

The Dark Side of Fandom: Competition, Authenticity, and Fanfiction

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In modern culture, fandoms – communities or subcultures of “fans” – are widespread in entertainment, sports, and media. For example, many Star Trek enthusiasts actually speak the Klingon language, which enables fans from around the world to develop relationships through Klingon communication that would be impossible without the fandom (*Klingon Language Institute*). Despite these ideals of a unified fan base, however, fandoms are often places of division and controversy, especially due to the complexities of each fandom, making it difficult to even define the word “fan.” Unfortunately, this ambiguity causes fandoms to be clearer about defining who is *not* a fan than who is. John Fiske argues that fans “discriminate fiercely [because] the boundaries between what falls within their fandom and what does not are sharply drawn” (Fiske 34). This discrimination is also a method of alienation, as it causes “mundane viewers [to] often wish to avoid what they see as the taint of fandom,” while simultaneously prompting obsessive fans to “argue about what characteristics allow someone to cross it and become a true fan” (Fiske 35). When fans “fiercely” categorize each other and outsiders, conflicts lead to dissatisfaction that detracts from the fandom’s original goal of unity.

Although the fandom knows who is *not* a fan, the level of participation possible within the fan-

dom makes it unclear who is “authentically” partaking in the fandom culture. Camille Bacon-Smith seeks to unravel this confusion by defining terms. For Bacon-Smith, there is an umbrella term; for example, “‘Star Trek fandom’ refers to fans of that source product, regardless of the activity in which the fan participates” (Bacon-Smith 22). However, because there are so many activities to participate in, Bacon-Smith claims that ethnographers should use the term “interest group,” which categorizes fans through “a combination of the preferred genre, delivery channel or source product ... and activity” (Bacon-Smith 23). In application, interest groups connect fans based on their methods of participation within the fandom, such as cosplayers, gamers, moviegoers, and so forth. Although Bacon-Smith specifically states that the term “interest group” does not belong to the fandom community itself when it defines its fandom limits, fans still use this mindset unconsciously to judge themselves and other fans. Thus, Bacon-Smith seeks to unite fans by categorizing them into groups that attempt to form efficient relationships among fans with common interests. However, Bacon-Smith’s solution unintentionally creates the very fan division that it tries to avoid, by keeping fans separate and alienating potential new fans. Grouping fans with similar interests together facilitates a conflict of interest that divides the fandom, where differences in interest defined by mutual curiosity lead to diverging interest in the benefits from status within the fandom.

As a result, the concept of “interest groups” raises many questions. Should fans give more credence to the fans who accept only canonical sources, or to those who contribute through fanfiction?

Is fandom somehow tied to consumption, such that the more one buys, the more one is a “fan”? Bacon-Smith’s argument about interest groups for fans is useful because it recognizes the individual identities that exist in fandoms, because each fan possesses different interests. But I ultimately disagree with Bacon-Smith’s categorizing of fans into interest groups, which divides fans unnecessarily and suggests that some forms of participation are more significant than others, promoting self-interest at the expense of other fans. The use of interest groups ignores the equal legitimacy of fans within the fandom community, and instead places fans in conflict with one another. Instead, fans must remember to return to the true purpose of fandoms: to be an accepting community of individuals with similar interests. In this essay, I argue for an understanding of fandoms as complex utopias, accepting the different roles in a way that still facilitates the inclusive purpose of fandoms, because the fans are united under a common interest. As a result, fans are able to rise to a level of co-ownership with the creator of the text and find equal validity in the numerous forms of fandom participation.

Many of the tensions that exist in fandoms can be traced back to three different but intertwined factors, as exhibited in Star Trek, Star Wars, and Harry Potter fandoms: demographics, consumerism, and fanfiction, respectively. In Star Trek, the complex, multi-generational series divides old and new fans. Consisting of thirteen films (including the recent “reboots”) and seven television shows (*Discovery* currently entering season two), the Star Trek franchise continues fifty-two years after the airdate of the first episode in the original show. Many fans still celebrate the fandom, calling them-

selves “Trekkies” or “Trekkers” and attending fan conventions, fandom-themed cruises, and museum exhibits. But fandom involvement varies from fan to fan, according to Robert V. Kozinets, such that “Star Trek fans run the gamut from commonplace mainstream views to highly devoted members of an alternative subculture” (Kozinets 67). Tensions have arisen among fans with the release of the newer reboots, as Star Trek has consistently appealed to older fans who grew up with *The Original Series*, and that older demographic does not wish to see the fandom undergo drastic changes. Star Trek’s demographic problem is amplified in its fandom, because Star Wars appeals to mass culture through consumerism, as the vast scope of the franchise universe lends itself to many products. For example, according to Brendan Cook, fans who consider themselves to be Original Trilogy purists, or film purists, or general canon purists, are divided about what is considered part of the Star Wars franchise “simply because it means so many things to so many people around the world” (Cook 85, Elovaara). Now that Disney has bought the Star Wars franchise, many of the published books and stories about the Star Wars universe are no longer considered “canon” (the official storyline of the franchise) and are categorized as fanfiction. Both Star Wars and Star Trek draw a wide variety of fans who have conflicting opinions about how the fandom should be expressed and how other fans should participate in the culture.

The tensions between fans as creators and fans as consumers are most pronounced in the widespread fan culture of Harry Potter. Fan groups enjoy the series in many different ways, according to their personal creativity preferences. Fan sites such

as The Leaky Cauldron and conventions such as Prophecy and LeakyCon are ways that many fans connect with each other both online and in person. Additionally, fans contribute to the fandom in their own non-canonical ways, with wizard rock bands and fanfiction. The biggest controversy among fans in the Harry Potter fandom occurs through fanfiction, which is a phenomenon that frequently utilizes Harry Potter as source material, since the fans have different ideas about how the original text should be interpreted. For example, many Harry Potter fans participate in "shipping" (that is, pitching a romantic relationship between two characters who often had no indication of being in love) different combinations of characters, such as Harry Potter and Hermione Granger—good friends in the series who never pursue a romantic relationship (Schwabach 391). (Shipping fan art may be viewed at various fandom websites, most notably *DeviantArt*: www.deviantart.com.) Thus, the Harry Potter fandom is remarkable in the sense that it is constantly in motion between the fans, the author, and the text.

The phenomenon of fanfiction will offer clearer insights into the definition of a "real" fan in different fandoms. I have chosen fanfiction instead of other fan expressions, such as cosplay (dressing up as a character from a fandom when going to an event such as a convention), because fanfiction is a creative process in which fans build on existing canon, whereas cosplay is a reflective celebration of canon as it currently exists. Fanfiction is a speculative text about the fandom's characters that places them into new situations and predicts how they would act. In this way, fans can take the original text into their own hands as a personal creation.

As Henry Jenkins III argues about the Star Trek fandom, "Star Trek is not simply something that can be reread [or re-watched]; it is something that can and must be rewritten in order to make it more responsive to [the fans'] needs, in order to make it a better producer of personal meanings and pleasures" (Jenkins 87). Thus, for Jenkins, fanfiction is not only beneficial to fandoms, but perhaps even required for fandoms to fulfill their ultimate role—to personally apply to situations that the fans can understand and create for themselves. For this reason, "the fans often cast themselves not as poachers [a term that Jenkins uses pejoratively when describing fanfiction writers] but as loyalists, rescuing essential elements of the primary text misused by those who maintain copyright control" (Jenkins 87). The fanfiction becomes an outlet for fans, a way for them to connect with other fans in ways that they otherwise could not. By appointing themselves as creators of the text through fanfiction, fans claim that they are better able to understand and interpret the characters and the text than the original author. For example, "many [Star Trek] fan writers characterize themselves as 'repairing the damage' caused by the program's inconsistent and often demeaning treatment of its female characters" (Jenkins 93). Jenkins would argue that fanfiction is not just important but necessary if fandoms are to be meaningful to fans. Molding the text is a method that fans use to connect and shape the text to suit their individual needs.

Although many fans read and write fanfiction, not all participants in the fandom value fanfiction equally. For many fans, fanfiction is an outlet for creative and personal reflection on the original franchise text, but others view it as a defilement

of the canon. This debate becomes more complex when one considers the legality of fanfiction, which has caused some copyright disputes between the author and the fans, especially when fans are economically interested in the fandom. According to Aaron Schwabach, a professor of law, there are three main objections that an author might have to fanfiction: (1) fanfiction “alters the nature of the original work,” (2) fanfiction “anticipates elements of the author’s own future works,” which constrains authors’ ability to publish their own ideas, and (3) fanfiction “borrows extensively from the author’s own work,” leading to copyright concerns (Schwabach 388). In this way, fanfiction often impedes the author’s ability to properly publish and create a franchise world, and may cause some fans to view fanfiction writers as not “real” fans because of their carelessness with the text.

These copyright concerns have caused authors to react in a variety of ways. For example, Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry responded positively to Star Trek fanfiction, allegedly telling George Lucas, “Leave [the fans] alone, they’ll make you rich!” (Schwabach 390). However, some authors place more defined limits on what fans can do with the original text. J. K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books, has sued fans who attempted to publish fanfiction, “even though the same material had long been available online, with Rowling’s approval” (Schwabach 402). Generally, the distinction between parodic fanfiction and plagiaristic fanfiction is unclear, leading to great confusion among fans and authors about whether fanfiction writers should be allowed to express their individual fandom.

Considering the significant positive impact of

fanfiction on the communities of fans, fanfiction becomes a method to further the communal purpose of fandoms. When an author publishes a text, he or she is, to some degree, releasing control of it, as it is not possible to control who is allowed to consume that text. Additionally, although the fans can be steered toward a particular way of interpreting a text, it is impossible to require a specific interpretation of the text. Thus, when authors release their texts, they are figuratively entering into a contract with their fans. In this contract, the author agrees to guide the fan base through official texts, but the opinions about that text belong to the fans themselves. One good example of this contract is in the Star Wars fandom. Disney bought the rights to the Star Wars franchise in 2012, and by 2014, as the new “creator” of the franchise, it declared that what was previously known as the “Expanded Universe” (texts – not including the Skywalker Saga movies – that were released as additional stories about the Star Wars universe) would now become “Legends,” non-canonical works that should be treated as speculative fanfiction (*Star Wars Expanded Universe*). Thus, echoing the conflict of the Star Wars fandom, Disney has made a clear distinction between what is canon and what is merely fanfiction. Although this canon-fanfiction divide does alienate the fans’ contributions to the fandom to some degree, it is a reasonable compromise that allows these texts to exist without labeling the fans who participate through non-canonical method as “fake” fans. Due to the unstoppable nature of fanfiction in fandoms, perhaps a sharper divide would eliminate some of the conflicts between the definitions of a “real” fan.

In order to undertake this compromise, fan-

dom assumptions need to change: instead of dividing fans into Bacon-Smith's "interest groups," fans must return to the true purpose of fandoms. Fandoms are not places of competition among fans, wherein individuals hope to rise in status above the masses to become an "authentic expert" on everything within the limits of the fandom, as in a capitalistic community. Instead, fandoms should be interpreted with a more socialistic lens, recognizing that communal ideas circulating among fans are unstoppable, and that the community actually becomes the fandom's greatest strength. Through his fieldwork with various Star Trek fans, Robert V. Kozinets has found that the fandom is a "social utopia" in which "some fans assert that Star Trek fandom ... is a place where many of those who do not easily fit into mainstream social roles ... can find a form of sanctuary and acceptance" (Kozinets 72). Kozinets imagines fandoms as communities of harmony and acceptance in a way that Bacon-Smith's idea of interest groups fails to accomplish.

How would Kozinets's social utopia work in application? Conflicts between individuals are inevitable and must be acknowledged when creating a new model for ideal fan interaction. In his book, Will Brooker pursues this inevitable conflict in two chapters that examine case studies of two different examples of fandom interactions: the equally valid methods of fandom participation of watching Star Wars with friends and watching it alone. In this juxtaposition, Brooker demonstrates that fandom is not reliant on social participation or knowledge to make someone a "better" fan. Rather, the fandom's meaning changes based on how people participate with the text. For Star Wars fans watching

in groups, the fandom involves quoting the text, debating the canon, and generally joking about the content with inside jokes. However, without a group, fandom participation is "more like the traditional practice of scholarship, the reclusive study of a dense primary text" (Brooker 64). With these case studies, Brooker demonstrates how the social utopia of fandom can encompass different identities of interest groups and yet view those differences as equally legitimate. Fandom can be associated with individual textual interpretation but also group identity. Ultimately, one can conclude that belonging to a fandom does not depend on one's rank in the fandom; rather, the only requirement is one's participation. Individual reflection is as valid an interpretation of the text as group discussion, and neither method is an exclusive category, as fandoms are intersections between individual love of the text and communal engagement with others. During instances of individual textual reflection, a fan is still actively engaging with the fandom, formulating the personal ideas and opinions necessary for future interactions with other fans. As a result, fandoms need a broader understanding of "fan" to encompass the general sense of Kozinets's utopia but also span the different individual identities within the fandom, forming a compromise between the concepts. An "authentic" fan exists on as a spectrum, not as an absolute, and the terms used should reflect that.

Although current fandoms have language to describe fans—Harry Potter fans are "Potterheads" and Star Trek fans are "Trekkies" or "Trekkers"—these definitions only demonstrate the inclusion-exclusion divide. There is no term for "fan-who-has-only-seen-the-movies," or

“fan-who-attends-conventions-religiously.” Greater precision in describing the nature of one’s participation in the fandom would make it easier for an individual to feel a sense of belonging to that fandom, in a way that would not exclude any individual fans. A myriad of terms could be used, depending on individual interest, such as fanfiction author, movie reviewer, canon specialist, cosplay costume designer, etc. With these terms, fans would feel a greater sense of connection to the larger fandom, without claiming greater authority than other fans. However, due to the necessary precision in fandom language, each fandom should develop its own unique terms that are independent of other fandoms’, which would also reconnect fans to the text in the process. Adjusting fandom language, with the intent to promote greater understanding rather than create division, would minimize conflict among members.

Although fandoms would be clearer if terms existed to mark the distinction between a more “casual” fan and an “obsessive” fan, one potential problem that would arise as a result might be intimidation of new fans. As this essay demonstrated in the beginning, individual fandoms are complex utopias that are difficult to summarize accurately. With the debate about fanfiction’s legality and questions about the authenticity of any individual fan, the tight-knit community of a fandom can be off-putting to a potential new fan. However, the addition of more precise language defining the spectrum of fandom participation in interest groups can allow new fans a better entry point into the fandom, offering them a sense of belonging where none might previously have existed due to their initial lack of knowledge. More precise

diction in fandoms, refocusing the fandom away from pointless competition, would allow fandoms to accomplish their ultimate goal—to give people a sense of sanctuary in a community of people with similar interests and passions.

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