BEYOND RESISTANCE: GENDER, PERFORMANCE, AND FANNISH PRACTICE IN DIGITAL CULTURE

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Although the web appears to be a welcoming space for women, online spaces—like offline spaces—are rendered female through associations with the personal/private, embodiment, or an emphasis on intimacy. As such, these spaces are marked, marginalized, and often dismissed. Using an explicitly interdisciplinary approach that combines cultural studies models with feminist theory, new media studies, and performance, *Beyond Resistance* uses fandom as a way to render visible the invisible ways that repressive discourses of gender are woven throughout digital culture. I examine a variety of online fan practices that use popular media to perform individual negotiations of repressive ideologies of sex and gender, such as fan-authored fiction, role-playing games, and vids and machinima—digital videos created from re-editing television and video game texts. Although many of these negotiations are potentially resistive, I demonstrate how that potential is being limited and redirected in ways that actually reinforce constructions of gender that support the dominant culture.

The centrality of traditional notions of sex and gender in determining the value of fan practices, through both popular representation and critical analysis, serves as a

microcosm of how discourses of gender are operating within digital culture to support the continued gendering of the public and private spheres within digital space. This gendering contributes to the ongoing subordination of women under patriarchy by marginalizing or dismissing their concerns, labor, and cultural tastes.

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For my Bean and my Dood.

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CHAPTER I

INRODUCTION: LABORS OF INTIMACY

It is no accident that this project, which addresses the intersection of resistive media consumption practices and discursive formations of gender in online space, focuses so intently on issues of embodiment and intimacy; it constitutes, for me, a double birth of sorts. It was researched and written first while I was pregnant and then with my infant son at my breast—with me snuggling him close in a sling while my fingers tapped on the keyboard. Yet, I find myself tempted to delete these lines for fear of being seen as lacking in objectivity, motivated by emotion, or (worse) by hormones. After all, this is a work of scholarship, not a birth story. This distinction I find myself citing—between the authority of former and the dismissal of the latter—encapsulates the project's central focus: the ongoing marginalization of female concerns, labor, desire, and cultural tastes. Academic scholarship is reviewed by peers and printed in books published by University presses while women's' birth stories are pasted into scrapbooks, scrawled into journals, and typed into internet discussion forums browsed mostly by fellow mothers. Yet, the two genres are not dissimilar. Producing a work of scholarship is much like producing a human being; it is a long and grueling process that involves labor characterized alternately by pain, frustration, joy, exhaustion, and love. It makes sense that stories of fruition for both should be given equal weight. Yet, my hesitation in foregrounding the project in notions of birth, intimacy, and embodiment reflects the over-arching ways in which gendered notions of authority and legitimacy are operating in restrictive ways within the realm of academia.

The goal of this dissertation is to illustrate how these discourses are operating in similar ways within the seemingly emancipatory sphere of online space by examining how the arguably resistive practices of media fandom are being redirected toward reinforcement of repressive ideologies of sex and gender. This reinforcement is articulated in three general ways: through the use of cultural constructions of gender to determine the legitimacy of different modes of fannish consumption, the corporatization of fandom that is taking place through the production of media as 'transmedia,' and the centrality of performance in day-to-day life within digital culture.

Using an explicitly interdisciplinary approach that combines cultural studies models with feminist theory, new media studies and performance, *Beyond Resistance* uses fandom as a way to render visible the invisible repressive discourses of gender woven throughout digital culture. This dissertation examines a variety of online fan practices that use popular media to perform individual negotiations of repressive ideologies of sex and gender, such as fan-authored fiction, role-playing games, and vids and machinima—digital videos created from re-editing television and video game texts. Although many of these negotiations are potentially resistive, this potential is often limited and redirected in ways that actually reinforce patriarchal constructions of gender that support the dominant culture.

I have chosen the phenomenon of media fandom as a site for exploring the implications of the gendering of online space for reasons that are both methodological and personal. From a methodological standpoint, my project reads fan practices as a microcosm of how discourses of gender are operating within digital culture to support the continued gendering of the public and private spheres within digital space. By exposing

the ways in which traditional notions of sex and gender are deployed, in both popular representation and critical analysis, to determine the value of fan practices, this project seeks to make male privilege on the internet more visible. Raising awareness of the gendered nature of online space is an important endeavor because this gendering contributes to the ongoing subordination of women under patriarchy by marginalizing or dismissing their concerns, labor, and cultural tastes.

The area of fan studies is one that is largely situated within the larger field of cultural studies. Yet, it is truly interdisciplinary, crossing the fields of reception studies, television and new media studies, anthropology, sociology, communications, feminist criticism, and legal studies. Still, even within this diversity of approaches, fan studies is usually divided up into two general foci: study of the fan and fan cultures and study of the artifacts that fans produce. In order to clearly articulate my methodology and position myself with the various theoretical fields and disciplines that inform the area of fan studies, I want to first explain what I mean when I speak of 'fans' because the definition is one that is often contested.

The notion of the fan that has been the foundation of much of the work on fan studies is described by John Fiske as being "associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race" (Fiske 1992: 30). However, this definition of fandom does not include the activities of a majority of consumers who consider themselves fans: television fans who love to watch a show but do not participate in other practices and activities associated with 'fandom', sports fans, music fans and the ever-growing group of consumers of computer and video games—groups of people who, by

and large, do not fall into subordinated categories due to the fact that they are largely white, middle class and male.

Henry Jenkins and John Tulloch (1995) distinguish between two categories of avid media consumers: followers and fans. The first are characterized by repeated consumption of media texts, the second by specific cultural practices; followers watch a series faithfully but rarely interact with the text outside of that initial consumption. Fans, on the other hand, take their consumption to a different level—translating it into cultural activities, discussion with other fans, and participation within communities. Lawrence Grossberg defines fandom in relation to a "sensibility" or "affect" that helps the fan locate a sense of identity, both as an individual, and within a collective group (1992, 56-57). Slightly broader, but along the same lines, Karen Hellekson, defines fandom as participation in a subculture dedicated to a "specific object of study" that can be anything from a football team to a television series and involves creating and passing along a specific culture, with its attendant rules of behavior and acceptability (Hellekson, 2009)[1].

My own formulation of fandom more closely resembles that of Cornell Sandvoss (2005), whose somewhat psychoanalytical approach analyzes fannish practices as performative narcissism. Sandvoss interviewed a wide array of consumers who consider themselves fans of sports and music and found that, though the intensity of practices varied, there are two indicators that function as common denominators in fannish practice: avid repeated consumption and affect. Regardless of the object of fandom—be it a sports team, a musical artist, a computer game, or a television series—being a 'fan' consistently involves both an emotional and monetary investment. Thus, Sandvoss

[1] This definition is taken from an article entitled "Fan Studies 101", published online on *Media Commons: a Digital Scholarly Network*. It is available at the following link: http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/content/fan-studies-101 (accessed 11/19/2010).

defines fandom as "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text" (Sandvoss 5-8), which can include anything from books to games to celebrities. This broader definition of fandom opens up new possibilities for fan studies by unshackling it from assumptions about subordination and disempowerment. It also does not assume that fandom is necessarily constituted by a subcultural identification. Thus, it speaks more to my own early involvement in fannish practices.

As a white, heterosexual, middle class mother who self-identifies as a scholar, 'gamer-chick,' media fan, and feminist, I have much in common with some of the fans whose work I explore in the following pages. However, due to constraints of time, I am not an active participator in fannish communities. Thus, my position in this study is of the outside observer. Still, I have an understanding of the impetus for fannish production. I started creating fan fiction when I was thirteen years old; I just didn't know it was fan fiction. In seventh grade, my best friend Michelle and I were very invested in *21 Jump Street*. I adored Johnny Depp and his character, Tom Hanson; Michelle was enamored of Richard Grieco—who played Dennis Booker, one of Hanson's partners in a cadre of young, hip, undercover narcotics officers embedded in public high schools. Together Michelle and I would fashion narratives in which we were the stars. In our 'silly stories,' (as we called them) we were a part of the *21 Jump Street* world—fellow officers recently transferred from a different precinct, or students from the school in which Hanson or Booker were undercover. We didn't know what a 'fan' was; we just liked the show a lot and, even more than that, we loved telling stories.

Like a majority of media-centered fan fiction, our stories were all about intimacy—revolving around the central theme of negotiating heterosexual romance and

female friendship. We chose our avatars, so to speak, from the pages of fashion and entertainment magazines. I chose Nicole Kidman because I had always wanted spirally curly hair and I crushed on Tom Cruise. Michelle's choice varied but she preferred short, tough looking brunettes and often customized them or combined two women into one like a "like a cross between Phoebe Cates and Demi Moore". Our stories went along with the themes of *21 Jump Street*; there was violence, intrigue, sex; our characters, like those we saw on the screen, were often victimized—domestic abuse and its romance-enabled recovery were prominent themes.

Our stories were not resistant; rather, our ideological subject positions were reflected in our character performances. The youngest of five girls in an evangelical Christian home that demanded strict adherence to gender norms, I was the passive one. I was in it for the romance and rarely strayed outside my own (very traditional) value system in my performance. My characters were often victims of abuse who were 'healed' through romantic relationships with the rebellious but sensitive Tom Hansen. Michelle, who was being raised in a secular home by a single father, created characters who were daring, rebellious, and consistently tough. She was in it for the action; career and adventure were central and romance was secondary. Her romantic relationships, like that of her parents, were often physically, sexually, and emotionally combative.

In creating our stories, we utilized the technologies available to us ways that enabled us to perform them for each other. We not only wrote our stories down in longhand and stored them in giant three-ring binders, we also used Michelle's old Macintosh Apple 2e to type up databases of characters, plots, and ideas for future stories. We took turns writing sections of the narrative; we moved from writing them down to

acting them out. Long before instant messenger programs, we developed character conversations through notes passed back and forth during math class. We performed for each other at sleep overs at each other's houses. When we couldn't be face to face, we held cordless phone-enabled conversations that extended for hours. When my family moved to the Pacific Northwest, I met Lisa and she, too, liked "doing stories" that revolved around members of the rock band Bon Jovi. Lisa and I performed our stories in the same way; we never told anyone about our stories and we belittled them in our discussion of them. Still, we practiced this well into our early twenties. When I began to formulate a terminal project that centered on media fandom, I reflected, first, on these experiences. Having been introduced to the academic notion of 'fandom' through cultural theory, I immediately recognized some of the practices being described as those I had engaged in—only on a much smaller scale. We lacked access to a larger community of fans, so we did not develop the subversive cultural identity that many early fan scholars associate with fandom (Jenkins, 1992; Fiske, 1989; DeCerteau, 1984; Penley, 1991, 1992).

My critical reflections on my own experiences using media texts in this way developed the project's first assumption: that fan practices are too complex, personal, and integrated within existing discourses of gender and sexuality to simply constitute either resistance or complicity. Negotiation seemed to be a more fitting description. Though Michelle, Lisa, and I did "poach" popular culture objects for our own use and adapt technologies to enable us to perform our stories, my own experience with fandom demonstrates Matt Hills conception of fandom as a phenomenon wrought with inescapable contradictions that enacts "essential cultural negotiations" rather than

intentionally deploying resistive "tactics" (Hills, 2002; DeCerteau, 1984). Drawing from two sources, our own experiences of growing up female in a patriarchal culture, and the images and narratives represented to us through popular media, my girlhood friends and I used popular culture objects and icons to construct and role-play narratives that helped us negotiate some of the most repressive discourses that constitute girlhood in American culture: compulsory heterosexuality (Butler 1990, 1993; Doty, 1993), the construction of femininity as passive (Mulvey, 1975), the sexual double standard, constant threat of sexual violence, the centrality of intimacy and romance to representations of womanhood (Radway, 1984; McRobbie, 2004), the ever presence of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), and the marginalization of the desires or concerns of girls (Douglas, 1994).

Fannish practices, such as the writing of fan fiction, do not take place in a vacuum, and it is significant that I did not develop these stories on my own. I always had a partner in crime, so to speak and we served as each other's combined muse and audience. Our stories brought us closer. We used them to cheer each other up, to escape the 'real' world, and to express our depth of feeling for each other. Academic analysis of fandom also contextualizes fan practices within communities that serve this same purpose—to generate and strengthen bonds of intimacy. The necessity of an audience for fan practices associates them, again, with the concept of performance. When fan communities migrated into online space in the 1990s, via Usenet, bulletin boards, fan-created websites, and mailing lists, the audience expanded even further. Yet, even within this ever-expanding context, the central labor of fandom remains that of creating, nurturing, and maintaining intimacy.

Though intimacy has been discussed as oppressive, my formulation of the

significance of intimacy to the resistive potential of fannish practices online is based on the work of Anthony Giddens (1992) who insists that intimacy has "radicalizing" potential when it functions, as it often does in female fan communities, as a "transactional negotiation of personal ties by equals" (3). Thus, I argue that the resistive potential of fandom lies not in what John Fiske (1989) termed its semiotic, enunciative, and textual productions, or in Henry Jenkins' formulation of "textual poaching" (1992), but in the intimate relationships formed through these practices and performed for and between fans.

I discuss these relationships in the context of performance for three reasons. First of all, as I mentioned, an audience for fan practices is always implied and this identifies them as performative. Secondly, within the context of digital culture and its web of social networking, data-mining, and identity construction, internet users are consistently performing for a variety of different audiences. Third, as I discuss in more depth in Chapter IV, since fannish practices consistently focus on issues of embodiment and intimacy and employ repetition, they seem to fit the definition of performances more so than that of simply 'media objects' or works of literature (Coppa 2006). Viewing fannish practices as performances of negotiations of essential categories of identity allows us to acknowledge their potential for both resistance and reinforcement without reverting back to a binary that opposes good/bad fan practices based on resistance vs. complicity.

Within the larger cultural context of the United States, the labor of intimacy is one that is associated with women; this labor is often dismissed as unimportant or un-valuable. Within popular representation, intimacy is constructed as the ultimate object of female desire, but something that men are expected to either avoid, or 'manage' (Kerfoot

1999). Popular culture objects that emphasize the importance of intimacy are marked as feminine: the so-called chick flick, chick lit, romance novels, or the television soap opera. Likewise, fannish practices that center on intimacy, such as fan fiction or the re-editing of televisual texts into analytical music videos known as vidding—and the online spaces in which they are produced, distributed, and consumed—are similarly marked.

In order to connect media use and identity to notions of gender and sexuality, I rely on Judith Butler's controversial insistence that the construction of identity is inseparable from that of gender identity because, what our society understands as 'personhood' is completely dependent on our interpretation of an individual's performance of specific behaviors and regulatory practices associated with one gender or the other within a discourse of compulsive heterosexuality. The self, in this sense, is always a gendered self (Butler, 1990 16-17) and, though gender and sexuality are not necessarily visible in computer-mediated communication environments, gender is constituted by the repetition of normative behaviors and is just as much a requirement for 'personhood' online as it is offline.

Academic theories on categories of identity and "cyberspace" ranging from the late 1980s to the early 1990s painted an overwhelmingly positive picture of the new space known then as "The Net". The Net was described as a playground where one is free to construct and play with fluid and shifting identities that cross categories of gender, sexuality, race or class (Paasonen 22). In the words of Howard Rheingold (1993a) the anonymity of a sphere of communication based only in text makes it impossible to "form prejudices about others before we read what they have to say" because "in cyberspace, everyone is in the dark" (66). Entering cyberspace and joining internet communities has

been discussed by Sherry Turkle (1995) and Allucquere Roseanne Stone (1996) as a means of constructing "alternative social configurations where the rules of 'making the self' are subverted" and computers are seen as portals to a new space that enables users to "leave behind the confines of embodiment, along with the markers of identity and difference" (Paasonen 23). Rhiannon Bury terms this the 'dream of disembodiment' which is evident in the 'cyber-punk' subcultural and much of early new media theory. Douglas Rushkoff insisted that when going online, "one forsakes both body and place and becomes a thing of words alone" (quoted in Bury, 2005, p. 3) and Mark Dery (1994) claimed that "the upside of incorporeal interaction is a technologically-enabled, post-multicultural vision of identity disengaged from gender, ethnicity and other problematic constructions" and interacting online lets us "float free of biological and sociological determinants" (3-4). However, this celebration of the empowering potential of a communication space that allows participants to escape the notion of the body and retain their anonymity—this assumed transcendence, is a return to the ontological distinction between mind and body that aligns consciousness with masculinity, embodiment with the feminine, and "invariably supports the relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy" that are justified by such a distinction (Butler 12). Thus, the notion that an escape from the material body is empowering re inscribes the very same cultural hierarchies that cyber-theories of disembodiment seek to transcend. Therefore, I want to emphasize that this project is grounded in a post-structuralist understanding of the body that—in the Foucauldian sense—views the body as a product of discourses that extend into online space. It is important to keep in mind that, "while we may be without the benefit of vision in textual cyberspace, there is no reason to assume that [regimes of

knowledge] are not operating and producing bodies" (Bury 7).

In the chapters that follow I will often refer to 'traditional notions of gender and sexuality' which, in alignment with materialist discourse on feminism, I see as "dictated through enculturation . . . formed to support the structure of the dominant culture" in ways that oppress both men and women (Dolan 290). Among these notions are the ways in which males are constructed as competitive, authoritative, tough, sexually aggressive and hard-wired for promiscuity and violence but, through processes of civilization can learn to control the lesser of these 'natural' traits and utilize the rest to enact their role as leaders of society. Females are constructed as less physically and mentally capable than males and more driven by emotion—which makes them 'naturally' fall into nurturing roles such as motherhood and distances them from technology. Western discourse of gender and sexuality aligns women with nature, the body and the changeable, constructing the feminine as unreliable, un-authoritative and dangerous—a force to be controlled. However, women are also constructed as a civilizing force—responsible for controlling the appetites of men.

Within western culture, these notions underpin the larger discourse of heteronormativity that is consistently woven throughout society at both the institutional and hegemonic levels. They construct and enforce a set of invisible norms that assume two complementary genders that line up with two biological sexes (male and female) that are each 'naturally' associated with different roles and behaviors. Within this complex web of assumptions, codes, laws, and narratives intimacy is presented as something that should only be accessible through heteronormative sexual relationships—which can only be accessed through adherence to the behaviors associated with the gender that

corresponds to an individual's biological sex. Intimacy is represented as the realm of women and men only enter that realm to gain access to sex (and, as the genres of comedy and melodrama teach us, that entrance should be made with reluctance). Women are 'naturally' desirous of intimacy while men are taught from a young age to repress their emotions and desires for intimacy.

I use a variety of methods and texts to expose the ways in which repressive discourses of gender function to redirect the resistive potential of digital culture. I chose to use a diverse sampling of texts because I feel that it is important to note how gender discourses are operating in two different types of online space: everyday space (such as social networking sites, web browsers, corporate-sponsored web sites, and entertainment pages) and spaces associated with specific subcultures (such as LiveJournal and machinima.com). Because each of these spaces, and the media objects and interactions found within, has their own specific contexts, each text and space must be analyzed individually.

In the Chapter II I illustrate the need for fan scholarship to move beyond the simple association of fan practices with resistance and suggest that utilizing theories of performance is one way to expand our analysis to take into account cultural changes precipitated by the advent of internet culture. In order to model my approach to texts and interactions in spaces associated with specific subcultures, I begin by focusing on constructions of gender and fandom in everyday space. I address the media industry's attempts to corporatize fandom through social networking sites such as *Facebook*, demonstrate how the gendering of online space takes place through seemingly innocuous objects such as software applications, and, by comparing popular representation of fans

of Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* franchise with those of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2010), explore the ways in which gender plays a key role in determining the legitimacy of fannish practices.

Although, in 2010, the World Wide Web appears to be a welcoming space for women, online spaces—like offline spaces—are gendered female through associations with the personal/private, embodiment, or an emphasis on intimacy. Constructed in opposition to the unmarked (read, masculine) spaces on the web, these feminine spaces are marked, marginalized, and often dismissed. To illustrate this, Chapter III compares fannish practices in two online locations: LiveJournal (LJ), the hybrid social networking and blogging site that has become a central hub for fan communities and corporate-sponsored fandom on the CW Network's *Supernatural* (2005-present) fan site in order to demonstrate how these two completely different locations both redirect fannish practices in ways that support the continued subordination of women within the public and private spheres. LJ, which takes its name from a genre of personal writing that is associated with femininity, is coded female through its self-representation, interface, and use by fans as a central site for the production, distribution, and consumption of fan artifacts like fiction, user icons, and vids.

Using a close reading of the CW's site, I argue that, although the tendencies inherent in the media industry's transmedia approach to production and consumption (Jenkins 2010) encourage a more participatory mode of consumption, that encouragement is tied solely to the network's agenda. Though the network solicits creative work and participation from fans through contests and a community site, this seeming outreach is essentially functioning to exploit the unpaid labor of fans for free promotion and content

in ways that seem emancipatory but, in actuality, are quite limiting. Turning then, to the interactions of fans on Live Journal, where fans use a combination of text and user-generated icons extracted from media texts to create and maintain communities that nurture intimacy, I demonstrate that, even in fannish spaces associated most directly with fandom's subcultural reputation, the limitations and conventions of the media apparatus function to align those practices with many of the traditional notions of sex and gender that support heteronormative culture.

Chapter IV looks closely at examples how fans use media texts as a means of performing individual relationships to hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality. Focusing on *Harry Potter* fans, I examine fan-authored stories that pair heterosexual characters together in homoerotic relationships (slash fan fiction), textual role-playing games, and individual interactions between fans on Live Journal in order to demonstrate how media objects can provide a stage on which an individual's relationship to dominant ideologies of gender and sexualities can be performed. I chose the *Harry Potter* fandom for two reasons. First of all, it is a globally popular phenomenon with a large and diverse fan base. Secondly, it is one of the first fandoms to come to its fruition in online culture, with its first fan-created websites appearing online in 1997. The two fan texts that I analyze in this chapter, the textual role-playing game "Waking Pandora" and the Slashpervert's novel length fan fiction *Harry Potter and the Bound Prince* serve as two opposite poles on an ideological spectrum dealing with heteronormativity; the first seeks to reinforce the dominant paradigm, the second to question it.

In Chapter V, I shift focus from LJ to a comparative analysis of fan vids and machinima—two genres of fannish production that are very similar in terms of

production but are differently valued in both mainstream media representation and critical analysis in ways that rely on traditional assumptions regarding the masculine and feminine. Both genres are based on preexisting texts; both genres rely on digital technologies for their production, distribution, and consumption; both are produced within the context of digital culture and consumed within communities of media fans. Yet, machinima is lauded as an original aesthetic art form and celebrated by the Academy of Arts and Sciences while vids are circulated via individual homepages and their producers are constantly threatened with litigation over copyright infringement. Through close readings of texts from each genre and discussion of the communities in which they are produced and consumed, I argue, despite this perceived difference of legitimacy, that these two genres are, essentially, doing the same thing: taking a beloved media text and altering it to fit their own desires in ways that perform negotiations with ideologies of sex and gender. This difference in cultural value consistently returns to notions of gender: the mind/body split, the association of technology with the masculine, the cultural devaluing of feminine genres of production—each of which are operating within the context of online space.

The emphasis of new media and fan studies needs to shift away from the construction of the internet as an emancipatory site, not to deny that potential, but so that we can address the limits and caveats attached to the 'liberation' afforded to consumers via the Internet's status as a mass entertainment medium. The resistive potential of a global and digitally connected sphere of communication is limited by the ways in which repressive discourses of identity are enmeshed within the Internet itself. Yes, the web has emancipatory potential. But, to exploit that potential, we first have to deal with the limits

being placed upon it. By focusing on how the resistive potential of media fandom is being stripped, redirected, and exploited through the marginalization of the intimate labor of fans, my project renders visible the invisible ways that the Internet—as a technology and mass communication and entertainment medium—is functioning in ways that often reinforce patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality.

CHAPTER II

MOVING BEYOND: FROM RESISTANCE TO PERFORMANCE

We live in a media saturated world where life consists of a series of interconnected performances that unfold across multiple screens. The Internet, unlike William Gibson's formulation of 'cyberspace' in *Neuromancer* (1984), is no longer a place where we go to 'travel', 'surf' or escape the discourses that construct bodies in so-called 'real' life; instead, its use, like the use of entertainment media, is integrated into the day to day activities of life through social networking and sharing sites that use the Internet's communication potential to link together people, ideas, images and media. This integration makes the Internet subject to the same discourses that construct categories of identity offline. Whether checking email while having a morning cup of coffee, web browsing on a smart phone during a commute, uploading vacation pictures to Flickr, shopping, playing games or watching television, use of the web is performed in a context that is well within prevailing discourses of gender, race and class (Paasonen 29).

With the advent of Internet culture, it is easy to get caught up celebrating the potential of the web for identity play, grassroots media production, or social activism and to overlook how the web's status as a mass medium within a culture of convergence limits instances of actual play and activism. In line with this, a majority of the scholarly work done on the practices of a narrowly-defined category of media consumers, labeled fans, insists that these practices are consistently resistant to the traditional ideologies of sex and gender that are woven throughout most mainstream media texts. *Beyond Resistance* questions this insistence by demonstrating the variety of ways that fans use media texts to cite, negotiate, undermine, and, surprisingly often, reinforce traditional

assumptions of what constitutes femininity and masculinity in online communities.

Because practices considered 'fannish'[2] involve what Henry Jenkins (1992) famously termed the 'poaching' of media texts by fans to cater to their own desires, they have been consistently discussed as examples of subversive behavior. Yet, fandom's migration, en masse, to the World Wide Web has simultaneously expanded and limited its potential as a site for activism, feminist practice and subcultural value. Digital communication technologies have expanded fandom's scope, made textual production easier and more widespread, and made fannish communities more accessible to new fans. At the same time, fandom's location in cyberspace exposes fannish practices to corporate colonization and exploitation and subjects them to discourses that construct gendered notions of legitimacy and cultural value by associating technology and material production with masculinity and undervaluing women's unpaid labor. In the context of media convergence, in which corporate media producers are encouraging consumers to engage with their products in more participatory ways, some of the practices of fans once associated with subculture are now part of the cultural mainstream while others continue to be marginalized and exploited in ways that reveal that traditional notions of gender and sexuality play a key role in determining the cultural legitimacy of media texts and the fannish practices that cluster around them.

Within this context, models of scholarship that merely celebrate fandom as a mode of resistance made possible through textual production cannot sufficiently address

[2] My use of the term 'fannish' is meant to include activities associated with media fans via cultural studies and includes Fiske's three general modes of production (semiotic, enunciative and productive) and, specifically: the interpretation of media texts either alone or collectively, the gathering, sharing and/or archiving of information about a media text (meta) and the production of fan-created media texts in textual, visual and digital formats.

the gender-selective mainstreaming of fannish practices that is taking place not only in popular representation, but also in critical scholarship. The first step is to move beyond the ideal that fannish practices, especially when conducted online, are necessarily aligned with subculture or resistance to ideologies of sex and gender. Therefore, in this chapter, I discuss how purely celebratory fan scholarship limits what we can learn about the complex ways that fans engage with these discourses in online space by defining fans and their practices too narrowly, and demonstrate how theories of performance can be useful in analyzing how people use media in their day to day lives.

Using the foundational scholarship of Judith Butler connecting gender and performativity, I construct a materialist feminist framework that questions the notion of identity online as somehow disconnected from discourses that construct and delimit categories of gender and sexuality. Through a close reading of a software application for smartphones called "Taptu Touch Search" I demonstrate that resistance, even online, always functions within the limits of discourse. As I illustrate by comparing popular representations of (mostly male) fans of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2010) with those of (mostly female) Stephanie Meyers' *Twilight* saga (2005-2010), these discourses are central in determining how different fannish practices are valued. Then, I trace the evolution of fan scholarship from its roots in the late 1980s when fandom was new, shiny, and full of subcultural potential to its place within the contemporary media landscape in order to demonstrate the limits of early fan scholarship's celebratory assumptions. Building upon the work of Cornell Sandvoss, who views fandom as a type of performative narcissism, I look at how fans use two social networking sites, Facebook and Live Journal, to construct and perform the self in relationship to media texts. Finally,

taking into account the notion of contemporary culture as televisual (Caldwell 1995) and thus always caught up with notions of performativity, I link participation in online communities and the use of social networking sites to Victor Turner's three-level model describing the role of performance in society to both subvert and reify cultural norms. In doing so, I illustrate how this interdisciplinary approach can be a useful way in to the complex relationship between media consumption and the construction of gendered subjectivities in a world that assumes a life of constant performance in front of an audience that is always online.

Notions of gender and sexuality are a point of anxiety within mainstream culture to such an extent they are obsessed over at all levels of society but, most prevalently, in popular entertainment. Thus, it is not surprising that contemporary modes of media consumption reflect the ways in which individuals engage with these notions on a day to day basis. These norms are enmeshed within our everyday lives; they are created, negotiated, resisted and reiterated through legislation, education and the production and consumption of popular culture objects that, at first glance, do not seem to be about gender at all.

To illustrate, I want to share my experience finding and using a run-of-the-mill software application called "Taptu Touch Search". A search engine designed to point users toward "Touch Web sites" in search-able categories to help find (and share) images, apps, news, wiki, video and 'buzz', "Taptu Touch Search" is an application developed for the Apple's I-Phone that bills itself as the ideal resource for finding 'the best' sites created especially for touch screen browsing. The app, with over 1400 ratings, has a score of 4/5 stars and a slew of overwhelmingly positive reviews. As I explore this new app, I am

impressed by its clean, easy-to-navigate, interface. A quick 'tap' on the 'news' button and I am given access to the mobile version of news sites and blogs that span the ideological gamut—from "The Huffington Post" to Fox News and everything in between. A click on the 'octopus' button at the top right corner of the screen brings up a sub-menu with the ability to filter my news to 'realtime buzz', full sites, blogs, touch sites, wikipedia, images, videos, Twitter or apps and games. The app runs efficiently and I appreciate the convenience of having so many sources for news all, literally, at my fingertips. In addition to its manual search feature, Taptu also allows you to browse through pre-made categories of pages divided up by general interest such as Sports, Celebrities, Music, News & Weather, Technology and Games.

As I scroll through the categories, I find myself confronted by two that give me pause: Men's Interest and Women's Interest. Although the consumer in me is impressed by the App, she is quickly displaced by the critic who finds these categories suspect. What, in the world of Taptu, is considered 'of interest' to women? A quick tap on the category icon reveals nine sub-categories ordered from top to bottom by what, one can assume, is order of importance: Women's General, Astrology, Beauty, Hair, Women's Health, Careers & Jobs, Hobbies and Food and Drink. The ordering of the categories constructs a hierarchy of gendered interests that not-so-subtly prioritizes a woman's interest in a career below her interest in hair and just a step above hobbies, while relegating food to the bottom of the list. A closer look into the specific categories reveals assumptions of appropriate gender behaviors at an even deeper level.

The 'general' category points the user to mobile versions of websites that relate to regulatory practices that constitute the female sex through cultural assumptions of what

women *should* be interested in: parenting and family (i-Village, Disney Family), home-making and the domestic (Woman's Day), fashion and beauty (Elle and marie-claire) and celebrity gossip (oxygen.com, Chatelaine). We see this prioritization reflected again within the category of Careers & Jobs in the specific career choices the application suggests for women. The first few sites are general job-search tools such as CareerBuilder and Monster.com but soon the user is linked to jobs that place women in jobs as entertainers (www.onesourcetalent.com), caregivers such as nannies or housekeepers (www.absolutebestcare.com), and cooks/chefs (www.chefva.com). Thus, in Taptu's use of categorization, we see can how regulatory ideals of sex and gender are easily distilled into something as simple as an application designed to streamline web surfing on portable devices.

The app also constructs and delimits a narrow set of assumed interests for men that reiterates a set of masculine norms. A quick and easy tap-navigation back to "Men's Interest" reveals lists of only six hierarchic sub-categories that intersect with those relegated to women, but diverge in interesting ways: Top Gadgets, Men's Health, Careers & Jobs, Colleges and Universities, Hobbies and Food and Drink. In addition to the Astrology, Beauty and Hair categories, emphatically missing from this list is the "General" tab—with its links to sites regarding parenting and the home. Instead, it is replaced by "Top Gadgets"--clearly demonstrating a male alignment with technology and the public sphere and illustrating that home and family are not something men, as a category, should be interested in. This is replicated in the career choices listed for men as well, with links to technology-based companies such as Siemens Global, AT&T and www.techcareers.com interspersed between general job search sites and links to

recruiting sites for the Armed Forces.

In its gender-based categories, Taptu is citing norms of sex through its assumptions of hierarchies of interests. This citation, as a function of discourse, further cements those norms by lending them authority. Like any media object, however, it is in its *use* that Taptu raises the most interesting questions for scholars interested in issues of gender and performance. As a user of this app, I am in no way confined to the categories assigned to me. I can easily utilize the app's other categories, its manual search feature, or browse deliberately in a 'cross-gendered' way to gain access to the media I want to consume. In doing so, am I subverting categories of gender? If I take these gender-divided categories seriously and 'buy into' the hierarchy of interests, am I simply capitulating to the gender status quo? Butler reminds us that "the norm of sex takes hold to the extent that it is 'cited' as such a norm, but it also derives its power through the citations it compels" (284). Though my use of Taptu may involve an interrogation of these norms and a refusal to submit myself to the categories of gender that it cites, my agency is still functioning in a way that is "immanent to power" rather than a manifestation of direct opposition (Butler 285). On the Web, I am still being addressed as a member of a category called "women" that is defined through embodied difference and gendered divisions of labor, interests, and value because online and off line lives are no longer separated (Paasonen 30).

Participation in fandom is also subject to the same assumptions about gender and sexuality that govern so-called 'real life' and this is demonstrated by the centrality of gender and sexuality to the new acceptability of fannish practices within mainstream media culture and the way fans are using media to perform gendered subjectivities.

Within the contemporary media landscape, becoming a fan of something can be as simple as clicking a button on a social networking site or as complex as dressing up like a beloved character from your favorite video game at PAX[3]. Fans are everywhere. We congregate physically at sporting events, concerts and conventions; we congregate online on discussion boards, websites dedicated to our favorite media objects, and social networking sites. Fandom is no longer limited to media objects but extends to cover random items, activities, religions, political figures and philosophies, celebrities and just about anything you can imagine. Fandom has become more than a set of activities practiced by a bunch of social misfits with too much time on their hands. Today, "fandom is not some particular thing one *has* or *does*. Fandom is a process of being; it is the way one *is*" (Cavicchi 1998: 59).

Whereas the word fan used to raise the specter of the socially awkward, overly-invested consumer—often constructed as a loser or example of obsessiveness gone awry, the label of fan is now taken on rather than avoided. This shift in the valuing of fandom as a state of being is, at least partly, a result of the larger cultural media shift from broadcasting to narrowcasting precipitated by the Internet's status as a mass medium. This process has reconstructed the fan as "a specialized yet dedicated consumer" who is now one of the most sought after commodities in media culture—so long as their activities are in line with capitalist principles and do not infringe on the industry's legal ownership of the media object itself (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 3-4). This construction of the fan is also, implicitly, a male construction because it validates and encourages fannish practices that cluster around texts associated with men and

[3] PAX is the acronym for one of the largest computer/video gaming conventions in the US: "Penny Arcade Expo". It is an annual convention that takes place every Fall in Seattle, WA.

supposedly ‘male’ interests such as rock and roll music, sports franchises, or video games. For example, we often see media coverage of male celebrities and high profile politicians deliberately using practices of consumption associated with fandom to construct their star texts for public consumption. Ben Affleck is consistently seen attending Boston Red Sox games; former British Prime Minister Tony Blair appeared on a football chat show during a low point of his popularity, and the former U.S. President George W. Bush, is famous for listening to honky-tonk and classic rock and roll on his I-Pod during his mountain biking treks (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 4-5). In each of these cases, these men are representing themselves consuming media that, invariably, links them to behaviors and interests that are associated with the masculine. In this way, they are using fannish practices to perform themselves as ‘normal’, regular guys.

After citing the use of fandom by these celebrities, Gray et al point out that no celebrity or politician “has yet outed himself as a soap opera fan” (5). This quip is not expanded upon or discussed in depth but its assumption, that no man in the spot light would dare associate himself with a genre so heavily associated with the feminine, infers that the acceptability of fandom as a state of being is conditional upon the perceived gender or sexuality associated with the object of fandom. This demonstrates that fandom, as a set of participatory consumption practices, is now considered acceptable but the terms of acceptance are conditional and can be revoked if the object of the fandom is *not* acceptable. Hence, the legitimacy of a fandom is not only determined by the choice of the fan object and its surrounding practices, but also by what that choice tells us about the fan’s relationship to norms of gender and sexuality (5).

It only takes a cursory Google search to find examples that make this inference

explicit. Western culture has, indeed, normalized fandom as a mode of consumption under capitalism but continues to marginalize specific practices and media objects that are associated with the feminine. Take, for instance, the recent media coverage of the furor over the premiere of the new film installment of the *Twilight* series[4] in which fans are criticized for camping out in the streets four days before the event. In online articles in both *People Magazine* and *Deadline: Hollywood*[5], the obsessiveness of the fans is only hinted at; the true vitriol comes from the user comments that not only refer to the fans as "losers" with "no life" but also zone in specifically on their gender and sexuality. One user exclaims, "ALL WOMEN???????? shocker. I bet the parking lot was a nightmare… ZING" while another states: "I'm thankful for Twilight. It gives Star Trek nerds something to look down on". Finally, a commenter muses: "If these chicks were getting properly laid, I don't think they would be sleeping on the concrete for four days".[6]

We can compare this coverage to that surrounding the release of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2010) in which the focus is on the technology used to make the film and the use of the internet by fans to make connections with the film and those who love it. A recent article on CNN[7], for example, although noting the ways in which fans utilize social media outlets to better immerse themselves in the *Avatar* universe, avoids questioning the

[4] The "Twilight Saga" is a series of four vampire-themed fantasy novels written by Stephanie Meyer about the romantic relationship between a shy human girl (Bella) and a century old vampire teen that has set records in both book sales and film receipts. The fan-base consists largely of teen and preteen girls and middle-aged women and they are collectively known as "Twi-hards". For more information see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twihard

[5] http://www.people.com/people/package/article/0,,20316279_20396059,00.html and http://www.deadline.com/2010/06/fans-of-fangs-twi-hards-start-lining-up-already-for-thursdays-eclipse-premiere/

[6] See comments here: http://www.deadline.com/2010/06/fans-of-fangs-twi-hards-start-lining-up-already-for-thursdays-eclipse-premiere/

[7] "How Avatar Fans Took over the World" by Grace Wong. January 19, 2010. http://articles.cnn.com/2010-01-19/entertainment/fan.frenzy_1_fans-forum-member-global-success?_s=PM:SHOWBIZ

legitimacy of that immersion. It does pose the question as to whether or not learning Na'vi (the language of Cameron's fictional indigenous peoples from *Avatar*) indicates a dangerous level of 'obsessiveness' but answers it in the words of Joel Meadows, editor-in-chief of *Tripwire*, a magazine of comics, film and TV who explicitly legitimizes the behaviors by insisting *Avatar* fans are "merely looking for a way to deepen their engagement with the world that has become such a part of their lives" and that it is "heartening to know people connect so strongly with the material that they want to take this extra step" (Wong 2010).

The fannish practice of immersion is constructed in such a positive way when connected to James Cameron's masterpiece and describing the activities of (mostly) male fans. The same article's brief mention of fans of the *Twilight* franchise is not nearly as affirming. Wong notes, dismissively, that "the outpouring of support for *Avatar* comes on the heels of the fan hysteria surrounding "New Moon," the second installment of *Twilight*, another global success" (ibid). Thus, fans of *Avatar* are participating in an outpouring of support while Twilight fans are hysterical, a term loaded with a history of representations of women as emotionally and physically unstable due to embodiment, about their vampire romance novel. The shift in tone and language is subtle but clearly based in gender and examples like this are rampant in mainstream representation of fandoms. This is significant because it signals to scholars of fan cultures that it is not enough to simply discuss fannish engagements with media texts in the context of ideological resistance or subculture. Rather, we must take into account the social and cultural context of contemporary fannish practices, turn our attention away from direct questions of textual meaning-making in relation to notions of resistance, and

acknowledge the fact that many fannish practices are being redirected in ways that reflect society's continual dismissal of women's labor, concerns and value to society.

My intention is not preclude oppositional readings of media texts among specific fandoms, by individual fans or groups of fans. There are many fans who utilize practices such as the writing of fan fiction, video production, conversational analysis of media texts and participation in role-playing games in ways that are deliberately resistive to the ideological status quo. In fact, throughout the project I discuss several examples of ways in which fans have utilized the nature of participatory culture to enact changes that range from individual and personal to overtly political. However, the now ubiquitous nature of activities that used to be limited to small scattered groups of media consumers undermines the notion that such acts are subversive in and of themselves.

Much of the early academic work on fandom, recently termed the "first wave"[8] (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 1-4), was initiated by scholars who were media fans themselves and sought to deconstruct stereotypes of fans as pathological and unthinking cultural dupes. Theorists such as Henry Jenkins and Constance Penley (1991, 1992), for example, utilized their status as participating members of fan communities to gather and interpret both primary and secondary sources and solicit direct input from fans within their communities. In particular, the work of Jenkins in his foundational study of fan culture, *Textual Poachers* (1992), focused on legitimating the viewing practices of fans by describing their productions as evidence of active and participatory consumption (Jenkins 1992).

This has resulted in a certain degree of 'wedding' of academic scholarship and

[8]Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington utilize the term 'waves' to refer to theoretical shifts within fan studies in the same way that feminist theorists apply it to differentiate different theoretical notions of feminism (i.e. first wave, second wave, third wave).

media fandom has led many academic scholars to participate in fandom and utilize cultural theory to construct an image of fandom that locates its identity in subversive/resistant behavior. This has arguably led to more purposefully subversive readings and productions among fans and so-called "aca-fans" alike insists that the collective interpretation of media texts holds tremendous potential for social change. However, these models pre-date fandom's migration to online space and rely on a very narrow definition that sees the fan as "Other"—defined in opposition to 'normal' consumers and assumed to be disempowered by virtue of gender, sexuality, class, and/or race.

Following up on Stuart Hall's communication model in "Encoding/Decoding," this early scholarship consistently discussed fandom as a collective practice emblematic of ideological resistance within the dominant hegemony. In spite of its limitations, first wave fan studies did much to legitimate the study of fans and fan cultures. Representing fandom as a site of battle between what Michel DeCerteau (1984) termed the "guerilla tactics" of the subordinated (consumers) and the "strategies" of those in power (media producers), it constituted an intentional political intervention that sought to celebrate and defend fan communities against ridicule in popular representation and critical analysis (Gray, Sandvoss, Harrington 2). Thus, I term this early scholarship "celebratory fan studies" and I feel it is important to acknowledge its contributions to the field, I want to insist that we move beyond some of its central assumptions: that fans are "Other", that fans are consistently using their active participatory consumption practices to resist dominant ideologies, and that fans are defined through their status as culturally subordinated.

The scope of early fan studies was focused too narrowly on the exercise of control over meaning in popular culture texts and often assumed a simplified power dichotomy that pits consumer against producer in a battle over indoctrination (Sandvoss 154-155). Consequently, the binary of 'normal' consumer and fan itself is not only left intact, it is arguably reinforced (just differently valued) , thus establishing a strict and narrow definition of fandom that centers on the very notion theorists had tried to overturn: that fans are "Other" (Gray, Sandvoss, Harrington 3). In 2010—in the midst of the time-shifting, me-centered, media-sharing and creating digital culture in which cultural production is consistently integrated into the day to day life of the average consumer, it is difficult to reconcile the notion of fan as Other with the realities of the contemporary media landscape.

Fandom's subversive reputation is linked to the appropriation and 'poaching' (Jenkins 1992) of copyrighted materials used to create fan-made texts, which associates these practices with piracy and illegal activity. Fans also tend to showcase a high level of emotional investment in media considered 'low'. Prior to the advent of the internet and its integration into everyday life, the intense pleasure that fans take from popular media was a point of anxiety in mainstream culture. Because of this, much of the popular discourse surrounding fandom has consistently functioned to de-legitimize the 'excessiveness' mapped onto the viewing practices of fans.[9] Thus, fans were popularly represented as Other in mass media due to their emotional investment in popular culture and their inappropriate cultural taste (Bourdieu). Now, as demonstrated by representations of *Twilight* and *Avatar* fans, we see this same 'othering' taking place but in ways that are gender-selective.

[9] Jenkins, 1992.

The notion of the fan that has been the foundation of the academic field of fan studies is described by John Fiske as being "associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race" (Fiske 1992: 30). The problem with this definition of fandom is that it does not include the activities of a majority of consumers who consider themselves fans: television fans who love to watch a show but do not participate in other practices and activities associated with 'fandom', sports fans, music fans and the ever-growing group of consumers of computer and video games—groups of people who, by and large, do not fall into subordinated categories due to the fact that they are largely white, middle class and male.

In line with my argument that fannish practices are being redirected in ways that reflect and reiterate traditional notions of sex and gender that perpetuate disempowerment, Sandvoss views fannish consumption as a process through which individual fans use media texts as mirrors to reflect their own concerns, values, and ideological subject positions back to themselves. Seeing the relationship between fans and media texts as essentially narcissistic, he insists that fans are not only emotionally and financially invested in their objects of fandom, but that it becomes "intrinsically interwoven with our sense of self, with who we are, would like to be, and think we are" (96). Although the object of fandom exists outside the self, the fan recognizes aspects of the self in the object; this recognition is the basis for the emotional attachment and the extension of self into the object. This extension of the self into the object of fandom is created through self-reflection. However, this recognition of self in the object of fandom is not based on an objective observation of similarities. Rather, it stems from the fan's

projection of their image onto the object itself (104). This formulation of fandom, as emotion-fueled media consumption that individuals use to construct who they are, is an ideal way in to an analysis of what fans do with media texts on social networks and internet communities because these spaces are created specifically for the construction and performance of the self.

On the social networking site Live Journal, which has become a hub for media fans, individual journals are often dedicated to specific media texts and the communities that grow up around them. In one such community, Live Journal blogger Amonitrate constructs an entry in which she integrates the CW Television Network's melodramatic horror show, *Supernatural* (2004-present) into her sense of self. Responding to a short quote from a book review in *The Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures* in which the author claims that the show does not directly address issues of class, Amonitrate gives a detailed analysis of the ways in which, in her reading, the show not only addresses class, it is essentially about class. This reading is based upon her own experiences growing up within the working class and she is so attached to it that she invests a large amount of time and emotion to craft a significantly long and detailed analysis (which she refers to as a 'rant'). Basically, Amonitrate uses *Supernatural* as a mirror in which she sees her own experiences reflected.

Supernatural chronicles the lives of a pair of brothers, raised on the road by their unstable monster-fighting father on a quest to avenge the murder of their mother by a demon, who have been thrust into taking over his quest to kill monsters and avert the apocalypse. One of the running themes of the show is the tension between their lives as 'hunters' and the desire for a 'normal' life. The younger brother, having tried to escape the

hunter life by attending Stanford and studying law (only to lose those hopes when his girlfriend is murdered by the same demon that killed his mother) is often at odds with his older brother who never left the 'family business' and holds some resentment for his younger brother.

In her post, Amonitrate analyzes this relationship in terms of class and insists that the longing for normality is, essentially, a longing for socioeconomic stability. She aligns the younger brother with a more upwardly mobile middle class ethos and the older with a blue collar ethic and chronicles the ways in which these are demonstrated and struggled with throughout the show's five seasons in everything from quotes to costuming, location and each brother's food choices.[10] What is most interesting about the post is not the reading of class, though it is very well-articulated and a top notch analysis, but the writer's insistence that she reads the show this way because of her own experience of poverty and instability as a child and that the academic who wrote the review does not see this connection because of her own lack of experience with working class issues—thus inserting herself into the Supernatural text and molding it to fit her own experiences of class.

This reading of the show can be discussed simply as an example of the foundational concept of the polysemic text—that is, a text with multiple readings inherent within it. A text that is polysemic is such on two levels. First of all, it "presents the reader with a multiplicity of possible interpretations which are consciously realized by the reader" and secondly it "allows for different readings for different readers" (Sandvoss 125-126). Thus, on some level, any text can be discussed as polysemic. However, when a fan takes that reading to the point that it is reflective of that fan's sense of self, this takes

[10] http://amonitrate.livejournal.com/501098.html

the notion of polysemy to the point of neutrosemy—that is, a text can have so many individual meanings that it, essentially, has no meaning at all and functions as an empty container which the fan fills with her/his own self (127). In this way, fandom is simply emotion-fueled consumption that individuals use to construct who they are; when expressions of that fandom are communicated online through social networking sites and other online spaces, that fandom functions as a performance of that self to others. This more inclusive definition of fandom is broadened even further when we apply it to online spaces not specifically affiliated with media fandom to cover ideas, philosophies, political affiliation, religion and any number of products, services and blogs—all of which function to construct and communicate individual identities.

As You "Like" it: the Price of Fandom on Facebook

Each day, on the social networking site, Facebook,[11] I work on building my wall. My Wall is, essentially, an ever-changing portrait of *me*, created in real time through the production and consumption of media. To build this wall, I post everything from random musings on politics and popular culture, complaints, accomplishments, mundane details of my day, or links to media as "status updates." I upload photos, videos, and other digitized pieces of my life and the lives those I am close to. I comment on the walls of a few of my 288 friends and lend my support to everything from political causes to celebrities with the click of a 'like' button. In doing so, I construct an elaborate homepage that serves as a constantly shifting stream of information about me that links me to my friends and enables sharing of status updates, photos, videos, links,

[11] An increasingly popular social networking site where users can keep in touch with 'friends' via status updates, participate in discussions by commenting and sharing links and uploading photos and various media. The site is used for everything from basic communication to job networking. www.facebook.com

announcements and discussion about the day to day details of my life.

Until early 2010, users had two different means of conferring approval on Facebook activity. Users could either 'like'[12] something or 'become a fan'. However, in April of 2010 Facebook made an interface change that collapsed the two categories into one, effectively merging Facebook fandom into the less enthusiastic 'liking' system (Jacobsson 2010)[13]. Since what people click on serves as an indicator of shifting cultural tastes, tracking clicks is indispensible to data mining and marketing operations. Analysis of Facebook's usage data indicated that users clicked 'like' twice as many times as they clicked 'become a fan' so, it should follow that merging the two categories would double the amount of clicks (ibid) However, this merger was based on the false assumption that 'becoming a fan' of something is no more significant than 'liking' something. As Sarah Jacobsson, writing for *PC World* Magazine explains, this is not the case. Whereas 'liking' something on Facebook is quick and easy way to acknowledge something without having to be involved, 'becoming a fan' of something locks users into relationship with that thing that is displayed publically and visible to anyone:

> If you "Become a Fan" of, say, Starbucks, your name is added to their fan page, and their brand is listed on your profile. And you *cannot* be a fan without the brand being listed on your profile -- trust me, I've tried (ibid). My Facebook privacy settings are set so that people who aren't my "friends" can't even search for me -- yet they can still see what brands I'm a "fan" of.

[12] As defined by Jacobsson: "like" is a link placed by pictures, wall posts, and status updates on Facebook -- users can click on "Like" if they want to give a thumbs-up or a nod to the picture, wall post, or status update. Clicking "become a fan" on something connects users with the object/brand/idea, etc. through a 'fan' page that functions as promotion. http://www.pcworld.com/article/192971/facebook_decides_youd_rather_like_than_be_a_fan.html

[13] http://www.pcworld.com/article/192971/facebook_decides_youd_rather_like_than_be_a_fan.html

I thus rarely -- if ever -- "Become a Fan" of anything.

In this way, 'becoming a fan' of something on Facebook means allowing that something to use your profile as free advertisement for its product, idea, or philosophy and, therefore, marking you as that thing's promoter. This integrates the object of fandom into the user's constructed self and performs this integration in front of an audience.

When Facebook merged 'become a fan' into 'like', users lost the power to differentiate between the two and, in doing so, lost the ability to use activities/ideas/media texts/celebrities as building blocks for their identities without involving themselves directly. At the same time, the Facebook interface was also changed to link all the interests and 'likes' listed in the manually constructed user profile to any 'fan' pages that might be dedicated to them. For example, a user who listed David Bowie under the category of music interests would now automatically be linked to the David Bowie Official Fan Page as if they had subscribed to the fan page. The only way to sever the connection to the fan page is to remove David Bowie from the list of interests. So, if I want David Bowie to be part of my Facebook profile, I have to be involved in the official page and, thus, be subjected to constant updates, promotions, and publicity disguised as 'insider' information reserved especially for fans. By integrating David Bowie into my sense of self, I am implicitly submitting myself to a barrage of marketing. Thus, on Facebook, the arguably subversive practices generally associated with fandom through foundational academic scholarship are relatively absent. In fact, on Facebook, 'fandom' is little more than shameless promotion for both individual and corporate users looking for an audience in a televisual world. In essence, on Face book, an individual's wall positions them as a star in their own reality show—focusing on the

minutest of everyday details, an unlimited supply of images, videos and a plethora of personal opinions and philosophies all performed before a customizable audience.

Therefore, in discussing the practices of fandom in an increasingly mediated world, the notion of performance is incredibly useful because it takes into account the location of fandom within a culture that assumes a constant audience for consumption and an interaction between the performer and her/his audience (Sandvoss 45). In addition, it can also help to formulate a model for discussing the role of media consumption in the forming of the self. The notion that the self is actually constituted through "processes of performance as communication, ritual and adoption of different roles in everyday life" is not new (46). The fact that these performances are taking place in a world that puts individuals in constant communication with media texts and each other in the context of online space, constructs fandom as one of those self-forming roles (47).

In applying theories of performance to the practices of fandom, it is important to understand the basics of performance, as a theoretical discipline, and the ways in which performance intersects with fandom; the two notions have much in common in their representation, interpretation and use. First of all, performance and fandom are both contested concepts—meaning that their existence is bound up in disagreement over what constitutes that existence (Madison and Hamera xi). Performance and fandom have both been criticized for being "extracurricular, insubstantial, or what you do in your leisure time" and this notion, in representation, diminishes both to "mimicry, catharsis, or mere entertainment" (xii). Fannish performances tend to be organized in relation to social and cultural conditions in ways both support and oppose dominant ideologies because they

are rooted in the experiences of individual fans and groups of fans (Sandvoss 47). These tendencies align fandom with Dwight Conquergood's notion of performance as a "generative force and a critical dynamic within human behavior and social processes" that functions simultaneously as a work of imagination, a pragmatics of inquiry, and a tactic of intervention (Conquergood, 2002, p. 152). Fannish productions, specifically, tend to do all of these things and fans use their own creative ideas to change media texts in ways that analyze, criticize, suggest changes, and create supportive communities. Thus, Conquergood's formulation allows us to take fandom seriously as a way to intervene in the world and acknowledges its potential for activism and change without centralizing our discussions only on examples of hegemonic resistance.

Performance is described, anthropologically, as formed through dialectic of experience and expression. Anthropologist Victor Turner defined *expressions* as "the crystallized secretions of once living human *experience"* (quoted in Madison and Hamera xvi), and that experience evolves into cultural expressions as varied as stories, gossip, humor, poetry, novels, theatre or film, essentially, performances (xvi-xvii). These expressions/performances function to bring experience into the world where it takes up time, space, and public reality and connects performers to audiences in ways that are integral to the construction and maintenance of communities (Madison, 2005, p. 151). But expressions also evoke experience and this "reciprocal" relationship between the two is articulated by Turner as a three part classification: cultural performance, social performance and social drama (Madison and Hamera xvii).

In the context of fandom, cultural performances can include a wide variety of enunciative and productive practices. From simply clicking "like" on Bon Jovi's fan

page on Facebook to, joining a community of *Supernatural* fans on Live Journal, producing fan fiction or dressing up as a sparkling vampire to celebrate the release of the newest "Twilight" film, each can be considered instances of cultural performance because they are framed by cultural conventions and expectations, have a limited time span, performers and audiences, and a place and occasion (xvii). They are also constituted between the media text and its consumption context in ways that turn the text into a set of practices that take place within a specific cultural and social context (Sandvoss 45).

Social performances, unlike cultural performances, "are not self-consciously aware that their enactments are culturally scripted" and they "become examples of a culture and subculture's particular symbolic practices" including, "ways of greeting, dining, dressing, dating, walking or looking" (Madison and Hamera xvii). Social performances within fan culture include specific uses of language; ways of deploying technologies, images and semiotic codes; conventions of genre or patterns of behavior expected within fannish space.

Lastly, social drama occurs when a "schism or break" in the social harmony of a society (xvii). Turner defines social drama as a four-part structure: breach, crises, redressive action, and resolution. The process of social drama deals with the consequences of individuals or groups of individuals "overtly breaking away" from a "shared set of social relations" (ibid).

Focusing specifically on fannish practices that fall into the categories of cultural and social performance, the following chapters examine various fannish media objects and behaviors as works of imagination, inquiry and intervention that, depending upon the subject position of the individual fan or group of fans, utilize media texts in a

neutrosemic fashion to negotiate norms of gender and sexuality in ways that both oppose and reiterate prevailing ideological norms.

Thus far I have demonstrated how the mainstreaming of fannish practices is being articulated in ways that consistently place value on texts and practices associated with the masculine while continuing to marginalize those that are associated with the feminine. Since the growing cultural acceptance of fannish practices is, in actuality, reinforcing the marginalization of female-centered texts, concerns, labor and value, far from being resistant, this mainstreaming of fannish practices is taking place within a continued gendering of the public and private spheres within online space that is manifested in both mainstream media representation and critical analysis.

CHAPTER III

SUPERNATURAL SPACES: GENDERING FANNISH LABOR ONLINE

Notions of media production and consumption have been consistently represented, in both mass media and academia, through the frames of gender and sexuality. In the simplest terms, production is aligned with the masculine while the arguably 'passive' pursuit of consumption/reception is discussed as feminine. One of the most valuable consequences of the Birmingham School was the troubling of this assumption through work questioning the passivity of reception through the work of foundational scholarship like Stuart Hall's "Encoding and Decoding the Television Discourse" (1973) and Raymond Williams' work on television and communication (1989). As mentioned previously, early fan studies took this questioning a step further by aligning fannish[14] practices with subversion and noting the ways in which specific groups of consumers subvert/resist dominant ideologies of sex and gender—a notion that this project seeks to trouble by looking at the ways in which fannish engagement with media often performs traditional gendered behaviors that erupt at the level of the individual fan and wind their way up through the structures and hierarchies of the fan communities themselves and their popular representation.

Media fandom has consistently been subject to popular representation that 'other-izes' fans and their media objects through feminization and/or desexualization. Jenkins' oft-cited analysis of William Shatner's famed 'get a life' skit on Saturday Night Live, is

[14]My use of the term 'fannish' is distilled from the work of John Fiske, Henry Jenkins and Constance Penley and is meant to include activities associated with media fans and includes Fiske's three general modes of production (semiotic, enunciative and productive) and, specifically: the interpretation of media texts either alone or collectively, the gathering, sharing and/or archiving of information about a media text (meta) and the production of fan-created media texts in textual, visual and digital formats.

perhaps the quintessential example of the ways in which fans, both male and female, are other-ized via their representation as 'geeky', overly-invested, mindless consumers with limited social skills, lack of sexual experience, infantile emotional/intellectual skills and a perceived inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality (Jenkins 10). However, as discussed in Chapter II, these representations of fans have shifted due to evolving digital media technologies and the ensuing switch from broadcasting to narrowcasting. In addition to changes in the representation of fandom, the Internet's status as a mass medium has instigated technological, industrial, cultural and social shifts in media production that function to encourage a more participatory mode of consumption in order to further corporate interests and profits while simultaneously limiting the ways in which fans can adapt media texts to their own desires.

The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate how fannish practices are being deployed in mainstream culture in ways that support the legitimation of fannish modes of consumption in general but limit the ways in which those practices can produce actual change to the material conditions of those disempowered within heteronormative culture. Essentially, within this cultural context, we see many fannish practices that perform behaviors associated with masculinity like broadcasting, promotion, profit-making and satire being legitimized and celebrated while those such as fan fiction, vidding or role-playing are simultaneously subject to elision or punishment due to their connections to embodiment, intimacy, the personal and the so-called 'derivative'—all of which are associated with femininity. In this way, though the much-touted explosion of fannish practices into the mainstream may seem to be evidence of an empowering grassroots media revolution, the subtle ways in which corporate media producers continue to exert

control and exploit the labor of fan producers complicates this notion.

The cultural acceptance of fannish practices that we are seeing in the context of what Henry Jenkins' has termed "convergence culture"[15] is functioning in ways that, contrary to appearances, often legitimate cultural discourses aligning authority, material production and access to the public sphere with masculinity while continuing to marginalize the interests and labor of women by assigning them only symbolic value.[16] Thus, the heart of this chapter is centered on a comparative analysis of fannish practices in two different locations on the World Wide Web: the corporate sponsored fan site for the CW Network's show Supernatural (2005-present) and the social networking site Live Journal—which has arguably become a centralized hub for a diverse array of fan cultures. By examining each location at the level of the interface and actual use by fans, I demonstrate the ways in which both the corporate sponsored site and Live Journal function to reiterate cultural assumptions of what constitutes the feminine and limit how fans can use media to affect social change.

Focusing first on the CW's "TV to Talk About" advertising campaign as articulated on the Supernatural website, I read both the campaign and the site as

[15] Which Jenkins tells us refers to "the flow of content across multiple platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, the search for new structures of media financing that fall at the interstices between old and new media, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who would go almost anywhere in search of the kind of entertainment experiences they want" (Jenkins, 2006, 282).

[16] I am referring here to the work of Jurgen Habermas in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (translated by Thomas McCarthy, Boston Beacon Press, 1984) in which he articulates a social-theoretical model for understanding how modern societies reproduce themselves materially and symbolically. In her work interrogating the value of Habermas' work for feminism, Nancy Fraser summarizes his formulation as follows: "the institutional structure of modern societies is dualistic. On the one side stand the institutional orders of the modern life-world, the socially-integrated domains specializing in symbolic reproduction, that is, in socialization, solidarity-formation and cultural transmission. On the other side stand the systems, system-integrated domains specializing in material reproduction. On the one side the nuclear family and the public sphere. On the other side, the (official) capitalist economy and the administrative state"—a formulation with dismisses the unpaid labor taking place within the nuclear family and fails to address the ways in which women are subordinated to men in both spheres (Fraser 10).

emblematic of how corporate media interests are manufacturing fandom by utilizing principles of what Henry Jenkins terms "transmedia storytelling" to encourage participatory modes of consumption while still controlling fannish use of their copyrighted content. This corporate/fan relationship reinforces cultural constructions of femininity by exploiting the unpaid labor of fans and rendering that labor largely symbolic—thus diminishing its value in the context of capitalism.

Turning then to analysis of fannish practices on Live Journal, I argue that, though fannish communities on Live Journal often have explicitly resistive ideals and goals, the site's architecture ultimately works to transform the site from public space within the sphere of the Internet into a seemingly private, feminine space—thus rendering it suitable for the performance of personal narrative and the initiation and maintenance of intimate relationships (which can be empowering for individual fans) but ineffectual as a platform for social activism and material change. In addition to an examination of the site's form, we will look at three examples of the site's use in order to note the ways in which the site's use as a stage for the performance of personal narrative functions, in essence, to reiterate cultural assumptions of what constitutes the feminine. Combining Cornell Sandvoss' conceptualization of fandom as narcissistic and neutrosemic and Victor Turner's discussion of cultural and social performance into a methodological filter, I argue that although the individual cultural performances of users can often be read as instances of blatantly resistive behavior, the social performances (as dictated by the site's architecture and norms of use) reign in that resistance and undermine its potential by placing it safely within the realm of the symbolic. In the first example, we examine a user-response to an official LJ writing prompt that encourages users to talk about the way

they utilize films in dealing with emotional stress. Next, we move on to the production and use of photographic icons as self-representation and a means to enhance intimacy in conversation and conclude by looking at the ways in which the site's form and icon use come together on a meta-focused journal in which fans use the television show Supernatural (CW Network 2005-present) as material for performances of personal experiences with issues of social class and family trauma. Each of these examples demonstrates the extent to which LJ functions as a space in which the personal is performed for the purpose of attaining and nurturing intimacy. Thus, even on LJ, where fannish practices are often explicitly and openly resistive to the repressive cultural constructions of femininity that underpin heteronormativity, the potential of these efforts to enact material change is limited by the medium itself.

For the purpose of providing context for our discussion of the CW fan site and Live Journal as locations for contemporary fannish practice, we will first trace the evolution of fannish modes of media consumption from a set of non-normative practices limited largely to the private/semi-private sphere to their uneasy and problematized place within mainstream media culture in order to emphasize the continuity of marginalization in regards to the interests and labors of women. The fact that this marginalization of female fans and their concerns/texts can be traced throughout the history of media fandom, from its roots in science fiction fandom to its contemporary location as part of a larger digital culture indicates that fannish interactions with media texts are far too complex and multi-layered too be discussed simply as either resistant or complicit with ideologies of sex and gender.

Gender and a (Her)story of Fandom

Although there has yet to an 'official' history of media fandom written, Francesca Coppa has noted that there are enough individual fan-generated histories of specific fandoms to put together a "short narrative" of the development of some fandoms and the art produced by them from their earliest roots to their contemporary place within digital culture (Coppa 42). Although Coppa's narrative functions most explicitly to trace the historical events that brought about media fandom as a phenomenon, I argue that it also reveals the ways in which that phenomenon is caught up with cultural constructions of gender, legitimacy and marginalization.

In each of the over-arching milestones that formed media fandom as we know it--the beginnings of science fiction fandom, the birth of modern media fandom and the construction of communities based on mutual interests, the impetus for change and evolution lies in the activities of the female consumer connecting with and coming up against gendered notions of power. When women were excluded from publication in sci-fi magazines, they published their own; when the narratives that spoke to women were not welcome in science fiction fandom, they branched off and formed their own; when the media texts they loved excluded narrative multiplicities they found interesting, they constructed their own and built an entire culture around those multiplicities. The replication of traditional notions of gender that can be traced within these multiplicities illustrates the ubiquitous nature of ideological assumptions about gender, sex, power and expectations for behavior and reiterates the fact that it is hard--even in the early days of fandom when it could be discussed as more of a subcultural phenomenon, to examine fannish activities as truly resistive of the ideological status quo.

Coppa's historical narrative traces the roots of media fandom back to the letter pages of Hugo Gernsback's magazine *Amazing Stories* (1926) where readers were given their own space to interact with editors and each other. Though female science fiction fans consistently wrote letters to the editors of magazines like *Amazing Stories*, space was often given first to male fans and so the letters of women were often excluded. As a result, female fans began publishing their own letters and stories in fan-produced 'zines' that were circulated via post and from person to person. These zines also functioned to fill in a magazine's 'dry weeks' during the Depression (44). The interactive element of this space instigated the phenomenon of modern fandom by giving fans ways to contact each other directly and, ultimately, begin to organize the production and publication of their own amateur work in magazines such as *The Comet* in 1930 (Coppa 42). This do-it-yourself science fiction continued and, with the release of Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* (1965-1969), expanded from the science fiction novel to the science fiction television genre and this expansion into the televisual, according to Coppa, marks the 'birth' of modern media fandom.

From its earliest days, Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* was a divisive force within professional science fiction fandom in a way that mirrors traditional notions of the masculine and feminine. Due to the show's focus on intimate relationships and psychological drama along with science and technology, "many traditional fans, whose culture continued to be centered around professional science fiction magazines, dismissed *Star Trek* as science fiction for non-readers" (Coppa 45). This gender-centered hierarchy, placing the hard science of professional textual sci fi over the soft focus of emotions and drama in *Trek* refers back to associations of authority, authorship and knowledge/progress

with the masculine and de-legitimizes embodied traits such as intimacy and emotion by dismissing them as feminine.

Star Trek, as a media text that is set in a utopian fantasy world where cultural issues such as race, gender and class have been resolved, is an ideal universe for the creation of narrative multiplicities that negotiate issues of sex and gender and this comes to the forefront as *Trek* is one of the very first media texts to inspire the writing and sharing of fan fiction based on media texts that foreground the relationship of two (usually male) 'buddies' (48). This buddy dynamic has inspired (and continues to inspire) countless fan fiction stories in several different genres that are overwhelmingly written by women.

The nature of these buddy-centered texts makes them ideal material with which to perform negotiations of gender norms because they often showcase values that are associated with the feminine but in shows about male/male relationships. From *The Man from U.N.C.L.E* (1964-1968) to *Star Trek* (1966-1969), *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-1979) and *The Professionals* (1977-1983), television media narratives revolving around 'buddies' resulted in an explosion of media fan-authored narratives. Though the cop shows may seem to have little in common with *Trek*, all of these shows share three central characteristics that function as points of identification with female fans: an emphasis on intimacy, collaboration and alienation.

Each of these shows emphasizes the importance of intimate friendship and partnership. The protagonists are adventurers and problem solvers but problems are solved collectively and not individually. The narratives are set in a dangerous environment that forces the two to depend upon each other and the nature of their jobs

(whether as space explorers, government intelligence workers or police detectives) often results in social isolation and alienation from mainstream society (Coppa 49). This archetype is embodied in the character of Spock who consistently seems to function as a point of identification with fans. As media fan Azdak posts in a discussion of the evolution of media fandom online:

> I'm intrigued by the fact that those two "founding fathers" of fandom, Spock and Illya[17], are both outsiders - and the "insider" heroes, Kirk and Solo, didn't strike anything like the same chord - and both were all about repressing their emotions. There seems to have been something about that situation that triggered massive identification in the audience. There was an interesting article I read recently (somewhere on the internet, natch) about how the Spock character was originally conceived as female, and even after recasting continued to reflect women's struggle to transcend the limitations of a 60s understanding of "femininity". It makes me wonder whether that's one reason for Illya's vast popularity with women - because we see something of ourselves in him.[18]

The fact that many female fans tend to extract characters who fit this 'outsider' archetype, arguably supports one of the underlying themes of early fan studies--that media consumers identifying themselves as 'fans' tend to have in common a sense of alienation from mainstream society based on the limitations of traditional notions of sex and gender. After all, many of the founding mothers, as it were, of fandom did not fit into traditional roles in the 1960s; they were highly educated, voracious readers and often held degrees

[17] Ilya and Solo are the male protagonists in *The Man from U.N.C.L.E* (1964-1968)

[18] http://st-crispins.livejournal.com/494884.html?format=light (accessed 2/14/2010)

or jobs in science and technology and this discrepancy between the realities of gender that these women experienced and the traditional expectations for women in the 1960s may explain their affinity for the character of Spock--"an alien with an inappropriate and disconcerting emotional range" (Coppa 45).

Though these women (as well as women currently involved in contemporary fannish cultures), may view themselves as cultural outsiders in regards to sex and gender roles, many traditional notions of gender are re-inscribed in the structure of media fandom and participation within it. This is particularly noticeable in the division of labor in fannish cultures. The gendered nature of this division is identifiable within early *Trek* fandom itself, as there was conflict between "those fans who liked *Trek* primarily for the science fiction elements, and those who liked it for the characters, particularly the buddy dynamic between Kirk and Spock" (46). The relationship between Kirk and Spock—as one that consistently emphasized their intimacy, trust and collaboration, inspired the first zine to contain fan fiction, *Spockanalia*, which was published in 1967. [19]It is estimated that by 1973, 90% of *Trek* stories are written by women (47). Whereas many male fans felt that *Star Trek* fictions focused too much on relationships, writers such as Jacqueline Lichtenberg insist that the show lends itself to a focus on relationships and intimacy because it, "did not keep its distance from emotion; did not deny close, warm human relationships even among males; did not call for a stiff upper lip; did not deny the existence and importance of sex; did not ban psychological action as a plot-moving force; did not deny the possibility of women who might be more than damsels" and was "startlingly sexy—sexy in theme, in attitude—not merely in gratuitous scenes of bodies" (qtd in Coppa 46-47). As a result, Lichtenberg jokes, the men "made themselves scarce"

[19] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fan_fiction

(47).

This gender-centered split in the labor of *Trek* fandom is mirrored, again, in its representation. Main stream representation of *Trek* fandom characterizes the fandom as mostly male and emphasizes the roles men play in fandom[20]: writing articles in fanzines discussing the science of the show and its universe, collecting and archiving, organizing conventions, learning fictional languages (such as that for the "Klingon" race) and translating texts, etc. (47-48). Very little, if any, attention is paid to the woman-driven phenomenon of fan fiction production or the distribution of zines.

Though marginalization and hierarchisation rooted in ideologies of gender have consistently been a part or fannish culture, the gendering of fandoms is not necessarily an inherent aspect of fan culture itself. Rather, it can be seen as more indicative of the gendering of leisure activities after industrialization in which some activities (such as sports, cinema clubs or rock musicians) are gendered male and their fandoms represented as more legitimate than activities assumed to be the domain of women (such as television, romance novels, celebrities or pop music) (Sandvoss 16). This not-so-subtle gender-selective legitimization of media consumption practices demonstrates Pierre Bourdieu's claim that "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (Bourdieu 436). Bourdieu was speaking specifically of social class but we can just as easily apply this notion to gender.

These gender-based variations in legitimation of fan texts and media genres reflect ideologies of sex and gender and the resulting power positions in the larger culture

[20] These activities are also performed by women within the fandom but are associated with men through mainstream media representation. Examples of this type of representation can be seen in Roger Nygard's 2002 documentary *Trekkies* and the CBS network's *Big Bang Theory* (2007-present).

and they are often replicated not only in the structure of fandoms and the divisions of labor but also in specific practices and genres of fannish production.

As one of the largest and most prolific of those genres, fan fiction, is emblematic of the ways in which cultural notions of gender and sexuality are enmeshed with the productions of fans because, though it has been discussed as resistant due to its 'poaching' of existing material, its distribution via an underground economy, and the sub-genre of 'slash,'[21] the genre still very much performs behaviors and expectations associated with the feminine.

Fan fiction often utilizes the general conventions of formulaic romance which can encourage narratives centering on the education of a heroine with insufficient knowledge and/or experience to negotiate her world. Heroes in romance are usually flawed externally but are internally virtuous. The suspense comes through the real or assumed obstacles associated with social status and the general theme is the discovery of love in overcoming these obstacles. Romance narratives nearly always culminate in heterosexual fulfillment (Driscoll 84-85). Though fan fiction plays with these conventions by pairing together couples of the same sex (slash) and setting their fics in fantasy worlds of assumed gender equanimity, the two protagonists are still understood as hero/heroine in line with these generic expectations. In addition, the fact that these narratives are considered romance, subjects them to all of the gendered assumptions about the romance genre by those outside the reading community; its representation as formulaic, immature and a substitute for 'real' romance is degraded even further by the fact that its enjoyment is predicated on a seemingly 'over-investment' in popular culture (85).

[21] Slash fiction places same sex characters in sexual relationships.

However, within an increasingly mediated culture in which modes of consumption and communication specific to fandom have now become a part of everyday life for people in modern societies around the world, what constitutes an 'over-investment' has consistently shifted based on the assumed gender of the activity/media object being consumed. The advent of the internet has shifted the standard of what constitutes 'normative' media consumption practices.

Living in a Transmedia World: Corporate-Sponsored Fandom

In the age of the Internet, new media technologies and broadband Internet access are facilitating an unprecedented expansion of fan communities into the public sphere. Within the context of convergence, many fannish practices previously characterized as threatening to the status quo both economically and ideologically are now being encouraged, facilitated and—in many cases controlled and exploited by corporate media producers. However, what hasn't shifted are the gender-inflected ways in which value and legitimacy are assigned to those practices.

As demonstrated by the wider cultural application of the term 'fan' in day to day communication on sites like Facebook, fannish practices are becoming one of the key ways in which individual identity is being constructed and performed within the context of digital culture. The everyday nature of semiotic, enunciative and textual production related to media consumption that used to be limited to small scattered groups of media consumers undermines the notion that such activities can be considered subversive in and of themselves.

Readings of fannish activities that are centered on their status as ideologically subversive depend upon fandom being subject to three general conditions: being limited

to the private/semi-private sphere, being culturally stigmatized and being relatively cohesive in terms of norms and practices; since the advent of the internet, these conditions are, by and large, no longer present. The relegation of socially stigmatized fan activities to the private or semi-private sphere has not only been a fundamental part of the association of fan practices with resistance, but also one of the ways in which fans have often been distinguished from other types of media consumers.

The 'private but public' space of the Internet as the central location for both corporate and fannish media blurs the fandom/mundane binary by simultaneously legitimatizing and exploiting many fannish practices. Fandom's swift and complicated migration into cyberspace has exposed many of its previously ignored or disavowed practices to the world at large, shifting the location of media fandom from the basement to the Internet—where texts are produced and consumed largely in *private* but distributed to a potentially global *public*. This is important because, throughout media history, fans have shared their love of media and circulated fan-produced texts at annual conventions and the homes of fellow fans—thus placing them and their communities, effectively, within what I call a 'semi-private' sphere. Though conventions do take place in public, attendance at these events has, until recently, been consistently limited to media fans and exhibitors with very little advertising or promotion. As such, conventions were largely unknown to non-fans and attendance was considered another marker of the fan's status as a cultural outsider. Thus, we could consider fan conventions more associated with a semi-private sphere than the public.

The transition to the internet has had the farthest reaching implications for fandom of any previous technology or activity (Busse and Hellekson 13). Whereas fans used to

have to work to find others who shared their emotional connection to media objects through processes of enculturation (like attending conventions, purchasing zines, or joining fan clubs), now all it takes to find like-minded fans is a few words typed into Google. Since entry into cyberspace requires only a computer and a connection, the demographics of fandom have shifted dramatically as younger and younger fans find their way online. In addition, many fandoms have become global as it is no longer necessary to cross geographical or national boundaries to interact with other fans (13-14).

In essence, media fandom, which began as a relatively semi-closed culture with its own rules, etiquette, language and mentoring system for new fans, is now something anyone with access to a computer with an internet connection can participate in. One of the most direct consequences of this shift is a loss of mentoring and enculturation. For example, fans who have been writing stories about their favorite media object, but have never heard the term 'fan fiction' or 'zine' can now post their stories online without having any idea that there are specific communities dedicated to this sort of thing or forums created to post in. The internet has also made it possible for fans who want to consume fannish creative works but not produce them or participate to lurk in web forums and communities without reciprocating. Now that access to the internet has proliferated and its use is common and expected in most of the developed world, fandoms of all kinds have sprung up, spread and collided. Music fans now take up residence next to television fans; anime fans mingle with fans of comics and computer gaming. Fannish 'rules' such as not 'slashing' real people are disregarded as celebrity fandoms to produce and distribute new genres like RPS (real-person slash) fan fiction.

Additionally, in a culture of convergence the 'fan', defined in relation to a

consumer's level of emotional and economic investment, is the most desired commodity in the marketplace. As a result, engaging with texts in active ways—such as enunciative production on discussion boards, producing videos, mash ups and photo manipulations have been normalized and even encouraged by mass media producers in order to cash in on fannish practices through labor exploitation. Whereas these behaviors used to be considered subcultural and were often derided as examples of fans taking content too seriously, now content is being created specifically to cater to these impulses—particularly the tendency of fans to engage in collective consumption/interpretation of media texts, construct and revel in narrative multiplicities and integrate media into their personal lives. This "make everyone a fan" mentality, although seemingly encouraging freedom of interpretation and creativity, is tightly controlled and functions to make fans complicit with the economic and ideological goals of the media text itself.

Within this context, media has become 'transmedia'; it moves across diverse platforms in order to attract increasingly mobile consumers and solicit their participation. A transmedia narrative is produced specifically to criss-cross different, cooperating, media platforms and utilizes the labor of fans to promote those narrative multiplicities. A narrative may be pitched as a film or television series but with extensions into comic books, video/computer games or novels.

With its lineup of sexy and glossy shows targeted specifically to encompass their heavily online audience in the 18-34 age demographic[22], the CW Network's "TV to Talk About" campaign (2009-2010) is an ideal example of the ways in which principles of transmedia are being deployed in order to initiate so-called 'normal' audiences into a more participatory mode of consumption by associating the concept of 'talk' with on-site

[22] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_CW_Television_Network#.22TV_to_Talk_About.22

blogging, instant messaging, texting and sharing on Facebook and Twitter. On its *Supernatural* website (see Figure 1, below), the network specifically and overtly constructs the show as a transmedia text by promoting the show through social networking sites, linking fans to outgrowths of the narrative on other media platforms and encouraging fans to integrate *Supernatural* into their personal lives in various ways. However, as emblematic of corporate-sponsored fandom, the site only values fannish participation that functions materially to promote the concerns of the network and its content and either ignores or limits interactions with the text that might utilize it to perform dissonance with its ideology. Instead, all fannish participation is controlled and channeled to play up emotional investment and repeated consumption, harnessing fannish response for the purposes of profit, data mining and promotion. Unlike non-corporate sponsored fan culture, there is a distinct lack of emphasis on the personal, the intimate and use of the text as a means of negotiation.

Figure 1: CW Website (Screen Capture from August 2010).

As you can see, links at the bottom of the page connect fans to a diverse array of extra content, activities and merchandise. A link to the *Supernatural* magazine[23], published by Titan Books, ask fans to follow the show to a different media platform to gain access to new narrative content, interviews with cast and crew—all available with a paid subscription. The website also points fans toward a new *Supernatural* novel (also published by Titan Books) that promises to reveal unseen adventures of the 'boys' not available through watching the episodes alone. This cooperation between the CW and Titan Books is emblematic of transmedia narrative production within convergence.

The *Supernatural* site functions as a communication hub that encourages the show's promotion through Jenkins' first two principles of transmedia storytelling, *spreadability* and *drillability*, which refers to a text's ability to expand its "economic and cultural worth" through the use of social networking and its ability to "encourage a mode of forensic fandom that encourages viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling"[24] Encouraging fans to 'become a fan' on Facebook, 'follow' the show on Twitter and subscribe to the show's newsfeed through RSS software effectively 'spreads the word' about the show through the labor of the fans themselves. In return, fans are consistently 'updated' on new episodes, fed 'extra' content such as trailers and behind the scenes footage, and subject to constant promotion.

In order to showcase the series' potential for narrative multiplicity, in addition to new narrative content about the 'boys' available through fiction, the site also gives fans access to a web-based 'spin-off' of the show ("Ghostfacers") that centers on a group of

[23] http://titanmagazines.com/app?service=external/Product&sp=l1079&sp=Sen&sp=SUS

[24] http://henryjenkins.org/2009/12/the_revenge_of_the_origami_uni.html

minor characters that appear in a few episodes and satirizes the reality show "Ghost Hunters" (SyFy 2004-2010). On its sister *Ghostfacers* website[25],full 'mini' episodes (about three minutes long each) of the *Ghostfacers* show can be streamed and discussed and fans are encouraged to "get more" by clicking on individual links for each cast member that lists their interests, likes/dislikes and idiosyncrasies.

The site is also pushing fans toward *immersion* and *extraction.* By encouraging fans to integrate the show into their daily media routine through sites like Facebook and Twitter, pointing them toward different media platforms and multiplicities to 'get more' *Supernatural*, the show's producers are encouraging levels of immersion in their product that, until the advent of the Internet, were usually disavowed by media corporations and considered abnormal. The producers also inspire fans to pull pieces of the text *out* of the universe and into their everyday lives—not only through media feeds, but also by making bits of the show, such as songs utilized in specific episodes, available for download and purchase through the website itself. However, this is a more shallow mode of immersion and extraction than that practiced by fans in non-corporate space because it is designed to promote purchasing and profit—not personal growth, the development of intimacy or creativity.

Finally, through the use of their "Making the Cut" contest, the producers of *Supernatural* encourage fans to *perform* their fandom by creating and submitting their own "non-traditional" trailer for their favorite show. The promotion calls for college students to compete for unpaid internships at the CW network and focuses on soliciting fan-made promotional material in exchange for a chance to have their content broadcast:

If you are a college student, "Making the Cut " is challenging you to

[25] Also hosted by the CW Network at http://cwtv.com/cw-video/ghostfacers

> create a killer trailer that could jump start your creative career by winning an Unpaid internship at The CW Television Network. Did we mention your spot could air on TV? That's right, your trailer airing on one of the biggest television networks on the planet. Does it get any better than that?
>
> With today's ever-changing media outlets, viewers are seeking out compelling and original content. The traditional way of promoting a television show is changing. Viewers and fans have an overwhelming passion for their favorite programs, and are generating their own trailers, commercials, video blogs, and personal content. This is where you come in![26]

The language of this promotion epitomizes the shifting relationship between fans and corporate media producers in the context of convergence. The ad is, essentially, calling for fans to produce trailers for the show without being compensated monetarily for their labor. Emphasis is placed on the opportunity to perform for an audience by having 'your' trailer broadcast on the network. Although it appears to be an opportunity for creative expression due to the promotion's naming of the trailers as 'non-traditional' and the call for spots to encompass what fans feel is the "essence" of the show, the contest actually reigns in the creative impulses of contestants by limiting their efforts to footage, voice-over 'talent', and music chosen specifically by the network—all of which are only accessible to fans after they create a profile with their name, address, email and telephone

[26] http://blog.cwtv.com/2010/03/12/the-cw-workshop-creative-and-promaxbda-present-%E2%80%9Cmaking-the-cut-iv%E2%80%9D/

number on two outside websites, thus mining for marketing information while harnessing and controlling the impulses of fans and channeling their creative labor to serve the needs of the corporation.

Although the contest appeals to the consumption practices of fans—particularly to their tendency to create original narrative multiplicities in textual and digital formats, immerse themselves in media texts and extract bits of those texts for their own use, limiting fans' resources to those that support only the goals of the network demonstrates the ways in which fannish practices are being encouraged while fannish *use* of media for their own desires/needs is actually being strictly controlled. These same creative impulses are, in non-corporate fandom, deployed by fans for the purposes of interpretation, criticism and the maintenance of intimacy within a community through the production of vids. Here, they are being exploited for the purposes of promotion and, because they are taking place within the context of competition, their symbolic value is not only under-valued, it is rendered absent.

In essence, both the website and the contest are functioning to encourage competition between individuals and exploit fandom's narcissistic tendencies—the calling out of the fan as special, the bestowing of special attention and rewards only to fans and the grand prize of having "your" trailer played on the network, while discouraging collective work and disavowing fandom's potential for social change, empowerment and personal growth.

As the CW Network's fan site demonstrates, in the context of convergence and transmedia narrative production that legitimizes how fan consume while not-so-subtly eliding how those consumptions function in the day to day lives of fans, relying on

theoretical paradigms that insist on fandom as inherently subversive is largely reductive. However, we can move beyond notions of subversion and resistance to closely examine how fannish use of media texts engage with cultural constructs of gender by utilizing theories of performance to discuss what fans do with media in internet locations not sponsored by media corporations.

"Heavily Young, Female and Resistant": the Limits of the LJ Interface

A hybrid of personal blogging and social networking software, Live Journal (LJ) was created by Brad Fitzpatrick in 1999 as a means of keeping up with his high school friends.[27] Since the early 2000s, there has been significant research done on Live Journal in fields ranging from Computer Science and Sociology to Media Studies and Gender Studies. In all of these fields, LJ has been discussed as a part of the general 'blogosphere' (Lin & Halavais 2004; Gopal 2007), been the subject of socio-demographic studies of blogs/blogging (Kumar et. al. 2004; boyd[28] 2006), as well as included in work on social networking sites (boyd & Ellison 2007; Golbeck 2007). In addition, some very recent work has been done that focuses on LJ-specific practices such as commenting, the creation and maintenance of the 'flist' (friends' list), community building, knowledge production/collection and systems of exchange (Cherney 2005; Fono & Raynes-Goldie 2005; Pearson 2007).

My interest in LJ stems from the centrality of both the feminine and performance to both the site's interface and its use by fans. On LJ, collaboration, intimacy and a focus on the use of media texts to enhance personal growth and create communities is

[27] http://www.livejournal.com/support/faqbrowse.bml?faqid=4&view=full

[28] The work of academics and fans are often blurred as fans are often academics and vice versa. Danah Boyd is both a scholar and a fan/user of LJ and I utilize her work in both arenas.

valued. LJ users consume, produce and exchange media in ways that facilitate and enhance strong and emotional bonds between media text and fan and between fans and other fans. One user, noting that a friend is having a bad day, might send them a short fan fiction or a photographic icon as a means of cheering them up. Or, to express their appreciation or love for a fan-produced vid, another might make their own as a response and circulate it. Fans produce texts for each other and distribute them within an economy where intimacy is the highest valued currency. This distinguishes LJ from corporate-sponsored fan spaces like the CW network's *Supernatural* site which emphasizes and values only fannish behaviors associated with material production and capitalism. Because of this it is tempting to read LJ, as does user/scholar Danah Boyd, as a female subversive space:

> Live Journal is not a lowbrow version of blogging; it is a practice with different values and needs, focused far more on social solidarity, cultural work and support than the typical blog. It is heavily female, young and resistant (Boyd 2005).

This description of LJ emphasizes aspects of the site that cultural norms construct as being more valuable to women: social solidarity, intimacy, cultural work and communication—which also fall under Habermas' formulation of the symbolic as they are unpaid and, within the context of capitalism, under-valued. This categorization of LJ as feminine space has gone largely unquestioned, regardless of the fact that the actual demographics of the site's users are not easy to verify. LJ lists its (just over 25 million) users as being 63% female and 37% male. In the creation of a profile, users can designate themselves as male, female or 'unspecified'. Since there is no way to verify that

a user's gender designation aligns with their 'real life' (RL) gender, one can easily create a fictionalized persona—though doing so is considered a breach of trust in most LJ communities and users caught 'cross-gendering' are often punished by the community and ostracized through the withdrawal of intimacy (Driscoll 2008, 199). Thus, LJ's reputation as "heavily female, young and resistant" is not actually based on demographics. Rather, it is largely constructed by the site's architecture, its designation as a journal and its association with the personal—all of which function to locate the site within the realm of the feminine and undermine its potential to act as a site of material change.

LJ's status as a journal, its positioning as female space by virtue of its construction as private and its focus on the personal, and its disinterest in reaching mass audiences or for-profit publication all demonstrate the ways in which notions of the feminine are performed through the site's form and the ways in which it is used by individual users. However, despite, LJ's status as a journal, the site is actually public and the fact that interactions do take place in front of an audience, also links its use to performance. The individual texts that fans produce and their communications between each other, at the textual level, can be read as instances of cultural performance—many of which negotiate ideologies of class, race, sexuality or gender. The social performance, on LJ, takes place at the level of the medium—in the use of LJ's architecture and the features of the site itself, such as icons, filtering and threading. At both the cultural and social levels, what is often being performed is a form of personal narrative. Personal narrative is a large category that spans mediums—from auto/biographical literature, film or television to the telling of stories around the dinner table. Due to its close relationship to home and the

domestic, genres of personal narrative also have associations with the feminine. Within performance studies, personal narrative has been discussed as "a defining condition of postmodernity" due to society's current cultural obsession with getting a life, advertising/sharing that life and consuming the lives of others as demonstrated by things like reality television (Langellier and Peterson 152). LJ's form and its use consistently meshes the personal with the fannish and creates a highly individualized discourse that centers fandom less on the fan text and more on the individual fan (Busse and Hellekson 15). These two characteristics of LJ function to associate the site (and its users) with traditional notions of the feminine, thus undermining its potential as a site for ideological resistance but making it an ideal space for examining fannish practice as neutrosemic and performative.

Like a blog, LJ also gives users space to post entries on the topic of their choice. LJ is not, however, either a social network or a blog; LJ is, as its title suggests, an online *journal*. I emphasize this point of genre because the form of the journal (or diary) is one that is often positioned as distinctly female (Huff 1989, McNeill 2005). In addition, the structures of filtering and threading function to create a sense of intimacy rather than promoting the broadcasting impulse of traditional blogs. LJ is, essentially, a semi-private space within the public realm of the internet. This connection with the private, the personal and the everyday, associates the site and the activities taking place within it, as female and, thus, not to be taken seriously by mainstream culture.

The form of the site simultaneously encourages intimacy and narcissism through the use of two formal aspects: filtering and threading. The filtering of posts on LJ allows for a single journal to include posts that are public, posts that are private (so that it can

function like an actual diary), and posts that are shared to one or more groups of that journal's 'friend ' journals. In this way it is easy to control not only what content a user can see but, also, what content they want to avoid. The use of 'threaded' comments—in which individual users can comment on either the general post or respond to individual comments, also creates a sense of one on one intimacy between users. Individual journals can also join 'communities' where they can post to and comment on entries in other people's journals. The fact that LJ identities are pseudonyms and there is no limit to the amount of identities/journals a single user can adopt and use, creates multiple spaces, degrees of publicity, community and intimacy for each post, comment and journal. All of this works against traditional (ie patriarchal) forms of hierarchisation such as authorship, instead resulting in a multi-layered sense of community that Catherine Driscoll describes as "clusters of intimacy" (Driscoll 199). Intimacy and notions of the everyday are central to LJ in nearly every way. Unlike a blog, which will take as its focus a specific topic/event/idea and broadcast opinions on it to an audience for recognition/publication, LJ focuses on the banal and the personal, thus associating it with cultural constructions of what constitutes the feminine and making it ideal for fostering intimacy but not for instigating larger cultural change. In this way, the site and its use perform behaviors traditionally deemed feminine.

Nearly all of the activities taking place on LJ revolve around the getting, advertising and consuming of aspects of everyday life in an economy of intimacy and this differentiates it from typical blogs and undermines its sense of authority by associating its use with triviality:

First, it is riddled with generic conventions—memes, emoticons,

> and webspeak shortcut communications and posts—which stress its everydayness, emphasize minor events, common routines, and shared personal experiences. Second, almost all LJs are pseudonymous, a distancing from "real life" furthered through avatars. Caught up in both distraction and immersion, un-authored and unpublished, LJ is thus dramatically different from the blog as public opinion. And most importantly, women usually come to L J through or for a community rather than in search of a place to record anything in any name (Driscoll 200).

The format of LJ functions to create intimacy-driven community. First of all, LJ is free, easily accessible and easy to learn how to use. This ease of accessibility and use makes it inviting for new users looking for a community in which to share themselves. This impetus for sharing is further emphasized through the interface itself. A new user to LJ is presented with a home page that, first and foremost, encourages the sharing of personal information by asking the user to set up a profile, customize their journal and make a post. The profile on LJ focuses on the construction of an identity/persona through the listing of interests and biographical information and creating a web of connectivity through various communication technologies and the personalization of privacy settings—all with an emphasis on individual customization that foregrounds the individual, the personal and the everyday.

For example, each day on the LJ homepage, users are given the opportunity to respond to a "writer's block" prompt. Each day the topic of the prompt changes. However, it is nearly always related to the personal and everyday aspects of life—from romantic partners to childhood memories, personal opinions on current events, etc.

Again, this links the prompt to the sphere of the private and personal and disconnects it from associations with material production. Recently, the prompt of the day was: "Are there any movies you watch when you're feeling anxious or depressed? If so, what are they, and what about them calms you down and/or lifts your spirits?"[29] I focus on this particular prompt because it calls for the poster to talk about their relationship to a favorite media text in a way that illustrates Cornell Sandvoss's notion of fannish texts as neutrosemic, in that they function like a mirror—reflecting the fan's own concerns and subject position back to them. In this way, the fannish text actually becomes a part of the fan's sense of self and that sense of self is performed for other LJ users (Sandvoss 40-45). LJ, through cues like the writing prompt encourage fans to perform these bits of themselves for an audience. Because these performances are often intensely personal, this creates an environment of intimacy. In response to this prompt, a user I'll call "Anonymous1" relates her experience watching James Cameron's *Titanic* over and over in a way that demonstrates the level of performativity in LJ interactions. Describing why the film always causes her anxiety, she writes:

> in titanic.
>
> i literaly [sic] want to kill rose for not sharing the door with jack.
>
> there was like alot of room left for him.
>
> it is completely her fault that jack dies in the end.
>
> if she has just shared her door with him.
>
> after he saved her.
>
> and gave her a new life in the end.

[29] http://www.livejournal.com/misc/qotdarchive.bml?page=2

she could not share her door with him.

and he turns into an icile [sic] in the end of the movie.

and dies.

so i hate rose.

alot.

a lot.

alot alot alot.

rose should have died.

not jack.

Because it is an instance of storytelling that has "a limited time span, a beginning and an end, an organized program or activity, a set of performers, an audience, and place and occassion" (Madison-Hamera xvii) Anonymous1's response to the prompt falls under the first of Victor Turner's three-part performance triad: the category of *cultural performance*. Not only is this user utilizing the prompt to perform her own interpretation of the film (as a poem, no less), she is so aware of the performative nature of her response that she offers a critique and additional information to help her audience imagine her ideal performance by grounding it within the body:

ok so that could have been better.

you should see me yelling it at you.

with spit coming out of my mouth.

and agression [sic] in my eyes.[30]

This sharing of a personal narrative of the user's experience watching *Titanic* repeatedly, in response to LJ's prompt is what Langellier and Peterson describe as *radically*

[30] http://magi143emmykat.livejournal.com/6935.html "Rambles Oddly Poetic".

contextualized performance—it not only emphasizes the body by describing her experience in physical/embodied terms, it is also situated within the confines of the LJ architecture and inseparable from her subject position in regards to popular discourse on gender, love and romance—thus rendering the performance unique to her as an individual and radically contextualized to her situation. This performance may offer a reading of *Titanic* that is, arguably, transgressive in terms of the film's ideology but simultaneously legitimates ideologies of gender that insist on self-sacrifice as an ideal feminine trait—thus demonstrating the potential of the performance of personal narrative to be both normative and transgressive in both art and daily life (153).

In addition to the site's use of filtering, threading and encouragement of sharing the personal via posts and prompts, personal narrative is also performed at the cultural and social level through the creation and exchange of LJ's content, which is nearly exclusively user-generated: fannish production of 'meta' (fan-authored analysis of media objects),traces of user interactions in the form of posts and comments and photographic icons (Tarkowski 118) all of which overlap and form the basis of LJ communities. This is completely opposite of the corporate-sponsored fandom on the CW site—which solicits user-generated materials only for the purposes of promotion. Meta—including canon analysis, episode reviews and recaps and fannish communications can be traced back throughout the history of fandom, with meta being printed in zines alongside fiction with story feedback and criticism published as “letters of comment” by readers.
Of these different productions and communications, I focus specifically on icons because of their centrality to LJ’s interface and the ways in which fans communicate and their status as one of the few fannish objects to be completely reliant on digital technology for

their production and exchange and this makes them unique to internet-based fannish practice. Photographic icons are a form of fannish art that emerges only with Internet communication. In terms of artistic form, they are a type of collage that usually consists of three layers: a background, an image and a motto or slogan that (like an emoticon) can be used to express mood or reaction (Rebaza 1).

Icons are utilized in online environments for a variety of purposes—first, and foremost, to signal identity and function as a representation of the self in digital/graphical communities such as discussion forums, chat rooms, computer games and social networking environments. There is no identifiable pre-Internet parallel to the user icon because the production of icons is reliant upon digital technologies that allow for the cheap, quick and easy capturing, copying and modification of photographic content. Icons must adhere to the parameters LJ and, therefore, have the following technical specifications: be in .gif, .jpg or .png format, be no larger than 100x100 pixels and consist of no more than 40kb of memory (Tarkowski 119). What this means is that icons are, essentially, tiny—yet fans are able to concentrate and distill multiple layers of meaning within those technical limitations.

Icons are utilized on LJ to enhance the performance of personal narrative and this makes them one of the site's most valuable objects of exchange. Like in many spaces on the Internet, users of LJ tend *not* to use pictures of themselves as avatars (though some users do). Rather, they often utilize images that represent partial aspects of themselves—in much the same way that Internet users have incorporated textual 'sigs' (signatures) at the end of each post as representative of aspects of their personality (Rebaza 2). This is significant because, in the choice of what to use for an icon, a user is signaling aspects of

their identity through the extraction of aspects of a media object—a beloved character from the fandom's media text, a cell from a digital comic or a favorite quotation emblazoned on an aesthetically pleasing background. In deploying these extractions in communication with and in front of other fans in ways that follow codes and expectations within LJ's culture and architecture they are also engaging in social performance.

Building upon the work of Alek Tarkowski (Tarkowski 2007) on user icons as examples of poaching for the sake of self-expression, I want to focus on the ways in which icons function on LJ as elements of social performance that work within LJ's culture to construct and maintain bonds and intimacy between fans, their media texts and each other—thus reinforcing LJ's location as a feminine space. In the context of LJ interactions, icons move from being used solely as a means of user-identification to functioning in a multitude of ways: as enhancements to conversation, a form of currency in a gift economy and as symbols in a cultural lexicon. Because these ways of functioning are part of the everyday behavior of LJ and would be inexplicable to those who had never participated in an LJ community, they can be read as elements of social performance.

As a form of social performance, icons are completely central to being a member of LJ communities. A 2006 survey of 299 members of the same LJ community revealed that 96% of users reported consistently using icons as part of their LJ interactions. In addition, 33% of users believed that the use of icons by other users were always selected for use intentionally, 64% said they felt use was sometimes intentional. By an 88% margin, L J users state they use a particular icon because it "represents (in some way) the topic I'm writing about" and 57% "use the icon to do part of my 'talking' for me" in LJ

interactions (Rebaza 3).

LJ icons “do part of the talking” because they are used to signal attention, emphasize intent or to acknowledge of the content or mood of other users in conversation. In this way, the use of icons performs the same work as gestures in face-to-face (ftf) interaction (Rebaza 3); also like gestures, an understanding of how to use icons is needed in order to function in a community that values communication and intimacy above all else. Utilizing a series of icons produced by fans of *Supernatural*, we can see the multi-layered ways that these graphical representations function and how central they are to the culture of LJ. Specifically, we can see the difference between an icon's intended use as an identity marker and its actual use as “a material artifact connected to [the] cultural practices and social behaviors” of fandom (Tarkowski 120).

The show, a hybrid of the horror and melodrama genres, is famous for its depiction of emotional angst and lingering close ups of its protagonists in pain and suffering and fans use this to their advantage when creating visual artwork such as icons and vids. The characters in the following icons (figures 2,3, and 4) are Dean and Castiel. Dean, one of the show's two central protagonists, is a hunter of all things 'supernatural' who is working with his brother Sam to avert the biblical apocalypse. Castiel is a rebellious angel who has been banished from Heaven for assisting the brothers in their cause. Together, fans refer to these three central characters as “Team Free Will” because they are consistently working against what they are told is their destiny. Like the character of Spock, these characters are negotiating their place in a world that tries to force them to behave a certain way; they are outsiders. This outsider status makes them particularly attractive to women of fandom.

The use of these icons in the context of *Supernatural* fandom on LJ would identify the user as a fan of *Supernatural* in general and, more specifically as Dean/Cas shipper who beliefs the show implies a sexual relationship between Dean and Castiel. In the process of the creation, circulation and use of these icons in day to day interactions on LJ, characters from *Supernatural* are extracted from the show and deployed by fans as part of the social practice of fandom. The televisual text is sampled, customized and used in specific ways by individuals to perform their own interpretation of the show that is connected to their own individual life experience.

Figure 2: User icon 1


Figure 3: User icon 2


Figure 4: User icon 3

These three icons[31], could all be inserted into any conversation on LJ simply to denote a specific mood—puzzlement, despair, pain, betrayal—all of which are emotions experienced by the characters in the episode from which the screen caps[32] are taken. However, if used in a community of *Supernatural* fans specifically, the pictures also refer to specific meanings and tropes both within the show itself and its fandom. Figure 2, through the combined use of image and text communicates separate but linked meanings. On the surface, the icon is a screen capture of a specific moment in the episode where both characters are dealing with the recent knowledge that God will not interfere on their

[31] http://sallyna-smile.livejournal.com/165834.html?thread=2699722 these icons can be found here.

[32] A screen capture refers to the 'capturing' of a still image from a video/digital text utilizing digital photo technology. Fans use screen caps to produce icons, banners and other forms of visual art.

behalf. In the context of this episode, God is figured as dead-beat Dad who doesn't see the fight between heaven and hell as his problem. Both characters are disillusioned by this and find themselves unsure about how to proceed. In figure 3, both Dean and Castiel are shoved up against the left side of the frame—seemingly small and unsure of what to do in the face of the emptiness that looms on the right side of the frame. A fan of *Supernatural* might read that as representative of their feelings of abandonment by God—whom Castiel was counting on as their only hope for success. Figure 4, portraying Dean and Castiel as two halves of the same frame is a study of the two characters and their emotional reactions to the situation. Dean who, in this episode is shown growing tired of the conflict and expressing his desire to stop fighting, is represented in black and white. He is, literally, drained of color, to demonstrate his emotional and physical exhaustion. Castiel, in color, looks up toward Heaven in hurt, disbelief and anger.

These three icons together, also, utilize the close up shots of the characters to convey meanings that are not necessarily connected those in the episode itself and can be read as inferring a "slash" relationship between the two characters that pairs them up sexually in a way that is not addressed directly in the show's diegesis. The juxtaposition of Dean and Castiel in the series of icons links them emotionally, spatially and physically. Visually following the generic traditions of slash fan fiction, the first icon illustrates the emotionally vulnerable position of both men and the text "what now?" gives voice to a potential for a sexual encounter. In slash fan fiction, emotional pain is often the impetus for sex as a form of comfort. In the second and third icon, the use of a visual line that separates the images of the two men's faces refers to the written slash (/) used to separate character names in written pairings (ie. Kirk/Spock) describing genres of fanfiction. The

second icon could be read as representing both men dealing with their sexual attraction in this moment of vulnerability and the third, as their surrender to those feelings.

In this way, the use of these icons can be seen as a radically contextualized performance of elements of the self simply in their use as an avatar. This becomes especially apparent when we see the use of icons in the context of conversation. Returning to the journal of LJ user Amonitrate[33] , we can see the ways in which the writing of meta, the use of icons and the threading of comments weave together a specific performance of personal narrative that demonstrates how *Supernatural* is used by two fans as a means dealing with their experiences of family dysfunction.

Enmeshed—in the sense of being entangled or caught up within, is the perfect word to describe the relationship between a media fan and neutrosemic media object; the show and the fan become entwined so that *Supernatural* becomes part of her and she sees herself reflected with it. Examining a series of screenshots that document a conversation between LJ users Amonitrate and Datenshiblue, we can see how *Supernatural* interconnects with their personal life experiences and the ways in which that interaction is performed at both the cultural and social levels through direct conversation and the use of graphical icons.

In her post, Datenshiblue utilizes the architecture of LJ and the narrative arc of *Supernatural* to perform her narrative of growing up the youngest of two children of an alcoholic mother. In, "**Part 1:** 'I didn't deserve what he put on me': the whitewashing of John Winchester and the celebration of family dysfunction as heroic in *In the Hunt*", the first in a series of meta essays responding to an anthology of unauthorized essays on *Supernatural,* Amonitrate argues that article author Sheryl A. Rakowski's reading of the

[33] In Chapter II.

central characters' father as heroic for sacrificing his life and soul for that of his eldest son, is not supported by the show's narrative arc. Citing specific examples of narrative points, dialogue and supplementary information from the show's producer, Erik Kripke, Amonitrate reads the show's 'supernatural' conflicts as metaphors for family dysfunction and insists that whitewashing John Winchester not only undermines the show's representation of the horrors of family dysfunction, it also reduces the character's complexity and makes him less appealing.[34] Just as in her reading of the show's representation of economic class and instability, Amonitrate utilizes the threaded comments to converse with her audience. In a string of several conversations with individual readers, she performs her own experience with family dysfunction. One such 'one on one' conversation takes place with user Datenshiblue, and illustrates both the ways in which fannish media consumption becomes neutrosemic and fans use LJ functions to enhance and perform intimacies—thus performing behaviors associated with the feminine in a space designated female.

In her post (figure 5, below), Amonitrate describes how the show's central characters (Dean and Same Winchester) are emotionally and mentally abused by their father through "emotional incest" and "parentification".[35] Amonitrate cites several

[34] http://amonitrate.livejournal.com/504947.html
Rakowski's interpretation of the family dynamic justifies John's parenting (or lack thereof) as being not much different from that of a typical single parent with limited child care options and sees his actions as a form of self-sacrifice that elevate him from bad father to hero. Amonitrate takes issue with Rakowski's reading based on a combination of her reading of the show's narrative and her own personal experience with family dysfunction. In her response to Amonitrate's post, Datenshiblue agrees and cites her own experience with an abusive and alcoholic parent and the show as evidence. Both users place importance on the parallels they see between their own childhood experiences and those of 'the boys' as portrayed on *Supernatural.* Datenshiblue cites those parallels as the central reason for her becoming so "enmeshed" with the show and its universe.

[35] According to Amonitrate's sources for her post, a parent who engages in emotional incest, violates a young child's sense of intimacy by treating them as a surrogate spouse or best friend. The child's needs are ignored and the child is used to satisfy needs that should be met by other adults. Likewise, the term

instances in the show's flashbacks that document this exact type of relationship between John and his eldest son, Dean. In *Supernatural's* diegesis, it is revealed that Dean was often left in charge of his younger brother Sam for weeks at a time while their father had them on the road while he 'hunted' supernatural creatures and tried to avenge the violent death of their mother at the hands of a demon.

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parentification refers to a child being expected to take on the responsibilities of an adult (not specifically emotional).

Mar. 30th, 2010 08:37 pm (UTC)
I got here backwards, from your part 2, to the intro, to here.

In general I agree wholeheartedly with your premises, and the reasoning you've used.

TMI to follow: I've been seriously stuck on Supernatural in part because it's amazing, it's in a genre I was already a long time fan of, and it had cute guys. ;) However the thing that has made me very seriously enmeshed in the story of the Winchester family is the fact that there are so many lightning struck parallels to my own family and upbringing.

I have one older sister and we two were raised by an alcoholic single mother.

It's hard for me to even explain more than that, to detail why that gave me such a sense of identification with the two main characters. Since you know about dysfunctional families and probably co-dependence, you probably already get it - demon hunting was John's alcoholism (added to which he also seems to have had at least hints of real alcoholism, but the hunter life is definitely a metaphor for substance abuse).

Children of alcoholics learn to keep secrets and all of the dysfunction that you explain in your part 2 essay. Fiction provides the perfect metaphor for real life issues, but from the point of view of one of those children, it's unsettling and painful, while still being desperately attractive, to have that dysfunction elevated to "heroic" status.

Reading fandom reactions that glorify the abusive parenting, that put martyrdom on a pedastle, and the last part that you haven't addressed, and I have no idea if you intend to, the scapepgoating of one family member to preserve the dysfunction, has driven me alternately crazy and depressive from time to time.

amonitrate **wrote:**
Mar. 30th, 2010 08:58 pm (UTC)
adding, there really should be a meta devoted to Sam's role as Scapegoat and how this parallels Lucifer. I just can't figure out how it fits in with this series.

I'm the oldest, and as such identify more with Dean's role. I understand the role of the scapegoat intellectually but not from the inside like I do the "hero."

Anyway. Maybe another project? I'd love to hear your thoughts.

OH! and here's a link to that post where I briefly discussed the roles children fill: http://amonitrate.livejournal.com/492052.html

Edited at 2010-03-30 09:37 pm (UTC)

Link | Reply | Parent | Thread | Track This

datenshiblue **wrote:**
Mar. 31st, 2010 01:57 am (UTC)
Again, thanks for the link! All of these essay's are going into my memories, apart from being linked all over my poor little post. ;)

If you don't mind a little more TMI, I'm the youngest. :) My sister and I had the traditional roles up until she left home for college and tried to get our mom some real help. Then those roles changed in the eyes of my mother's family.

amonitrate **wrote:**
Mar. 31st, 2010 02:02 am (UTC)
Yeah, I have two younger brothers, and we line up nearly perfectly as Hero, Scapegoat/Jester, and Lost Child, though I have some Lost Child tendencies as well.

it can be a little scary to see how much this stuff is true. And yeah, I find it easier to empathize with Dean, but watching the show has really broadened my understanding and sympathy for the scapegoat, since I'm on the outside of this particular family:)

Link | Reply | Parent | Thread | Track This

Figure 5: Use of icons in context of LJ conversations. Datenshiblue's use of the term "memories" refers to a function of LJ that allows you to bookmark posts for easy reference.

The threading of comments constructs a seemingly one on one conversation between the two users and the incorporation of icons both as conversational tools and markers of identity, adds multiple layers of meaning to the performance. Amonitrate consistently utilizes her 'default' icon and does not change it during the exchange. Datenshiblue, however, shifts her icon in her second post to emphasize her point regarding the different family roles that Sam and Dean (and she and Amonitrate) fufill.[36] Each of Datenshiblue's icons makes direct reference to the show, its characters and her own personal experience. The first reiterates her claim that monster-hunting is a metaphor for alcoholism and that Dean (and his father) struggle with alcohol on a literal level as well. The second icon, taken from a specific episode in which Sam struggles with an addiction to demon blood and Dean forces him to 'detox' (Sam is on the bed, Dean stands looking over). Each of these icons demonstrates the parallels that Datenshiblue sees between the show's narrative, its characters and her own identity as the daughter of an alcoholic. Her final comment (Figure 6, below) emphasizes, even further, the performative aspect of her participation in *Supernatural* fandom in a neutrosemic fashion:

[36] http://amonitrate.livejournal.com/504947.html

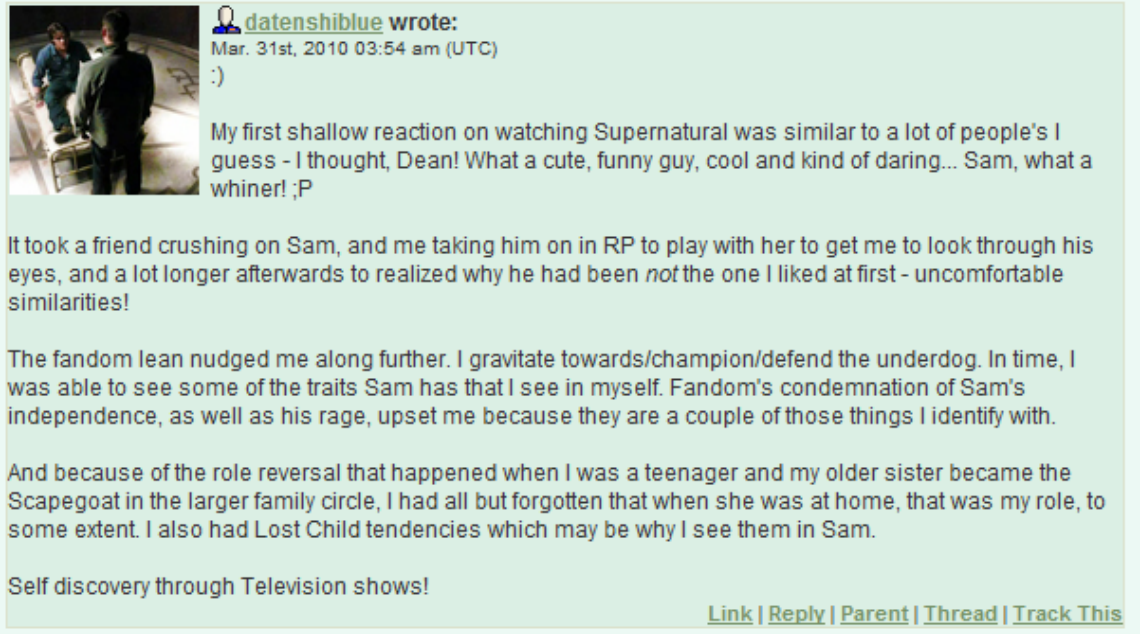

Figure 6: Use of icons in performing the personal in LJ conversations.

Her identification with the character of Sam evolves through a series of performances that replicate Dwight Conquergood's formulation of performance as "how human beings fundamentally make culture, affect power, and reinvent their ways of being in the world" (Madison and Hamera xii-xiii). Datenshiblue's role-playing performance of Sam combined with her playing the 'defend the underdog' role in interactions with other fans on LJ through criticism and analysis utilizes the show, its universe and its characters as tools for self-discovery and growth—all of which are performed for an audience of LJ fans. This type of performance does differ from the performances enacted on the CW site through the trailer production contest because it is instigated by a desire for community and intimacy rather than competition and promotion. In this way, it is arguably more empowering and meaningful for the individual users involved and can function to instigate change on a personal level. However, like much of fannish interaction online, it is limited in its scope and potential not only by its location within the confines of the LJ

interface, but by virtue of its status as electronic and, thus, transient. This fact reinforces gender-based hierarchies in the evaluation of consumer-produced media objects. The use of digital technology makes fannish texts easier to both produce and consume within a specific context but increasingly difficult to archive for the purposes of evaluation or analysis. This transience further devalues fannish interaction and texts like fan fiction, visual art and vids in the context of mainstream media representation and locates these objects in the realm of the feminine by designating them as ephemeral, fleeting and fluid—thus reinforcing the notion that the work of women in society is largely unstable, symbolic and less valuable than the 'material' work associated with masculinity and authority.

CHAPTER IV

BOUND PRINCES AND POST-APOCALYPTIC WIZARDS: PERFORMING GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN *HARRY POTTER* FANDOM

Remaining within the production and consumption context of Live Journal, this chapter explores two modes of fannish storytelling, slash fan fiction and role playing games, as performances that use JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* universe to negotiate fans' relationships with norms of gender and sexuality. In order to provide a foundation, first we will examine how theories of performance can be applied to fan studies as a theoretical model and then move in closer to examine the *Harry Potter* media text as a stage for fans' performance of negotiations of sex and gender. We will examine several levels of performance in three distinct locations on LJ: the narrative role-playing game, the production and distribution of slash fan fiction and the interactions between the fans through comments and profiles in semi-public forums in order to demonstrate the performativity inherent in fannish practice and the usefulness of the notion of performance in understanding the relationship between media use and the construction of identity.

Performance and All Things Fannish

Fans often refer to their texts, practices, productions and selves as 'works in progress'. Fannish practices function to create community, facilitate a change and communicate an idea, desire or lack—all of which are inherent in Diana Taylor's (2003) definition of performance as referring to "a process, a praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment, and a means of intervening in the world" (Taylor 15). I apply this definition of performance to fandom because it allows room for the

transformative power of fan creation without falling into the ontological trap of cultural studies versus political economy—which pits media producer against consumer in a battle over ideological meaning. Instead of assuming that media texts construct and impose structures of desire and appropriate behavior in regards to sex and gender and that fannish practices willfully resist those structures, we can view fannish practices as "ways of viewing, living with, and retelling or recycling" cultural materials (Taylor 21). This perspective can help us account for some of fandom's most prevalent modes and practices—such as fans' choice of media texts, the centrality of repetition, and the focus on intimacy and the body.

Within various media fandoms, the themes, ideologies and 'world' of a media text is referred to by fans as *canon*. In the world of fandom, the collection of fan-created knowledge gathered and media produced is known as the *fantext.* The distinction between the canon and the fantext is very similar to that between performance scholar Diane Taylor's notion of the *archive* and the *repertoire* (xvi-xviii). The *archive* refers to materials that are assumed to be enduring such as literal texts, buildings or documents. As applied to media fandom, the object of fandom—be it a book, television series, film, star text, or game—is archival. In the digital age, any text can be infinitely reproduced, easily traced and available for repeated consumption. Working alongside the archive, the *repertoire* (xvii) refers to the ephemeral, embodied, fleeting and fluid—such as spoken language, ritual or literal performances like dance or the theatrical. However, it is important not to think of the model simply as an oppositional binary. Though the archive can be aligned with hegemonic power, the repertoire is not simply its anti-hegemonic antithesis (22). Because human beings span a wide range of ideological subject positions,

performances—including fannish practices—are often employed to both reinforce and undermine dominant paradigms.

Just as we live our lives between the archive and the repertoire, fannish storytelling develops through the limitations and possibilities of both the source's canon and fantextual expectations. Canon, as archival, shapes the fantext in countless ways, but does not ultimately dictate it. On the contrary, fantext interprets, shifts, and often contradicts canon. In this way, fan stories—in their production and consumption—perform a dialogue between the source text and the desires of the fans. The fact that these performances negotiate issues of gender and sex is not coincidental.

Even in its contemporary and more mainstream context, fannish storytelling is marginalized in ways that are distinctly gendered. The term, "derivative" is consistently utilized to describe genres of literature that re-work or re-interpret earlier works—genres produced overwhelmingly by women. Using terms such as "derivative" and "appropriative" to describe fan-produced texts reinforces hierarchal notions about power, writing and aesthetics and re-inscribes hierarchies that subordinate the feminine to the masculine while setting up fan fiction in opposition to unmarked (read, masculine) standards of aesthetics. Thus, I will be joining Abigail Derecho (2006) in utilizing Jacques Derrida's (1995) term archontic to describe the genres of fannish storytelling due to its relationship to the word archive and the sense of continual expansion, openness and lack of finality it implies (Derecho 64). An archive, insists Derrida, "augments itself, engrosses itself" and he calls this the "archontic principle" (qtd. Derecho 64).

As archontic texts, fannish texts refuse the stability, stagnation and 'end' of a canon and are propelled by a drive to extend and transgress boundaries—expanding the

canon indefinitely with new and alternative meanings that communicate individual and collective negotiations with the ideological status quo. Though archontic texts are often associated with the ideologically disempowered (65), they do not necessarily express hidden or resistive meanings. Rather, we can think of them as performances that "reorient a canonical text, opening its fictional world onto a set of demands determined by the individual" (Willis 155) in relation to their own knowledge and experience of both the fictional source text and that of their daily life. These demands placed on a text can be political or apolitical, resistive or not, hedonistic pleasure or thoughtful critique; the media text functions as a stage for the fan's performance of their reorientation.

Many of the objects that usually result from fandom are most obviously textual (fan fiction, online text-based role-playing games, poetry, blogs, forum discussions) and digital/visual (vids, machinima, visual artwork). However, upon closer examination, we can see three characteristics of fannish practices that align them with performance rather than literary production: the emphasis on bodies and the behaviors of bodies, the use of repetition and the collaborative modes of production utilized to create these objects within the context of media fandom (Coppa 225).

Fannish narratives are filled with descriptions of bodies in action. Whether writhing in the throes of sexual passion, bent over in grief or loss, or reaching out in comfort to someone who is hurting, bodies are the central focus of a majority of fan stories—whether they be narratives developed through the mode of the RPG, digital videos, or fan fiction. Although, drawing largely on generic structures outside of fandom such as the teen romance or redemption narratives (Stein 249), the most basic of fan-specific generic structures are centered on behaviors of bodies in space—specifically

sexual behaviors. In the narrative mode of fan fiction, these are divided according character 'pairings' such as het (stories focused on heterosexual relationships) or slash (stories placing same sex characters in sexually intimate relationships), or on situations specifically involving or concerned with bodily experiences such as mpreg (stories in which a male character gets pregnant). This links fan fiction with the filmic 'body genres' of horror and melodrama and that of popular romantic fiction (see Williams 1991 and Clover 1992). Like horror and melodrama, fannish storytelling's emphasis on bodies is one of its central aesthetic criticisms; it marks it as feminine and separates it from so-called 'legitimate' literature, which gives prominence to thought and idea. This gender-based hierarchy is emblematic of "a double articulation of the low and the feminine" in which cultures considered feminine are disparaged and deemed imitative while 'authentic' culture is represented as gender-free or masculine (Thornton 105). However, whereas the embodied nature of fan fiction is marginalized in genres of literature, it is prized in performance arts. In fannish storytelling, like the performative arts of theater and dance, the body is the instrument through which knowledge and experience are communicated.

Performance theorist and theatre director Richard Schechner defines performance as "restored" or "twice behaved behavior"--meaning behavior that is consistently revised, repeated and transmitted across generations in ways that are "completely independent of the causal systems (personal, social, political, technological) that brought them into existence" (Schechner 28, quoted in Coppa 229). Gender, as performative, entails the repetition of specific behaviors that are passed down through the generations but with no connection to their originating source. Likewise, the practice of repeatedly slashing same sex characters and placing those characters over and over in similar situations,

demonstrates how fannish storytelling uses characters like strips of film that can be cut, rearranged, and redeployed to serve the needs and desires of fans.

Slash stories are constructed around a limited number of repeated scenarios, and the genre's reliance on repetition links it even closer to performance and its relationship to gender. The most repeated scenario in slash fan fiction is that of the "first time," which is recognized by its narration of the first sexual encounter (same sex) between the two partners. One of the partners is invariably constructed as withdrawn or introverted—unable, unwilling or unsure of initiating the sexual encounter. The sex in these stories is always linked to the preexisting relationship between the two partners and either starts off casually and spontaneously or, as a result of a crisis involving both partners (Cicione 160). Building upon the claims of Russ (1985b) and Lamb and Veith (1986), which suggest that many of the features of the 'first time' scenario within slash fiction reflect a disconnect between how women are socially conditioned in regards to intimacy and sexual relationships and their own desires and lived experience, I argue that fan producers often use media texts as spaces in which to perform this disconnect between conditioning and desire. Thus, I will be reading Harry Potter role playing games and slash fan fiction as performances that transmit knowledge and experience about gendered expectations and their relationship to fan's individual desires.

Harry Potter: a (not so) Queer Reading

In order to demonstrate the ways in which the production and reception of fan fiction in online communities can function as performative epistemes of gender and sexuality, I want to focus on one of the most ubiquitous online fandoms producing fan texts today—that of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. The series itself is one of the

most commercially successful literary works of all time, with the books selling more than 400 million copies worldwide and spawning seven film adaptations produced by Warner Brothers—making Rowling the world's first billionaire author.[37]

I have chosen to focus on the *Potter* fandom because it is emblematic of the evolution of contemporary fan practices within digital culture discussed in the previous chapter. With a media text that crosses multiple media platforms (seven books, seven films and eight video games) and a fan-base that spans age ranges and national borders, the *Harry Potter* franchise exemplifies Henry Jenkins' notion of convergence (Jenkins 2006). With its first fan-created websites appearing online in 1997 and 1998, the *Potter* fandom is also one of the first to 'grow up' online, thus becoming one of the first fandoms to negotiate the shifting relationship between media producers and consumers resulting from media fandom's migration to cyberspace.[38] The *Potter* fandom utilizes a diverse array of media platforms for creating and maintaining communities and sharing productions, including (but not limited to) fan sites with discussion forums and galleries, online databases and 'wikis', podcasts (*MuggleCast* and *PotterCast*), social networking sites and role-playing games—all of which can be discussed as stages for performance.

Harry Potter's much-touted anti-normalcy rhetoric has been read by both fans and academics as a a welcoming environment for exploring queerness in a heteronormative culture (see Bronski, 2003). The *Harry Potter* universe's opposing of the muggle/wizarding worlds is consistently framed in terms of normal/abnormal—with the

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[37] These statistics are taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Potter#Cultural_impact .

[38] Although author J.K. Rowling has consistently had an open relationship with fans and encouraged their creative endeavors—even bestowing awards on fan sites and utilizing fan-created information databases for her own work, the sale of the film rights to Warner Brothers resulted in clashes between the studio and fansites publishing fiction, vids, images and artwork over copyright infringement.

normalcy of the muggle world seen as narrow, limiting and prejudicial. The wizarding world, by constrast, is constructed as open, celebratory of Harry's secret desires and powers and ultimately 'other' to that of the "muggles" (non-magical humans), who blindly follow authority and insist on rules and conformity. Although none of this explicitly implies a celebration of queer sexuality, the books do celebrate the notion of 'queer'.[39]

It is unsurprising that the Harry Potter story has been read as a metaphorical 'coming out' narrative (Bronski 2003). Harry's experience throughout the novels arguably parallels that of queer young people coming to grips with their sexuality in a heteronormative society. Beginning in the series' very first lines, the title character's muggle guardians (the Dursleys) are constructed as being so invested in appearing normal that they force Harry to live in a broom cupboard. When his wizard powers emerge and he is invited to "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry", they tell the neighbors he is in reform school and consistently deny any connection to the wizarding world (Rowling 1997). As the books progress and Harry comes of age as a wizard, they continue to conceal his status as 'other', punish him for any 'abnormal' behavior (using magic or receiving messages from the wizarding world via owl) and deny him even the ability to speak about his experiences by refusing to speak about "those people." Harry is alienated from his family, a 'queer' little boy in a world that celebrates the mundane. He is consistently bashed by his aunt, uncle and cousin and is punished for making any mention of the "M" word (magic).

Secondly, the setting of the *Harry Potter* books at "Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry" locates it (at least partially) in the genre of the "boys' school"

[39]Bronski is using this term in a larger sense, one that "suggests a more generally deviant, nonconformist, renegade identity. In its oldest, original sense, queer means 'deviating from the expected or normal; strange' or 'odd' or unconventional in behavior" (Bronski paragraph 5).

literature, with its focus on homosocial learning environments. As Tison Pugh and David Wallace point out, the *Harry Potter* series is very much the story of a straight boy growing up in a type of boarding school that, although it does not exclude women, segregates boys and girls in separate dormitories (260-261). In *Harry Potter* fanfiction, these dormitories are often places in which queer sexualities are explored.

Third, the series' construction of the wizarding world as post-feminist—with gender egalitarianism supposedly reached and thus no longer at issue—arguably challenges traditional gendered hierarchies (Pugh & Wallace 260). Girls and boys are seen as equals at Hogwarts and gender differences are never explicitly addressed in terms of power or status. Throughout the novels, girls and boys showcase similar magical and academic abilities. In fact, several of the series' strongest characters are women. Harry's best friend Hermione excels at both academics and magic and Professor Minerva McGonagall is a respected authoritarian character and mentor to the students whose magical abilities are very impressive.

This reading of the *Potter* series is meant to emphasize how the ideology of *Harry Potter* appears to rebel against notions of normalcy in regards to gender and sexuality but ultimately reinscribes heteronormativity and gender hierarchies. Although the series' celebration of the non-normative, its homosocial setting and post-feminist idealism can be read as a potentially threatening to the ideological status quo, the fact that this potential is undermined by the narrative itself illustrates the endemic nature and power of our culture's insistence on heteronormativity and traditional notions of gender. These three premises: the books' celebration of a notion of queerness, the homosocial setting of the boarding school and the post-feminist ideology have resulted in claims that the series

is ultimately empowering for children, regardless of sexuality. However, the potential for each of these premises to be truly threatening to the heteronormative status quo, is undermined by the series' central theme of heteronormative heroism, its post-feminist camouflage of traditional gender roles and invisibility of alternative sexualities (Pugh and Wallace 260-261).

The series constructs its protagonist, Harry, as a prototypical hero type: the young, white, straight boy who must grow into his potential, overcome great odds and defeat the ultimate evil. As such, "the heroism demanded for the protagonist of these narratives typically depends upon an alpha-male model of masculinity that systemically marginalizes most other characters, especially in relation to gender and sexual orientation difference" (Pugh & Wallace 261). We see this in the *Potter* books as Harry's two best friends become less central and more periphery as the heroism narrative develops. As the narrative progresses, we see Harry become more and more alienated from his intimate relationships as the responsibility of his heroism grows (263-265).

Secondly, notions of a 'post-feminist' wizarding world that no longer concerns itself with gender difference are problematic (268-272). Female characters, though uncharacteristically strong for children's' literature, are still portrayed in very traditional roles. Hermione, constructed as another sidekick, begins the series as very central and important to Harry's exploits. Her magical abilities are unparalleled and she breezes through academics. However, her talents are always put to use in the service of Harry's needs. The only times Hermione uses her magical abilities for her own purposes are associated with cosmetics—to straighten her "bushy" hair and realign her crooked teeth; this places her well within the range of the gender status quo. Similarly, Professor

McGonagall is very adept at magic and a figure that demands respect from students and colleagues alike. However, she always defers to the authority of Albus Dumbledore (the male headmaster of Hogwarts and the only wizard the series' supervillain, Voldemort, fears) and only becomes a true authority in the books after his death. Positions of government in the wizarding world are overwhelmingly held by men and the two families that effectively 'raise' Harry Potter are traditional two-parent homes in which the mother stays home as caregiver and the father works and supports the finances.

Lastly, although the book does arguably invite a positive reading of the notion of queerness and it is not explicitly homophobic, the series effectively erases alternative sexualities by rendering them non-existent. In seven books, no character of any age or gender expresses confusion over sexuality or gender roles. Though the sexuality of Albus Dumbledore was tentatively "outed" by Rowling to fans, it is not discussed in the books and all romantic relationships that emerge are heterosexual.

Like many fan-centric media texts, the tension between the *Harry Potter* series' potential for subversion and its tendency to pull back to safe ideological ground, makes the series ripe for readings of meta-textual queerness. It also provides a stage for the performance of fans' negotiations of heteronormative sexualities through the production and consumption of archontic texts. In order to emphasize fandom's neutrosemic nature, I have chosen to read two ideologically diverse fannish texts. The first, a post-apocalyptic, text-based role-playing game (RPG) called Waking Pandora, constructs a world that restricts alternative sexualities; the second, a novel-length slash fan fiction series called Harry Potter and the Bound Prince, purposefully questions normative gender and sexuality in both its narrative and in its authors' interactions with readers on Live

Journal. By comparing the different ways that these fannish texts utilize Harry Potter to negotiate their own subject positions within ideologies of sex and gender, we can see how central media consumption has become to the construction and performance of identity in the context of online space.

Performing Anxieties: Waking Pandora

Participation in role-playing games (RPGs) is a popular and unarguably performatic mode of storytelling within the Harry Potter fandom. Online role-playing utilizes several different interfaces—taking place on forums, in chat rooms, over instant messenger programs and on social networking sites like LJ. One LJ, a general search for Harry Potter RPG's yields a list of nearly 200 individual journals dedicated to role-playing; each of these journals is made up of performances that engage with the Potter canon in various ways. When participating in an RPG, fans are cast in the roles of fictional characters and act out scenarios that, like fan fiction, engage the Potter canon and its themes in various ways. The classification of the RPG as a 'game' connotes a sense of play, creativity and the use of the body. Game-play consists of the weaving of collaborative narratives that are loosely tied together under the game's rules but can go in any number of directions and involve any number of players.

Like some genres of slash fan fiction, many RPGs are intimatopic; they subjugate larger action in order to focus on the development of intimacy. In fact, the action in these RPG's is the narrative, which is often centered on the construction and development of intimate relationships. Both modes are characterized by repetition, both function as a stage upon which to perform the gendered self, and both use the body. However, RPGs and fan fiction utilize the body in different ways. In fan fiction, the bodies of fictional

characters are used as a marker of genre and as a means of performing ideological dissonance. In the RPG, the body of the fan literally performs the character in a world that is not defined by generic sexual pairings. The genres of these RPGs differ from those found in fan fiction in that they are not specific to romantic pairing (i.e. an RPG is not usually labeled 'slash or 'het'). Instead, they are constructed in relation to time period, universe and the level of adherence to the archive.

The RPG differs from fan fiction in terms of generic structure, but the two storytelling modes both demonstrate how fictional characters become behavioral scripts that move about independently from their source text and perform the anxieties and negotiations of the fans. In the case of Waking Pandora, characters and themes from the Potter universe are utilized to perform anxieties over notions of difference by framing the narrative as a ‘what if’ scenario. Just like the repetition of the 'first time' scenario in slash, the 'what if' scenario is the most common impetus for the RPG because it allows players to perform narrative multiplicities that extend far beyond the limits of canon. The moderators expand the Potter archive to include various 'what if ' scenarios that alter it in specific ways. Many of the RPGs combine different fictional universes and even create their own—moving very far from canon but adhering just close enough to have access to the Potter universe itself. The 'what if' scenario often moves the Harry Potter behavioral strips backward and forward through time to explore parts of the narrative that are foundational to the canon but not directly accessible to fans.

The ‘what if’ scenario is significant at the level of analysis as well because it gives fans a chance to act out their individual engagements with the Potter universe in ways that reveal the neutrosemic nature of fannish consumption. What the game and its

participants choose to alter about canon constitutes a multi-layered performance that allows fans to work negotiate their own dissonance and accordance with ideologies within the Potter universe and in their day-to-day lives. Just as in fan fiction, this performance can be read as negotiation of cultural tropes and anxieties.

When we speak of the RPG as performer, we are really talking about the performance of the moderators who are responsible for creating the journal, writing its premise and rules, casting the characters and enforcing its rules. In the context of performative storytelling, the mods direct the overall performance and also perform their own, collective and collaborative, version of the Potter archive through the creation of the narrative frame. The narrative frame of the RPG is produced by the mods through the crafting of the game's premise and rules, which are inspired by a specific scenario that alters the canon text in a significant way. All of the storytelling that takes place within the RPG must fit within the limits and potential of the game's premise and rules, which function for the RPG in the same way that a media source text functions as canon/archive for fan fiction.

Waking Pandora, much like the Harry Potter canon itself, holds the potential for performances of queer sexualities but reigns in that potential through the narrative frame itself. Waking Pandora expands the Potter archive beyond its original chronology, it moves the text's behavioral scripts into a universe completely unrelated to the world of Harry Potter, and constructs a situation never addressed by the series' archive: muggles (non-magical humans) discover the existence of wizards. The fear of exposure to humans is discussed at length in the Potter canon and this RPG addresses the question in a unique way by setting the game within a post-apocalyptic world. Combining elements

and characters of the Potter canon with the History Channel series Life after People (2009), the mods construct a universe in which the muggles' discovery of the wizarding world, in the year 2000, results in the xenophobia-fueled creation of a virus that is meant to target those with 'magical' blood but, instead, spreads to all humans and wipes out a majority of the human population.[40]

The premise goes on the describe the combined attempts of both the muggle and wizarding worlds to contain the virus without success and the decision to place a mixture of young, genetically diverse and older experienced muggles and wizards into solar-powered (and magic-enabled) stasis chambers to be opened automatically 100 years in the future. The game begins with the opening of the wizards' pods in the jungle-infested ruins of Hogwarts.

Waking Pandora uses the fantasy context of both Harry Potter and Life After People to negotiate global issues of difference and anxieties about cultural notions of apocalypse by constructing a narrative frame centered around the on-going conflict between Self and Other (i.e. muggle vs. wizard). What I find most interesting about this RPG are the ways in which these issues of difference are mapped onto notions of sexuality through the mod-produced premise and rules and, through the development of intimate relationships in the individual narratives performed by the players.

Although Waking Pandora's premise is centered on the consequences of a conflict between muggles and wizards, the theme of self/other is played out at the level of romance and intimacy—specifically, through the 'star-crossed lovers' motif. Many of the RPG's threads revolve around romantic and sexual relationships that cross categories of difference established by the Potter canon. However, due to the structure of the narrative

[40] http://mods-wp.livejournal.com/507.html

frame itself, these relationships do tend to conform to heteronormative sexualities and traditional gender roles. In the world of Harry Potter, the largest markers of difference are magical blood[41] (which arguably comes to stand for race in the series), magical house[42] and social class. With a majority of the world wiped out by a virus, these categories lose their meaning and relationships that would never be possible within canon are allowed to grow and flourish.

Though the 'blank slate' that Waking Pandora offers, through its post-apocalyptic motif, a seemingly open space for players that allows their characters to shift alliances, change perspectives and evaluate prospective sexual partners differently, the canon created by the premise and rules functions to narrow the potential sexualities of the characters by specifically limiting homosexual encounters. The game guidelines state the following in regards to slash:

> Slash is not forbidden but it's not going to be welcome in a survival game where the small population simply will not sustain more than a .001% population of gay/bi characters. Bi characters will be expected to actually be bi. If a character is accepted as bi but only participates in gay sex, the character will be removed from the game and the relevant threads

[41] The series centers much of the conflict on the difference between muggle-born wizards (those wizards who are born into non-wizarding families and are unaware of their magical abilities until late childhood when they are invited to Hogwarts) and 'pure-blood' wizards who have no muggle ancestery. The derogatory name for the muggle-born is "mudblood"--as opposed to pure-blood. The series villain (Lord Voldemort) focuses his efforts on wiping out muggles and muggle-born wizards in order to populate the world with pure-blood wizards.

[42] The houses at Hogwarts correspond to personality types as well as political/social factions in the series: *Slytherin* students are usually of the upper class, focused on power and (often) aligned with darker magic, *Gryffindor* members are brave and associated with heroism, *Ravenclaw* students are intelligent and focused on academics and *Hufflepuff* are strong and kind.

deleted so please do not be tempted to use "bi" as a way to get around this.[43] The narrative supports this rule by claiming that the 'wise ancients' who placed the muggles and wizards in the pods chose only those who sexually identified as either heterosexual or bi—for the purposes of repopulating the planet and saving the human race (magical or otherwise) from extinction. Homosexuality is constructed as a threat to human survival. If the mods feel that a character's sexuality is not conforming to the parameters of a survival game that character vanishes, all relevant threads are deleted, and the character will be 'recast'. Though the mods perform a more traditional notion of gender and sexuality via the construction of a heteronormative frame for the RPG, the individual storylines within the game are intimatopic—focusing much more on the development of intimate relationships that overcome the boundaries and limits of the Potter canon itself than on the larger issues inherent in surviving in a post-apocalyptic world.

The Bound Prince: Performing Intimacy, Desire, and Disconnect.

Our next text, the slash fan fiction novel titled Harry Potter and the Bound Prince, performs a much more complex and problematic negotiation of sex, gender and intimacy than Waking Pandora. Distributed over the authors' LJ pages, *Bound Prince* is the first in a series of slash novels in what its authors term "a five volume *Harry Potter* fan fiction mega work" [44] that pairs together the series' hero (Harry Potter) with one of its key villains (Draco Malfoy) in a sexual relationship that begins at Hogwarts and extends into adulthood. Harry and Draco's relationship culminates in marriage and the birth of a child in the later books—thus taking the opposite ideological stance of *Waking Pandora* and

[43] http://mods-wp.livejournal.com/874.html (accessed 12/8/09)

[44] http://www.slashpervert.org/

opening up the narrative frame to allow for both slash sex and fecundity.

Bound Prince was developed through role playing over instant messenger software between January 2007 and February 2008; not only is this writing process collaborative and cooperative, it is also literally performative. Each writer takes on the role of a character and acts out the story, thus making the writing process itself a performance. Its authors are LJ "Slashpervert" and "Sosorry_hh". Slashpervert plays Draco and Sosorry_hh plays Harry. On the LJ page created to discuss her writing, Slashpervert explains the process in a query for new co-authors: "Most of it is written using a cooperative style of writing that uses YIM or AIM[45] based 'role playing' and then a great deal of negotiation and editing to make it fiction."[46]

As an intimatopic 'enemyslash' fic, *Harry Potter and the Bound Prince* centers on the development of intimacy as expressed through sex and eroticized comfort between two characters that are enemies in the series canon—focusing intently on bodies and demonstrating the use of repetition in behaviors and the appropriation of Rowling's characters to perform non-normative sexual behaviors. The fic falls into the genre of slash m/m (indicating both partners are male) and takes place in what fans refer to as an "alternate universe" (AU). AU, as a marker of sub-genre, can be used to describe a wide range of even more specific sub-genres—from the crossover, which moves characters (or behavioral strips to use the performative term) from one universe to another (an example might be a story in which Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Harry Potter team up to fight a vampiric Voldemort) to a departure from canon that is large enough to change the course

[45] YIM = Yahoo Instant Messenger, AIM = AOL Instant Messenger.

[46] http://slashpervert.livejournal.com/tag/writing.

of the original storyline. The Bound Prince, constructs an alternate universe by changing an event that takes place within the canon based on assumptions held by Harry/Draco slash fans.

The authors' description of the first novel reads as follows:

> In *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* there is a pivotal moment where things could have gone very differently. That is the bathroom scene where Harry nearly kills Draco by accident. Draco is upset that Harry has caught him crying and throws a hex. It escalates and ends in blood. Our story begins with the simple premise of "what if" something changed in the bathroom scene so that Harry and Draco talked instead of throwing hexes. It also takes the assumption of unvoiced attraction between the two. Draco takes a chance and kisses Harry. Once sparked, their mutual desire and exploration becomes the driving force in the alternative ending to that of *Half-Blood Prince*. Draco's "mission" from Voldemort turns out to be more complex than that presented in canon and their solution even more difficult.
>
> [Harry/Draco. Rating: ADULT. 135,000 words, 37 chapters.][47]

This description illustrates how fannish storytelling is performed in relation to the Potter archive. In this case, the authors of The Bound Prince make a point of writing a story that breaks with canon at a very specific point: a scene in which Harry Potter discovers his rival, Draco Malfoy in an emotionally vulnerable position. In the source text, this discovery ends in violence that further distances the two teens and highlights their mutual emnity. However, Slashpervert and Sosorry_hh depart from canon by changing the violence of that moment into an opportunity for intimacy—exchanging a

[47] http://www.slashpervert.org/

hex for a kiss. The magic and flexibility of the Potter universe becomes a space where heteronormative sexuality is transcended through a relatively subversive acceptance of intimacy between people of the same sex. This same-sex intimacy performs the authors' disconnect with the ideological assumption that the strongest intimate bonds are found through relationships with members of the opposite sex. We can see this even more clearly by reading this fiction through the filter of the authors' performances of self on LJ through their profiles and interactions with other users.

Slashpervert is far more vocal and participatory than Sosorry_hh in her interactions and the storytelling on LJ and her profile yields much more information. If we read The Bound Prince, as a performance of Slashpervert's and Sosorry_hh's knowledge and experience with the cultural tropes of gender, sexuality and intimacy, we can see how the Harry Potter universe becomes inextricably intertwined with the authors' sense of self—which is performed both through the story, the authors' profiles and in interactions with readers on LJ through comments. On her LJ profile page, Slashpervert's bio lists her as a journalist, social scientist and publisher of academic articles and books. She states that she is female, over thirty and "old enough to remember and have read Star Trek K/S fan fiction back when we still had to print it in fanzines and sell them to others to get our fiction out there" (www.slashpervert.org)--thus simultaneously establishing her "RL" identity as a successful academic with a 'real' job and 'legitimate' publications and her fannish identity as an "old school" fan with a sense of authority and knowledge that comes with 'pre-internet experience. Although Slashpervert does not overtly claim a queer sexuality, a sense of the 'non-normative' is communicated via many of her listed interests: (bisexuality, queer, human sexuality, sex, slash and polyamory) as well as a

comment on her FAQ page which she explains the origins of her screen name:

> When I created this journal, it was just with the intention of reading fan fiction, not writing it. I wanted something easy to remember. Since I felt like an even bigger pervert than usual for reading HP slash fiction, I chose the name to reflect that. I kept it because I like the idea of reclaiming the word "pervert" as "a person whose sexuality deviates from the norm (www.slashpervert.org).

Thus, Slashpervert's profile constructs an identity that specifically and intentionally questions the value of heteronormativity, revealing an ideological dissonance between her own notions of gender/sexuality and those of the culture. This dissonance is performed throughout The Bound Prince's narrative.

In the novel's second chapter, Slashpervert's Draco challenges Harry to kiss him. Harry (played by Sayingsorry_hh) is constructed here as the more introverted partner and arguably performs socially conditioned behaviors in regards to gender. His reluctance embodies a typically constructed heteronormative response to the notion of queer sexuality; he is embarrassed, anxious and compelled to assert his heterosexuality in order to appear 'normal'.

> Harry narrowed his eyes. "It's not that I'm afraid of you," he said.
>
> "I just can't. I'm not gay for one thing," he said, the blush on his face now creeping across his neck and chest.

Draco, played by Slashpervert, responds by refusing the label of homosexuality. When Harry asks, with some confusion, why he would want to kiss him if he is not gay, Draco replies:

> "Is everything black and white with you?" Draco asked in exasperation,

putting his cup down and standing. He walked around the table, gesturing as he spoke. "Straight or gay? Good or evil? Reality is a complex place, and people even more so. Isn't there room in your head for all of the other possibilities?"[48]

This insistence on gray areas in both the novels' notion of good and evil and cultural constructs of sexuality can easily be read as a performance of Slashpervert's own negotiation of heteronormative sexuality—one that expresses the frustration of dissonant expectations and desires. This performance of dissonance is also identifiable in her interactions with fellow fans and readers on her LJ page where it becomes collective and functions to nurture intimacy and strong bonds between members of the slash community. Note how ideological dissonance is being performed by Slashpervert, as well as her readers, in discussions of the novel on her journal. Here we see Slashpervert's performance of her own negotiations with heteronormativity in her assertion of her identity as polyamorous. By inserting a warning indicating monogamy, she is undermining its status as normative and calling attention to the cultural assumption.

Corvusdea: I have read this several times and am mad-crushing on the sequel! And can I just say how wonderful it is that monogamy is one of your warnings???[49]

---

[48] www.slashpervert.org (chapter two)

[49] ***Fandom:*** *Harry Potter*
Rating: *Adult*
Genre: *Romance, Drama, Angst, Smut*
Pairing: *Draco/Harry (others implied as backstory).*
Length: *135,000 Words (37 Chapters) – COMPLETE*
Warnings: Language, Explicit M/M Sex, Anal, Oral, Rimming, Dom/Sub, Dubious Consent, Monogamy, Jealousy, Humiliation, Pain, Violence, Blood and Character Death (H/D live). www.slashpervert.org

Your Draco is so exquisite! Just the right amount cunning ice-prince mixed with a zesty helping of vulnerable, needy bottom. Excellent work!

Slashpervert: That is wonderful to hear! *blushes* The monogamy warning is funny for me. I am polyamorous, but found if I didn't warn people in my poly fiction, they got upset. But it felt wrong to warn about one and not the other. Hence the monogamy warning. I don't see Draco as naturally monogamous. It is Harry's need for control that makes him so in this story.

(LJ 1/07-9/09, accessed 10/24/09).

Slashpervert's performance does not end with her insertion of her own relationship to heteronormative sexuality as expressed through the use of the slash genre, the warnings and the content of the fiction itself. The performance extends through the repetition of behaviors by the characters of Draco and Harry that are unique to Slashpervert's fiction. In essence, Slashpervert and Corvusdea are expressing ownership of Rowling's characters. Corvusdea refers to Draco Malfoy as “your Draco” and Slashpervert insists she does not see Draco monogamous. In the series' canon, Draco's sexuality is barely mentioned and assumed to be heterosexual. The Draco that both fans are referring to not only belongs to Slashpervert, he is a part of her identity.

Each fan has their own Harry/Draco on which they project aspects of themselves—who they are, want to be, or want others to think they are, thus reflecting and constructing and performing the self via their active consumption of media texts (Sandvoss 48). Slashpervert not only recognizes aspects of herself in Rowling's Draco, she projects her own self onto that character and uses it to construct part of her own identity. We see this occurring several times throughout the comments section of The

Bound Prince, as users describe the way they like "their" Harrys or Dracos to be—dark, angry, icy, top/bottom, confused, pouty, etc.

Often, the interactions between the fans are performances for each other—performances that are highly sexualized. In her work on "real person slash" (RPS),[50] Kristine Busse notes that much of fannish interaction on line is highly performative due to the very nature of internet culture. In a space that lacks true physicality, virtual relationships become exaggerated and sexualized and emotional intimacy is expressed through sexual language (Busse 208). In a space where women are constructing narratives for each other that are centered on queer sexualities, it is tempting to consider this slash community a queer female space. However, the fact that a majority of these female fans identify as heterosexual in their 'real' lives, coupled with the lack of focus slash stories place on the difficulties or politics of homosexuality in a heteronormative society, complicates this notion of fandom as definitively queer. Instead, I want to suggest that what is being performed is not necessarily queer sexuality, but a desire for intimacy not tied to heterosexual expectations.

In the LJ discussion following the The Bound Prince's second chapter—in which a kiss between Harry and Draco ends in an episode of mutual orgasm-inducing grinding, the level of explicitness in the comments and interactions (spanning from January 2007-September 2009) demonstrate this point:

bitofaspaz: I'm all wet now omg lol.

Tangible_magic: wow

[50] RPS is a genre of fan fiction in which real people (usually celebrities), as opposed to fictional characters from media texts are slashed. The slashed fantexts in this genre are still constructed in relation to a 'canon' that is, in essence, the celebrity's star text (Dyer).

wow.wow.wow.
holy-fucking-wow.
hot damn.
fuck - that was *so incredibly fucking hot*
holy *shit*

adores you both like crazy

Cupboardwitch: That was so hot, I almost came when they did.

In a discussion of the sexualized nature of this type of communication on LJ and its relationship to a queer sensibility, one user suggests that what is being performed is friendship:

> . . .the credibility that people gain from those interactions is not "queer street cred" but a more general kind of status. . . If nothing else, that sort of flirty talk makes it very clear to everyone else in the conversation that these two posters are friendly with one another. So do all the ::squishes your boobies:: and ::dipsnog::s functionas a kind of adverstisement of how close we are? (Busse 212 [LJ, May 11, 2005]).

In this way, the interactions of slash fans online mirror the intimatopic nature of the texts they share with each other and constitute performances of the desire for intimacy that we are socialized to expect from heterosexual relationships, but some find lacking in those same relationships. In this way, we could argue, that these women are performing in ways that are resistant to ideologies of sex and gender.

However, these performances are conducted via avatars that are represented by fan-created icons and connected to online personas. They take place in a forum that, as know from Chapter III, is constructed as a distinctly female space dedicated to archontic textual production. Although Slashpervert, and the community centered on her fiction, are performing dissonant negotiations with the cultural constructions of gender and

heteronormativity, their performances are still relegated to the semi-private sphere and they are engaging in labor that is traditionally feminine and, thus, undervalued: the nurturing of intimate bonds within a community. In Chapter V, we will examine how this undervaluing works by looking closely at two genres of digital fannish production that are distinctly gendered in their production, consumption, and evaluation through both popular representation and critical analysis.

CHAPTER V

GENDERED GENRES: DETERMINING CULTURAL LEGITIMACY IN VIDS AND MACHINIMA

The norms of gender are enmeshed in the most minute of our interactions with media objects—from the use of tools like search engines to the consumption of televisual narratives, the playing of video games or the various forms of productivity associated with fannish practice. Thus far we have examined how fannish practices, in general, are being selectively mainstreamed in ways that assign value and legitimacy based on the perceived gender or sexuality of the object of fandom through representation, labor exploitation and the limits of new media interfaces. We have also noted the ways fannish practices function, at the individual level, to perform negotiations of gender norms in interactions on Live Journal, the playing of role-playing games and the production and consumption of fan fiction. In each of these cases, I have focused on activities that are overwhelmingly practiced by women, take place in spaces that are gendered female and perform behaviors that are constructed as feminine through constant reiteration of gender norms: the maintenance of intimacy, the focus on the personal/private over the public and the centrality of the body. As these examples demonstrate, within the context of digital culture, fannish practices often associated with subculture and resistance are, in various ways, being deployed to reinforce some of the underlying assumptions that reinforce heteronormativity.

In this chapter I would like to apply the same theories of performance to a discussion of how these assumptions about gender and appropriate interests are performed in radically contextualized ways through the production and consumption of

two genres of fannish production that are distinctly gendered: digital fan vids and computer/video gaming-based machinima. Vids, a genre associated with the feminine, focus specifically on analysis and interpretation and seek to elicit emotional and bodily responses in spectators and function to cement intimate bonds in fan communities. Vids are not made for profit and are not generally circulated outside of their fandoms for fear of copyright prosecution or shifts in meaning resulting from their reception out of context. Machinima, a genre associated with the masculine, often utilizes satire and parody and is valued within mainstream culture as a legitimate aesthetic object worthy of accolades and profit. My hope is to show how both genres consistently perform behaviors that cite the norms of sex and gender that underpin our society's compulsory heterosexual foundation. Again, my intent is not to foreclose on the possibility of agency, but to emphasize how the performances of fans, through their consumption practices, can function (often simultaneously) to cite, identify with or expose the apparatus through which norms of sex and gender are constructed. By comparing the performances of gendered subjectivities inherent in the production and consumption of fan vids and machinima, we can see how fans are utilizing different types of media to perform their engagement with the regulatory ideals of sex and gender.

Though both vidders and computer gamers/machinima filmmakers have been discussed as subcultural in the past, the expansion of fannish practice and video gaming into everyday/mainstream life arguably strips them of much of their subversive status. Thus, in this chapter, I focus specifically on how vids and machinima are constructed and represented as 'female' and 'male' genres and how the production and consumption of individual vids and machinima films in their respective communities, perform diverse

notions of feminine and masculine behaviors that range from traditional to quite resistive.

Looking first at modding/machinima and then vidding, this chapter explores the intersection of performance, fandom and gender norms at the levels of genre/form, community and text in these two genres of fannish production. Beginning generally, at the level of form, we will examine the history and evolution of both machinima and vids as distinct genres of fannish production that can be read as performances that cite, identify with and question cultural assumptions and expectations of gender and sexuality through the use of medium and the development of conventions. Then, moving in closer, we will look at how negotiations of gender and sexuality are performed through the production, consumption and evaluation of fanvids and machinima within their respective communities.

Finally, zooming in even closer to look at individual texts, we will close read three fan-created texts. We will be looking at a hack/mod of Squaresoft's Final Fantasy 3 that takes an existing game and alters it in significant ways to meet the specifications of its hacker, who goes by the handle "MetroidQuest". The resulting game, Final Fantasy 6: Eternal Crystals, demonstrates how modding and hacking[51] perform in ways that are not

[51] The definitions for 'mod' and 'hack' that I rely on come from within the computer gaming communities and are best articulated on sites produced through collective and grass-roots knowledge such as Wikipedia and Urban Dictionary. I use these sites as resources for statistics, general knowledge, and history because analysis of these practices by those outside the community is extremely limited and, often, prejudicial. Thus, the definitions of "hack" and "mod":
Hack: "To program a computer in a clever, virtuosic, and wizardly manner. Ordinary computer jockeys merely write programs; hacking is the domain of digital poets. Hacking is a subtle and arguably mystical art, equal parts wit and technical ability, that is rarely appreciated by non-hackers.
A mod, essentially, describes the re-writing of computer code to modify an existing game. Urban Dictionary defines Mod as follows: "In computers: Modification. Ranges from add-ons (Example: UT2K4 VCTF) to Total Conversions (Example: Classic Doom for Doom 3, Red Orchestra, Counter-Strike)." Mods are often written to make games easier or more difficult or to address things that players find lacking, annoying, or 'buggy'.
Source: www.urbandictionary.com

significantly different than those of vids and fan fiction, even though hacking and modding are considered to be masculine practices. Within the machinima community, we will discuss Rooster Teeth Production's Red vs. Blue, the machinima series that arguably "started it all" and set up the conventions for the comedic 'buddy' genre of narrative machinima and utilizes the X-box's Halo franchise as its primary text. We will read this foundational machinima series as performance of gamers' negotiations of notions of masculinity and heteronormativity as practiced within the computer gaming community. Then, turning to vids, we examine a vid from Supernatural that explores how women must negotiate through violence to enjoy their favorite media. Relying, again, on Sandvoss's notion of the fan-text as neutrosemic and fannish use of media as narcissistic, we explore each of these texts as radically contextualized performances of the fan's relationship to norms of sexuality and gender in order to illustrate how media consumption has become an integral part of how we negotiate and engage with shifting norms of gender and sexuality that function to support a heteronormative culture.

My primary resource for machinima productions, directors, evaluation and reception is the foremost site for all things machinima: *www.machinima.com* . This site functions not only as a database for machinima art work, but also as home to active community forums, a site for evaluation with comments and rating system, a source of 'meta' theory written and discussed by machinima producers and fans, and a training resource for new producers. On this site machinima films and videos can be sorted by series, game engine, genre (comedy, drama, official trailers, etc.), most viewed and highest rated. I will be using this categorizing system to locate places in which cultural hierarchies of gender are a determining factor in the aesthetic evaluation of machinima

films and videos within the machinima community.

Unlike machinima, there is currently no 'official' centralized distribution site specifically for fan vids. This is due, largely, to the vidding community's hesitation in publicizing their work and making it available to non-fans in an attempt to both avoid prosecution for copyright infringement and protect their work from those who would view it and evaluate it out of context. In order to gain access to the most popular and edgy vids in different fandoms, my focus will be on fan-created databases called "vid-recs" (short for vid recommendations) that link to personal websites, LJ journals, and YouTube.

Machinima: the 'Original', Legitimate Aesthetic Form

Because they essentially alter the "rules and structures" of existing media texts to suit individual needs, both vidders and machinima producers can be discussed as examples of fans engaging in "transformative" play (Jones 2006). Despite their differing levels of perceived cultural legitimacy and value, the practices of machinima and vidding are essentially doing the same work: taking a loved/valued media text and altering it to fit the desires/needs of the fan in ways that, I argue, often perform negotiations of prevailing ideologies of sex and gender. Although they share this commonality, a close look at how each genre engages with notions of cultural legitimacy, reveals differences that split along distinctly gendered lines. The differences in ways vids and machinima are evaluated and discussed outside their respective communities reveals a gender-based discrepancy that values machinima as an art form identified with the cultural values of masculinity and denigrates vids as a form identified as feminine.

Machinima producers use 3-D game engines and digital avatars to create

everything from music videos and episodic shorts to full length films. Within the context of mainstream media culture, machinima is valued highly—both as a new aesthetic form and as a commodity. Machinima, interestingly, is also an art form that is overwhelmingly dominated by male producers. Although there are several women producing machinima and distributing it on personal websites as well as broadcasting sites like Vimeo, YouTube and Machinima.com, data culled from the 2008 Machinima Filmfest indicates that levels of participation and recognition for male producers far outnumber those for women. The festival awards prizes in seventeen award categories with six films nominated in each. Of those one hundred and two films, only one was produced by a woman: "The Snow Witch" by Michelle Pettit-Mee from the UK, utilizing the game *The Sims 2*.[52]

This demographic discrepancy is addressed briefly by Robert Jones (2006) in his work discussing machinima as an emerging form of fannish production. Connecting machinima production to both the male-dominated computer gaming genre of the first-person-shooter and tracing its historical roots to hacker culture and the practice of 'modding' computer code, Jones suggests that it is unsurprising that a majority of machinima producers are male. He explains the gender discrepancy between those who participate in fannish productions such as fan fiction and machinima, quite reductively, as an issue of access to technology and the ability to master it. Stating that "the technical skills necessary to manipulate a video game engine in order to produce machinima also presents the same barrier to potential female producers of machinima as does the entry

[52] Festival information available at their website at http://festival.machinima.org/wordpress/?page_id=17 (accessed June 11, 2010). Incidentally, "The Snow Witch" was only given an honorable mention in the category of Best Direction, which signifies superb machinima making but does not qualify for an actual nomination.

into male-dominated arenas of computer programming" and "the skill set necessary to write fan fiction does not pose the same barriers" (262-263). This assumes that women do not have the necessary skills for computer programming or the manipulation of video games—which is categorically false.

Jones' discussion of gender demographics and machinima production is heavily inflected with cultural assumptions regarding gender and technology. In fact, his central claims rely on one of the most common ideological assumptions regarding the behavior of women: that they are inherently more collaborative than men and that they do not seek control, engage in competition or have an in-depth understanding of technology. Suggesting, as he does, that it is in the nature of women to work with machines rather than try to master them, that women do not possess the required skill set for producing machinima and that only 'user-friendly' technology can resolve this (263), he is performing his own reiteration of traditional norms of sex and gender by both citing them and lending them authority.[53] Not only does his analysis elide the existence of female machinima producers, it also ignores the practice of vidding—which requires many of the same skills as machinima production. Besides, narrative machinima can now be produced with minimal technical skill thanks to in-game video capture capabilities (or third party software for games that don't include it) and digital filmmaking software like I-Movie or Adobe Premiere. In fact, there are now software programs, like Moviestorm, written exclusively for the creation of machinima and the most recent incarnations of

[53] Regardless of Jones' claims regarding women and machinima, his work overlooks the machinima that is regularly produced by women and is available on distribution sites like machinima.com or Vimeo.com, which boasts a channel specifically for women producers with the expressed purpose being to "highlight women, currently working in machinima, who use a thoughtful approach to tell stories, or communicate ideas and emotions." http://vimeo.com/channels/54662

games such as The Sims include tools made especially for the creation of 'sets' and capturing in game footage for machinima production.

Jones also insists that, because modding and machinima making involve the altering of the game itself through manipulation of the source code, that it also has a more valuable cultural potential for subversion and resistance. The ability to design and create their own content and put it up on a network to share with others allows players to "not just alter their own experience of the medium; they also potentially alter the experience of others" and, thus, "become producers in a way that is arguably far more empowered than that of fan fic writers or fan film producers" (268). Again, Jones' analysis fails to acknowledge the work of vidders who, in the cutting and re-editing of existing footage do, in fact, alter the source text and, potentially, the experience of those who watch their creations. This elision is another example how vids are represented, in academic scholarship, as somehow less legitimate in their potential—in this case, their potential for empowerment and 'resistance' and their legitimacy as performances. This is important because it illustrates how machinima, as an art form, is bestowed with cultural legitimacy, even in critical analysis, in ways that tie that legitimacy to the 'masculinity' of the genre itself—its relationship to technology and its roots in computer gaming.

Notions of the masculine and feminine are inscribed even deeper into these genres than the demographics (whether perceived or real) of the producers themselves. We can also see assumptions about gender operating in these genres, first and foremost, at the level of language. Machinima—a word constructed by its producers by combining the terms 'cinema' and 'machine'--takes on the legitimacy of film as an art form and links it with the notion of technology and progress—marking it as, essentially, a male pursuit.

As such, machinima texts are referred to as films, implying a sense of aesthetic quality that is celebrated through several annual machinima 'film festivals'. The "Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences" is one of several organizations that hosts regular festivals. The Academy recognizes exemplary machinima films through its "Mackies" awards. The existence of an 'Academy' that celebrates the aesthetics of machinima further cements its status as a legitimate art form worthy of official recognition.[54]

Although machinima is not technically reliant on found footage, it is reliant on found technology. Just like other fannish productions, it began with appropriation. Machinima is considered to be an 'original' aesthetic form because the footage, created and shot within a 3-D game engine, is a primary, not a secondary source. The roots of machinima in the practices of hacking and modding, troubles this notion of originality. Video games were not developed with the purpose of creating movies but, just like fan fiction writers and vidders, gamers poached the technology for their own ends. As Henry Lowood points out,

> Developers and programmers such as John Carmack stabilized game technology around the notion of the "game engine" beginning with games like *DOOM* and *Quake;* players appropriated and re-purposed the game engine as a ready-made "found technology" for making their own animated movies inside these games (Lowood 2008, 2)[55].

This re-purposing of technology pre-dates DOOM and Quake, however as the set of practices that have come to be known as machinima, can be traced back to both what is

[54] www.machinima.org

[55] Article available at http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Spring08_GameCapture.pdf (accessed 7/14/2010).

referred to as the 'demoscene' of the late 1970s and early 1980s when teams of hackers began to engage in "competitive displays of technical prowess" known as demos. (Jones 265). A demo refers to the creation of digital signatures in cracked software in which hackers would 'tag' software they had cracked (a sort of digital graffiti) on early gaming systems like the Commodore 64 and the Amiga personal computer. These visual tags were called 'intros' and each intro was unique to the group of hackers that cracked the software. Eventually, the hackers stopped bothering to crack the software and just made demos; communities dedicated only to their creation and distribution were created and the demos expanded from simple graphical 'tags' to short narratives (265-266). These demo movies—a non-narrative precursor to contemporary machinima, and their contemporary descendants, function as performances, not only of skill and dexterity, but also some of the central behaviors associated with notions of masculinity: competition (often violent), the 'broadcast impulse' (the desire to 'show off' their progress and efforts to others) and that of imparting knowledge.[56]

As the demo scene continued to expand, Id software[57] developed and released

[56] These demo films still exist in different forms and are prolific within the genre of the MMORPG (Massive Multi-player Online Role-playing Game) as players will utilize the first-person perspective of their characters as a camera to record in-game achievements such as victories over other players in PVP (player vs. player) combat as well as collaborative efforts such as the "raiding" of dungeons and instructional videos to help others defeat dungeons and difficult encounters (known as 'bosses'). Whereas narrative machinima such as "Red vs. Blue", as we shall see, often demonstrate the ways in which intimacy between males is performed in round-a-bout ways because intimacy between males is taboo in gaming culture, guild videos/raiding videos function to bring the community (guild/clan) closer together by documenting achievements and creating ways to engage in nostalgia for relationships and past events. Though the collaboration demonstrated through guild/clan videos can be seen as circumventing intimacy avoidance and performing intimacy to cement the community, these videos negotiate notions of masculinity and intimacy much like sports—by promoting the values of teamwork and victory through hard work, values also associated with the masculine.

[57] Id Software is one of the foundational production companies for computer and video game software and was responsible for the first three-dimensional first-person-shooter game—which was a precursor to the machinima aesthetic. The company still produces games and more information can be found at the web site: http://www.idsoftware.com/

Wolfenstein 3- D (1992). With this game came the convergence of five necessary conditions for the creation and distribution of machinima: the creation of a 3-D engine, the capability for networked, competitive multi-player gaming, an in-game camera and the game's original source code, thus enabling and encouraging their fan base to both modify the game and create their own levels, or, mods and to record actual game play. Essentially, in 1992, players of *Wolfenstein 3-D* were given access to the means of production and the license to use them (266). This resulted in a plethora of demo movies known as speedruns (videos of players navigating the 3-D environment with amazing speed) and frags (videos of players beating other players in 'deathmatch' mode), in which players would record their game play for the sake of boasting rights.

Calling the practice of modding more empowering or resistive than other fannish practices is problematic because, use of technology aside, modding is not significantly different than the writing of fan fiction or the creation of vids. Modding is, essentially, the practice of taking the tools provided by an existing media text and twisting them to a different purpose. Just like other fannish productions, mods are created (both legitimately and within hacker culture) by game fans for other game fans. They are distributed and evaluated within the community and tend to perform the values associated with the gender that makes up a majority of the population. In the case of gaming, the values being performed most often are those associated with traditional notions of masculinity: competition, broadcasting, aggression and the expectation that males repress emotions and do not engage in intimacy among other males.

Just like fan fiction and vidding, modding and machinima perform individual negotiations of ideologies of gender and sexuality that vary in terms of their resistance to

the ideological status quo. A close look at the creation, distribution and evaluation of a mod for Squaresoft's Final Fantasy VI, within the male-dominated hacker community romhacking.net, reveals how game hacking both parallels and differs from fannish production in female dominated genres such as fan fiction and vidding.

Final Fantasy VI: The Eternal Crystals, by MetroidQuest, is a specific type of mod known as a "rom hack" and, in the context of fannish production, it functions in the same way as fan fiction—by taking the characters and fantasy universe of an existing media text and altering them to fit the desires of the fan. The term 'rom hack' stems from two practices that take place within gaming culture: that of creating video game roms[58] and that of modifying those roms by writing code that alters or 'hacks' them. Within gaming culture it is common for players to modify consoles (such as Microsoft's X-Box) with third-party operating systems and emulator software to allow players to upload and play games for earlier systems like the Commodore 64, Nintendo or Super Nintendo (SNES) on their X-Box. Modding is widespread and, online, there is a large underground economy where video game roms are exchanged through peer-to-peer networks and torrent sites. With a 'modded' X-Box, for example, a gamer can upload hundreds of games from all different consoles to the system's hard drive and play them without ever purchasing them.

A 'hack' refers to the editing of code within the game's software in order to make specific changes to the game itself. A hacker can change everything from graphics and

[58] A 'rom' is a file that contains data from a 'read only' memory chip, such as that from a video game cartridge, that enables that game to played using emulator software on a newer computer system (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ROMs). As it is a relatively new area of study/interest, much of the general historical information on roms, modding, and game hacks come from Wikipedia and player-generated wikis and databases.

textual fonts to elements of game play. On fan-created websites[59], fans of SNES games can download and install hacks that can change difficulty level, replace existing characters with those from other games, change the music, add new character abilities or even completely change the game for the purposes of spoofing.

As a re-working of one of the most critically acclaimed and popular fantasy role-playing games in the genre[60], the Final Fantasy VI: the Eternal Crystals hack changes the game in ways that are meant to change the player's experience by playing into the fans' nostalgia for the game and the series that spawned it, surprising them with elements of other Final Fantasy games and 'restoring' many elements of the game that have been lost or changed in its translation from Japanese to English—thus making the game seemingly more authentic than the version released in the United States in 1994.

Thus, just like fan fiction, this mod functions as a way to 'fix' issues with the media text that, when unattended, disrupt the fan's engagement with a text. As is standard for rom hacks, the changes that Metroid Quest, as a sort of hacker auteur, made to the original Final Fantasy 6 game are listed and described in an attached document file known as a 'readme' file.[61] The Eternal Crystals adaptation changes the game's storyline, character names, character abilities and biographies, dialogue, enemies, commands and 'fixes' what Metroid Quest considers problems with the original game. What a fan chooses to 'fix' about the text performs the fan's individual relationship to the

[59] Hackers post roms on their personal websites and fellow gamers post reviews, walk-throughs, and other commentary on sites such as http://www.romhacking.net/hacks/431/.

[60] The hack is based on Squaresoft's *Final Fantasy VI* (1994). Though the game was the sixth in the Final Fantasy series released in Japan, it was called *Final Fantasy III* in the US because the original *FFIII* released in Japan had not been released in North America.

[61] Information taken from the readme.txt file included with the hack file at the following website: http://metroidquest.angelfire.com/FF6_EC_vX/

ideology put forth within the text itself. We have seen how this works in fan fiction and role playing games; a close look at the changes listed in the readme file demonstrate a similar process taking place within the realm of computer gaming.

In FFVI: The Eternal Crystals, Metroid Quest alters the game in ways that remove elements that differed too much from earlier games in the series. By doing this, he[62] also performs behaviors that are valued within the hacker culture and conform to traditional notions of masculinity: an in-depth knowledge of conventions, competitiveness, technical prowess, an inclination to broadcast achievements and a desire to limit changes to the status quo. By changing everything from the storyline to what enemies and playable characters appear in the game and what their abilities are, Metroid Quest's popular and acclaimed[63] hack takes ownership of the text in a way that demonstrates both neutrosemy and performance. He renders the video game text neutrosemic by changing it into a text that reflects his own sense of self, values and desires back to him. The hack also performs both technical prowess and a sort of 'nerd cred' by broadcasting his coding skill and his intimate familiarity with the entire series—from its music, characters and themes to its enemies, graphics and conventions.

Regardless of the technical skills involved or modding's problematic relationship to piracy, Metroid Quest's FF6 hack is neither fundamentally empowering nor resistant. The hacker has shifted the game, in both its narrative and its core structure, in ways that

[62] Although Metroidquest's gender is not specified on his personal website or his profile on YouTube, his gender is assumed to be masculine due to demographics of the community and interactions with those who consider themselves 'fans' of Metroidquest's mods. Essentially, as the hacker's gender is unmarked, it is assumed to be male.

[63] Through comments on Metroidquest's personal website as well as those on his demo/trailer videos posted on YouTube, reveal that this hack (and Metroidquest himself) are well respected and regarded within the rom-hacking community. See the following: http://www.romhacking.net/?page=reviews&action=ReviewSubPage&section=Hacks&id=76#review And http://www.youtube.com/user/metroidquest

reveal a deep affinity for the status quo, anxiety about change and clear moral/ethical boundaries. The game's storyline is changed from one of ambiguity, darkness, defeat and slow regeneration, to what Metroid Quest refers to as the 'old school light warriors' type story. The light warriors' story is a heroic storyline that parallels plots of classical/epic literature in which a small band of rebels fight against an evil empire that seeks to take over the world by exploiting magical power. This specific story mode is utilized in many games in the Final Fantasy canon and was established in the first game. Changing the plot of FFVI 'back' to the form of the first game performs a preference for the status quo and the familiar and reveals anxiety over ambiguity and changes to 'classical' conventions. This change also indicates an in depth knowledge of the genre and its conventions, experience playing the original game and ones like it, and the attention to detail attributed to 'hard core' fans of lots of different media texts.

Because the driving force behind this hack is to fix 'bugs' that are agreed upon within the Final Fantasy fan base as issues that needed to be addressed, this hack is created specifically for an audience of other fans and, therefore, can be read as performance. In addition to the change in storyline, Metroid Quest also changes the names of abilities, playable characters and enemies in order to "stay loyal to other FF games" and changes commands and scripts to fix aspects of the original game that players considered 'bugs'. Character names from the FFIII version were changed back to the FFVI names to remain loyal to the original Japanese version and specific enemies and bosses were changed to a "mix of enemies from other FF games (changed sprites, palettes and battle scripts)". Changing of commands, fonts, 'fixes' for bugs in the original game demonstrate the hacker's technical prowess as well as a sense of confidence in

expectations and knowledge of conventions—so much so that the hacker can be seen as arrogant in his insistence in 'fixing' the original game by altering menus and editing code to deal with common issues and complaints from other Final Fantasy players—for example a problem in which characters would not effectively evade enemy attacks when using the block ability during battle.[64]

Though mods, like Final Fantasy VI: The Eternal Crystals require specialized skills such as the writing and editing of computer code, when we break down the hack we can see that it is performing a similar function to fan fiction or role playing—utilizing a beloved media text to construct and perform negotiations of hegemonic norms within a community of like-minded fans. Taking favorite bits from different games and inserting them at will demonstrates a sense of 'canon' for the Final Fantasy universe as a whole in which different elements can be interchanged and substituted to fit the desires of Metroid Quest and can be read as an example of fannish extraction. This parallels work being done by media fans who extract characters from different fictional universes (such as Harry Potter or Supernatural) and shift and combine them into crossover fics—utilizing them like strips of film that perform repeated behaviors and scripts. In his Eternal Crystals hack, Metroid Quest moves characters around and changes their individual characteristics—their abilities, their appearance (sprites) and their names, in order to deploy them as part of a performance of his negotiation of the themes of the original Final Fantasy 3/6 game. This is much like the ways that fan fiction writers alter the personalities and sexual proclivities of TV characters in fan fiction and role playing and showcases a sense of ownership over the characters that demonstrates the neutrosemic

[64] Information taken from the readme.txt file included with the hack file at the following website: http://metroidquest.angelfire.com/FF6_EC_vX/

nature of fannish practice.

In much the same way that the work of rom-hackers mirrors that of fan fiction writers, the production of narrative machinima is akin to the production of fan vids because it takes a loved/valued media text and alters it to fit the needs and desires of the fan. Both machinima and vids are genres of digital production that are produced within and for communities of fans; they both function performatively as celebrations and critiques of media texts and the communities that grow up around them. Thus, just like fan fiction, role playing, LJ interactions and modding, I will be reading narrative machinima and vids as cultural performances of negotiations of cultural norms of gender and sexuality.

As we established earlier in the chapter, though machinima films differ from vids in that they do not rely on 'found' footage, they are still playing within the boundaries set by the original media text—in this case, the environment and engine of the chosen game. The foundational machinima series, Red vs. Blue: the Blood Gulch Chronicles (RVB), is based on the Halo series for Microsoft's X-Box console and the filming takes place within the game environment. Much like the practice of vidding, in which the fan is limited to footage that exists already, filming within the environment of a console game limits what can be done, not only graphically, but also in terms of plot and story. The recording of game play is enabled by an in-game camera that is controlled through the use of a player's avatar in first person perspective. There are limited settings, props, costumes and avatars and these limitations force producers of machinima to get creative with the materials available to them within the world of the game itself.

Halo is a science fiction video game franchise produced by the software

development company Bungie and owned and distributed by Microsoft. The first installment of the game, Halo: Combat Evolved was released in 2001 with the second in 2004 and the latest in 2009. Credited with being the most successful title in the first-person-shooter genre, the Halo series has spawned several adaptations—comic books, novels, toys and anime, in addition to fan fiction and countless machinima titles.[65] Beginning with RVB in 2003, the Halo series has been one of the most popular settings for narrative machinima (followed closely by the Sims series). In fact, of the ten highest rated machinima videos on machinima.com, eight videos are related to Halo and five are episodes of RVB.[66]

The story of the Halo series is one of war and heroism that follows the experiences of a cyborg soldier known as "Master Chief" who, along with his artificial intelligence companion Cortana, set out to save humanity from a race of theocratic aliens. As Roger Travis points out in his work on Halo as epic, this storyline parallels one of the great classical epic adventures: the Aenid—in which a more-than-human soldier defeats the Carthiginians and the Greeks and founds the new civilization that will become Rome. In both the classical poem and the video game, the central theme is that of "securing the self by defeating the other" (Travis 2).[67] The central character, Master Chief, is half human half robot and all marine—encompassing the militaristic values of contemporary American society that are part of our expectations for masculinity: unwavering patriotism, sacrifice of self for nation and compatriots and the eschewing of emotional

[65] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halo_%28series%29#Reception_and_critical_response

[66] http://www.machinima.com/

[67] http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue_66/384-Bungies-Epic-Achievement.2

expression. These values, ever-present throughout the plot of the Halo trilogy, are cited, problematized and negotiated through the RVB machinima series.[68] The first episode of RVB, "Why Are We Here", examines these values utilizing the satire and parody—genres of laughter notably associated with masculinity through the work of Kathleen Karlyn (1995).

The central focus of the first season is on critiquing and mocking the conventions of Halo, its universe, its player-base and the multiplayer mode of 'capture the flag' (CFT) combat. Through a series of hilariously timed shot reverse shots, the two 'red' characters (though one wears yellow armor and one wears maroon) discuss the absurdity of the situation in which they find themselves in a way that performs the awkwardness imposed upon male/male in relationships in terms of intimacy and the expression of emotions in the context of homosocial culture.

The episode begins with a long slow tilt up the side of a canyon wall that reveals two heavily armored soldiers (one in Red named Simmons and one in yellow named Grif) made anonymous and dehumanized by mirrored face-plates:[69]

Simmons: Hey.

Grif:Yeah?

Simmons:You ever wonder why we're here?

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[68] Although machinima is usually discussed as film, much of the genre is actually more akin to television due to its seriality. RVB follows the conventions of the television serial. The first few episodes introduce the characters and settings and pose the central question of the first season: why are we here? As the season progresses, the episodes create a narrative arc that develops the characters, reveals intricate relationships, builds to a climax and then resolves—all in the traditional Western/Aristotelian form.

[69] Fans of *Halo* recognize these figures as those that are playable in the game's multi-player format and the terrain as part of the CTF map "Blood Gulch"--which is essentially a box canyon in which each team (Red/Blue) builds a base on each side of the canyon and tries to capture the opposite team's flag and bring it back to their home base.

Grif:It's one of life's great mysteries, isn't it. Why *are* we here? I mean, are we the product of... some cosmic coincidence or, is there really a God... watching everything? You know, with a plan for us and stuff. I don't know man, but it keeps me up at night.

Simmons:...

Grif:...

Simmons:What? I meant why are we out *here*, in this canyon?

Grif:Oh, uh... yeah.

Simmons:What was all that stuff about God?

Grif:Uh... hm? Nothing.

Simmons:You wanna talk about it?

Grif:No

Simmons:You sure?

Grif:Yeah.[70]

The sense of awkwardness is created through the timing of the shots in which neither character speaks. Grif realizes he has revealed too much emotion and his level of existential thought when Simmons was asking a question that is quite literal. Simmons tries to encourage the moment as an opportunity for intimate communication but, embarrassed by his slip, Grif refuses and both characters move on to discuss the pointlessness of their never-ending battle with the "blue guys" until the "Sarge" character calls to them, referring to them as "Ladies". During the entire exchange, the characters do not appear in the same frame until the Sarge calls to get their attention, even further emphasizing the expectation of solitariness and independence by having them "caught" in

[70]Transcripts of episodes available at Rooster Teeth's website at the following link: http://www.roostertooths.com/transcripts.php?eid=1 accessed 8/2/2010.

a moment of intense conversation by a male authority figure. This cites cultural assumptions regarding gender and sexuality that construct intimacy between males as taboo and grounds for questioning their status as heterosexual and male.

The characterization of Grif and Simmons refers to the relationships that develop between male gamers within the culture of online gaming communities like those created through "X-Box Live"--in which battles and competitions are initiated and voice communication is utilized for strategy, game-play and (often flippant, homophobic and sexually-charged) conversation, but rarely for honest communication of feelings or emotions. This is the opposite of how voice and instant messenger software is utilized in female-dominated communities centered on fan fiction, textual RPGs or vids. What makes this exchange funny and meaningful to fans of *Halo* (and other games in the FPS genre), is the fact that this underlying 'rule' to avoid intimate communication is understood; it is enacted through social performances like language use, conventions for commenting in forums and codes of behavior in game environments that marginalize any behavior that demonstrates overt intimacy by casting it as 'gay' or associating it with the feminine through the use of the word 'pussy' as a term of insult. This exchange between Simmons and Grif cites norms of masculinity as performed within gaming communities, hints at both its constructed-ness and repressiveness, and then lets it go.

When the perspective shifts to that of the blue team, this notion is reinforced as we are introduced to that team's protagonists, Tucker and Church. Church is looking through a sniper rifle at the red base, and Tucker is with him. Just like the exchange between Simmons and Grif, this sequence is a series of shot-reverse-shots that keeps each character in a separate frame. In fact, throughout the sequence, Tucker appears in the far

left side of the frame while Church is in the far right of his frame—separating them even further:

> Tucker:What're they doing?
>
> Church:What?
>
> Tucker:I said what're they doing now?
>
> Church:God damn, I'm getting so sick of answering that question!
>
> Tucker:Hey you have the fucking rifle, I can't see shit. Don't bitch at me because I'm not going to just sit up here and play with my dick all day.
>
> Church:Okay, okay look: They're just standing there, and talking, okay? That's all they're doing. That's all they *ever* do, is just stand there and talk. That's what they were doing last week, that's what they were doing when you asked me five minutes ago. So five minutes from *now*, when you ask me "What're they doing?" my answer's gonna be "They're still just talking, and they're still just standing there!"
>
> Tucker:... What're they talking about?
>
> Church:You know what? I fucking hate you.

Again, the comedy is created through the rhythm of the shots and carefully timed silences. The red team is seen by Church as passive due to the fact that they just 'stand there' and talk; Talking is precisely what Tucker wants to do but he is shut down by Church at every turn and punished for his attempts at communication with harsh words. However, as the series progresses—particularly in episode eight (out of 160 episodes) where Church is killed by friendly fire it becomes apparent that Tucker and Church have attained a sense of intimacy. Yet, even in death, the two characters cannot bring themselves to express this. As Church lay dying, his last words to Tucker are: "I hated you most of all", to which Tucker replies "I know, hurry up and die already".[71]

Thus, the episodes note how the construction and maintenance of intimacy

[71] Ibid.

through communication is considered the realm of the feminine and thus taboo within the world of the game—as well as that of gaming culture. In the second episode, the 'place' of intimacy is cemented when the Sarge punishes Grif and Simmons for their moment of honest communication by referring to them as “Ladies” and reminding them that they are engaged in war and not an “ice cream social”. The series seems to cite these norms with the purpose of exposing them as constructed—performing a relationship to the ideological status quo that is somewhat questioning as the character pairs continue to 'steal' moments of intimacy beneath the constant gaze of their superiors in the same way that men in heteronormative culture must keep their expressions under the radar to avoid having their sexuality questioned. Hence, *Red vs. Blue*, the machinima genre’s most foundational text, points toward the constructed-ness of norms of gender and sexuality. By focusing on homosocial intimacy as taboo, the series—read as cultural performance, actually increases intimacy in a community that, through rituals cemented in social performance, outwardly eschews it.

In this way, machinima, at its core, is not markedly different than vids. What truly differentiates machinima from vids are how each genre is perceived, evaluated and categorized within mainstream culture and its analysis within the academic community. This difference in evaluation is rooted, again, with cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity that align technology, material production and work in the public sphere with masculinity and function to marginalize the labor, interests and concerns of women by associating them with the private, symbolic and bodily.

Whereas machinima, as a genre, performs many behaviors associated with the masculine, such as the broadcast impulse, competition and creating a legitimate market

for the genre, the genre of vids are focused nearly completely on creating and maintaining intimate relationships within communities and fostering that intimacy through the sharing of productions that incite emotions and bodily response. These characteristics associate the vids with other genres deemed feminine, like the so-called chick flick. In addition, the vidding community's lack of interest in broadcasting their work to the general public and in negotiating the complicated legal terrain restricting how vids can be produced and distributed for profit marginalizes them by relegating keeping them out of the sphere of material production. This limits how vids can change the material conditions of those who create them. Although there are many factors that make the broadcasting of vids difficult and undesirable for many vidders, this contributes to the genre's lack of cultural legitimacy and this is an issue of some controversy within the vidding community itself.

Unlike machinima producers, vidders do not have the support of the corporations that produce their primary media texts and they often have to hide their work to avoid litigation over copyright infringement. Vids are not celebrated with officially acknowledged festivals or given "Academy"-sanctioned awards. Rather, the largest honors for vid-makers are given out online through individual LJ pages and at the art form's central convention, VividCon—thus keeping vidding, as a practice, within a semi-private sphere of production and distribution that is largely invisible within the gender-selective mainstreaming of fannish practices in digital culture and assigning them little to no cultural or aesthetic value within mainstream media. Vids, like fan fiction, are often labeled derivative due to aforementioned reliance upon media footage that already exists. Machinima, regardless of the fact that its films do require found technology, are not

subjected to this label. In addition, the term "vid" itself is the diminutive of the word video which implies a value lower than video—which is seen as a lower quality version of film in terms of both aesthetics and cultural value (as in the term 'straight to video) and implies inferiority. However, for those who produce, distribute and consume vids, their value is not measured in dollars or accolades.

"Vidding is Love."

The first vid was, in actuality, an instance of cultural performance. Beginning in 1975, Star Trek fan Kandy Fong used a slide projector to create live slideshows juxtaposing footage from the show with music. Traveling, with her equipment, from convention to convention, Fong performed her interpretation of the character of Spock. The progeny of a human mother and a Vulcan father, Spock's dual nature has consistently been appealing to female fans as he struggles to repress his emotions in a culture that values logic above all else. Her slideshow using Leonard Nimoy's performance of Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" has been discussed by vidders as the "grandmother" of all vids as it set the conventions for the form as one of thoughtful interpretation that utilizes deliberate song choice to foreground specific themes and perform a reading of the media text that is meaningful to the fannish community and elicits an emotional response.[72] Like Fong's piece, a contemporary 'vid' can be most succinctly defined as a visual essay that constructs a "reading" of a media text by selecting footage from its archive and re-editing it with music in order to interpret, critique and/or celebrate that text.

The genres of vids that have evolved throughout the history of fandom all function to further the growth of intimacy and each can be seen to perform negotiations

[72] http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/videos/2007/11/19/celebrating-kandy-fong-founder-of-fannish-music-video

with assumptions of sex and gender. Categories of vids shift from fandom to fandom as individual shows/films have specific characters, relationships, and 'insider' humor. However, there are several sub-genres that seem to sprout up, in one form or another, across fandoms and range from specific in their concerns to quite general. On the specific end of the spectrum, there is the episodic vid—which focuses its analysis on one specific episode of a serial media text, the character study vid, the relationship study—which interprets relationships between characters and is further distinguished by pairing and whether the relationship discussed is het or slash. On the other end of the spectrum, we have 'general' vids—which interpret/analyze/celebrate the media text's general themes/universe, comedic vids that make use of fannish knowledge and ways of seeing for the purposes of humor and "meta" vids—which discuss/analyze/celebrate the practice of vidding itself and its community and "dance" vids which combine 'footage of characters dancing or clubbing from several different media texts with dance/techno/club music to high light the motifs of dancing and sexuality that span different media genres.

The driving force behind the fan-created vid is interpretation and analysis rather than parody and this sets it apart from much of remix culture, including much of machinima. Vids also differ from the parody culture of remix and machinima by being a primarily woman-dominated genre of media production that pre-dates machinima and remix by about twenty five years. As vidder Luminosity insists in an interview with New York Magazine, vids are one of the most prolific outgrowths of media fandom and—much like fan fiction, are part of how women are "talking back to male creators, teasing out for ourselves and telling the stories we don't get otherwise."[73]

[73] "The Vidder: Luminosity upgrades fan video" by Logan Hill. November 12, 2007. http://nymag.com/movies/features/videos/40622/

Vids, as a genre, can be associated with traditional notions of the feminine. Vids are produced and consumed collaboratively, they perform the unpaid labor of intimacy in a community that is made up of (mostly) women, many of whom who see themselves as cultural outsiders, and their value is often determined by their worth to the community and their ability to elicit an emotional and bodily response and nurture intimacy within that community. Thus, vids function to perform one of the tasks generally considered feminine within the confines of traditional gender norms: the nurturing of intimate relationships within a community. Within the cultural matrix that supports heteronormativity, this labor is relegated to women and its worth is symbolic rather than material. As such, vids and vidders are marginalized and elided within mainstream media culture like other woman-centered genres like melodrama, so-called chick-lit, and romance.

Yet, just because vids are performing in ways that engage with cultural notions of femininity does not mean they are not a source of empowerment for those who make them and the communities in which they are consumed. However, just because they are produced largely by women does not mean they are inherently resistive, either. Although, as cultural performance, individual vids can be discussed as a way to undermine cultural constructions of gender and sexuality much of the social performance inherent in vidding communities—such as rules that discourage the linking of vids and limiting access to them by those outside the community for the sake of protecting interpretation—limit the resistive potential of vidding within mainstream media culture. Still, their worth as feminist practice should not be underestimated and is best understood through the words and work of the vidding community itself.

As vidders themselves put forth, the goals of vidding, as a practice, are myriad, but are essentially rooted in pleasure—the pleasure of reveling in a media text, the pleasure of sharing the love of that text with a community, and the pleasures inherent in repeated consumption and collective spectatorship. As part of a general push toward new media literacy and an effort to shed light on vidding as a practice, the fan-run Organization for Transformative Works produced a five part series of video shorts in which experienced vidders explain the practice of vidding and its value to young media consumers. In the first segment, entitled "What is Vidding?" Vidders describe their work variously—as a way to form a connection, a creative outlet for ideas, or a "stupid hobby". However, overwhelmingly, vidders note that vidding is, in many ways, a practice of love—a love for the media text, for the fandom within which it is created and for their collaborative communities and themselves.[74] In the OTW's short "Why We Vid", vidders note the frustration inherent in the vidding process but claim the practice is ultimately rewarding for reasons that are all grounded in notions of intimacy. Vidding, allows vidders to make connections with others, to form communities and to share their love of the text and their love for each other. In essence, the ultimate goal of vidding, as noted by the vidders themselves, is to generate and increase intimacy within a self-selected community. Vids are created "for" the community, exchanged as gifts and utilized as a way to "work through" personal issues by "using emotions like paint" in ways that enable vidders to trust themselves and their ideas.[75]

This intimacy work is performed, in part, through the production of vids that are

[74] "What is Vidding?" Directed by Francesca Coppa. http://techtv.mit.edu/tags/2522-otw/videos/1246-otw-fanvidding-series-what-is-vidding

[75] "Why We Vid" Directed by Francesca Coppa http://techtv.mit.edu/tags/2522-otw/videos/1251-otw-fanvidding-series-why-we-vid

deliberately designed to evoke a strong emotional response. In fact, a key factor in a vid's reception is its ability to make its viewer feel what the vidder wants them to feel. Ethnographic research, which I performed by visiting and documenting responses on various vid-recommendation sites, demonstrates that nearly every vid recommendation mentions the vid's power to elicit a emotionally-fueled bodily response. On a vid-rec website for the Harry Potter fandom, a fan recommends the vid "Mad World" because " . . . the song, the editing, the mood–all perfect. I bawled for days after watching this." About the vid, entitled "Please, Please," the same fan notes that "it's impossible not to feel for Harry after watching this vid. The editing is sweeping and grand while the music inspires a mix of longing, pain, and hope." Another vid is recommended because it "will give you chills" and others for their ability to be moving, touching, etc.[76] In this way, vids are functioning in a melodramatic mode—a genre whose association with the feminine has been the subject of feminist scholarship for decades (see Williams 1984 and 1991, Modleski 1984).

The collaborative nature of the vidding community associates it both with traditional notions of femininity and performance. Many vids are produced by 'collectives' or by vidders working in pairs. However, regardless of the negative assumptions about collaboration and gender cited and reinforced by scholars like Jones, vidders believe that working together does not limit what they can do, but increases the value of their vids by making them stronger, more polished and more meaningful to the community.

Vidder Luminosity, one of the most prolific, acclaimed and public fans producing

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[76] http://fanvid-recs.com/category/harry-potter/

vids at the moment, often works with co-vidders on specific projects. The vid, Women's Work, for example, was created with co-vidder Sisabet because the two women share both a love of Supernatural and a concern about the eroticization of violence against women in media. One vidder notes that collaborative vidding is fun because "you learn from each other, you inspire each other and you refine the idea that you have together."[77] In fact, some vidders cite the vidding community itself as their inspiration for vidding because of its welcoming nature and the wealth of help and mentorship available for new vidders and fans. When asked where they preferred to watch vids, many vidders noted that they loved to watch vids with other fans—at conventions, in hotel rooms or in living rooms because it creates a community experience. The impact of the vid can be felt in a stronger way because there is an opportunity for immediate collective response and feedback. This collective spectatorship becomes directly performative when it is combined with the bodily art of dance. Each year, at VividCon, there is a designated space where 'dance vids' are played and fans and vidders can enjoy the vids in a group while dancing—thus allowing for an extra level of performance that involves the body in a more direct way and keeps the genre connected to its roots in cultural performance.

Whether the vid results in laughter, tears and/or a physical or sexual response, the best vids create a sense of camaraderie based on a shared love for the characters, relationships and world of a media text that results in a shared emotional response and a sense of community that deepens and develops through collaborative production and collective spectatorship. The collaborative nature of vid production and consumption mirrors that of the fan fiction and role playing on Live Journal discussed in Chapter

[77] "Collaboration and Community" Directed by Francesca Coppa http://techtv.mit.edu/collections/newmedialiteracies:1075/videos/1248-otw-fanvidding-series-collaboration-and-community

IV—in which media texts are used as a medium through which to perform individual negotiations of ideologies of sex and gender.

Emblematic of this work is Luminosity and Sisabet's vid, *Women's Work*, which performs a critical analysis of the common nature of the eroticization of violence against women in all media by using images from their favorite show, Supernatural. The vidders insist they could have used images from any number of shows but chose Supernatural because they love it so much. The vid uses Supernatural's dark and horrific aesthetic to point out the gratuitous amount of women, in media, who are "sexually assaulted, murdered, and then laid out in artistic tableau, chopped into pretty pieces" for the pleasure of the viewer and the progression of the plot. The goal of the vid is to point out that "in order for us to love a TV show—and we do—we have to set this horrible part of it aside. A lot. Often" (Hill 2007).[78]

Juxtaposing images from the first three seasons of Supernatural with Hole's "Violet", the vid performs a three-part indictment of both the media industry and fandom. The first section of the vid lays bare the media industry's construction of women as consistently under threat (especially in their own homes). Then, using a seemingly endless supply of excessively violent images of so-called "one episode girls", Luminosity and Sisabet point out how women, as both characters and images, are ultimately disposable. Finally, focusing on the series' female villains, the vid demonstrates how women in media are always punished for being 'out of control' of patriarchy. Throughout each of these sections, through the use of a song whose lyrics alternately warn and reprimand viewers, the vidders acknowledge the complicity of fans in perpetuating these very constructions through their participatory consumption.

[78] http://nymag.com/movies/features/videos/40622/

This vid returns us to Supernatural (WB, 2005-2006, CW, 2006—present) and its obsessive study of the family as a site of horror. Supernatural chronicles the lives of two brothers, Sam and Dean, whose lives are defined by their experience of the brutalization and death of their mother (at the hands of a demon) when they were small children. Raised by their revenge-fueled father to be 'hunters' of all creatures deemed 'supernatural', the brothers struggle to control their own destiny in a universe that, throughout the series, is shown to be controlled by petulant angels and demons warring for the attention of a dead-beat father-god.

As a hybridization of horror and melodrama, Supernatural is a media text that is, in its unaltered form, already bound up with traditional notions of gender and sexuality and the policing of the feminine through punishment (Clover 1987, Williams 1984, 1991). In true melodramatic form, punishment is enacted on both the (mostly female) body and psyche. Yet, the pilot episode's opening shots place the show squarely within the genre of the horror film. While white text at the bottom of the screen locates the narrative in Lawrence, Texas twenty two years in the past, the camera moves us slowly through the leafless branches of a looming tree on a dark night and comes to rest on a Dutch colonial home. The house, already constructed as creepy by its framing as solitary and dark is made even more ominous by fog and the shadows of tree branches that appear to hold it in a frightening grip and foreshadow violence and terror. Pausing only for a brief moment, the camera moves in a tad closer and the tree shadows seem to pulse and grip the house even tighter. The episode's first cut finds us entering a dark room with a mother and son that, with the flick of a light switch, is revealed to be a nursery with an infant lying in its crib. This opening sequence mimics that of the haunted house film and

introduces both the series' central protagonists (the older boy is Dean and the infant is Sam) and the woman (their mother) whose incendiary death incites the revenge saga that drives the narrative for the first two seasons.

Luminosity and Sisabet's vid also begins with this motif of tree-shadows, darkened houses and children in danger—only their children are little girls. Matching, cut for cut, the fast and angry pace of Hole's anthem of self-destruction, the editing moves from quick and sharp to slow and whimsical and back again. The opening sequence, aligned with the song's introduction, is a series of shot-reverse-shots from a dark window with naked tree branches extending and looming to a dark haired little girl. In the center of the frame, she is kneeling down—praying. As the music picks up, the shots move quickly from the window to the bed and back again—revealing a slowly grasping bony hand flexing amongst the branches before it cuts to another little girl in a different bed, cowering in fear from another monster—this one, inside her closet. The little girls are, emphatically alone. The first girl is praying to an unseen father and, though her own father is behind her, with his head purposefully out of frame, he is effectively absent. The second sits up alone in bed as the camera stalks her from the shadow of the closet.

The shots chosen by Luminosity and Sisabet are those that place the viewer alternately in the role of the victim and the aggressor because this dual role is one that reflects the position of the female spectator. When consuming a media text, especially in such a participatory way, fans sacrifice a bit of their own innocence (thus the focus on little girls) for the sake of the text's other pleasures. Female fans, like these little girls, are aware of the danger but they seem either helpless or unwilling to prevent it.

Moving next to a series of shots of a grown woman preparing for a bath, the camera's gaze both sexualizes and fragments her body——turning her into nothing more than a bundle of fetishes. The camera then cuts to a shot of a man's hand moving slowly beneath the straps of a lacy red bra on an anonymous woman and then swiftly to that of a candle 's flame being snuffed out—not-so-subtly pointing out how sex and violence are connected. The images speed up and we are presented with a series of successive shots of impending violence: a dark-haired woman drinking beer in bed while the shadow of skeletal hands reaches for her neck, the first little girl hiding beneath her covers, a monster's shadow approaching the bed of the second girl, a blond woman cowering away from a faceless dark-haired aggressor and another woman, held down on the floor, struggling to escape.

The lyrics give way to a rush of angry guitar licks and in a swift, and seemingly endless assault, we are bombarded with even more images of women being chased, hunted, terrorized and assaulted—one after the other. Each of these girls and women are featured victims in only one episode. This brutalization often opens the episode and gives the impetus for Sam and Dean Winchester to come investigate the cause of their demise and kill the monster—thus protecting future victims and making the world safer. These women, however, are never seen again. In effect, these women are disposable and rarely last an entire episode. This is highlighted by the music. Love's gritty and sarcastic voice sings “might last a day, yeah”, pointing out the ease with which each of these unwitting victims are quickly dispatched in bloody and sadistic ways. This sequence culminates with the image of a bikini-clad young woman being pulled under in the depths of a lake—disappearing beneath the waves.

These women and girls, as the song's bridge tells us, are simply a means to an end:

When they get, what they want,

they never want it again.

When the get what they want,

they never want it again.

Who are the "they" being referred to? At the level of the show's diegesis, they might refer to the various monsters hunting and consuming these women at the rate of at least one per episode. On a deeper level, however, these women are also disposable as media images—being used up and tossed away over and over in an endless supply with their eroticized bloodied bodies furthering the plot but not actually taking participating in the plot (Hill 2007)[79]

Before we can recover from the previous barrage of disturbing images, a quick but smart sequence introduces us to the women who have been important in the lives of the Winchesters (their mother Mary, Sam's girlfriend Jessica, and later romantic interests for both characters) while simultaneously noting how they are not so different from the one-episode girls: they are plot devices whose bodies are burned, slashed or broken for the sake of driving the narrative.

The sequence starts with a slow lingering tracking shot up the body of Jessica in her "sexy nurse" Halloween costume and then directly to Sam caressing the naked back of Madison—a woman he later falls in love with but is forced to kill when she becomes a werewolf. This connection between these two characters refers not only to the violence inflicted upon those characters by the narrative but also to the truism pointed out by the

[79] http://nymag.com/movies/features/videos/40622/

show's fans: that having sex with Sam is a death sentence. The next shot, of their mother kissing Sam goodnight as a baby reminds us that all of this violence is predicated on the death of the mother—who is angelically represented in a modest white nightgown before she bursts into flames above the crib. As the music speeds up in anticipation of the repeated bridge and chorus, we are again bombarded with images of violence—this time enacted upon characters central to the plot and generally loved by the fan base. This reminds viewers that no one is safe from the helplessness, violence or disposability.

The vid's final sequence begins with the death of Meg, a woman who is possessed by a demon and is forced to commit heinous acts of violence herself before she is violently killed during its expulsion. Meg's demise is followed by images of the deathes of other 'supernatural' women—vampires, witches, succubi, demons, and the ghost of a mother who killed her children in a jealous rage. This cascade of images reminds us that when these women get what they want (revenge, restitution, justice, etc.), they are never heard from again. The images of these women acting out in violent ways and then being violently 'put down' speed up faster and faster as the chorus screams out:

Go on take everything, take everything I want you to.

Go on take everything, take everything I want you to.

Go on, take everything, take everything, take everything (repeat)

until it abruptly ends with the shot of a central female character (Ava Wilson, who appears in three episodes in the second season) having her neck snapped in punishment for acting on her own behalf.

Through its stream of harsh and unyielding images of women being hunted and slaughtered, *Women's Work* accomplishes its stated goal. It is disturbingly clear in its

indictment of media's depiction of violence against women as erotic. Yet the pairing of the images with Hole's "Violet", a rage-filled anthem chronicling an unhealthy and self-destructive relationship, adds an even deeper dimension to the critique—one that not only performs the frustration inherent in being a female spectator and constantly having to "set aside" this treatment of women in order to enjoy a media text but also notes the complicity inherent in being that spectator.[80] The pairing of images and lyric seems to hint at the role that fans play in perpetuating this media violence by virtue of their complacency and participation. In the first section, following the images of the little girls, the woman in the bath tub and the snuffing out of the candle, the song's lyrics chime in with:

you should learn when to go.

you should learn how to say no!

With this juxtaposition of image and lyric, the vidders are referring back to a rich history of similar images and motifs throughout the history of visual media that are constantly repeated across genres and media—reminding us, the viewer, that we have seen all of this before, we know what happens next and we should put a stop to it. Yet, as viewers and fans we not only 'set aside' our concerns over this brutalization, we often revel in it.

In the second section, the song's lyrics drive home the point even deeper:

And the sky was all violet

I wanna give my violet more violence

Not only are female spectators complicit in this violence through their continued consumption, fannish production of vids, icons and fics result in both a wider distribution of these violent images and additions to the violence through narrative multiplicities that

[80] Ibid

build upon existing narratives and expand—so we have eroticized violence coming down from above and moving back upward from fandom's roots.

The vid's abruptly violent ending with Ava's execution—following Love's screaming refrain: "take everything, take everything, take everything, take everything. . ." signifies what could be read as an unhealthy and self-destructive relationship between women and media texts in which the female spectator continually gives all that she has, only to be rewarded with her own exploitation.

Like *RVB, Women's Work* is performing negotiations of ideologies of sex and gender: *RVB* centers on constructions of masculinity and intimacy in a medium created for a community where intimacy is often taboo and *Women's Work* critiques both their beloved show and their fellow fans in order to demonstrate the ubiquity of eroticized violence against women and acknowledge fandom's role in perpetuating these forms of violence. In this way, *Women's Work* is doing feminist work by exposing these representations and calling on female spectators, in particular, to be more mindful of their participation. But, can we discuss Women's Work in relationship to resistance? This vid, like many fan-texts, is far too complex to succumb to a reading that focuses only on whether or not it resists dominant ideologies of sex and gender. To do so would simply beg the question, what do we mean by resistance? It is resistant because it is critical? Yes, the vid cites televisual representations of eroticized violence against women in order to emphasize their ubiquity and critique them as harmful. However, because of its rather narrow circulation within the semi-private, under-valued sphere where female-centered fannish practice is relegated, its message remains contained to those who already understand its consequences. The vid has not altered either the representations or their

consumption and re-distribution by fans. The production of the vid and its collective consumption by fans has great potential for small scale empowerment but it does little to change material conditions of media production.

As a cultural performance, Women's Work is powerful and memorable—remarkably incisive in its indictment of mainstream media images. However, as the vid acknowledges, it is also part of the problem because participatory fandom helps these images and constructs proliferate. Perhaps, what is most remarkable about Women's Work, is the fact that it has been jettisoned out of its marginalized space and into the cultural mainstream by its creators. In conducting interviews about the vid and the practice of vidding with mainstream media outlets, such as New York Magazine, Luminosity has performed in a way that defies a consistent part of the vidding community's social performance code, what we might to refer as fandom's 'self-marginalization,' by taking the vid beyond its intended community. Considering Women's Work as an example of a collaboratively produced cultural performance, we can read it as two women using a media text that they truly love to perform their own negotiation of the complicated position of the female spectator in a trans-mediated culture—where media objects are infinitely reproducible, globally available, and increasingly lacking in context.

Throughout the project we have explored a diverse array of fannish practices that orbit around gendered texts, communities and genres and we could ask the same question of Red vs. Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles, Metroid Quest's Final Fantasy VI: the Eternal Crystals, Slashperv's slash fan fiction novel or LJ blogger Amonitrate's class-centric reading of Supernatural or 'slash' icons on LJ: are these texts resistant? The

answer is that these media interactions are far too complex to fall on one or the other side of such a binary. From fan fiction and interactions on Live Journal to corporate-sponsored fan sites, vids, computer modding and hacking and machinima, we have seen the insidious ways that invisible norms of gender and sexuality are central in the determination of the legitimacy of these practices. Each text—from the *Waking Pandora* role playing journal to *Women's Work* is performing its creators' relationship with ideologies and realities of sex and gender within a larger culture that, in the macro-sense, performs behaviors and assumptions that engage with traditional and heteronormative notions of femininity and masculinity. Some of these cultural performances can more easily be read as resistant because they often purposefully question the status quo. However, the social performances that we have traced in the way the larger cultures of media fandom and gaming fandom function largely to support cultural constructions of gender and sexuality. Within gaming and machinima communities, everything from rating systems to the use of language limits how intimacy can be expressed between males. On Live Journal, the positioning of the site itself as feminine and its interface's role in focusing content on the personal and intimate functions to limit fannish interactions to a semi-private sphere. Finally, the vidding community's hesitancy in pushing their labor of love out into the public sphere for fear of legal repercussions and a desire to control the conditions of consumption perpetuates the marginalization of vids and limits their potential as a tool for change.

Essentially, the role of gender in how notions of cultural legitimacy are being applied to fannish practices demonstrates that cultural assumptions of what constitute male and female—in expectation, behavior, potential, rights, etc. are so pervasive that

individual performances of resistance are still subsumed and sublimated. Within this context, it is necessary to move beyond the notion of whether or not media consumption practices are resisting the status quo and, instead, work in interdisciplinary ways—incorporating theories of performance, for example—to examine fandom at the micro level. By looking at the cultural performances of individual and small collective groups of fans, we can get a more complete picture of how fans are incorporating their use of media in the construction and performance of the self and how these performances are engaging with invisible norms that underlie repressive cultural foundations like heteronormativity.

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