relation to the text. For example, typing in all capital letters usually conveys ‘yelling’ and an attendant angry or excited emotional state. Full. Stops. After. Each. Word. are used to add emphasis or to communicate that the writer is ‘speaking’ slowly and sarcastically, as if to a person who is mentally deficient. Some also use textual or graphic emoticons (e.g. ‘>_<’) with broadly recognised meanings for this purpose, and LJ allows users to select a ‘mood’ when posting, which will be displayed above the relevant post beside an illustrative graphic. As with language games, although these meta-communicative signals are decipherable to those who possess the relevant fluencies, they may be indecipherable to people with limited digital literacy (Hawisher & Selfe 2000, Danet 2001, Danet & Herring 2007, Baron 2008, Crystal 2008), which can be problematic for outsiders trying to access the layered meanings present in virtual documents. One informant even suggested that this explained why some people mistrust the sincerity and depth of virtual relationships: ‘They get confused [by virtual communication]...They don’t understand how we talk...how we know when another person is angry or hurt. So they can’t understand how we make friends’. She added that she finds textual communication easier in some ways, because it allows her to compose her thoughts, choose her words carefully, and reduce the anxiety of at reaching out to others – an observation paralleled by Scott’s (2004) research on the online activities of shy people. Similarly, a number of my other informants expressed the opinion that it was a mistake to construe textual communication as an inadequate substitute for face-to-face interaction. They didn’t perceive the former as lacking key aspects of ‘normal’ communication or possessed of lesser emotional weight – rather, they saw both formats as possessed of different meta-communicative capacities, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. As one informant said, ‘I miss the

~~strikethrough~~ button IRL. It's important to my sarcasm!³⁰

If one accepts their perspective, then fannish documents are no more entextualisations than verbal speech: text is the natural form of these exchanges, and these interactions are, for some, differently but equally capable of conveying the same depth of meaning and sentiment of actual-world interactions. However, Mackay (2005) aptly cautions that although a virtual document may constitute a single exchange in its entirety, it does not necessarily follow that the document represents the entire 'context of use' that generated it. For example, the text of an interaction does not always indicate the interpersonal relationships between participants, technical factors affecting their contribution, prior events or actual-world context that may have influenced the conversation (Mackay 2005: 129-31). Furthermore, the Internet is more closely networked and inherently intertextual than many other contexts, which may impacts the social context of a text: documents may be linked to when responses are published in other mediums, reused and adapted to other contexts or purposes (chat records may be published in blogs or other public forums, ideas generated in email exchanges may become fics, pictures may be shared with different captions), and in so doing their context may be stripped from them or irrevocably altered. In addition, the technological infrastructure itself has a significant effect on the content and character of the exchange, as is demonstrated in the above discussion of the impact of threaded commenting on blog discussions, or the influence that the word *journal* and its personal connotations had on fan use of blogs. Thus, although these texts are *inscriptions* of self, social organisations, and interpersonal relationships (see Prior 2011), they do not constitute a documentary reality linked to 'actual' reality but rather a distinct if not entirely discrete reality in and of themselves. Thus, fan creation of these texts is more than the publication of a document: it represents direct participation in the broader social reality of online fandom constructed by those texts, and in the negotiation of that reality and the *terms* of that participation, which has numerous implications for understanding and analysing online fandom, virtual identity, and the technologies and contexts that constitute them.

³⁰ IRL: 'In Real Life'. The strikethrough html tag crosses out words, and has numerous linguistic uses: it may convey glib or sarcastic meanings, demonstrate that the author is somewhat embarrassed or uncomfortable with the text, or that the text should not be taken as an official part of the document. For example, *NY Times* blogger Noam Cohen (2007) writes 'In Internet culture, the strike-through has already taken on an ironic function, as a ~~ham-fisted way of having it both ways in type~~ a witty way of simultaneously commenting on your prose as you create it'. My informant's comment is particularly interesting because many people complain that online technologies are ill equipped to convey sarcasm.

Regarding virtual identity, it should be understood that personal accounts, and stories or texts written in the individual voice – such as that present in most blog posts or comments – are outward representations of complex internal relationships between such forces as agency, self-performance, manipulation, identity, culture, and literary ability (Nadel-Klein 1991, Maffesoli 1996, Turkle 1997, Keane 2001, Riessman 2001, Miller & Shepherd 2004, Bortree 2005, Busse 2006, Jenkins 2008, Booth 2010). They are, in a certain sense, the entextualisation – or at least the depiction and self-representation – of the person writing them; what Foucault (1997: 215) calls ‘self writing’ in which the author reveals and constitutes herself in text, making herself ‘present’ to the reader. However, it is perhaps more useful to think of virtual identities as *inscriptions* rather than *entextualisations*, as the latter refers to textual translations of entities that actually exist in another form and context, whereas *inscriptions* may be fabrications without specific, actual-world counterparts. Indeed, there is a growing trend in Internet research that considers online identities to be distinct from and not necessarily contingent upon a user’s actual world identity, but no less real (see Chapter 2; Boellstorff 2008, Hookway 2008). My informants certainly understood the difference between ‘actual’ and ‘virtual’ identities, but considered the designation ‘real’ somewhat irrelevant. One informant commented that when a ‘troll’ or cyber bully uses a ‘sock puppet’³¹ identity to harass people, it doesn’t matter whether that person is ‘really’ like that IRL, or even whether they are using their ‘real’ (meaning primary, as opposed to sock puppet) online identity – they can still have a damaging effect on the people they interact with.

So, in a very real sense, a person’s existence online is inscribed: she fashions herself through the act of writing and interacting, and the documents and interpersonal impressions resulting from that effort (Reid 1996, Turkle 1997, McRae 1997, Markham 1998, Sundén 2003, Stern 2008, Weber 2008). As Figure 3.7 suggests, it is a person’s visible – and therefore searchable and readable – presence in the online record that realises their online identity. Sophia-helix



Fig. 3.7: LJ Icon by jackshoegazer

³¹ *Troll*: ‘One who posts a deliberately provocative message to [online venues] with the intention of causing maximum disruption and argument’, usually for purposes of self-amusement, and to make other members feel attacked. *Sock Puppet*: An account made by someone who already has an account on that site, or who was previously banned from it; usually used to post anonymously, often to support the opinions expressed by the individual’s primary account, or for purposes of trolling (‘troll, *n.*’ ‘sock puppet, *n.*’).

(2004) writes, 'Journal identity, in this vast and changing community, is of vital importance. Your username, attached to a recognizable userpic, is your only currency'. Virtual identity is also inscribed on another level: Not only does it exist in the actual and exchanges and accounts produced by an individual, and in the accounts of them written by others, it also exists in the social networks and connections rendered visible by the technology. As discussed above, a list of each LJ user's friends (those she follows and those who follow her) and communities can be found on her profile page. Like message board profiles, this page contextualises her, both in relation to her 'actual' identity and interests and within the fannish social and technological network she inhabits. In addition to those two lists, LJ profile pages display a user Bio (a personal introduction written by her) and any screennames or contact information she chooses to share (e.g. email address, Skype ID, AO3 account). LJ also invites her to provide a list of interests (e.g. 'slash', 'Iron Man', 'mythology'), which are indexed and searchable: each one links to a list of all users and communities with that interest. These blog profiles surpass any contextualisation afforded by message boards because, in addition to visibly depicting her activity on that site and linking to the other programs and venues in her technological network, it also renders visible her social connections, her 'friends' or 'people she likes to read', and the things that interest her, both in terms of her actual listed interests and in terms of the Communities and other connections represented on her page (for example, a deviantART account may indicate artistic inclinations). Blog profiles are also more intimate than many similar features, because, as discussed above, blogs themselves are conceptually associated with journals and self-expression and often contain more personal content.

By extension, boyd (2006) argues that the 'public displays of connection' and social networks represented by and within profile pages are not merely part of establishing individual users' presence online and constituting the character of their online identities, they are also part of a related process of inscribing community into being. Each of the social connections between individuals apparent in their friends lists, and the underlying collective adaptation and use of a technological network (see above) demonstrated by their inclusion of usernames from other relevant sites and services, is a visible representation and confirmation of the existence of the socio-technological infrastructure of their community. Some fans consider this visible rendering of their

community – especially their friends’ location within that network – to be an integral part of growing that community or expanding their individual participation in it. When I asked informants how they found new sites to join, or how to select which of a number of similar venues to frequent, most of them told me that they either read about new technologies in their friends’ LJ entries, or followed links on their profile pages. This is true of fan participation on LiveJournal too. Seimaisin (2005) wrote ‘When I join a new fandom [dedicated to a specific title] these days, the first thing I do is browse through the user info of the friends I know participate in that fandom, figuring that any communities my friends belong to will have a certain level of intelligence’.

Such displays are also identity signals that help people navigate the networked world by reinforcing or validating those relationships by corroborating them with the relationships on other profiles (see Donath & boyd 2004; Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield 2007, Taylor 2012). However, my informants were largely disinterested in ‘validating’ or ‘corroborating’ each others’ identities; several suggested that this reluctance might be rooted in pre-Internet fans’ fears of being ‘outed’, while others noted that in the early days of online fandom there were several nasty incidents surrounding the revelation of actual-world identities which might account for this aversion. Other informants said that although they considered it poor etiquette to ‘check up on’ or ‘validate’ other fans identities, they found that relationships they maintained in multiple venues tended to be stronger and more meaningful – ‘better reinforced’, Donath and boyd (2004) might say – than acquaintances they only interacted with on one platform.

My informants also concurred with the assertion that visible displays of connection help ground and contextualise people’s virtual interactions within an (imagined) audience, thus creating community by enforcing certain behavioural norms (Donath & boyd 2004, Walther et al. 2008, Ellison et al. 2011). However, they preferred to frame these observations with less emphasis on a watchful audience and more of a sense that the people ‘reading’ or ‘observing’ them were *participants*: full members of their collectivity who were actively collaborating with and responding to them, and who would take proactive steps to educate them or correct their behaviour. When asked for supporting evidence, most informants had stories about themselves as ‘baby fans’ who had unwittingly broken a rule, or lacked the experience to identify which fannish spaces were receptive to which topics, and been – kindly or harshly – apprised of their

error and asked to correct it by a veteran fan or authority in that space. Several informants also directed me towards posts on basic LJ mechanics, etiquette, and jargon aimed at newbies (see sophia-helix 2004; devildoll 2005; amireal 2008; azurelunatic 2008a, b). They noted that such posts serve two purposes: they help orient new fans, teach them how to interact with other fans and use the technology, and they alleviate some of the irritation older fans experience when dealing with breaches of fannish etiquette caused by inexperience, either by educating new fans before they can offend or by providing a resource for veteran fans to recommend rather than necessitating that a mentor take personal responsibility for educating each new member.

So, just as individuals' virtual identities are inscribed or constituted in their textual exchanges and the visual depiction of their social relationships and location in the technological infrastructure, so too is the community inscribed, expanded and realised in the accounts, exchanges and visual representations of the socio-technological network that both constitute and facilitate its existence. However, there is another dimension to the inscription of virtual community, and that is the actual technologies that enable and preserve these exchanges and depictions. This chapter has demonstrated that each technology works in different ways, which can affect the format, style, and content of the exchanges conducted within it, and the subsection of the fannish population it appeals to. Further, the particular emphases, capacities, and population that favours each technology can have an effect on the character of the community and discourse that develop within. Thus, the technologies in which a virtual community exists are not merely the context or facilitating mechanisms in which or by which that community is inscribed. Rather, the technology inscribes *itself* upon fandom; it informs and affects how fans interact, how they think, talk, and perceive themselves and their community. As facetofcathy (2011) writes,

Livejournal is a synecdoche...a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole...the whole for a part...the species for the genus...the genus for the species...the material for the thing made...

People say Livejournal when they mean their friends list or the people they hang with at some comm[unity]...They say Livejournal, and they mean the people who manage Livejournal.com...They talk about Livejournal and they really mean [other blog platforms]...They say Livejournal, and they mean the individual blogs on Livejournal. They talk about the culture of livejournal, how the bloggers write and the commenters comment, about how the place is so harsh or so fun or so superficial or so welcoming...They say Livejournal, and they mean the fic they love that is posted there, or the conversations they've had...They mean the things that they and their friends have made out of Livejournal.

Thus, LiveJournal and everything associated with it – the company, similar technologies, the users, the documents it archives – are intrinsically linked, not only to the process by which fans participate or inscribe their community, but to the *idea* of the fan community, to fans’ conception of what fandom is. Fandom on LiveJournal is a different entity from fandom on message boards or mailing lists or Usenet, and this is not simply a matter of venue, because LJ has become more than a space, a tool, or even an influence on the style and content of the conversation or a subject of interest and analysis – it has become a *part* of that community, an *actant* (Latour 1996) with its own agency and effect, a participant in the constitutive changes. So, in some ways the fans who insist that ‘fandom is dying’ when a new core technology takes hold are correct – but they are also wrong, in that many of the patterns, styles, and traditions carry over from each format to the next, having been inscribed into the fabric and functioning of fandom.

Post-Modern Fandom:

‘I DO NOT UNDERSTAND YOU TUMBLRS BUT I LIKE YOU’ (Fraction 2013)

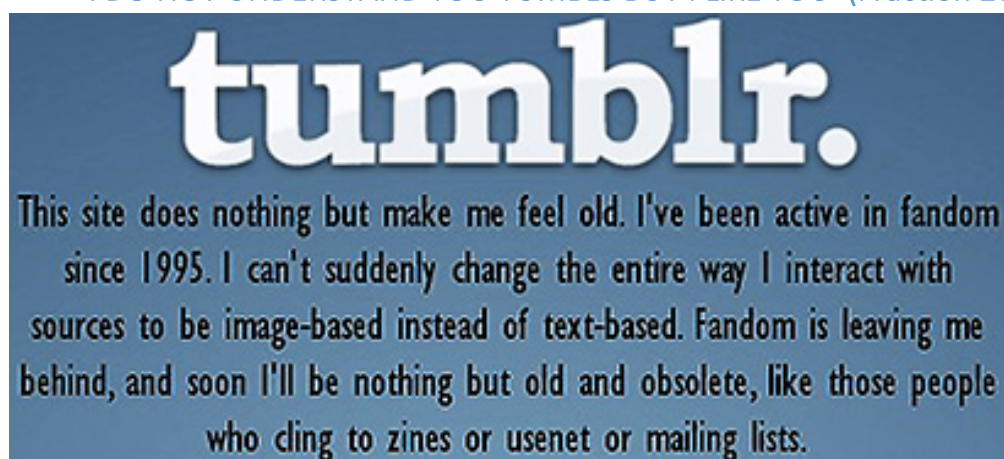


Fig. 3.8: Anonymous confession on the LJ Community Fandom Secrets (2011).

Communication is the central theme underlying fan technology use. It was a need for increased communication that inspired the genesis of fanzines, and it was a desire for better, easier, faster, more intimate communication that prompted fannish migration to each new Internet technology. When I asked why my informants remained in fandom or log on every day, the overwhelming response was ‘To talk to my friends.’ When I asked if they perceived a difference between active members of fandom like themselves and people who were devoted fans of the same media but who did not participate in fandom, most replied ‘Yes’, although their reasons and experiences were different. Some explained that interacting with more experienced fans changed their

relationship with the material; they brought new details to their attention, prompted them to view their beloved stories through new lenses. Others emphasised their relief at discovering other people who shared a similar level of passion, who were also interested in discussing the same media for hours, who made them feel less crazy and obsessed. Some focused on the creative aspects of fandom; they had been writing fanfiction before they knew there was a word for it, and they were interested in exploring the established traditions and genres of fic and delighted to learn that there were structures in place to them improve as writers. Not everyone agreed about what the differences were, but all concurred that yes, the experience of participating in fandom, of making friends and interacting with other fans, of being educated in fannish traditions, practices, and etiquette, set them apart from casual fans.

Given this context, it can be somewhat difficult to make concrete assertions or even propose theories about fandom's transition to Tumblr. This is partially because the migration is still in progress, and Tumblr's ultimate effect on fandom is not yet complete or discernible. It is primarily due to the fact that Tumblr is a departure from previous fan formats. Tumblr is a microblogging platform optimised for multimedia sharing, and it lacks native comment features.³² Instead, Tumblr uses a mechanic similar to Twitter: users post content, which appears on their personal blog, and other users can 'like' or reblog each post – the latter action of which means that the post now appears on the



Fig. 3.9: Gif from Disney's *Lilo & Stitch*; Stitch uses laundry as a prop to pretend he's a superhero. The body text is larger, just below the picture, while the second line is metadata: Publication date, Notes (total quantity of reblogs and 'Likes'), and tags. The 'lilo and stitch' tag credits the movie, while many fans use 'This is me' tags to indicate that they share the experiences depicted in the post.

second user's blog. When reblogging, the second user can add text to the body of the post, which will be included in all subsequent reblogs of the post, or she can use tags to reply or add personal commentary (Figs. 3.9, 3.12).

Most Tumblr conversations utilise the first mechanic, replicating earlier post(s) in

³² Users can install Disqus, a third-party comment service, but this requires HTML skills. Further, not all Tumblr 'themes' (aesthetic and mechanical styles that allow users to customise their blogs' appearance and function) support Disqus comments. So reblogs remain the ascendant conversational tool.

their entirety and adding new text to the bottom, so the text of a document gradually develops over time³³ (see Figs. 3.10-11). Consequently, Tumblr does not support anonymous commenting: to participate in conversations, users must have a journal with which to reblog. My informants explicitly linked this to the notion that fan community is defined by adherence to behavioural standards, arguing that

Tumblr has been the best boon to the online fan community. It links the private intensity of LJ with the public gleefulness of Facebook and Twitter, and forces people into at least partial ownership of their comments and behaviors. The lawlessness of purely anonymous communities like [some on] LJ can be toxic when people refuse to behave kindly or use the site as an outlet for frustration, anger, or their fucked-up id

This is not a universal experience, however. Cupidsbow told me that ‘Ironically, I’ve found hate speech to be much, much worse on Tumblr than on LJ’. Others criticise Tumblr for being ‘an amplification tool, not a discussion tool’ and used ‘for interacting ...without really having to interact’ (fail_fandomanon 2013; FL: ‘Tumblr’). Despite such complaints, the popularity of Tumblr can be explained by the convergence of four factors. First is its unprecedented support for multimedia content. Second, users have subverted Tumblr and adapted their communicative practices so that it can be used as a communicative technology, despite its flaws in that regard. This effort further demonstrates that social interaction is a fannish priority, as a technological feature and as part of building or conceptualising their community. Third, Tumblr enables the construction of collective stories, of conversations and ideas that respond to and build on each other, and it visually depicts both the collectivity of that process and the final result – the shared, fluid document – in a format that is clearer and more intuitive than previous formats were capable of. Fourth, the way content is collectively created and depicted on Tumblr, and the prominence with which authorship attributed to each creator, encourages users to take responsibility for their own content and incentivises adherence to the traditions and standards that define the fan community. Social relationships also play an important part: people migrate to Tumblr alongside their friends.

To illustrate, consider Figures 3.10 and 3.11 (below). In the first, the original post is a picture of actress Lucille Ball accompanied by information about her role in media history and contribution to fandom, and an asterisk linking to a source (demonstrating

³³ This is similar to the email replication-and-reply format (fn. 25) but reversed, with new text at the bottom. Tumblr documents share many of those flaws, though they are public and visible, and other conversational strands can (with difficulty) be located using the *Notes* below each post, detailing all likes and reblogs.

the interconnected or ‘linked’ nature of virtual contexts). Some rebloggers attached short emotional reactions to the text, while others added to the document either by contributing additional information relevant to the original post or by using the information in earlier posts to draw conclusions and promote a feminist message. As with the Gabaldon example above, the final document cannot be understood as the sole contribution of the original poster (who didn’t write the words, but did make them available on Tumblr): her post exists as the basis of the content, but it no longer comprises even the majority of the words in the document. Unlike the previous case, the meaning of the post is supplemented rather than subverted, but the basic principle is the same, and both forms are common to fan exchanges and general Internet discourse.

Most relevant here is the fact that Tumblr documents are formatted so that each new post can build on the previous ones; can supplement, complicate or disagree with any of them. Even the short emotional responses are important, as they demonstrate the resonance and importance of the more substantive posts. The final document is a cumulative visual representation of the collective process by which it was authored. Tumblr also allows fans to selectively participate in such creation (see Jenkins 2006, Castells 2009, Shirky 2010). Figure 3.10 has almost 27,000 *Notes* as of this writing, which expresses the total number of times it has been *Liked* or reblogged, but it has only eight contributors, including the original poster. If this exchange had occurred on a message board or traditional blog, readers would have had to sift through the comments to locate those eight posts, but on Tumblr they are (relatively) clearly displayed as a chronological, cumulative whole.



Fig. 3.10:
Lucille Ball
post, cont'd.
below
(Tonidorsay
2013)

knitmeapony:

dduane:

tinuelena:

Whose intervention ensured Star Trek saw the light of day?

Answer: Lucille Ball

Most people recognize and remember Lucille Ball as the lovable and silly star of one of America's earliest and most loved sitcoms, I Love Lucy. What most people don't know is that Lucille was a savvy business woman and that she and her husband Desi Arnaz had amassed a small fortune and owned their own studio, Desilu.

It was at Desilu that acclaimed Sci-Fi screenwriter and visionary Gene Roddenberry got his big break. Roddenberry pitched the Star Trek pilot to the studio as a sort of Western-inspired space adventure. While many within the studio balked at the idea, Lucille liked the idea and the first pilot was approved and filmed. The pilot was pitched to NBC and was promptly rejected on the grounds that it was too intellectual, not enough like the space-western they had been lead to believe it would be, and audiences wouldn't relate to it. Lucille, a fan of Roddenberry's work, pushed back against NBC and insisted they order a second pilot. Ordering a second pilot was a practice almost entirely unheard of and save for Lucille's charisma and clout with the network it would never have happened.

Roddenberry shot the second pilot, NBC accepted it, and Star Trek premiered in 1966, thus beginning a new era in the Sci-Fi genre and laying the foundation for half a century of Star Trek fandom—an era that would have never come to pass without the intervention and insistence of Lucille Ball.

Bonus Trivia: After her divorce from Arnaz, Lucille bought out his share of their studio. As a result she became the first woman to both head and own a major studio. ()*

Now I love Lucy.

So few people know about this! Too few. Glad to see this turning up here. Also: it was through Lucille Ball's influence that the concept of the rerun (previously unknown and thought to be worthless by studios to whom it was pitched) finally took hold. Desilu essentially pioneered the concept of syndication, and of the "syndication package" — the minimum number of episodes (initially 65, now sometimes more) necessary for a series to become commercially viable, via onward sales, for longer than its initial live run.

We have a lot to thank Lucy for besides that beautiful rubbery face. :)

whoa.

This is just another way that we can remember that as women We. Created. Scifi.

Never let anyone tell you that women are a recent addition to fandom. From Mary Shelley on, horror, sci fi and fantasy have been a women's realm since the beginning.

Always reblog.

fuck. I never knew this. A NEW FOREVER REBLOG.

There is much, much more to know about Lucille Ball and her contributions to pop culture, but even more to know about her and her contributions to feminism.

Without Lucille Ball, there would never have been a Mary Tyler Moore.

The Untouchables, Mission: Impossible, Mannix, the Andy Griffith Show, Dick Van Dyke, My Three Sons, I SPY and That Girl were all part of what she, specifically, realized were going to be popular, often despite everyone else saying she was wrong.

Desilu bought RKO, though later sold many of the rights to films from that incredible collection.

As a company, they developed the standard multiple camera format that is used on all sitcoms today.

Today, what was once Desilu, is known as CBS Televisions Studios.

She was an older woman who married a younger man — a Cuban, which in those days was an interracial marriage — through elopement. It was, for the times, scandalous.

So scandalous, that the radio show that ultimately became I Love Lucy was sidelined because Executives didn't think the public would go for it.

A Cuban headlining a major hit was and is a major win, that is often overlooked these days because of the stereotypes that came from such a popular show.

Together, her and Desi were incredibly shrewd. When the sponsor, Phillip Morris, wouldn't pay for the expense of filming the show, they said they would take a cut in pay in exchange for the rights to the film, and ended up owning I Love Lucy. It would be two decades and change before CBS got it back, and then under some terms that were favorable to Lucille and Desi's children, ultimately. Both of whom were born when she was in her 40's.

She registered as communist in the 1930's, and as a result, was brought up before the damnable McCarthy HCUAA. She supported Roosevelt for President, and then later voted for Eisenhower — showing that she was more interested in doing what's right, over doing it for personal gain.

She was one of the greatest women of the last century, a "B movie queen" who changed the world in ways that are, as is often typical, consistently overlooked.

She was the prototype that pushed women to question the status quo, the icon that many struggled with and against, an example that reverberated with people old and young when marching and shouting and arguing about a woman's right to be her own person and have control over her own life.

She not only inspired it, she lived it.

Fig. 3.11: Note that all images were originally moving gifs. Source: reservoir-fantasy & kvotheunkvothe (2014)



kvotheunkvothe:

castiel-rosebluetardis:

reservoir-fantasy:

It was **Hermione**.

"But she didn't look like Hermione at all. She had done something with her hair; it was no longer bushy but sleek and shiny, and twisted up into an elegant knot at the back of her head. She was wearing robes made of a floaty, **periwinkle-blue** material..." - Ch23 | **THE YULE BALL**

Wasn't her dress pink?



Reblogged 4 months ago from sherlockssunglasses
(originally from reservoir-fantasy)

104,678 notes



Fig. 3.12: Dress from *The Goblet of Fire* movie (Barron & Newell 2005) in its original colour. **Source:** HPwiki: 'Hermione'

Figure 3.11 is similar, but it demonstrates how fan analysis and critique are pursued within the Tumblr format. The original post, by reservoir-fantasy, is a photomanip³⁴ rectifying the fact that the dress worn by Hermione Granger, the main female character in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, was periwinkle blue in the book (Rowling 2000: 414) but pink in the movie (Barron & Newell 2005; Fig. 3.12). The first reblogger to add substantive text asked 'Wasn't her dress pink?', showing that she had overlooked the quote from the book in the original post and that her memory of the movie overshadowed that of the book. The next reblogger added a reaction gif from a scene in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi 1959) in which two

fairies fight over the appropriate colour of Princess Aurora's ball-gown, magically alternating its colour between pink and blue. In addition to indirectly correcting the second poster, the gif perfectly encapsulates the Harry Potter situation and layers in a deeper critique of gender and attractiveness, and how both are portrayed in media. The implied criticisms and analyses present in the first and third posts are made explicit in the tags of posters who did not choose to contribute to the body of the text directly (Fig. 3.13). Further, tags like 'reblogged for gif use' (Fig. 3.13) call out applications of particular media or technology the poster considers clever or resonant.

Figure 3.11 illustrates Tumblr's aptitude for displaying the collective creative processes of fandom. It also demonstrates Tumblr's facility at encouraging and representing fans' multimodal capacities (see Kress 2010) to use numerous mechanisms and varieties of media to communicate and convey meaning. Because Tumblr is optimised for multimedia expression in ways that no previous fan technology achieves, it enables fans to explore the possibilities of other communicative modes. However, although

³⁴ *Photomanip*, short for *photo manipulation*, refers to images that have been altered using graphics editors like Photoshop. Fans do this for a number of reasons, including the creation of journal icons and gifs. Manips can also be used like fanfiction to tell a story, or to supplement or comment on an existing world. They are also particularly suited to forms of satire or comedy, as images can often highlight mistakes or miscalculations more swiftly and clearly than words.

variations in format and capacity have made certain aspects of fan exchanges easier and more discernible, in many ways the underlying content and pattern of discourse has remained the same. It is simply that now, instead of writing a detailed analysis of a movie's gender messages, their frustrations with the lack of diverse racial representation in major studios (see Fig. 2.3), or their immediate responses to content, fans can use images to do so, which can be more communicative or nuanced than words. Significantly, the gendered messages of Figure 3.11 are made explicitly textual in the tags, and they are also the subject of long, written essays (some also on Tumblr; see *bronzedragon* 2014), while the racial critique represented by Figure 2.3 also exists within a broader context of written analysis and debate about race in the specific movie in question and fandom more broadly. In other words, they do not replace the textual conversation but rather supplement, complicate, and sometimes translate it.

Fig. 3.13: These are sets of tags applied to the same post (Fig. 3.11) by different Tumblr users (Usernames omitted for privacy). Collected using Xkit.

#harry potter

#castiel-rosebluetardis you are wrong you should feel wrong and no

#Hermione Granger #i hated that they changed the color of her dress

#especially because i don't like pink and i don't like people telling me

that pink is for girls and blue for bos

#boys* #and i feel they did something like that with this movie

#you can't wear blue hermione

#you are supposed to IMPRESS everybody at the ball #especially ron

#how are you supposed to do that if you're wearing blue

#lets put you a pink dress! #¬¬

#hp #yes yes this is so important

#i loved hermione's periwinkle blue dress

#and the fact that it was made pink in the movies

#always somehow felt like the ~girls wear pink~ thing to me

#maybe i'm reading too much into it #did anybody else feel that too?

#THANK YOU #STUPID PROBABLY-HETERONORMATIVE-CHANGE

#hp

#reblogging because #best use of gif ever

#harry potter #hermione #sleeping beauty

#excellent usage of that gif #Q

Conclusion

This is not the first or only history of fandom by any means, either in academic papers or fan meta texts. However, it is almost unique among scholarly works in that it focuses on the relationship between the character and experience of fandom as a community and the technologies that facilitate it. This approach was previously confined to fan analyses of their own history, with the possible exception of Versaphile (2011), being a fan-authored work published in the OTW's semi-academic journal. The disparity in focus between fans and aca-fans is due perhaps to the fact that academic histories of fandom are largely concerned with the development of the discipline (see Coppa 2006, Grey et al. 2007), whereas fans are concerned only with the development of their community – which they understand primarily in terms of the eras during which particular technological platforms were ascendant. However, as Booth (2013) observes, one weakness of modern fan studies, and particularly studies of online fandom, is that it has departed from an ethnographic focus on the everyday experiences of fans, and from making space for their voices, articulations, and understandings within our data and analyses. Technology – and particularly the way it facilitates communication, customisability, archiving capacity, and meaningful emotional interaction – is the primary focus of the majority of fannish accounts of their own history, and this chapter sought to engage with the reasons for this, and to analyse the conclusions fans have drawn about the impact of technology on the development of their community.

Although Tumblr has given new form to old content, adding new dimensions to old patterns, I do not consider it the radical departure from fannish practices that some fans do, but merely the most recent stage in an evolutionary process. Zines allowed fans to reach out to each other and established analysis and discourse, as well as fic and fanart, as fundamental to fannish exchange. Usenet and mailing lists moved those exchanges online, made them accessible to anyone with an Internet connection and an interest; mailing lists especially contributed a sense of cohesion, centrality, and companionability to the fandoms they served. Message boards made those interactions more permanent and visible, broadening access further and giving fandom a sense of history it had lacked. They also restructured the format of engagement to be more conversational and comprehensible, making fan documents more useful as records and analytical resources. LiveJournal brought a personal dimension into fandom, or

legitimised it rather than condemning it as ‘off topic’, and built the formation of social relationships directly into the communicative mechanisms. It also improved the social and archival features of message boards, making fandom easier to engage with personally and in the historical record. And Tumblr made fan exchanges multimodal, integrating images and videos into fan discourse in a sense that is at once innovative and reminiscent of the fanart in early zines. Each technology brought its own strengths, features, and capacities, and each shaped fan discourse and the character of fandom in particular ways. The effect is cumulative; like a Tumblr document, all of the stages of this evolution are visible, their capacities, priorities and effects remaining integral to modern fandom. Underlying all of this is text, as the form of the exchange or the context in which it is embedded, and textual communication: a driving need to engage with other like-minded individuals.

There are few empirical studies of the development of virtual communities over time, and few virtual communities that rival the long history and documentation of fandom. As such, understanding how and why fans selected particular technologies, how they adapted each new platform to suit their needs, and how each platform in turn shaped the practices and interactions it facilitated and the character of the community as a whole has important comparative value for the study of any other virtual community that utilises similar technologies. In addition, understanding fannish choices and the history of their online development could be invaluable for organisations attempting to build or reshape their own platforms to encourage or enable a similar sense of community or social or political engagement (as, for example, in Fotopoulou & Couldry 2015). Fan use, adaptation, and analysis of these various technologies could also provide a helpful model for established technological companies such as Twitter that are struggling to understand how the lived experiences of their users differ from the expected use of their technology and the social implications of the framework they have designed. Finally, the fannish understanding and use of digital space as a complete and complex context for social interaction has important implications for the future of online interaction – and for the future of qualitative research involving virtual texts.

Chapter 4: Triggers, Erotica & Communal Responsibility — Internal Fannish Conflict

Conflicts are natural, inevitable, and essential aspects of social life. They serve to alert individuals...and communities about underlying tensions that exist on some degree in every social relationship. They provide a pathway through which challenges to an oppressive status quo can be articulated and they give individuals and groups a vehicle for achieving desired social change. In this sense, social conflicts can be beneficial...and even improve relations between erstwhile opponents. Without struggles...organizations would remain stagnant, relationships could not mature and develop, and the problems confronting groups...could not be comprehensively considered, debated, and solved (Kriesberg & Dayton 2012: 3)

Much of this thesis focuses on fandom as a creative, cooperative body, one that grew out of people's passions and shared enthusiasms, out of a collective search to find *'those who feel and think as we do'* (Maffesoli 1996: 12-13), and as a consequence is built on ties of friendship, emotional support, and collaborative, constitutive effort. This is also true of the literature on fandom more generally because, as Chapter 1 discusses, community and cooperation are at the centre of aca-fans' struggle to bring legitimacy to fandom and eradicate the associations of deviance that still cling to it. However, no community is homogenous, not even one that is comprised of individuals who actively and voluntarily associate with each other on the basis of their shared enthusiasms and ways of thinking. Indeed, Cohen (1985: 20) portrays community not as an *'integrating mechanism'* that assimilates individuals into a uniform whole, but as an *'aggregating device'* that produces a collectivity defined by its *'commonality of forms'* (ways of behaving) whose content (meanings) may vary considerably among its members'. Given this diversity, disagreement and outright conflict should be understood as inevitable and necessary components of everyday social interaction rather than as aberrant and negative occurrences; they have the potential to be divisive, but they can also be positive and constructive aspects of community building.

However, although scholars in fields ranging from sociology to international diplomacy to linguistics have long believed that conflict can be constructive, there is a dearth of recent holistic or ethnographic research on the subject. Instead, modern studies focus on techniques for resolving disputes or turning destructive conflicts into constructive ones, recognising the linguistic and pragmatic cues that create or identify constructive disagreements, or on the cohesive effects of *inter-group* conflicts with outside entities rather than on *intra-group* conflicts within a community (see Cooley 1918; Gluckman 1940, 1955; Simmel 1964; Deutsch 1969, 1973; Locher & Watts 2005; Johnson, Johnson

& Tjosvold 2006; Gelfand, Leslie & Keller 2008; Jenkins 2008; Tjosvold 2008; Angouri & Locher 2012; Kriesberg & Dayton 2012). This thesis asserts that there is a considerable benefit to using conflict as a lens through which to conduct a more holistic study of community, by exploring conflict as an ordinary part of fans' experiences, and an important aspect of the process by which they construct, negotiate, and alter their community. The manner in which a group conducts itself, the topics they choose to contest or defend, and the language, mechanisms and context they employ can help illuminate their practices, priorities, and standards of behaviour. Likewise, identifying the boundaries between normative disagreement and unusual or destructive conflict may shed light on the everyday experience of participation in fandom. Finally, conflict reveals the underlying fissures within a community and highlights the divisions between members and outsiders – and it is in relation to such boundaries that communities often make the greatest effort to define and articulate themselves (see Cohen 1982, 1985, 1986; Strathern 1982; Brewer 2001; Lamont & Molnar 2002; Tilly 2004, 2005; Jenkins 2008).

This chapter and the next are therefore concerned with what fans call *wank*,³⁵ they explore the role that discord and controversy play in shaping fan practices, behaviour, and their conceptualisation of fandom. Devoting two chapters to conflict is not an indication that fandom is especially fractious; rather, as already stated, treating conflict as an ordinary part of fans' experience of community is a productive and underutilised analytical tool. This chapter considers disagreements between fans, while Chapter 5 focuses on disputes between fans and outside entities. The examples in both chapters were chosen partly because they are among the most common and recurrent sources of discord, partly because they are typical of fannish conflict more broadly, and partly because they are especially helpful in illuminating certain aspects of the character of online fandom. This chapter begins by discussing fanfiction as a controversial genre because the somewhat problematic nature of fic is an underlying issue in many fan-related conflicts, including all of those discussed in this thesis. The second section of this chapter explores the development of warning labels, which apprise readers of potential triggers or unwanted content, into a fannish institution rather than a courtesy as an internal effort to address the problematic aspects of fanfiction.

³⁵ Derived from UK slang for masturbation or 'an objectionable or contemptible person' ('wanker', *n.* 2), fans use *wank* to mean 'a loud and public online argument' or 'objectionable and contemptible fannish behavior' such as 'plagiarism, character bashing, sock-puppeting, blatant self-aggrandizement, and trolling' (FL: 'wank').

Underlying Tensions: Fanfiction as Controversial Genre

All of the conflicts discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 relate to fanfiction in some way, though they encompass a wide range of other moral, legal, social, technological and philosophical issues. This is not a coincidence, nor is it the result of selecting particular incidents to fit a theme: fanfiction, as the most common and distinctive variety of fanwork (OTW 2012), is also one of the most misunderstood and maligned by outside sources like newspapers (see Wortham 2015, Koch 2014, Alter 2012, Wilson 2010, Wong 2010), making it a recurrent subject of controversy within fandom and a popular target for outside attacks. This chapter, in keeping with its focus on intra-fandom conflict, begins by examining fan exchanges that attempt to articulate and address the ways that fanfiction is itself controversial or problematic, and their effort to reconcile the more troubling aspects of fic with fannish understanding of their community as a safe space. This has the additional advantage of contextualising some of the issues surrounding fic in ways that help illuminate underlying tensions in other fan-related conflicts. The documents quoted in this section are drawn from fan wiki entries about controversial aspects or genres of fic or relevant tags in LJ meta or discussion Communities (e.g. FL: ‘darkfic’, ‘dubcon’, ‘non-con’, ‘warnings’; metafiction 2015: ‘warnings’).

This section exemplifies what scholars consider *constructive conflict* (Johnson, Johnson & Tjosvold 2006; Gelfand, Leslie & Keller 2008; Jenkins 2008; Angouri & Locher 2012; Kriesberg & Dayton 2012). Indeed, it is arguably more accurate to refer to fannish exchanges about the problematic aspects of fanfiction as discussions rather than disputes. However, this does not mean that conflict analysis cannot provide useful analytical tools for this investigation: scholars of pragmatics note that there are activities and contexts where disagreement is expected, encouraged, and productive (e.g. decision making, debates) and particular linguistic and social strategies that may be employed to indicate that participants intend to disagree in a non-injurious manner (Tannen 1998, Muntigl & Turnbull 1998, Locher 2004, Paramasivam 2007, Angouri & Locher 2012). Furthermore, the institutionalised form of conflict management represented by such strategies can become so ingrained in a society that certain conflicts come to be regarded more as games than as fights (e.g. electoral politics in stable democracies; Kriesberg & Dayton 2012: 92-3). This is pertinent because fandom is a community founded in part on discussing and analysing media – activities that intrinsically involve a level of

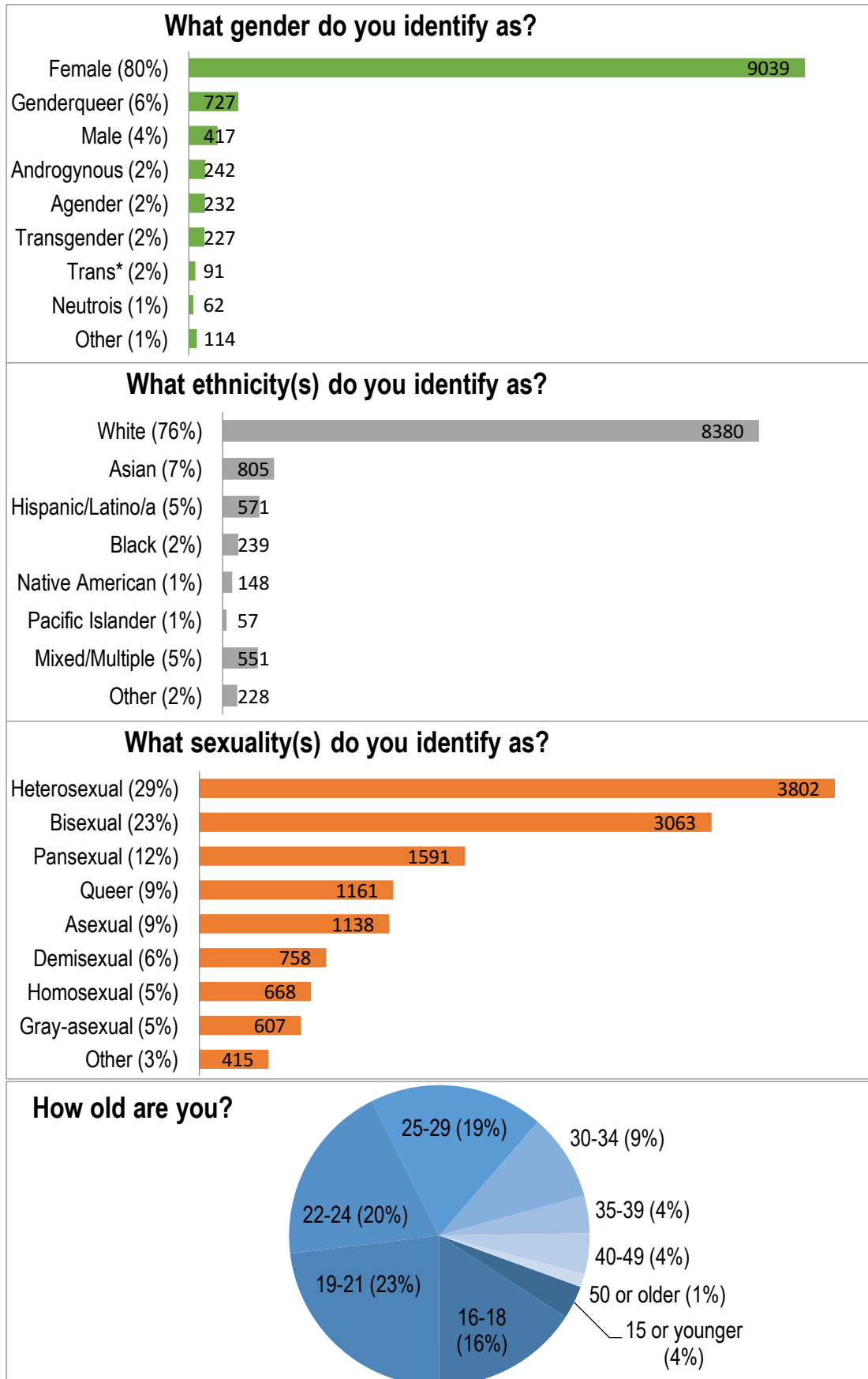
disagreement but are not inherently hostile – so most fannish spaces are perceived as legitimate venues for respectful, ‘sociable argument’ (Schiffrin 1984: 331) in which participants seek to ‘get one’s point across without...being injurious’ (Locher 2004: 94).

Fans are aided by demographic pressures in establishing their community as one in which sociable disagreement is encouraged and even normative: the vast majority of modern online fandom identifies as white, Western, college-educated, female (or non-male), and non-heterosexual, with between 65-96% of the fannish population in each of those categories (see Fig. 4.1; Lulu 2013a, b; OTW 2012; melannen 2010a, b; Sendlor 2010). This is not to say that fandom is homogenous – those characteristics intersect with each other in diverse ways, and with other aspects of identity that are equally important but less held in common among fans – but rather that such a foundation of shared experience and overarching common interest are often helpful in promoting harmonious and productive dissent (Tajfel 1981, 1982; Brewer & Hewstone 2004; Brown & Capozza 2006; Kriesberg & Dayton 2012). In addition, fandom is a voluntary community based on a shared love of media, participants must actively seek out and participate in it to maintain a sense of belonging, and many members have also been dismissed or marginalised for their interest or accused of unhealthy levels of obsession. The intersection of these shared experiences and demographic traits means that fans tend to begin with or develop many of the same values, interests, and beliefs in a manner also conducive to constructive conflict (see Northrup 1989, Bartos & Wehr 2002, Ashmore, Jussim & Wilder 2001).

Demographics also inform the most basic reason that fanfiction is contentious: fics are stories written by women, for women, and many are explicitly and unabashedly sexual, or deal with violent, disturbing, or problematic themes. Destinationtoast (2013) found that 33.7% of all fics hosted on Archive of Our Own (AO3) were rated *Mature* or *Explicit*, indicating that they contain ‘content with adult themes’ and ‘porn, graphic violence, etc’, while a further 30.9% of stories were rated *Teen and Up* for being potentially ‘inappropriate for audiences under 13’ (AO3 2014).³⁶ Explicit fics were the most popular as well as the most numerous, consistently receiving over 1/3 more ‘hits’

³⁶ Many archives have policies against hosting fic that AO3 considers *Explicit*, including FFN, the largest fic archive online. Thus, AO3 numbers may over-represent the quantity of these fics. However, the numbers are striking even when this is taken into account; further, there are archives that *only* host pornographic fic, which might counteract the sampling bias somewhat.

Fig. 4.1: Fandom Demographics derived from AO3 user data. **Source:** Lulu (2013a, b).



(people opening the story) and ‘kudos’ (expressions of reader appreciation) than Mature fics, the next most popular category (destinationtoast 2013). Pornographic fic appeals to fans in part because most fic is written by women in response to the needs and interests of a female-dominated community, so it privileges the female gaze and female sexuality in ways that mainstream porn usually cannot achieve and mainstream society often does not attempt (professorfangirl 2014; Chan 2014; holmseanpose 2014; amireal 2008; melannen 2007; stele3 2007; Cumberland 2004; Kass 1999; Green, Jenkins & Jenkins 1998). Brenda Twohy (2014) expresses this in her National Poetry Slam entry:

Ask me what kind of porn I am into and I will
 take you on a magical journey into fanfiction.com
 backlash Harry Potter backlash NC17.
 What turns me on is Ginny Weasley in the restricted section
 with her skirt hiked up; Sirius Black in a secret passageway
 solemnly swearing he is up to no good; and Draco Malfoy
 in the Room of Requirement slithering into
 my chamber of secrets.
 I am an unapologetic consumer of all things Potterotica
 and the sexiest part is not the way Cho Chang
 rides that broomstick or the sounds of Myrtle moaning.
 The sexiest part is knowing they are part of a bigger story,
 that they exist beyond eight minutes in Titty Titty Gang Bang
 that their kegels are not the strongest thing about them and still,
 I am told my porn is unrealistic;
 not quite as erotic as flashing ads saying “JUST TURNED 18”
 so you can fantasize about fucking the youngest girl
 you won’t go to jail for.
 Told that my porn isn’t quite as lifelike as
 a room full of lesbians begging for cock.
 Told that this is what is supposed to turn me on.
 ...
 My sex cannot be packaged - my sex is magic,
 it is part of a bigger story.
 I am whole. I exist when you are not fucking me
 and I will not be cut into pieces anymore.



Fig. 4.2: Fan graphic about the appeal of fic. Source: usbdongle (2013).

Thus, the first fannish value that conflict over fic illuminates is the feminist, sex-positive embrace of female sexuality. However, not all mature fics are pornographic, and not all fics with sexual content necessarily seek to present unproblematic or even appealing depictions of sexuality. Another reason that people write fic is to fill syntagmatic gaps in a story (Jenkins 1992, 2006; Fiske 1992). This can involve writing ‘deleted’ scenes that were implied but not described in the original (or *canon*) text, or stories from the perspective of a minor

character, but it can also include interpolating aspects of human nature that are often censored or omitted from popular media, like sex or violence (see bitterfig 2007, femmequixotic 2007c, Briarwood 2008). Elf (2007c) explains,

We imagine what's missing from the stories... We write stories and meta... exploring one of the crucial aspects of reaching adulthood: sexual identity, and how that relates to everyone else's sexual identity... Some explore ideas that we deplore in real life – incest, child sexuality, rape, nonconsensual sex – because we want to know if something that extreme, that unlikely, could plausibly fill some of the gaps in canon

Even non-pornographic mature fics often involve problematic themes. *Darkfic*, for example, is a genre ‘which deals with intentionally disturbing material, such as physical and emotional violence’ (FL: ‘Darkfic’), and is dedicated to telling stories that ‘explore’ and ‘go beyond those boundaries and... aspects of human nature that are bound by rules and morals in our daily lives’ (HPdarkarts_mod 2013). These stories are not always explicitly or even implicitly sexual, though that does not necessarily detract from their erotic appeal to some fans; similarly, not all the intentionally pornographic fics avoid problematic themes like incest or rape. For example, *Hurt/Comfort* (H/C) is one of the oldest genres of fic, and refers to stories in which one character is in physical or emotional distress and another character takes care of him; and the Hurt/Hurt subgenre, which involves little or no ‘comfort’ and significantly more harm, is arguably even older than H/C (e.g. Meuser 1969, Guttridge 1971; see FH & FL: ‘H/C’). *Rapefic* is another venerable genre; indeed, rape was the traumatic event at the core of many early H/C fics. Some fans also make a distinction between rapefic, which they define as fics in which rape is treated as a realistic and traumatic event, and *non-con*, short for *non-consensual*, which ‘eroticises elements of non-consensual sex such as aggression, helplessness, and power imbalance’ (FL: ‘non-con’). This, in turn, is distinct from *dub-con* (from *dubious consent*), which refers to fic in which consent is unknown or uncertain. Mainstream portrayals of fic tend to over-emphasise its problematic or erotic aspects even when trying to present fandom in a positive light (see Wagner 2007, Hicklin 2014, Koch 2014; Granick 2006, Wilson 2010, Wolfson 2012), which sets the stage for subsequent conflict with outside bodies that acquire much of their information about fandom from these sources (see Chapter 5).

There are two issues that must be clarified. First, there are fans who have no interest in pornographic fic; fan and published author Seanan McGuire (2014b) writes, ‘I read

a novel's-worth of fanfic every week or so, and I very rarely read explicit sex unless it happens in the context of a long, long story about other things' (see also kurukami 2007, dragonscholar 2008 & comments; FL: 'gen'). There are also many fans who do not enjoy darker stories. Of those who do, some are titillated by such stories, some appreciate them for other reasons; a distinction highlighted by the fact that not all mature fics are explicit. More importantly, most fans who read these stories clearly distinguish between the production, consumption and even enjoyment of their content, and the endorsement of those activities in the actual world; forcefully rejecting the notion that they 'can't make that distinction between fiction, fantasy and reality' (Briarwood 2008; see also bitterfig 2007). Bironic (2011) explains,

Let's put it simply: Rape is bad. Noncon—fictionalized rape—can be hot.

The reverse is true as well: The fantasy can be hot, but the reality is not. A fanwork creator or a character who has a noncon fantasy almost certainly does not want to experience, perform or witness rape in real life.

Second, many fans of non-con and related genres are self-described feminists, and some are themselves survivors of sexual abuse or other violence. Femmequixotic (2007c), for example, uses psychological research (Hines 2000, Krause, DeRosa & Roth 2002) to make the point that reading and writing stories with 'problematic' content can be a beneficial part of survivors' healing and recovery process:

I have friends on LJ, both those who have been abused as children and those who have not, who have written...adult/minor fic for numerous quite valid reasons. Either they wanted to explore the psychological/ethical/moral elements of a relationship where the younger character is below the age of consent, or the story of how such a relationship would develop intrigued them – much as it has done for writers and artists throughout...[history] (don't make me whip the much-dreaded, much-overused Nabakov et al out on y'all), or, sometimes, they wanted to work through what had happened to them as children.

Because, yes, just as many rape survivors write rape fic to deal with their experiences, many sexual abuse survivors write underage fic for the same reason. Please note, no, not all...survivors choose this method of working through their life experiences...but a goodly number do.

Her acknowledgement that not all fans with such experiences cope with them in this manner is important to emphasise, as is the fact that not all fans of these genres are survivors; some just find them intellectually or erotically appealing. However, perhaps because a high proportion of fans are college-educated and identify as female, queer, and feminist (see melannen 2010a, b; Sendlor 2010; OTW 2012; Lulu 2013a, b), the significant texts on both sides of the argument display a strong commitment to fighting

rape culture and treating the survivors of sexual abuse and other violence in their community with sensitivity and respect (see thingswithwings 2013, eumelia 2011, lunardreamed 2008; Fanlore: ‘non-con’, ‘dub-con’). For example, ficcers may post statements like this one by AudreyV (2014), who acknowledges that ‘these kinks are incredibly problematic and can be seen as idealizing rape, but...hopes that in her work, and in others of the genre, the difference between the taboo kink of fictional non-consensual situations and the ugly reality of sexual violence remains clear’. Likewise, the conversation about non-and dub-con includes progressive and complex explanations of affirmative consent that encompass moral, philosophical, legal, social, and feminist perspectives (see thingswithwings 2013, eumelia 2011, Briarwood 2008). For example:

1. Orgasm is an involuntary reaction to direct stimulation – in both genders. Just because someone has an orgasm, doesn't mean the sex is consensual...
2. ...Consent given in the past doesn't imply that it will be in the future...
 - a. In some jurisdictions, marriage contains the concept of ‘implied consent’; however, many such cases of spousal rape have been successfully prosecuted as assault...
3. Consent given after the fact doesn't make noncon ‘okay’. Any relationship that starts with noncon will remain noncon, because you can't start an equitable relationship without being able to draw boundaries and trust they'll be respected.
4. Consent given under any kind of chemical influence or biological imperative...is not valid.
5. Consent given under duress is not valid. In its 1998 judgment, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda defined rape as: “a physical invasion of a sexual nature committed on a person under circumstances which are coercive.”...
6. Characters have the right to change their mind, no matter how far the sexual situation has progressed.
7. Lack of verbal protest...is not implied consent (thefrogg 2008)

This text, with its multi-disciplinary academic engagement, as well as femmequixotic’s (2007c) invocation of psychological research and literary works such as Nabokov, illustrate the ways that common experiences and resources – like a college education – can shape not only the character of a community, but provide common ground upon which to pursue constructive rather than destructive disagreement. On that point, it is significant that the three preceding quotes – which represent a defence of dub-con, an acknowledgement of its indefensibility, and an articulation of its meaning and purpose (bironic 2011, AudreyV 2014, femmequixotic 2007c) – *all* entail a similarly complex and feminist understanding of consent

consistent with thefrogg (2008). This corresponds to the observation that more homogenous communities tend to have similar values and priorities, which is conducive to harmony and constructive dispute (see Simmel 1964, Deutsch 1973, Ashmore, Jussim & Wilder 2001, Kriesberg & Dayton 2012).

The above quotes also suggest that feminism is not merely a philosophy that many fans espouse, but a core value of the community. This is not to say that all fans identify as feminists; rather, every social group possesses certain ideologies, norms, and priorities that most members accept, or that are seen as most legitimate. These are not static or homogenous – not everyone subscribes to the dominant ideology, nor do all of those who do conceptualise it in the same way, and social norms change over time – but assertions that correspond to the social norms and draw on the dominant ideologies tend to have more weight, particularly in disputes (Cohen 1985; Bestor 1992; Lapinski & Rimal 2005; Johnson, Dowd & Ridgeway 2006; Kelman 2001, 2006; Kriesberg & Dayton 2012). In fandom, feminism is one of these values. In addition to sharing a feminist understanding of consent, most fannish perspectives on problematic fic make other claims to being feminist: unambiguous defences are predicated on the assertion that sex-positive works and female pleasure are inherently feminist and empowering (bironic 2011, Briarwood 2008, bitterfig 2007); more equivocal justifications often emphasise the capacity of problematic fic to combat rape culture by condemning, exposing, and starting conversations about the ugly reality of assault (AudreyV 2014, femmequixotic 2007c); and opponents usually prefer not to condemn entire genres, but to suggest that specific plot elements should be discouraged as anti-feminist (sherlockfeminist 2015a, b), or that darker fics should only be posted with adequate warnings so that others can avoid them (eumelia 2011, thingswithwings 2013).

Furthermore, outsiders who attempt to use fannish spaces to assert that non- or dub-con fic is antifeminist are usually met with prompt and thorough refutations that highlight the feminist sex-positivity of fic and assert that ‘kink shaming’ sexual proclivities (that cause no harm) is generally condemned by the fan community as antifeminist and antithetical to their values (see kiwichtulu 2013, failfandomanonwiki 2015). Conversely, however, defences of such genres must explicitly invoke the feminist principle that ‘In real life, there’s no such thing as “dubious consent”. In real life, either informed consent exists, or it’s rape’ (Briarwood 2008; also bitterfig 2007, bironic 2011, eumelia 2011), or

they do not correspond to fannish values and will not be enshrined in fannish historical records such as metafiction or Fanlore. Thus, feminism emerges as an underlying value of fandom; one that all parties, even those who may not identify as feminists, can use to add legitimacy to their argument. This is interesting because many studies that try to identify the characteristics of virtual community either presume or discover that shared values are an irrelevant and unreliable measure (Blanchard 2007, 2008; Abfalter, Zaglia, & Mueller 2012). Fandom, however, has many identifiable communal values; in the case of feminism, conflict arises not because the community does not share this value, but from attempts to define and apply that principle. This is usually a more constructive model of conflict than disagreements caused by multiple opposing values or by one party rejecting the importance other(s) ascribe to a principle, because these models involve less common ground on which adversaries can agree (Kriesberg & Dayton 2012: 38-41; Kelman 2008, Worchel & Coutant 2008).

These tensions can be seen in the fact that many fans reject the semantic division between *rape* and *non-con* on feminist grounds, arguing that the difference is illusory and serves only to perpetuate rape culture (see were-lemur 2009 & comments, ratherastory 2011 & comments, Unprevailing 2011, MadamAce 2012). However, this critique is not limited to opponents of the genre, and critics are careful not to condemn the fics themselves (or the kinks they portray and the fans who enjoy them) as antifeminist. Rather, they argue that euphemistic terms like *dub-con* are antifeminist and significantly more harmful than the actual content:

If people want to write rape fic, go for it, and I will probably read it, but let's step up and acknowledge what it is we are writing. I take issue with these qualifiers because I think that it is far more insidious than out and out rape porn. At least when we say it is rape, then we can move on to the next step: saying it's wrong, just a fantasy, etc. But avoiding the label perpetuates the rape myths that have had such a damaging effect on victims and justice: did she enjoy it, she didn't really say no, she was a tease, they've done it before. None of those things matter, and when a person labels their fic, they need to stop pretending they do (Lunardreamed 2008)

Other fans argue that such terms are both helpful and feminist:

Fandom has taken the RL definitions of rape and used words like noncon and dub-con to help people negotiate their own boundaries and comfort zones, and stepping back from that would be a mistake I think, not this great leap forward in the fight against rape culture that she seems to think it is (fail_fandomanon 2013)

Once again, neither perspective characterises dub-con as antifeminist; that would be kink shaming, and inimical to the feminist priority of sex-positivity. Rather, they agree that these labels have feminist implications, and influence whether and how problematic fics can be used as tools to combat rape culture, but they disagree about which terms can be used to accomplish this collective goal. As the next section discusses, this negotiation is usually accomplished through the use of *warnings*: labels at the beginning of fics that identify problematic content relevant to that story. This enables readers to avoid content they find distasteful without curtailing other fans' capacity to read those stories. However, not everyone defines those terms uniformly (thingswithwings 2013), so labelling a fic *dub-con* does not necessarily allow fans to avoid content they personally consider non-consensual – which somewhat limits readers' capacity to use such labelling to negotiate their own boundaries.

All of these issues – warnings, characterising fanfiction as sex-positive and feminist, collective awareness of and dedication to an active definition of consent, commitment to combating rape culture, opposition to 'kink shaming' sexual tastes – highlight another underlying priority of fandom: establishing their community as a safe space. The fannish conception of safe space invokes the values of Trust and Emotional Support, which McMillan (1996) identifies as two of the defining features of community. McMillan (1996: 316) suggests that in order to inspire a 'sense of community' and belonging, a group must 'provide the acceptance, empathy, and support for members to speak their truth and be themselves'. These are aspects of community that many Internet studies find easy to dismiss, arguing that anonymity and lack of face-to-face interactions inhibit the capacity of virtual environments to generate these feelings of emotional safety and mutual trust (Forster 2004; Blanchard 2007, 2008; Abfalter, Zaglia & Mueller 2012). However, other studies find that although these characteristics may be harder to produce in virtual contexts, some virtual communities take steps to create them, and members of these communities report a sense of emotional support and safety – which in turn often encourages them to stay in these groups, thereby reinforcing their sense of cohesion and community (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2002; Oh & Jeon 2007; Sangan, Guan & Siguaw 2009). Fans acknowledge the challenges of their medium, and concur that safe space is often more of an aspiration than a reality; traumachu (2015), for example, recounts an exchange

that challenged her presumption that ‘fandom is the only real safe space for women to explore their sexuality’ by pointing out that

It is disingenuous to call fandom a safe space because it is not safe...Everyone’s definition of safe space is different, and it may be impossible to ever truly create safe spaces for everybody, because the Internet is not a safe space...It might even be dangerous to call fandom a safe space, because that makes it hard to have productive discussions. What we should do instead, as a community, is aim to make fandom a respectful space, where we try...to respect each other and each other’s safe spaces

Other fans note that their community’s sex-positive ideals do not always protect them when their kinks are perceived as unhealthy or antifeminist. This includes fans of non- and dub-con, but it is especially problematic for fans who experience BDSM and related practices as a healthy, fulfilling, and consensual part of their actual-world sexual identity (see Deller, Harman & Jones 2013, Briarwood 2008). Telesilla (2009), for example, writes

I've been talking about death and rape and child abuse, and then all of a sudden... here's something that is an integral part of my sexuality being compared with those three things. Somehow fandom has decided that a form of consensual sex needs to be warned for, like it was the same as death or rape or child abuse. I'm a sadist who likes hurting people who like being hurt. Asking me to warn for BDSM is telling me that I'm no better than a murderer or a rapist. Wow, that makes me feel welcome in fandom. That makes me feel like fandom is my safe space, where I can take my experience and write about what I know and not be judged for it

However, even these critiques of safe space uphold it as an ideal; the first quote suggests that although it is impossible to create a perfectly safe space, the community should still strive to be as respectful and safe as it can, while the outrage in the second quote is predicated on being denied access to the safe space the community promised it would be. Beyond those criticisms, there are many fans who do consider fandom a safe space (see amireal 2008, starvinbohemian 2010, Tori 2014). If they did not, fandom would not be as effective at facilitating the variety of healing that femmequixotic (2007c) describes. Several of my informants who were abuse survivors asserted that part of what makes fandom a safe space for them is that it is somewhere their experiences are recognised and represented in a respectful and sensitive manner – something that is often lacking from the mainstream news or entertainment media portrayals of sexual assault. One fan told me that if fandom were to ban non-con fics, it would be like her experience – and in some ways she herself – had also been erased. It is common for defenders to point out that one motivation for writing darker stories is

to explore rather than deny the darker realities of human life (see bitterfig 2007, elf 2007c, Ellis 2014). Similarly, many fans argue that because fandom is a safe space, it is an ideal forum for discussing and addressing the feminist issues underlying these genres:

okay can we just establish that teenage girls writing dub con fic with warnings plastered all over them, author's notes addressing the disturbing content, and the issues and trauma being dealt with in the actual narrative, is in no way normalizing, fetishizing, or supporting rape culture. it's doing the opposite. it's creating a discussion. it's giving girls and women, and boys too – fans a safe, creative way to explore their fears and their trauma. yes, even ones who have been lucky enough to never experience sexual assault themselves. because the threat of sexual violence is something every girl lives under

As an extension of this, another reason that fans write non-con fic is to address deficiencies in popular media portrayals of their experiences. For example, in an episode of *Stargate Atlantis*, a character complains that 'Just once, I'd like to be taken prisoner by the sexy alien' (Wright & Waring 2007). This fic responds by illustrating how the reality of that situation would be less pleasurable than he seemed to believe:

"We don't have any kind of a deal," Rodney said, "because 'deal' implies that both parties are able to enter freely into an agreement, and I'm tied up and on my knees." Which should have been hot – it certainly *sounded* hot in theory – but instead he felt raw and vulnerable and kind of freaked out (anon 2010)

That excerpt demonstrates how fans can use fic to repair problems of consent, context, and representation in canon, and also how it is impossible to do so without intimately describing reprehensible actions and their effects. Further, the quote shows the author's clear understanding of the consent issues being violated in this scenario, and her comprehension of the division between rape fantasies and 'reality'. It also highlights the final argument of fans who are titillated by the more problematic genres of fic, which is simply that sexuality is complex and unpredictable, and as long as they remain aware of the boundaries of consent and reality, and ensure that they are not harming anyone with their proclivities, they should be free to explore and express their desires however they see fit. They further argue that when appropriate safety measures are taken, BDSM, kink, and consent play can be a healthy part of human sexuality, and that attempts to make them feel guilty or ashamed of their desires is 'kink-shaming' and antifeminist, in that it attempts to make moral judgements and apply negative values to female pleasure (see Briarwood 2008, telesilla 2009, Deller, Harman & Jones 2013).

As already stated, this section is a straightforward example of constructive conflict: although the fannish discussion of problematic fic entails some bitter and substantive disagreement, it is usually conducted so as to ‘preserve relationships, maximize mutually satisfactory outcomes and minimize reliance on violence’ (Kriesberg & Dayton 2012: 4). Fandom is naturally inclined towards constructive conflict by its shared demographics, experiences, priorities, and values. This section illuminates feminism as a key underlying value of fandom, and safe space as an important and intentional part of how fans conceptualise their community; values like informed consent, combating rape culture, championing the respectful representation of marginalised identity in media, and the sex-positive embrace of erotic fic and feminine pleasure are all subsidiary issues that are discussed and negotiated in relation to their capacity to further those two issues. It is noteworthy that the majority of exchanges on this subject produced in the last fifteen years support those principles, including every document enshrined as representative or historically significant by the fans who maintain or contribute to wikis, meta discussion communities, and fan archives (see cathexys 2005a-c; Fanfic Symposium 2006; Fanthropology 2005; metafiction 2015; FL: ‘warnings’, ‘non-con’, ‘dub-con’). Thus, the conflict arises not from disagreement about fannish values, but from differences in definitions, priorities, and strategies for furthering these shared goals – giving fans the advantage of a common ground they can start from *and* work toward.

Another reason that this conflict is constructive is that the participants largely remain within the community’s standards for polite interaction. As a community with a strong tradition of analysis and debate, respectful dissent is an expected and even necessary category of fannish exchange. Furthermore, as a community that conceptualises itself as a ‘safe space’, fandom must also strive to ensure that people feel comfortable speaking out about issues and practices that they find harmful. Scholars of interpersonal pragmatics similarly observe that there are particular contexts in which disagreement is expected or encouraged and particular linguistic and social strategies that may be employed to indicate that they intend to dispute the subject in a non-injurious manner (Tannen 1998, Muntigl & Turnbull 1998, Locher 2004, Paramasivam 2007, Angouri & Locher 2012). In addition, conflict is more likely to be constructive when a society has an established set of rules and sanctions that govern disagreement and which are internalised and perceived as legitimate by all parties

(Kriesberg & Dayton 2012: 92-5). The texts in this section display a commitment to polite, constructive discourse that moves fandom in a direction that fans perceive as more positive and in keeping with fannish values.

Several rules of ideal fannish disagreement can be discerned in this section. First, fans should not attack other individuals, but rather stake intellectual positions. Second, they should articulate objections to a particular fannish practice clearly and with specific explanations of how it harms them personally, how they expect it to harm others, or why they do not feel it corresponds with fannish values like feminism or safe space. Third, when they disagree with a position, they should acknowledge any common ground they share with their opponents and their desire not to cause any harm or distress – often coupled with the implied belief that their opponents do not wish them harm, in accordance with the fannish commitment to safe space. Fourth, they should not simply state a position and a justifying argument: they should volunteer information that might help others respect their needs, or propose solutions that they feel might help move both parties towards a compromise. The fifth point cannot be discerned when the quotes are removed from their original context, but it is significant that every one of these quotes was a post made in the author's own journal or in respectfully designated debate posts, rather than comments embedded under someone else's journal. Unless the author invites debate into her personal, intimate space, it is considered impolite to 'hijack' someone else's post to express controversial opinions on topics with such potential to cause others distress (sophia-helix 2004). That last is more relevant to traditional blogs than to Tumblr, where all exchanges take the form of hijacking others' posts.

Of course, not all fans share these values, and not all fans can always maintain this standard of polite discourse. Indeed, escalation and de-escalation are an expected and natural part of the conflict cycle (Deutsch 1973; Gelfand, Leslie & Keller 2008; Kriesberg & Dayton 2012). Furthermore, when the issues are as fraught as discussions of sexuality and creativity often are, it is unlikely that any one solution will be acceptable to all parties. The next section deals with a period of escalated conflict, centred on what has become fandom's most significant attempt to reconcile the conflicting needs of fans find darker stories harmful with those who find them beneficial.

'A Vague Disclaimer is Nobody's Friend':

The Great Warnings Wank

Fannish warnings are traditionally placed at the start of a fanwork to notify readers about potentially unwelcome or problematic content before they begin reading. Their development into a fannish institution corresponds to a growing awareness that certain topics can cause readers psychological distress, usually by 'triggering' memories of traumatic experiences. Fannish warnings vary in detail and content, usually at the author's discretion, and may range from vague *darkfic* labels to specific information about



Fig.4.3: Quote & gif from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Wheedon, Petrie & Contner 1999).

story content. The controversial status of warnings centres on the fact that their proponents consider warnings a social and emotional responsibility owed to their fellow fans, while opponents consider warnings an unnecessary and patronising requirement imposed on them by overly cautious or hypersensitive members of their community. The warnings debate spans several decades and technologies, and this section begins by establishing some of that historical context, but in the interest of telling a cohesive story the modern analysis will focus on texts primarily drawn from a single incident known as 'the last big warnings wank', which occurred in 2009. This is an ideal example because it articulates most major arguments for and against warnings, is recent enough that it represents most of the modern concerns and incarnations of those arguments, and because it spanned most contemporary active fandoms and therefore represents a wide variety of perspectives. The texts quoted in this section are drawn primarily from contemporary and retrospective summaries of this incident, collections of links or archived texts that document the scattered responses to the initial altercation, and the appropriate tags in general meta Communities posted in the month after the inciting event (see *magicastles* 2009, *some-stars* 2009, *regala-electra* 2013; *metafandom* 2015 & FL: 'warnings'). Not all relevant documents remain publicly available, so in some cases I use quotations and summaries in secondary sources, as well as images of the relevant texts captured before they were deleted (esp. *magicastles* 2009, *some-stars* 2009). For ethical reasons, I tried to contact both primary and secondary authors, and I only use publicly visible quotes. This account and analysis of these events and the historical trajectory they represent were read and approved by almost every author named in this section, including those on the dissenting side.



Fig. 4.4: A somewhat humorous set of suggestions for illustrated fic labels from the fanzine *Southern Enclave* (Nowakowska 1987), created in response to demands that editors be more specific about the content of their zines.

Warnings date back to the zine era, though at that time they were not very common or institutionalised, nor were they necessarily limited to identifying negative material (as Fig. 4.4 illustrates, with labels including ‘warm fuzzies’ and ‘birthday/holiday’). Indeed, some early fans used warning labels as advertisements; Sian1359 (2010) recalls that it was difficult to learn about the content of upcoming zines, ‘so the more details/“warnings”, the better. “Warnings” gave buyers the opportunity to decide what to buy – or what not to buy – of something [that] pretty much otherwise went sight unseen until you bought it’. Her equation of ‘warnings’ with ‘details’ is particularly telling, as is Busker’s (2003) observation that ‘certain labels that are commonly identified as “warnings” are just as often used to help readers seek out stories’ (see also Carnal 2010, FL: ‘warnings’). One of the few genres that was consistently labelled in the early days of fandom was *slash* fanworks depicting intimate relationships between male characters. Even when the stories were not sexually explicit, ficcers in the 1980s ‘were regularly castigated for posting slash fic **without** a warning’, which they attributed to homophobia and the perception of homosexuality as deviant and inherently sexualised (Jaciem 2010, emphasis original; also Beth 1995, brat queen 2003, Andersen 2005; see Murphy 1997, Weston 1998). This double standard directly relates to the fact that early slash fans were a marginalised group even within fandom; prominent fans frequently described them as ‘a bunch of

twisted sickos’ or asserted that they were not ‘real *Star Trek* fans...[but rather] fat ladies with a sexual dysfunction’ (Gerrold 1985; FL: ‘slash controversies’). Slash fans were thus among the first groups to institutionalise warnings; Jane Carnall (2010) describes how they used them as advertising, like other fans did, but also as a defence:

When I first found slash fandom, “warnings” were both a signal to other slash fen that there was What We Were Looking For inside those covers, and something to shield us from those manic anti-slash fans going “I READ THIS STORY WHERE SPOCK AND KIRK WERE LOVERS OMG I NEARLY THREW UP!” This was in 1983

Warnings quickly became an institution for online fans, though they have ‘just never been the tradition in zines’ (Duny 2001). Conflict scholars observe that abrupt changes in demographics and technologies can be a source of tension in a community, exacerbating old differences or inspiring new ones: ‘traditional attitudes may not keep up with new circumstances, or various segments of the system may develop differences in interests and values, which create potential new conflicts’ (Kriesberg & Dayton 2012: 35; Jehn 1995, Lau & Murnighan 2005, Brown 2009). The Internet certainly had such an affect on fandom in the 1990-2000s: it afforded fandom greater visibility, allowing it to attract a broader range of people with diverse experiences and interests, and bringing fans into closer and more immediate contact with each other (see Chapter 3). This in turn affected the creation of fanworks: although some of the controversial fic genres discussed above were invented by zine fans, the variety and quantity of sexual kinks and other ‘mature’ content increased dramatically in online fanfiction. Concurrent with this rise in the availability of fic and the more ‘extreme’ or potentially harmful nature of its content (Duny 2001), the Internet was eroding many of the safety precautions that early fandom had developed. With zines, ‘fans knew what to expect from certain editors, and made their buying choices accordingly, rather than depending on warnings’ (Shay 2001). However, zine editors who carefully fostered relationships with writers and buyers – and even *listmoms* and *moderators*, who played a similar role on early online platforms (Kielle 2002) – were slowly being replaced by faceless archive administrators, like those on Fanfiction.net, who allowed anyone to host fic with them regardless of quality or content. Simultaneously, there was a decreased call for mentors, because new ‘netfen’ could teach themselves how to access fic and participate in fandom, but this also deprived them of guides to help them negotiate the surprising or alarming aspects of fandom, such as H/C fic.

The increase in potentially harmful content and decrease in protections was exacerbated by the fact that the move online was accompanied by a population influx with a disproportionate rise in the number of vulnerable fans who could be harmed by this content. This is because the Internet was particularly effective at making fandom more accessible to people with fewer personal resources and autonomy, including adolescents (Hellekson & Busse 2006: 13). Minors had always been a subject of concern in fandom; editors and ficcers feared they might be held responsible for exposing them to adult content, and that creators would use such incidents to exact legal sanctions when they could not successfully prosecute copyright infringement (see Chapter 5), or that angry parents might use their work to incite a moral panic that could tarnish their community's already-deviant reputation. In addition, the Internet was a new technology with unknown ramifications regarding surveillance and legal liability, and they feared facing charges involving the sexualisation or corruption of minors (Verba 1988, Carnall 2010; FL: 'age statements', 'warnings').

Perhaps more significantly, moving online also marked the beginning of fandom's shift towards the contemporary demographics depicted in Figure 4.1 (see Lulu 2013a, b; OTW 2012; melannen 2010a, b; Sendlor 2010). Early fandom was primarily comprised of heterosexual white women (Jenkins 1992, Bacon-Smith 1992), who had always been aware that their community included survivors of sexual assault, domestic abuse, and other violence. However, members of modern online fandom – with its increased proportion of fans identifying as people of colour and LGBTQIA+, all marginalised populations with staggering rates of violence and neglect (WHO 2013, Creese & Lader 2014, FBI 2014, Terry 2015) – are more likely to have experienced trauma that might be triggered by the content of problematic fics. In addition, even adult fans with no triggers were not always comfortable with the aspects of fandom the Internet brought them into closer proximity with. For example, when Aspen (2001) published a Harry Potter slash fic in which consenting adults participate in sexual roleplay where one pretends to be a child and the other his father, she was drawing on common tropes found in anime fandom and fanfiction. However, because most HP fans did not have her background in these expectations, Aspen was branded 'the freak from anime fandom' for years afterwards, her story used as an example of disturbing or problematic content (permetaform 2004, charlotteschaos 2007; FL: 'Daisychain Draco').

Overarching social change does not affect all members of community uniformly or simultaneously, so shifts in broader societal values can also precipitate divisive intra-group conflict (Kriesberg & Dayton 2012: 35-6; Jehn 1995, Lau & Murnighan 2005, Marcus 2006). Media fandom was born amid the 1960s and '70s movements championing civil rights for people of colour, women, and LGBT people, and they reflected these values to a certain extent; it is no accident that *Star Trek*, with its 'egalitarian' vision of the future was the first significant fan text. However, by the time fandom was migrating online in the 1990s, it had to contend, like the rest of America (and the majority of fandom *is* American; Sendlor 2010), with stark reminders that those struggles were not over. Furthermore, these injustices highlighted the importance of the media and its capacity to harm or help: the Los Angeles riots, sparked by taped evidence of police brutality, were the largest race riots in twenty-five years; the Anita Hill and Monica Lewinsky trials were public spectacles of slut shaming, double standards, and enforcing glass ceilings over ambitious women; the LGBT community used the 'SILENCE=DEATH' slogan to publicise the rapid spread of AIDS and its stigmatisation as a 'gay' disease (Deem 1999, Fassin & Swenson 2002, Tervalon 2002, Eaklor 2011). These incidents and many others contributed to increasing awareness of such injustices, particularly among young, liberal Americans who identified with those groups. The new generation of fans – less white, less heterosexual, and younger than most veteran fans – brought this awareness with them into fandom. They demanded that their new community treat them with all the warmth and support that such a term implied, and they came prepared to educate them about how to do so. For example, while warnings for slash were considered beneficial by early proponents *and* opponents of the genre, by the late 1990s people were beginning to argue that such warnings were homophobic and contributed to the perception of queerness as deviant and dangerous (Beth 1995, the_shoshanna 2007, dunmurderin 2009, Carnall 2010; FL: 'History of Slash Fandom', 'slash', 'slash controversy', 'warnings', 'WNGWJLEO').

Thus, the increase in the vulnerable population of fandom intersected with an increased recognition of their vulnerability *and* with an increased awareness that media, including their own fanworks, had the capacity to cause harm. Warnings were fandom's answer to this problem: an attempt to reach a compromise between the fans who needed protection from the darker varieties of fic and the fans who needed such

stories for the reasons discussed above. Warnings can therefore be seen as fandom's commitment to the safety, health, and wellbeing of *all* members, regardless of which side of that divide they fall on. Further, by their very presence warnings identify safe spaces in which vulnerable people will not be forced to contend with discriminatory or harmful content unless they *choose* to engage with it. They represent a feminist pushback by a community of women against the patriarchal and misogynistic enclaves of virtual culture, like those exposed in the recent GamerGate and Reddit scandals (see Kain 2014; Marcotte 2014; Romano 2014b, c; Wingfield 2014; Pantozzi 2015; Robertson 2015; Lachenal 2015). Indeed, Internet news reporter Alison Vingiano (2014) credits fans and fan venues, particularly LiveJournal, with popularising use of the term *trigger warning* before presenting sensitive material – a practice that has become so common that it is debated in mainstream news sources like *The Guardian* and Associated Press, and has become the standard on feminist websites and other contexts that prioritise being safe spaces.

However, not all fans consider warnings a positive feature of their community. This antipathy began as a clash between the older traditions of zine fandom and the new expectations of online fandom. Notably, not everyone who participated in zine fandom necessarily rejected warnings, nor do online fans universally embrace the institution. Rather, as demonstrated above, warnings were a response to the shifting pressures and needs prompted by the new technology and the changes in behaviour and demographics that it precipitated. The early warnings dispute should therefore be understood as a conflict between those who sought to preserve or defend traditional fannish practices and those who believed that some combination of the new technology, population, social context, and more 'extreme' fanworks (Duny 2001) necessitated a change in these traditions. However, it is common for all parties in a conflict to present their view of the issues and participants in ways that justify their position and make it seem most legitimate and dominant to opponents, outsiders, and unaligned parties who might become allies (Kriesberg & Dayton 2012: 4-5; Calvano 2008, Kelman 2001, Bestor 1992).

Early opponents of warnings presented the conflict as between zine fans and online fans. They noted that warnings had never been prevalent in zine fandom, but generally eschewed using tradition as an argument in favour of their position. They preferred to make assertions like 'generally it was assumed that if you bought an 'adult' zine, you

could deal with such themes' (Shay 2001) characterising themselves as more mature, responsible, and capable of assessing their own boundaries than netfen. This had the added benefit of implying that all zine fans and similarly mature people would align with them (Shay 2001, Walsh 2011; FL: 'warnings'). Conversely, readers who requested warnings were portrayed as selfish and inconsiderate:

Fandom isn't a store, created to meet customer needs. It doesn't exist for the needs and expectations of only the people who consume the product. It's there for the enjoyment of the people who supply the product, as well...Managing your emotional allergies is not why a writer writes (Langley 2003)

This was exacerbated by the fact that opponents could fall back on fannish tradition, but early proponents of warnings were struggling to develop a consensus about what merited a label. In one apocryphal story about this process, a fan of *The Sentinel* reportedly requested warnings for fic in which a character cut his hair (Fig. 4.5), because she found it 'traumatic'. Her request was denied, but the incident became emblematic of the over-sensitivity of pro-warnings fans (FL: 'Sentinel', 'Warnings'). Thus, some fans could present their stance against warnings as an assertion that their peers were not too immature for adult themes, and warnings were therefore patronising and unnecessary:

I'm a dinosaur, and I don't believe in warnings so that readers are never exposed to something new, or something that will make them feel. Take a chance, and experience the stories as they were meant to be experienced - without warning, raw, and real

(Walsh 2011)

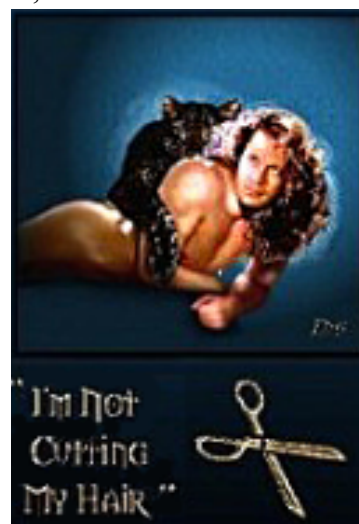


Fig. 4.5: Cover of a *Sentinel* zine (ENG n.d.)

Supporters, however, contend that warnings are the opposite of patronising. They consider warnings 'a way to provide information, so that readers can make an educated decision about what they, at that moment, are capable of handling' (scifigirl47 2014). Further, they note that responses to triggers are involuntary, that it is not always possible for individuals to gain control over these responses, and that people do not always have the resources and support that are necessary to making the attempt (robintheshrew et al. 2012, thefrogg 2008). They believe maturity is represented not by the capacity to cope with unexpected 'raw' content, but in the capacity to choose their own reading material and make intelligent decisions about managing their own physical and mental health.

Thus, like the discussion in section one, this aspect of the warnings conflict begins with collective agreement about a fanish value – in this case, respect for other fans and belief in their maturity – but dispute about how this should be prioritised or expressed. The significance of this value is emphasised by anti-warnings fans’ active preference for using respect rather than decades of tradition as the basis for their arguments. However, unlike the first section, which exemplifies the reasons that conflict based on negotiating the definitions and application of a consensus value tends to be more constructive than conflict over multiple opposing values framing this conflict as a single-value dispute did not make it less divisive. This is largely because both parties consider their opponents’ attitude damaging to individual people and the character of fandom as a whole, so compromise between these incompatible views is impossible. This partly explains why the warnings conflict is destructive and recurrent: when only one party may win, but the victors unilaterally impose an outcome on an entire society that is incompatible with the defeated party’s values, the tactics employed tend to be less constructive, and the losers usually regard this as oppressive and requiring redress. This in turn is often the basis for a renewed and more destructive struggle unless one or both of the parties is fundamentally transformed (see Kriesberg & Dayton 2012: 22; Worchel & Coutant 2008, Kelman 2004, 2006; Deutsch 1973, 2008).

Some opponents of warnings explicitly reject the idea that respect for other members of their community should be a factor in this argument; one complains ‘You say I have a moral obligation to put warnings...on my stories to protect a reader’s mental state. I say bullshit because I am not responsible for your mental upkeep’ (quote in some-stars 2009). These fans argue that ‘every form of entertainment – fanfiction, books, movies, whatever – carries a risk’ (Langley 2003), that because life does not come with trigger warnings and ‘blindsides us all the time no matter the traumas’ (quote in some-stars 2009), it is unreasonable for such individuals to demand trigger warnings for their reading material. Some even go so far as to suggest that fans who need warnings have ‘victim “privilege,” that the hurt [caused by a lack of warnings] might in fact be the result of dismantling...that privilege’ (quote in some-stars 2009; see zvi 2009). These assertions are, of course, in conflict with the notion that fandom is or should be a safe space, or that they have a responsibility to help maintain that space – and the notion of ‘victim privilege’ is further in conflict with feminist opposition to victim blaming (see

Suarez & Gadalla 2010, Grubb & Turner 2012). Just as the previous section demonstrated that the shared values of a community can lend credence to all perspectives that draw on them in a dispute, rejecting these values can decrease the perceived legitimacy of an argument (see Mannheim 1952; Cohen 1985; Bestor 1992; Lapinski & Rimal 2005; Johnson, Dowd & Ridgeway 2006; Kelman 2001, 2006; Jenkins 2008; Kriesberg & Dayton 2012). This is plainly evident in the fact that responses to the individualistic arguments above regard them as more contentious and offensive than arguments made on other grounds. Iamtheenemy (2009) writes,

Expecting warnings for common trigger things like rape, death, incest or dubcon isn't *privileged*, for fuck's sake. It's expecting some common courtesy from the community that we're all involved in. You know what *is* privileged, though? Having the luxury to be able to complain about people needing warnings, because those specific issues don't trigger you personally

AirgiodSLV (2009) responds with less outrage, but also asserts that individualistic arguments are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the character of fandom:

We're a community, and we look out for each other...We share stories, and we teach, and we try to make the world a better place. We provide a support network that every single one of us can turn to in times of need...I try never to...knowingly hurt a member of this community, or to hurt someone without then apologizing for it and doing everything in my power to rectify that mistake.

We are a community of minorities, of all colors and sexual orientations and gender identities and religions. We have a responsibility, to ourselves and to each other, to do no harm...Part of what being in this *community* means is that every person in it has a right to feel safe.

Posting warnings is a part of what makes our community safe for everyone. It's not an attack; it's a defense. It's part of what we do to make sure that we as artists do no harm...I would rather have fifty people skip reading my story or prematurely find out a 'surprise' plot detail than have one person's mental health be endangered by it

It is notable that both texts prominently feature the word *community*, a concept they equate with treating their fellow fans with respect and courtesy. This once again highlights the notion that fan community is partly defined by awareness of and adherence to a certain standard of behaviour. The texts also acknowledge that the world beyond fandom is less safe and respectful, but they do not accept this as a justification for lowering their standards; rather, they assert that this difference helps define the fan community by acting as a boundary mechanism that constitutes and maintains the division between fandom and the outside world (see Strathern 1982; Cohen 1985; Lamont & Molnar 2002; Zimmer 2003; Tilly 2004, 2005; Jones 2009).

Most significantly, both texts assert that this notion of community – as a safe space defined by courtesy, and respect for each other’s experiences, struggles, and human dignity – is a fannish value that supersedes any inconvenience to individual fans.

This conclusion is supported by the existence of anti-warnings arguments that attempt to appropriate the fannish value of safe space to support their position. One complains that ‘I don’t warn of potential triggers because there are so many triggers that I can’t cover all of them, and I could easily miss one’, and another that ‘In my experience whatever you do, it is **literally never good enough**. So, seriously, unless I can have some strict guidelines, I’m not playing the game’ (quote in some-stars 2009). They note that even if such guidelines existed, it would be difficult to agree on standard definitions of each term, or to ensure that authors applied those standards uniformly – a point conceded even by defenders of warnings (thingswithwings 2013, thefrogg 2008). Their argument is that holding creators responsible for other fans’ wellbeing is an unreasonable burden that denies them equal access to the fannish safe space by making them vulnerable to what may be perceived as ‘legitimate’ attacks when they fail to meet this impossible standard. Scholars observe that the potential for divisive conflict is greater when the rules of engagement, etiquette, and acceptable sanctions are not perceived as clear and legitimate by both sides (Angouri & Locher 2012, Kriesberg & Dayton 2012, Marsella 2005). However, reflectedeve (2009) again invokes the notion of the fannish community to argue that such writers would not be excluded if they were willing to engage with the fannish effort to constructively address these issues:

It is true that fandom is a broad, loose set of communities that have no absolute ruling standard. This hardly means that we can't suggest and advocate for a standard, as much as possible...I like to think that being part of a community means actively taking steps to take care of each other, to some degree. I also like to think that fandom, much as I'm sure we're all invested in individual and creative freedoms, leans towards this idea of supportive, compassionate community.

Opponents also assert the danger of ‘warnings creep’, suggesting that if fandom continues trying to satisfy everyone’s requests, they will fall down a ‘slippery slope’ towards a set of standards that require warnings for innocuous details; for example, use of the word *cock*. (Some fics do facetiously warn for that; see Nikki_chidon 2010, Strykeroptic 2014). Iamtheenemy (2009) quickly dismisses this argument:

No, that doesn't mean people should warn for everything under the sun...It means warning for the most *common* triggers. Ignoring that that's what people are trying to

explain is deliberately missing the point. If, for instance, a person doesn't like repetition of the word "cock", then guess what? THEY'RE PROBABLY NOT READING GAY PORN.

However, while the warnings creep argument is specious, it is true that overzealous warnings can be a source of personal or social injury that compromises the fannish safe space. Warnings function as a combination of symbolic category, classification system, and boundary mechanism: they identify certain varieties of behaviour as distasteful or harmful, define and articulate what precisely is meant by these labels, why they are problematic, and how they should be employed to mitigate this. In so doing, they assign moral and practical significance to those categories and to the people who do not perceive and utilise them in the manner negotiated and approved by the community (see Cohen 1982, 1985, 1986; Housley & Fitzgerald 2002; Lamont & Molnar 2002; Leudar, Marsland & Nekvapil 2004; Jenkins 2008; Jones 2009). Thus, warnings can be a powerful and problematic exclusionary force, particularly when fannish standards require warnings for aspects of people's identities that they do not consider dangerous or controversial in the sense implied by the word *warning*; for example, it took years before fandom renounced *slash* warnings on homoerotic content as homophobic (FL: 'slash', 'slash controversies', 'history of slash fandom'). Likewise, telesilla (2009) complains that she finds it incredibly problematic that BDSM is one of the most commonly requested fannish warnings, alongside deathfic, non/dubcon, and sex involving minors:

All of you who insist on being warned for BDSM are, in fact, judging me. You're saying that my form of sexuality, which does not involve rape, under-aged sex or death, is still so bad, so dangerous, so WRONG that it needs to be warned for.

This example affirms reflectedeve's (2009) assertion that fandom is a community that can work to collectively establish standards that satisfy everyone's needs. The fans who created the Archive of Our Own, shortly after telesilla's post, established only four specific warnings: *major character death*, *underage*, *rape/noncon* and *graphic violence*. Other notifications are handled not as warnings but as tags, which may include *BDSM* or *incest*, but also *first kiss* or *romance*. This is reminiscent of the tagging system on Tumblr, which allows members to 'track' or 'block' certain keywords. These platforms have inspired a rise in using *tags*, *categories*, *content notes*, or *keywords* to label fic instead of or in addition to warnings (for example, stargateficrec

2015). Although these changes were not the direct effect of posts like the above, nor does this represent conclusive proof that constructive dissent is an effective strategy within fandom, it does show that a community founded on roughly similar values – like not denigrating any form of consensual, non-destructive sexuality – will find ways to anticipate and address each others’ needs, even in the absence of direct engagement.

Further arguments against warnings, instead of trying to appropriate or diminish safe space as a fannish value, instead assert the primacy of a different principle: they point out that fandom is a creative community, and that warnings compromise writers’ artistic integrity or prevent readers from experiencing ‘the stories as they were meant to be experienced’ (Walsh 2011). For example, they argue that labelling *deathfic* in which a major character dies is a ‘spoiler’: it tells readers about events that are supposed to be a revelation and thereby diminishes the story’s emotional impact. Similarly, Aspen’s (2001) ‘Daisychain Draco’ fic, discussed above, only reveals at the end that the characters were consenting adults roleplaying father-son incest – but this information is implied by the absence of *incest* and *underage* warnings at the start of the



Fig. 4.6: Photomanip of *Doctor Who* character River Song (Holz 2012)

story. Furthermore, even warnings that do not spoil specific plot details

...serve to prime a reader and guide them to interpret a fic in a certain way. So choosing to tag something as “dub con” might be a means for the author to signal “I don’t think of this as rape and I don’t want you to read it that way either.”

(thingswithwings 2013)

Thus, some ficcers eschew warnings because they feel their inclusion unduly informs how readers engage with their story, and by extension they often believe that warnings will deter readers who are opposed to spoilers. Indeed, the ‘great warnings wank’ of 2009 began when arsenicjade (2009) posted a mature fic in an LJ community and then declined to comply with requests that she add warnings for several hours, saying that she didn’t want to lose readership. It is significant that this exchange, which was framed as a conflict between the opposing fannish values of creativity and communal responsibility for maintaining fandom as a safe space, incited perhaps the most bitter and widespread conflict about warnings in modern fandom history; this supports the assertion that disagreements about how to define and prioritise common values tend

to be more constructive than disputes about conflicting values (see Ashmore, Jussim & Wilder 2001, Kelman 2008, Worchel & Coutant 2008, Kriesberg & Dayton 2012). However, it is also significant that although creativity was rejected as a justification for not complying with the fannish consensus about warnings, it was not considered illegitimate in the manner that the individualistic arguments above were. Advocates of warnings do not dispute that they can act as spoilers, and they acknowledge that this compromises creative integrity – which they agree is also a fannish value. The conflict arises from divergence in priorities: they reject the notion that creativity is a value that absolves them of responsibility toward their fellow fans, or maintaining fandom as a safe space. Elucidate_this (2009) voiced the predominant reader response to this argument, ‘If your desire for artistic integrity or whatever is more important to you than my mental health I have no desire to read your fiction’, which is echoed in the most common authorial response: ‘I would hate to think that I contributed in any way to anyone’s discomfort’ (stele3 2009). Airgiodslv (2009; above) explicitly linked her commitment to not harming other fans to her conception of the fan community as a supportive, respectful space. It is noteworthy that even the comments that do not directly tie their rejection of this argument to the idea of community are still participant in enforcing fandom’s status as a safe place, and the behavioural standards that maintain such a space. Elucidate_this and ficbyzee do not claim to speak for anyone but themselves: they merely assert that they do not want to be, or be associated with, any person who would cause another fan harm, and they consider this more important than the quality or integrity of their work.

It is interesting, then, that the final argument put forward by opponents is that warnings have become disruptive to the general standards of courtesy and respect that mark fandom as a community. This is true; one reason that this thesis uses warnings as an example of conflict is that the issue precipitates recurrent periods of escalated and destructive dissension that exceed the established fannish standards of constructive, sociable argument (see Schiffrin 1984, Tannen 1998, Muntigl & Turnbull 1998, Locher 2004, Paramasivam 2007, Angouri & Locher 2012). The assertion that warnings are detrimental to these standards is also an attempt by opponents to present themselves and their position as more legitimate by laying claim to another fannish value that defines their community. They argue that because the debate about warnings is a

recurrent and largely unresolvable one, there is little capacity for compromise or constructive debate – which echoes the scholarly observation that defeated parties tend to feel oppressed and humiliated when the victorious perspective is incompatible with their values, often leading to cyclical outbreaks of destructive conflict (Kelman 2006; Deutsch 1973, 2008; Kriesberg & Dayton 2012). Opponents specifically note that fans with philosophical objections to warnings, or who mistakenly fail to post appropriately comprehensive warnings on a fic, are routinely subjected to unreasonable and malicious personal attacks. Megyal (2009) recalls, speaking of a friend who experienced this, ‘I believe she was called the antichrist. Or an attention whore’. These complaints also invoke creativity as a fannish value, with assertions like ‘if there was a warning for everything, or if people jumped all over writers for every thing they write, nothing would get written for fear of the “readers” wrath’ (quote in magicastles 2009). However, most proponents of warnings also agree that personal attacks are inappropriate and violate the behavioural standards they expect of their community. They maintain that there are appropriate ways to dispute this point, and that both sides of the issue must adhere to them. Elucidate_this (2009) articulates these standards in her description of the difference between the behaviour of arsenicjade, the writer whose fic sparked the 2009 warnings debate, and the earlier incident involving Megyal’s friend, ficsoreal:

arsenic engaged in polite discussion and then put up a warning even though she seemed to disagree about it being necessary. someone then made a ridiculous attack on her character and was appropriately dogpiled. ficsoreal deleted polite requests for a warning, was super defensive in her post and in the posts other people made warning for things she would not warn for and eventually put up a vague and unhelpful warning

The meanings underlying this account are clear: Members of the fan community should strive not to hurt each other – which might involve using warnings to avoid triggering people and certainly includes refraining from attacking the personal character of those who disagree with them. Additionally, fans should try to argue politely, to listen and engage with their opponents substantively even when they cannot reach a consensus. As Megyal told me, the real issue was that the incident ‘just felt like dogpiling on my friend; up to this day I am bitter about it. I now really support warnings/triggers, but I hate that we got dragged through that to learn.’ The importance of adhering to these standards is further demonstrated by the fact that three of the major participants from both sides of the 2009 warnings debate made apology posts (see magicastles 2009).

In addition, the rules of polite engagement extend to respecting opposing texts; even if the original poster disagrees profoundly and chooses not to engage with certain comments, it is still considered good form not to delete them from the record of the debate. My informants largely concurred with this, though some considered it reasonable to make an exception for certain varieties of hate speech, or comments that caused the original poster mental or emotional distress. This raises another important general characteristic of online fannish conflict: the role of archived and historical accounts. There are three major factors at work here. First of all, despite the aforementioned etiquette involved in deleting other people's comments, it is easy to understand why a poster who felt they had been subjected to undue scrutiny and personal attacks might choose to delete the offending comments, or remove the post from the public record entirely – especially given the personal nature of the blog as a space (see Chapter 3). However, this conflicts with the second factor: the documentary record of online fannish history is relatively complete, easily accessible, and semi-permanent – a fact that has played an important role in shaping the character and practices of the online fan community (see Chapter 3). Thus, fans have a stake in preserving that record so that their history continues to be available as a resource for future analysis or fans who are trying to explore the history of their community or contextualise future incidents. To that end, there are numerous resources that fans can use to resurrect deleted comments or posts, including screencaps, feed aggregators, and web archives. Fans who save or recover such materials usually make them available to the rest of the community, as a public service: not only have they preserved this small facet of fan history, by doing so they set the record straight and prevent people from editing or excising portions of that history. This also helps stabilise the sense of permanence, security, and trustworthiness entailed in that historical record.

The third factor is the dispersed, infinite, and difficult to navigate nature of virtual space, and even of the considerably smaller fannish digital spaces. For example, the 2009 incident that this section focuses on began in the comments below a fic *arsenicjade* (2009) posted in an LJ community. However, the discussion quickly spread beyond that entry as people began posting in their own journals about their responses to specific comments or about the issue of warnings more generally. Six days after the inciting incident, *Magiccastles* (2009) made a post entitled 'Fandom

Warnings Wank: A Comprehensive Linkspam' in which she described the week's events, complete with screenshots of the original post and comments. Her account, which she regularly updated until the furore died down, quotes verbatim several responses to that incident, and she provides links, summaries, and contextual information (about the order of posting and patterns of exchange) for sixty-three total entries. Some of these were also resource posts that summarised and contextualised the incident for posterity: some-stars (2009) compiled a list of the most 'offending' anti-warnings quotes, including comments on one key entry that had been made inaccessible. Several LJ Communities that document fandom history (e.g. Metafandom) or incidents of poor behaviour (e.g. Fandom_Wank) also published their own resource posts for this incident (see acari 2009, doriangrey 2009, oulangi 2009). The existence of such communities is further testament to the fannish drive to preserve their history for the benefit of their fellow fans. Even the wank Communities can arguably be seen as institutions can also have a positive effect on fandom's sense of community by policing and correcting harmful trends.

Conclusion

This chapter presents two models of fannish conflict. The first is a constructive discussion about the nature of fanfiction and the responsibilities entailed by its more problematic aspects. The second is an unresolved and largely unresolvable debate about warnings as the primary method of addressing the problems inherent in fic. The first example established certain rules of polite conduct, illuminating fandom's commitment to encouraging polite and supportive interactions, as well as many of the values that define or characterise fandom as a community – including, most significantly, the importance of constituting and maintaining fandom as a safe space, in which all members could feel comfortable participating. It also establishes fandom as a queer (or queer-inclusive), female-dominated community that tends towards the liberal end of the socio-political spectrum in terms of values and ideology. The conversation as a whole also represents a process of exchange by which the community discussed issues that troubled them, proposed and negotiated solutions, and in so doing evolved their society in what they collectively perceived as a positive direction.

This notion of safe space is an important contribution to academic understandings of virtual community because perhaps the most significant criticism of the concept is that

digital environments are capable of facilitating trust. However, the fannish invention and maintenance of safe space – and tools for discussing, transforming, and enforcing its existence – provide a credible alternative. Instead of having to ‘trust’ every person who might view their public posts as if they were part of their community, fans can instead rely on a set of behavioural guidelines and a system for the collective enforcement of safe, polite interaction with those textual spaces in a manner that both transforms and maintains traditional conceptions of community.

The warnings debate exemplifies a considerably more divisive form of conflict. Both sides considered their positions incompatible and irreconcilable, and both believed that the other side had a vision of fandom that was harmful to the character of the community and possibly to its individual members. However, it is significant that both sides asserted that polite, respectful dissent is an integral part of their community, even though they cannot always meet that standard. Furthermore, it should be emphasised that the opponents of warnings are a minority: warnings have been an institution of online fandom for nearly two decades, and they are unlikely to disappear at any point in the foreseeable future. This is primarily due to the fact that, despite their best efforts, opponents could not successfully frame warnings as detrimental to the maintenance of fannish safe space, which the first section established as central to fannish conception of their community. Thus, warnings are best understood as a concrete expression of that community. They create and demarcate the boundaries of fandom, as a community and as a safe space; they represent an acknowledgement by fan creators that their words have the potential to damage other members of their community, and a commitment to do their part to prevent or ameliorate that harm; and they embody and confirm the collective fannish effort to engage with the and address the problems in their community, and to maintain their status as a safe space.

Taken together, both of these intra-fandom conflicts do not simply represent a struggle over their community and what it means – the boundaries, priorities, values, and terms of membership that are entailed in and constitute the fan community. They represent a collective and explicit effort to define that community: to clearly articulate and debate what fandom is and should be, to address problems that arise from conflicting or changing values and to negotiate solutions that are acceptable to the greatest number

of fans or that are most compatible with the ideal conceptualisation of their community that they have collectively constructed.

On a broader level, this chapter rectifies a gap in the community and conflict literature by providing an empirical, qualitative look at how groups provoke and resolve disputes during their everyday existence, and how such conflicts can be a positive source of transformation and modernisation. This is a presumption that has existed in the social sciences for over a century, but the majority of relevant modern literature focuses either on the global and political ramifications of the constructive conflict model, or on the linguistic practices that facilitate or indicate such disputes. In addition, warnings as an institution have spread far beyond the fan community. Thus, this discussion of the history and evolution of warnings, and of conflict surrounding warnings, is of particular relevance to the current cultural and generational conflict over the place of warnings in college classes and social justice debates.

Chapter 5: Asserting Ownership —

On Authorship, Virtual Citizenship & Conflict with Outsiders

All social relationships have two aspects, one of fission, in which divergent interests tend to rupture the relationship, the other of fusion, by which the common ties in a system of social cohesion reconcile these divergent interests. Fission and Fusion are not only present in the histories of individual groups and relationships: they are inherent in the nature of the social structure. Thus every social group was defined by its not being some other social group, usually formed on the same pattern, and by its acting as a group only in a situation when it stood opposed to the other. Therefore it depended for its strength on the latent conflict between them
(Gluckman 1940: 168-9)

Chapter 4 is about struggles within fandom; it specifically discusses fanworks, especially fanfiction, as creative genres made controversial by their frank expression of female sexuality and their active engagement with non-normative sexual identities (like BDSM) and the darker aspects of human experience (like rape, torture, domestic abuse, and unequal sexual power dynamics). It uses warnings – the system fans devised to protect vulnerable people from such content – to argue that maintaining fandom as a ‘safe space’ where all members feel comfortable is an important aspect of how fans conceptualise their community and their communal responsibilities. This chapter is concerned with external struggles, though like the previous chapter, it presents conflict not as a divisive breakdown in the social order, but as a natural and necessary aspect of social interaction that can be part of a constructive process by which communities are constituted, negotiated, and evolved.

Inter-group conflict has long been considered an especially cohesive force, because when outsiders threaten or malign a community’s way of life, members are usually quick to put aside internal differences to protect their own collective self-esteem and positive social evaluation by defending the community against a common foe. In addition, collectivities often define themselves by their (real or imagined) divergence from outsiders and other groups, which means that social identity and membership are conferred in part by the exhibition of communal traits. Therefore, although community members often exaggerate their similarity and the universality of ‘communal traits’, it can still be valuable for researchers to understand how they perceive themselves to be distinct from other groups, as well as the boundary mechanisms by which these divisions are created, negotiated, and maintained – and conflict is among the best ways to investigate this (see Gluckman 1940; Strathern 1982; Tajfel 1981, 1982; Cohen 1982, 1985; Turner 1984; Turner et al. 1987; Ashmore, Jussim & Wilder 2001; Brewer

2001; Lamont & Molnar 2002; Zimmer 2003; Tilly 2004, 2005; Jenkins 2008; Cuhadar & Dayton 2011; Kriesberg & Dayton 2012).

This chapter has two sections, each focused in a distinct variety of conflict. Both use specific incidents to exemplify the broader history of which they are a part and to illuminate the underlying priorities, themes and tensions that they represent. Section one is about conflict between fandom and technological authorities, focusing on a dispute with LiveJournal in 2007. During this period, LJ deleted a number of personal journals and Communities³⁷ the administration ‘did not think were appropriate’ or legal (Berkowitz in McCullagh 2007), and did so without prior notification or offers of compromise. Collecting the documents used in this section began with relevant wiki entries (e.g. FL & FH: ‘LiveJournal’, ‘Strikethrough’, ‘Fanfiction.Net’, ‘age statement’), and branched out through a process of ‘snowball sampling’ (Baltar & Brunet 2012) to include other relevant texts linked to by the initial set of documents. The second section discusses the longstanding tensions between fans and creators with regard to authorship, intellectual property rights, and the appropriate extent of creative control. It also draws on wiki entries (particularly FL: ‘Fan Fiction and Moral Conundrums’ and ‘Professional Author Fanfic Policies’), but it relies primarily on fannish efforts to permanently capture and archive Gabaldon’s original (now deleted) posts and the attached comments, and their contemporary responses to her statements as collected in various news, meta, and controversy-oriented blog Communities (see metafiction 2015, fandom_wank 2015). Rough drafts of both sections were submitted to the fans quoted in each, and the resulting comments and interviews were used to correct, contextualise, and guide the accounts of each incident and the framing and selection of the quotes used in each section.

The chapter as a whole deals with themes of authorship, ownership, legality, and accountability: Who owns an idea or text, and how far does that authority go; where are the boundaries between acceptable, adult, and dangerous content, and who is responsible for controlling and policing it; what responsibilities do fans have towards each other or the other bodies they interact with?

³⁷ LiveJournal Communities are themed discussion groups that members participate in using their personal blogs (see Glossary). For clarity, this thesis uses a capital letter to distinguish between LJ *Communities*, and *community* as the theoretical concept of social collectivity central to this research.

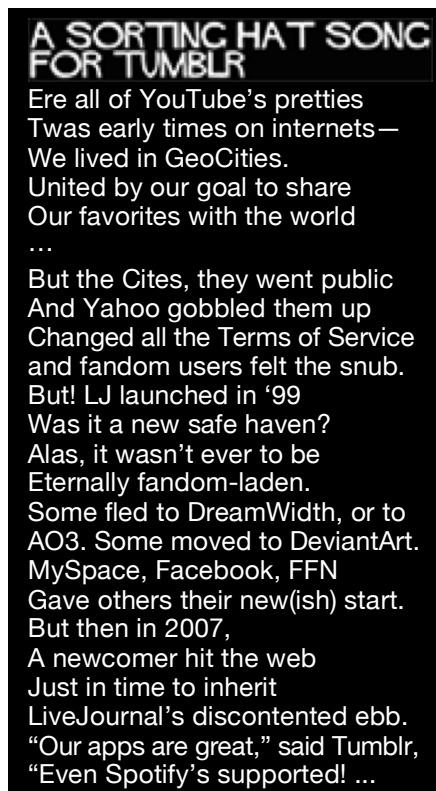


Fig. 5.1: A rendition of the history of online fandom, written as a parody of the Sorting Hat Song (Rowling 1997: 88). **Source:** backinasex (2012).

Fandom TOS-ed: Terms of Service, Mature Content & Conflict with Webhosts

Terms of Service: The rules a person or organization must observe in order to use a service. Generally legally binding unless it violates federal or local laws, the terms of service agreement (ToS) may change from time to time, and it is the responsibility of the service provider to notify its users of any such change...All Web sites that store personal data for a user [have a ToS, especially]...social networking sites (PC Magazine 2014)

This section is about the conflict with LiveJournal known as *Strikethrough*. However, discussion of that incident first requires some historical and cultural contextualisation. Chapter 4 dealt with authorship primarily as a personal and communal responsibility; for ficcers who acknowledged that their stories could potentially harm others, warnings became a service

to their fellow fans. Another relevant institution is the *age statement*: texts that require zine subscribers and website users to affirm that they are above the legal age of consent for accessing adult content (see Fig. 5.2). Age statements theoretically provide limited practical and legal protections for zine editors and fansite administrators: for example, if a parent discovers her minor child reading pornographic material, an age statement is evidence that the editor had reason to believe the reader was a legal adult. However, it is difficult to enforce truthfulness on these forms, so they were always an expression of the social contract between fans, and an indication of mutual trust: as with warnings, readers must trust the writers and editors to appropriately label mature content, while the writers must trust readers to make mature decisions about what material they can and should access and how their actions might cause harm to themselves, others, or the community as a whole (Carnall 2010, seperis 2010; FL: 'age statement', 'warnings').

Interestingly, although the protections age statements afforded to zine editors were dubious and anecdotal at best, particularly since not everyone abided by the social contract they embodied, they carry more weight as legal defences in online venues. This is not because

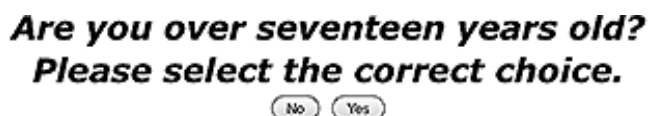


Fig. 5.2: Virtual age statement from HP archive *Fiction Alley*

virtual age statements are more effective at preventing minors from accessing adult materials than paper statements, but because similar mechanisms have become a ubiquitous feature of online life for everyone, so their legal and social legitimacy is perceived to be higher.³⁸ Thus, by using an accepted tool for limiting legal liability, fan authors and site administrators are fulfilling their responsibility to protect the websites and companies that host their work – which, by extension, meets their responsibility to the fan community by doing their part to ensure that the content in those venues remains available, not removed by nervous webhosts.

However, such relationships represent a mutual agreement between two parties with disparate interests, values, and concerns. Such divergent priorities provide fertile grounds for conflict and resentment, which most commonly manifests when online fans believe they have met their obligations but their host companies have not, or when companies transgress the underlying or explicit terms of their accord. This dates back to some of the earliest fannish spaces on the Web: personal fansites, or web pages maintained by a single fan or a small group of administrators. Fans favoured free hosting services like GeoCities and Angelfire, and with basic html skills they could create sites for almost any fannish purpose, from fic archives to episode guides. However, Yahoo! purchased GeoCities in 1999, and immediately enacted a new ToS which seemed to claim that the company owned the rights to all content it hosted. This was incredibly unpopular with all GeoCities users, including fans, and Yahoo! was forced to ‘clarify its intentions’ by amending its ToS to assure users that they retained ownership of their content (Napoli 1999). In 2009, Yahoo! shut down all GeoCities services in the United States, Canada, and Europe, resulting in the loss of countless fansites (Rao 2009; FL: ‘fansite’, ‘Geocities’). This also constitutes a change in ToS, as the company abandoned its previous content hosting commitments.

The fear that ToS changes will suddenly and retroactively result in the loss of content or strip creators of their ownership rights is a profound and recurrent cause of fannish

³⁸ People must state their date of birth when they join social networking sites, create email accounts, or engage in many other activities that have become necessary to virtual interaction. This is partly due to laws like the US Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act of 1988 (COPPA), which outline the responsibilities of website operators with regard to protecting personal information about children younger than thirteen who are under US jurisdiction, and detail the circumstances under which verified consent from a guardian is required and the procedures for acquiring it. Access to specific ‘adult’ content, like pornography or gambling sites, is even more stringently regulated because in some countries access by underage persons is criminal.

concern. For example, when Yahoo! purchased Tumblr in 2013, echoing the disastrous GeoCities buyout, users responded to the first ToS change with rumours that the company was once again laying claim to their intellectual property; as illustrated in Figure 5.3,

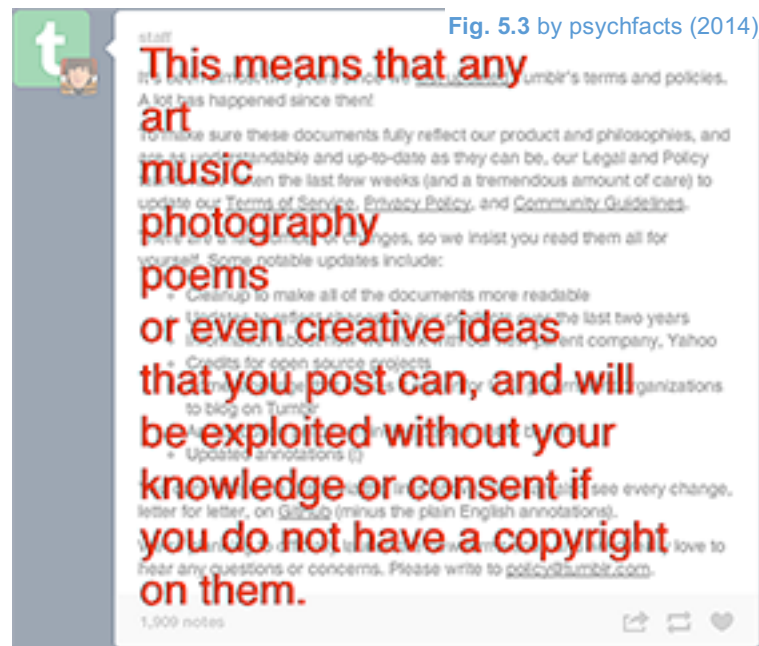


Fig. 5.3 by psychfacts (2014)

which superimposes the accusation over the text of the new ToS (Tumblr 2014). Romano (2014a) and Efyehcopyrightlaw (2014) explain that this was not the case; indeed, they suggest that one reason for Tumblr's popularity with fans and artists is that its ToS assures users that they will always retain ownership and control of their work. This commitment may also contribute to the fierceness with which Tumblr users enforce the appropriate sharing and accreditation of art on their platform (see mishasminions 2012).

The significance of ownership rights and archiving is also evident in fandom's relationships with other companies. FanFiction.net (FFN) was launched in 1998 and LiveJournal (LJ) in 1999, putting both sites in an ideal position to receive fans fleeing the GeoCities buyout. FFN and other similar, purpose-built archives allowed writers to upload fic without maintaining and coding their own website or having friends who did. However, FFN had certain restrictions: most notably, in 2002 it banned all fics rated NC-17 (for graphic sex or violence), which allowed the site to officially offer membership to individuals under the age of thirteen. Fans were given eight months after that ToS alteration to remove and preserve any stories in violation of this rule. However, when FFN judges fics to be in violation of extant Content Guidelines (CGs), they frequently do not give advance warnings or grace periods in which to backup fic. For example, in 2012 FFN deleted thousands of stories rated *Mature* without warning and temporarily suspended the offending users' accounts, asserting that those fics included MA/NC-17 content and were therefore in violation of the CGs enacted in

2002 (see Fig. 5.4). Numerous fans protested that their stories seemed to have been deleted because of profanities in their titles or summaries, despite the fact that coarse language is rated *Mature* and therefore permissible under FFN's own CGs (FFN 2008, 2009a, b; see Ray 2012 & comments; FH & FL: 'FFN').

The first and most basic thing at issue is ownership and retention of content. This could be framed as a matter of contested interests, as competition over resources, assets, and capabilities (see Kriesberg & Dayton 2012: 9), but that is too simplistic: fans do not want to *own* technological platforms, they want to *use* them to publish creative content, and IT companies do not want to own fan content, they want to use it to demonstrate the viability of their product – and, by extension, to make money. This illuminates a significant underlying dimension of the conflict, which is that both parties are interdependent: although each can exist without the other, the technology has no purpose without user-generated content, while the content (and the fan community as a whole) is unable to reach its intended audience without the mediating technology. This is problematic because the more integrated potential adversaries are, the more opportunities they have for friction – and if both parties do not have the capacity to easily extricate themselves from the relationship, this increases the potential for bitter, divisive conflict (Hewston & Greenland 2000; Brewer 2001; Ashmore, Jussim & Wilder 2001; Gelfand, Leslie & Keller 2008; Cuhadar & Dayton 2011; Kriesberg & Dayton 2012).

It is somewhat more appropriate to frame the conflict over content ownership and archiving as a matter of competing values, but this too is inadequate. Trying to explain these incidents in terms of disagreement about the importance or implications of money, ownership, or creativity obscures the fact that this conflict is about fundamentally incompatible conceptions of virtual space and identity. In these disputes, IT companies

Fandom	28/05/2012	31/04/2012	Suppression	%
Harry Potter	594 940	493 684	1 255	0.21
Naruto	304 957	302 995	2 002	0.66
Twilight	200 159	198 662	1 497	0.75
Inuyasha	104 330	103 966	364	0.35
Glee	73 204	72 534	670	0.92
Kingdom Hearts	66 20	65 998	282	0.43
Bleach	65 829	65 544	285	0.43
Supernatural	62 350	62 051	299	0.48
Hetalia - Axis Powers	61 537	61 173	364	0.6
Yu-Gi-Oh	59 591	59 734	143	0

represent their platforms as just that: technologies that mediate and host communication. Fans, however, see the issue differently; it is informed by their experience of individual and communal online identity as located *within* mediating technologies, grounded in stable archiving, and constituted through the actions of writing and interacting (see Chapters 2 & 3). Mirabile_dictu (2008), quoted Shirky (2008) in her response:

The act of hosting social software, the relationship of someone who hosts it is more like a relationship of landlords to tenants than owners to boxes in a warehouse. The people using your software, even if you own it and pay for it, have rights and will behave as if they have rights. And if you abrogate those rights, you'll hear about it very quickly



Fig. 5.5. Source: Sound of Vision (2008)

Those were the basic issues at stake in the fannish conflict with LiveJournal that transformed the philosophical and legal landscape of online fandom. LJ was not, it should be noted, a purpose-built fic archive; its first legal disclaimer merely disavowed responsibility for journals' content and requested that users inform the company of inappropriate content or improper use of the service, which they defined as 'anything illegal or...extremely offensive' (LJ 1999). Its first official ToS asked members not to post 'vulgar' or 'obscene' content (LJ 2001), but this prohibition was rarely enforced by the original company, which is part of how LJ came to be a significant hub of fannish activity and fic archiving. However, in 2005, LiveJournal was sold to the company Six Apart (6A). In 2006-2007, 6A licensed and then sold LJ to the Russian company SUP Media, despite vocal concerns among Russian bloggers about SUP's position on censorship and free speech (Norton 2006). This turmoil was the background for the conflicts known as Strikethrough and Boldthrough 2007.

On 29 May 2007, just after an American holiday weekend, LJ 'permanently suspended' over 500 journals and Communities, effectively deleting all posts and comments archived under those usernames. LiveJournal did not warn any of the affected users in advance, giving them no opportunity to correct any of the problems that led to their suspension, nor did the company contact them afterwards to explain why their accounts had been deleted or what if anything they could do to get their journals reinstated. LJ also did not announce or explain the suspensions in the official Communities normally



Fig. 5.6: LJ Icon
by unsymbolic

used to convey news or policy updates to its members. It was only in response to enquiries that LJ users were told that the accounts had been reported to LJ Abuse for ‘containing material which expresses interest in, solicits, or encourages illegal activity’ (femmequixotic 2007a, tiferet 2007). They were further informed that listing certain interests in a user or Community profile qualified as of confirmation of that report, as it expressed interest in and potentially solicitation or encouragement of that activity. These interests included child pornography, paedophilia, and rape – but not, fans noted, topics like murder, crime, drugs, theft, or tax evasion – and the deleted accounts included book discussion groups and at least two rape survivors’ blogs (see catrinella 2007) as well as fannish Communities. Initial correspondence with the abuse team suggested that LJ would not un-suspend the accounts even if users agreed to bring their journals into compliance with the ToS, because if future issues arose, the company ‘would most likely be considered to have foreknowledge of that activity and thus become liable’ (femmequixotic 2007a, b; FH & FL: ‘Strikethrough’). The whole incident was dubbed *Strikethrough* or *Strikeout* because deleted accounts were identifiable by a line through their names.

Upon further enquiry, official news outlets and fan investigators were told that the purges were prompted by activists’ complaints. In fact, LJ only ever named one complainant: ‘Warriors for Innocence’ (WFI), a somewhat dubious anti-paedophilia group that was later revealed to be affiliated with several conservative political blogs, but could demonstrate no ties to official law enforcement agencies or recognised organisations that combat paedophilia or online predators (chgowiz 2007, Marcs 2007a, McCullagh 2007). It should be noted that 6A discovered and banned several actual paedophilia Communities during this purge, but none were fannish in content or affiliation, and fandom thoroughly supported this action (see lolaraincoat 2007). As Chapter 4 discusses, fandom rejects any association with such content because fans make strong moral distinctions between their fictions and actual-world sexual assault (see bironic 2011, Briarwood 2008). Femmequixotic’s (2007c) argument in Chapter 4 was a direct response to this situation: she considered it offensive to presume that even fanworks that *were* potentially illegal or in violation of LJ’s ToS indicated moral degeneracy or deviant urges, and asserted that such assumptions disregard the needs

and experiences of fans who use fic as a therapeutic tool and fandom as an important part of their support networks. Similarly, bitterfig (2007) writes,

As a queer, feminist writer who explores the darker aspects of human nature, many of my stories deal with incest, rape and child molestation. As such, I belonged to and contributed to several of the communities which have been suspended and frankly I'm pretty offended. I don't like being lumped in with rapists and pedophiles and other "monsters on the web."

For fans, however, the issue was not simply fanfiction, or even the controversial aspects of fic. As Ronnie (2007) explains, they were defending their *community*, which is inextricably linked to both the fanworks and the technological platform:

While I personally neither read nor write fanfic, I do recognize that it is a major part of fannish life and a central aspect of fan communities, so when LJ decides to delete numerous fanfic archives without reason, I take it as a sign of complete and utter disregard for the large portion of LJ that is involved in any fandom in any way

Community was not simply mentioned in abstract terms, however. Over the next two days, LJ users worked to provide emotional and practical support, the implied sense of belonging and safety and mutual responsibility. Femmequixotic, administrator for one of the most populous and significant LJ fic Communities caught in the purge, became a focal point for the community response. She recalls,

There were a lot of really incredibly positive things going on behind the scenes...I was put in contact with fandom lawyers; fannish members of Abuse and Support were giving me advice; non-profit organizations dealing with cyber-freedom were being approached on behalf of...[those] affected by Strikethrough. People were amazing, coming to me and other fen affected with offers to help, with people I could call, with resources I could make use of if I needed to. I honestly had *no* idea where to turn...when Strikethrough first happened, and then suddenly fans showed up offering legal and practical assistance.

And there was fandom as a whole with so much overwhelming support—even from people who were skeeved by the idea of Harry Potter erotica (femmequixotic 2008)

That was typical of the fannish experience in the two days following Strikethrough. Fans reached out to support and comfort each other while they organised in every way they knew how. For example, LiveJournal declined to publicly explain or even comment on Strikethrough during this time, so Catrinella (2007) created a post consolidating the information gathered by individual users from their own interactions with the LJ administration. The post also debunked rumours and shared links to various resources and Communities that affected fans could avail themselves of, as well as links to news stories as they appeared. Ioldanach (2007) compiled a list of the affected

accounts, while lolaraincoat (2007) added a running commentary of the reasons for suspensions where possible. Liz Marcs (2007b-e) corresponded with a member of WFI, attempting to pin down the organisation's mission statement, membership, and methods – and then published that exchange and further information about WFI for the benefit of her fellow fans. These are all further examples of fans taking action to share resources and information, document and preserve their history, and provide links to the farthest reaches of fandom, so that everyone's voice could be heard.

In addition, the Innocence Jihad (2007) Community was created to give fans and other affected users somewhere to share thoughts and resources. Fandom Counts (2007) and Fandom Pays (2007) were Communities intended to take a head-count of the number of basic and premium LiveJournals belonging to fans, in the hope that this could be used to make an economic argument for LJ to reconsider its position. Fandom Lawyers (2003), which had existed for years to discuss and provide resources and support for dealing with 'the broad spectrum of legal issues of concern to the fan community', became incredibly active, and many others posted legal opinions on the issue (Marcs 2007a; elf 2007a, b; Skud 2007). And throughout all of this, fandom and other parties collaborated to impress upon LiveJournal their legal, personal, moral, and practical objections to its decisions and its conduct in enforcing them, as well as their disappointment in a platform that had been a refuge for so many of them (FL: 'LJ', 'Strikethrough'; Hale 2007, katiefoolery 2007, femmequixotic 2008, Romano 2012).

It is significant that in this conflict, too, fans emphasised the communal nature of their existence. They did not conceive of themselves as individual victims of these purges, and they responded to the threat collectively, as a community. Fans who had not been affected wrote to the LJ administration on behalf of those who had, or found other ways of supporting their fellow fans or contributing to the effort. Some of this was, of course, enlightened self-interest; many fans recognised that it was only by chance that their journals had been spared, and that they could easily be next. However, some of it was an awareness that this issue was bigger than individual people or even the fan community. The fannish response to Strikethrough, both during the event and in retrospective analyses, includes many discussions about the importance of members to companies that are built on user generated content, and the ways that fans were or were not leveraging that power. The above point about LJ members being more like

tenants than commodities, particularly in terms of their tendency to fight back (Mirabile_ductu 2008), is consistent with George's (2007) assertion that 'Companies invest in commodities. Users invest in *communities*', and that that

My relationship to Livejournal is not merely a one-to-one contract between myself as an individual and the company Six Apart. It's first and foremost a relationship between myself the member and Livejournal-as-collective-noun: the community. I don't see myself as a Livejournal *user*. I see myself as a Livejournal *citizen*.

The metaphor of citizenship is particularly apt given that LJ premium account holders do pay for that service, but they cannot be considered customers in the traditional sense; they are not exchanging money for goods or services, but are rather paying for the upkeep and maintenance of a platform in which they converse, participate, and build community. The exchange evokes the way that citizens maintain their government by paying taxes; they receive services in return, but they are not governmental *customers* so much as participants in and contributors to the nation-community (see Anderson 1986) that exists within the physical and social infrastructure laid out by the government. Their experience of disenfranchisement is similarly akin to that of the dissatisfied citizen; telesilla (2008), for example, presents herself as a citizen who contributes to the company but is nevertheless invisible and oppressed:

It's not just that we're paying for a service that doesn't approve of us. We're actually *working* for that service. We're giving them the fruit of our labor, we're giving them our fiction and our meta and, more importantly...our thoughts about dealing with depression and...what it's like to live with chronic pain or what the daily life of a bisexual person is like and they are making money off of that labor.

All while pretending that we don't exist. Not just fandom, which is, you know, a weird area and one the mundane world has a hard time understanding, but people dealing with depression and pain, people talking about their sexuality, people who are looking for a platform on which to build a support system. And LJ will take their content while denying that those people exist. Denying that **we** exist.

Her analysis illuminates the fallacy of framing this conflict as a problem of divergent values. Although most fans abhor the idea of profiting from their community activities (see Jenkins 1992, Bacon-Smith 1992, Arduinna 2000, Fiesler 2008, storyalchemy 2014, Moraine 2013b, Morgan Dawn 2015), they understand that their presence and works increase the value of the technological platforms they inhabit. More importantly, they do not begrudge that, but rather see it as a mutually beneficial arrangement that allows the technology companies to continue providing services to their community for free. The problem arises, as with the GeoCities and FFN incidents,

only when these companies refuse to recognise the reciprocal and interdependent nature of their relationship with citizen-customers (see George 2007, Mirabile_Ductu 2008, Shirky 2008, telesilla 2008).

On 31 May, LiveJournal backed down, much like a government responding to collective action. LJ chairman Barak Berkowitz made a post entitled ‘We really screwed this one up...’ He confirmed that many of the journals ‘were suspended for easily correctable problems in their profiles...and that this was not communicated to the journal or community owners at all’. He promised that LiveJournal would review the suspended accounts and expected to restore about half of them, though some users would be required to amend or clarify their profiles. He stated that LJ would communicate directly with each affected user to help them ‘avoid further difficulties’, and assured members that the company would be using their input from the last two days to review and refine LiveJournal’s ToS, as well as the procedures by which they implemented and enforced their policies (Berkowitz 2007a-c). In the words of femmequixotic (2008), ‘I felt like we’d won. Fandom had defeated Goliath.’

They had not won. When LiveJournal’s policy review was completed (Hassan 2007a, b), it stated that LJ took a ‘zero tolerance stance on...material which violates United States law’. This appears straightforward, but US law on this subject is predicated on entirely subjective judgements about the definition of *obscene* and what artwork possesses literary, artistic or political merit (see US Code Title 18.1.71§1466). Thus, fans were left to struggle with the same confusion and uncertainty they had experienced during Strikethrough: What standard was LJ using to determine unacceptable content, could they trust that standard would be consistently applied, and what would happen if they inadvertently violated the new ToS – would they be suspended again, would they be given prior warning, would they be reported to law enforcement bodies? Then, on 1 August, while a significant portion of Harry Potter fandom was at a convention, two HP fanartists had their accounts suspended. This incident was dubbed *Boldthrough*, as deleted journals were now marked in bold rather than lines. Once again, fans organised, supported each other, and communicated with LiveJournal – and once again, LJ agreed to reinstate the journals and further promised that they would issue warnings before any new suspensions. And then, once again, two more artists were banned summarily and without warning (femmequixotic 2007c).

That summer was the beginning of the decline of fandom on LiveJournal. Some immediately fled to other journal services built on LJ's code, which functioned like LJ but without the hostile administration. Others were more reluctant to go; a recent survey found that LJ is still the primary site of participation for 78.5% of fans (OTW 2012). Atrata (2008) explains, 'People (myself included) aren't going to leave LJ for greener pastures unless the pastures are quite shiny (in terms of awesome features and ease of transition) and their friends are there'. Fans who remained on LJ made some gains, including electing a fan to represent their point of view and advocate for their interests on the LJ Advisory Board. Notably, legomymalfoy's (2008) fannish election platform explicitly endorsed the paradigm of users as community citizens with power:

I feel that the irresistible value of LiveJournal is in its community. We are what makes LJ valuable. The users who post about their day, about their kids, about their last BDSM encounter, about sex and food and everything under the sun. Without its users, LJ is nothing but an empty husk. To continue being valuable, LJ needs to work on retaining existing users by keeping the aspects of the site that are most valuable to them, while at the same time attracting new users by making new features available and taking advantage of new ways of thinking.

Many fans viewed her election as a mixed success, in part because she was required to sign a non-disclosure agreement, which somewhat limited her capacity to promote that platform or use her position to address the feelings of uncertainty and instability that fans had been struggling with by rendering the decisions of that board more open and comprehensible (Romano 2009). In May 2008, LJ introduced its adult content flagging policy, which allowed users to mark particular entries or whole journals as containing 'adult content' (LJ 2010b). This content was blocked by age statements, which protected the company from legal liability, thus allowing LJ (2008) to promise fans two things:

Content...flagged as containing explicit adult content does not mean it is in violation of our ToS, and will not result in other actions being taken against users who post it...

Our policy on Non-Photographic Images of Minors is being removed...We will no longer be requiring the removal of this content, or suspending people who have posted it. We feel that with the introduction of the adult content flagging system, we do not need to take any further action on this type of material.

This was the victory fandom thought it had won the year prior. In addition to providing the aforementioned legal and practical protections to both LiveJournal and fan creators, the introduction of age statements was also a material gesture of goodwill. It demonstrated that LJ understood that the difference between adult content and 'illegal

and harmful activity' (Hassan 2007a) could be a matter of context and presentation, and that LJ trusted fans to comprehend this distinction and behave accordingly. Those successes certainly slowed the flight of fans from LiveJournal, though the company continues to lose members to InsaneJournal (IJ) and Dreamwidth (DW).

Like the citizens they represent themselves as, many people found that duplicating LJ's technical structure is not the same as duplicating the community or social network within it. There were several journaling platforms available in 2007, some already extant and some established in response to Strikethrough, but there was no consensus about which service to migrate to. Fans did try to reach an agreement; they created communities like Fandom Flies (2007) to handle 'the organisation and planning that needs to happen' before all of fandom could move to another service. Notably, the entirety of fandom was included in these discussions, even the subsections that largely exist on the margins of broader media fandom. Fandom Flies' (2007) mission statement extended to 'Not just HP fandom or SPN fandom or Japanese boy band fandom, but everyone. Anime fandom, comics fandom, video game fandom, movie fandoms, book fandoms, *everyone*'. This proved an impossible task, however; despite their efforts, fandom after Strikethrough was fragmented across at least five blog platforms, with the largest portion remaining on LJ (OTW 2012). Individual LJ communities like Pornish Pixies were more successful in forming a consensus amongst themselves about where to move (femmequixotic 2007b), but this was not the purposeful collective migration that fans had envisioned. InsaneJournal is the most popular and enduring of the original alternate services, which many attribute to the fact that its administrator, Squeaky, 'offers a clear and open line of communication to the users when things are going wrong or when he is planning decisions concerning the site and the rest of the user base' (FL: 'IJ'). However, IJ's continued popularity was not inevitable, and although IJ is 'fanfic-friendly' (IJ 2014) it was not created specifically for fannish use, unlike some of the other options (see FL: 'JournalFen'). Thus, simply creating an account on another site was no guarantee that one's LJ friends list would be there too, thereby undermining both the social contact and dynamic source of new material that makes user-generated content platforms appealing (see Chapter 3).

Ownership of content and control of archiving remain significant issues. One reason the LJ purge was so destructive to the fan community was that it was more than merely the loss of stories, it was also the loss of all comments to those entries, of the identities and social, personal, and thematic connections that were embodied and embedded in those journals. Femmequixotic (2007a) wrote, ‘That’s just four years worth of HP fanfic history and I *refuse* to let it go down the drain.’ Seperis (2007) added, ‘livejournal, if it did nothing else, gave us this; a history we keep to ourselves in our ljs, answerable not to listmods or usenet mods, but to ourselves. And apparently, SixApart’.

Furthermore, it is difficult to invest, emotionally or fiscally, in a platform that no longer seems stable or certain – which might have been detrimental to the vitality of fandom, especially given the importance of technological infrastructure to fans’ conception of and participation in their community (see Chapter 3; elf 2007b, Hale 2007, katiefoolery 2007, La Guera 2007, pyrop 2007, Romano 2012). Thus, Dreamwidth (DW) swiftly became fans’ alternate blog of choice³⁹ after its launch in 2009, due in large part to its stability and the importance of ‘awesome features and ease of transition’ (atrata 2008). DW has a unique mechanic that allows users to synchronise their blogs across platforms, and to import the entire contents of their other blog accounts, including tags and comments, into their DW archive. Dreamwidth also enables automatic cross-posting, so that all new entries posted on DW are simultaneously published on linked LJ accounts, and new comments are mirrored on both sites (DW: 2013). Prior to this, fans had to backup their journals manually, with no automated content mirrors. This time consuming and ineffective archiving mechanism was untenable as a permanent solution because it split the vital, constitutive discourse of fandom across multiple venues.

Thus, the fannish response was not simply outrage or hurt at the loss of content and history or the sense of destabilisation and confusion. The injury to the foundation of their community did not diminish their sense of affiliation and coherence, but strengthened it. The differences in media interests or kinks that usually created boundaries between

³⁹ However, even together DW and IJ are not the primary site of fannish activity for even 25% of fans surveyed by the OTW (2012). Some perceive DW as a growing, thriving community that will eventually supplant LJ as the dominant fannish blog (kouredios 2012, Romano 2012, Wang 2013, author-by-night 2014, fjbryan 2014; FL: ‘LJ’). However, others point to the pattern of fannish drift that moved fans from zines to mailing lists to blogs, arguing that microblogs like Tumblr are the future of fandom (see Chapter 3).

different groups fans became much less important in the face of a menace that largely failed to distinguish between them and therefore threatened all of them equally. Further, the conflict prompted them to conceptualise themselves as part of a wider movement in defence of a more important issue than the one at hand, as George (2007) explains:

This issue of ownership is much bigger than Six Apart and Livejournal, because it's really about how we as a culture construct the new class of relationships between citizens and businesses that is embodied by the interactive, hyper-connected social nodes that form the new structures through which modern humans are organizing our public lives.

Strikethrough was only one of many incidents that brought these issues to a crisis point. Also in May 2007 was the FanLib scandal: a for-profit fanfiction archive owned by a corporation of male outsiders to the fan community, and who tried to use an exploitative ToS to monetise fanfiction hosting and wrest control of fanworks from their creators (see *angiepen* 2007; *astolat* 2007; *Carnall* 2007; *Icarus* 2007; *Jenkins* 2007, *KJ* 2007; *stewardess* 2007, 2008; *synecdochic* 2007; *telesilla* 2007a, b; *FL: 'FanLib'*). In response to FanLib, *astolat* (2007) proposed that fans needed a platform operated by and for fans, with fan priorities and knowledge; 'a welcoming space for new fans that has a sense of our history and community behind it'. This combined with Strikethrough and a 'critical mass of fans who had experienced a **variety** of similar events' (*astolat*, personal correspondence) to convince fans that they needed more than just a space for archiving fic or facilitating conversations, and they needed to do more than simply respond to purges and deletions as they occurred. They needed an organisation to proactively fight for their rights as virtual citizens, and to define them as creators who appropriated or transformed – rather than stole – from the media they enjoyed. However, as the next section discusses, there have always been authors and copyright holders who disagree with that assessment.

‘Interrogating the Text From the Wrong Perspective’⁴⁰:

Conflict with Authors

My position on fan-fic is pretty clear: I think it’s immoral, I *know* it’s illegal, and it makes me want to barf whenever I’ve inadvertently encountered some of it involving my characters (Gabaldon⁴¹ 2010a)



Fig. 5.7: LJ Icon
by sailoreagle

With those words, Diana Gabaldon, author of the *Outlander* books, set into motion a conflict that has played out again and again in modern fandom. Gabaldon’s blog posts provoked greater attention and a more widespread response than other incidents, but there has always been some conflict between fans (particularly fanfiction writers) and the creators or companies that hold the media copyrights.⁴² Indeed, negative authorial responses to fanfiction have become so repetitive that fans made them into a bingo card (see Fig. 5.8), as well as developing standard responses to each criticism. This section will begin by examine some of these individual points of disagreement, as they illuminate several defining issues that shape fannish conceptualisation of their community. They also demonstrate how fans use academic sources, including philosophy, law, and ethnography, as resources in their arguments and in their attempts to articulate or conceptualise their community. This section will use specific points of contention with authors to consider how fans use such conflicts as a platform to make assertions about the nature and character of fandom.

Before beginning, it is significant that although these conflicts predate the Internet, modern technology has, in the words of fan journalist Aja Romano (2013), broken the ‘fourth wall’ between fans and creators, the dividing line that ‘insulates us, protecting us from their often harsh judgement and sometimes even real-life repercussions’. Authors use many of the same technologies as fans, especially blogs, and occupy

⁴⁰ This titular quote is from a response made by author Anne Rice (2004) regarding negative reviews from Amazon readers. Fans adopted the phrase, mocking authors and other fans who attempt to deify authorial intent or argue that there is only one ‘correct’ interpretation of a text (see Fig. 5.7).

⁴¹ Several creators quoted in this chapter, including Gabaldon, deleted all blog posts related to these incidents. However, in the tradition of preservation discussed throughout this thesis, fans recovered the posts and comments, and they are publicly available from multiple sources. I acknowledge the ethical quandary involved in referencing texts that the authors attempted to remove from public circulation, but the fact remains that they were unsuccessful; the posts continue to be read and referenced by fans, and indeed have become an inextricable part of the fan discourse. Given that it is impossible to read fan meta texts on this subject without being exposed to quotes from these documents or accounts of these incidents, any attempt to discuss this conflict without referencing authorial texts would have been incomplete and misrepresentative. Further, the AoIR (Markham & Buchanan 2012) and ESRC (2012) both consider the use of public virtual documents ethically permissible. In an attempt to fairly represent all points of view, I use Google web caches and sources like Nepveu (2010) that replicate authorial posts in their entirety, and I only quote passages recovered by multiple sources.

⁴² For linguistic ease, I refer to all of these entities as *authors* or *creators* regardless of the media format; this highlights their ownership of and authority over the text.

It's illegal!	It's copyright infringement!	You have to ask the writer for permission!	You're insulting the writers whom you claim to love!	Nobody can say anything about my characters but me, the original writer!
It's a waste of time; you should be learning how to become a Real Writer!	It's totally different if the author is dead!	How would you feel if somebody wrote fanfic about YOUR story?	It's like you came by my house and stole my car!	You have to THINK of the CHILDREN!
You're raping my characters!	Marion Zimmer Bradley!	Slash is icky!!	Chelsea Quinn Yarbro!	It's immoral!
You owe the writers respect for creating an ORIGINAL (TM) world!	You're acting like spoiled children!	Bad fan stories will make people not want to buy a writer's work!	You're raping me!	It's trademark infringement!
It's unethical!	It's plagiarism!	It's totally different if you have a contract!	Fanwriters are just like stalkers!	Go ahead and write it if you must, but don't put it on the internet for everybody to see!

Fig. 5.8: Anti-Fanfic Bingo Card (Ithiliana 2007)

many of the spaces fans consider ‘theirs’. This has had certain negative consequences, discussed below, but it also illuminates the fact that the fannish standards of respectful behaviour and safe space do not apply only to members of their community – they extend to outsiders as well, at least in principle. For example, responses to Gabaldon demonstrate repeatedly that many fans consider it common courtesy to comply with authors’ wishes regarding fic. For example, u2shay (in Nepveu 2010) wrote ‘We are reasonable people...all you had to do was ask us not to express our appreciation for your novels in the form of fanfiction, stating that you have an abhorrence of derivative works. We would have respected and honoured your wishes.’ Likewise, Lana-lovely (in Nepveu 2010) advised Gabaldon that ‘decent’ fans would respect her request, and ‘The main fanfic websites will remove sections and not allow uploads for your stories...if you simply contact them...just like Anne Rice did’. Authors Holly Lisle (2005) and Claire Hennessey report successfully using this method; Hennessey (2010) in particular comments that ‘I do think authors should have the right to make their feelings about fanfiction known, and respected – and most fanfic⁴³ sites do respect authors’ wishes on this front, as well as the majority of fanfic writers’. Not all fans do consider or honour an author’s wishes, of course, but even then the predominant opinion I encountered was a disinclination to engage with such authors’ work at all, not a desire to create or confront the author with more fic.

⁴³ Many fic archives do have such a policy, including FFN (2009); Fan Works Inc. (2011) kept an extensive list of creator policies for years. AO3 does not disallow any fic, because their parent company, the OTW, maintains that fanworks do not infringe copyright (OTW: ‘FAQ: I’m a professional creator...’).

The social contract of safe space and mutual respect may be less explicit than a written ToS, but authors who breach these rules provoke no less outrage for violating the safety of fannish platforms than webhosts did in the previous section. Thus, if fans feel that an author was disrespectful in articulating her objections to fic, they often do not feel obligated to respond politely, though most will still comply with her request to remove all fic. However, several fans did confide in me that this was partially because they tended to lose interest in works that they could not engage with through fic. Fans tend to respond less constructively if they perceive an author's objections to be disrespectful in content as well as tone; for example, one of the most common authorial complaints is that fanfiction is 'immoral'. This is usually related to its pornographic content: Robin Hobb (2005) writes, 'At the extreme low end of the spectrum, fan fiction becomes personal masturbation fantasy', while Gabaldon (2010c) herself argues that 'good characters...*are* the person who created them...[so] you're not messing with my characters, you're messing with *me*' – which makes explicit fic tantamount to rape. Gabaldon (2010a) also compares it 'trying to seduce my husband', and

Opening your daily mail and finding a letter detailing an explicit sexual encounter between...your 21-year-old daughter and your 48-year-old male neighbor – written by the neighbor. At the bottom it says, "Fiction! Just my imagination. All cool, right?"

These assertions are in direct opposition to fannish values, and fannish perceptions of fic as empowering, feminist expressions of sex-positive female sexuality (see Chapter 4; also Chan 2014, holmseanpose 2014, Twohy 2014, professorfangirl 2014, amireal 2008, Cumberland 2004). Fans particularly object comparing fic with immoral activities like the above because of how carefully they consider and analyse the problematic aspects of fanfiction, and the dedication with which they try to address those issues and protect vulnerable members of their community. Furthermore, Gabaldon's dismissal of the imaginative aspect of fic displays a fundamental misunderstanding of fandom: the community as a whole strives not to judge others' *fictional* sexual kinks, but they make a clear distinction between enjoying non-con fic (when marked with appropriate warnings, thus harming no one) and endorsing actual-world rape (see Chapter 4; Briarwood 2000, bitterfig 2007, bironic 2011). Indeed, recognising that fic can cause real emotional distress is part of why many fans will agree not to write in an author's universe (or at least not to show it to her): they value her safe space as well.

However, as with the ToS conflicts, resentment occurs when fans feel that they are meeting their commitments to protect a shared space and respect the needs of other inhabitants who, despite this, refuse to consider *their* values, needs, and safety. Thus, criticisms of fic as immoral become especially contentious when it is clear that a creator is not objecting to the darker, more problematic genres of fic, but to *all* sexual content. For example, Lucasfilm enforced this standard for decades:

[We] own *all* rights to the Star Wars characters and we are going to insist upon *no* pornography. This may mean no fanzines if that...is necessary to stop the few from darkening the reputation our company is so proud of. For now, the few who ignore the limits of good taste have been turned over...for legal action (Garrett 1981)

Lucasfilm was a particular subject of fannish ire because they specifically targeted homoerotic slash fic ‘on grounds that it harms the [‘family friendly’] *Star Wars* image’ (Plotz 2000; FL: ‘Lucasfilm’, ‘Open Letter...’, ‘Star Wars’). Until the property was sold in 2012, it was official policy that none of the hundreds of characters in the *Star Wars* expanded universe was queer (Brooker 2004; Luckhurst 2004: 800; Quinn 2012). Many fans experience this erasure as an act of violence, a deliberate exclusion from a beloved text and a dismissal of their identity as ‘immoral’ and ‘deviant’ (see Chapter 6; Willis 2006, Sedgwick 1994); certainly, the very existence of this authorial fiat compromises queer *Star Wars* fans’ capacity to access the fannish sense of safety and belonging. This is accentuated by the threat of legal action; as scholars have observed, disputes tend to be more bitter and divisive when one party has more power, is perceived as more legitimate by society, or unilaterally seeks to enforce a standard that is not acceptable to all parties (Deutsch 1973; Foucault 1988; Wilder, Ashmore, & Jussim 2001; Rubin & Hewstone 2004; Kriesberg & Dayton 2012: 21-2, 95-6). In this case, the threatened legal action is an exertion of the authors’ superior power over fans to achieve a desired effect – but by banning sexual or homoerotic fanfiction, the creators also hamper fandom’s capacity to reorient the text and to constitute their community as one that is safe for queer and feminine sexuality (see Chapter 6). Thus, fans often experience moral criticisms of fic as a direct attack on not just fanfiction, but their community. Thefourthvine (2010) wrote, ‘the ten percent of fan fiction that is worth dying for is not just good, and in fact not just great: it’s great and it’s *for us*. It’s written for our community, with our community standards in mind, by someone who shares at least some interests and probably some beliefs with us.’ Another fan, responding to Gabaldon’s assertion that fanfiction is rape, protested that ‘You’re publicly comparing

something my best friends do out of love and community to the worst thing that's ever happened to me, one of the worst things that *can* happen to a person' (in Nepveu 2010).

Even polite and respectful authorial statements can be problematic. JK Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* books, endorses non-pornographic fic, saying 'I find it very flattering that people love the characters so much' but 'The books may be getting older, but they are still aimed at young children. If young children were to stumble upon Harry Potter in an X-rated story, that would be a problem' (Rowling 2000, Waters 2004). This edict is largely ignored for many reasons, but two are particularly relevant here. First, Rowling herself is not distressed by fanfiction. Second, while most fans concur that 'young children' should be protected from explicit fic, and that exposing them might constitute an immoral act, the latter statement fails to take into account how dedicated fandom is to maintaining their community as a safe space – and how carefully they have considered the ethical, practical, and moral dimensions of doing so. To reiterate the argument in Chapter 4, many fans assert that their role in developing and popularising trigger warnings (see Vingiano 2014) demonstrates a considerable investment in protecting not just children, but *all* vulnerable readers:

Female-Dominated Fanfic Culture is *the least rape-culture-y place on the internet*. We obsess about consent. We agonize over labelling. Outside of feminist activists and writers, you will not find more people who are thinking [as] deeply and sensitively about consent...Fandom has a lot of things it deals with very badly. This isn't one of them
(fail_fandomanon 2013)

Thus, authorial statements that suggest that explicit fanfiction is immoral because it might hurt or corrupt children are often received by fans as implied synecdochical aspersions on the character of their community. They indicate that unlike other, more normative communities, fans cannot be expected to take responsible and mature actions to protect children and vulnerable people. This is particularly significant because obsolete stereotypes of fans as deviant, immature, and concerned only with (erotic) self-gratification (see Burchill 1986, Jenkins 1992, Jenson 1992) is a recurrent theme in fannish conflict with outsiders that continues to cause material harm to the community; for example, it played a part in the dispute with LiveJournal (above).

The second category of authorial criticism that should be discussed here is the assertion that fanfiction is a form of theft. There are two main branches of this argument: The first is purely legal, as Orson Scott Card (1997) explains,

If they try to publish it (including on the net) except in very restricted circumstances, I will sue, because if I do NOT act vigorously to protect my copyright, I will lose that copyright...So fan fiction, while flattering, is also an attack on my...livelihood.

In addition, many authors, regardless of whether they otherwise approve of or abhor fanfiction, are afraid of ‘a fan at some point writing a piece that inadvertently picks up a plotline that I have myself written, but that hasn’t yet appeared in print – and then turning around and claiming that I’ve stolen it from him/her’ (Gabaldon 2010b; also Roberson 2004, LeGuin 2007, Martin 2010, Yarbrow 2013; FL: ‘Professional Author Fanfic Policies’). This fear derives from an incident between a fan writer and SF/F legend Marion Zimmer Bradley (see Feist 1999, Martin 2010). In fact, the details of this incident are highly specific and have little bearing on whether fanfiction *in general* is legal, or whether it can harm an author’s copyright – and even if it did, the case never went to court, so it is not the legal precedent that many believe (Thomas 2010, Hines 2010, opusculus 2010). It is worth noting that the details of the Bradley case were obscured by decades of rumour and oral (textual) tradition before Gabaldon made her claim. The urgency and fervour with which that controversy spread across fandom prompted several fans (some also published authors) to investigate the facts of this case through personal correspondence and analysis of primary source documents, many of which are now available due to the commitment to documenting and sharing their history that has developed in online fandom. They publicly posted their findings as a direct response to Gabaldon, and as a resource for other fans to use in future iterations of fan-author conflict (see Thomas 2010, Hines 2010, opusculus 2010; FL: ‘MZB’). This, once again, demonstrates fans’ dedication to sharing and preserving their history, to using their skills to create resources that their fellow fans can use to protect each other and the community as a whole, and their awareness of fandom as a historical and social entity that exists on the margins of society.

In fact, there is almost no legal precedent for or against fanfiction. A minority of legal scholars support authorial fears that that implicitly or explicitly endorsing fanfiction implies consent, and therefore voids the author’s right to sue for copyright infringement (McCardle 2003, Stendell 2005), but this conclusion is highly contested. Most copyright disputes concern music or media piracy, which has direct and immediate financial consequences for creators; thus, they are identifiably a form of theft. Fanfiction, however, is often legally defined as ‘unauthorised’ and ‘not-for-profit’ because it is created and distributed for free, and furthermore it is not a direct duplication of content

that would otherwise only be available at a cost – which makes it an ambiguous subject with regard to copyright law (Tushnet 1997: 655, 2008: 501; Fiesler 2008: 731-2; Ball 2007, Hetcher 2009). Tushnet (1997) argues that fanfiction is protected by the ‘fair use’ clause of copyright law, because ‘fanfiction involves the productive addition of creative labor to a copyright holder’s characters, it is non-commercial and it does not act as an economic substitute for the original copyrighted work’ (also Tushnet 2005, 2008; Hetcher 2009). There is no legal precedent regarding non-profit fanfiction in either US or UK law. Thus, as one fan explained in the wake of the Gabaldon posts,

“Fan fiction” currently occupies a big legal gray area as far as fair use is concerned. No legal decision has ever been made concerning it, and both sides of the debate tend to like it that way, since neither side wants particularly to lose (and give absolute power to the other side), and there really isn’t any way to say *which* way such a decision would go (Dawn 2010)

The most relevant case is *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music Inc.* (1994; 510 U.S. 569), which ruled that ‘derivative works’ that add ‘something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the first with new expression, meaning or message’⁴⁴ are protected under US Law. That case emphasised ‘transformativeness’ as a key to identifying texts that are protected under the fair use clause of copyright law (Hetcher 2009: 1902). The Organization for Transformative Works made this analysis central to their assertion that fanfiction is legal, because copyright law ‘does not preclude the right of others to respond to the original work, either with critical commentary, parody, or...transformative works’, and further that fic poses no legal threat to the aspects of copyright that allow authors to profit from their works (OTW 2014b).

Modern fans are increasingly aware of the relevant legal arguments, and are incorporating them into their analyses, as the above quote demonstrates. Similarly, Kate Nepveu (2010a), the fan who archived Gabaldon’s posts, also wrote an open letter explaining that ‘fanfic is not, *as a category*, illegal in the United States. Anyone who says otherwise is misinformed’. She then provided links to the ‘Fair Use Overview’ published on the Stanford Copyright & Fair Use Center (Stim 2010) and some of the relevant case law (Nepveu 2010a). The Fandom Lawyers (2003) LJ

⁴⁴ Also relevant is *Suntrust v. Houghton Mifflin Co.* (2001), which lifted an injunction against the publication and sale of *The Wind Done Gone*, classifying it as parody for its critique of the racism inherent in *Gone With The Wind*. UK Copyright law grants the right ‘to make an adaptation of the work or do any of the above [copy, issue copies, perform or broadcast] in relation to an adaptation’, though it also grants the original author a moral right to object to derogatory treatment of his or her work (Copyright, Designs & Patents Act 1988). This has not been challenged in court with regard to non-profit fanfiction.

Community has dozens of entries tagged ‘copyright’ and ‘fair use’, which discuss these issues, and often link to articles relevant to fan concerns when they are published in legal journals – which is yet another example of fans using their skills and experience to support each other by providing resources that benefit the community as a whole. Such legal awareness is beginning to permeate fandom and affect fan practices. For example, one fan humorously demonstrates how fannish disclaimers⁴⁵ have changed dramatically as such knowledge decreased their fear of legal retribution:

author’s notes in 1998: these characters, of course, do not belong to me !!! :) all rights reserved!!!! just borrowing them for some fun!!!! heehee. i lov 2 obey the law

author’s notes in 2014: literally ignore all of canon. the author is dead. i own these assholes now
(verygaygirlfriendfoxmulder 2014)

This returns us to the second set of arguments characterising fanfiction as theft, which are predicated on the assumption that fanfiction is inherently inferior,⁴⁶ and that the poor quality of fic can harm an author’s livelihood by damaging perceptions of their work. Robin Hobb (2005), argues that ‘My name is irrevocably attached to my stories and characters’, and therefore likens fanfiction to identity theft:

It injures the name of the party whose identity is stolen...[It] can sully your credit with your readers. Anyone who read fan fiction about Harry Potter, for instance, would have an entirely different idea of what those stories are about than if he had simply read J.K. Rowling's books. In this way, the reader's impression of the writer's work and creativity is changed.

Diana Gabaldon (2010a) concurs that ‘a terrible lot of fan-fic is outright cringe-worthy and ought to be suppressed on purely aesthetic grounds...about three-quarters of it is graphic, badly-written...masturbatory fantasy’, and follows up with an anecdote about her assistant arguing with a fan who ‘*insisted*’ that a scene she read in a fic had actually happened in canon (Gabaldon 2010b). Katherine Kerr suggests that writing fic demonstrates ‘a paucity of imagination’ and asserts that fans ‘probably don’t have the taste and imagination to write anything original anyway’ (see knitmeapony 2010). George RR Martin (2014) advises that ‘Every writer needs to learn to create his or her own characters, worlds, and settings. Using someone else’s world is the lazy way out’.

⁴⁵ A statement posted at the top of a fic disavowing ownership of the canon or any desire to profit from this work, ostensibly protecting the ficcer from accusations of copyright infringement and attendant legal liability (FL: ‘Disclaimer’, actualvampireang et al.)

⁴⁶ Not all authors concur. Scott Lynch (2005) believes ‘Anyone truly interested in becoming a better writer – anyone with the diligence and the self-honesty needed to improve their work sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph – can use fanfic as a means to that end’ (also McGuire 2014a, b; Brennan 2010; Valente 2010).

Other authors are more measured in how they present this argument. Tina Morgan observes that ‘The name of a series, a character can become an author’s “brand” long before anyone knows the author’s name...if they ever do know the author’s name. I’d wager that more people are familiar with Sherlock Holmes than...Sr. Arthur Conan Doyle’ (in Yeo 2006). Sharon Lee (2013) suggests that fanfiction is not flawed by a lack of talent, but by the fact that fans are not the original creators: ‘Interpreting our characters is what Steve and I do; it’s our job. Nobody else is going to get it right’.

Fans have two major responses to the argument that fanfiction is theft because it compromises the authors’ ‘brand’. The first is, once again, grounded in assertions about the character of the fan community. One fan told Gabaldon ‘the fact of the matter is that if I wasn’t as involved in fandom as I am, I wouldn’t have spent so much money on DVDs, shirts, and other merchandise. Once the story was over, I would have moved on’ (in Nepveu 2010). Others point out that fandom has always considered not profiting from fanfiction a point of pride (see Jenkins 1992, Bacon-Smith 1992, Arduinna 2000, Fiesler 2008, Moraine 2013b, storyalchemy 2014, Morgan Dawn 2015), because fans love and support the original media and have no desire to divert money away from the official products that allow creators to continue making a living as authors. Romano (in Nepveu 2010) expands this point into a deeper meta analysis of the character of fandom:

Fanfiction has always operated outside of a commercial framework, because it deals in cultural, not monetary, capital. You’re operating out of the worldview that fanfiction is a deflation of your property. But fandom operates as a group collaboration of literary theory applied to your work, one that incidentally enhances your property value by building a community around it, and by adding tropes, new ideas, and emotional attachment to it.

Her argument represents fannish engagement with media as a direct extension of mainstream literary theory, thus demonstrating the inter-relation of fan and academic analysis by drawing on social theory (see Bourdieu 1986) to explain fan practices of production, exchange, and valuation. It is more significant, however, that community is once again an intentional but not obligatory component of her analysis. Fans could simply argue that they do not monetise fic, or that their fannish activities encourage them to spend money on official products (a connection that does not inherently presume community, as defunct representations of fans as obsessive, undiscerning collectors show; see Jenkins 1992, Jenson 1992). They prefer, however, to assert that the *community* adds value to these works, and keeps them invested in the story.

Fans also dispute the basic premise that fanfiction is inherently bad on a communal, philosophical, and historical level. They grant that a significant amount, perhaps the majority, of fanfiction is poorly written and nonsensical; indeed, there are whole fic genres dedicated to pure pornography or utterly preposterous fun (FL: ‘Porn Without Plot’, Crack!fic’). However, they challenge the authors’ assumption that quality is their aim, or that good writing is necessarily more important than the value they find in fic; Yahtzee63 (2010) asserts, ‘Writing can be something done purely for pleasure, and it need not aspire to publication to have merit’ (see also st_salieri 2010). Community is an important part of that value; one contemporary meme (a shared text, duplicated and disseminated for its relevance to each individual perpetuating it) lists dozens of motivations for writing fanfiction, including ‘writing as a communal experience is amazing’ and ‘I get so much enjoyment from reading fanfiction that I want to contribute to the community by providing enjoyment for other fans’, and neglects to mention writing improvement at all (see alias-sqbr 2010, lirazel 2010).

Fans also do not concede the argument that fanfiction is inherently incapable of meeting or surpassing the literary quality of the original work (Hobb 2005, Gabaldon 2010b, Martin 2014), especially when the canon in question is widely considered substandard to begin with. For example, Alicorn’s (2010) fic, ‘Luminosity’, rewrites the entire *Twilight* series by turning the main character – who is widely criticised for being anti-feminist and romantic to the point of life-threatening stupidity and dangerous levels of self-abnegation – into ‘a rational self-awareness-junkie with a penchant for writing down everything that crosses her mind in a notebook’ (Alicorn 2014). Reviews of ‘Luminosity’ regularly include comments like this: ‘When dealing with transhumanism, text media doesn’t usually do a very good job of describing people’s capabilities in their new bodies and minds. It’s odd to find an exception in a *Twilight* fic’ (Normagest 2010). These efforts do not necessarily represent the fundamental hatred for the canon that authors often presume (see Hobb 2005); for example, Alicorn emphasised to me in private correspondence that ‘people often mistake me for disliking...the original *Twilight* books when in fact I quite like them. I like mine *better*, but I’m also trying to do a fundamentally different thing’.

Other fans dispute the premise that only creators can write their characters correctly (Hobb 2005, Gabaldon 2010c, Rice 2012, Lee 2013). As Chapter 6 discusses in greater detail, many fans argue that it is an incontrovertible fact of media production that they

will share identity facets (like race, sexual orientation, immigrant experiences) with certain characters that the author does not share, and that this gives them insight into those characters' perspectives that the author lacks – which means that, in some cases, they are more capable of accurately and insightfully interpreting them (see Willis 2006). One informant who wrote fanfiction and original stories explained it to me like this:

I love all my characters, but I will never understand some of them as well as my readers can, because I have not lived their lives. I am not, for example, a man. I'm not a mother, I'm not black, or English, or disabled, or a whole list of other things. I can empathise with all of those conditions, but they're not something I *know*. My readers do, and I can only hope that I have written the things I don't know accurately enough that they can...fill the gaps themselves, from their own experiences

This quote does not invoke the academic sources directly, but many fans use historical, legal, and philosophical texts to dispute the idea that authors can 'own' characters and stories to the degree that they can be stolen; as Irukandji (in Nepveu 2010) asks, 'You do realize that this is about intellectual rights for participants on both sides of the debate, right?' Fans quote Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946: 4), asserting 'The poem is...not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public' (in Angua 2006). They explicitly reference 'the Death of the Author' (Barthes 1977; see Angua 2006, Collective Blog 2014, Meejaleibling 2014, theafictionado 2014), especially this quote:

A text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture
(Barthes 1977: 146)

The resulting arguments, which represent fannish delight in engaging with academic sources to analyse their community and its practices, and the fannish drive to use their skills to create resources and arguments that their fellow fans can use, read like this:

In a purely literary sense, fanfic doesn't exist. There is only fiction. Fanfic is a legal category created by the modern system of trademarks and copyrights. Putting that label on a work of fiction says nothing about its quality, its creativity, or the intent of the writer who created it
(Hayden 2006)

There was a time, not that long ago as we measure things, where all fiction was what we would now call "fan fiction." Shakespeare didn't come up with most of his own plots. He wrote plays about the stories people already loved...Originality wasn't the god of fiction until the last few centuries, and even then, we didn't fixate on it until we reached the era of modern copyright
(McGuire 2014a)

[Historically,] the concept of ownership of characters and fictional universe would have been ludicrous. It's constructed...by the rise of publishing as an industry, and

is entirely driven by economic motives. The paradigm shifted in the 18th century, and not coincidentally, this is when we first start to see issues about copyright and creative plagiarism and so on. Listen up: *the paradigm is changing again*. All this flailing about fanfic cannot and will not change the fact that the digital revolution means that we need a new construct – one that embraces remixing, sampling and transforming as worthy creative & scholastic endeavors (kalichan 2010)

These assertions often link to a post (Romano 2010 & comments) that lists hundreds of media texts that are either critically acclaimed or established components of the literary or classical canon. The post is regularly updated, and represents the collective work of innumerable fans who contributed examples and explanations. In addition to the aforementioned Shakespeare and fairy tale adaptations, they point out that Greek playwrights Aeschylus and Euripides wrote ‘missing scenes’ and ‘fix-it fic’ for the *Illiad*, that Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) and Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone* (2002) retell classic stories from the point of view of neglected or maligned characters, that the main character of the BBC miniseries *Lost in Austen* (2008) could easily be described as a time-travelling ‘Mary Sue’ – all of which are established fic tropes or genres (see Glossary: ‘Tropes’). That list is a testament to fans’ desire to use their knowledge and experience to benefit their community, to create resources that everyone can use in future iterations of this conflict. It also demonstrates their awareness of where fandom stands in relation to literature and history, and hints at their capacity to understand and apply academic theory to their arguments, self-analysis, and fic creation. Fan use of academic theory in analysis and fic writing is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5, but responses to Gabaldon exemplify how fans incorporate literary theory into the defence of the literary, artistic, and creative merit of their community and activities (see earlwyn 2010; Irukandji & u2shay in Nepveu 2010):

In a sense, characterization in fanfic is more...challenging than writing an original character. There are certain rules...otherwise it isn't so much a fanfic as a wish-fulfilment fapping story that happens to have Spike and Angel's names in it. You simply *can't* do whatever you want to these characters, not if you want to stay true to the story and engage your readers...Writing an original story and slapping Buffy's name in it will not engage readers who value good characterization (st_salieri 2010)

This assertion, although it does not explicitly invoke community, displays a consciousness of the fact that fanfiction is not merely a creative exercise: it is written *for* an audience and often *with* them, or at least with the expectations of that readerly community in mind, as the next chapter will discuss. And this conflict as a whole

demonstrates how consistently fannish issues, arguments, and analyses explicitly relate to community. Even texts that are not intended to contribute directly to the process of articulating and realising their community, that make no claim to be insightful or ‘meta’ analyses of fandom, are still predicated upon basic presumptions about the existence, nature, and values of the fan community, and are important to how it is constituted.

Conclusion

This chapter and the previous one focus on conflict, not because fandom is particularly prone to feuding or especially lacking in solidarity or cohesiveness, but because discord is an inherent part of the natural and healthy function of any society, and studying conflict can be a helpful tool for establishing a community’s boundaries, priorities and interests, and for examining how members attempt to reconcile divergent interests within their community or cope with encroachment or attack from outside groups.

The examples in this chapter can certainly be used in this way. First of all, they demonstrate that fandom is not an independent or discrete community; it exists within a broader society, and it cannot be analysed or understood except in context of that society. That may be obvious; after all, mainstream culture produces the media texts at the centre of fan activity, and fans themselves cannot live entirely within fandom but must locate their fannish participation within certain spheres of their lives. However, studying conflict allows the identification of individual points of influence, divergence, or subversion of the dominant social narrative. For example, fandom rejects the strictest interpretations of copyright and ownership, arguing that fannish practices are emblematic of a new paradigm and a societal shift caused by the dramatic changes in media and technology. On the other hand, fandom’s relationship with the dominant moral and social norms is more complicated and more comparable. This was particularly evident in Chapter 4, with its discussion of fandom as a queer, female-dominated community that tends to reflect and support the dominant liberal narratives.

The fact that fandom exists within and reflects the broader expectations of society also has bearing on the second point, which is that fandom as a community is committed to polite, supportive, and responsible interaction. Chapter 4 discussed this as a feature of intra-community interactions, but Chapter 5 shows that the fannish dedication to respectful and safe space extends not only to members, but to outsiders who interact

with the community in good faith. Several fans took pains to assure authors that if they engaged with fandom politely and expressed their opinions on fanfiction clearly, they would be heard and respected by the majority. Fan accounts of Strikethrough emphasise the internal and collaborative aspects of their experience, and their attempts to produce a unified front and achieve their desired outcome, rather than discussing any possible instances of poor behaviour or outright attack. This might be a result of personal bias and historical revisionism, of course, but the historical record largely supports their narrative; most of the contemporary documents call for constructive solutions and caution that frustrated outbursts can only harm their cause.

Third, these examples display a preoccupation with ownership and responsibility. This is most obvious with regard to authorial conflicts, where loss of ownership is tantamount to the loss of community, but it is present elsewhere. For example, the warnings debate represents fans' increasing awareness that their own work has the capacity to harm others. Some respond by taking responsibility for that power and trying to limit their negative influence, while others fundamentally reject the idea that they should have to do so – arguing that they respect their fellow fans as mature adults who can and should take responsibility for their own mental health. The disputes with LiveJournal and other companies illuminate a new frontier for this issue: ownership and control of virtual space. It was with great purpose and deliberation that fans phrased their outrage at LJ's behaviour in terms of *citizenship*, *relationship*, *lives* and *community*. They were not just protesting the loss of their history or content – though that was certainly important to them – they were attempting to negotiate new forms of ownership and tenant relationship before inequitable conventions were established and enshrined in societal norms.

These fannish power struggles over intellectual property and digital citizenship have relevance far beyond the field of fandom studies. Fans' conception of and relationship to the idea of copyright has vast implications for the media and publishing industries; their use of historical, legal, and philosophical scholarship to reject the notion that creators have a moral right to own an idea or police its use inform current struggles over copyright and piracy (see Svensson & Larsson 2012, Aufderheide & Jaszi 2013, Edwards et al. 2015). The new social norms and expectations that fans embody, as early adopters of technology and established participants in Internet conversations surrounding the production and consumption of modern media in all its evolving forms can be used as

a guide for predicting future general responses to and expectations about the behaviour and responsiveness of media producers, and the expectations of availability, affordability, and respect for consumers. Likewise, the struggle over the rights and power afforded to the members or ‘citizens’ of user-generated content platforms predicts and mirrors the general struggle over the rights and protections that can or should be afforded to participants in the modern ‘sharing economy’ – for example, users of Airbnb or Uber. These conflicts also challenge the notion that ‘social actors’ and ‘social movements...construct themselves...through a process of autonomous communication, free from the control of those holding institutional power (Castells 2012: 5, 9). In fact, although fans *do* construct themselves through a process of communication, they are very aware of the imbalance of power entailed in the fact that they do not *own* their communication platforms, and are therefore subject to the control of the companies that hold that power and thus control their communications to some degree. This, too, is an important dynamic that translates well beyond the confines of a simple conflict with a single blog company, and into the general sphere of modern news and companies associated with user-generated content or value – i.e., the sharing economy.

As an extension of points two and three, fannish conflict reveals an inclination among fans to contribute their resources, skills, and experience to the general wellbeing of the community. They recount and investigate their history so that future fans will not be ignorant, they compile each others’ comments and posts, provide links to the originals, so that other fans will be aware of important events as they occur, and will be able to read the relevant materials and form their own opinions – and again, so that the historical record will be clear and accessible. They use their legal knowledge to educate their fellow fans and to defend their community against attack. They share their college educations in literature, media, social sciences, and history to create resources for their fellow fans, not just for use in debates about the death of the author or the importance of copyright, but also for literary and sociological meta analysis.

That accentuates the fourth and most crucial point: community. The word itself was explicitly mentioned in every conflict in these chapters, and each debate can be seen as an attempt to articulate, influence, and defend the fan community. The warnings debate is an internal negotiation about whose vision of personal and collective responsibility is correct or appropriate for fandom. Some articulate the makeup of fandom – as categories,

demographics, or networks and connections – while others make an appeal to behaviour they want to see, or the character of fandom they think their actions should embody. Most importantly, they emphasise mutual support and courtesy as features that epitomise the fan community or as defining characteristics of community that fandom should strive towards. It is also significant that even the Chapter 5 conflicts, in which fans' primary focus is on defending themselves from outside attack, are preoccupied with the internal process symbolically constituting the fan community. This can take the form of outwardly-focused arguments, like encouraging fans to be on their best behaviour so as not to confirm outsiders' negative presumptions, or assuring critics that they misunderstand the supportive, moral, and responsible character of fandom. However, this is just as much a part of the internal process of asserting, contesting, and transforming 'the fan community' as the intra-community conflicts discussed in Chapter 4.

Taken together, these points create a clear picture of fandom as a group that considers itself a community founded on creative endeavours and social interactions. They define *community* as a group that respects and supports its members, and which treats even outsiders with compassion and understanding. And they understand their community to be one that occupies certain spaces, but also that it is not the 'space' or technology that defines them: it is the people and relationships – including with the companies and technologies that facilitate their interaction – that comprise their community.

Chapter 6: Patterns of Storytelling

— Fanfiction & Community-Building

['Story' is] an account of things that have happened...which has a beginning, middle and end, although not necessarily in this order; which involves some form of emplotment so that the story develops or at least has an end; it is produced for an audience, whether implicitly or explicitly; and it is a motivated or moral account because it represents a particular point of view or encourages a measure of understanding or empathy from the audience; and it works by being metaphorically and/or analogically connected (tacitly or explicitly) with the lives of its audience

(Stanley 2008b: 437)

Stories are at the core of fandom. The manner in which many fans understand, interact with, and internalise stories is distinctive in a way that constitutes a partial basis for community: mastery of these practices is a strong indicator of membership in fandom, while the process of teaching or learning these story-consumption practices has long served as point of entry into the social networks that constitute fandom (see Chapter 3; also Southard 1982; Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992, 2006; Hellekson & Busse 2006, Booth 2010, Arduinna 2012a, b). To begin with, it is a shared affection for stories that motivates fans to seek each other out, and without these interactions fandom could not exist. Further, while *fandom* refers to the group as a whole, individual fans choose to participate in specific fandoms (e.g. *Harry Potter*, *Doctor Who*) based on which stories hold the most appeal for them. In addition, many of the practices that define fandom and demarcate fans from the broader media audience are concerned with the consumption and reception of media stories; fans have developed certain lenses, methods of analysis, and systems of valuation that are particular to them. Fandom is also distinguished by the production of fanworks (e.g. fanfiction, fanart); these are creative endeavours that comment on and engage with the stories that engendered them in an intertextual and dialogic sense (as per Kristeva 1980, Bakhtin 1981). Many fanworks, especially fics, tell stories in their own right, usually by retelling, reinterpreting, and adapting the original (or *canon*) text. Finally, fans often converge into smaller sub-communities within individual fandoms based on the characters, genres and storytelling techniques they prefer.

Some folklore and oral history scholars suggest that participating in the retelling of familiar stories – whether fantastical, historical, or autobiographical – can serve to instil or transmit a community's values, traditions, and 'local knowledge', and encourage group cohesion and emotional investment in the community. Thus, storytelling can sometimes be used to induct new members and demonstrate belonging, while storytellers can use

their tales to construct, reaffirm, or alter their identity and position within the group, or the community itself (Dundes 1989; Nadel-Klein 1991, Wolf 1992; Plummer 1995, 2001; Norrick 1997; Rappaport 2001; Reissman 2001; Bottigheimer 2009). Not everyone involved in fandom necessarily participates in the fannish practices that surround building and telling stories, just as not every citizen or community member actively participates in the storytelling traditions above; many fans read fic purely for entertainment or stimulation and prefer not to engage in deeper analysis, though many fans choose to engage on this level because part of their motivation for joining fandom was their love of analysing stories. However, even lurkers who do not interact with other fans still make limited contributions to the processes discussed in this chapter simply by joining message boards and reading stories, thereby increasing their membership or view counts and silently reinforcing or endorsing certain messages or patterns.

This chapter deals primarily with those fans attempting to actively engage with and analyse both the canon stories their fandom is based around and the fannish practices by which they transform and appropriate those stories and build new storytelling traditions of their own. Many of the texts represented in this chapter were derived from relevant wiki entries or meta Community tags (e.g. FL: ‘fanon’, ‘Draco Malfoy’, ‘slash’). However, this chapter was particularly influenced by interviews and reader feedback; although most of the quotes are from public documents, not interviews, I was directed to specific examples, texts, wiki pages, and themes by fans who had found them especially memorable or relevant to their personal experiences of fandom.

The first section considers the intertextual relationship of fan texts to other texts (see Kristeva 1980: 69). It examines fanfiction as an act of collective storytelling and a mechanism for group bonding, as well as for creating and transmitting certain forms of local knowledge, which usually take the form of particular storytelling conventions and practices of media consumption. Section two then illustrates these practices using Draco Malfoy, an antagonist from Harry Potter,⁴⁷ as a case study. The focus then shifts

⁴⁷ Many examples in this chapter are drawn from HP fandom. This is partly because the Harry Potter series is such a phenomenon that its details have entered the public consciousness, so examples from this universe are more broadly accessible and require less explanation. It is partly because HP fandom is enormous and prolific, making it easier to find relevant examples. Further, there were often multiple texts written by different authors at different times about the same topic, which was useful for adding nuance and corroborating evidence. However, most of these practices predate HP fandom and continue to be used in modern fandoms, and all the observations and analyses proposed here are relevant to fandom in general.

toward the intertextual connection between the author and reader of a text. Because this thesis is primarily concerned with intra-fandom relationships and fannish conceptions of their own community, the focus is predominantly on fans as authors and readers of fanworks rather than on the relationship between fans and the author(s) of the source text. Section three examines the ways that fans use storytelling to interject their own perspectives and interests into the original story, and how this articulation of individual identity can form the basis for establishing and affirming social relationships and a collective fannish identity. Section four argues that knowledge of and facility with particular storytelling practices – the ability to analyse and retell a story in a specific way – can act as boundary mechanisms that both differentiate fandom from the broader media audience and allow fans to establish subdivisions within fandom, which facilitates fannish congregation in smaller groups based on interest and identity.

From 'Canon' to 'Fanon': Fanfiction as Collective, Intertextual Storytelling

Any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another
(Kristeva 1980: 66)

If you go back, the key stories we told ourselves were stories that were important to everyone and belonged to everyone. Fan fiction is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of...by the folk
(Jenkins in Harmon 1997)

In order to appreciate how the collective stories fans tell bond them as a community and transfer the knowledge and practices that mark them as insiders, it is necessary to understand how they characterise the media upon which their bond is based. Fans use the word *canon* to denote the original source material and all information contained within it. This includes anything from a character's hair colour, to their explicitly stated motivations, to metaphysical laws of the universe, to the general progression of plot events. Although canon might at first appear to be an official and stable category, in fact it is subjective and controversial. For example, while most *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (BtVS) fans accept the comic-book continuations of the TV series written by the show creator as canon, fans of *Doctor Who* often dismiss the spinoff novels as non-canon despite their endorsement by the BBC; writer Paul Cornell (2007) even asserts that there *is* no *Doctor Who* canon. Similarly, many fans use Barthesian philosophy to explain or justify their fanworks (see Chapter 5; Angua 2006, theafictionado 2014, Collective Blog 2014, Meejaleibling 2014), and as such they often prefer to exclude authorial statements beyond the published text of the story (e.g. interviews, blog posts; Angua 2006, Romano



Fig. 6.1: Examples of the headcanon meme. **Sources** (top to bottom): stealatimelord 2011, TexasUberAlles 2014, fuckyeareactions 2013b, a.

2010, st_salieri 2010, essbeejay 2012, quinara 2012, tonipontificates 2014; see Black 2008, Herzog 2012, Kazimierczak 2010, FL: ‘Word of God’).

Canon is in contrast with two concepts. The first, *headcanon*, ‘is a[n individual] fan’s personal, idiosyncratic interpretation of canon, such as the backstory of a character or the nature of relationships between characters’ (FL: ‘headcanon’; see Melusina 2004a, azurelunatic 2012, Asher-Perrin 2015). Jenkins (2008: 4-5) calls this *convergence*, the process by which ‘each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives’. Personal headcanons often develop into the second concept, *fanon*, which Kat (2009) defines as

those conventions and extrapolations from canon which become so popular and widespread in a fannish community, that they turn up in much fanfic, and often people cannot remember where the idea originally came from, and sometimes they can’t remember that the idea isn’t canon

Melusina (2004a: 6) describes fanon as a product of collaboration and collective storytelling, as

the fan created bits and pieces of characterization and backstory that accrue to characters until they become (in many readers’ minds) as much a part of the character as the characteristics ascribed to him or her by the creator. The creation of fanon is usually (but not always) shrouded in mystery. Someone describes [a character] as addicted to chocolate or [another] as tasting like spices, and someone else thinks, “hey, that makes sense!” and includes it in her story and someone else picks it up from her, and so on and so on

Fans are so reflexively aware of this process that they turned it into an Internet meme, a discrete unit of culture

comprised of or within a technological artefact that is spread from person to person online (Blackmore 2007, 1998; from Dawkins 1976). In this case, the words ‘Head-canon accepted’ or ‘headcanon approved’ became shorthand for the entire process of endorsing another fan’s theory and incorporating it into their own conception of that world (see Fig. 6.1). This highlights the important fact that although the distinction between canon and fanon is one of widespread acceptance among fans it does not necessarily follow that fanon is universal. For example,



Fig. 6.2: Fanart of the *Harry Potter* ‘Golden Trio’, depicting Hermione as a woman of colour (Milledge 2014).

there are groups in the *Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter* fandoms who imagine Katniss Everdeen and Hermione Granger as women of colour (Fig. 6.2). They cite as evidence the fact that both characters have ambiguously racialised features such as ‘bushy brown hair’ (Rowling 1997: 79) or ‘olive skin’ and ‘straight black hair’ (Collins 2008: 6), and point out that nowhere does the narrative of either series explicitly state that they are white (Wilson 2012, Alexandrina 2013, Milledge & serafinacastaway 2014, DiBernardo 2014, Bennett 2015). Similarly, many *Harry Potter* fans took Rowling’s assertion that her werewolf character, ‘Remus Lupin was supposed to be [an] HIV metaphor. [He] was someone who had... suffered stigma... It was a way of examining... unwarranted prejudice towards a group of people’ (*WB & Rowling v. RDR Books* 2008: 72-3) as confirmation that Lupin was ‘coded’ gay; that he was meant to be read as a queer character, but the constraints of children’s literature prohibited Rowling from saying so outright (musesfool 2003b, elwing-alcyone 2007, siriuslyslitherin 2011, spacecrip 2012, Aston 2013, overanalyticalqueer & spacecrip 2013, thirstforsalt 2013). Even when such fanons become mainstream, as with the debate about Katniss’s race (see DiBernardo 2014), it is certainly possible for other fans to reject or remain ignorant of them; regardless, they are broadly recognised canon variations that an identifiable and significant group of fans share with each other. Such divergence in interpretation can cause tension between fans who hold incompatible positions; conversely, shared positions – particularly fanons built around identity characteristics or personal struggles, like race or sexual orientation – can foster a sense of solidarity and belonging. Both effects have implications for fannish community building, and will be discussed below.

Later sections discuss the role that resonant identity characteristics play in the development of fanon, but this alone does not explain the phenomenon given that many fanons are not concerned with identity or even with story details that might traditionally be considered important. For example, a character's penis size can become a matter of fanon (Blytheley & Circe_Tigana 2014), and it became so common for *Stargate SG-1* fic to use the name 'Paul' for a character known canonically only as 'Major Davis', that the show writers adopted the name in later seasons (Mallozzi, Mullie & Woeste 2002). Melusina (2004a: 7) argues that 'Fan inventions become fanon because they resonate with readers and writers', while Fanlore ('Fanon') observes that

Certain types of fanon are created because certain details or interpretations invented by fans seem so right, so true or plausible or pleasurable, that they're repeated by other writers almost as a form of tribute, as if that's what *must have really happened*.

Slaymesoftly (2013: 7-8) adds,

Much of the stuff that I read when I first found fanfic (and didn't know that fanon was even a thing) ended up in some of my fics, just because I assumed they were part of the show's canon and I had missed that particular line or scene, whereas these more experienced and knowledgeable authors knew what they were doing

And I suspect that's exactly how fanon tropes developed. An author...used something with no basis in canon, but that seemed interesting and even likely. Another author thought it was cool (or assumed it was a detail from the show that she'd missed) and used the same something in her fic, as did another, and before you know it, the origin has been lost and it's been used so many times that many readers/authors have come to believe that it is canon.

This process is not emotionally neutral, nor is it a one-sided exchange; cupidssbow (2004) writes 'I get a sense of closeness with people because the things I loved enough to write about have found their way into other people's heads and become real, the way fiction you connect with does.' Furthermore, the four quotes above emphasise the integral part that fanfiction and investment in story can play in the development of fanon. Indeed, the most common method of expressing and disseminating headcanon – of transforming it into fanon – is through the medium of story. Kat (2009) equates the popularity and widespread acceptance that denote fanon status with 'turn[ing] up in much fanfic', and other fans are even more explicit in stating this connection: Darkkitten1 (2004) defines fanon as 'ideas related to a canon universe...which are not part of the canon universe but which multiple authors incorporate into their fanfiction', while Isis (2004) considers fanon 'that body of wisdom that "everybody knows" because they've read it a million times in fanfic' Although many examples in this chapter are drawn from images and meta essays, this is because those sources are more discrete and therefore require less

contextual explanation than a fic would. However, this does not invalidate the centrality that fans attribute to fics and storytelling given that there are usually related fics that deal with many of the same themes and advance many of the same headcanons. For example, there are numerous fics about WoC!Hermione⁴⁸ navigating interracial relationships and experiences of black female sexuality, or combating racism in school (FSHA-SRP 2015, IrreverentFangirl 2014, pommedeplume 2014), or exploring the implications of making Lupin literally rather than metaphorically HIV-positive (istalksnape 2005, Minnow-53 2005, Roses of the Storm 2005, Raven 2007, Cherie-morte 2009, westwardlee 2009). Carolyn-claire (2011) affirms this understanding of fic as a medium for analysis and experimentation with story, calling them a ‘discussion of the source in a particular language’, while Melusina (2004b) considers fanfiction to be

one of the most significant ways that fans converse about the source material. The body of work in a particular fandom is a detailed and nuanced conversation about the original text, and about the various takes on it that have been presented in different pieces of fanfiction (“Yes,” I can hear you all groaning, “we *know* – intertextuality”)

Her mention of intertextuality demonstrates fan use of academic concepts to analyse or explain their practices, but more importantly it offers a valuable insight into some of the ways fans build, tell, and conceptualise stories and the role of storytelling in their community. Henry Jenkins, drawing on de Certeau (1984), proposed what Parrish (2007: 59-60) demonstrates is the dominant lay and academic framework for understanding how fans relate to stories. Jenkins (1992: 23) characterises fans as textual poachers, ‘readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a complex and participatory culture’. His notion of participatory culture is highly social, but his textual poachers paradigm focuses more on appropriation and transformation as a function of a more personal and solitary relationship between reader and text: ‘each reader is continuously re-evaluating...her relationship to the fiction and reconstructing its meanings according to more immediate interests’ (Jenkins 1992: 35). Willis (2006), referencing Barthes (1986), proposes a more communal approach: she suggests that fans use fic to reorient the canon text – to make it reflect their interests, experiences, or subjective interpretations – and the fics themselves become ‘*shared*

⁴⁸ Exclamation marks between two words to denotes a trait-character relationship between them; thus, *WoC!Hermione* signifies Hermione interpreted as a Woman of Colour, while *CAPSLOCK!Harry* refers to canon and fannish texts in which capslock dialogue is used to convey shouting (FL: ‘!’).

readings, potentially offering other fans new ways to engage with a reoriented canon' (Willis 2006: 153). This approach is discussed below regarding the intertextual relationship between writer and audience; here, it is relevant as an academic framework that supports the fan assertion that fic is the primary locus of fan conversations about and analysis of canon texts, and that fics build on and respond to each other in much the same manner as canon texts. Stein and Busse (2009) assert that a fic is limited by the boundaries of the canon, by the body of fanworks that preceded it, and by the storytelling and genre expectations of the fan community – and that all three bodies constitute intertextual referents to which each story is responding.

The notion that fans appropriate and transform stories to serve different interests – like retelling stories with a feminist narrative – certainly helps to explain some aspects of fannish production and storytelling. For example, Alicorn's fic 'Luminosity' (2010) rewrites the *Twilight* series, criticised for its passive heroine and patriarchal values (Cox 2010, Eddo-Lodg 2013) with a critical and self-actualised protagonist, and Figure 6.3 uses imagery to similar effect. Likewise, homoerotic slash fics can be understood as an appropriation of the story, and the (heteronormatively-presumed) canonically straight characters, so that they appeal to certain erotic, emotional, and sometimes political interests of slash fans (Green, Jenkins & Jenkins 1998; DarkTwin 2004; stele3 2007; Davies 2013; porluciernagas 2013; saezutte 2013; FL: 'History of Slash Fandom', 'Slash'). Jenkins' foundational study of fandom highlights the intertextual nature of fannish stories twice:



Fig. 6.3: Rosie the Riveter! Cinderella (Loper 2013).

He notes that fans enjoy the intertextual exercise of juxtaposing story elements with other cultural materials (Jenkins 1992: 36); for example, affixing the head of *Disney's* Cinderella onto the WWII propaganda poster of Rosie the Riveter as a comment on feminine strength and the value of women's labour (Fig. 6.3), or the cover of Jenkins' book (Fig. 6.4), which depicts characters from the sci-fi series *Star Trek: TNG* as if they were in a medieval fantasy setting. Jenkins (1992: 67-9) also draws on Barthes (1975: 15-16) to note that all reading is intertextual, as a person's understanding of a story is necessarily informed by her previous

experience of other texts. This framework helps illuminate the fannish relationship with stories, but it fails to consider the important intertextual exchange between fan texts (rather than just between canon texts and other cultural materials) and the manner in which fannish storytelling is at once an individual act of appropriation *and* a cooperative process of creation and embellishment.



Fig. 6.4: Cover of *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins 1992)

This is illustrated by processual accounts which suggest that fanon is most commonly created when fans read a fic and find a detail that resonates with them so profoundly that they (consciously or unconsciously) assimilate it into their own writing, where it resonates with other readers and is incorporated into their fics (see Melusina 2004a, Slaymesoftly 2013). It is important that many of the seemingly insignificant details that become fanon are directly concerned with the storytelling process, or with meeting the particular needs of fan stories and genres. For example, Spike/Xander is a non-canon slash ship involving characters whose canon relationship is predominantly hostile (spuzz 2004, FL: ‘Spike/Xander’). Thus, they lack the ‘pet names’ that a canon couple, like Spike/Buffy, already possess – but the existence of such canon terms suggests that the same character might use similar terms for their non-canonical lover. This leaves each fic writer with the choice of borrowing pet names she considered especially apt from another fic or inventing her own; this task is further complicated by the fact that only certain options appropriately capture the character’s voice and personality, so parallel evolution of the same names might easily contribute to fanon development, and by the possibility of unconscious borrowing. After all, if a pet name seems obvious or logical to her, it might be because she had read it elsewhere and then forgotten it (Springhole 2014). Likewise, details about taste and touch are often irrelevant to the primarily audio-visual storytelling tactics of TV shows and movies, but these elements are often genre essentials for pornographic fic. The fact that fics are full of this variety of information, while the relevant canons are largely silent on the subject, could contribute to the process

by which attributes like ‘has a short, thick dick’ (Blytheley & Circe_Tigana 2013), ‘smell[s] of vanilla’ (Slaymesoftly 2013: 5), or ‘tast[es] like spices’ (Melusina 2004a: 6) become fanon; fans have a consistent need for such information and a demonstrated willingness to intentionally (see Melusina 2004a, Fig. 6.1: ‘headcanon accepted’ meme) or inadvertently (Slaymesoftly 2013, Springhole 2014) incorporate other fans’ headcanons into their own stories or conceptions of the universe – thereby producing fanon.

Fanon is further disseminated and enshrined in the fannish imagination, in ways that set fans apart from outsiders (see below), by the general consensus in fandom that ‘word-of-mouth and personal recommendations are the best way for fics to get attention’ (karis-the-fangirl 2014) or for readers to find good fics (Destina 2001, Moraine 2013a, Monroe 2014, rangi42 2014). Over the years, conventions have developed that attempt to govern the tone, content, and locations in which fans recommend fics to other fans (kiki-eng 2012, FL: ‘rec’). These traditions vary across fandoms, and sometimes within them, but popular characters and ships usually have *rec lists* or LJ Communities dedicated to publishing and publicising reviews and recommendations for fic about them. In addition, it is common for wiki pages and ‘ship manifestos’ (meta essays detailing the premise and canon or subtextual justifications for a ship and the history of that ship in fandom) to present lists of influential or classic stories pertinent to that character or ship, as well as links to active LJ Communities or rec lists that publish relevant fics. The lists of classic fics often have considerable overlap,⁴⁹ which ensures that most fans of that character or relationship start in a similar place, while the directory of preferred rec lists ensures that many fans continue to consume the same fics. Many fans and scholars have observed that this encourages homogeneity of content, with some arguing that established fans cultivate and enforce a dominant discourse of acceptable content (Arduinna 1999, vee_fic 2007, Black 2007, Parrish 2007, seperis 2007, Wright 2009, Fathallah 2014; FL: ‘fanon’). T’Mar (2001) writes,

stories which fit best into the ‘fanon’ for a particular show are the stories which find their way onto ‘recommended’ lists and are the ones which people are going to read. Stories which are just as good, but take a different, innovative, or non-fanon approach are ignored, dissected in a nasty manner, or the authors are flamed

The result, musesfool (2004) complains, is that ‘After a while, fanonical characterisations all start to feel the same, and isn’t one of the aims of fanfic to produce diversity?’ In fact,

⁴⁹ Harry/Draco is the most popular ship in HP fandom according to the total number of fics in the three largest HP fanfiction archives (FFN, AO3, and harrypotterfanfiction.com). The ship manifesto (dorrie6 2005) and Fanlore wiki page for this ship have an overlap of eight recommended fics.

fanon reinterpretations of a character can become so extreme and ubiquitous that the canonical version can come as something of a shock to entrenched fans. The next section uses Draco Malfoy, a Harry Potter antagonist, as a detailed illustration of how fanon transformation works, how elaborate and drastic these reinterpretations can be, and how ingrained they can become. Some fans add that fanon homogenisation affects writing style as well; saezutte (2013) observes that ‘guides like *Minotaur’s Sex Tips for Slash Writers* helped codify the way slash writers write...sex, and you can still see its influence, for good or for bad, in the way a lot of porn is structured in certain parts of fandom’ (see also Rain 2005, Dee 2003, Marley 2003). Likewise, beta-readers who edit fics and help writers ensure that their stories are in compliance with canon can also help codify the way that fic is written, as can reader feedback in comments; this helps ensure that the style and structure of fanfiction stays relatively constant over time and across



Fig. 6.5: LJ Icon
by Potterpuffs

fandoms (Karpovich 2006, Black 2007, Rain 2005, Sharakh 2002). Fanon is not limited to simple alterations in backstory, or even to revolutionary transformations like fanon!Draco (below); it can also extend to elaborate theories about a world’s history or metaphysics. For example, not only did many Harry Potter fans believe that Remus Lupin was canonically gay, they also used subtextual clues in the novels (see Fig. 6.6) to argue that Lupin had canonically been in a relationship with Sirius Black when they were teenagers. This extends into an intricate series of assumptions not only about the personality of and relationship between those two characters, but also about their friends and classmates and the socio-political climate during their youth (Ariel 2004, elwing-alcyone 2007, amuly 2010, siriuslyslitherin 2011). Similarly, characterisations of fanon!Draco often presume that Malfoy was abused by his father, or held to a set of abusive expectations – which extends to a series of fanon assertions about the nature of social class in the HP universe, and about the behaviour, motivations, and relationships between Voldemort, the primary antagonist of the series, and evil aristocratic supporters of his regime like the Malfoys (Clark & Isaacs 2011; Tan 2006; dorrie6 2005; Romano 2004; sitermagpie 2003, 2004b; FL: ‘Fanon!Draco’, ‘Draco Malfoy’). Universe fanons are not always extensions of character theories: For example, when a budget increase prompted the *Star Trek* creators to dramatically alter the physical appearance of the Klingon alien race between the first and second series

Remus & Sirius: Great Moments in Canon

as presented by rereadingharry.tumblr

the 'Brotherly' Hug

PoA,
p252-275, UK;
p343-374, US

In their first scene together Sirius and Remus communicate with astounding ease after a 12 year separation; Remus trusts Sirius immediately, before Sirius has revealed the whole story; they show an instinct for protecting each other, from even minor ills; and they begin their documented habit of looking at each other more than any other canon couple in the series. A strong start.

"Together?" "I think so."



the Forty-Line-Stare

OoTP,
p84-5, UK;
p88-9, US

"Ron, Hermione, Fred and George's heads swivelled from Sirius to Mrs Weasley as though they were following a tennis rally. Ginny was kneeling amid a pile of abandoned Butterbeer corks, watching the conversation with her mouth slightly open. Lupin's eyes were fixed on Sirius."

... forty lines of fierce, articulate argument later ...

"Personally," said Lupin quietly, looking away from Sirius at last...



Co-habitation

OoTP,
p110, UK;
p118, US

Sometimes, however, the visitors stayed to help. Tonks joined them for a memorable afternoon in which they found a murderous old ghoul lurking in an upstairs toilet, and Lupin, who was staying in the house with Sirius but who left for long periods to do mysterious work for the Order, helped them repair a grandfather clock...



a Joint Christmas Gift

OoTP,
p443, UK;
p501, US

Sirius and Lupin had given Harry a set of excellent books entitled Practical Defensive Magic and its Use Against the Dark Arts, which had superb, moving colour illustrations of all the counter-jinxes and hexes it described.



Not to mention the considerable, nearly undeniable, presence in film (Old Married Couple, People Like Me, etc.) which, while certainly not Canon, is scrutinized my Jo she can be pretty particular (cf. Dumbledore's sexuality, not mentioned in canon, was not allowed to be contradicted in film).

Whether or not their lips ever met (as I believe they did, frequently), their love is so strong and their love is canon.

Fig. 6.6: Graphic depicting some of the 'canon' evidence for Remus/Sirius (rereadingharry 2010)

(Fig. 6.7), fans were inspired to develop numerous theories that explained this discrepancy within the bounds of the *Star Trek* universe's history and science (Independencefleet: 'Klingon'). The two most popular fan theories appeared in a later spinoff episode (Moore, Echevarria & West 1996) before being integrated into the canon answer (Sussman & Grossman 2005). Unlike character-based fanons, which usually affect only the portion of a fandom who are invested in that character, or particular interpretations thereof, universe fanons are significant because they are constructed by and available to the entirety of a fandom. Thus, they are boundary mechanisms that exclude fewer people (see below), and serve as a foundation for building a sense of belonging or communal membership in broader fandom, rather than among supporters of particular characters or relationships.

Fanon can also develop around particular plots or genres. Parrish (2007: 33) observes that 'Within an individual fandom, certain plotlines may be reinvented so many times and by so many people – or alternatively may be written so persuasively by a few writers – that they take on the status of fan-produced canon' (also Stein & Busse 2009). This is not limited to individual fandoms, however: plotlines and fanon assumptions develop across many fandoms over time, which lends a degree of historical continuity to the foundation of shared experience, knowledge, and practice upon which the sense of fan community is built. For example, some of the earliest fanfiction plot devices (or *tropes*) originated in *Star Trek: TOS* canon. One episode reveals that Vulcans, an alien species, go into heat every seven years and must mate with an empathically bonded partner, engage in ritual combat, or die (Sturgeon & Pevney 1967). This includes the half-Vulcan character Spock, part of arguably the first and most influential slash ship in media fandom (FL: 'Kirk/Spock, TOS'). Another episode revolves around alien plant spores that lower inhibition, stimulating Spock to discuss and act on romantic and sexual feelings he would otherwise have



Fig. 6.7: Changes in Klingon appearance between *Star Trek: TOS* (Coon & Newland 1967) and *TNG* (Armus & Bowman 1989)

repressed (Fontana et al. 1967). *Star Trek* fans used these features of their canon in fic for many years, even exporting them to other fandoms until they evolved into the general fic tropes (FL: ‘Fuck or Die’, ‘Soul Bond’, ‘Sex Pollen’).⁵⁰ Kustritz (2003: 381) proposes that the fanon of psychic links between *Star Wars* characters and psychic energy exchanges during sex between *Highlander* characters were adapted from these K/S fic tropes. Similarly, Jen-in-Japan’s (2007) advice to modern superhero fickers on using sex pollen involves many of the same terms and priorities as fics about



the emotionally repressed Spock:

One of the most common uses of sex pollen is to bring together two people who have wanted to be together (consciously or unconsciously) for some time. The iffy question of consent raised by sex pollen is dodged by having the two people realize at the end of the experience that they're actually in love with each other. Yes, it's a pretty lucky coincidence, we all know that, but in these cases sex pollen functions as a metaphor for sexual desire itself – irresistible, uncontrollable, and surprising. Sex pollen's function in these kinds of stories is usually to corner the characters and force them to face their own desire and embrace the frightening lack of control it brings. Superheroes tend to be control freaks...compared to average people, almost always on a very tight leash emotionally, morally, and physically

Fig.6.8: Fan graphic that modifies the original comic panel (Lieber & Kirby 1962). **Source:** silent-odd-moth 2013.

It is not just plots or storytelling tropes that fans transfer between fandoms. For example, the *Draco in Leather Pants* trope (see below) refers to a particular fannish reinterpretation of that character and to the general set of practices by which fans downplay the flaws and emphasise the desirability and/or victimhood of certain characters. This specific variety of treatment and perception of villainous characters is longstanding in fandom; for example, when a classic comic depicting a female character’s response to *Marvel* Loki (Lieber & Kirby 1962) was posted on Tumblr, modern fans received it with a graphic (Fig. 6.8) acknowledging the continuity between past and present Loki fans,

⁵⁰ As of April 2015, AO3’s *Fuck or Die* tags totalled 764 fics in fandoms ranging from *Star Trek: TOS* to *Supernatural*, *Merlin*, to the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Sex Pollen totals 1,589, and *Soul Bond* totals 2,110. These tropes were also popular in older fandoms that are less well-represented on a new archive like AO3 (esp. *Stargate: SG-1 & Atlantis*, *The Sentinel*, *Starsky & Hutch*), which provided an important link between classic *Trek* fandom and modern fandoms popular on AO3 (FL: ‘Fuck or Die’, ‘Sex Pollen’, ‘Soul Bond’).

which was reblogged with comments like ‘Carrying on the legacy’ and ‘This is so me’ (ilovejosejalapeno 2014, lokislover97 2014). Similarly, some fans always saw villains like *Star Trek: TNG*’s Lore or *Doctor Who*’s Dalek race of genocidal robots as objects of lust to be redeemed through love (see Go-Gos 1964, Seawave 1993, Farbrother & Davies 1995; TVT: ‘DiLP’). Ship dynamics can also carry accross fandoms; woldy (2013) observes, ‘The first similarity between HP and Merlin fandoms is the most popular slash pairing: a blonde, bullying aristocratic guy and his love-hate relationship with a dark-haired, scrawny, relatively impoverished guy’.

In addition, particular stories can become so entrenched among specific portions of a fandom that they can be presumed as background knowledge in the same manner as canon texts. For example, *Established Relationship* is a genre of fics that are set after a couple has been together for some time – as opposed to *First Time* or *Get Together* fic, in which the plot revolves around the initial sexual or romantic encounter (FL: ‘Established Relationship’, ‘First Time’). However, it is not uncommon for fans to write established relationship fics about characters who have no romantic relationship in canon, or whose interactions are actively antagonistic; indeed, some fandoms boast significantly more established relationship fics for non-canon couples than for canon ones.⁵¹ Stein and Busse (2009: 198) similarly observed that

Community norms restrict individual interpretations and their reception and, in so doing, allow creator and reader to rely on expectations that have already been established intertextually. For example, some fandoms center on unconventional romantic pairings; in these communities, participants have already collectively established that two unlikely characters belong together. New stories in such a fandom work within that accepted framework...[and fans of that ship] will often not require any explanation about how those two have become lovers.

Not all fans are interested in the same characters or ships and therefore not all fans are aware of or invested in the same fanon conventions and presumptions. As later sections explore, fans tend to congregate in smaller groups made up of others who share their perspective. Thus, within the confines of those sub-communities, if ficcers adhere to the established storytelling tropes and fanon interpretations of the characters’ personalities and backstory, they have no more need to articulate the details of a non-canon couple’s courtship than they would for a canon couple – the ‘get together’ stage

⁵¹ As of April 2015, the 1,287 *Established Relationship* HP fics on AO3 include more non-canon ships like Harry/Draco (323 fics), Harry/Snape (218), Remus/Sirius (95), Hermione/Draco (57) and Snape/Lupin (57) than Hermione/Ron (48), the most populous canon ship in this category.

is presumed, and they can proceed to tell established relationship stories. This is part of Stein and Busse's (2009) argument that canon materials, fan texts (e.g. *fic*), and fan genre expectations and community norms (i.e. *fanon*) act as equal intertextual referents in the creation of new fics and the telling of new fan stories. Parrish (2007: 20) makes a similar point, arguing that fan storytelling 'involves the negotiation of a range of sources'. To illustrate, she quotes a fic disclaimer (see Glossary) that credits fellow fans as a source of inspiration and story material equivalent to canon texts:

The characters of Willow Rosenberg, Tara Maclay, Xander Harris and Buffy Summers, or the reasonable facsimiles that I employ in this story, are the property of Joss Whedon and Mutant Enemy productions. The setting for the story is within the universe of *Star Trek*, created by Gene Roddenberry and owned by Paramount Pictures, Inc. No infringement of copyright is intended. The other characters are the creation of either myself or several colleagues who don't care what I do with them...
(Capt. Murdock in Parrish 2007: 20)

Finally, fanfiction is not always collective storytelling only in the intertextual sense; literal collaboration is also an established part of fan practices. The above quote mentions borrowing characters created by other fans as a casual occurrence. Eleanor Musgrove's (2013b, 2014) frank articles about permissions, etiquette and responsibilities firmly assert the non-negotiability of consent before borrowing other fans' creative output, painting a picture of fandom as a community founded on mutual respect and creative collaboration. This is reinforced by the social structures fandom has established to support ficcers while they are writing: beta readers and cheerleaders who provide substantive or encouraging feedback respectively have long been an integral part of the fannish writing process (Bacon-Smith 1992, Karpovich 2006) – and it is even expected that fans reading the final fic after publication might provide *concrit*, substantive feedback intended to critique and improve the current or future works, though this is somewhat controversial (see princessofgeeks 2013, xequuth 2009 & comments, vain 2008, musesfool 2003a, Verba 1996).

The clearest example of fannish collective storytelling is the *multi-author fic*, in which two or more writers contribute to a story. *The Shoebox Project* (Jones & Bennet 2004-2008), one of the most famous of such fics, was a multimedia collaborative HP fic in which each author took primary responsibility for the voices of several characters to tell a story using images, diary entries, letters, cards, and narrative storytelling. Such efforts are institutionalised in *prompts*, where one person suggests an idea for the ficcer

to write, and *Big Bangs*, events where artists produce images to illustrate fics (FL: ‘Big Bang’, ‘prompt’). *Podfic*, audio recordings of fanfic read aloud by one fan or sometimes a cast of several, represents another variety of collaborative storytelling. There is considerable discussion of the aesthetic and creative nature of podfic, as well as debate about the ethics, practicality and necessity of requesting permission from the original creator (see FL: ‘podfic’, ‘podfic permission’; fire-juggler 2012, jedusaur 2013, thefourthvine 2013), which ties into the impression of fandom as a self-aware community based on respectful and consensual collaboration established in the discussion of OCs or the borrowing processes inherent in the development of fanon. There are also *shared universes*: collections of fics written by multiple authors and located in a single setting that is recognisably distinct from the original canon – essentially fanfiction of fanfiction. This institution dates back almost to the beginning of modern fandom: Jacqueline Lichtenberg’s *Star Trek* setting, Kraith, was created in 1970. Lichtenberg drew on college anthropology and archaeology courses to invent a history for the Vulcan race, focusing particularly on mysticism and religious practices (Swartz, Row & Lichtenberg 2010: 6) which she used as backdrops in her fics and part of the backstory and experiences of her Vulcan characters. More than 50 ficcers have contributed to the ongoing plot, character development and worldbuilding Lichtenberg began (FL: ‘Kraith’, ‘shared universe’). *Remixes* might also be considered fanfiction of fanfiction; this is a genre of fanfiction in which a fan rewrites a fic by another fan, keeping the details the same but transforming the story according to their ‘vision and style, just like a remixer does to songs’ (Remix/Redux 2008). The most common way of doing this is by telling the story from another character’s point of view – which is a technique frequently used when writing normal fanfiction – but other options include translating the story into another genre (from romance to horror, perhaps) or another setting (e.g. retelling *Romeo and Juliet* as *West Side Story*) (FL: ‘Remix’).

The long history of collaborative fics demonstrates a conscious desire among fans to borrow, appropriate and elaborate on each others’ stories just as they would a canon text. This supports the argument that fanworks can act as intertextual referents equivalent to canon (Stein & Busse 2009), and highlights many of the key similarities between fic writing and more traditional oral storytelling. Those similarities are further enhanced by the structures of feedback and collaboration that help create and strengthen the social

and collaborative dimensions of fan writing – which in turn acts as a foundation for the social and collaborative dimensions of the fan community, as later sections discuss.

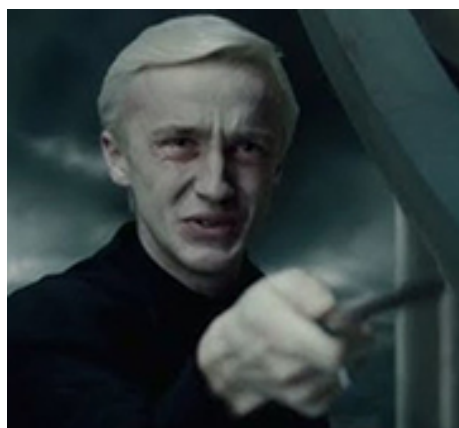


Fig. 6.9: Canon!Draco. Contrast with Fanon!Draco, Figs. 6.11–12. Source: Baron, Heyman & Yates (2009).

Fitting Him For Leather Trousers:

The Transformation of Draco Malfoy

Draco Malfoy, the HP villain, is perhaps the most iconic (or notorious) pan-fandom example of fanon completely transforming a character. Malfoy is one of the more unpleasant characters in the series; for many he embodies the bullies who plagued their school days (see Hamilton 2012, Flood 2014, Annie D. 2015). Within HP fandom, however, he is among the most popular subjects of fanfiction in one of the largest and most enduring fandoms.⁵² His notoriety and extreme deviation from canon make Malfoy an ideal example for illustrating some of the processes and principles involved in fanon creation. Indeed, fans on TV Tropes named a whole category of villain-reclamation fanon after him: ‘Draco in Leather Pants’ is what occurs

when a fandom takes a controversial or downright villainous character and downplays his/her flaws, often turning him/her into an object of desire and/or a victim in the process. This can cause conflicts if the writers are not willing to retool the character to fit this demand (TVT: ‘Draco in Leather Pants’)

To be clear, fandom is not homogenous: not all fans invest in villains, nor are all fans necessarily interested in reclaiming the same villains. This analysis deals only with the actions and motivations of those fans who chose to engage with this character. Further, while the specific tropes discussed in this section are primarily relevant to archetypally similar villains, the broader patterns of storytelling and reinterpretation used to transform Malfoy are generally applicable to explaining how the creation of fanon impacts fans’ experience of community and storytelling.

⁵² The diffuse nature of the fannish online network (see Chapter 3) makes it difficult to support any claims about the size of a fandom or popularity of a character. However, producing fanworks is by far the most common fan activity and fic is the most popular type of fanwork (OTW 2012). Thus, a comparison of fic quantities on the two largest multi-fandom archives (AO3 and FFN) can be used to contextualise the population of Malfoy fans (or ficcers who write about Malfoy, as quantitative data cannot measure whether their portrayal of Malfoy was positive) with regard to the broader fannish population.

In April 2015, HP is the most popular fandom on FFN (it has 713K fics, more than double the runner up) and third most popular on AO3 (74K HP fics). On FFN, Malfoy is listed as a significant character in 105K fics, coming in third after the series protagonists Harry (142K fics) and Hermione (119K), surpassing the third main character, Ron (35K). On AO3 Malfoy (17K) is second, after Harry (29K) but before Hermione (16K), Severus Snape (15K) and Ron (11K).

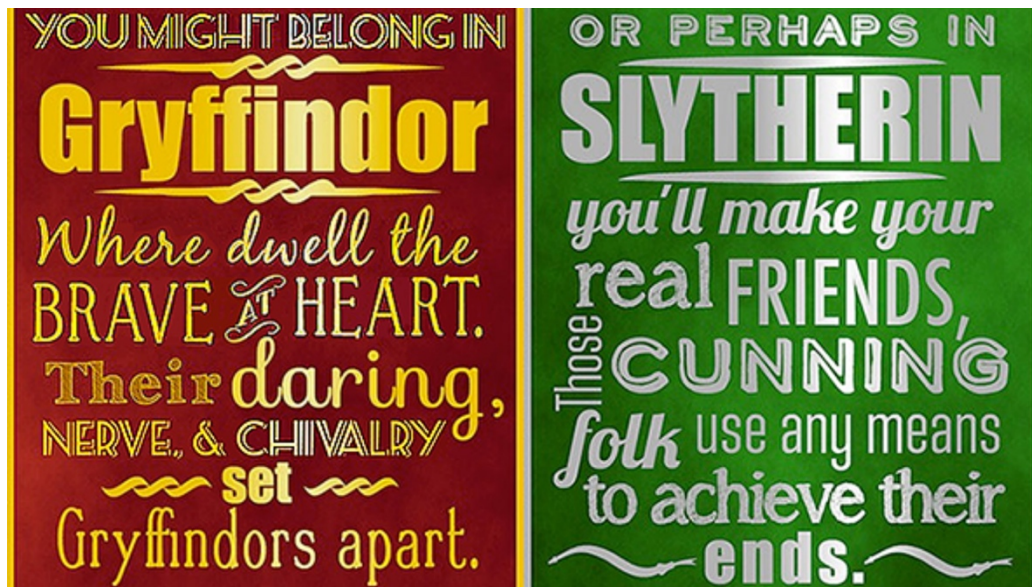


Fig. 6.10: Gryffindor & Slytherin House traits (Rowling 1997: 88). Image Source: GildMyWorldDesigns (2015)

The canon!Draco from which fanon alterations begin – what audience and reception scholars call the ‘preferred’ or ‘dominant reading inscribed in the text’ (Livingstone 1990: 187; see also Hall 1980, Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998; Fiske 1987, 2010; Morley 2003; Ang 2006; Livingstone 2013) – is a wealthy aristocrat, with two doting Wizarding parents and familial connections among the students and authorities. Malfoy’s school House is Slytherin, associated with ambitiousness, cunning, ruthlessness, and an aptitude for manipulation (Fig. 6.10). He is the literary ‘dark mirror’ of Harry, a member of righteous Gryffindor House, who begins the series as a starving and abused orphan, estranged from Wizarding culture. Rather than realising his potential as Harry’s opposite number, or utilising his privilege to become a challenging and complex antagonist, Malfoy is quickly established as a weak, bullying spoilt brat with an unfortunately ferret-like face (Fig. 6.9) who invariably loses to Harry at sports and school competitions despite his initial advantages. Like all Slytherin characters, Malfoy is portrayed as cowardly, racist, disloyal, and physically ugly, while his motivations throughout the series – which ought to be self-serving and ambitious – are instead arbitrary and counter-productive to the point of caricature.

The fans who participated in creating fanon!Draco were not blind to the canon, nor did most of them find such negative characteristics appealing. They were motivated by a variety of interests: some felt that the consistency of Malfoy’s losses made him a boring and unsatisfying antagonist, or that his repeated and inevitable humiliation at the hands of the main characters made Malfoy seem more sympathetic and compelling

than the official heroes. Others were interested in the idea of shipping Harry with his ‘dark mirror’ antagonist, but found the reality of Malfoy distasteful; this reflects the penchant in fandom, especially in homoerotic slash fandom, for fic about romantic or sexual relationships between characters who are canonically enemies (see FL: ‘enemyslash’, ‘hatesex’; TVT: ‘Dating Catwoman’, ‘Foe Romance Subtext’, ‘Foe Yay’, ‘Foe Yay Shipping’). Malfoy’s transformation also reflects the disappointment of fans who identify with Slytherin characteristics. They felt poorly represented by Rowling’s narrative as all but one of the HP villains are Slytherins, and the author herself is an avowed Gryffindor (Rowling 2001). These fans saw Malfoy as a vehicle for telling stories about how a person like them would behave in Malfoy’s canonical circumstances, and sometimes as a tool for arguing that these personality traits are not inherent indications of evil (Elkins 2002, Romano 2004, Kiki 2005, dorrie9 2005, furiosity 2005, Kitsunelover 2005, Harris 2010, Hale 2014; FL: ‘Fanon!Draco’).

Fanon!Draco (Figs. 5.11-12) is therefore another example of how fanon reflects the interests of fans and the needs of fannish storytelling. He is the result of fans telling stories that they find more sexy, interesting, or entertaining, that attempt to rectify these perceived deficiencies in canon or realise the character’s potential, or that rewrite the world so that it aligns more closely with their experiences. Thus, writes Romano



Fig. 6.11: Fanon!Draco by cupid12203 (2010)

(2004), fanon!Draco is usually

misunderstood, heroic, smart, witty, snarky, and essentially sexy. This Draco dresses well, is often gay, and...powerfully attractive...Because Draco’s motives in canon are so unclear, even if you have a canonical take on his voice and mannerisms, you can still wind up with a million and one different takes on his character simply because there are so many different directions to go with him – directions that are prone to change every time new canon comes out and forces us to completely re-evaluate and reconsider the conclusions we had drawn about him before...Fanon!Draco has undergone several distinct phases of growth and development since he first appeared as an entity with distinct characteristics. In many respects Malfoy in canon is a cipher, a blank page we in fandom have been writing and rewriting for years

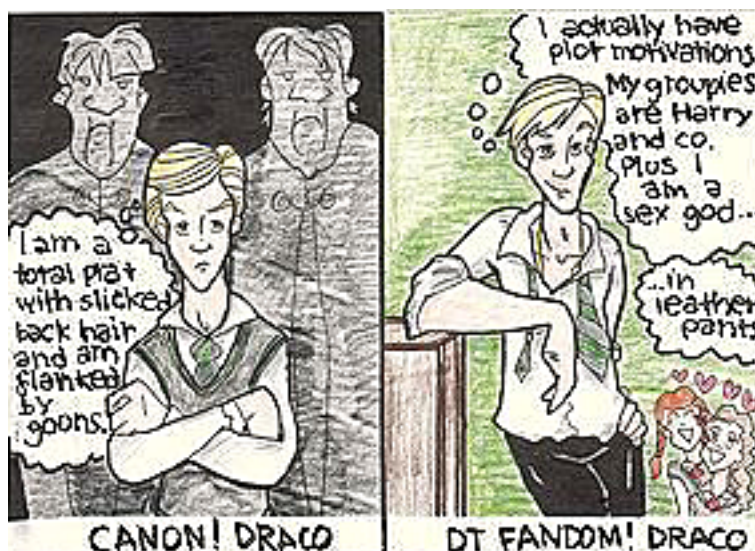


Fig. 6.12: Fanart contrasting canon!Draco with the Draco in Cassandra Claire's fics, which were a formative influence on fanon!Draco. **Source:** meagloo (in FL: 'fanon!Draco').

Even fans who agree that there is value in rewriting Malfoy do not necessarily concur about what constitutes an interesting story or a sexy character. Thus, as Romano (2004) observes, there is not *one* homogenous 'fanon' interpretation of the character, but several distinct eras and varieties of fanon!Draco. Two of the most iconic are Leather Trousers!Draco and Slytherin Ice Prince!Draco: the former exchanges the voluminous robes and rodent-like face of canon for tight, provocative clothing,⁵³ and expertly uses sex appeal to achieve his ends; the latter is haughty, conceited, and usually possessed of a significant entourage and the skills and resources required to maintain his dominant position in the social hierarchy. These are distinct but not mutually exclusive; LT!Draco frequently uses techniques of elegant, unwinnable hauteur in his flirtation, while Ice Prince!Draco may use the sarcastic quips and seductive clothing that typify LT!Draco as long as he retains his disdainful and detached demeanour. Further, they overlap with other traditions of fanon!Draco; for example, they often borrow techniques for writing ruthless and manipulative characters from the Slytherin fans, while ficcers writing Veela!fic (which reimagines a character, often Draco, as a magical creature possessed of mesmerising seductive powers) frequently borrow aspects of LT!Draco's behaviour and presentation.

Those two archetypes can also be used to illustrate the community-enhancing historical and pan-fandom continuity of fanon tropes. Drawing examples from *Star Trek* as a foundational fandom and the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a large contemporary fandom, the Ice Prince's aloofness evokes Spock's detachment or Loki's abandonment

⁵³ Leather trousers are not compulsory; most archetypal 'bad boy' sexy clothing will suffice. However, the trope was named for the Malfoy in a fanfiction series by Cassandra Clare (2000, 2001, 2006), whose leather trousers incited an era in which the garment was so ubiquitous that it became a cliché and then a longstanding joke – which supports the assertion that fans incorporate preferred elements from other fics into their own work (see Slaymesoftly 2013, Melusina 2004a). Also, the preferred method of ridiculing this trope is to write fic that exaggerates or subverts it for comedic value (see Romano 2002, griffin black 2007, mmmdraco 2012, RJJLupin 2014), which further demonstrates the reflexive, semi-analytical and consciously intertextual role that fic can play in fannish literary commentary.



issues, while the application of Leather Trousers transformed characters the (male) creators had originally conceived as unappealing into central objects of desire in their fandoms (Diehl 1986, Nikki 2013, Schulte 2015). Spock also demonstrates the flexibility with which fannish

Fig. 6.13: Sexy!Spock (Anki L. 2004) tropes may be implemented; the Leather Trousers trope is explicitly associated with villains, but the same techniques can be used to sexualise heroes, reclaiming them for the female gaze (see Fig. 6.13). Loki, being archetypically similar to Malfoy, is a more straightforward example of the continuity with which fannish tropes and techniques can be applied and the consistency of their results: Both characters are entitled, self-centred physical cowards who prefer to trick or bully others into doing their dirty work – and fans usually reclaim them by emphasising the skill and cunning required to trick others in this way, while underplaying the selfish motivations or destructive outcomes of their behaviours and using other characters (domineering fathers, in the case of Malfoy and Loki) to explain or excuse their villainy (Tan 2006, Clark & Isaacs 2011, Nikki 2013, FL: ‘Draco Malfoy’, ‘Loki’).

This effort to rewrite Malfoy as an object of sexual desire combined with other attempts to reimagine him in different ways: some sought to redeem him, others to make him more competent as a hero or a villain, others simply wanted to instil a degree of consistency in his internal motivations. Some, in response to earlier endeavours, refused to over-inflate his competence or his sex appeal. They maintained that Malfoy was more interesting if one did not excuse or erase his flaws, but instead grappled with all of the character’s complexities and imperfections. However, they too built on the foundations established by other iterations of fanon!Draco; for example, some used the abusive relationship with his father that was established as a mechanism for absolving Malfoy of guilt to instead tell a story about how victims do not always reject their abusers or break the cycle of violence (LadyVader 2003, Amalin 2004, Abaddon 2005, Furiosity 2005-2008). The overlap in fanon knowledge and writing techniques between groups of Draco fans supports the point that all varieties of fanon!Draco are intertextual responses to each other, in much the same manner as canon (see Stein & Busse 2009), and nowhere is this more evident than in the fics that explicitly seek to critique other fanworks. However,

the boundaries that set Draco fans apart from other members of HP fandom are notably distinct. For example, Veela!fic is such an institution among Harry/Draco ficcers that it has become an almost ‘obligatory’ rite of passage (Romano 2006, Brennan 2009, RuroniHime 2011, LadyVader 2012; FL: ‘Veelafic’). Furthermore, Draco fans can become so insulated by contact with each other that they are sometimes shocked when they encounter other fans or new instalments of the canon that characterise Malfoy as an unmitigated villain, or when they are reminded that H/D is not canon (Romano 2003, Morning Starr 2003, kowaiyoukai 2005; FL: ‘Draco Malfoy’, ‘Fanon!Draco’).

The example of Draco Malfoy illustrates the intertextuality of fannish storytelling. Fanon!Draco is best understood not as any one trope or interpretation, but as the aggregate total of fan innovations, especially the popular ones that were borrowed, perpetuated, and elaborated on; he is an intertextual being who exists at the intersection of canon and fan texts, as well as the headcanons, individual experiences, and collective interests and desires of his fans. He also demonstrates the historical continuity of fannish storytelling practices: fanon interpretations do not merely build up around one character, they are borrowed from previous fandoms and transferred to new characters and plotlines that seem literarily similar. The rest of the chapter explores in greater detail how the boundaries created in large part through storytelling and embodied in shared identity characteristics and collective fanon traditions and presumptions, like the permutations of fanon!Draco or Veela!fic as a ‘rite of passage’, can help delineate safe spaces and sub-communities that allow fans to engage with other like-minded fans, and the effect this has on their experience of fandom as a community.

‘Our common interests [are made] intimate through sharing our stories’
(Cupidsbow 2004): The Convergence of Self, Community & Story

The unity we find in texts is impregnated with the identity that finds that unity...As readers, each of us will bring different kinds of external information to bear. Each will seek out the particular themes that concern him. Each will have different ways of making the text into an experience with a coherence and significance that satisfies...All of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves (Holland 1993: 328-330)

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bettelheim (1976: 5-6) proposed that with every retelling storytellers refined a tale, each new voice adding layers of complexity, meaning and experience that no single teller could achieve alone. This is certainly one way to characterise the processes of sharing, collaborating and embellishing – of telling stories – described above. This section will demonstrate that fics constitute complex and highly social instances of collaborative narration through which participants negotiate story content and style, as well as the perceived character and positioning of individuals and subgroups in relation to each other and to the broader community – in a manner very similar to more traditional forms of in-person storytelling. Fans frequently draw parallels between fic and folklore, invoking pre-modern notions of creativity and authorship in their attempts to defend the legality or morality of their endeavours (see Chapter 4; Kalichan 2010, Romano 2010). McGuire (2014a) writes, ‘We didn’t get a thousand versions of “Snow White” accidentally: people changed that story to suit themselves, and no one said they weren’t storytellers’. Mortimer (2004) reflects that

Every time a story was told by a new voice, there was a slightly different spin on it. Ovid's gods and goddesses played the same games they had always played, but this time their dance through the familiar landscape seemed a bit more petty than it had been. Lancelot met Guinivere for the first time, and the meeting was comic, or tragic, or resentful, or admiring; it foreshadowed what was to come, it gave no hint as to what was to come. Merlin was wise; Merlin was foolish. The characters passed through the distinctive voices of thousands of people, each of whom took the tale inside themselves, loved it, and passed it on with new insights, new subtleties.

Storytelling...expressed itself as a tapestry of different shades; the same characters appeared in varying guises...part of one giant, beloved work of folk art.

To this day, it still happens. It's just that now we call it fan fiction.

More recent scholars often point out that the social context in which a story is told is frequently as important a subject of social or even literary enquiry as the content of the story or the words that are spoken. Wolf (1992) demonstrates that a given teller will recount the same story very differently under different circumstances, which suggests that the increasing layers of complexity a story accrues with each retelling are not simply

a function of each new voice contributing a single new perspective (see Tonkin 1992, Norrick 1997, Bottigheimer 2009). Riessman (2001: 337) describes storytelling as ‘a reciprocal event between teller and audience’, adding that the collaborative endeavour of story building allows the teller to perform her identity and to position herself in relation to the audience and the community as a whole (see Goffman 1959; Bauman 1975, 1986; Harre & van Langenhove 1999; Mishler 2000; Langellier 2001; Stanley 2008). Norrick (1997: 1) proposes that retelling familiar stories can sometimes play certain roles in a community, which may include ‘fostering group rapport, ratifying group membership, and conveying group values’, and while this should in no way be taken as an indication that collective storytelling will always function in this way, this section will demonstrate that such effects can be observed in certain aspects of fannish storytelling. Norrick also suggests that retelling well-known stories presents an important opportunity for collaborative storytelling that allows the tellers to alter the story such that it reflects the context in which the story is being told and the needs and interests of the storytellers. This is similar to Jenkins’s (1992: 23) argument that fans are ‘readers who appropriate popular texts and read them in a fashion that serves different interests’, though Norrick’s emphasis on *collective* expression rather than individual appropriation is a key distinction.

Some might argue that fanfiction, as a primarily textual genre, lacks many of the interactive and meta-communicative features that theories about oral storytelling often presume, and therefore the paradigms developed for analysing folklore or traditional storytelling are not relevant (see Bauman 1975, 1980; Basso 1992; Gumperz & Levinson 1996; Norrick 1997; Riessman 2001). However, as Chapter 3 discusses, fannish virtual documents are textual *by nature*. Fics are not ‘written and codified’ versions of dynamic verbal stories (see Barzilai 1990: 515); rather ‘the body of work in a particular fandom is a detailed and nuanced conversation about the original text’ (Melusina 2004b), that engages with and retells the canon. The distinction between written and verbal storytelling also becomes less relevant when viewed through an intertextual lens. Bakhtin (1981: 263) argued that novelistic language is a heteroglossic ‘multiplicity of social voices’ and dialogic, meaning that a text ‘does not merely answer, correct, silence, or extend a previous work, but informs and is continually informed by the previous work’ (Sharm 2012: 18). Kristeva builds the notion of *intertextuality* on this foundation, arguing that a text does not have one fixed meaning,

but rather possesses myriad potential meanings that are derived through ‘a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context’ (Kristeva 1980: 36; see also Hanks 1989, Allen 2000, Orr 2003, Barber 2007, Marcus 2008, Martin 2011). Similarly, Barthes (1977: 146) understands text as ‘a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash...a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture’ and he conceptualises reading as the creative act of ‘ourselves writing’, in which the reader brings meanings and texts into the constitutive space and in so doing becomes ‘no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text’ – a storyteller, who rewrites the story in a manner that reflects her unique identity and experiences (Barthes 1975: 4). Thus, ‘distinctions between speaker and listener, and between writer and reader become blurred as the purposes and understandings of each are anticipated by, and interpenetrate the other’ (Maybin 2001: 69); even written texts can serve as a locus of negotiation between reader, author, and cultural context that is comparable to the conceptualisation of oral storytelling as a collaborative, ‘reciprocal event between teller and audience’ (Reissman 2001: 337) that enables the teller to articulate and position her individual and collective identities.

However, even conceptualising fanfiction as an entirely static textual work rather than a social and collaborative negotiation of meanings does not preclude the analysis of fic using many of the techniques applicable to folktales and traditional storytelling; as Barzilai (1990: 515) points out, a story like ‘Snow White’ is also

part of a literary as well as a folkloric tradition, it may be studied as a cultural artifact and text valid in itself. As part of a people's oral tradition, a folktale is a continually recreated narrative. Even when written and codified, the tale still reflects the conflicts and concerns of earlier generations of tale-tellers. An analysis...will yield interesting and valuable information about a variety of individual, national, and cultural characteristics.

Similarly, Dundes (1980: viii) characterises folklore as ‘a mirror of culture’ that ‘represents a people’s image of themselves’. This language is adopted by Cornell Sandvoss in his book, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (2005: 10), which proposes a ‘model of fandom as a form of self reflection, in which the object of fandom functions as an extension of self’. However, mirrors are a somewhat passive metaphor for fans’ conception of fic as a deliberate interpolation of themselves, their experiences, and their community into a story. Matt Hills (2007: 151) observes that ‘Sandvoss’s focus...seems

to lack the powerfully and vitally self-transformative dimension which frequently accompanies “becoming a fan,” and where people feel...that a particular text speaks to them, moves them, provokes them in some new way’. Bailey’s (2007) model of the ‘hermeneutic social subject’ aligns more closely with the degree of agency and complicated cognitive, social, and symbolic work embodied in fans’ relationships with the object of their fandom. Drawing on symbolic constructionist theories of identity (Mead 1934, Giddens 1974, Foucault 1972, Miller 1993) and agency-laden audience reception paradigms (de Certeau 1984, Fiske 1989, 1994), Bailey suggests that media becomes a lens by which and through which individual and collective identities are constructed. As Willis (1990: 30) puts it, ‘Cultural media are used as a means to vitality, to provide and construct dimensions for what [young people] are and might become – they are resources for identity construction as much as they are texts to be interpreted (see also Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998).

Sometimes the use of media or fanworks to realise individual identities within a text is literal. *Mary Sue* is the epithet for a common variety of original characters in fanfiction who are ‘generally presumed to be idealized self-inserts [of the fic writers] rather than true characters’ and who are usually despised for being

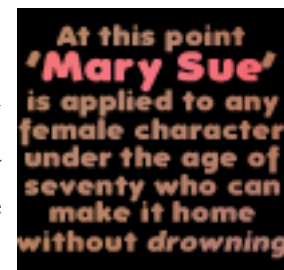


Fig. 6.14: LJ Icon
by maharet83

overly perfect, desirable and competent (FL: ‘Mary Sue’). Mary Sues have been perceived as indicators of lazy characterisation and bad writing since the early days of *Star Trek* fandom. However, in the 1980s, some fans began to realise that their antipathy for Sues was a manifestation of internalised misogyny,⁵⁴ while others noted that their capacity and desire to write female characters in their fics was inhibited by a fear that their readers would dismiss them as Mary Sues (Bacon-Smith 1992: 94-102; Cantor 1980; Baker 1999; Vyrwen 2003; albumsontheside 2010; staranise 2010; Gray 2013; kaylapocalypse 2013; unwinona 2014; Tremaine 2014; dubonnetcherry 2015; Busse 2016; FL & TVT: ‘Mary Sue’). Ladyloveandjustice (2011) illustrates the problem with an example:

⁵⁴ Most fans are female (melannen 2010a, b; Sendlor 2010; OTW 2012; Lulu 2013a, b), which might explain why the default term for fannish self-inserts is thus gendered. The equivalent male archetype is called *Gary Stu*, *Larry Stu* or *Marty Stu*. As the lack of a consensus term indicates, male Stus did not catch on with fandom as quickly or thoroughly as Mary Sue did, and for a long time Mary Sues were singled out and reviled to a much greater degree. Explanations for this vary: some blame the fact that Marty Stus were not identified and defined in the fic (Smith 1973) that coined the term *Mary Sue*, others blame internalised misogyny and point out that strong, interesting and competent male characters are the literary default and therefore less likely to provoke attention and criticism (Brennan 2009a, ladyloveandjustice 2011, unwinona 2014; FL: ‘Mary Sue’, ‘self-insert’, TVT: ‘Mary Sue’, ‘Marty Stu’).

There's this girl. She's tragically orphaned and richer than anyone on the planet. Every guy she meets falls in love with her, but in between torrid romances she rejects them all because she dedicated to what is Pure and Good. She has genius level intellect, Olympic-athlete level athletic ability and incredible good looks. She is consumed by terrible angst, but this only makes guys want her more. She has no superhuman abilities, yet she is more competent than her superhuman friends and defeats superhumans with ease. She has unshakably loyal friends and allies, despite the fact she treats them pretty badly. They fear and respect her, and defer to her orders. Everyone is obsessed with her, even her enemies are attracted to her. She can plan ahead for anything and she's generally right with any conclusion she makes. People who defy her are inevitably wrong.

I just described Batman.

The archetypical Mary Sue remains a poorly-written one dimensional character that 'only her author could love' (dubonnetcherry 2015), but since that movement began in the 1980s there has been a recognition among certain parts of fandom that an idealised female self-insert wish-fulfilment character can be an important and powerful tool for validation, or for combatting patriarchal power structures, and the position of maleness as the 'default' in language, literature, and society. As unwinona (2014) writes,

There is a reason that most fanfiction authors, specifically girls, start with a Mary Sue. It's because girls are taught that they are never enough. You can't be too loud, too quiet, too smart, too stupid. You can't ask too many questions or know too many answers. No one is flocking to you for advice. Then something wonderful happens. The girl who was told she's stupid finds out that she can be a better wizard than Albus Dumbledore. And that is something very important. Terrible at sports? You're a warrior who does backflips and Legolas thinks you're THE BEST. No friends? You get a standing ovation from Han Solo and the entire Rebel Alliance when you crash-land safely on Hoth after blowing up the Super Double Death Star. It's all about you. Everyone in your favorite universe is TOTALLY ALL ABOUT YOU.

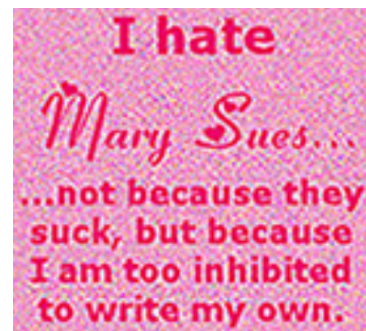


Fig. 6.15: Anon. confession (fandom-anon 2010)

I started writing fanfiction the way most girls did, by re-inventing themselves.

Mary Sues exist because children who are told they're nothing want to be everything.

Mary Sue is commonly seen as an early, immature stage of fannish participation (Bacon-Smith 1992, niqraeli 2010, staranise 2010, ladyloveandjustice 2011, Kleefeld 2013, unwinona 2014, dubonnetcherry 2015, Maggs 2015). Often, fans move away from the self-insert Sue who only represents the needs and identity of one individual and towards the community-oriented folkloric model which understands story as a tool that can help integrate people into the community and, in so doing, come to 'represent *a people's* image of themselves' (Dundes 1980: viii, my emphasis) rather than 'an 'extension of *self*' (Sandvoss 2005: 10, my emphasis). The implication is that as ficcers get older and

transcend the community's boundaries to become insiders inculcated into the literary expectations of fandom, they will find more sophisticated ways of rewriting the story so that it expresses their interests, validating themselves and their community. This echoes scholarly assertions that more traditional stories often allow tellers to perform their identity and position themselves in relation to their audience and community (Goffman 1959; Bauman 1975, 1986; Basso 1996; Norrick 1997; Riessman 2001; Langellier 2001).

Representing themselves in story allows fans to explore and define the boundaries of their shared identity and experiences in a manner that generates and articulates the nature of fandom as a community, as Steele (2007) describes in relation to homoerotic 'slash' fic:

Slash is an **exploration and affirmation of the 'other.'** Let's be honest here and say that a lot of fangirls (and boys) do not fit the social 'norm' in some way... We're the 'others,' and it's natural for us to identify with other 'others.' And you don't get much more 'other' in our society than the queer community...

Reimagining straight characters as gay gives us power. It takes the socially-accepted 'norm' and turns it on its ear, puts it under our control. It affirms us, makes us less alone. This hypothesis also applies to polyamorous fics, bdsm fics, whatever... all of these are 'other'-oriented fics. These are the things that fascinate slash writers/readers, because they ARE us

It is notable that, contrary to historical statistics (esp. Bacon-Smith 1992, Jenkins 1992), recent demographics suggest that a significant proportion of fans (often a majority) identify as women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community (mellanen 2010a, b; Sendlor 2010; OTW 2012; Lulu 2013a, b, c). Thus, although there is some truth to the criticism that slash fic (which refers specifically to stories about men engaged in intimate relationships) is equivalent to mainstream pornography depicting lesbian sex – slash substitutes the female gaze for the male, but is a similarly fetishizing and inaccurate portrayal of gay men's experiences of relationships or intimacy (see Brownworth 2010, effingdeixis 2013, Davies 2013, Lady Geek Girl 2013, shutthefuckupstraightpeople 2013, thecutteralicia & tookmyskull 2013) – it is also arguable that such fics accurately represent *a* queer experience, albeit a female one.⁵⁵ Further, many slash fans acknowledge this flaw, and it is notable that most self-reflexive analyses of slash fandom do not make such representational claims, but are instead consistent with the above claims that slash fic empowers fans by subverting societal norms or validating

⁵⁵ Those demographic studies show that non-heterosexual, non-male identified persons are an even greater proportion of slash fans than they are of fandom in general: 31.2% of slash readers identified as heterosexual, while 2.7% of non-heterosexual respondents identified as male. Of slash creators, 25.8% were heterosexual while 3% of non-heterosexual creators were male (Lulu 2013b, c; OTW 2012).

marginalised experiences (see ivyblossom 2003, kitsune13 2003, brat queen 2003, DarkTwin 2004, shadowscast 2005, the-shoshanna 2011, kiki-eng 2013, lierdumoa 2013). This is a longstanding perception of slash, as Kass (1999) demonstrates:

We're taking the subtext of queer romance and making it text, which neatly subverts the dominant paradigm. Hear ye, pop culture: you may think heterosexuals rule the airwaves, but we're rewriting your narrative to include a spectrum of possibilities...

Slash fiction is a shared universe. It's a community.

Her invocation of community highlights the fact that fans conceptualise this as a social process: it is not enough to simply affirm *oneself*, one's own otherness, or to subvert the dominant cultural expectations in one's own personal reading – for fans, it is important to *share* that validation with each other. This is somewhat at odds with Sandvoss (2005), who depicts the relationship between fans and media as inherently narcissistic. He means this not in a pejorative sense but an analytical one: if fannish practices of media reception and production derive from personal experiences and identities, and fannish practices explicitly seek to subvert dominant paradigms to reflect marginalised identities (see Willis 2006, Bailey 2007, Busse 2016, Jones 2016, Kirpatrick 2016, Pande 2016, Williams 2016), then it logically follows that the fannish relationship to and understanding of media texts should – 'narcissistically' – focus on and reflect the individual self. However, although Sandvoss's basic argument about the personal nature of these reflections is indisputable, fans often understand their efforts to insert their individual identity into a text not as a personal effort, but as a public, collective, communal service.

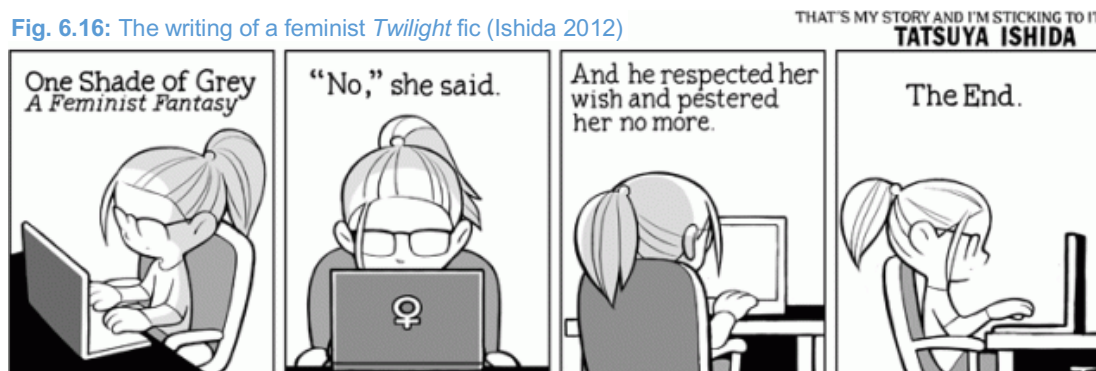
Willis (2006) articulates this best, drawing on Barthes (1986) and Sedgwick (1994) to argue that fanfiction allows fans to supplement and reorient the canonical text with their own experiences in such a way that it is accessible and available to other readers, thereby turning fics into 'shared stories' and 'shared spaces' that offer other fans potential new ways to engage with the canon. To illustrate this thesis, Willis focuses primarily on the interpolation of queer and immigrant experiences into the Harry Potter canon; with regard to the latter, she notes that although the canon presumes that the transition of students born to non-magical families into adult members of the Wizarding world will be unproblematic, total, and have no impact on the dominant culture, fanfiction allows writers like her to challenge and embellish this narrative with the 'painful and complex cultural negotiations' that characterise actual-world experiences of acculturation (Willis 2006: 165). With regard to the former, Willis suggests that fic allows readers to

rectify the fact that the existence of homosexuality is referred to only once in the whole seven book series, and then only as an accusatory slur (Rowling 2003: 19). To clarify, Willis is not merely claiming that fic poses a variant interpretation of the text that is possible but not technically stated in the canon. She is saying that, for the readers who adopt those interpretations and bring them into the Barthesian space, fic can literally rewrite the canon so that it contains queer persons, engages with immigrant experiences implied by the text, or whatever the headcanon in question proposes. For many fans the effect is akin to Bettelheim's (1976) analysis of folkloric storytelling: each new voice adds a layer of complexity that no teller could achieve alone, which can have a collective, affirmative impact. Dingsi (2008), a bisexual man, describes it like this:

what I, personally, always found empowering about slash...fandom is that it's giving me a break from heteronormativity. Being queer is the *norm*, and (characterization issues aside) it doesn't have to be "explained", defended, or justified. The queerness *just is* and people are fine with it, and on top of it, we get queer characters who are mages, superheroes, mutants, starfleet commanders, demon hunters, and so on...Slash fanfiction gives me things I want that I don't get otherwise

This quote is interesting because it articulates an experience that is individual *and* collective. On the first level, it expresses a need similar to that observed by sexuality scholar Eve Sedgwick (1994: 3), who writes about the tendency of queer children to smuggle representation into cultural texts where 'the meanings didn't line up tidily', which she considers important to their survival in a world that tries to make non-heterosexual possibilities invisible. On a communal level, however, Dingsi (2008) almost explicitly articulates the causal relationship between slash fic and community that the earlier quotes merely implied; the quote characterises slash fandom as a safe space in which queerness is not a deviant identity, and suggests that slash fic helps create this space by telling stories that present queer characters as normative. It also concurs with stele3's (2007) suggestion that by affirming the 'othered' identity shared by a many slash fans, fic brings fans together and makes them feel less alone. Furthermore, while slash is perhaps the most famous and well-documented example of this phenomenon (Stanfill 2016; Jones 2016; Britt 2014; lierduoma 2013; Neville 2013; Sandvoss 2005; Romano 2010; Cicioni 1998; Green, Jenkins & Jenkins 1998; FL: 'history of slash fandom', 'slash'), there are many other identities and interests that fanfiction validates in this way. For example, there is a small but dedicated community of asexual fans committed to asserting the reading of particular characters as asexual and ensuring the respectful and accurate representation of asexuality in fic (asexual_fandom

Fig. 6.16: The writing of a feminist *Twilight* fic (Ishida 2012)



2010, melannen 2010c, FL: ‘Asexuality and Fandom’). Likewise, fic that rewrites canon with a feminist lens (like Fig. 6.16) or tells the story from the perspective of a female supporting character is often an explicit attempt by a predominantly-female community to insert their experiences into a masculine text or to assert the importance and complexity of female characters (Britt 2014, chordatesrock 2014, Leow 2011, saeva 2011, Brennan 2009a, yourlibrarian 2008). Race can also be an important point in the nexus of fannish storytelling and the affirmation and building of communal identity (Stanfill 2016, Pande 2016), as Serafinacastaway’s (2014) response to an image of WoC!Hermione (Fig. 6.2) illustrates:

My ENTIRE CHILDHOOD, this is what I imagined Hermione looked like. A curly haired girl of color who looked something like me, who had a hard time making friends like me because she was intelligent and sometimes she thought too much and didn’t have a problem losing herself in a book. I even ARGUED, tooth and nail with the other students...and questioned why she COULDN’T look like me, what was wrong with her looking like me, and why they felt she HAD to be white.

When I found out she wasn’t thanks to the movies, there was a kind of disconnect from her character, and the way I closed that disconnect was to ignore canon and keep picturing her as someone like me. I stopped talking about my headcanon to avoid arguments and name calling and teasing, but I never ever let go of the idea of a POC Hermione.

So to the artist, THANK YOU FOR DRAWING MY HERMIONE

This exchange, which is comprised only of Figure 6.2 and the post above, shows that even incidental interactions with other fans can serve as an affirmation of solidarity, encouragement, and shared experience so powerful that they prompt a three-paragraph expression of gratitude. This suggests, contrary to many challenges to the validity of virtual community, that although online exchanges are often more fleeting and superficial than actual world conversations, this does not necessarily mean that even the most transitory virtual interaction cannot have a profound and lasting effect in terms of providing emotional support in people’s actual-world lives, nor does it mean that they cannot assist in the process of integrating individuals into a virtual community or reinforce extant members’ sense of belonging and solidarity. In

addition, like Dingsi (2008) above, this post expresses an appreciation for fandom as a place where her marginalised identity could be the norm, presumed as the default without requiring explanation, justification, or an explicit affirmation in the canon. Further, it demonstrates the applicability and effectiveness of Willis's thesis: by creating and sharing this interpretation of Hermione, Milledge (2014; Fig. 6.2) reorients the canon not only for herself but for other fans who encounter her fanwork and incorporate it into their own understanding of the text – or, in this case, she affirms an orientation that the viewer already possessed, tacitly validating her ability to identify with and draw strength from the character and assuring her that she is not alone in either her interpretation of the text and her lived experience of the outside world as a woman of colour. The post also demonstrates how fan activities, particularly the creation and circulation of headcanons, can reinforce or even salvage an individual's attachment to a media text. This is important not only as a testament to how powerful one fanwork can be as a mechanism for reorientation, but also because investment in canon is often integral to individuals' continued engagement with fandom – so by creating fanworks that affirm each others' marginalised identities, fans can help each other remain invested in both the canon story and the community.

Interestingly, it is not always necessary for fans to share the identities that prompt such headcanons in order for them to resonate; sometimes, shared experiences or perceptions of the world are enough. For example, one informant told me that she had always assumed Remus and Sirius were a couple because they reminded her of gay family friends from her childhood, so R/S fic was important to her not as a validation of her own identity but as a validation of her understanding of the world as a place that contained gay people, including couples who resembled Remus/Sirius (other heterosexual slash shippers report similar motivations; see Green, Jenkins & Jenkins 1998; Dark Twin 2004). Another informant told me that as the child of a social worker and a person who struggles with mental illness herself, she strives to read and write fic that inserts what she calls 'psychorealism' into worlds where there is none. For example, she cited the scene in *Harry Potter* where Harry confesses to a new acquaintance that he was locked in a cupboard and starved for most of his childhood (Rowling 1997: 76), pointing out that it is rare for abused children to admit their treatment to a stranger, and even more unusual for them to voluntarily describe their abuse without prompting.

As before, her objection was not personal – she had never been abused herself – but rather that the canon text failed to adequately reflect her experience of reality, so she looked to fandom and fanfiction to rectify this discontinuity. Although these fans are not seeking validation of their identity in the same way, they are still searching for others who share their understanding of the world – and they can participate in creating a supportive space for the fans who *are* represented by such fics. These examples offer a path to reconciling Sandvoss’s paradigm with the lived reality of many fans. Rather than conceptualising the relationship between fan and media as one that reflects *only* herself, her identity – like the reflection in Narcissus’s pool – it is perhaps better understood to reflect her *perspective*, her *experience* of the world, which includes not only herself but the other important people, identities, and experiences in her life.

Underlying these accounts and the myriad others like them is a single bold claim: they assert that fandom is a community, and that its nature as a community is founded in part on storytelling. They argue that fanfiction and other fanworks allow fans to ‘realize [themselves] in this language’ (Bakhtin 1981: 264), to ‘symbolize and finally replicate [themselves]’ (Holland 1993: 33) as individuals – and by so doing they create and perform their identities, or at least parts of their multifaceted identities (see Jenkins 2008, Maffesoli 1996), assert their membership in the fan community and position themselves in relation to other fans. They argue that creating fanworks – telling stories that articulate their individual identities – is part of how they participate in the shared project of establishing and articulating their collective identity as a community. They argue that these stories can serve as social conduits through which they and other members of their community may validate, support, and encourage each other, and further that both the stories and the affirmational exchanges they may incite can serve as the foundation for deeper interpersonal exchanges and relationships. Finally, they argue that these stories are part of the process by which they establish fandom as a safe space for ‘deviant’ or outsider identities, as an environment that encourages such supportive relationships – and this nurturing environment is the primary foundation upon which they base their claim to be a community, with all the emotional connotations of that term. Of course, not all fans have the same experiences and interests or seek out the same varieties of validation – a fact that can lead to divisions that both reinforce and diminish the community, as the next section discusses.

'Teams', Outsiders & Ship-to Ship Combat:

On Conflict, Boundary Mechanisms & Community Building

When...inhabitants...talk of 'their community', they refer to an entity, a reality, invested with all the sentiment attached to kinship, friendship, neighbouring, rivalry, familiarity, jealousy, as they inform the social process of everyday life. At this level, community is more than oratorical abstraction: it hinges crucially on consciousness.

This consciousness of community is, then, encapsulated in the perception of its boundaries, boundaries which are themselves largely constituted by people in interaction (Cohen 1985: 13)

The dividing line between canon and fanon is at once profound and incredibly thin. On the one hand, fanon is defined in part by the fact that it is usually an extension of the canon so seamless that 'often people cannot remember where the idea originally came from, and sometimes they can't remember that the idea isn't canon' (Kat 2009; see also Melusina 2004a, Slaymesoftly 2013). Furthermore, fans are constantly blurring that line. This can be passive, as when Draco fans are surprised by unsympathetic portrayals of the character in new canon instalments or need to be reminded that the canonical relationship between Harry and Draco is comprised entirely of contempt and pity rather than desire (see Romano 2003, Morning Starr 2003, kowaiyoukai 2005; FL: 'Draco Malfoy', 'Fanon!Draco'). Transgression of the canon/fanon divide can also be active and conscious, however; for example, WoC!Hermione and Katniss fans were careful to assert that the canon did not explicitly contradict their reading (Bennett 2015, Milledge & serafinacastaway 2014, DiBernardo 2014, Alexandrina 2013, Wilson 2012), while Lupin fans were not content to assert that there was a solid canon *basis* for the widespread belief in Lupin's queerness – instead, they took the argument a step further, contending that the author had intended for Lupin to be read as *canonically* gay and in a relationship with Sirius Black. When Rowling (2013) published a biography of Lupin that precluded this reading, the fan response was characterised by words like *grief*, *betrayal* and *outrage* (musesfool 2003b, Ariel 2004, elwing-alcyone 2007, amuly 2010, siriuslyslytherin 2011, Aston 2013, overanalyticalqueer & spacecrip 2013, thirstforsalt 2013). Like Serafinacastaway (2014) above, they were surprised to discover that the canon did not reflect their identities or expectations in the way they had presumed, felt the same 'disconnect' with the text – but their reaction was magnified by the fact that they had been insulated by their participation in a communal echo chamber that had spent over a decade promoting, justifying and disseminating this reading as canon. Thirstforsalt's (2013) response to Rowling's revelation articulates some of the motivation for active fannish attempts to subvert the canon/fanon line:

I know that, literarily, I am allowed to parse and re-frame and subvert the text to my heart's content, as are you all. But I never meant for it to be that way; I wanted the creator's blessing, and even more than that, her participation. But of course, I am not owed that. I recognize this. Somehow, it still hurts just a little

At issue here is the fact that by asserting the canonicity of a fanon interpretation, fans assert the legitimacy of their experiences and identity. So, by refuting their interpretation of the text Rowling was, in a way, invalidating some of the affirmational work done by this reorientation of the canon; if nothing else, she reasserted the heteronormativity of the broader world within a fictional space that (some) fans had established to give them a 'break' from that reality (Dingsi 2008). Of course, creators can also blur the line between canon and fanon in the other direction by officially incorporating fan creations into the canon text; for example, the first name of Major 'Paul' Davis, or the theories about Klingon appearance (see TVTropes: 'Ascended Fanon').

On the other hand, the line between canon and fanon is crucial and indelible in that it serves as a boundary mechanism (Strathern 1982; Cohen 1985; Lamont & Molnar 2002; Zimmer 2003; Tilly 2004, 2005): it creates, constitutes and maintains the divisions between fans within fandom and *casual fans*, i.e. people who enjoy the story but do not participate in or conceptualise themselves as part of the community (see fn. 1). To put it another way, with the exception of ascended fanon, casual fans are often unaware of the body of fanon assumptions that the fan community has built up around the text, and are usually insulated from the positive and negative effects that participation in fandom and fanon-creation might have (Sandvoss 2005, Stein & Busse 2009). Thus, for example, a casual fan might independently conceive of WoC!Hermione or queer!Remus headcanons, use her experiences to develop a suite of related assumptions around that headcanon, and be devastated to have her belief refuted by the canon – but she has no access to the circular cycle of corroboration afforded when other fans join her in rewriting the canon to positively reflect her identity, building up her expectations so that the ultimate disappointment is greater. Furthermore, while her extended headcanon might be complex and compelling, it does not represent a form of 'local knowledge' in the way that fanon does; it does not help her access the assumptions that fans take for granted when reading non-canon established relationship fics or participating in shared universes. Likewise, it is only by participating in fandom that she can learn the conventions of writing, borrowing and giving feedback that characterise the community.

Thus, one might say that it is the capacity to recognise the conventions of fanon and fan writing, and the capacity to rewrite canon *in specific ways* that draw on the community's expectations and storytelling traditions that marks fans out to each other as insiders – as members of the community discrete from casual enthusiasts who share their interests. Indeed, fan scholars have always asserted that 'socialisation into fandom often requires learning "the right way" to read as a fan' (Jenkins 1992: 89; also Bacon-Smith 1992), and those who failed to learn the appropriate conventions and behaviours were dismissed as *feral* and *outsiders* until they assimilated properly (see Arduinna 2012b; FL: 'feral', 'Fandom and the Internet'). Even fans who are critical of the dominant role that fanon expectations sometimes play in accepting new fic, like Musesfool (2004), acknowledge that using fanon 'can be a shorthand to indicate membership in a community, and in that way, some people love it', though she complains that often 'you have to be part of a specific segment of fandom for a story to work'. This highlights an established truth of community studies, which recognises that although a community may define itself in opposition to outsiders who 'do not belong', it is overly-simplistic to presume that the group that falls within those boundaries is homogenous – or even that it is necessarily a community (Strathern 1982, Cohen 1985, Lamont & Molnar 2002).

In fact, fandom is not homogenous in terms of demographics or interests, and internal division and disagreement are inherent features of its structure. As this chapter shows, fans often cohere into smaller groups around shared appreciation for particular character interpretations like WoC!Hermione, queer!Remus, and redeemed!Draco. These groups often provide validation for aspects of their identities and experiences by creating safe spaces inhabited mostly by others who share those characteristics or who must be respectful and supportive of those who do. It is also common for fans to separate themselves into groups based on shared interests or tastes; for example, a preference for particular sexual kinks, relationships, or fic genres. Such subdivisions can help guide and limit an individual fan's interactions with fandom; this is important because even an average sized fandom has too many members and produces too many texts for any one person to engage with meaningfully. Thus, although boundaries may be inherently divisive, in this case they can also help build cohesion and solidarity by making it easier for fans to position themselves within the social-technological network of fandom among others who share their experiences – or at least their taste

in stories. Captaindibbzy (2015) describes this effect in a beginner's guide to participating in fandom posted on Tumblr:

An agreeable Fandom is a small one.

If you want very specific things find people who agree with you and stick to them. Fandom Friends are the best way to fandom...

Accept that finding people who agree with you will not happen instantly.

They are there. I can guarantee it. But you may have to talk to a lot of the 'wrong' people before you find the right one. Don't get discouraged.

Do not try to convert the whole fandom to your way of thinking. It will not work.

You see you changing how you're reading the material cause someone else is telling you you're wrong? No? Well same for them. **Stop it.**

Do not be aggressive towards people you don't agree with. It will escalate and poison the fandom.

You or they will end up in a cycle where your love of the thing is being spoiled by the fandom. If you can't deal with the wider circle fall back on your basics.

This etiquette guide and others like it (see sophia-helix 2004, betty 2005, devildoll 2005; azurelunatic 2008b; Musgrove 2013b, 2014) are built on the predominant fannish assumption that fandom is a whole, if heterogeneous, community. Thus, they take for granted that some disagreement is inevitable, but assert that fans participate in such conflicts as members of the same broader community, with equal claim upon and responsibility to each other and to the norms and expectations of fandom as a whole. However, a vocal and articulate minority of fans take issue with this presumption, arguing that fandom is at best 'a collection of communities and subcultures loosely aggregated under one fannish flag' (carolyn-claire 2011; see also tea-and-liminality 2015, Wanenchak 2014, vee_fic 2006). They argue that these fannish subgroups represent a degree of insularity, divergence, and outright conflict incompatible with a true community, and that fandom is better understood as a subculture based on shared practices and styles of signification (see Chapter 1).

It is certainly true that conflict plays a prominent role in both fandom history and in fans' everyday interactions (see Chapter 4). For example, the conflict between *slashers*, who write homoerotic fic, and *het shippers*, who prefer heterosexual couples dates back to *Star Trek* fandom in the '70s, and has been one of the most important formative debates in fandom history – and also one of the most bitter. It is in part comprised of literary debates about whether the canon supports readings of characters like Kirk and Spock as romantic couples, or whether such interpretations devalue and disrespect deep and intimate but platonic relationships between men. Attempts to make these

arguments to each other through the medium of fic have had an enduring effect on the development of fanon and fannish storytelling practices (e.g. Sex Pollen, Fuck or Die). However, the majority of this debate has largely been characterised by decades of both sides exchanging insults with each other, like ‘deviant’, ‘homophobic’, ‘twisted sicko’, ‘canon rapist’, ‘nonsensical’, ‘blind’, ‘internalised misogynist’ and similar (see Gerrold 1985; Bacon-Smith 1992, Jenkins 1992; Conch 1993; Green, Jenkins & Jenkins 1998; Dark Twin 2004; Carnall 2010; Jaciem 2010; Bancroft 2013, FL: ‘Het’, ‘History of K/S Fandom’, ‘History of Slash Fandom’, ‘K/S (TOS)’, ‘Slash’, ‘Slash Controversies’).

Likewise, *Ship Wars* between supporters of incompatible ships, like Harry/Draco and the canonical Harry/Ginny, are among the most dynamic and driving forces in fandom. Fans and scholars alike have observed that one of the easiest ways to strengthen audience engagement with a story is to increase active participation by getting them invested in fighting for a character or a relationship; Piccoli (2013), a fan and pop culture critic writes ‘Fans invest a tremendous amount of heart and soul into their shipping’. Other fans add ‘Shipping in fandom means emotional commitment. A lot of investment. It means...joy and happiness and fuzzy feelings when things are going alright. And it means pain and angst when they are not’ (ysu73 2015; see also Bancroft 2013, saathi1013 2014, Zubernis 2014, Valentine 2015, Jones 2016; FL: ‘Ship’, ‘Shipping’, ‘Pairing’; TVT: ‘Die For Our Ship’, ‘Ship’, ‘Ship-to-Ship Combat’). Such conflicts are often divided into ‘Teams’; this terminology was coined for a *Twilight* fandom ship war between ‘Team Edward’ and ‘Team Jacob’ (Fig. 6.18), though fannish division into quarrelling groups is much older than that. Indeed, Sarah Rees Brennan (2008), a



Fig. 6.17: Team Edward Shirt (Loud Distribution 2010)

published author and former Big Name Harry Potter fan, suggests that one reason HP fandom was so popular

was because you had the sides arranged for you: people could think of themselves as aligned with the different houses and cheer for them to win cups. People can get into heated debates about which character/relationship /side/TEAM is best and of course, if one team wins, the other has to lose, so tempers can run high

This emphasis on conflict, temper, and internal divisions might lend credence to the position that fandom is too divisive to be a community. Indeed, Sandvoss (2005) suggests that although it may once have been accurate to understand

‘fandom’ as a group that collectively resisted the dominant interpretations of text, modern fandom should be understood as groups of people with divergent, individual interpretations of the text that are influenced by their personal experiences and identities. Perhaps more significantly, he argues that ‘Through subcultural capital...discrimination and [normative] power relations are maintained and reconstituted in fandom’ (Sandvoss 2005: 40). However, this analysis misses the point, which is that fannish conflict and division may be inevitable, but they are by-products of emotional investment in particular aspects or interpretations of canon – which can, for many fans, translate to an emotional investment in the sub-community or ‘Team’ of fans who share their predilections, and from there to investment in fandom as a whole. Bancroft (2013) argues that ‘by internalizing our ships, by investing ourselves into fandoms completely, it [the ship and the community of shippers] becomes a part of us, as fans.’ Or, as sophiagratia (2013) writes, fans of femslash (homoerotic fic about female characters)

relate to each other through our investment in these modes of eroticism and in...the loving, creative production of a discourse of ‘rumor’ [embodied in fan texts like fic] that has the ability to...share our investment with our fellow travelers – to show them what we see, make them see what we see. We recognize our investments in each other, in this rumor mill that is femslash fandom

Thus, as with the division between fans and outsiders, shared fanon presumptions can also serve as boundary mechanisms demarcating these internal divisions within fandom (see Musesfool 2004, Stein & Busse 2009). For example, as discussed above, fans who ship canonical enemies often write fics that

take the characters’ love for each other for granted. Such stories can be quite confusing for outsiders who do not share the same deeply held beliefs and expectations. This delineation...is perhaps part of the point; such established presuppositions are vital to the community’s sense of cohesiveness, clearly demarcating the intended readers as those that share a common reading of the source text. Debates...often reveal differing interpretive communities that may have emphasized varying aspects of the source text or may have adhered to the limitation of the source text in divergent ways (Stein & Busse 2009: 198-199)

The ‘other’ in this case is not outsiders with no conception of fanon, but fans *in their own fandom* who do not support their ship, or an interpretation of the relevant characters that would support a relationship. However, the emphasis in this quote, as in the fan accounts of shipping above, is not on confusing or excluding other fans but on creating a clearly demarcated space in which fans who share their interpretation can come together to use the storytelling techniques available to all of fandom to

collaboratively produce fanon traditions unique to their Team. Conflict arises when fans stray out of their chosen spaces, or when divergent interpretations spread far enough into the broader fandom imagination that they begin encroaching on other spaces.

Fans' ready adoption of the *Team* terminology and outward display of their team affiliations highlights an important parallel between media and sports fans. Even more than media fandom, sports fandom is a community predicated entirely on symbolic conflict between teams and their fans – one that sometimes involves actual conflict between fans of opposing teams. Despite this, however, researchers find that identifying with a team can lend sports fans a sense of family, belonging, and personal connection when traditional social and community-based ties prove inadequate (Wann et al. 2001, Wann & Grieve 2005, Jones 2010, Porat 2010). Fans with high levels of identification with a specific team were more likely to express a sense of solidarity with their fellow fans, or to believe that fans of their team were more likely to possess 'special qualities' (Wann & Branscombe 1993; Wann & Thomas 1994; Wann et al. 2001; Jones 2010; Porat 2010; Benkwitz & Molnar 2012; Havard, Reams & Gray 2013; Havard 2014). Thus, supporting or fighting for a team – by viewing or attending matches, displaying colours, and participating in the complex and sometimes violent fan rivalries – is the primary reason for conflict among sports fans and the primary characteristic with which fans of opposing teams seek to attack and delegitimise each others' status as fans and their membership in the broader community. However, supporting a team is also the primary way that fans are able to participate in sports fandom, to assert their membership and access the sense of solidarity and network of support and social connections entailed by belonging to this community (Wann & Branscombe 1993; Wann & Thomas 1994; Wann et al. 2001; Wann & Grieve 2005; Jones 2010; Porat 2010; Benkwitz & Molnar 2012; Havard, Reams & Gray 2013; Davis 2014; Wann et al. 2015).

Just as fighting supporters of other teams does not make sports fans any less members of their community – indeed, it arguably makes them *more* invested and participant in sports fandom – so too can conflict between groups of fans act as a cohesive force. Similarly, even the most divisive, discourteous, and entrenched fandom conflicts can still be solid foundations that help fans position themselves within fandom and guide their participation in the community – and some can even become explicit sources of identity and attachment. For example, decades of fighting about slash fic produced a

subsection of slashers who consider this affiliation the single most important aspect of their fannish identity and participation in fandom; bettyp (2002) writes ‘[We] are **slashers**. It is an identity issue... We'll read slash for shows we don't give a shit about. We'll slash a show with no subtext visible without the use of laboratory equipment. We're in it for the **slash**’⁵⁶ (see also T'Mar 2004, bethbethbeth 2005, Reinhard 2009, Jones 2016; FL: ‘slasher’). Williams (2016) identifies this as an aspect of ‘post-object fandom’, in which enthusiasm for a specific media text becomes irrelevant to or subsumed within enthusiasm for or identification with fandom as a whole, or with particular practices, texts, people, or identities/sub-communities within fandom.

Furthermore, although slashers and het shippers or other fannish ‘teams’ may define themselves by their opposition, they are best understood in relation to each other – as parts *of fandom*, rather than distinct subcultures or sub-communities. The terms *slasher* and *het shipper*, for example, only have meaning within the context of fandom; further, their decades of conflict involved both groups attempting to claim or subvert the same tropes (like sex pollen, a plotline that canonically furthered a heterosexual relationship but has now become a staple of slash fic) in ways that shaped the development and character of fandom as a whole, and permanently impacted the storytelling traditions of the community (see Bacon-Smith 1992, Jenkins 1992; Green, Jenkins & Jenkins 1998; DarkTwin 2004; Carnall 2010; Bancroft 2013; FL: ‘Het’, ‘History of K/S Fandom’, ‘History of Slash Fandom’, ‘K/S (TOS)’, ‘Slash’, ‘Slash Controversies’, ‘Sex Pollen’). Likewise, fans of opposing ships draw on the same literary traditions and practices of consumption, production, language use and storytelling described above, which were developed by fandom as a whole for use by all fans. In addition, proclaiming their affiliation and articulating their position – in fanworks, meta essays, and arguments with other fans – strengthens their intellectual and emotional investment in the canon, in their interpretation of it, and in the group of fans who share those interpretations (see Brennan 2008, Bancroft 2008, Stein & Busse 2009, sophiagratia 2013). Furthermore, doing so makes them visible as members of these groups, which makes it easier for other fans to locate and interact with them. Thus, as was true of sports fans, affiliation with and conflict on behalf of these groups is one of the primary means by which fans

⁵⁶ Not all fans who read and write slash relate to this identity, preferring instead to establish themselves as people who support slash ships – meaning that they must care about the show and characters, and the slash subtext must seem plausible for them to ship a couple (musesfool 2005, Reinhard 2009, effingdeixis 2013, FL: ‘Slasher’).

participate in fandom – and one of the primary ways they access the sense of solidarity, support, and personal connection entailed by their membership in the community.

This is all consistent with the approach taken in Chapters 4 and 5, which examine the nature of fannish conflict in greater detail, demonstrating that ‘conflict and co-operation’ or ‘fission and fusion’ are two halves of a process that together contribute to and are instantiated in the social structure and which help bind the group into a more cohesive whole (see Cooley 1918, Gluckman 1940, Simmel 1964, Cohen 1985). Further, those chapters repeatedly demonstrate that although the divisions within fandom are a regular source of strife, they are less significant than the boundaries between fandom and outsiders; fans are always willing to defend each other from outside attackers, like authors or technological administrations, regardless of their usual opinion on the particular subgroup of fandom under attack (for example, *femmequixotic* 2008). This is consistent with the behaviour of many more traditional communities (see Gluckman 1940, Cohen 1985, Hewstone & Greenland 2000, Brewer 2001).

The internal divisions of fandom also carry less weight because of the particular ways that modern fans relate to them. Although it was common for fans in earlier eras to devote themselves to one fandom at a time, and often one character or ship within that fandom, most modern fans prefer not to limit themselves in this way (see Arduinna 2012b; FL: ‘fannish butterfly’, ‘mono-fan’, ‘multifandom’, ‘multishipping’, ‘OTP’; TVT: ‘OTP’). Furthermore all modern fans in even moderately sized fandoms, including those who prefer the simplicity of supporting only one fandom and one ship, are obliged to position themselves within smaller subgroups based on genre, identity, or interest, or they would be overwhelmed by the quantity of interactions and texts available to them. As Chapter 3 discusses, the consensus among fans is that technology is responsible for this shift. The Internet made fandom more broadly accessible, dramatically increasing the quantity and diversity of fans and fanworks, while the mechanics of blogs and other interactive technologies make it easier to locate groups that cater to their specific tastes (*rusty-halo* 2003, Arduina 2012b, *captain dibbzy* 2015; FL: ‘Fandom and the Internet’, ‘mailing list’, ‘The Impact of Blogging on Fandom’). Blog technologies also render the connections between established fans visible, making it even easier to for new fans expand their network and settle themselves within it. Once fans have positioned themselves appropriately, the technological infrastructure

inherently increases the probability that individual fans will come into contact with posts, stories and people who encourage them and validate their experiences. These networks also provide continuity for those already in fandom; for example, a fan who found affirmation in WoC!Hermione fanworks might follow those creators out of HP fandom and into Hunger Games fandom, automatically positioning herself in the parts of that community who engage with Katniss Everdeen as a woman of colour.

Thus, it is most helpful to understand fannish subgroups not as separate communities or loosely affiliated subcultures, but as components of fannish identity that allow fans to precisely locate themselves within the network of individuals and texts that comprise fandom. Just as a person's broader identity encompasses multiple elements (like race, gender, religion) that overlap and inform each other, not all of which carry the same degree of significance inherently or in relation to different individuals or social contexts (Cooley 1956; Goffman 1959; Tajfel 1982; Mead 1987; Wiley 1994; Maffesoli 1996; Ashton, Deaux & McLaughlin-Volpe 2004; Brewer & Hewstone 2004; Brown & Capozza 2006; Jenkins 2008), so too are fannish identities comprised of multiple affiliations. For example, a Harry/Draco shipper is part of HP fandom, but she might also: support other HP ships, consider herself a Slasher or a Slytherin, prefer certain!fic in which the couple are domestic or darkfic that explores the extremes of human nature, be seeking out spaces in which queerness or BDSM relationships are normative – and she might be involved in other fandoms, with similar networks of affiliation in each.

Conflict and partisanship remain an important part of this framing: acknowledging that fans exist within webs of affiliation does not diminish their emotional and intellectual investment in these affiliations (read: *teams*) or their willingness to defend the perspectives they represent and the teammates who share their affiliations. Rather, conceptualising fannish identity thusly de-emphasises the boundaries without erasing them, reorienting focus towards how fans use their affiliations to articulate and orient themselves within the broader realities of fandom. More importantly, this conceptualisation highlights the fact that fans do not merely locate themselves on teams: they position themselves *within* teams, surrounding themselves with the individuals and texts that most interest, entertain, support, and resemble them. It is through interactions with these people and stories that fans participate in fandom, and through which they mediate their understanding of what fandom is and what it means to be a fan. Thus, although fannish teams may regularly

come into conflict, and define themselves partly in opposition to each other, even these disagreements are accessed through affiliation with a small, supportive subgroup. These personal, social connections are the basis upon which the most fans define themselves as a community, regardless of the broader divisions inherent in fandom – just as membership in a family or church might serve as the basis for conceptualising belonging in a local community, regardless of the fractiousness of that group.

Or, as Cohen (1985: 13) observed, when people discuss ‘their community’ they do not present it as a single, harmonious unit, but rather as a combination of positive and negative social relations, as ‘an entity, a reality, invested with all the sentiment attached to kinship, friendship, neighbouring, rivalry, familiarity, jealousy’. This is consistent with the fact that although the majority of fans conceptualise fandom as a whole community, this section demonstrates that they make no attempt to claim that it is a homogenous or harmonious one – indeed, for many, their experience of community is founded on the boundaries and divisions that allow them to identify and access ‘those who feel and think as [they] do’ (Durkheim in Maffesoli 1996: 13).

Conclusion

In many ways, fandom is a community defined by and built upon story. It is a shared appreciation for stories that brings fans together in the first place, and particular practices of consuming and creating stories as well as shared literary and linguistic traditions that set fandom apart from other enthusiasts. Within fandom, it is specific elements and traditions of storytelling that draw fans into ever-narrowing layers of intimacy. Each fan uses stories to reorient the canon in a way that articulates her identity and interests – often with the explicit intent of reaching out to affirm and express solidarity with other fans who share her experiences. Stories that represent similar perspectives, together with the exchanges and interactions they inspire, create shared spaces in which particular interpretations, identities, and literary expectations are promoted and normalised. It is notable that these interactions do not have to be significant or prolonged to have a profound effect: a single image or line of text may be enough to contribute to the collective narrative of a space, or to dramatically impact an individual’s emotional experience of the story in ways that strengthen their sense of belonging and membership in the community. These shared spaces are the source of many internal divisions within fandom, because fans often become heavily invested in their particular

interpretation of a story, which provokes conflict with other groups of fans who hold incompatible views. However, many fans argue that such dissension and partisanship has a cohesive effect as well – it reinforces fans’ commitment not only to their interpretations, but to the others who share their space, and therefore to the broader community as well. Further, they conceptualise of fandom as a community based on an understanding of community as an entity that includes both harmony and discord.

This chapter also represents an effort to address the recurrent criticism that ‘fandom is no longer an object of study in and for itself’ (Gray et al 2007: 9), or that fan scholarship needs to ‘integrate fan voices’ and return to the discipline’s early ethnographic focus on the everyday experiences, practices, and priorities of fans (Booth 2013: 120; also Bennett 2014, 2013; Evans & Stasi 2014; Pearson 2010). Instead, fandom has become a lens through which we study the modern audience’s relationship to media and technology. This chapter engages with the preoccupation of the current wave of fan studies – the relationship between fans, the object of their fandom, and the nature of fandom as a whole. However, instead of proposing a theoretical model of audience reception or general interpretive practices, this chapter uses ethnographic analysis of the voices and experiences of fans to engage with the question of how individual fans’ practices of media reception inform their everyday participation in fandom and their conception of the nature, character, and purpose of fandom as a whole. It uses fans’ assertions to engage with, refute, and build on extant theories of media reception and subversion, and particularly suggests that the current models are overly individualistic, whereas the fannish experience is often very communal and community-oriented.

Conclusion: Community in a New Context

‘Community’...is a powerful everyday notion in terms of which people organise their lives and understand the places and settlements in which they live and the quality of their relationships. It expresses a fundamental set of human needs...Along with the idioms of kinship, friendship, ethnicity and faith, ‘community’ is one way of talking about the everyday reality that the human world is, collectively, more than the sum of its individual parts...As such, ‘community’...is among the most important sources of collective identification. Whatever we do with it, it isn’t to be ignored (Jenkins 2008: 133)

In many ways, this thesis is not ground-breaking. It presents a view of fandom that is largely consistent with accounts of media fans dating back more than three decades. It presents a view of virtual community that is, again, largely consistent with early expectations about online society and even with traditional conceptions and definitions of *community* in the ‘actual’, offline world. There are few surprises in the data presented or the conclusions drawn – much of this has been common knowledge in either fandom or Internet studies for years. However, being unprecedented in that way was never the purpose of this thesis. This work seeks, rather, to fill more modest but no less important gaps in the current literature. It may not be revolutionary to find that modern online fandom greatly resembles the offline fandom of old – but at the same time, it is worth investigating the considerable lengths fans went to in order to ensure that this continuity was preserved, the effort they expended in adapting both technology and their own traditions to maintain the character of the perspectives, practices, and works they viewed as central to their community. Likewise, it may not be revolutionary to suggest that virtual community, as it is embodied in and understood by online fandom, is an evolving, socially-constructed collaborative project of meaning-making characterised by shared interests and experiences, emotional resonance, and interpersonal support. Nor is it novel to assert that the things people are looking for in online communities are almost identical to the characteristics of an actual world community – but there is a dearth of holistic, in-depth, multi-platform ethnographic research that grapples with the everyday experiences of participating in a virtual community or the articulatory and interactive practices by which such a community is constituted.

This is not to suggest that this thesis is not creative or innovative, or that its only strength lies in articulating the unexpressed presumptions of relevant disciplines or providing detailed empirical data to support hackneyed theories of virtual community. Doing these things is certainly a part of the project of this work, but only as a function of its unusual approach to data, methodology, analysis, and the ethnographic study of the

interactions and records of fans' everyday lives online. Thus, this thesis's contributions stem from the fact that the project began with a methodological question: What can fandom – particularly the unsolicited, self-reflexive emic analyses represented by fannish meta texts – tell us about the nature and function of virtual community, and of modern community more generally? The question is a broad one, in terms of analytical scope and volume of data, and this investigation can only begin to answer some part of it. Furthermore, given the constructionist approach of this thesis, my intention is not to argue that the conception of community evident in online media fandom, informed by their specific social experiences and history, demonstrates a general truth about the character or definition of community. Rather, I suggest that their understanding can help illuminate the process by which modern virtual communities are constituted. Chapters 1 and 2 argue that fandom is an ideal case for studying virtual community: first, because fans actively seek to construct themselves as such; second, because the unsolicited, first-hand meta analyses are a natural part of their community discourse and everyday interaction; and third, because the nature of the technological platforms they frequent is such that the record of their exchanges is notably complete, nuanced, and contextualised – which made them an unusual and valuable subject of enquiry.

The first contribution of this thesis is the methodology itself, which addresses gaps in two different disciplines. Fan scholars have repeatedly complained that the current 'third wave' of scholarship focuses on the individual experiences of fandom, often using this as a lens to propose general (non-fannish) paradigms of audience reception and consumption, which hampers the discipline's capacity to engage with fandom, its putative object of study. The current consensus seems to be that this would be most effectively addressed by returning to the ethnographic approach of early, 'first wave' fan studies, which would 'refocus attention back onto fans themselves' by 'partnering fans, engaging in discourse with fans, and including fans in the research process' (Booth 2013: 120; see also Jenkins 2009, Bennett 2014, Evans & Stasi 2014). This thesis is a first step towards proposing a model of digital 'ethnographic methodologies that emphasise the fan's voice as well as the researcher's' (Booth 2013: 127) by 'asking [fans] to articulate their understandings of...different platforms, and how they negotiate digital technologies with texts and producers' (Bennett 2014: 12). This methodology does not, of course *ask* fans to articulate their understandings so much as it utilises the unprompted articulations already extant

in the record of fan meta discourse, but the general theory is the same – and the final product is arguably more reliable, given that it is less biased by the researcher's presence.

This methodology also addresses some of the gaps present in the general literature on digital ethnography. To begin with, it takes a multi-platformed, multi-sited approach to studying online communities, which is unusual in current digital ethnographic work. This enables researchers to study the holistic, everyday experience of participating in online communities, unfettered by the artificial limits imposed by the current default assumption that field site boundaries should correspond to the boundaries of a single platform or website. Given that most fans' participation in their community involved at least half a dozen different technologies, many of which shifted over time as technologies or enthusiasms evolved, confining this research to a single platform would have been fundamentally unsuited to the ethnographic demands of the community and topics under investigation. More significantly, this is an area in which fans seem to be ahead of the social curve, rather than aberrant. This can be seen in the rise and fall of platforms like MySpace (Torkjazi, Rejaie & Willinger 2009; Pfeil, Arjan & Zaphiris 2009) or the current conversations surrounding Twitter and its variable roles facilitating interaction and activism and as a primary and secondary source for news and reporting (Florini 2014, Lindgren 2013, Sharma 2013, Gerbaudo 2012, Hands 2011). Thus, as increasing numbers of people, and corresponding virtual communities, take this multi-sited, temporally fluid approach to digital space, multi-sited ethnographic approaches like the one used in this research will become increasingly necessary.

This methodology is also unusual in its use of archival ethnographic theory. Although I am not the first to suggest that digital texts are documents and can be studied as such, few works of Internet scholarship grapple with the nature of the Internet as an archive. Of these, most focus on the practical and ethical implications of this fact: on the utility of the 'ultimate field recorder' (Hine 2005: 22), or the ethical dubiousness of referencing texts that cannot be erased from the permanent record of the Internet and which the original creators might have forgotten or lost access to over time (see Markham 2012; Klein 2011; Marshall, McCown & Nelson 2009). However, many of the techniques used in archival ethnography to construct a picture, an 'imagining' of a community using the texts and artefacts produced by their everyday activities (see Comaroff & Comaroff 1992; Dirks 1993, 2002; Steedman 1998, 2001, 2008; Axel

2002) are directly relevant to conducting digital ethnography. Conversely, however, this thesis also challenges many of the current presumptions about how scholars understand and approach virtual texts. Although they *are* documents, and can be subjected to similar varieties of analysis, they are also complete social contexts in and of themselves, and it is important and necessary for digital ethnographers to treat textual communities and interactions with the same degree of agency, reality, and weight as any other social interaction or context. This has many important implications for understanding virtual identity and interaction, some of which are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, but many of which must be subject to further research.

These methodological innovations are all, of course, intended to facilitate the study of virtual community using the unprompted articulations of an especially analytical, self-reflexive, and self-aware group of people. So what does this thesis reveal about fandom as a virtual community, and about virtual community more broadly?

To begin with, fandom not only actively and consciously conceptualises itself as a community, it explicitly engages in negotiating its symbolic significance in ways that many other communities only reach on an unconscious or instinctive level. To rephrase, fans are deliberately and often consciously attempting to *create* the community they want to be a part of through a continuous processes of articulation, analysis, and discourse present in meta texts and other exchanges. This is not, as noted above, a *new* observation about either fandom or community. However, this thesis is the first to engage with online fandom as a group uniquely suited to provide decades of unsolicited empirical data that demonstrate the processes of this negotiation, and the ways the practices and products of these articulations have changed in response to moving online and later migrations between various digital technologies (see Chapter 3). Chapters 4 and 5 address the ways these articulations are shaped by conflict, and by the dynamics of ownership surrounding fanworks, fan spaces, and canon texts.

This thesis highlights the ways that story and storytelling are an important part of the practices by which people create and negotiate collective conceptions of their community, and their individual positions within that community and in relation to other members. This is, again, an observation that has been made about other social and political communities (see Anderson 1986, Dundes 1989, Nadel-Klein 1991, Tonkin 1992; Plummer 1995, 2010; Norrick 1997, A. Smith 1999, Rappaport 2000, Reissman

2001, Bottigheimer 2009, Kapferer 2011). However, it is perhaps especially true of fandom, with its close ties to media storytelling (see Chapter 6). More significantly, fannish storytelling practices, and their relation to identity construction are more visible, as well as more complete and comprehensive, due to the peculiar character of the fan community and the nature of the digital archive. Thus, fandom provides a useful case for empirical study of the everyday processes by which storytelling is used to construct, transform, and negotiate both individual and collective identities. Chapters 5 and 6, in particular, deal with ways these articulations create boundaries between fans and outsiders, and allow fans to negotiate what it means to be a fan and to locate themselves within fandom. However, such a project is enormous, and this thesis only begins the work of using the digital fannish record to shed light on the general practices by which communities use storytelling to collectively construct identity.

This thesis is also unusual in its detailed empirical examination of the ways that text and technology – the mediums, mechanisms, and spaces that fandom inhabits – have a profound impact on the character and function of a community, and exert a certain degree of agency upon the constitutive process. This is enabled in part by the multi-platform nature of this investigation; although there are many excellent studies of the pragmatics and processes of communication within the confines of specific technologies, it is difficult to compare these discrete contexts without an overarching holistic investigation. Chapter 3 demonstrates that although new platforms can and often are adapted to suit the patterns and traditions developed in previous technologies, they also have a profound impact on the style and content of the interactions they facilitate, and on the character, traditions, and practices of the community. Interestingly, this means that the evidence presented throughout this thesis both supports and undermines theories of technological determinism. This thesis leans away from determinism, arguing that while technologies have specific, rigid restrictions with regard to what they can and cannot accomplish, human agency and creativity allow users to adapt and circumvent those restrictions – sometimes to the point of rendering the platform’s original purpose and capacities unrecognisable. Furthermore, in circumstances where a platform cannot be altered, myriad other options exist to choose from – so users do not have to permit technology to determine their capacities. This conclusion is also enabled in part by the methodology, and its ethnographic focus on unsolicited fan texts and articulations, which provide a unique,

empirical, and personal view of the process by which online communities select and adapt technologies that meet specific needs and abandon others as they fade into obsolescence.

Turning to the meta texts themselves, fans' reflexive analyses of their community illuminate several presumptions, values, and themes. These are interconnected and overlapping, and have greater precedence in different contexts or in relation to other values – and they all inform and are informed by the above themes of story, technology, and the process of socially and symbolically constructing community. The first is a standard of behaviour: as early as the 1970s, the phrase 'fan community' was explicitly associated with the process of establishing rules to govern social interaction (Southard 1982). There are two dimensions of behaviour that fandom is invested in standardising: the first is about politeness, respect, and etiquette, and the second is about the practices, processes, and mechanisms by which fans engage with their community.

Treating other members with politeness and respect is a commonly recognised attribute of community; David McMillan, who created the framework by which many studies evaluate virtual community (see Koh & Kim 2003; Blanchard 2007, 2008; Sangan, Guan & Siguaw 2009; Abfalter, Zaglia & Mueller 2012), argues that without such standards it is impossible for communities to achieve the degree of trust and emotional support that define them as such (McMillan 1996). Emotional support is certainly a facet of community that fans lay claim to, separately from standards of etiquette. Indeed, this emotion-laden, 'fuzzy' dimension of fandom is arguably one of the reasons that early scholars chose to use the word *community*, despite its controversial nature (see Chapter 1; Jenkins 1992, Bacon-Smith 1992) and why fans who argue that fandom is too variable and disjointed to qualify as a community are in the minority. Together, their collective commitment to emotional support and standards of politeness and respect are the face fans present to outsiders. They use it to argue to authors that fanfiction (and, by extension, fandom itself) is not immoral, that fans are deeply committed to doing right and good in the world; they use it when trying to convince online administrators that they are responsible and ethical enough that they can be trusted to distinguish between harmful or illegal content, and to protect their members (and, by extension, the technological platforms that facilitate their exchanges); they use it to combat the lingering impression in popular culture that they are dangerous, obsessive, and socially maladjusted deviants (see Chapters 1 and 5; also Burchill 1986, D'Acci 1988, Bacon-Smith 1992, Lewis 1992, Jenkins 1992, Jenson 1992).

Fannish commitment to emotional support can also be seen in the ways that fans use stories to ‘make space’ for themselves and their experiences in the cis, white, heteronormative and male narratives that dominate popular media, and to critique those stories and the broader societal failings they reflect (see Chapter 6; Derecho 2006, Willis 2006). More importantly, fans do not tell stories that reorient the canon simply to validate or represent themselves – they do it as part of an active and often conscious affirmation of others who share their experiences and interests, and as part of an effort to shape or maintain fandom as a community that is not only supportive of their perspectives but in which their experiences are the norm (see Chapter 6; Kass 1999, stele3 2007, Dingsi 2008, Serafinacastaway 2014). This influences the structure and experience of participating fandom, because fans tend to cohere in to groups based around specific interests, which makes it easier for individual fans to locate themselves amongst like-minded fans who are best able to validate their experiences and offer them emotional support. This, in turn, contributes to the overall sense of fandom as a community: it is through their interactions with this like-minded and supportive cohort that fans participate in fandom, and through which they mediate their understanding of what fandom is and what it means to be a fan – so, even when they come into conflict with other groups, their conception of fandom as a safe and supportive community can be repaired and supported by their (more frequent) interactions with that cohort. This is not dissimilar to the way that membership in a family, church, or local organisation can mediate and facilitate membership in a geographically bound community.

Significantly, this process as a whole goes a long way towards suggesting an empirical answer to the question of how the experience of virtual community can resemble that of more traditional communities, rather than causing individuals to become lost in information overload, or to simply mirror the style-based identification with a subculture. For fans, the answer is simply that they do not try to interact with the *entire* community, nor do they locate their membership in fandom simply in styles of signification. They often understand themselves to be part of fandom as a whole, and they recognise each other by those styles – but their *experience* of community is often grounded in a relatively small, intimate network of individuals who support and mediate their interactions with and understanding of fandom as a whole.

This also relates directly to warnings and the notion of feminism as a fannish value (see Chapter 4). It is not that all, or even most, fans necessarily identify as feminists or actively champion feminist ideals or causes; rather, feminism as an ideology permeates the community as a whole and plays an active part in affirming the experiences of this female-dominated community. It is a framework that supports and furthers their commitment to other ideals they value, and that make them feel safer and more comfortable, such as consent, combating rape culture, gender equality, intersectionality, representation, and sex-positive affirmation of feminine sexuality and other sexual preferences or tastes that do not cause others harm. Warnings act simultaneously as an expression of this dedication, as a tool they use to meet that commitment – by notifying readers of potentially harmful content, so they can avoid being triggered – and as boundary markers that create and identify spaces that are fannish, feminist, and safe.

Fans' embrace of warnings and feminism align with the aforementioned expectations of politeness and respect as integral to the process of constructing and maintaining their community as a 'safe space'. This phrase identifies and articulates a covenant of behaviour, one that goes beyond simple manners and is more nuanced than a simple promise that fans will always feel safe within the community. Rather, fans acknowledge that virtual space is inherently public and unsafe – that the things that make one person feel 'safe' can make another feel oppressed or uncomfortable. Thus, safe space is a commitment to the idea that it is possible for members of a virtual community to hold themselves to a standard of responsible behaviour that respects and acknowledges the needs of all participants, seeks to minimise harm and set out clear, explicit, rational behavioural standards for anticipating and avoiding injury and for responding to incidents where harm could not be prevented. This is not, notably, the same as avoiding conflict – indeed, conflict is often the process by which these behavioural standards are negotiated.

Interestingly, although McMillan (1996) considers trust and emotional support linked and interdependent aspects of community, *trust* is not a word that occurs frequently in the fan texts I read during this research. This can perhaps be explained in part by the public and insecure nature of the Internet – and particularly the venues where I gathered my data, which were visible to everyone (see Chapters 2 and 3). In general, fans are aware of the risks inherent in virtual platforms, and carefully control the aspects of their actual world identities and experience they share in public spaces. For

example, although very few people refused to participate in my research, and many were comfortable using their legal names in private email correspondence with me, they universally requested that I use fannish screennames – which do not provide anonymity, at least with regard to their virtual, fannish identities, but do act as a barrier between those identities and their actual lives (see Chapters 2 and 3) – when referencing their public texts. This does not mean that fans do not trust each other as individuals – as in the actual world, that is a function of specific relationships and not the technology or community. Rather, public spaces are an important aspect of building community in online fandom, and it is impossible to ensure that everyone with access to a public virtual space is either trustworthy or a member of fandom.

Chapter 4 makes the argument that ‘safe space’ can, to some degree, take the position of ‘Trust’ in online experiences of community. When the insecure nature of public virtual space precluded trust, fans identified particular issues, interests, and identities as important to them, and specific virtual spaces and technological platforms as theirs, and then they fiercely protected those interests within those spaces. This occasionally magnified their sense of violation when those spaces were threatened by outside authorities they could not educate, censure, or negotiate with (see Chapter 5), but in the absence of conflict, safe space has become a largely successful proxy for trust. Standards of behaviour in both senses of the term are also an important factor here: if fans within those spaces do not treat each other with the politeness and respect that fans expect from their community, then the space is not safe. Likewise, if fans do not utilise the designated platforms in the fan-approved ways (which may be subversions of the technology’s official mechanics; see Chapter 3), then fans have less capacity to maintain the safety of that space. This is important given that one of the most persuasive arguments against the existence of virtual community was the contention that even if it is possible to trust individuals one meets online, it is impossible to trust everyone who can see one’s public interactions online. However, if one only has to trust that the majority of people who inhabit specific community ‘safe spaces’ will protect and enforce an understood and agreed-upon standard of behaviour, then the idea of virtual community becomes tenable again.

This raises the issue of virtual spaces themselves. Chapter 3 identified communication as the key feature of the technologies that form the core of fannish participation. Fandom is, at its core, a community founded upon stories – on a passion for media, and

for rewriting old stories so that they have new purpose – but this is a fundamentally social endeavour. This is evident in the above observation that ficcers often write stories that seek to affirm not only their experiences but those of their fellow fans, and it is evident in the numerous practices (from liveblogging to beta reading) that fans have developed to make creating, consuming, and analysing stories a collective and social activity – and technologies of mass communication have always been a key part of this. The pre-Internet era had a limited selection of technologies suited to fan needs, but when fans began migrating to the infinite variability of virtual platforms, they favoured technologies that were best suited to communication, and especially to facilitating social interactions that could engender and sustain the levels of emotional connection and support that contribute to a sense of community, and could be defined and occupied in a manner that created and constituted safe space associated with their conception of their community and its needs. LiveJournal, for example, was initially adopted because it allowed ficcers to control how they archived fic and shared it with other people – but LJ retained its influence for years because of its capacity to encourage and maintain social relationships between community members, and because it enabled fans to locate themselves in the aforementioned emotionally supportive cohorts more easily.

Archiving plays a significant role as well. History is an important aspect of traditional community and the formation of communal identity. A sense of shared history can instil feelings of cohesion and continuity of purpose, which helps create and legitimate the traditions and practices that define a community. Telling stories of shared history can also be a significant mechanism by which individuals are assimilated into a community, demonstrate their membership or position themselves within a group, and by which community bonds and conception of collective identity are created, and rendered more coherent and enduring (see Chapters 1, 2 and 6; also Anderson 1986, Nadel-Klein 1991, Halbwachs 1992, Tonkin 1992, Maffesoli 1996, King 2000, Rappaport 2000, Riessman 2001, Hobspawm & Ranger 2002, Jenkins 2006, Pinder 2007). This is especially evident in online fandom, where the advent of more permanent and accessible archiving tools had a significant and traceable effect on the character, demographic makeup, and communicative practices of the community; specifically, this tangible continuity with the past made fans feel that their community was more stable, available, and legitimate. Furthermore, they began consciously and actively archiving these exchanges and

making them available to other fans as an explicit service to their community, and these documents became an important part of the practices and traditions by which fans engage in conflict *and* in more supportive interactions (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6). This is a significant place where the transition from offline to online technologies seems to have had a profound impact upon the character and expectations of a community, and it would be interesting to see if investigations of other communities yielded similar findings.

These observations about technology, communication and archiving inform my argument that it is necessary to rethink and reframe the current understanding of virtual documents and online interaction: these are certainly *texts*, even by the most traditional and limited definition of a text as a collection of words within an artefact or set of linked artefacts (see Levy 2001, Barber 2007). However, they are more than that: virtual documents are primarily written texts – in which images and other non-textual data may be embedded – through which individuals communicate with each other online. Thus, although they may be studied using many of the analytical tools employed with human documents, they are categorically different: they are not the by-product, transcription, or record of those conversations, but rather the mechanism and the social context of that interaction. And, more importantly, they are the *actual* social interaction in its entirety – though, of course, like an actual-world interaction, a single exchange may also lack an explicit articulation of certain social, historical, and interpersonal context that underlies it (see Bauman 1975; Gumperz 1982, 2001; Basso 1996; Gumperz & Levinson 1996; Schegloff 1998, 1999, 2003; Wetherell 1998; Billig 1999; Markham 2004a, b; Mackay 2005; van Dijk 2007, 2008). Furthermore, fans employ many of the paradigmatic techniques developed by their community and other virtual denizens to convey in text much of the significance inherent in actual-world meta-communicative signals like body language and tone of voice (see Bauman 1975; Gumperz 1982, 2001; Basso 1996; Danet 2001, Thomas 2006; Danet & Herring 2007; Graham 2007; Crystal 2008, Tiidenberg 2011; Bolander 2012; Langlotz & Locher 2012; Herring 2013). This in part explains their capacity to develop emotional and supportive relationships through online communication: these exchanges may be textual and mediated, and stripped of certain aspects of actual-world emotional intimacy, but they have their own practices of emotional communication that are native to textual communication in a virtual context.

That observation is in many ways a metaphor for everything that online fandom can illuminate about the nature of virtual community. Fandom is not the same as geographic communities, and it even differs in certain ways from actual-world communities based around shared passions, interests, or identities. It is certainly accurate to say that online fandom, as an example of virtual community, lacks some of the priorities, capacities, and practices of communities that are constituted by actual-world exchanges and the social, emotional, and intellectual dimensions we associate with such interactions. It is also true that in many ways online fandom is more diffuse and disparate than many traditional definitions of community allow for. However, online fandom has also developed its own methods of conveying meaning and adding emotional and intellectual dimensions to communication that are not present in face-to-face communication – ‘safe space’ comes to substitute for trust, while tools like gifs and ~~striethrough~~ comments become proxies for vocal tone. Other defining features of community, especially emotional support, do not develop as naturally from the mediated, textual interactions that constitute virtual community – they are possible, but they must be an active and conscious goal of both the community and its individual members. However, if a virtual collectivity like fandom makes an effort to support each other, to create safe space, and strengthen their sense of shared history, common goals, and mutual interest, they can achieve something is distinct from but also related to more traditional concepts of community. Finally, Jenkins (2008: 133), in the epigraph above likens community to kinship, friendship, ethnicity, and faith: all categories with similarly broad and fluid definitions that are likewise shifting in response to technological and social changes. Virtual communities are more than capable of affecting people in similar ways and on similar levels to those concepts, and as such the question of whether they are ‘really’ communities is immaterial. They are ‘really’ capable of influencing people’s sense of belonging, of collective and individual identity, their relationships and access to social support, and these are the levels upon which virtual community must be engaged with.

Glossary

!: Fans use an exclamation point between two words to denote a trait-character relationship between the two. For example, WoC! Hermione signifies an interpretation of Hermione who is a Woman of Colour, while CAPSLOCK!Harry refers to canon and fannish texts in which capslock dialogue is used to convey shouting. The exclamation point can also be used to identify fic genres: for example, crack!fic is a story that begins from a ridiculous premise, and wing!fic refers to stories in which human characters sprout wings (FL: ‘!’, ‘crack’, ‘wingfic’).

/: See *Slash*.

6A: *Six Apart*, the software company that owned LiveJournal between 2005 and 2007, before selling LJ to SUP, a Russian media company.

AO3: See *Archive of Our Own*.

Aca-fan: A portmanteau of *academic* and *fan*, the word refers to scholars who study fandom and also identify fans themselves; they use the term to acknowledge the complex and sometimes problematic effect that their dual identity can have on their participation in both spheres.

Actual: Following Boellstorff (2008), I use the word *actual* to denote the world outside of computers, as distinct from virtual, online spaces. The word *physical* marginalizes the intangible elements of our experience of the actual world, while the word *real* implies an inherent value judgement in its implication that all concepts and contexts opposed to it are ‘not-real’ – i.e., are fictitious, unsubstantive, and generally less valid. I find such implications unhelpful; there may be a practical and conceptual difference between the intangible virtual world and the actual one, but an acknowledgement of difference does not necessarily imply that the virtual is less real, important, or possessed of less practical or emotional impact. Further, this distinction should not be taken as an argument that the virtual and actual are discrete, independent contexts; they are contiguous and interdependent entities that influence and alter each other as well as individual experience and social reality.

APA (Amateur Press Association Zines, letterzines): This is a format that existed long before fanzines were created, though fans appropriated APAs for their purposes. Fan APAs are best understood as an extension of official pulp magazines’ letters pages, or as an analog version of mass email mailing lists: As forums in which fans could communicate with each other regarding specific topics.

Letters were mailed to an editor, who formatted, photocopied, and then mailed them to all subscribers (who paid a nominal fee for printing and shipping costs), who could then read and respond to everyone’s letters, or begin new conversations.

Archive of Our Own (AO3): A pan-fandom fanfiction archive maintained by the Organization for Transformative works. AO3 is the first purpose-built archive run by fans to meet fan needs, address fan concerns, and free fandom from the censorship and strife of hostile webhosts.

Beta, beta reader: In fan parlance, *beta* is a noun and a verb and refers to both the act of editing and the person who edits a fic. A beta reader may provide simple grammar and proofreading services, or she might make editorial and creative suggestions about the story, or she might provide feedback on canon compliance and

characterisation. It is not uncommon for fic writers to have multiple beta readers who provide different varieties of feedback, and the relationships between writers and betas can range from professional to close friend to creative collaborator, and is an important component of creating and maintaining a position in the social network of fandom (see Karpovich 2006; FL: 'beta').

Blog: From *weblog*, a blog can be many things. The format began as collections of links to websites the creator considered interesting, but they quickly grew into a

Blog Community, LJ Community, Community: In this thesis, I use the word *Community* with a capital letter to refer to the technological innovation by LiveJournal that allowed members to join interest-based discussion groups using their personal blogs. Examples of fandom communities include those dedicated to meta discourse, specific fandoms, ships, fic recommendations, roleplaying games, and creative writing support. Members post entries to discussion communities so that others who share these interests and follow that community but not the original poster's blog can see and respond to that entry, while friends who follow the individual's blog but who might not be interested in that topic will not see the entry because it is only posted in the community forum. Such communities are one of the ways that fans make initial contact with new friends.

Boldthrough, Boldthrough2007: See *Strikethrough*.

Canon: Technically, the original source material – the story – upon which a fandom is based, and all of the information contained within. However, *canon* is perhaps better defined as the source texts and information that the fannish community *agree* are authoritative. Thus, while *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fans accept both the TV show and the comic book sequels (which are supervised and sometimes written by Joss Whedon, the show creator) as canon, not all *Doctor Who* fans accept the spinoff novels or radio plays as canon, despite the fact that they are similarly endorsed by the creator – in this case, the BBC (see Cornell 2007). This is not merely a matter of media format, however; *Fanon Discontinuity* occurs when fandom collectively decides that an entire season, movie, or even spinoff series are non-canon – for example, *The Matrix* is officially a trilogy of movies, but fans often disregard the latter two (see Munroe 2009, TVTropes: 'Fanon Discontinuity').

Creator Website: These are official websites that are operated by authors, directors, actors, etc. They provide access to content from media producers, and may allow fans to personally interact with those entities.

Community: See *Blog Community*.

Convention (Con): Physical gatherings of fans held in various locations, usually on an annual basis. There are many different varieties of con dedicated to different media and subjects, or aimed at serving particular geographic areas.

Disclaimer: A somewhat archaic fan tradition in which fans posted a statement at the top of a fic disavowing ownership of the canon or any desire to profit from this work, which ostensibly protected the ficcer from accusations of copyright infringement and attendant legal liability (FL: 'Disclaimer', actualvampireang et al.)

Discussion Board: See *Message Board*.

Dreamwidth (DW): A blog platform that was originally based on LiveJournal's code, though DW now implements new features and changes of its own. DW was launched in 2009, and serves as a fandom-friendly home for *Strikethrough* refugees, and other fans who find the LJ administration overly hostile to fan activity.

Fan Wank: An LJ Community (see *Blog Community*) dedicated to archiving and discussing fandom controversies (see also *wank*).

Fanart: Art produced by amateur fans, set in a media universe not owned by the artist.

Fandom: An umbrella term that encompasses several distinct yet overlapping groups devoted to particular media genres or formats. To illustrate: *media fandom* originally referred to fans of TV shows and movies, regardless of genre, though fans of *Star Trek* might also consider themselves part of *science fiction and fantasy fandom* (which was more focused on literary media), and the boundaries of media fandom are often understood to explicitly exclude *anime fandom*, despite the fact that Japanese animation technically airs on television.

This thesis is primarily concerned with *media fandom*, so when the word *fandom* appears without qualifiers or context in this thesis, it refers to media fandom. This decision is reinforced by the fact that technological changes are making these divisions increasingly irrelevant in modern online media fandom

Fanfiction (fanfic, fic): 'A work of fiction written by fans for other fans, taking a source text [canon] or a famous person as a point of departure. It is most commonly produced within the context of a fannish community and can be shared online such as in archives or in print such as in zines' (FL: 'fanfiction'). Fic is the most popular and iconic variety of fanwork (OTW 2012), and also one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented in popular media, due in large part to the prevalence of sexual or mature content (see Chapter 4).

Note that *fanfiction* is the accepted fannish spelling, but authors, journalists, and other outsiders frequently spell it *fan fiction*.

FanFiction.Net (FFN): The largest fic archive online, and one of the oldest purpose-built, multi-fandom fic archives on the Internet.

Fan History (FH): A fan-maintained *wiki* dedicated to documenting the history of fandom, fan practices, trends, jargon, and notable persons. Fan History is somewhat controversial among fans for failing to appropriately protect or credit sources, and for trying to monetise fandom.

Fanlore: A fan-maintained *wiki* run by the Organization for Transformative Works, dedicated to documenting the history of fandom, fan practices, trends, jargon, and notable persons.

Fannish: The adjectival form of 'fan'; things of or relating to fandom.

Fanon: The details, conventions, characterisations and facts of a story that are widely accepted among fans, but have little or no basis in canon. Fanons can extend across an entire fandom or they may be confined to a specific portion of the fandom that finds that particular detail interesting or compelling, and it is very common for fans to forget (or never realise) that a fanon is *not* a fact of the canon (see Chapter 6).

Fansite: An unofficial website maintained by a single fan or a small group. This can take many forms, including fic archives, image galleries (of both fanart and *Screenscaps* of canon media), and episode guides.

Fanwork: A general term for all fan-produced creative works. This includes fanart, fanfiction, fanvids, filk (songs), etc.

Fanvid: Movies created by fans. Most are simply music videos that combine canon footage with songs to produce an often-satirical story, e.g. 'Buffy vs. Edward: Twilight Remixed' (McIntosh 2009), though more elaborate examples create original footage, like 'Potter Puppet Pals' (Cicierga 2007), based on fictional worlds or characters, essentially making them film fanfic (FL: 'vidding').

Fanzine: An amateur publication in which fans could publish fiction, art, and non-fiction related to particular media or literary genres. Fandom is not the only subculture that published zines, and there were several different genres published even within media fandom. Of these, *SF zines* were usually non-fiction and consisted of articles about fannish topics, *media fanzines* were largely concerned with fic, and *APAs* or *letterzines* were entirely dedicated to fan conversations with each other, often about fandom (see Chapter 3; also Katz n.d., Penley 1991, Coppa 2006; FL: 'History of Media Fanzines', 'letterzine', 'zine', 'zines and the Internet').

Femmeslash: Fic featuring two or more female characters in a sexual or romantic relationship (see also *Slash Fic*).

Fen: The plural of *fan*. This term is primarily used in science fiction fandom, as opposed to media fandom more generally, and was especially popular in pre-Internet fandom.

Feral: Fans who did not enter fandom through the traditional gatekeeper rout outlined by Camille Bacon-Smith (1992). This meant that they lacked awareness of (and often respect for) fan traditions. The term could be applied to both individual fans and to whole fandoms that developed suddenly, and beyond the influence of media fandom as a whole. It was generally considered a consequence of the Internet, as before that it was often difficult to locate fandom without making connections and going through the gatekeeper route – and even when there were exceptions, their numbers were low enough that they did not impact the general experience of fandom (see FL: 'feral'; Arduinna 2012b; vee_fic 2006).

FFN: See *FanFiction.Net*.

Ficcer: A person who writes fic, or the writer of a specific fic, depending on context.

Filk: A musical genre that often involves songs written about events in stories, fictional worlds, or as if by fictional characters.

FL: See *Fanlore*.

Flist: See *Friends List*.

Follow, Follower: Followers are the people whose blogs one likes to read, who one has chosen to 'Follow', meaning that their journal content automatically appears on one's dashboard or friends list. (On LJ, the act of *following* is called *friending*).

Forum: See *Message Board*.

Friend: See *Follow*.

Friends List (Flist, Friends Page): This has two meanings. First, a *friends list* is the list of journals that one has *friended*, which enables a set of privileged mechanics, which vary depending on the blog platform. The most basic mechanic of friending, which occurs on all technologies, is that all posts made by friended journals are collected on the original user's *Friends List* in reverse-chronological order. On LiveJournal and other blogging platforms built on LJ's code, users can also 'Friend' discussion Communities, and entries posted in these communities also appear on their *flist*.

Friendslock: This is one of the mechanics enabled by *friending* or *following*. Some blog platforms allow users to designate specific posts (or the whole journal) as visible only to people the user has friended. These are referred to as *locked* posts, and the process is called *friendslocking*. Note that friending is not necessarily mutual; so if *Journal A* has friended *Journal B*, but *Journal B* has not friended *Journal A*, then user B will be able to view user A's friendslocked posts, but user A will not be able to view user B's.

Fuck or Die: See *Tropes*.

Gif: An image file format. *Animated gifs* are a series of images stored in a single graphics file, which allows the picture to move. Fans use *reaction gifs* to convey 'a physical or emotional response' with the image. For example, Figure 2.2 is a reaction gif often used to convey suspicion, rejection, or disgust, while the images in Figure 6.1 communicate that the user enjoys the other person's theory about a story so much, or finds it so logical that they have incorporated it into their own interpretation of the story.

Gifset: Two or more gifs that are thematically related to each other. They are often used to capture a brief scene from a TV show to communicate moments that the creator (of the gifset) found especially funny, moving, beautiful, sexy, or significant. Gifsets are frequently used to make meta commentary; as, for example, Figure 3.10 does by changing the colour of a female character's dress from blue to pink – restoring the book canon *and* commenting on the message of femininity inherent in the movie adaptation's colour. Gifsets are a popular art form on Tumblr (see FL: 'gif').

Icons: See *Journal Icons*.

InsaneJournal (IJ): A blog platform that was originally based on LiveJournal's code, though IJ now implements new features and changes of its own. IJ is particularly notable for its founder and administrator, Squeaky, who was sympathetic to fan concerns after the events of *Strikethrough*. IJ is 'fanfic friendly' (IJ 2014).

Internet Forum: See *Message Board*.

Journal Icons: Small images used on blog platforms and some message boards next to a user's name, and beside every post they make. This often enables quick visual identification of the user. In addition, LJ and other, similar blog platforms allow users to upload multiple icons, so when they make each post or comment, they can select the image that best suits the content.

LGBTQIA+ (LGBTQ): Acronym of *Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex*, and *Asexual*. The *plus* represents awareness of the fact that the acronym does not encompass all groups who are part of this community, and the fact that the labels and boundaries of such groups are still being negotiated and shifted.

An increasing number of fans identify with one or more LGBTQIA+ identity characteristics, and that in some parts of fandom they are the majority (see Lulu 2013a, b). It

should be noted that *queer* is a reclaimed slur that many people within the community find offensive when used by outsiders; my use of it here should be understood both in terms of my identity as a bisexual woman in a same-sex relationship and because it was a reflection of my informants' language, as members of the LGBTQ community.

LiveJournal (LJ): A blogging platform, and possibly the most influential technology ever adopted by fandom. LJ had a particularly community-oriented ethos for a blog platform. This perhaps inspired its invention of the *Community* mechanic (see *Blog Community*). LJ users can *Friend* other journals, which enables them to privately communicate with each other, and facilitates easy access to all of their posts by collecting them alongside other posts made by friended journals (see *Friends List*), and it is this functionality that designates LJ a *Social Network Site* as well as a blog platform. LJ was among the first blog platforms to adopt *Threaded Viewing*, which transformed internet discourse by visually depicting the shape, flow, and timeline of the conversation (see Chapter 3).

LJ Community: See *Blog Community*.

LJ Icons: See *Journal Icons*.

Mary Sue/Gary (Marty) Stu: A fanfiction trope, commonly associated with 'bad' fics, in which the character is usually a self-insert who plays out the author's personal fantasies about being in the world. This often includes being desired by the canon characters regardless of canon relationships, or outstripping them in their areas of expertise. However, there is a longstanding feminist critique of the concept, which notes that Mary Sue is a female trope (and considerably more noticed and criticised than its male counterpart) that reveals underlying assumptions that women are less competent than men, as well as being more annoying and less worthy of love (see Chapter 6; FL & TVTropes: 'Mary Sue').

Mass Mailing List: Mailing lists are a technological mechanism that allows users to join using an email address, which then enables them to send emails to the whole group. Any member of the group can then respond to any email that was sent, and the whole group will receive their reply as well (see Chapter 3; FL: 'mailing list').

Message Board, Internet Forum: An online discussion site that allows users to have discussions in the form of posted messages. These messages are archived, at least temporarily, and they are often Internet-searchable; thus, message boards were instrumental in making online fandom more visible, accessible, and permanent (see Chapter 3). In addition, Message Boards are where *Threaded Viewing* originated.

Meta: Discussion or analysis of a show, its characters, fanworks or of fan behaviour and fandom itself. Meta is usually textual, though images can be a powerful medium for meta commentary (see Figs. 2.3, 6.2). Meta is often academic in character, and frequently draws on (and cites) academic sources or academic theory.

Missing Scene: Fics about events that were implied by the text but never shown in the actual canon (FL: 'Missing Scene').

Netfan, netfen: An early term (primarily from the 1990s) denoting fans who engaged with fandom primarily or exclusively through online venues, as opposed to the vast majority of fans in those days, who still preferred zines and physical gatherings.

Newsgroup: Subject-based discussion communities that members could join on *Usenet*. Members of a newsgroup posted entries to the ‘online bulletin board’ of a newsgroup, and other members could download and read them in the inboxes of their ‘reader’ (the software by which one accessed Usenet content). Reading and responding to newsgroup posts was similar in experience and format to that of email mass mailing lists, except that posts were downloaded into the reader inbox and onto the user’s hard drive, rather than into online email inboxes.

Organization for Transformative Works (OTW): A nonprofit organisation established by fans in 2007, to serve fan interests by providing access to and preserving fanworks and the history of fandom, and to advocate for and provide legal advice and assistance to fans when necessary. The OTW runs the fic archive *AO3* and the wiki *Fanlore*.

OTW: See *Organization for Transformative Works*.

Podfic: ‘An audio recording of fanfic, read aloud by a fan (or several)’ (FL: ‘podfic’). The effect is similar to a radio play or audio book. The podficcer (person who creates a podfic) is usually not the same person as the ficcer who wrote the original story.

Queer: See *LGBTQIA+*.

Reaction Gif: See *Gif*.

Reblog (reblogs, reblogging): A mechanism on Tumblr and other similar blogs that allows users to repost the entire content of another user’s post on their own blog. This sometimes but does not always involve adding their own text below the original post. The original author (and other contributors) will be visually indicated beside the text they authored, and the post will link back to the original (see Chapter 3). This mechanic is similar to Twitter’s ‘retweeting’, though Tumblr supports longer posts.

Rec, Reccing, Rec List: Short for ‘recommendation’, *rec* can be a noun or a verb. ‘To rec’ something is to read a fanwork and publish a short review (usually with a link to the work) explaining why you enjoyed and recommend it, while ‘a rec’ is the text of that review. Rec lists, pages, and communities (see *blog community*) are venues where sets of recs are collected in one place. They are often written and/or assembled by a single fan, or devoted to a particular theme (e.g. fandom, ship, genre).

Resource Site: A subcategory of *fansite* that collects information to facilitate media consumption and/or fanwork production. For example, the *HP Lexicon* is a fan-maintained online encyclopaedia with content including timelines of the Harry Potter books, a comprehensive list of spells and characters that appeared in the books, etc.

RL: ‘Real Life’; refers to the actual world, as opposed to the virtual.

Sex Pollen: See *Tropes*.

Screenshot (screenshot, screengrab): A still image ‘captured’ from a movie, TV show, or other visual media. Fans also use screenshots to save a record content (such as blog posts) that they believe the author will erase soon.

Ship, Shippers, Shipping: From *relationship*, *shipping* refers to the process of supporting or imagining a romantic or sexual relationship between two (or more) characters. This support usually takes the form of fic, art, meta, or other fanworks though creative production is not a requisite of shipping. Fans who have and promote their favourite ships are called *shippers*. The word *ship* is a noun and a verb, and refers to

both the act of shipping and the relationship itself. Thus, ‘I ship Harry/Hermione’ and ‘My favourite ship is Harry/Draco’ are both acceptable fannish usage.

Slash Fiction (Slash fic): Fic that features male characters having sex (‘femmeslash’ for female characters). This is not necessarily the same as homosexual fic, since frequently the dialogue, narration, or authors’ notes insist ‘They’re not gay, they just love/fuck each other’ (Green, Jenkins & Jenkins 1998; Dark Twin 2004).

Slash: A slash or virgule (/) between characters’ names or initials (e.g. *Kirk/Spock*, *K/S*) indicates that they are being *shipped*, that they are part of a romantic or sexual pairing. This convention originated in slash fandom, and was therefore originally used only in context of male characters in a homoerotic pairing, but quickly came to be used for all pairings regardless of sexuality.

Slasher: A fan of slash, particularly one who identifies this as a significant aspect of her fannish (and sometimes sexual) identity. For some, this means that they do not necessarily care *what* slash ship they support, or whether there is an actual relationship or sexual subtext between the characters in question. Thus, many people who are fans of specific slash ships, and who support the idea of slash do not identify as slashers (see FL: ‘slasher’).

Strikethrough, Strikethrough2007: An event that took place in May-June 2007, when the LiveJournal administration (6A) suspended or deleted over 500 journals based on their interest lists. This was an attempt to eliminate blogs and communities dedicated to child pornography, incest, and similar topics, but it affected a disproportionate number of fannish journals, many of which contained no such content, or dealt with the topics as problematic but important literary themes. Strikethrough was so titled because the deleted journals appeared with a slash through their names (e.g. ~~Pornish_Pixies~~). Boldthrough occurred 2-3 months after Strikethrough, and involved many of the same problems and participants, but the suspended accounts appeared in bold instead of with a strike (see Chapter 5).

Strikeout: See *Strikethrough*.

Threaded Viewing: A mechanic used by message boards, blogs (including LJ), newsreaders, bulletin boards, and some email clients that depicts the shape, flow, and timeline of a textual conversation, visually contextualizing the discussion and compartmentalizing it into accessible sections. Most significantly, threaded viewing made archived online conversations accessible and comprehensible to future readers and to returning participants, which greatly contributed to the stability, visibility, and accessibility of online fandom (see Chapter 3).

Trigger: An experience or stimulus that can cause someone to recall a previous traumatic incident. This is relevant to fandom because a significant proportion of fic contains explicit or mature content (e.g. sexual, violent, or problematic), which prompted fans to develop a system of *warnings* to protect vulnerable members of their community (see Chapter 4).

Tropes: There are numerous genres or details of fic that get carried between fandoms, recycled and refined over time. This thesis only names a few, which will be defined here. Missing scene fics are about events that were implied but never actually shown by the original text. Fix-it fics attempt to correct perceived ‘problems’ in the canon. Both are common genres of fanfiction, as are fics written from the point of view of

a minor or villainous character. ‘Fuck or Die’ fics involve situations in which the characters are put into a situation where physical intimacy is forced on them, either by biological mechanisms or by outside powers. ‘Sex Pollen’ fics similarly involve forcible intimacy, though this is usually caused by the influence of a biological or magical force that lowers their inhibitions and raises their libidos (FL: ‘Fanfiction’, ‘Fuck or Die’, ‘Fix-it’, ‘Missing scene’, ‘Sex Pollen’).

Tumblr: A micro-blogging platform founded in 2007 that allows users to post text, images, audio, and visual content. This has made it particularly popular among fanartists and fans of visual media such as TV shows and comics. Tumblr uses a *reblogging* mechanic similar to *retweeting* on Twitter (see *Reblog*). Tumblr is possessed of social networking features that enable fans to *Follow* each other, though many complain that its communicative capacities are minimal (FL: ‘Tumblr’).

Usenet: The oldest online fannish discussion tool. Usenet is accessed using a *reader* or *newsreader* which effectively functions much like an email inbox, although modern newsreaders can simulate *Threaded Viewing*. Users could join *newsgroups*, discussion groups dedicated to particular topics (like specific TV shows or genres). Like email *mass mailing lists*, users could make posts to a newsgroup, which were then sent to all members of that group – who could then read and respond to those posts, or start new topics.

Warning: These are words placed in the *header* at the top of a fanwork that informs readers of any potentially disturbing, problematic, or ‘triggering’ content. Warnings are a somewhat controversial concept in fandom; although the majority of the community accepts them and considers them a positive or at least necessary feature of fandom, others believe that they ‘infantilise’ readers, that they are over used for unnecessary content, or that they stifle creativity (see Chapter 4).

Wank: A public argument, often characterized by ‘objectionable or contemptible behaviour’, and/or one that involves many participants, has high emotional stakes, and involves destructive rather than constructive methods of argument (see Chapter 4; FL: ‘wank’).

Wayback Machine, The: A digital library of ‘Internet sites and other cultural artifacts in digital form’, including multiple incarnations of the same site on different dates, to provide an evolving record (Internet Archive: ‘FAQ’). This means that fans and other Internet users can recover lost content, sometimes including blog posts and comments (if they have been stored by the site’s automatic programming, which privileges popular websites).

Webzine: An online fanzine. Many of fan webzines were established in the 1990s and early 2000s, when fans were acclimating to the Internet, but their modern numbers are considerably less. Some fan webzines publish original content (e.g. Fandom Wanderers), while others (e.g. The Fan Meta Reader) reprint meta that was originally published in more private venues like blogs.

Wiki: A website that allows anyone who accesses it (or registered users, depending on the site) to contribute to or modify content – making it a collaborative and often anonymous mechanism of authorship (see Chapter 2).

Zine: See *fanzine*.

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