

Thesis

**The Communication of Fan Culture: The Impact of New Media on Science Fiction
and Fantasy Fandom**

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Abstract

Historically, fan culture has played an enormous role in the creation and development of science fiction and fantasy, and the genres have left a significant impact on the lives of their fans. I have determined that fandom relies on and can be described purely by its method of communication. This essay traces the historical relevance of the fan community as it relates to the evolution of science fiction and fantasy and the contributions fans have made to the genre's literary and stylistic conventions. This paper will also be showcasing the genres' influence on its fans' lives, such as through the establishment of fan culture, as well as the reasons this highly interconnected relationship is necessary to the continued existence of the science fiction and fantasy genres.

Particularly, this paper highlights the key activities and productions of fan culture: the languages (fanspeak), dress codes (costuming), literature (fan fiction), art (fan art), and music (filking), and the organized outlets for fan activities (conventions and fanzines). Each of these activities and productions is a mode of communication, and it is this communication between fans that creates fan community and culture. These activities and productions will be explained in an anthropological manner that will explore the cultural reasoning for and issues that occur due to these fan activities.

Keywords

fandom, fan culture, fanspeak, costuming, fan fiction, fan art, filking, fan activities, conventions, fanzines, copyright infringement, fan publishing, popular culture, subculture, science fiction, fantasy, slash fiction, communication, cyber-fandom

Introduction:

Fandom, in the most basic terms, is a group of fans who form social networks with one another based on their common interest in reading and watching particular texts, and the fans in turn write or otherwise produce materials for that text. The history of fandom and its evolution into the phenomenon it has become today can be most easily traced in the science fiction and fantasy genres. The relationship between fans and professionals in these genres has always been close, and the evolution of the genres cannot be fully described without including fan history as well. For this reason, fandom is documented by the science fiction and fantasy community in a way that other genres are lacking. The fan community revolving around these two genres has expanded so dramatically that many people perceive it to be a subculture. Fan culture has its own language, sometimes called “fanspeak,” where words and phrases have been adapted to create a jargon that only other fans fully understand, and there are also rules of society to fandom (for example, levels of hierarchy within the community and dress codes). Fans create their own forms of literature and art, called “fan fiction” and “fan art” respectfully, and even have their own form of music, called filk songs. Given the diversity and complexity of modern fandom, it is no surprise that media and culture scholars study fandom as a culture in its own right.

Although fan culture is as old as science fiction itself, it was not until the 1990s when fan culture studies became more unified and the research began to proliferate. However, I will discuss fandom studies history in its entirety to give a greater understanding of fandom scholarship as a whole. Fandom scholarship can be loosely separated into three generations of study: historical summary of fandom (1950s-1980s),

the rise of media fans (1990 to 1999), and the advent of “cyber-fandom” or fandom through the use of the internet (2000 to present).

The first generation, while being the longest in duration, is the least coherent of the three and will be only explained briefly. Scholarship during this time was very broad and predominantly focused on fandom of literary texts (though the shift toward visual texts is seen later in this generation). Studying primarily the historical significance of literary fandom, scholars during these three decades did touch on subjects that were better explored in more detail in later years, such as the role gender plays in fandom. Due to its lack of uniformity of subject, the first generation is the least relevant set of research to this paper but should be noted for its contribution, however broad and/or nominal, to subsequent research.

One of the of the most well-know and revered science fiction fandom historians is Harry Warner, Jr. who was not only an active member of the fan community but also contributed two full histories on fandom. Both his books, *All Our Yesterdays* (1969) and *A Wealth of Fable* (1992), covered the 1940s and 1950s respectively and are considered to be classic non-fiction staples in the science fiction genre, though it was the latter that won a Hugo award for Best Non-Fiction in 1993 (Hansen, Online). Proving the common fan adage “all knowledge is contained in fanzines,” Warner obtained most of his knowledge through fanzines and interacted with other fans primarily through the use of fanzines. Warner became somewhat of a legend in the fan community mainly due to his thoughtful reviews of fanzines, the extremely large number of letters he wrote to publications within the genre, and his reclusive nature (Hansen, Online). Although Warner’s histories are considered informal, they contained clear and attentive recounts of

major people, works, and publications of the two decades in question. Perhaps it was his distance from the physical side of fandom (such as not traveling to conventions) that separated his works from other historians of the first generation of fandom study: both his histories went beyond reciting personal memoirs as was common occurrence in fandom studies during this time.

Although Warner's histories cover fandom over half a century ago, many of the observations he made are still relevant today. In *A Wealth of Fable*, which was originally a three-volume fanzine published in 1976 by Joe Siclari and was later expanded in 1993 (Hansen, Online), Warner discussed the growing crossover between science fiction fandom and other similar fandoms, such as fantasy fandom. For example, Warner expounded on the emergence of "role-playing" games (RPGs) in science fiction fandom, a pastime that was common for fans of fantasy. In this activity, a group of fans would come together to physically act out or write in the point of view of a particular character. This is especially interesting due the large number of RPG fan fictions (also known as "round-robins stories") that have appeared since the innovation of the Internet. The crossover between fandoms has not lessened since Warner's time, and the lines between fandoms have blurred even more over time. His point about fan speak evolving because of this blurring is particularly relevant since today fan speak has adopted words from several other source, including the fantasy genre and computer lingo. Obviously, not all Warner's observations about fans are still relevant, such as the lack of "feminine fan" (Warner, 77), but his distinct insights into fandom during that time added an interesting divergence from the detailed summation of fandom history. While he did primarily

focused on the historical summary of fandom, Warner nonetheless opened the door for later scholars to explore fandom both historically and anthropologically.

During the second generation, fan studies became both more structured and focused on fans of visual texts. During this time, science fiction scholars began concentrating on the increasing number of fans, known as media fans, who had become solely devoted to the aspects of the genre related to film, television, and comics. At one time shunned by the literary facet of the fan community, media fans (or mediafen) are often the stereotypical image most people have of a traditional science fiction fan today. Mediafen, like fans of written SF, have close working relationships with the producers of their preferred texts. Scholars of the second wave focused on how mediafen have literally been able to shape the face of science fiction on television simply through their continued dedication and inspiring love for the shows and for the genre. Throughout this decade, scholars have published works concentrating on topics ranging from the historical aspect of fandom to the consumerist analysis of fan culture to culture research on the reasons behind fan productions.

Many scholars associated with the second generation of media fan studies have undertaken the task of chronicling the significant events that have occurred in specific fandoms over time, and one such scholar is Forest Ackerman. Given credit for coining the term “sci-fi” for science fiction, Ackerman is only one of many fans to become a professional writer and editor. It is common for a member of the professional community to begin as a fan (such was the case for other well known science fiction authors - Judith Merril, Isaac Asimov, and Damon Knight). Despite Ackerman having followed this path to becoming a professional writer, his greatest contribution to the science fiction

community is as a fan icon. He built the largest collection of science fiction, fantasy, and horror collectables and memorabilia from television show and films in the world, and he is well known for being a major focal point at conventions for his appearances, as well as a key speaker. Ackerman has been participating in fandom well before the 1990s and wrote some histories that revolved around the previous generation of fandom studies. However, he has been placed in this generation of scholarship because his publications into the field of fan studies have primarily dealt with media fandom.

Having been a significant figure in the science fiction for several decades, Ackerman has written several books that showcase what he considers to be his most important memories and observations of the genre. His book, *Science Fiction Worlds of Forrest J. Ackerman* (1997), specifically covers topics relating to the progression of science fiction as a genre in literature, television, and film. Topics include the use and reuse of *Frankenstein* in all three categories of the genre, the biographies of some famous science fiction, fantasy, and horror authors and Ackerman's opinions of their work, and the many recurring themes used in science fiction like dystopia, robots, and atomic war. Because of his involvement in the fan community, Ackerman is able to describe the history of the culture in detail and to offer insight as an insider. However, it should be noted that these accounts are also limited by the fact that they tend to revolve primarily around accounts of his own personal participation. Often Ackerman's works highlight events that are significant only to him and stray from the other important general events within fandom that he did not participate.

Science fiction and fantasy fans have played an enormous role in the creation and development of both genres, and this was explored by many scholars in the second

generation of scholarship. The relationship between fans and professional authors interested in these types of storytelling is unique and unlike many other genres. These genres rely not only on the continued consumption of science fiction texts by fans, but on the fans' production of materials based on works of science fiction. John Tulloch, for instance, explores the relationship between producers and the audiences of television. In his well known work, *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Star Trek and Doctor Who* (1995), Tulloch focuses on fans of two science fiction TV shows to investigate fan power and the authority fans have on the production of these significant shows. The book observes and interviews several diverse groups of science fiction fans ranging from MIT students to Australian high school students. The issues discussed in this book include the diversity of fans, their unwavering support of these shows, and the struggles fans have with the production companies and gatekeepers of shows.

Tulloch explains that the fan community has always been integral to the genre of science fiction. When television was first developed, it opened the door to new ways in which fans could interact with science fiction by providing them a more readily interactive and widespread form of text. Although science fiction fans have always had an intimate relationship with their chosen genre, fans' authority and power has grown, or at least become more obvious, in regard to media texts. Tulloch proves this thesis by citing several instances in which the continued existence of *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* was predominantly determined by fan insistence and support, such as through large scale fan campaigns. Tulloch does an impressive job of showing the power fans have and how fans of the respective shows use this power to achieve different goals (such as the continued production of show for several decades). However, by focusing on just *Star*

Trek and *Doctor Who* fans, he has limited himself to a specific ethnography. Because these shows are much older than most media science fiction, the issues that Tulloch mentions are very specific and cannot be fully applied to any other show. Certain issues are less problematic in the *Star Trek* fandom, for instance, than in younger fandoms due to the general age of fans. Tulloch discusses copyright issues but does not touch on the subject of the age of readers versus the maturity of content of fan production. Some of the issues that he fails to address (or adequately address) are those that are vitally important to cyber-fandom and will be discussed later in detail in this paper.

The production and analysis of fan materials is another area that scholars have begun to study with increasing frequency within the second wave. Although predominantly believed to be a genre by and for men, science fiction fandom has increasingly been dominated by women for the last half century. Camille Bacon-Smith, for instance, is known for providing one of the first studies of the worldwide fan community of science fiction television and emphasizing the role women have on fannish activities and the formation of fan productions. In particular, her book *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992) illustrates that women have had a significant impact on the development and expansion of fan fiction. The author provides detailed analysis of female fans of several shows, including *Star Trek*, *Blake 7*, *The Man From Uncle*, *Alien Nation*, and *Doctor Who*, to draw parallels and show similarities between different fandoms.

Immersing herself in the fandom subculture, Bacon-Smith delves into the personal and sometimes secretive world of fandom, and focuses particularly on the practice of fan fiction and fanzines. She explores genres within fan fiction that were

either created by or appeal to most female writers and readers. Several genres within fan fiction have specifically been formed by female fans and the most commonly discussed are “Mary Sue,” “hurt-comfort,” and “slash” fiction. Mary Sue stories revolve around original characters inserted into the fan fiction world that basically act as an extension of the writers' own personae and fantasies. Hurt-Comfort stories showcase tender accounts of nurturing and caretaking between favored characters and usually illustrate the fan’s desire for more observable intimacy between characters onscreen. Last, slash fiction examples are usually homoerotic romance stories featuring explicit sex between established characters. Overall, Bacon-Smith is able to provide an insight into the motives and desires of female fans as well as their impact on the subculture of fandom.

By becoming part of the fan community, Bacon-Smith obtained a great exposure to the culture and was able to gather insider information lacking in many other accounts. However, there are disadvantages to being so close to one’s subject, such as favoritism to a particular subject and not defining terms or events clearly. She often cites behaviors or patterns in fan fiction but leaves much of the reasoning behind the behavior to the reader’s interpretation. Furthermore, Bacon-Smith’s study has become antiquated in some ways; while accurate at the time of publication, many of her findings were due to generational reasons rather than gender. For instance, exposure to other cultures through the overlapping of fandoms, such as through Japanese anime and science fiction, has caused a new generational reason for certain issues discussed above, such as the acceptance of homosexual relationships. As the world view on several of the subjects found in fan fiction has evolved, so have the reasons for which fan authors write fiction.

The third generation of fan culture study, which I call “cyber-fandom” due to the emphasis of the role of the internet (a.k.a. cyberspace) on fandom, is less comprehensive but growing rapidly and addresses the same topics as scholars in the second wave especially as they play out in cyberspace. With the turn of the century, scholars shifted their research to include the expansion of the fan community online and the ways in which the internet is impacting both the fans and how fandom operates. One of the first works revolving around this concept of cyber-fandom is by acclaimed fan culturist Henry Jenkins entitled *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Media Consumers in a Digital Age* (2005). In his earlier works, Jenkins examined the relationship between fans and the television shows and/or films they watch, such as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *Batman*, as well as the media culture, such as the production company and the actors. Jenkins calls fans “Textual Poachers,” a term commonly used in fandom research, because they “construct their own culture from borrowed materials, as an alternative social community defined through its cultural preferences and consumption practices” (1992, 24). However, he shows this poaching in a positive light and illustrates the fan community as its best: a community of hard-working authors and artists trying to become closer to their favorite stories, films, and television via reproduction. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* expands on these subjects and puts them into a more technocratic and internet dependent context.

Since the beginning of science fiction, the boundary between fans and the professional community has been indistinct and is even more so with the involvement of the internet. Jenkins explores how the relationship between fans and professionals has changed due to the interactivity and accessibility of online communities. He places significant emphasis on the growth in the participatory nature of fandom online and

declares blogging to have the most significant impact on media consumption. Jenkins also pays a noteworthy amount of attention of the potential psychological influence games, both online or otherwise, have on fans. His input on the ongoing debate over the connection between violent crimes such as the Columbine shooting and video games is both informative and definitive. However, his insight into fandom is limited to the consumerist side of fan culture and shies away from discussing fan activities that have no commercial merit and are for entertainment purposes only.

After studying the works of previous scholars in my field, such as those mentioned above, I have determined that fan culture studies can be further divided into three areas of research: the historical documentation of individual fandoms, the exploration of the cultural reasoning for and issues that occur due to fan activities, and the analysis of fan productions as cultural artifacts. These categories were first explored in great detail by scholars in the second generation and are now being applied to the cyber-fandom. When we examine these three categories, a single uniting factor emerges: fandom relies on and can be described purely through its method of communication.

By focusing on the communication of fan culture, scholars can determine how a culture has been formed around celebrated texts and fans reaction to problems that arise in their culture. All fan productions, from fan speak to fan fiction, act as mediums in which fans interact with authors and each other. These mediums of fandom parallel social aspects often deemed essential to defining a culture, such as literature and art, and are thus, representative of a culture of a specific population of people. In this thesis, I will show certain fan activities and productions from an anthropological standpoint while

placing emphasis on problems that arise, such as the legality of appropriating texts and the role gender plays.

Finally the impact of worldwide communication via the internet is key to understanding the reasons behind changes in certain cultural aspects of fandom. I will analyze the highly accessible medium of the internet and its positive and negative affects on fandom. For instance, the interactivity between fans has increased dramatically through the creation of forums and blogs. Fans are able to participate more readily and easily in multiple fandoms. However, these websites created to house fan discussions and productions are also easily accessible to everyone and problems have arisen due to age/maturity, race, gender, and cultural differences. Through public forums, *LiveJournal* communities, and personal correspondence with fandom members, I have obtained detailed accounts from a variety of fans of various ages on this subject. The data I have gathered gives a personal and subjective outlook on fandom and enables me to produce a more accurate description of cyber-fandom. The internet has impacted fandom in a momentous way, so it is no surprise that fandom, a subculture that is so dependent on communication for its survival and expansion, would utilize such a resource.

Fandom for Dummies

The term fan is generally used to describe a person who likes or is devoted to a particular activity or subject like science fiction and fantasy. Fandom can be used to describe the general collection of fans interested in science fiction, or it can reference a set of individuals dedicated to a single element of science fiction (fringe fans), such as a particular author, film, or television show. Fan culture has developed rapidly and

expansively over the past few decades in part due to the increased interest in media science fiction and use of online communication. Because an increasing number of cultural elements and artifacts of fandom are originating from mediafen, it important to note that all classifications used within this paper are primarily applied, though not limited, to media science fiction and fantasy fandom for the purposes of this discussion.

Science fiction fandom has been around since the birth of the science fiction genre itself, though the most obvious evidence of its existence began shortly after the introduction of SF pulp magazines in the late 1920s. However, there was little to no organization to the SF community until the 1930s. The founding of the fan community can be most noticeably traced back to Hugo Gernsback's science fiction magazines (often shortened to zines). Through outlets such as Gernsback's magazines, fans were able to actively participate in the science fiction community along with authors, editors, and other important people in the SF population. It was also in one of Gernsback's magazines that the existence of the Science Fiction League (SFL), the first popular fan society or fannish community, was announced. Although the SFL was short-term, only lasting two years due to financial issues, its existence and popularity with the fans solidified science fiction as a rich environment in which fans and authors alike could share their opinions, views, and ideas about the genre. It also foreshadowed the type of SF community that would be formed more than a half a decade later.

After the demise of the SFL, many other fan organizations were created to take its place, and they opened the doors for fans to directly correspond with one another. SF fanzines as well as conventions (also known simply as cons) began to be produced and organized respectively. Fanzines are amateur and recreational publications designed to

entertain, inform, and discuss science fiction while conventions are gatherings of SF authors, editors, fans, artists, etc, whose sole purpose is to interact with each other and discuss the many different aspects of science fiction. The first acknowledged fanzine, Raymond A. Palmer's *Comet*, was distributed in 1930, though the popularity and proliferation of fanzines began in the late 1930s. Although fanzines are still around today, the number has decreased significantly since the early years of the genre (Clute, 414). The first convention, however, is more difficult to determine due to some dispute over what constituted a con at that time. A select number of Futurians, an influential group of fans who later became significant in the professional arena of the SF community as editors and writers, claim their gathering in Philadelphia in October of 1936 with local fans as the first SF convention. However, a group of British fans argue that since their congregation in Leeds, UK on January 3, 1937 was an organized and planned event, that it is the first convention (Clute, 402). All the same, conventions began to be held on a much larger scale, especially after the relative success of the first World SF Convention in New York in 1939. The creation of forums via magazines and conventions just showcases the level of importance communication had to the overall formation of both the genre and its fan community. Without the establishment of this network, it is arguable that the cultural aspects of fandom would not be as highly developed today.

Fandom has continued to grow and its resemblance to other, more commonly recognized cultural groups cannot be ignored. As stated above, fans have created their own forms of language, literature, art, etc. based around their preferred texts. Jenkins states they do not “reproduce the primary text,” but instead “rework and rewrite it, [while] repairing or dismissing unsatisfying aspects, [and] developing interests not

sufficiently explored” (Jenkins 1992, 162). It is impossible to list the countless other cultural aspects of fandom that parallel with the “real” world, but it is easy to appreciate how fandom can be considered to be a culture all on its own.

Fan culture has its own language, sometimes called fanspeak, where words and phrases have been adapted to create a jargon that only other fans fully understand. Because of the diverse population of the fan community, the terminology reflects the influence from not only written and media texts of science fiction, but also heavily from gaming and hacker lingo, just to name a few. Often words are spliced together, such as with cybercrud, meaning the use of computer terms to confuse non-computer users; shorted, like with the term sub, short for subscriptions, a term used when a fanzine has been released before its announced publication; or an acronym is used, an example of which is BNF or Big Named Fan to refer to someone well-known in fandom. While some fanspeak has been assimilated into mainstream dialogue, such as fanzine, most is still designed to create a community that the “mundanes” (Rogow, 216), those who are not related to science fiction and have made no attempt to try to understand the fandom, cannot penetrate. There are also rules of society to fandom (for example, levels of hierarchy within the community, such as with the existence of BNFs) and dress codes (for instance, costuming or cosplay which is the making and wearing of a costume).

One of the most well-known and actively participated fan activities is fan fiction. Fan fiction is any type of fiction written using previously conceived characters, events, and/or settings to produce unique stories. This type of fiction is often published in fanzines. With the advent of the internet, though, fan fiction is no longer limited to fanzines and fans are now able to publish their stories on highly accessible websites, such

as *FanFiction.net*, or other text-specific sites. Like normative literature, fan fiction has several conventional classifications like as romance, action/adventure, and drama. However, subgenres have also emerged within fan fiction, such as the aforementioned 'Mary Sue' story and slash fiction.

Fan art is an artwork whose subject is a character, scene, or setting from a science fiction text. Like fan fiction, fan art has been around since the formation of the fan community though it became much more prevalent when the introduction of media science fiction. Originally, fan art referred to art created through traditional artistic methods like painting or sketching. Recently, however, the definition has broadened to include computer generated or altered images. Fan art has become a widely popular fan-ac and many fan artists showcase their work via exhibits.

Science fiction fan culture also has its own style of music know as filk. Filk is a subset of folk music that is practiced in, by, and for the science fiction (and fantasy) community. People who write or sing filk are called filkers and filking can either be the setting of new words to pre-existing music or can be completely original lyrics and music. Filk songs can range from funny to heart wrenching to silly to serious and is one of the oldest fan activities of science fiction fan culture.

Costuming is the wearing of clothing at a convention that usually resembles outfits or clothing worn by characters of an appropriated text. Costumers often design, produce, and wear their own costumes. A costume contest called a masquerade or costume call is an instance where costumers go on stage and compete for prizes based on their skill in assembling and presenting their outfits. Masquerades are also referred to as cosplay by some fans, particularly if the costumes are based on anime.

A convention (con) is an event in which people of similar interests, both amateur (fan) or professional (pros) in nature, gather for business and social purposes. There are several types of cons including media cons, comic cons, and special interest cons. Fans who attend science fiction cons are also known as members of that convention while the pros are commonly known as guests. Science fiction cons usually consist of panels, where discussions of specific topics take place, as well as several special events, such as art shows, filk concerts, costume contests, and other exhibits. Other organized outlets for fan activities are through clubs and societies and are usually on a much smaller scale.

By creating these cultural aspects and activities, fans have created a type of community that only fans can fully participate. Each of these activities is a mode of communication in which fans interact and relate to one another to create a diverse yet intimate community. While there are varying levels of participation by fans, fandom is a community where fans are able to construct “cultural identities through fannish attachment to media texts” (Hills, 1). It is clear that fandom must be considered seriously as a subculture, and after this acknowledge is made, one must then look toward cyber-fandom as the next step in fandom evolution.

Cyber-Fandom: The Good, the Accepted, and the Ugly

Similar to the evolution of technology, the perceptions of fan culture are continuously changing. New innovations in mediums, such as the advent of film and television, allowed the science fiction genre another way to reach their fans. In turn, the impact of the fan community on contemporary science fiction (media science fiction) has continued to expand. In fact, fans influence in the television realm is extremely obvious

and clear. Whether it is their ability to keep a show running for several years, such as with *Star Trek* and the *Stargate* affiliations; to revive what is considered to be a SF TV classic, like *Battlestar Galactica*, *Dr. Who*, or *Bionic Woman*; to prevent the full cancellation of cult favorites, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Roswell*, or to push for a series to be extended into a mini-series or movies, as in the case of *Farscape* and *Firefly*, fans are the most important aspect of the science fiction community. In the end, the fan community continues to thrive, grow, and gain influence and as long as the unceasing fan support of the genre exists, SF will also always exist.

With the introduction of the internet, several cultural concepts were forced to be reevaluated, and in particular, cyber-fandom and other forms of virtual communication/interaction have altered our perceptions of community and identity. Loosely defined, a community is a social group of people who share common interests and environment. Clearly this definition is very similar to the one used earlier to describe fandom. However, those who participate in fandom do not necessarily live in the same place, and especially with cyber-fandom, fans often communicate without ever physically meeting each other. Therefore, our definition of community must be expanded further.

Many argue that a “sense of community” (Chavis, 24) or identity is more useful to the definition of community (and thus culture) than the physical closeness of the community’s participants. Sense of community is “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (Chavis, 24). In cyber-fandom, fans come together virtually rather than physically to share their interests and productions and create a virtual community and culture. Because of cyber-

fandom's virtual nature, the connection between the community in cyber-fandom to communication must be stressed: it is literally through communication with typographical characters (letters and symbols found on a keyboard) that community on the internet is formed and maintained. This participation via communication is the primary means by which fans feel that they are part of the fandom community. Often, computer mediated groups use emoticons, abbreviations, and inside jokes to create a closer community and sense of belonging. This idea is similar in many ways to the development of fanspeak: "as groups develop over time they generate group-specific meaning... new forms of speech, or genres, unique to that community" (Watson, 122). The main reason fans participate in fandom is to find a place where they will be accepted for their activities that are considered "fanatic" by the normative society. Cyber-fandom in particular allows a diverse set of people to interact and to not be judged based on their social, racial, or economic backgrounds and instead on the merit of their commitment to their chosen fandom(s).

Fans are able to create a fan community due in part to the high level of accessibility and interactivity of the internet. Fans are able to go online and easily communicate with other fans and participate in fannish activities, and it is through these communications and activities from which fan identities emerge. Within cyber-fandom, fans communicate with one another primarily through blogs. Blogs are websites that allow people to "post" written entries and for people to "reply" to these entries. Blogs, which can range in function from providing commentary or news to acting as online diaries, operate as a forum in cyber-fandom for fans to interact with one another. An example of a blog website that is used by a large number of fans is *LiveJournal*

(<http://www.livejournal.com>), and this particular blog allows its users to sort their individual “journals” by subject or interests and to form “communities” around these interests. These blogs are accessible by people around the world which allows for a cross-pollination of culture. Fans can also create and visit specialized websites that center around specific fan productions, like fan art or fan fiction, while clubs and conventions use these sites to promote their organizations. The internet has allowed fans to communicate with one another on a much larger scale and with a more diverse population. The influence of this accessibility, such as the effects from cross-pollination of cultures and economic changes, is very significant and must be discussed further.

The accessible nature of cyber-fandom allows fans to participate in “multi-fandom” or multiple fandoms simultaneously. In the print day, when fandom primarily revolved around fanzines and conventions, fans were limited to one or very few individual fandoms due to time constraints and economic reasons. The internet is a highly interactive medium and fans are able to access several fandoms from the same outlet: their computer. As mentioned above, websites like *LiveJournal* allow for fans to list their interests; this list also acts as a hyperlink organizer for which fans navigate and use to traverse fandoms. Because of this interactivity, fans are literally a mouse click away from the next fandom in which they participate. The amount of time a fan puts into his or her fandoms is determined with less difficulty now that they are no longer limited to the physical world. Fans are able to participate as much or as little as they deem appropriate. The internet provides an effectively free means to partake and contribute to their fandoms of choice, and thus writing a fan fiction story or exhibiting a piece of fan art has never been easier. Cyber-fandom provides fans a seemingly effortless means of

communication that is inexpensive as well as allowing for a greater degree of involvement from the fan in multi-fandom.

One cannot talk about the shifting perception of community without also discussing the impact this shift has on the concept of identity in cyber-fandom. Identity in cyberspace has been a subject of discussion because cyber-fandom has shaped the ways in which fans express their identities. While science fiction is stereotypically believed and portrayed to be a genre by and for men, cyber-fandom is dominated by women (Bacon-Smith, 113). In fact, early scholarship on the subject of fandom either ignores the concept of the female fan or disregards the presence of women as insignificant. Harry Warner, an early fan culture scholar, dedicates only a small section of one chapter of his book *All Our Yesterdays* to what he terms “Feminine Fans.” He declares that:

“around 1940, it was possible to claim that there was no such thing as an independent, honest-to-goodness girl-type fan, because virtually all the females in fandom had a fannish boy friend, brother, husband, or some other masculine link.” (78)

He then briefly describes the ability of some to “pass” for other races and ethnic groups due to assumption that these fans were white males. One is left to wonder how many women were “passing” as “honest-to-goodness” men. Interestingly, this idea of passing is a concept often discussed when dealing with online communities. Passing online is extremely easy, and yet women are highly visible and accepted in cyber-fandom. The lack of passing for men by women online is due in part to the open nature of the fan community as well as to the social evolution of our everyday society. Female fans are no longer passing for male and are instead more interested in creating pseudonyms or “pseudos” (Jenkins 1992, 201) from which an online identity can be formed.

The concept of “in real life” or IRL has emerged in cyber-fandom to help fans distinguish between their online identities and those they maintain outside of fandom. Often, fans will keep their fandom activities separate from their normative activities and this disconnect is influenced by the level of anonymity the internet lends its users. IRL identity could differ from online identity in many aspects ranging from sexual to professional to political to familial. Fans are not limited by social connotations of their everyday lives and are thus more adventurous in the topics they discuss and activities in which they participate. For instance, as stated previously, slash fiction is fiction in which two canonically heterosexual men are described to be in a homosexual relationship within fanon texts (those written by fans) and that slash stories are primarily written by heterosexual women. Reading or writing slash fiction is considered to be “abnormal and threatening” to the hetero-normativity of our society and is thus seen as a “disruption of dominant cultural hierarchies” (Jenkins 1992, 17). The internet, however, allows female fans a means in which to explore their sexuality without risk of this exploration negatively affecting aspects of their everyday or mundane lives even more easily before the existence of cyber-fandom.

Slash fiction has been around for decades as a subject of much discussion within fandom scholarship. Many science fiction scholars describe slash fiction as a way for female fans to attach feminine ideals and emotions to characters in a male dominated genre. Because visual media science fiction and fantasy texts do not give “models of active, engaged women” (Bacon-Smith, 240), female fans appropriate the male characters and use them as vehicles to express feminine qualities and sexuality. Often, one of the men will be given feminine attributes or placed in female “roles,” such as the role of the

wife, in an attempt to feminize the male character. The lack of strong female characterization and heterosexual romance narratives in SF texts forces “the [female slash] writer [to use] male homosexuality to reconstruct men... and change them into people with whom women can coexist more comfortably” (Bacon-Smith, 248). Female fans are able to achieve “a sexual enjoyment that is intense, whole and satisfying... and intense emotionally” (Russ, 90) by exploring “a love that is entirely free of the culture’s whole discourse of gender and sex roles” (Russ, 89). By reconstructing the normative idea of sex and gender, slash fiction explores identities and relationships that the original texts have underrepresented or ignored. This explanation is not new to fandom studies and although it is still relevant with fans who participate in cyber fandom, it does not explain certain aspects of the genre that evolved within the last decade (such as the introduction of “girl power” to television and the influence of other cultures).

There has been a shift in the past decade in which female characters have become more common in SF and fantasy media texts, and this change is often associated with the introduction of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997). With *Buffy* came the assumption that it was acceptable for strong female characters to not only perform alongside male characters but also for a woman to be in the role of the main protagonist. Other examples of television shows with strong characterization of women include but are not limited to James Cameron’s *Dark Angel* (2000), Joss Whedon’s *Firefly* (2002), and Ronald D. Moore’s *Battlestar Galactica* (2003). Despite this increased sense of “girl power” in the SF and fantasy genres, cyber-fandom is still swarming with slash fiction and we must therefore explore the reasons for the continued existence of slash.

Perhaps one explanation of the continued production of slash fiction has to do with the exposure of fans to diverse cultural and moral backgrounds via both television and cyber-fandom. For instance, in the mid-1990s, Japanese animations, known simply as “anime,” began to be aired on children’s networks like Cartoon Network. Many anime texts contain positive images and stories involving homosexuals and bisexuals and focus on the closeness that can emerge in same-sex relationships (both sexual and friendship in nature). *Sailor Moon* (1992) is one such anime that targets children as its primary audience yet contains gay, bisexual, and transgender characters. In America, alterations in the characters’ genders and relationships were made in an attempt to avoid the social and moral criticism of the general public. However, as fans became active in *Sailor Moon* fandom, the truth was easily obtained, and this often led to further exploration of the omitted elements of the show.

Not only are anime texts open to different representations of gender and explore issues of homosexuality, the fandom around anime is equally focused on these concepts. This is not to say that Japanese culture is more accepting to homosexuality, but rather than anime texts produced in Japan seem to contain a larger number of “taboo” subjects than Western children’s cartoons. The influence of other cultures (such through anime), combined with the already large amount of slash content in cyber-fandom, forces fans at younger and younger ages to confront these issues of sexuality. One can argue that fans mature as fandom participants in an environment not only condoning slash fiction but also celebrating it as a genre of merit. As a result, fans essentially “grow-up” with certain degree of expectancy to dealing with slash fiction.

While having several positive elements, the accessible nature of cyber-fandom has given rise to certain issues and concerns. Although legal issues over the appropriation of texts are not new to fandom, cyber-fandom has opened the doors for a greater number of fans to become “textual poachers.” There has always been a close and symbiotic relationship between fans and the professionals of their preferred texts. Without the fans, professionals would have no audience for their works, and conversely, fans would have nothing to basis their fandom on without the professionals first creating the texts in which fans “poach.” JK Rowling, the author of acclaimed children’s books *Harry Potter*, has stated that she “[finds] it very flattering that people love the characters” enough to write stories and create art based on her work, and Joss Whedon of *Buffy* fame says he “loves [fandom]” (“Fanfiction Supporters” Online).

However, other authors do not like fans tampering with and publishing their own interpretations of their works. One of the more noticeable cases in the debate over intellectual property right occurred on April 7, 2000; on this day, Anne Rice, author of the popular *The Vampire Chronicles*, posted on her website that she did not condone fan fiction of any kind. She then issued complaints to several fan websites and authors requesting the removal of all stories with her characters. As the legal owner of these characters, Anne Rice was within her right to take these actions, and she is not the only author to do so, and the debate over the use of copyrighted material has become more highly visible to the general public due to the internet.

Probably the most heated debate in cyber-fandom is over the banning of explicitly sexual stories (or fan art) due to the children who participate in online fandom. As stated above, the internet is accessible to everyone, and problems have arisen due to age of

readers versus the maturity of content found in cyber-fandom. Several fandoms have a very diverse group of fans whose ages range from young teens to adults over thirty. When these fans all have access to similar forums, there is bound to be topics discussed by the adults that are not suitable for children. The *Harry Potter* fandom is the best example of such a fandom because although the books are aimed at children they have attracted the attention of adults as well. A popular adult website of Harry Potter fan fiction known as the “Restricted Section” (<http://www.restrictedsection.org>) received a “cease and desist” letter in 2003 from the lawyers representing J.K. Rowling’s Literary Agency and Warner Bros. The letter stated the ease of which “impressionable children” could be directed to the website (such as through search engines) was a “matter of serious concern” for J.K. Rowling. (“Harry Potter...” Online) Known to be a supporter of fandom, J.K. Rowling’s apparent issue with the website was not the appropriation of her text but that sexually explicit and graphically violent stories being produced in a fandom occupied by children. The website, and many others like it, still exists, but contains the added security measure of password protection of graphic stories and can no longer be tracked via search engines.

Many other websites began banning NC-17 stories (those that contain sexual scenes) around 2002 in an effort to uphold the Child Online Protection Act (COPA) and to satisfy angry parents and the professional authors of certain texts. Parents and other institutional figures of normative society believe that these stories must be banned to “[protect] children from the ‘corrupting’ influence of undesired cultural materials” (Jenkins 1992, 17). Although COPA has been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court (“The Legal Challenge...” Online), websites of high visibility to the general public

and children in particular, like *FanFiction.net*, support the act because those in charge of the website want to avoid as much conflict as possible. Other websites, like *AdultFanFiction.net*, force fans to state their date of their birth and sign an electronic signature to certify and affirm that they are legally able to view the mature stories. *LiveJournal* has requested that its users “friends-lock” their journals and communities so that the creators and “moderators” can determine the age of those that view the content. However, it is extremely easy for children to get around these restrictions, and in a way, the issue of “passing” has simply shifted from being a gender problem to one related to age and maturity.

Other taboo subgenres that are considered to be socially deficient have also arisen in cyber-fandom. These subgenres include but are not limited to stories in which rape is discussed, often referred to as non-consensual or simply “non-con,” and sexually explicit stories revolving around a young character of non-legal status, known as “chan” or “shota” fiction. The former, while dealing with a graphic subject, is not as protested as the latter because these stories are considered to have the potential for literary merit. Chan fiction, on the other hand, is seen to be morally corrupt despite arguments that chan fiction is not simply child pornography. The assumption that chan fiction is about the immoral exploitation of children ignores the fact that the conventions and characteristics of the subgenre can be used to explore issues of sexuality and gender similarly to fiction portraying adults. In some cases, such as within the *Harry Potter* fandom, it is canonically accurate for the characters in fan fiction to be minors and cannot be avoided unless the stories take place in a future timeline. Fandom in general does not impose societal restrictions and allows for each fan to determine the age at which the protagonists

engage in sexual activity. Some fans ensure that their story contains sufficient information that it is evident that the characters are legal, while others portray younger characters being sexually active. As underage sex is a volatile issue in our society, it is easy to understand why this debate is animated inside and outside fandom.

The debate between free speech and the moral responsibility of internet communities to protect children continues to be controversial. Parents and other social authorities see “those who enjoys [slash or chan fiction] as intellectually debased, psychologically suspect, or emotionally immature” (Jenkins 1992, 17). These authorities argue that exposing children to mature content of this nature will cause “harmful social effects or negative influences” (Jenkins 1992, 17) on the children and should be banned from being published online. However, fans that read, write, and create art within subgenres of slash or chan fiction believe that it is the responsibility of the parents to monitor their children. Fans feel that they should not be held accountable for when appropriate warnings and levels of restriction against minors viewing mature content are disregarded by the children. Adult fans believe that their interests are no longer being taken into consideration and instead their right to communicate and express themselves is being limited by major organizations, corporations, and politicians that have little or no understanding of the technology or culture that has evolved from the internet. The argument over the right of the adult fans versus the protection of the child fans has no clear answer and will continue to be debated well into the future.

4. Conclusion

Fandom is a subculture built around the production of fan materials derived from an appropriated text and the communication of fans about this text. Fans do not see themselves as thieves or plagiarizers, but as active readers of a particular work of media in which can be expanded by them to involve notable ideas and details. Fans are using the creativity of others as the basis for their own creative endeavors and have produced “cultural artifacts” (Jenkins, 223) from this “poaching.” These cultural artifacts, such as fan fiction and fan art, are also modes of communication around which fans have crafted their entire community. The term culture may be ambiguous to many, but to fans the term refers to the activities and methods of communication that have give significance and importance to their existence.

From these modes of communication, fans have been able to redefine the definition of community and identity to fit their own standards outside hetero-normative society. As Henry Jenkins states:

To speak as a fan is to accept what has been labeled a subordinated position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional authorities. Yet it is also to speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of taste, which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic. (23)

Despite the lack of acceptance of fandom by “the cultural hierarchy,” the fan community has continued to thrive and has become a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. Many of the issues being dealt with in cyber-fandom, for instance, are implicative to concerns of our general society, such as the issue of gender and sexuality in cyberspace, as well as how these issues are been communicated. Fans have altered the concept of community and opened the doors to creating a culture in which a diverse population of people can interact without fear of discrimination. These issues and concerns are revolutionary in

many ways and are considered by some to be critical for the progression of our larger society as a whole. Some issues may not have clear answers, yet they are suggestive to the complex and multifaceted nature of fandom. Fandom is progressive, particularly in regards to the use of cyber-space and technology that allows fans the use of engaging, problem solving, and creative communication. Such communication will continue to allow this special community to increase in number as well as have influence on major issues in our society. While fans may not be accepted by all members of the current recognized normative society, it is important for people to be appreciative to the progressive nature of fandom.

After all, fandom is a way of life, which fans of course have a term for: FIAWOL.

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