Cultural mediaries on AniTube: Between fans and social media entertainers

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[0.1]   Abstract—Over the last forty years, the increasing popularity of Japanese anime, manga, light novels, and other related transmedia texts has created a demand for the promotion, review, and criticism of such content among Anglophone, non-Japanese audiences. One of the most prominent communities meeting this demand is YouTube's AniTube community. With its roots in pre- and early internet fan reviewing, AniTube has transitioned from a fan to a creator culture, demonstrating how contemporary online communities adapt previously noncommercial practices for commercial production. Through interviews with creators and analyses of AniTube videos, this article details the tensions between cultural intra- and intermediation and between the communal and individualistic values and practices of its members.

[0.2]   Keywords—Anime; Japanese animation; Manga; Prosumption; Reviews; Vernacular culture; YouTube

1. Introduction

[1.1]   Over the last forty years, the increasing popularity of Japanese anime, manga, light novels, and other related transmedia texts have created a demand for the promotion, review, and criticism of such content among Anglophone, non-Japanese audiences. This demand has been underserved because legitimate distribution of anime and manga and corollary forms of institutionalized English language cultural journalism did not develop in tandem with the fandoms in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia. As such, anime fans have undertaken many of the roles traditionally served by newspapers, magazines, and other cultural institutions, and these fans have increasingly sought to monetize and formalize their practices as social media platforms have allowed for the commodification of user-generated content. One of the most prominent communities engaging in the promotion, review, and criticism of anime and manga is YouTube's AniTube community. AniTube is an example of the widespread diffusion of reviewing and criticism online that has created alternative forms of cultural mediation, forms based in vernacular rather than institutional cultures.

[1.2]   Since the 1960s, academics in a range of disciplines have documented and analyzed vernacular culture, and though definitions of the vernacular differ, in general it is concerned with local practices outside institutions or practices and strategies that signal a noninstitutional position (Howard 2010). First formulated by Bourdieu ([1979] 1996), cultural intermediation concerns the framing of goods (both material and immaterial), their use, legitimacy, and desirability as well as, ultimately, the legitimacy and desirability of the people who use and consume them. What traditionally differentiates cultural intermediaries from others in the public is their claims to authority: the resources that legitimate their process of legitimation (Maguire and Matthews 2012). The proliferation of review websites—as well as the ubiquity of rating and review features on web 2.0 sites in general—has combined and problematized notions of both vernacularity and cultural intermediation. More a demoticization of evaluation than a democratization (with the leveling of power implied by the latter term) (Turner 2010), the current "Golden Age of Evaluation" has significantly opened opportunities for cultural mediation while maintaining many earlier hierarchies of authority (Taylor 2015, 29).

[1.3]   I analyze the evolution of anime and manga reviewing on YouTube to detail these changes to reviewing and their intertwining in anime's symbolic and market economy. AniTube creators differ from previously studied anime fans and intermediaries because they do not produce anime music videos, manga scanlations, or fan subtitles. Rather, AniTubers create videos reviewing, critiquing, analyzing, ranking, recommending, and promoting anime and manga.

[1.4]   Originally, non-Japanese anime and manga fans created their own "shadow cultural economy" (Fiske 1992, 30), one that existed outside the official organizations that promote, critique, and distribute culture. In this economy, they shared content with each other as "cultural intramediaries," Maarit Jaakkola's (2018, 25) term for mediaries focused on individual consumption and peer-to-peer production. Yet due to the increasing popularity of anime in the West, the transnational developments in anime funding and distribution, and the commodification of user-generated content on YouTube, anime and manga fans can produce content not just for the anime fan community but also for anime production and distribution companies, serving as influence marketers.

[1.5]   Moving from fan production to "social media entertainment" (Cunningham and Craig 2019, 1), AniTube demonstrates how contemporary online communities adapt previously noncommercial practices for commercial production. However, not everyone in the community is aiming to be an entrepreneurial entertainer; some creators engage in practices of "productive failure" that limit their potential for growth and sponsorship on YouTube (Halberstam 2011, 23). As such, AniTube provides a confluence of concerns relating to the study of fandom, social media platforms, and cultural intermediation. These subjects remain academically and socially important due to the increasing centrality of participatory culture, digital media, and global capitalism in daily life.

2. Methodology

[2.1]   In 2020, I interviewed twenty-four members of the AniTube creator community through video and voice chat. The project went through university ethics approval, and all participants signed consent forms before being interviewed. The interviewees represent a wide range of experience on and with YouTube, and they could speak to the changes the AniTube community have undergone over time. Some of the interviewees had been creating content for over ten years whereas others had only recently started. They ranged in age from twenty-one to thirty-nine. Eleven were in the United States, five were in Canada, and the rest were split between the United Kingdom, the European Union, Australia, and India. Their channels varied widely in the number of subscribers, number of total views, and number of total videos uploaded. The average number of subscribers was 220,000, with a range between 508 and 1.2

million. Ten of the interviewees were full-time creators, ten were part-time, and four were part-time creators but full-time editors for other AniTubers. This article is informed by these interviews and analyses of AniTube videos.

3. Intramediation and anime fandom

[3.1]   Meaningful access to manga and anime in Europe outpaced that in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia by two decades (Patten 2004; Daliot-Bul 2014; Pellitteri 2019; Hernandez Perez, Corstorphine, and Stephens 2017). The founding of the first US anime fan club occurred in 1977, yet it was not until 1989 that the first US anime import company arose. Though there was some importation of anime into Anglophone countries in the 1960s and 1970s, it was sporadic and aimed at children, and content was often edited and dubbed so that signs of Japaneseness were elided.

[3.2]   Until the late 1990s, fans who wanted anime, especially less ambiguously foreign and more adult-oriented anime, were relegated to swapping videotape recordings of Japanese TV that were mailed to the United States (McKevitt 2010; Roberts 2012). The rise of Toonami, the US Cartoon Network's afternoon anime block, and the global success of *Pokémon* in the late 1990s helped to further spread anime fandom (O'Melia 2019). In the next decade, anime began to be more available on television and DVD, and manga began to be sold in big book retailers, but this content remained limited as foreign licensing and release lagged significantly (Close 2016).

[3.3]   Just as early fans found ways to distribute and share analogue content, fans during the 2000s began using technologies like BitTorrent for online sharing. Communities cohered around making and distributing digital subtitles for anime and "scanlations" of manga (Lee 2011, 1131), with much of this fan translation targeted at English speakers in the United States (Denison 2011). The general lack of access had a significant impact on English-speaking fan practices, which cohered around obtaining, sharing, translating, and demonstrating consumption and understanding of anime and manga.

[3.4]   English-language online anime and manga reviewing began during this period of limited digital access to content. Web 1.0 sites like the Anime News Network (created in 1998; https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/), ANIMEfringe Online Magazine (2000–2005; https://www.animefringe.com), and The Anime Academy (2001–2013; now archived at https://theanimeacademy.wordpress.com) reported on anime news, reviewed popular titles, hosted WebBoards for online discussion, and built databases of subcultural terminology and anime and manga information. Though these sites were built by and for anime fans, they were, like most web 1.0 sites, primarily read-only (Aghaei, Nematbakhsh, and Farsani 2012, 2), with the site administrators serving as gatekeepers for publication. Online reviewing without strict editorial oversight at that time was only possible in forums and IRC chat channels, which also served as resources for sharing anime and manga. As one interviewee put it, "Anime procurement in the early-to-mid 2000s was a matter of who you knew and how fast your internet connection was." Reviewers acquired content (officially subtitled, fansubbed, and scanlated) from both legitimate and illegitimate sources, sharing, buying, and torrenting as desire and access dictated.

[3.5]   Anime and manga content appeared early on YouTube, mainly consisting of anime music videos (AMVs), anime trailers, and anime clips. Quickly though, fans started posting reviews of anime and manga. These were mainly vlog-style reviews that combine clips, images, voiceover, direct address to the camera, and/or simple animation. Few of these early videos still exist online, but Glass Reflection's 2010 review of the anime *Death Note* (Madhouse, 2006–2007) hints at this type of content (video 1). In the video, a young man summarizes the anime from within the confines of a bedroom (with anime

posters, DVDs, and other fan paraphernalia displayed), detailing what works and does not in the anime and its live-action movies while also making comic cutaways and critiquing the lack of incredulity of some fans of the show. Evaluations of the show are at times qualified as opinions and expressed with emotion, and the use of first-person signals subjectiveness. The studios that produced the anime series and the live-action films are mentioned in the video, but their history and industrial practices are not. The camera is stationary, graphics are minimal and simple, and the edits between clips and the reviewer are infrequent and undynamic.

Video 1. Glass Reflection's review of the *Death Note* anime (2010).

[3.6]   This kind of reviewing demonstrates the strategies of vernacular reviewing and cultural intramediation. De Jong and Burgers (2013), in their study of consumer and professional online film reviews, found that consumers were more concerned with evaluating films whereas professional critics were more concerned with presenting information. Consumers were more likely to use first-person perspective, to directly address the reader, and to discuss themselves, whereas professionals were more likely to use third-person perspective, to address viewers of a film generally, and to appear neutral and objective in their tone.

[3.7]   Similarly, Jaakkola (2019), in her study of study of Instagram book reviewers, found that "vernacular Instagram reviewers are not so much *re*-viewers, retrospectively looking back at a carefully selected published piece of work to place it in a larger sociocultural and historical context, as *me*-viewers, individualized experts of their own reading experience, mediating their intellectual, emotional and aesthetic ephemeral experience regarding the book product they happen to have received or stumbled upon" (105, emphases in original). Such vernacular reviewing develops from the bottom up and is highly variable and platform specific, serving online communities' needs (Jaakkola 2019).

[3.8]   More broadly, Jaakkola (2018, 24) has argued that "co-consumption," which is the lack of distance of the reviewer from the consumption of cultural products, is the central aspect of vernacular, user-generated reviews. These reviews differ from institutional reviews in that the latter cohere around questions of creation (i.e., the author and the production context) rather than consumption. Thus, vernacular reviews are a form of "intramediation" (Jaakkola 2018, 25), a peer-to-peer mediation that is disconnected from the industrial linkages of cultural intermediation.

[3.9]   Reviewing and criticism have always played an important role in fan communities (Jenkins 1992), and early YouTube anime reviews grew out of the reviewing taking place on web 1.0 websites. Henry Jenkins (2009, 110), early in YouTube's history, insisted, "If YouTube seems to have sprung up overnight, it is because so many groups were ready for something like YouTube; they already had communities of practice that supported the production of DIY media, already evolved video genres and built social networks through which such videos could flow." An enduring part of YouTube's appeal has been the potential for amateur and alternative forms of cultural production to reach large audiences, which is nicely combined in its slogan: "Broadcast yourself." Fans of anime and manga answered this call, demonstrating their subcultural capital by creating reviews of difficult-to-access texts and sharing them with the small, though growing, online fan community.

4. Intermediation, creator culture, and social media logic

[4.1]   In the first half of the 2010s, access to anime and manga outside of Japan finally began to meet the demand for it due to the maturation of anime streaming sites like Crunchyroll, Funimation, and AnimeLab. These services created apps for mobile devices, gaming systems, and digital media players, and they started to release anime soon after they were released in Japan. Later, they hosted simultaneous releases with Japan. They began to achieve large subscriber bases as they were acquired by media conglomerates with capital to invest in their expansion (Chozick 2011; Gelles 2013). At the same time, television streaming sites like Hulu started licensing anime content (Chozick 2011), and Japanese anime production committees began to better capitalize on the foreign popularity they had previously failed to exploit (Mihara 2020).

[4.2]   The content of AniTube videos evolved dramatically at this time. The poles of this diversification can be witnessed through two 2014 videos from Digibro (now Ygg Studio): "Useless Anime Knowledge: Pioneer LDC and Armitage III" (video 2) and "Sword Art Online - An Analytical Diatribe" (video 3). The former video is a history of the Pioneer company's expansion into anime production and US distribution in the 1990s. It discusses the history of Pioneer's subsidiary, Pioneer LDC, and its Armitage III franchise, with a particular focus on how the company's decisions for the US market tried to capitalize on the success of *Ghost in the Shell* (Production I.G./Bandai Visual 1995).

Video 2. Digibro, "Useless Anime Knowledge: Pioneer LDC and Armitage III" (2014b).

Video 3. Digibro, "Sword Art Online - An Analytical Diatribe" (2014a).

[4.3]   The latter video is an hour-long vivisection of the first two seasons of *Sword Art Online* (A-1 Pictures, 2012), a very popular anime from that period. (The diatribe was originally posted in separate twenty-minute videos, but all were removed for content violation; this video is a reposted, collated version without any content from the show.) Digibro's diatribe is most certainly a review of the show, but it is also an intervention into an ongoing debate on the show's popularity and its chauvinistic representations. Reminiscent of Mark Twain's "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses" (1895), the video minutely and comprehensively savages *Sword Art Online*'s inconsistencies of logic, plot, and character and its eroticization of sexual assault.

[4.4]   These videos adopt the textual strategies of intermediation and institutional criticism by offering more contextualization and interpretation than coconsumption-oriented reviews. They focus, respectively, on the industrial conditions that affected anime production and distribution and the wider cultural discussion of representations of women in male-dominated media. Both situate their evaluations in contexts outside the texts to better understand them: the former in the practices of business expansion and imitative production and the latter in the history of the series, its author's statements about his writing process and goals, and the ongoing debates about anime and the media's use of sexual assault as a plot device. By doing so, they evaluate not just the specific anime texts but also cultural value. By positioning them as industrial outcomes and as cultural artifacts, Digibro also, ultimately, implies valuations about those who consume them—or at least those who consume them without considering the systems and cultures that produced them. Though these evaluations are still made from the position of an anime fan, they are farther away from fandom's affectivity and excessiveness, its indefinable and unjustifiable qualities, which are ultimately what separate fan attachment from other forms of appreciation and investment (Grossberg 1992).

[4.5]   The evolution of anime reviews on YouTube was a result of the increasing number of viewers of such content and a corresponding increase in creators of such content. As one interviewee put it, "One channel will do a review of literally any anime and manga that they can think of, like a separate video. That is no longer what people are looking for. Same thing with a Top Ten list of basic stuff. And I think that's because more and more people are deeply involved in anime. They're not just looking for an anime to watch. They're looking for a detailed analysis, a detailed breakdown of something that they already

watch and are interested in." From this perspective, the move from intramediation to intermediation can be seen as a response to increased demand for more complex analysis in an increasing crowded commercial market.

[4.6]   Many AniTube videos focus not just on the anime text and its consumption but on its place within a series, a medium, an oeuvre, and an industry. Videos about directors, writers, and artists are common, as are considerations of anime subgenres, Japanese culture, and industry practices and developments. Over two-thirds of AniTubers interviewed stated that staying informed about the Japanese animation industry was important to them. Although many admitted that it was difficult due to the language barrier, they valued remaining informed and communicating about studios, directors, and other production aspects.

[4.7]   Vernacular reviewing on AniTube has not disappeared, however. Intramediation has the appeal of unpolished authenticity, and it is easier to produce than more professional, objective forms focused beyond personal consumption. It therefore continues to exist on AniTube as an entry format and as a content diversity option for established creators. In fact, the rank or list review (Blank 2006), which is the simplest and least production-focused form of review, has been a constant within the community (though few of the interviewees admitted to making them). Thus, intra- and intermediation are now coextensive within the community because YouTube is, as Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2009) emphasize, "a highly visible example of the broader trend toward uneasy convergences of market and non-market modes of cultural production in the digital environment, where marginal, subcultural, and community-based modes of cultural production are by design incorporated within the commercial logics of major media corporations" (75).

[4.8]   The evolution of AniTube also overlapped with what Stuart Cunningham and David Randolph Craig (2019) have identified as the rise of social media entertainment 2.0, when platforms ceased to primarily focus on content sharing and community creation and instead focused on competition with second-generation platforms, appropriation of their innovations, and new monetization opportunities for creators. The YouTube Partner Program, launched in 2007 (but initially limited to select, invited creators), was opened up to all eligible creators in 2012 (Hollister 2012). That same year YouTube changed the recommendation algorithm to prioritize time spent watching videos rather than the number of clicks and views a video received (Bucher 2018). Users during this period also began to develop business models combining platform advertising revenue, influencer marketing, sponsorships, traditional IP products, live performances, branded products and services, and crowd funding (Cunningham and Craig 2019).

[4.9]   AniTube arguably transitioned during this time from a fan to a creator culture, a culture of "commercializing and professionalizing native social media users" (Cunningham and Craig 2021, 1). With this transformation came a change in the motivations of those producing anime and manga content on the platform, as "the institutional nature of participatory media themselves shapes the possibilities of the discourse enacted in those media" (Howard 2010, 248). Several of those I interviewed choose to produce anime and manga content because they viewed it as an underserved market. As one interviewee explained, "When deciding to enter something like YouTube I tried to look for an audience that hadn't yet been reached yet. So I started out by making videos on the latest anime news, previews and announcements. I believed there was a gap in the market that someone could fill by making those types of videos." Or as another stated, "I like many others, tried gaming beforehand…but with gaming, you go into a market that's really saturated. So it's really hard to stand out. After a year of doing that, I decided that since I actually have no other skills, the only thing I could maybe talk about was anime."

[4.10]   Although many of my interviewees espoused traditional fan motivations like desire for

community, discussion, and self-expression (Jenkins 1992), they were just one part of a constellation of motivations in which market considerations and remuneration carried enormous weight. This calculus was succinctly stated in a recent Scamboli Reviews (2021) video: "I know all the good shows before they even come out, and I want to share it with you because it makes me happy yes because it's fun yes but because it makes me money."

[4.11]   The importance of economic motivations distinguishes AniTube reviewers from other mediaries in anime and manga fandom. Anime fansubbers aim to make unlicensed series available in other languages (or available more quickly or with more fidelity to the original), to develop their translation and editing skills, to gain recognition from the anime community, to engage in meaningful collaborative activity, and to promote anime culture (Rush 2009; Lee 2011). Manga scanlators are motivated by roughly the same goals (Lee 2012). AMV creators also aim to develop their skills, accrue subcultural capital, and promote anime (Ito 2012). All these other anime and manga fan practices and motivations fit within the paradigm of participatory culture, one that is based in a notion of communal, bottom-up fan creativity (Jenkins et al. 2009). "Because it makes me money" significantly alters the goal and valuation of fan practice. Of course, the line between fan and professional production has always been blurry, and Jenkins acknowledges that fandom "is not autonomous [from commercial culture]; its products are not in any simple sense 'authentic'" (2018, 22). But when artistic expression and civic engagement are secondary, then participatory culture starts to mirror commercial culture. Increasingly, on large web 2.0 platforms a creator's primary target is not a community of fellow creators or fans but rather a much larger, globally aggregated audience and the revenue they can produce.

[4.12]   Part of the appeal of fandom for academic study has been its difference from commercial culture. Because of the collaborative processes of fan production and the social connection necessary for and engendered by it, fan communities have often adopted a gift economy model, in which market exchange is replaced by free sharing and status in the community (Stanfill 2019). However, in a creator culture market exchange becomes imbricated into community practices, and what José van Dijck and Thomas Poell (2013) have identified as "social media logic" structures the market. This logic is concerned with the programmability of algorithms (both from the platform and users' side), the importance of popularity (according to algorithmically determined and influenced metrics), the connectivity created by online platforms (between platforms, their users, and advertisers), and the invisibility and malleability of datafication. The interplay of programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication help to explain many of the current practices of AniTubers, both in terms of the kind of videos they make and how they make them.

[4.13]   YouTube creators fashion their content to the recommendation algorithm, creating content that they believe will achieve more prominent positioning although the opacity of platform architecture and operations means they do not have explicit means for verifying their beliefs (Wu, Pedersen, and Salehi 2019). AniTubers believe that videos that focus on new, popular, or controversial shows are ranked higher, so they are more likely to cover these kinds of shows. This is significant in that the videos are not responding to community tastes as fan-produced texts traditionally have (Jenkins 1992); rather, their videos conform to industrial release schedules, popularity metrics, and ephemeral controversies. As one creator put it, "We want to try to be as diverse as possible because YouTube is very unreliable. And it all depends on if there is hype. So if an anime is currently airing and we're talking about it, usually we're doing well. But once that anime is no longer airing because the season is over, and if we're only talking about that anime, then our views go down very quickly."

[4.14]   Several AniTubers bemoaned the need to focus on the new and the ephemeral rather than focusing on more valuable, older, and less-discussed shows. Donations from supporters were repeatedly discussed as allowing for slower, more involved content creation. Relatedly, there is a perceived need to

constantly produce content: more videos mean more possible views, and a lack of frequent and regular uploading can lead to a loss of subscribers. Content diversity, in relation to this logic, also becomes a way to enable constant production and algorithm programmability. There is thus a tension between the desire to produce intermediary content, with its more contextual and intertextual analysis, and the need for intramediary content with its more efficient production process.

[4.15]   Failing to satisfy the algorithm leads to a lack of popularity, which undermines intermediary authority. Authority is a central element in reviewing, criticism, and cultural intermediation (Blank 2006; Maguire and Matthews 2012), yet web 2.0 platforms offer little in the way of authority and expertise signaling (Kammer 2015). As such, online reviewers must rely on textual strategies and platform rankings to demonstrate that they are "granted the legitimacy to describe, explain, elucidate, contextualize, and/or evaluate a certain cultural object or topic to a certain audience" (Frey 2015, 18). Textual strategies for conjuring authority involve adopting the more objective, contextual focus of institutional intermediaries (as discussed previously) and demonstrating advanced knowledge of anime production, history, aesthetics, and/or narrative structure. These textual strategies must be tempered by the pace of production and the level of discourse of the community and YouTube user-generated content. Arguably more important for the platform is the authority granted by metrics. On YouTube, subscribers, views, and number of comments provide the most visible markers of quality and authority (Jaakkola 2018): they demonstrate that others have valued a channel or video, and it is therefore valuable.

[4.16]   Popularity as authority then feeds back into programmability, and it increases connectivity, as views and subscribers are the main metrics by which creators catch the attention of advertisers. Sponsorships and affiliate links are generally the most important revenue stream for social media entertainers because they can be much more lucrative than platform ad revenue or donations (Cunningham and Craig 2019). Without them, full-time content creation is not feasible for most creators. As anime funding and distribution have globalized, AniTubers have been connected, through YouTube, with anime and manga's industrial agents. Many AniTubers with larger subscriber bases are sponsored by or have affiliate links for anime streaming companies, anime- and manga-related game companies, and/or anime and manga merchandise companies.

[4.17]   Anime distributors have also begun to sponsor AniTube videos to coincide with anime film or series releases. However, they are not content to simply sponsor content: several of these companies have also begun to produce their own AniTube-like videos. In 2018, Federator Networks, part of the conglomerate responsible for shows like *Adventure Time* (Cartoon Network, 2010–2018), created its own anime and manga content channel titled Get in the Robot (https://www.youtube.com/c/GetInTheRobot/). Crunchyroll, which sponsors many AniTube channels, not only has YouTube videos remediating anime content but also since 2017 has been producing anime reviews, video essays, behind-the-scenes documentaries, news bulletins, and opinion videos featuring animators, directors, voice actors, and AniTubers (e.g., see Thew and Crunchyroll 2017). Netflix, which has become a major funder of Anime content production in Japan, sponsors AniTube videos and, in 2021, created two series starring AniTubers on its Netflix Anime channel (https://www.youtube.com/c/netflixanime): "Anime Club" and its unimaginatively titled series "AniTubers React to Anime."

[4.18]   Working directly for anime production and distribution companies can undermine the authenticity of an AniTubers' evaluations, a problem that naturally occurs as YouTubers become more prominent and as creation becomes more lucrative (Hesmondhalgh 2019). Like many on YouTube (Shtern and Hill 2021), AniTubers have different strategies for maintaining their authenticity while also managing relationships with sponsors. When sponsors are the dominant companies in the anime industry or when AniTubers do not have editorial control over content, as in the case of the Crunchyroll and Netflix produced videos, ethical stances become much harder to maintain. This is clearly demonstrated

in an AniTubers React to Anime video about the show *Record of Ragnarok* (Netflix Anime, 2021). The AniTubers struggle to say something positive about the show, with one only able to offer the sad equivocation, "This feels like a parody of anime, but it obviously isn't. But this seems great."

[4.19]   One of the most recent changes in the AniTube community has been creators switching to what is deemed anime adjacent or, more commonly, personality content. This kind of content is not about anime or manga but uses their iconography, sensibility, and themes. An extreme example of this would be Nux Taku's "Face Reveal (will delete soon)" (2020). This video is about the creator of the channel finally showing his face to his fans, yet it is nonetheless tagged with #anime.

[4.20]   As personality content does not require the consumption of texts, it makes for a much quicker production process. This is not unlike the shift in American radio production in the 1940s as it moved from sketch comedy (which had to be created anew each week) to sitcoms (which developed and then reused characters in slightly different situations) (Tueth 2005). Although part of the appeal of anime and manga has been their window onto Japan and cultural difference (Norris 2005), personality content can shift AniTube away from Japanese cultural production and away from fandom's intense focus on textual consumption.

5. Communal practices and productive failure on AniTube

[5.1]   The increasingly commodified nature of online participatory culture has caused scholars to fret over the loss of previously celebrated fan practices and values. Stanfill (2019), for example, warns, "Traditional, strongly noncommercial, communitarian models of fandom are increasingly existing alongside, or even in some cases being superseded by, market-oriented and individualistic ones. As these new forms gain ascendancy, old forms may fall out of use and cease to be an option, particularly if fans do not know it could be otherwise" (80). Considering that "to build an online presence within the YouTube community as a vlogger requires time, patience, and persistence, rather than a more casual mode of engagement with YouTube" (Burgess and Green 2009, 74), it is not surprising that almost all part-time AniTubers want to be full-time content creators, with one I interviewed even calling it "the dream." While creating social media entertainment is motivated by different values than those of fan creation, it is too early to mourn the death of noncommercial fandom.

[5.2]   Though AniTube is a creator culture, it is also "community of practice," a group of "people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 4). As a community of practice on a commercial platform, AniTube evinces communal and individualistic values and practices, though the communal aspects are often not apparent. AniTubers have private Discord servers for walled discussions among themselves, some for the community at large and others for subgroups within it. On these servers, creators propose ideas for videos, share techniques, ask for help, gripe about YouTube's algorithm, and discuss other topics, and the servers function as forums for advice, guidance, and encouragement. The creators' videos themselves also function as a site for sharing. As is common on YouTube, videos often respond to other videos, and collaborations are frequent, especially for content that is livestreamed or unscripted. Collaborations between AniTubers are both a form of cross-promotion and a way to help new community members gain visibility.

[5.3]   At the same time, as creators become more popular and prominent, they undertake individualistic practices that mirror those of traditional media producers. Many full-time AniTubers hire video editors to increase the speed and quality of their production. These for-hire editors are primarily part-time creators in the community, located through the same communal networks that provide support.

The hiring of editors is so common that some part-time creators now work as full-time video editors for other AniTubers. Similarly, some AniTubers have hired community coordinators and have joined multichannel networks. Using viewers and supporters as sounding boards and knowledge pools also occurs, and creators market test ideas to their personal donator communities. This combination of communal and individualistic oscillates between the more communal, at the level of less popular or smaller creators, and the more individualistic, at the level of the more popular or larger creators.

[5.4] The AniTube community also has creators who do not aim to satisfy the algorithm or become social media entertainers. One example of this is Shaybs's (2020) channel, especially its series *AniTube Digest* (https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLd0kDhYvIPCbgQf2IdfgKtun7vZ7a9Z9e). Each week, Shaybs posts direct to the camera discussions of new videos created on AniTube, critiquing, praising, and offering unsolicited advice to other creators. These meandering videos, often more than an hour long, are reminiscent of the kind of discussions and workshopping that take places within fan communities. One channel that has eschewed efficiency of production is Pause and Select (https://www.youtube.com/c/PauseandSelectForReal/), which presents cerebral analyses of anime and its history, aesthetics, and themes. The videos use theories from poststructuralists like Derrida, Barthes, and Foucault, and have featured anime scholars like Patrick Galbraith, Rayna Denison, Sandra Annett, and Thomas Lamarre. Each video is highly overproduced, featuring handpicked and original music, clips from up to thirty or forty different sources, and references to multiple academic texts. Due to the complexity of the videos, the channel only releases five or six videos per year. Another channel, ThatAnimeSnob (https://www.youtube.com/c/ThatAnimeSnobDeleted/), is focused on trashing almost every contemporary show it reviews as well as attacking and insulting those who would dare to defend such trash. A clear and regressive reaction to anime's increasing popularity, the channel attempts to wrest back the object of fandom from the mainstream. Dripping with caustic, elitist spite and begging to offend, each video on the channel supports John Fiske's assertion that fans "discriminate fiercely… Textual and social discrimination are part and parcel of the same cultural activity" (1992, 34).

[5.5] Though these channels have existed for over six years, they each have fewer than 50,000 followers (two have much less than that), and all have persisted in their various approaches to content creation rather than adapting to garner more attention. Interestingly, each of these channels was mentioned by other creators within the community as examples of noteworthy AniTube production, but from the perspective of successful social media entertainment these channels are failures. However, these channels should be viewed as a kind of productive failure: "a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit" (Halberstam 2011, 11). These channels demonstrate a different "moral economy" than those chasing YouTube's algorithm (Hills 2013, 149): they prioritize community engagement, approach anime as high culture, and uphold a repugnant level of subcultural elitism, all of which harken back to earlier fan culture and attenuate their broader appeal on YouTube. Each channel proposes a different way of being on AniTube and, implicitly and explicitly, a critique of the move toward social media entertainment.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] AniTube production necessitates a considerable time investment: not just the making of videos but also the consumption of anime (and/or manga and light novels); the viewing of other AniTube content; the following of related discussions on other social media platforms; the following of English and preferably Japanese-language industry news; the promoting and multiplatforming of YouTube content on Twitter, Reddit, MyAnimeList, Twitch, Patreon, and other locations; and the engagement with subscribers and commenters. This final task becomes increasingly difficult (both in terms of time and in terms of emotional toll) as channels grow. Depending on the type of content produced (scripted or

unscripted) as well as the amount of effort put into writing, recording, clip selection, editing, soundtrack selection, sound mixing, thumbnail creation, and captioning, part-time AniTubers can spend from five to forty hours a week producing content while full-timers spend up to eighty hours a week. As one creator put it, "you really have to work a full job for pretty much a year without any pay. And afterwards, that's where you're getting somewhere." Creative and physical burnout are real dangers for full-time and part-time AniTubers.

[6.2]   Despite the effort and risks, the majority of AniTube creators have embraced the dream of producing content full time and becoming social media entertainers. The autonomy, creativity, and remuneration it can provide outweigh the drawbacks. This means that commercial concerns are shaping anime fan production in ways that they previously had not. As one creator described it, "But like, at the end of the day, we do live in a capitalist society. And you can't continue to make art at any kind of reasonable pace unless you find a way to profit from it. I was trying to find a way to do something that would make me happy and that I could stay passionate about." Yet not everyone is happy selling their content and themselves online. One of the most poignant moments of all the interviews was with a successful, full-time creator. At the end of each interview, I asked if there was any topic I failed to mention that I should have, if there was any question I should have asked that I didn't. The creator responded, "Ask me if I'm happy."

[6.3]   Digital platforms are providing new opportunities for professional and fan production but are also significantly altering participatory culture (Lamerichs 2020). The case of AniTube shows that as fans become social media entertainers, as they begin creating for anime's market economy and not just its symbolic economy, the culture they create is complex and contradictory. The presence of corporate sponsors and anime industry agents, the global prominence of YouTube, and the multiple ways to commodify content and receive support make the relationship between platform, sponsor, creator, and fan extremely complicated, and these relationships problematize any distinction between bottom-up fan practices and top-down commercial production. Intramediation and intermediation, participatory and commercial culture, communal and individualistic practices, and success and failure all combine in different and novel constellations within the AniTube community.

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Revisiting gender theory in fan fiction: Bringing nonbinary genders into the world

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[0.1]   Abstract—While these facts are generally ignored, nonbinary gender is a theme in fan spaces, and Judith Butler's theory of gender creation mostly excludes the possibility of any genders outside of the binary. When brought together, classic queer studies and fan studies texts offer explanations for both and indicate that nonbinary genders are at the core of fan fiction. Fan fiction communities, although often transphobic, practice bringing into the world genders outside of the binary gender system. Judith Butler's gender theory and classic fan studies research inform one another; when they are brought together, it is clear that fandom is a ground for the creation of genders, which in turn are embodied outside of fandom and are objects of attraction that exist outside of binary-gendered attraction models.

[0.2]   Keywords—Classic fan studies; Judith Butler; Transgender

1. Introduction

[1.1]   Nonbinary gender is a recurring motif at the core of fan fiction. Classic texts such as those by Judith Butler (1993, 2006, 2011), Anne Kustritz (2003), and Camile Bacon-Smith (1992) highlight the transgender and nonbinary presence that has so far been continuously disregarded. In particular, Kustritz's theory of gender in fan fiction suggests that fan fiction communities are involved in a practice of bringing genders outside of the binary gender system into the world. I propose that such genders are not only written but brought into our world physically on fans' bodies and that there is attraction toward these genders outside of binary-gendered attraction models.

[1.2]   The definition of nonbinary genders is still in debate. Darren Cosgrove (2021) explains that "non-binary people, like their binary transgender peers, identify as a gender different from that which they were assigned at birth. However, for non-binary people, gender identity falls outside of a male/female dichotomy" (78). Samantha Jaroszewski et al. (2018) suggest that "'non-binary' refers to people whose genders are multiple, fluid, and/or something other than male or female" (1). While these definitions are important to establishing and identifying meaning in the discussion, I offer a slightly different definition: nonbinary genders are genders that are outside the realm of continuously,

completely, and exclusively "man" or "women." Some nonbinary genders are entirely different from woman or man—these may be no gender at all, partial identification with one or more genders, multiple identifications at the same time, or movement between any of the above. Furthermore, it is important to note that nonbinary genders are not the same as gender nonconforming. There is no one way people of nonbinary genders should or should not look. It is also important to stress that these definitions may apply to some who don't identify as nonbinary: for example, some who don't have a gender and don't wish to define themselves through the absence of such or through a system that is only about gender. Additionally, the white, binary gender system often surrounding nonbinary gender discourse is tied to white supremacy and colonialism. Some nonbinary persons are outside of this system and don't wish to associate with it.

[1.3]   People of nonbinary genders are severely discriminated against in Western societies and even in queer spaces. There is very little demographic information about them, and the existing information is sometimes informed by inaccurate questions. That said, Jack Harrison, Jaime Grant, and Jody L. Herman (2012) found alarming rates of violence, inaccessible healthcare, police retaliation, poverty, and attempted suicide rates among people of nonbinary genders. Chase Harless et al. (2019) found that nonbinary people reported poorer health by a wide margin compared even with LGBTQ people of binary genders. Anxiety and depression occurred at 86 percent and 77 percent, respectively (47). Reports of physical assault and harassment came in at 30.7 percent and 84.1 percent, respectively (43). Additionally, 58.9 percent of nonbinary participants reported suicidal ideation, compared with 51 percent of binary trans people and under 20 percent of cisgender LGBTQ participants. Another 45.1 percent of nonbinary participants reported instances of self-harm, compared with 40 percent of all trans participants and 18.2 percent of cis LGBTQ participants (49). They were also far less likely to be insured, and nearly half said they are "always" or "often" forced to educate medical professionals about their medical needs (Harless et al. 2019) (63).

[1.4]   LGBTQ communities and spaces often contribute to this discrimination rather than alleviate it, discriminating against less privileged members, including those who are BIPOC, disabled, neurodivergent, fat, poor, from rural places, lower class, immigrants, femme, and so on (Patel 2019). This also includes the frequent erasure and oppression of groups such as asexual, aromantic, intersex, and polyalterous communities. Many LGBT+ communities also engage in severe erasure and hatred toward nonbinary people: for example, mocking pronouns and appearances, erasing identities, withholding resources, and actively seeking to harm them.

[1.5]   In fan studies, there is little scholarship about transgender people. There are a few important and meaningful texts, but they mostly focus on binary trans issues. Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian (2009) explore fan works that include depictions of gender change to find that they are often written for a cisgender audience. Jonathan A. Rose (2018, 2020) writes about fan communities "transing" as a verb, akin to "queering" things, in building on Ika Willis's (2006) work portraying fic as queer play for cis people. This further correlates with Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (2006), who describe straight fans as playing with sapphic attraction. Rose (2020) suggests that stories about transgender experiences, such as physical transition and passing, may offer trans readers relief, visibility, and even community and may be useful as a learning and broadening experience for cis people. J. T. Weisser (2019) explores the omega trope in ABO *Hannibal* (2013–2015) stories as representing trans experiences, explaining that "if omegas are allegorically cisgender women, presenting as a beta becomes an act of transitioning from one's assigned (secondary) gender. Taking heat suppressants is a transmasculine act, analogous to taking testosterone as part of gender transition. The omega taking heat suppressants and the transmasculine individual taking hormones both claim bodily integrity, altering their body in a way that changes how their gender is externally received." Weisser also explains that some stories demonstrate "that the pregnant male omega embodies an intersection between queer masculinity, lycanthropy, and

pregnancy, all three of which are desexualized in normative discourse." As a whole, fan fiction research nearly entirely ignores experiences unique to nonbinary people and their connections with fandom. I hope to make a contribution to this discussion (note 1).

2. A community brainstorm to bring forth gender outside the binary

[2.1]   Kustritz discusses a common practice within fan fiction communities: reading multiple stories about the same plot or prompt. She wonders why readers would be interested in reading so many stories about the same thing. As she writes, even the most dedicated fan of a trope, having read in one day twenty stories about it, "must tire of basically the same story slightly tweaked by a different author" (2003, 382).

[2.2]   Kustritz suggests that this is because fan fiction communities create a large-scale brainstorm, intended to imagine masculinity that is not oppressive toward women (note 2). More particularly, Kustritz offers that fans are working to collectively imagine a relationship with a heterosexual man who is not harmful. As she explains, "By rewriting both the source product and each other's reconfigurations, women are able to write out a radically different romance narrative and an unconventional conceptualization of community, gender, and relationships" (2003, 383).

[2.3]   Kustritz also describes how authors read one another's depictions of (gendered) relationships, rewriting and recreating them through repetition. With each repetition, authors make little adjustments, trying to improve the collective vision of potential men who don't oppress (some) women. She explains, "As fan writers work together, rewriting the source products and rewriting each other's reconfigurations, they begin to write out a story that is worth having. They begin to create a metatext that tells us how to live in a relationship founded upon equality" (2003, 383).

[2.4]   Kustritz further informs that fans are interested only in reinventing heterosexual cisgender relationships. As she explains, the men captured and rewritten by fans "are also suited to rescription because they embody many of the things that are wrong with the patriarchal system of traditional romance" (2003, 376). The image reflected in Kustritz's description implies that fans are collectively inventing nonoppressive masculinity (toward cisgender, straight women). I suggest that fans often do this to workshop coding not only of a type of masculinity but nonbinary genders.

[2.5]   Though Kustritz (2003) doesn't mention it, the structure in her description is reminiscent of Judith Butler's (1993, 2006, 2011) theory of the origins of gender. Butler indicates that gender has no single origin, but is rather created by endless imitation and repetition. As they put it, gender is "a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself…the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect" (Butler 2006, 21). A woman, for example, becomes a woman by behaving as a woman. In this theory, of course, Butler builds on and resonates Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1989). They explain that a woman is both a subject and a woman by imitating behaviors of various other women time and again. As Butler (1993) states, "These are for the most part compulsory performances, ones which none of us choose, but which each of us is forced to negotiate" (26). A woman is required to constantly reestablish her womanhood by continuously repeating this imitation. In this way, women and women's representations perpetually imitate, inspire, and police one another. According to Butler, this is the way genders are created: a society-wide continuous reinvention (note 3).

[2.6]   Butler stresses that this is not a matter of choice. Being part of the binary gender system is not voluntary: "it is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will" (1993, 22). People are not able to just step in and out of genders every day; the only agency Butler finds within the system is in making tiny adjustments, as one repeats gender iterations. These adjustments may then inspire others and be integrated into the acceptable characterizations of one's gender.

[2.7]   I argue that there is a loophole in Butler's classic theory that explains and allows for the existence of genders outside the binary, even within Western societies. Butler (1993, 2011) suggests that it is impossible for people to step outside of the binary gender system for two main reasons. First, they explain that gender digressions are severely punished by society, describing severe violence and personal harm to people who don't comply with the binary gender system. It should be noted that this assertion has been criticized by scholars such as Viviane Namaste (2009) for exploiting and universalizing the lived experience of sex workers and black trans women. This universalization, as well as misinformation, contributes to the rift between white and higher-class queer people and black people—a rift Roderick A. Ferguson (2020) sees as caused by and reinforcing fascism.

[2.8]   Butler's second argument is that gendered behaviors that are not binary are impossible for others to understand. They write that

> [2.9]   performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that "performance" is not a singular "act" or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (Butler 2011, 95)

[2.10]   More specifically, doing nonbinary genders perplexes people and remains not understood. These genders are unknown to most people, making them incomprehensible and therefore without meaning, impossible to do. To reiterate, Butler's gender model is based on the external understanding of a series of gendering codes. That is, one is a woman when one performs traits recognized by others as belonging to women, and a person performing well enough is then classified as a woman (note 4). Simply put, one is a woman when one is read by others as a woman. Butler (2011) explains that "there is no 'one' who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a 'one,' to become viable as a 'one,' where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms" (177).

[2.11]   David Ross Fryer (2003) suggests a way to allow room within this theory for a sense of self. He offers that in addition to Butler's model, one has an inner sense of who one is. The source of this sense still complies with Butler's model; one learns the available genders and identities, then identifies with one, creating an inner sense of gendered belonging. Both Fryer's and Butler's models describe a universal, inescapable, and self-perpetuating system of coding. Within this system, presenting as a gender that is not coded, known, and recognized is null—akin to speaking in a made-up language. I argue that a loophole exists that enables some level of system shift.

[2.12]   Kustritz's (2003) model may offer this loophole. Butler's model depicts a single person left alone to fight a virtually all-encompassing system. Kustritz's model, on the other hand, describes a community. At the time of writing, the Archive of Our Own (AO3), a central archive for fan fiction works, has more than 2,903,000 registered users. Within a field this large, otherwise unknown codings

can be and regularly are understood. Fandom often uses its own language and codes, as anyone who ever told a nonfan "I stan Stucky, but only in H/C PWP ABO AUs" would know. In a community this size, a person inventing codes for gender outside of the binary might not be alone. A person like that may be able to find those who understand their gender language and who by seeing and acknowledging it validate it and make it part of a system.

[2.13]   This is not to say that fan fiction fan spaces are without binarism and other types of transphobia: as Busse and Lothian (2009) discuss, fan fiction is often written for the pleasure and education of cisgender people while disregarding the needs and interests of actual transgender and nonbinary people.

[2.14]   However, quite a few fan fiction spaces are aware enough of nonbinary genders to recognize and engage with the possibility of genders outside the binary system. I discuss this further later, and it is also reflected in the results of Centrumlumina's (2013) census of AO3 users. While the question to participants was phrased a bit problematically, this census still provides deeply important information: even by the most conservative interpretation of the data, it's undeniable that over 7 percent of participants identified as genderqueer, and about 9 percent chose more than one of the provided gender options. In this way, the fans' counterpublic allows for its own system rules. While there is not a lot of research on the topic at the time of writing, these numbers validate what I believe was a zeitgeist in the census's age: fandom, as a whole, knew of the existence and presence of nonbinary people.

3. This gender is often nonbinary

[3.1]   Kustritz (2003) indeed describes fandom as a community project that has the goal of reinventing gender. But according to Kustritz, it seems fans are only interested in improving masculinity and are completely unaware of nonbinary genders. This assertion may be true of some fans, but it seems that fandom is undertaking a more groundbreaking practice in gender creation: bringing forth genders outside of the binary gender system. I now examine the multiplicity and nonbinary characteristics of the genders that fans are workshopping together.

[3.2]   While classic fan studies researchers seem to ignore anything and everything transgender and nonbinary, many actually describe practices that they believe to be at the core of slash fan fiction fandoms that are hard to read as binary and cisgender. They set out to understand why fans—whom they assert are heterosexual women—would want to write slash, stories that seem to be about gay men. This story format, it should be mentioned, was shown to be inaccurate due to erasing readers and characters who are attracted to more than one gender (Lackner, Lucas, and Reid 2006).

[3.3]   Classic fan studies scholars often suggest that authors writing these stories are in fact writing about women on the bodies of men characters. Bacon-Smith (1992), for example, finds these stories in the hurt/comfort genre (stories where a character is hurt and another cares for or comforts them). As Bacon-Smith explains, hurt/comfort stories allow the woman reader to explore her rage. Through the characters, she is able to inflict pain on those who regularly threaten and harm her, receive empathy, and experience her confusion and dread.

[3.4]   Bacon-Smith (1992) also indicates that fans enjoy identifying with men who are being taken care of since this is forbidden to women. She outlines that at the same time, fans identify with characters (men or women) who take care of men, as it validates their identities as women. As such, according to Bacon-Smith, authors may identify with multiple characters of more than one gender at a time.

[3.5]   One of the most popular and repeated theories in fan fiction research explains that authors of

slash write about romance between men because this allows them to envision romance not based on (nonconsensual, socially enforced) dominance and submission, unlike what they find in heterosexual romance (Lackner, Lucas, and Reid 2006). Kustritz (2003) explains that heterosexual women authors struggle to imagine equal and safe relationships between men and women because of systemic inequality between these groups. Writing stories about relationships between two men thus enables the authors to imagine equality within the relationship.

[3.6]   This theory appears in many studies regarding fic, often with the assertion that in slash ships, one of the pairing is coded as a woman. Bacon-Smith, for example, describes the widespread format of women writers writing women characters on the bodies of men characters. She concedes it does not appear in all stories, but "some writers in all genres strongly feminize one character over another: they may emphasize a difference in height and bulk between the pair, such as Hutch's height or the broadness of Kirk's shoulders…Some writers place one of the participants in the role of 'wife,' even if he is a working wife" (1992, 250).

[3.7]   This theory is still widely taught and repeated (Lackner, Lucas, and Reid 2006), despite echoing old stereotypes of same-gender relationships. Milena Popova (2018) revisits this theory, pointing out that a lot of relationships within fan fiction and slash are far from equal or ideal. One example are stories written in ABO worlds, where there is often severe discrimination between partners within romantic relationships.

[3.8]   Another revisitation of this model by Rukmini Pande and Swati Moitra (2017) indicates that the model does not account for systemic racial inequality that may exist between romantic partners who are both men. This would also be true of many who are transgender, genderqueer, disabled, fat, asexual, aromantic, immigrants, undocumented, neurodivergent, autistic, of different classes, religions, ages, financial positions—the list goes ever on.

[3.9]   I suggest that the practice this model describes is all about gender transition. To reword this theory, while some characters are often assumed to be men and have bodies that audiences unthinkingly read as men's, they are really women. This alone is probably the most well-known narrative of what "transgender" means, though it is often inaccurate at best.

[3.10]   As Shannon Sennott and Tones Smith (2011) put it, "Often, trans- and gender-nonconforming individuals within a clinical setting are described as those whose physical sex does not match the gender of the mind or soul: 'She's a woman trapped in a man's body.' This explanation may make sense intuitively, but only because the sex/gender binary is so assumed that it becomes a privileged invisible identity" (226). What these classic scholars are describing is a genre in which protagonists are regularly women in men's bodies.

[3.11]   This theory also describes authors who are assumed to be women, who find that the best way to express their gendered selves is through characters who are assumed to be men. To paraphrase, the authors described publish anonymously in a space intended for expression of the most intimate gendered lived experiences—and they regularly choose to write these as expressed in or through bodies assumed to belong to men. This anonymous space is also notorious for being intended for the most indulgent, pleasurable gendered fantasies. What this theory is (seemingly inadvertently) saying is that a regular fantasy for fan writers is moving in the world, and being loved, in a body assumed to belong to a man.

[3.12]   These are all basic transgender narratives. On the other hand, one might ask whether the two halves of the equation don't negate one another—if these characters are women, and the authors are women, this is not transgender at all. At most, this is what Kustritz and Bacon-Smith describe as appropriating transgender people's experiences in using transition for cisgender enjoyment, as Busse and

Lothian (2009) demonstrate.

[3.13]   I suggest another reading that takes into account the existence of nonbinary genders. In such a reading, authors feel that the oppression and dreams that they have regarding gender are better represented in this way.

[3.14]   Classic scholars such as Kustritz and Bacon-Smith describe a world in which women authors express their lived experiences, fantasies, and gendered selves through women characters (who those not in the know mistakenly read as men). Let's take this to be true while continuing to explore these characters. Though, as Bacon-Smith (1992) says, codings linked with womanhood are often emphasized in these characters, they are often accompanied by emphasis on other codings that are linked with being men.

[3.15]   One of many examples is Dean Winchester of the *Supernatural* (2005–2020) fandom. Dean is one of the show's main characters, arguably the protagonist. Dean is regularly characterized as working hard to build a reputation as a man who is not gay (Tosenberger 2008). This is a rare endeavor for wives and the romance novel heroines that the above theory equates characters like Dean with. In practice, this means Dean is commonly linked with Western masculinity. On the other hand, Dean is described as having long lashes, as well as other codings generally associated with womanhood. More specifically, the character is coded as a woman, alongside being coded as a man. As I (Leetal 2018) elaborate in my work, having more than one gender is one of the common forms of nonbinary gender (e.g., it is often at the core of being bigender, trigender, genderfluid, and multigender; Jaroszewski et al. 2018). Generally, research either treats characters as simply and directly men or—following the model—as women. However, the very existence of these two strong, supposedly contradictory branches implies that these characters have more than one gender—meaning they are therefore not binary.

[3.16]   Generally speaking, these characters often have so many contradicting gender codings that reading them as binary-gendered is reductive and out of character. As I demonstrate (Leetal 2018), Dean is strongly described by different scholars as a man, a woman, and variations of those. Writing Dean as having only one gender would mean leaving out a significant part of Dean's characterization.

[3.17]   Kustritz (2003) and Bacon-Smith (1992) suggest that one way of knowing these characters are women is that they are generally depicted as facing oppression most often experienced by (white, binary, cisgender) women. Classic fan fiction research, however, ignores the reality that the various oppressions that characters face are very often experienced by people of nonbinary genders. For example, according to Harrison, Grant, and Herman (2012), 20 percent of nonbinary people are involved in informal economics like sex work (22), 32 percent have been assaulted (23), and 43 percent have attempted to take their lives, as compared to 1.6 percent of the general population (22). These are all common depictions of characters in fan fiction.

[3.18]   I do not mean to say that every author and character in the fan fiction sphere is transgender or otherwise nonbinary, but it is a strong theme at the core of the field. It is hard not to wonder how much of an erased contribution nonbinary participants have made to the construction of the field. Many have written about marginalized groups' contributions and lived experiences being uncredited, erased from history, or twisted to appear hegemonic, even within marginalized environments (Crenshaw 1991). Eden Lackner, Barbara Lynn Lucas, and Robin Anne Reid (2006) discuss this in regard to women fans in fan spaces dominated by men. It would be fascinating to revisit our fan histories and tell some of the lost stories of marginalized participants.

[3.19]   This theory's description of moving between genders or multiplying them is almost intrinsically a trans or nonbinary practice. But Kustritz and Bacon-Smith are far from the only classic fan studies

scholars whose writings lend themselves to understanding fans and characters as having more than one gender.

[3.20]   Another such scholar is Victoria Somogyi (2002), who suggests that despite common belief, fans who enjoy het fan fiction are not heterosexual. Lackner, Lucas, and Reid (2006) elaborately explore this as well. Somogyi (2002) examines the fandom and fan works around the Janeway/Chakotay ship of *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001). She explains that fans reading a story about a woman and man are assumed to identify with the woman character and desire the man character. According to Somogyi, this assumption is incorrect, and she argues that fans of Janeway/Chakotay instead identify with Janeway, but are attracted to both Janeway and Chakotay. In this way, the assumption of attraction should be broadened, and fans should be recognized as being attracted to both the man and woman characters.

[3.21]   Somogyi stops there, but one may ask, why not broaden the identification assumption as well? Somogyi (2002) writes that fans are attracted to both Janeway and Chakotay but doesn't suggest extending the assumption that fans only identify with Janeway. To borrow from Bacon-Smith's (1992) discussion of slash, however, the tendency to identify with more than one position is so strong that "some of the less experienced writers lose control of their point of view in sex scenes, as they simultaneously identify with all of the characters" (239). Why would only the identification aspect of the model not correlate? Just as fans may hold both attractions, they may hold multiple identifications as well. If so, this model describes fans who have multiple genders—a very common form of nonbinary gender(s).

[3.22]   One might wonder whether fans' identification with men characters is no more than the practice of an oppressed group pushed to identify with the hegemonic story protagonists, leading them to erase women from stories. Lackner, Lucas, and Reid (2006) discuss this possibility, alongside the assumption that fans are always subversive. They explain that both ends of this spectrum are true, along with a complex variety of experiences between them.

[3.23]   In fan fiction, as demonstrated, expressing one's gender experiences in a gender one was not assigned is so ubiquitous it may be transparent. So is writing characters who have more than one gender—that is, characters who are nonbinary (Leetal 2018). This points to fan fiction having an affinity for trans or other nonbinary genders. Whether fans are expressing or, in continuation of Butler, inventing and also doing nonbinary gender, it seems to be a common interest, practice, and ongoing large-scale brainstorm.

4. Brought into flesh

[4.1]   The nonbinary gender codings that fans workshop don't remain solely within the realm of words and imaginations. Fans bring these gender practices, expressions, and performances into the world on their own bodies. I now look at the ways fans bring these genders into flesh, such as through cosplay and podfic. Cosplay is a type of fan work that involves dressing up as and/or creating outfits of characters. Podfic is another type of fan work in which fans create audiobooks, radio plays, and other (usually spoken) audio-based art.

[4.2]   A lot of fan practices lend themselves to becoming embodied by fans. Cosplay is an obvious example, as are fan movies and theater productions. Fan creators study a character's movements, clothing, accessories, and speech patterns—many down to the smallest, most accurate details. They often spend hours, weeks, or sometimes far longer searching for the exact, perfect item—or making it themselves. Some fans study hairdressing and hairstyling history to get their hair just right to play characters. For example, it is doubtful a lot of the people even in the *Good Omens* (2019–) television

crew are aware of the exact right shoes, buttons, patterns, and hairstyles the characters have at every point they are shown throughout history. Some fans know them exactly.

[4.3]   These are, of course, all gendered items and practices. According to Butler (2011), gender is always a performance in the sense that it is based on practices, not in a deep personal core that exists outside of society. Nevertheless, Butler defends that official performances may highlight this model. In cosplay and fan productions, careful and accurate collection and documentation of gender signifiers is common. Like Butler's description of a woman imitating women in order to learn how to do womanhood, fans collect, learn, and develop information. These details, or gender characterizations to imitate, are found in corporate endorsed iterations of stories as well as in fan works, fanon, and/or headcanons. Fans inspire one another in making these ways for genders to be expressed or performed. This multiple and mutual learning also fits Butler's model exactly.

[4.4]   For quite a few fans, these practices have meaning beyond a simple performance at a convention. For some, these embodiments have a gendered personal meaning. This blog post from Spnaturalconfessions (2016), for example, discusses enjoying what some fans refer to as secret cosplay: "Sometimes I go to work in my Dean cosplay. Nobody knows it's Dean but my friend and me but it still makes me feel awesome." This feeling may be familiar to a lot of trans and other nonbinary people. It resembles a classic trans practice in which one chooses small signifiers of one's gender when unable to live full-time as who they are. Having something like Bucky Barnes's red star, Dean's amulet, or Aziraphale's tie may help ease dysphoria a little bit or simply promote happiness. Having a signifier of who you are can be meaningful in a world that relentlessly ignores or otherwise invalidates it.

[4.5]   Podfic as well easily lends itself to fans' practice of expressing fan fiction genders on their bodies. This is particularly meaningful given that mainstream media offers nearly zero nonbinary roles and characters, and the few existing ones are often played by binary and cis actors. While narrating podfic is unpaid and often doesn't make such representations explicit, it provides the possibility of listening to and playing multiple well-written nonbinary roles and creating in ways that allow one to engage with their gender.

[4.6]   Personally, when I tried narrating podfic, it was one of the very few times I felt gender euphoria. It was meaningful to be able to speak this gendered expression and feel it on my skin, my expression, in my throat, in the world. To be able to play a character whose gender I identified with, rather than felt pain in trying to pretend fit me. While binary actors may enjoy playing a gender that feels wrong, doing it for the length of a performance is quite different from spending years performing a gender that is not theirs with no choice and possibly without consent.

[4.7]   In accordance with Butler's model, fans learn how to do these genders from various sources. A fandom's canon is far from the only or even main source of gender characterizations—fans often learn them from one another. This happens in the same way that Kustritz (2003) describes, where fandom is a community brainstorm: fans get to know one another's works and accept elements of them. Through repeated reading, writing, and other participation in fandom, characterizations solidify or shift. There isn't a single set way to do fan fic genders just as there isn't a single exact way of doing other genders. But repeated mutual imitation, invention, and policing draw guidelines and pools of codings.

[4.8]   Bringing characters' gender codings into our world in flesh is not only done through cosplay and podfic portraying these characters. Many fans adopt into their everyday lives the music tastes, jewelry and clothing choices, drinking and eating habits, and body language and ways of movement in the world learned from their favorite characters.

[4.9]   During a period when I wrote a lot of fan fiction, I would often vocalize lines to hear the

characters' intonation and voice in order to feel whether it gave me the right body language—as well as what it was like to be in the character's body. I often found myself adopting characters' traits into my own expressions. For example, some of Dean's traits lingered: I started biting my lip and rubbing a hand over my face when I was upset, listening to Dean's music, and wearing flannel over my men-cut undershirts. I tried to learn to speak and walk like Dean and tried to find a jacket like his.

[4.10]   In current Western culture, there are very few ways to express or do nonbinary gender through appearance. Genders outside of the binary as we know it existed and still exist outside of Western cultures, as well as in rare and oftentimes concealed spaces within them. As far as most Western societies are concerned, however, the available ways to do nonbinary gender are mostly reserved for very few and privileged body types—there are nearly no social images of how to be nonbinary. Most nonbinary people don't have enough ways to express, explore, and enjoy their genders (or, according to Butler, to perform them). When people talk about nonbinary gender, they usually mean thin, young, white, middle-class people with a slightly boyish or masculine appearance (Gordon et al. 2019). This means, in continuation of Butler, that people who don't happen to embody these attributes are, for the most part, left with even fewer role models and little to no way to express, affirm, or perform their genders.

[4.11]   Fandom provides more and more characters who are coded as nonbinary to find joy in and through which to invent and discuss how to do nonbinary gender. While characters are rarely explicitly written as nonbinary (but remain coded as such) and are less represented, especially in outward-facing representation, characters in fandom provide material to create with and often a community to imagine with. While fandom is far from sufficiently diverse, nonbinary characters in fandom provide somewhat more varied ways to be nonbinary. For example, Aziraphale of *Good Omens*—unlike the emerging stereotype of nonbinary people—is chubby, looks middle-aged, and is always immaculately dressed in elegant upper-class clothing. These representations are something to build on. An inspiration.

[4.12]   In her work about affect in fan fiction, Anna Wilson (2016) explains that fan studies must take into account fans' affect and emotions. In continuation of this argument, I suggest that bringing characters into our world on one's flesh is an intimate sharing, entwined deeply with being a fan. When characters feel fear, fans' breath hitches and their muscles tense. When characters are relieved or amused, fans voice their laughter. Characters cry tears formed in fans' eyes. Some fans are aroused by kisses felt on characters' lips. Some lend their bodies as sites where characters' orgasms happen. A ship involves not just the characters: authors and readers are also part of that relationship. When an author writes Dean as loving Sam, the love may be felt in the author's and readers' bodies, as is Sam's returned love and his love for their love. Shipping is a polyamorous relationship involving characters, readers, writers, creators of podfic, and so on. As I tasted for nonbinary gender in my characters' words, in my throat and on my lips, people who make podfic of my stories may echo, taste, shift, or reinvent them. When I dress (poorly) as Bucky Barnes, I am not doing Sebastian Stan's Bucky Barnes, nor even the comics' Bucky Barnes: I'm recreating the Bucky I could identify with from my favorite fic.

[4.13]   Maybe fans are finding ways to express long hidden desires and personal truths. Maybe fans are inventing these genders and themselves as they are inventing characters. Regardless, it is deeply meaningful. This might explain why some people feel attraction to characters in fan works or on fans' bodies as a category different from men or women.

5. Attraction to these genders

[5.1]   Fans repeatedly express attraction toward characters, even when they are not attracted to those

of the character's supposed gender. It is fairly common to find comments like "I am not gay, but I'd be interested in Dean." One post from Spnaturalconfessions (2014) reads, "I am a lesbian but Dean–makes me question my sexuality."

[5.2]   This doesn't always mean attraction to Dean's actor, but rather an attraction toward Dean and Dean's gender. This is exemplified by Tumblr posts like Sherlylawks's (https://sherlylawks.tumblr.com): one post features a call to anyone who "plays Dean or is Dean" and a GIF of a person on a bed gesturing in invitation. It seems attraction to Dean does not always require one to physically look like Dean's most well-known actor, Jensen Ackles, but rather to perform as Dean.

[5.3]   Even several of *Supernatural*'s actors talk about feelings toward Dean outside of their usual interests. Perhaps the most outspoken is Matt Cohen, who seems to identify as straight. In response to a fan question, Cohen repeatedly discusses his first scene with Dean, explaining that he had trouble focusing, as he was so mesmerized: "He's like a prince, you know?…I don't remember anything that happened that day, night, or any time before or after because of Dean's mouth" (Leo (Wayward Winchester) 2018). Cohen often specifically mentions Dean's deep, gruff voice as well—not a coding Jensen Ackles regularly uses, but one adopted for playing Dean.

[5.4]   The discrepancy of people being attracted to fan fiction characters outside of their general gender preferences can be easily explained if one sees these characters as nonbinary. For example, a person who defines himself as a heterosexual man might simply mean that he is not interested in men. Since nonbinary genders are so frequently, deeply, and severely disregarded, this person may be unaware of or have never asked himself whether he might be attracted to those of any gender outside of the binary. Finding himself interested in a person who is not a woman may not necessarily mean that he is interested in men, but rather that he is interested in someone of a gender outside the binary options.

[5.5]   At this time, in most Western cultures, attraction toward nonbinary people is rarely recognized ("Romantic and Sexual Orientation," Nonbinary wiki, https://nonbinary.wiki/). Terms for this attraction are nearly universally unknown, and the meaning of words like "pansexual," intended for nonbinary inclusion, are a continuous site of debate over meaning and basic validity. Even sources that do recognize that some people might be nonbinary often disregard the possibility of anyone being attracted to a nonbinary person.

[5.6]   This creates an environment where if, for example, a man is interested in women and nonbinary people, he would most likely be categorized as straight; this would hold true unless he dates a nonbinary person who passes as a man, in which case he would likely be categorized as gay. Functionally, his attraction to nonbinary people is often entirely erased. On a personal level, almost every person who ever expressed romantic or sexual interest in me misgendered me to fit their identity of attraction.

[5.7]   As such, a very simple explanation of the many people attracted to fan fiction characters, despite not being interested in men and/or women, is that these characters are neither binary women nor binary men.

6. Conclusion

[6.1]   Despite going almost completely unrecognized, trans and nonbinary narratives appear in classic fan studies theories. Earlier fan studies address the sexuality of fic lovers at best, entirely ignoring the existence of trans people, but our presence is baked into the core of this theory. At the same time, classic models of fan communities' processes of creation correlate with Butler's model of gender.

[6.2]   Examining these models together points to a loophole in Butler's model that allows the existence of nonbinary genders. This comes in addition to the ubiquity of erased nonbinary coding (and possibly participants) in fan communities.

[6.3]   I suggest that these gender expressions are part of the work that fan fiction fandoms do. Fandoms are inventing ways to be nonbinary and may even be creating nonbinary genders. This is reflected, for example, in the practice of writing slash, as described by classic fan studies works. In this process, the author and character often possess one another's gender(s), sharing into being an existence of having more than one gender. This is also reflected in the ubiquitous attraction in fan spaces toward characters outside one's binary gender preference. I argue that said attraction is often because attraction toward those of nonbinary genders is erased, so these characters' nonbinary genders are erased as well.

[6.4]   These nonbinary genders, ways to be, and creations do not remain imagined and fictional but are also brought into our world in flesh on some fans' bodies. This is done, for example, through practices such as cosplay and podfic. Fandom allows some fans the opportunity to embody genders other than those assigned to them; in turn, fan communities allow some nonbinary genders to thrive and even be embodied in their desires and bodies.

[6.5]   This work does not deeply differentiate between various nonbinary genders or differences in point of view based on identities, intersectional differences, fandom, or genre. I hope future works will address these, as well as nonbinary fans' historical experiences.

7. Notes

1. One research paper (to remain anonymous, as the author need not be involved) claims that there wasn't any group for transgender stories in fandom before 2008. In fact, the group Transslash did this beginning in 2003 at the latest—and probably in 2001 or earlier.

2. The reference to women's oppression seems to only involve universalized white, cisgender, and otherwise privileged women. Early fan studies research ignores trans and other nonbinary fans and characters, insisting on seeing all fans as heterosexual married women, sometimes going as far as insisting that they are heterosexual (allosexual) women who have degrees and are dissatisfied with their jobs.

3. I use Butler's theory here in order to take part in academic discussion. My beliefs regarding the origins of gender are that the question is overdiscussed. While I enjoy some of the theories, every reply I am familiar with is translated into questioning the validity of transgender or nonbinary people. As far as I'm personally concerned, my loyalty is not with any theory, but with the rights, well-being, and safety of transgender and other nonbinary people. That said, I agree with Julia Serano (2015) that these harmful results are often inadvertent or intentional misunderstandings of theories. In addition, it should be mentioned that some may question the prominence of Butler's classic theories when Butler themself doesn't identify as binary-gendered. It is not for me to guess Butler's position on these issues, but, as cited, the fact remains that these theories are widely popular and are the ones taught. As Serano (2015) explains, Butler the theorist and Butler the person should be differentiated. In addition, it should be noted that while Butler let us know their gender is outside of the binary, their theory remains widely taught and influential, meriting revisitation and reexploration.

4. A mediocre performance would peg her as a failure at being a woman—an unsuccessful woman but still a woman, or at least still binary-gendered.

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Framing the Covid-19 pandemic's impacts on fan conventions

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[0.1] Abstract—Some initial findings are presented from a media monitoring project on the Covid-19 pandemic's impacts on comic cons and other fan events during 2020. We analyzed a sample of 77 items from a corpus of 813 articles, identifying story lines and themes that framed this moment of upheaval and uncertainty.

[0.2] Keywords—Comic cons; Discourse analysis; Frame analysis

1. Introduction

[1.1] Fan conventions were already known as superspreaders of ailments and illnesses before the pandemic, a phenomenon known as "con crud" and "con flu," among other slang terms (Fanlore 2022). Cons bring people together—sometimes from quite far away—in a convention center, hotel ballroom, or other venue to touch the same things and breathe the same air, often while failing to eat or sleep. It's no wonder people get sick. So when epidemiologists and public health authorities warned us all to avoid crowded, close-contact, and confined spaces to limit the novel coronavirus's spread (WHO 2021), they might as well have said to avoid comic cons.

[1.2] Despite stories emerging from early hot spots in January and February 2020, many of us in North America didn't appreciate how significantly the pandemic would upend our lives. When someone

asked the Friends of Comic Cons message board in late February if they thought the San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC) might be canceled because of the pandemic, they were met with skepticism. ReedPop's Chicago Comic and Entertainment Expo went ahead the next weekend, with organizers actually reporting higher attendance than in 2019 (Alverson 2020; Jennings 2020), but some exhibitors and guests pulled out of Emerald City Comic Con, originally scheduled for the weekend of March 12. ReedPop initially seemed committed to moving forward, as they had in Chicago, but eventually postponed the show until the summer (Grunenwald 2020a; Romano 2020). They were soon joined by other events, large and small, and many of those postponements later turned into cancellations. By early April, more commentators were asking the question one fan had posed back in February: what if there's no SDCC this year? (Lovett 2020; Wilson 2020; Pulliam-Moore 2020). Things were finally settled on April 17, when SDCC's organizers announced that the world's most prominent comic convention would be canceled for the first time since its founding in 1970 (Dixon 2020).

[1.3]   All of this was unfolding as Woo planned to launch a collaborative ethnography of SDCC. With no Comic-Con to attend, it obviously had to be put on the back burner; but what about this flood of reporting, speculation, and commentary about conventions and the pandemic? Woo contacted Francis, who has professional experience in the live events industry, to assist with a media monitoring exercise in spring 2020. By the end of the summer, they added Sinervo, who was interested in the pandemic's impact on transmedia industries more broadly, to the project. The resulting archive of articles, blog posts, and press releases captures a particular moment in time: convention season, or roughly mid-February to late October, during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Methods

[2.1]   Our data corpus contains 813 items from event organizations, mainstream and subcultural media outlets, and some social media posts. Broadly speaking, they address postponements and cancellations (Cancellations), their consequences (Fallout), virtual events (Alternatives), responses from attendees and fans (Reactions), the return to in-person events (Reopening), and other subjects (table 1). Early on, we worked backward to reconstruct a record of what had already transpired between February and April; however, the bulk of material was assembled through active media monitoring. Items were located through a series of Google Alerts supplemented with targeted web and database searches. We decided to stop data collection after New York Comic Con at the end of October 2020 (figure 1). NYCC is usually one of the last major cons of the season, we couldn't continue monitoring indefinitely, and, at the time, it looked like things would be mostly back to normal by the 2021 season.

Table 1. Crosstab of corpus items by source type and primary subject

Source type	Subject					
	Cancellation	Fallout	Alternatives	Reopening	Reactions	Other
Event Organizer	65	3	73	6	1	5
Mainstream–Local	46	19	63	35	19	6
Mainstream–National	13	7	25	8	8	3
Mainstream–Trade	2	4	23	2	1	4
Subcultural	63	35	174	14	39	23

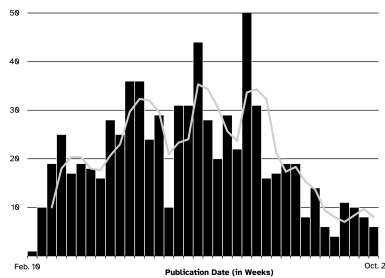|					
Social Media	5	4	19	6	15	3
Other	0	0	4	1	1	3

Figure 1. Dated corpus items published per week (February 10 to October 25, 2020), with three-week rolling average. The counts range from a minimum of 1 (the week of February 10) to a maximum of 50 (the week of July 20, when the San Diego Comic-Con would traditionally be held). The trend line, a three-week rolling average, shows three distinct spikes: late April, mid-June, and late July. The counts then steadily taper off for the remainder of the year until data collection ceased.

[2.2]   This corpus is too big for us to tackle immediately, so we decided to begin at a smaller scale, by reporting results of a random stratified sample. We sampled by source type—randomly selecting 10 percent of items published directly by event organizations; by national, local, and trade sources in the mainstream press, respectively; and by subcultural media (largely geek-culture websites)—hoping that they would show distinct points of view. Other source types were too heterogenous to enable useful comparisons, so we have bracketed that material for now. The final sample contained 77 items comprising 15 from Event Organizers; 6 from Mainstream–National; 18 from Mainstream–Local; 4 from Mainstream–Trade; and 34 from Subcultural (note 1).

[2.3]   All three of us initially reviewed the whole sample, paying attention to framing, structure, linguistic and rhetorical choices, and multimodal features. These observations informed our preliminary code book, which was further refined during coding in the cloud-based qualitative data analysis software package Dedoose (https://www.dedoose.com). We began formal coding by dividing the material among ourselves, and we reviewed and recoded each other's work. We created a word cloud of all codes from the sample, scaled by frequency (figure 2). Except for embedded media artifacts like photographs or social media posts, codes were generally applied at the paragraph level.

Figure 2. Word cloud of codes applied to the corpus, scaled by frequency. Relatively speaking, there is not that much variation in scale evident. Of the codes present, the most frequently used include Film/TV; Fans, Geeks, Nerds; Public Health Story; Business Story; Comics; Cosplay; Proactive Framing; and Event Organization (Staff) Quotes. Some of the least used include Youth; Identification with Industry; Wrestling; Subcultural Celebrity Social Media; and Expert Social Media.

[2.4]   As we read through the sample, four major frames emerged. We initially thought of these as genres of story, but we quickly realized that individual articles frequently evoked multiple registers. We

started talking about them as story lines, like the A, B, and C plots that weave through episodes of serialized TV dramas. The story lines were Public Health, Human Interest, Business, and Arts & Entertainment. Figure 3 shows their distribution across the five source categories, and vice versa.
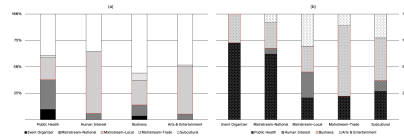

Figure 3. Distribution of story line by source type **(a)** and source type by story line **(b).** These charts show how often each story line code (Public Health; Human Interest; Business; Arts & Entertainment) was used by stories belonging to each source type (Event Organizer; Mainstream–National; Mainstream–Local; Mainstream–Trade; and Subcultural), and vice versa. Subcultural sources dominate across all story line categories, followed by Mainstream–Local, with the exception of Human Interest, where the order is reversed. The Public Health and Business story lines are most common across source types.

3. Public Health and agency

[3.1]   The Public Health story line places the events and actors in the context of the pandemic itself. It made up the largest proportion of Event Organizer and Mainstream–National items, and, with 82 applications, it was virtually tied with Business as the most used frame. Many articles mention local case counts, death rates, epidemiological models, and public health restrictions. For example, an article discussing ReedPop's initial decision to hold the Emerald City Comic Con as planned notes that the announcement came just "hours after Washington governor Jay Inslee declared an emergency in the state, following the second coronavirus-related death in Seattle's King County" (Grunenwald 2020b). Others introduce terms like "social distancing" (Brooks 2020) and "enhanced cleaning measures" (Badasie 2020) that became part of our pandemic vocabulary. Still others weighed the wisdom of returning to previously postponed or canceled events, such as a cluster that went ahead in Florida in summer and fall 2020. As one commentator put it, "Then there's Tampa Bay Comic Con screaming 'Leeroy Jenkins' right into the disease vector that is Florida" (Schenker 2020). Heidi Macdonald (2020) cautioned readers to wear a mask if they go, though she noted they were "controversial locally," and a blogger reported that Orlando Toy Collectors Summer Pop-up Show staff expected people to "manage themselves" (Croom quoted in Johnston 2020), foreshadowing the new normal of the pandemic's later stages.

[3.2]   A June 24 Facebook post by Tampa Bay Comic Con's (2020) organizers addressed to their "nerdy brethren" belatedly announced the event's cancellation: "Due to the recent surge in Covid-19 cases, the City of Tampa does not feel comfortable featuring Tampa Bay Comic Convention 2020 (and we share their sentiment)." Thus, TBCC portrayed the City of Tampa as ultimately responsible even as they (parenthetically) concurred. This statement combines what we term reactive and proactive framings of agency. On the one hand, organizers and commentators foregrounded external constraints through passive language, like "*had to* cancel its in person convention" (Valdez 2020) and "*forced to* go fully on the Internet" (Molnar 2020) or, like TBCC, by attributing decisions to local, state, or federal authorities. On the other hand, many organizers presented their pandemic response as decisive action going above and beyond public health rules: "We will react appropriately to any directives from government and our global group, but the safety of our visitors is paramount so we will be taking extraordinary steps to manage this" (Badasie 2020). A few even tried to put a positive spin on disruptions. For example, the Lakes International Comic Art Festival rejected a "do nothing and ride the storm into next year"

approach. Instead, "seizing the moment and making an opportunity of adversity," they made "a clear and positive decision" and asked stakeholders to see the virtual festival as "an opportunity rather than a threat to LICAF" (Lakes International Comic Art Festival 2020). We imagine these decisions—not only what to do but how to communicate them—were agonizing and would have become even more so as mask and vaccine mandates became increasingly caught up in political posturing.

4. Human Interest and Emotional Impacts

[4.1]   The Human Interest story line focused on the experiences of individuals or small, representative groups. Profiles of cosplayers who worked as nurses (Kunawicz 2020) and teachers (Elderkin 2020) or who made and donated personal protective equipment (Bear 2020; Elderkin 2020) are good examples of this framing. Overall, it was the least used of the four story lines. Event Organizers and Mainstream–Trade sources never used it, though it constituted roughly one quarter of the story line codes applied in Mainstream–Local sources. Nonetheless, Human Interest stories underlined the emotional toll of the pandemic on conventions' stakeholders, a theme we also tracked separately.

[4.2]   The Emotional Impact code appeared most often in Mainstream–Local sources, followed closely by Subcultural, then Event Organizer, Mainstream–National, and Mainstream–Trade. Authors often positioned themselves as fellow fans to demonstrate sympathy with congoers: "Geeks really look forward to their events. Being in quarantine and away from our gatherings makes us feel like travelers in a different country missing the sound of our native tongue" (Kunawicz 2020). Interviews with cosplayers, artists, exhibitors, and retailers further emphasized affective dimensions of a disrupted convention season. However, Event Organizers were the only source type that used the emotional frame more than the economic one. Their statements used explicitly affective language: "we are as *disappointed* as we know you are" (Phoenix Fan Fusion 2020); "It is with *extreme sadness* that we today announce the cancellation…We are *heartbroken*" (ReedPop 2020); "It is with great *sorrow*" (Winnipeg Comiccon, n.d.); and, "For over 30 years we have put our *heart and soul* into creating a special place" (Jirak 2020). Interestingly, these excerpts all came from cancellation statements, perhaps suggesting an instrumental use of affect, interpellating attendees and exhibitors as part of a community or family to contain the backlash to bad news. However, when looking at cases where event organizations, their staff, and event stakeholders like vendors are quoted in articles, they talked about economic impacts twice as often as emotional ones. When speaking to the press, rather than directly to their customers, affective language is drowned out by the business of geek culture.

5. Business and Economic Impacts

[5.1]   Whereas the Human Interest story line drew attention to the emotional impacts of a disrupted convention season, the Business story line focalized its economic costs. Discussion of cash flow ("Revenues per virtual event were not large, totaling $737,446 over the 60 events, but gross margin was higher on the virtual events than on the company's live events"; Griepp 2020) and contracts ("most big contracts […] will include what's called a Force Majeure clause"; Elderkin 2020) are hallmarks of the Business story line, as is management speak:

> [5.2]   That said, we have been prudent with our risk management and are well capitalized to survive in the longest of down periods […] Our advice for content presenters and suppliers alike is to do all you can to optimize for the current downturn, and prepare for the flood of (good) work that will come once we turn the corner.

[5.3]   The Economic Impacts code was used most frequently in Mainstream–National sources, followed by Subcultural, Mainstream–Local, Mainstream–Trade, and Event Organizer. While a similar number of items in the sample discussed economic and emotional costs (21 and 22, respectively), within those items, we applied the codes 53 and 35 times, respectively. In other words, Economic Impacts were discussed 1.5 times as much as Emotional Impacts. Despite this differential emphasis, articles asserted cons' economic importance more than they demonstrated it. Salon's Liz Szabo (2020) cites an estimate of the broader conference and meetings industry's economic footprint, but authors, commentators, and experts more typically took cons' role in propping up local hospitality and tourism businesses, retailers and dealers, and individual creatives on faith.

[5.4]   When they did get into details, Business stories focused on livelihoods: "Many creators rely on con sales to make a living" (MacDonald 2020); "we have a responsibility to the local artists and vendors who make their living at events like ours and the partners and employees who depend on local companies like ours for their livelihood" (Phoenix Fan Fusion 2020); "finding new ways to support these artists, many of whom counted on fan conventions as part of their income before coronavirus derailed that plan, is now more important than ever" (Trumbore 2020). Indeed, there is substantial overlap with Human Interest story lines—for example, a lengthy io9/Gizmodo piece on professional cosplayers struggling to make payroll, navigate government support programs, and find alternative revenue streams (Elderkin 2020)—because the "humans" at their center were frequently a business.

6. Arts & Entertainment and the pivot to digital

[6.1]   The Arts & Entertainment story line spoke to the perspectives of (would-be) attendees through a "things to do this weekend" lens. Instances of this frame were about as likely to be from Mainstream–Local and Subcultural sources, but they made up a larger share of the Mainstream–Local category. Arts & Entertainment discourses were often distinguished by information, instructions, or imperatives: "Head over to Petersen's Twitch page every day from today until Sunday August 23rd to see some of your favorite artists and their art" (Trumbore 2020); "Attendees are encouraged to purchase their tickets online, as only a small number of walk-up tickets will be available the day of the event" (Tomlin 2020); "To create your own schedule for the online panels, go to comic-con.org and click on the Comic-Con@Home tab" (KPBS 2020). As can be seen from these examples, this theme could be applied to live events and the virtual ones mounted to replace them.

[6.2]   We used the term "pivoting" to code discussions of what comes next for an event after being postponed or canceled. It applied to rescheduling—"BUT, we have some exciting plans for the Fall show" (Fan Expo Dallas, n.d.); "we aim to facilitate a smooth transition to the new dates for everyone involved" (Rose City Comic Con, n.d.); "Turcotte vows to bring Steel City NerdCon back when conditions allow" (Kelly 2020)—but over time became increasingly focused on online events, which were reframed as chances to "recreate normalcy" (Elderkin 2020) and "instill those friendly feelings and fun" that people missed (Sutlief 2020). Organizations and commentators worked hard to hype them. A few articles acknowledged that "the experience of being there in person can't be replaced" (Badasie 2020), but we found surprisingly little explicit discussion of this. Rather, the substitutability of online events for live ones seemed to be largely assumed through definitions of cons as bundles of content. Various writers and commentators used this frame to describe many different events, but the undisputed king was DC Comics publisher and CCO Jim Lee, who gave a lengthy interview to IGN ahead of a marquee virtual event, DC FanDome:

[6.3]   So, I think it was primarily that need to accommodate the desire of the fans to engage with as much *content* as we created, and also allow people the freedom to be able to

engage with *content* on any device, any place.

[6.4]   It's very interesting contrasting the two and how we're really hitting both ends of the spectrum of how fans look at the *content* we create and how they want to engage with that *content* and how we want to engage with them with this *content*.

[6.5]   So I think it just gives us the opportunity to go in super deep with all the *content* that we create across all the different divisions within Warner Brothers…We've got the comic book *content,* we've got gaming *content,* animation *content,* TV *content,* even film *content,* it's all in there. And it's all about showcasing things that might not necessarily get the airtime or attention. (Schedeen 2020)

[6.6]   Although traditional cons can be treated as collections of panels, activations, and other consumable experiences, they serve other functions too: they are spectacles, retail marketplaces, educational opportunities, and chances to meet creators or socialize with friends and fellow fans (Jenkins 2012). Conversely, most online fan events organized during the pandemic were basically packages of prerecorded video, with relatively little opportunity for fans to interact or to talk back to industry and creators. In that sense, pandemic-era virtual events may contribute to what Stanfill (2019) has described as the enclosure of fandom.

7. Conclusion

[7.1]   In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has caused so much loss and disrupted ordinary life for so many people, comic conventions were obviously a matter of relatively little importance, but their absence had an outsize impact on some people and communities. Indeed, fan events and their stakeholders provide a microcosm of the pandemic experience, from the depths of its isolating and uncertain lows to the peaks of its in-this-together highs, as exemplified in this statement from one event:

[7.2]   Superheroes never lose the fight. We observe, adapt, persevere and overcome. Motor City Comic Con 2020 will be postponed for a later date and we will prevail […] Until then, protect yourselves and your loved ones. Follow the government social distancing and shut-in guidelines so we can kick Covid's ass and get back to our beloved #conlife. (Jordan 2020)

[7.3]   Here we have tried to sketch some of the ways that this moment was understood in mainstream and subcultural media, as well as directly from convention organizers. We described four broad story lines—Public Health, Human Interest, Business, and Arts & Entertainment—that we found in a sample of 77 press releases, news articles, and opinion pieces drawn from our Cons & Covid archive. We discussed each of these story lines alongside some other themes they made salient: framings of agency, the pandemic's emotional and economic impacts, and how the suspension of in-person events perhaps changed what we think of as a convention. We have barely scraped the surface of what this material can tell us about fan conventions, for in tracing the edges of the comic con–shaped hole left in people's lives during 2020, they necessarily invoke normative ideas about what cons are, what they do, and whom they are for. We hope to continue exploring this in further research with the corpus.

8. Acknowledgments

North America 2021 virtual conference.

9. Note

[1.] The complete sample is available at the Carleton University Dataverse Collection (https://doi.org/10.5683/SP3/UI62YD).

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THE YEAR WITHOUT A COMIC-CON

The limits of Comic-Con's exclusivity

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[0.1]   Abstract—This essay considers the interplay between exclusivity and access growing out of Comic-Con's history, its pivot online during the pandemic, and the organization's plans for the future.

[0.2]   Keywords—Access; Covid-19; San Diego Comic-Con

1. Introduction

[1.1]   In the summer of 2019, the San Diego Comic-Con celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. The celebration was low-key by Comic-Con standards, marked by a new fiftieth anniversary logo, collectible shirts and pins, articles in the souvenir book, and fourteen panels devoted to the origins and evolution of the convention (https://www.comic-con.org/toucan/013-sunday-programming-schedule-comic-con-50-programs). Some of these panels featured appearances by Comic-Con's more high-profile devotees, like filmmaker Kevin Smith, but the majority were populated by the founding and sustaining organizers, fans, artists, and retailers that kept the event afloat over its fifty-year history. The year 2019 also marked the end of an era, as Comic-Con International mourned the passing of its long-time president, John Rogers, who had been at the helm of the organization since his election in 1986. Rogers helped to guide Comic-Con through financial challenges and into the twenty-first century as the convention gained increased visibility and embraced its reputation as a behemoth of media industry promotion and a celebration of fan culture, broadly defined (https://www.comic-con.org/frontpage/john-rogers). As the organization marked these important milestones, it was also in the midst of preparing for a new chapter in its institutional history with a fundraising push and gala event previewing the new Comic-Con Museum in San Diego's Balboa Park (Macdonald 2019).

[1.2]   By most measures, Comic-Con's past success and its plans for future growth are rooted in the materiality of in-person experiences; so much so that this has long been enshrined in the nonprofit's mission statement: "The SAN DIEGO COMIC CONVENTION (Comic-Con International) is a California Nonprofit Public Benefit Corporation organized for charitable purposes and dedicated to creating the general public's awareness of and appreciation for comics and related popular art forms, *including participation in and support of public presentations, conventions, exhibits, museums and other public outreach activities* which celebrate the historic and ongoing contribution of comics to art and culture" (my emphasis) (http://www.comic-con.org/about). Indeed, in an increasingly (socially)

mediated world, one of Comic-Con's enduring qualities is its ability to bring fans and various outposts of the media industries, from Hollywood celebrities and media conglomerates to independent artists and retailers, together under one roof—or, perhaps more accurately, within a one-mile radius in San Diego's downtown core.

[1.3]   Needless to say, when the in-person convention was canceled in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic, Comic-Con's public outreach model was radically upended. Like reams of other canceled conventions, conferences, and trade shows, Comic-Con weathered this storm by offering a virtual version of its flagship in-person event, Comic-Con@Home, in 2020 and 2021. But Comic-Con's close ties to Hollywood promotion and corresponding reliance on exclusivity made this pivot significantly more challenging when it came to replicating the experience online, raising questions about the convention's longstanding reputation as crucial interlocutor in the circulation of media industry buzz and hype.

2. The limits of the limits of exclusivity

[2.1]   In bringing Comic-Con's longstanding modus operandi to a grinding halt in 2020, the pandemic also provoked me to revisit my own research about the convention—much sooner and in different ways than I could have possibly anticipated (note 1). In my book *Only at Comic-Con: Hollywood, Fans, and the Limits of Exclusivity*, published just a few months before the world went into lockdown, I argue that exclusivity serves as a productive framework to make sense of the significant influence of media industry promotion and commerce at the convention. In doing so, I draw attention to the ways in which exclusivity relies on limits, from the spatiotemporal limits associated with high-profile, in-person media events; to the limits Hollywood constructs around access to various promotions, celebrities, and industry secrets in a bid to increase demand for its products; to limits that position Comic-Con fans as an exclusive group of tastemakers (and promotional laborers) by promising cultural capital in the form of insider access, while ultimately reinforcing Hollywood's institutional hierarchies. Exclusivity and its limits are deeply rooted in the spatial and in-person facets of the event. But, like so many of the Comic-Con experiences I've studied over the years, it is the discourses about Hollywood, fans, and Comic-Con—particularly those emerging from the media industries and their intermediaries—that really solidify these constructs in the popular imagination (Hanna 2020, 16).

[2.2]   While exclusivity remains a useful framework through which to make sense of the event in both its online and in-person iterations, reflecting on my research into Comic-Con's history and watching the convention reconfigure to meet the moment highlighted a connected concept: access. On the one hand, exclusivity and access at Comic-Con go hand in hand (Gilbert 2018, 321), particularly when it comes to industry promotion at the event, which constructs exclusivity by limiting access in various ways (Hanna 2020). However, the concept of exclusive access also hampers accessibility in a variety of ways, from the ongoing challenges expressed by attendees with disabilities in Comic-Con's annual talk back panels to the more general barriers to access growing out of the limits of exclusivity that frequently seem to be in tension with Comic-Con's mission (St. James 2014) (note 2). With this in mind, the remainder of this article reexamines this framework of exclusivity with an eye toward the added significance of access in light of Comic-Con's pivot online during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the convention's possible futures in a shifting media landscape.

3. A brief history of access and exclusivity at Comic-Con

[3.1]   In approaching the interplay of exclusivity and access at Comic-Con, it is necessary to consider

how this complicated and evolving relationship emerges from its history. When Comic-Con was founded in 1970, what made it exclusive was not the fact that the convention was in high demand and hard to access, as has been the case since the 2010s, but that it opened up experiences and activities that were themselves less accessible at that time. For example, the founding of Comic-Con happened as the comics industry was on the cusp of revamping its distribution model, which led to the increased availability of back issues and the explosion of specialty comics shops all over North America (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2015, 61–63). But in 1970, Comic-Con and other conventions like it provided exclusive spaces where fans and dealers could round out their collections by buying comics, art, and other memorabilia. This was certainly true in San Diego and was, in fact, one of the reasons the organizers (whose ranks included both fans and dealers) came together to put on a convention in the first place (Carone and Cavanaugh 2010; Schelly 2010, 102; Dean 2006, 51).

[3.2]   The other impetus for founding Comic-Con was to provide the space for, as founder Shel Dorf (1994) put it, "the amateur fan or amateur writer to really meet with the professionals and find the magical secret of how it's done" (http://www.comicconmemories.com/2010/01/08/recordings-of-the-1970-san-diego-comic-con-1-listen-to-them-here/). Again, what made Comic-Con feel exclusive was actually the promise of increased access—in this case, to industry professionals whose insights might deepen fan understanding and appreciation of comics and the popular arts or even provide mentorship and guidance for fans with professional aspirations. In the 1970s, this manifested as informal poolside chats with Jack Kirby or an annual brunch that seated fans at tables with Comic-Con's professional guests (Evanier 2017, 64; Graham and Alfonso 1973).

[3.3]   The majority of professional guests in these early years were comics artists and professionals, who, as Dorf (1994) put it, were "the only entertainers who didn't hear the laughter and applause." But in the decades since Comic-Con's founding, what constitutes an industry presence at the convention gradually expanded from artists, writers, and minor celebrities to a more institutionalized industry presence that highlighted companies, brands, and increasingly high-profile promotional content. This was so much the case that in 2002, *Hollywood Reporter* called Comic-Con "a key destination for Hollywood movie marketers looking to reach a burgeoning target demographic"; and in 2004, *Variety* described Comic-Con as "an industry trade show masking as a fan show" (McIntyre 2002; Bart 2004). By the turn of the twenty-first century, Comic-Con's exclusivity—and, specifically, the way this exclusivity was constructed through media discourses at and about the event—was increasingly tied to how it functioned as a promotional space that allowed the media industries to generate buzz extending beyond the walls of the convention center (Hanna 2020).

[3.4]   As the quotes above suggest, this redefinition of exclusivity aligned attending Comic-Con with the exclusivity of being a Hollywood insider, but without the same kind of personal access to that industry afforded attendees in the 1970s. And in the context of Hollywood promotion, at least, the increasingly restricted access associated with exclusive celebrity appearances, previews, and other promotional content, however arbitrary or constructed, became part of the pleasure of attending Comic-Con. Climbing costs and a cap on attendance at 130,000 meant that as the convention became increasingly visible, it was also becoming more difficult to obtain tickets (Czeiszperger 2014). Add to that the growing lines outside of the 6,500-seat Hall H, which houses the most high-profile Hollywood panels, and the barriers to access become even more significant (Kastrenakes 2015). Only a small percentage of fans could actually attend Comic-Con, and fewer still were able to weather the hours— sometimes days—of queuing required to see these industry panels in person. And that inaccessibility made the promotional content feel that much more exciting, newsworthy, and exclusive.

[3.5]   While there are plenty of other ways in which Comic-Con has worked to remain accessible or even grown increasingly inclusive, the exclusivity and inaccessibility surrounding Hollywood and

fandom at Comic-Con is somewhat counterintuitive, considering the organization's aforementioned mission statement and its status as a nonprofit dating back to 1975. Indeed, Comic-Con's nonprofit status has led to some very legitimate criticism about the convention's relationship to Hollywood in the twenty-first century, including its privileging of the promotional and economic imperatives of the media industries by favoring exclusivity over access (Wilkens 2007). While these remain salient critiques of the organization—ones that certainly informed my own research, which is similarly critical of how the event cultivated an imbalanced power relationship between industry and fandom even as it espoused a rhetoric of fan power and influence—it is worth reconsidering these criticisms in light of Comic-Con's approach to the pandemic and its future outlook.

4. Comic-Con's pandemic years and the limits of expanded access

[4.1]   When the pandemic hit and Comic-Con had to pivot to providing an online event, the carefully constructed aura of exclusivity around industry promotion at the con was also disrupted. And in reimagining Comic-Con as a virtual experience, organizers seemed to lean into this disruption, launching an iteration of the convention that was exponentially more accessible. Comic-Con@Home was free, which was a steep discount from 2019's admission price of $291; the exhibit hall was online, which meant that smaller dealers weren't competing with massive trade show-style booths on the show floor, and many of these smaller retailers reported significantly higher online sales; and panels went online at scheduled times but remained on YouTube after they ended, so they could be viewed anytime (Woo, Hanna, and Kohnen 2020).

[4.2]   But with this expanded accessibility, somewhat predictably, the value of Comic-Con's exclusivity as a promotional site also seemed to wane—at least from the perspective of Hollywood and the industry trades. *Variety* called Comic-Con@Home "a bust" in 2020; and in 2021, *Hollywood Reporter* asked "Is Comic-Con the Linear TV of Fandom Events?" (a damning question in this peak streaming moment) (Vary 2020a; Hibberd 2021). In addition to the lukewarm coverage in the press, Hollywood's response, as Comic-Con became accessible to a larger swath of the public than ever before, was to pivot away from the convention, as many conglomerates and brands have done on and off in recent years (Barnes and Cieply 2011; Donnelly 2016). And adding insult to injury, DC responded by launching its own branded virtual convention called DC FanDome in 2020, which would ultimately replace any kind of pronounced promotional presence for its films at Comic-Con@Home (note 3).

[4.3]   DC FanDome was initially planned for a single weekend but was subsequently split into two events, "DC FanDome: Hall of Heroes" on August 22 and the lower profile "DC FanDome: Explore the Multiverse," which was held on September 12. Hall of Heroes was clearly designed to emulate a day in Comic-Con's Hall H and offered a live stream of panels promoting upcoming films like *Wonder Woman 1984* (Patty Jenkins, 2020), *The Batman* (Matt Reeves, 2022),and *The Suicide Squad* (James Gunn, 2021). Even though the panel content was heavily controlled, planned, and, in some cases, prerecorded, it was presented as "live" and ephemeral (Haring 2020). Warner Bros.' Chief Marketing Officer Lisa Gregorian described it as "an event that would super-serve the fans" while also stating "if you're not there, you're not there. It goes away after 24 hours" (Vary 2020b). One might question how both of these statements can possibly be true, especially when weighed against Comic-Con@Home's prerecorded panels, which were still accessible on YouTube as of 2022. And yet DC FanDome received decidedly more favorable write-ups and extensive coverage in the entertainment press (Vary 2020b; Couch 2020; Bacon 2020).

[4.4]   There is no doubt the success of DC FanDome was rooted in Warner Brothers' significant

resources and ability to replicate the kind of content and ephemerality that hewed closer to the exclusivity that Hollywood studios have been cultivating and perfecting at Comic-Con for years (Hanna 2020; Gilbert 2017). Indeed, *Hollywood Reporter* described DC FanDome as "an eight-hour virtual in-house Comic-Con" (Hibberd 2021). But the contrasting responses to the more grassroots efforts of Comic-Con International's pivot to a virtual format that removed many barriers to access and DC FanDome's deliberate moves to limit access, despite the affordances of the virtual convention format, illustrate how discourses about Comic-Con as an exclusive fan event intertwined with industry interests have long blurred the lines between the function, capabilities, and resources of Comic-Con, a nonprofit organization—a highly successful one, but a nonprofit nonetheless—and those of one of the largest media conglomerates in the world, WarnerMedia (now Warner Bros. Discovery).

[4.5]   Keeping these differences in mind, DC Entertainment's decision to skip Comic-Con@Home is even more jarring. DC had benefited from promotional opportunities at Comic-Con for fifty years—as a comics publisher and later as a producer of blockbuster media franchises. This was and is a symbiotic relationship, with DC's presence at the event (along with many other comics and media companies) similarly boosting Comic-Con's profile in popular culture. However, despite the pandemic's significant impact on Comic-Con International's operations, leading to reported losses of at least $8 million, DC, then under the auspices of WarnerMedia, chose this moment to step back from its longstanding relationship with the nonprofit and instead seized the opportunity to stage its own *competing* corporate event (Stone 2022) ([note 4](#)).

5. Conclusion

[5.1]   This brief trajectory provides one possible entry point into thinking about how exclusivity and access can work in concert or toward opposing goals and are deployed differently in different historical contexts, by different actors and organizations, and for different reasons. It also points to how the pandemic might change Comic-Con in the future. Given that Comic-Con's visibility and cultural relevance in the twenty-first century has largely been expressed in relation to its impact on media industry promotion, it seems increasingly possible that its importance in the eyes of the press and media industries may be waning. This is especially true if studios continue to produce their own virtual (and in-person) events in-house, rather than spending their marketing dollars on ever more grandiose displays at the San Diego Comic-Con (Hibberd 2021). However, the convention's contributions and goals "don't start and end with Hollywood's needs" (Woo, Hanna, and Kohnen 2020). For example, the Comic-Con Museum, which had its soft opening on November 26, 2021, during Comic-Con's "Special Edition" in-person event, promises to "connect" visitors "with the magic of Comic-Con year-round" in a "space where everyone is included" (https://www.comic-con.org/museum/about). Indeed, the museum's list of core values begins with "access," promising that "the Museum is a place where everything is made to be accessible. Intentionally placed within reach—physically, intellectually, and financially." However, at the same time as Comic-Con was increasing its investment in the accessibility of its educational mission, it was also moving forward with plans to harness its own exclusivity as a brand, announcing in April 2022 that it had hired a licensing firm, IMG, in order to "allow it to secure consumer attention and deliver consumer value in more ways" (License Global 2022).

[5.2]   What all this means for Comic-Con's future is not yet clear. On the one hand, Comic-Con is poised to deliver on its nonprofit mission by increasing access to educational opportunities, particularly for its local community in San Diego, which has long subsidized and supported the organization's annual event. On the other hand, Comic-Con is actively looking for new ways to profit commercially on the exclusivity of its brand by "identify[ing] partners who can develop products, retail destinations and experiences for the fans not able to partake in the annual Comic-Con convention experience" (License

Global 2022). The tension between exclusivity and access extends beyond the convention's direct involvement with the promotional machinations of other industries as Comic-Con works to carve out its own place in popular culture. Whether the convention's two-year pivot online and its plans for the future mark a waning or solidification of that cultural impact remains to be seen as Comic-Con bumps up against the limits of its own exclusivity.

6. Acknowledgment

7. Notes

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2. As Elizabeth Ellcessor points out, the question of access has a particularly important resonance when it comes to "fandom's intersections with various forms of physical, mental, and emotional disability" and is a topic of ongoing concern, both at in-person conventions and in online fan communities (2018, 210).

3. DC FanDome was one of many online fan events staged by studios or brands that previously had a strong promotional presence at Comic-Con. It is also important to note that some of these competing events also predate the pandemic, most notably Disney's biennial D23 Expo, which was founded in 2009. Thus, Warner Bros.' intervention was part of a much larger shift that was likely expedited during this period.

4. It is worth mentioning that when Comic-Con announced the resumption of its in-person convention format in 2022, the newly minted Warner Bros. Discovery was slated to return with some high-profile panels promoting film, TV, and comics. However, seeking ways to cut costs, the conglomerate decided to scale back its presence in the Exhibit Hall, forgoing its usual extravagant and high-traffic Warner Bros. and DC booths. Whether this signals a continuing trend toward the company's divestment in Comic-Con promotion, which reportedly costs over $25 million a year, remains to be seen (Kit 2022).

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The experience economy during Covid-19: Virtual activations at Comic-Con@Home

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[0.1]   Abstract—I examine how industry and fans reassessed the value of TV promotion in the form of activations—branded pop-up in-person experiences that promise immersion into storyworlds—as they transformed into online events during Comic-Con@Home in 2020 and 2021. I highlight the industry's expansion of first-party data collection from and tracking of fans in virtual activations.

[0.2]   Keywords—Marketing; Platforms; San Diego Comic-Con

1. Introduction

[1.1]   Television and film promotion is a core feature of San Diego Comic-Con. In addition to panels and booths inside the convention center, networks and studios create activations, that is, pop-up branded experiences that take the forms of escape rooms, interactive sets, and themed restaurants. Activations cluster close to the convention center, often not more than a block or two away. Increasingly elaborate in size and scope—Amazon's 2019 Prime Video Experience took up 60,000 square feet—activations draw fan attention by promising an immersion in familiar and new storyworlds. Activations are part of the experience economy and are driven by a belief in experiential marketing, both of which prioritize in-person, affective, memorable experiences as strategies for creating brand loyalty (Batat 2019; Pine and Gilmore 2019). The most ambitious activations blend experiential marketing with immersive theater by asking attendees to become active participants in playing through an improvised scene taking place in the world of *Blade Runner 2049* (SDCC 2017), *The Good Place* (SDCC 2018), or *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (SDCC 2019), to name just a few examples from recent years (Kohnen 2021a). The inclusion of videos recorded specifically for SDCC is a common practice among the most elaborate activations; for example, both the 2018 *The Good Place* and the 2019 *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* activations featured videos by the shows' casts, who recorded in-character greetings and prompts for participants. These videos heighten a sense of immersion and exclusivity. In 2019, Comic-Con attendees could explore thirteen activations of varying degrees of immersion (figure 1). Pre-Covid, about five thousand people visited an activation over the four days of SDCC (Jarvey 2018). Fans accorded activations the same importance as

the core programming at SDCC. In the following essay, I sketch out industry and fans' reassessment of activations at SDCC as the convention transformed into Comic-Con@Home.
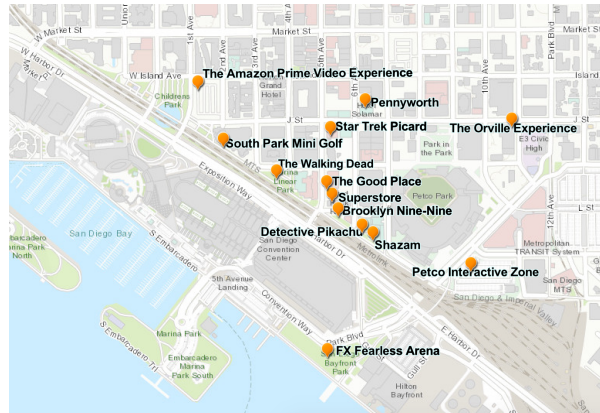

Figure 1. Locations of major activations in 2019 (map created by the author).

2. Industrial changes

[2.1]   Considering activations' emphasis on location-based, in-person experiences, the shift online required a retooling of what activations can be. This retooling held on to the emphasis on space as a key concept of an activation, as online activations took the form of virtual escape rooms, games, and 3D shopping experiences. At the same time, companies temporally distanced their activations from SDCC. Instead of offering activations in conjunction with Comic-Con@Home in July, established SDCC exhibitors like Netflix and DC Comics created in-house stand-alone fan events at other points during the year. Likewise, major retailers like Funko and Hasbro created direct-to-fan events. While the shift to Comic-Con@Home forced brands to reimagine activations as online experiences, the move toward siloed and gated spaces was already in motion pre-Covid.

[2.2]   Activations in downtown San Diego gained increasing popularity as a marketing tool in the 2010s. Pre-2018, most activations were free to access; they did not require monetary payment to enter, and they allowed fans to walk onto and roam the space of the activation (figure 2). From 2018 onward, many of the biggest activations began to fence in their spaces and demanded registration at the entrance: while fans previously paid for access by waiting in line (Hanna 2019), they had to hand over personal information, often encoded into RFID wristbands, for entry (figure 3). As activations grew in size and cost, return on investment beyond social media buzz and trade press coverage became important. Precise information about who attended activations and the possibility of follow-up targeted emails became desirable ROI. Moreover, these shifts went hand in hand with brands' increasing interest in acquiring first-party data from consumers and fans (Kohnen 2021a).

Figure 2. FX Exhibition 2018. Photo by the author.

Figure 3. A view into and map of FX's 2019 activation. Photos by the author.

[2.3]   When SDCC went online in 2020, so did activations. Brands created events on their own platforms but in affiliation and simultaneously with SDCC, similar to how activations were spatially adjacent to the San Diego Convention Center prepandemic. For example, FX presented FX Unlocked and Amazon hosted Amazon Virtual Con (figure 4). FX worked with experiential marketing agency Creative Riff to transform planned in-person activations into virtual experiences (Zelaya 2020). The video game *Guillermo's Stakeout* to promote *What We Do in the Shadows* (FX, 2019–present) was the most elaborate activity featured on FX Unlocked and most clearly retained an emphasis on a spatially immersive experience. The game featured several levels located in and around the mansion familiar from the show, and players assumed the identity of Guillermo as he fought off vampires and werewolves (figure 5). Every day, the top fifty fans on the leaderboard won a deck of playing cards that was released exclusively for Comic-Con, a strategy to incentivize multiple playthroughs of the game.

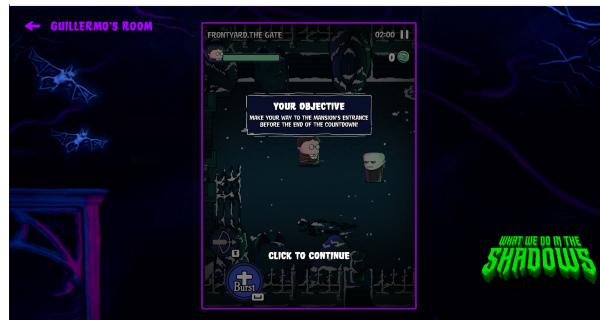Figure 4. The landing page of FX Unlocked. Screenshot by the author.

Figure 5. *Guillermo's stakeout*. Screenshot by the author.

[2.4]   Amazon Virtual Con featured a wide range of content promoting their brands Prime Video, Twitch, Comixology, and IMDB, including prerecorded panels, news, and previews. The Interactive section introduced *Hanna Unlocked,* a virtual escape room created in collaboration with The Escape Game to promote the second season of Amazon original *Hanna* (2019–2021). Participation in *Hanna Unlocked* required signing up with one's full name, email address, and zip code. In the game, participants were recruited as Utrax agents, which included the creation of a personnel badge featuring one's name and photo (figure 6). The game comprised map-based and text-based puzzles along with video clues, some of which featured actors from the show. In addition to *Hanna Unlocked*, Amazon Virtual Con also offered a free T-shirt or tote bag with designs promoting Amazon original *The Boys* (2019–present), which required fans to share their name and address to receive the item.

Figure 6. Utrax personnel badge sign-up form. Screenshot by the author.

[2.5]   As the industry scrambled to transform planned in-person activations into online experiences, they discovered that virtual games and escape rooms offered a direct way to obtain first-party data from fans. Referencing Creative Riff CEO Ryan Coan and FX Marketing SVP Kenya Haraway, *AdWeek* writer Ian Zelaya observes that direct engagement with a larger audience and the possibility to "capture engagement metrics more easily made virtual activations an attractive prospect for brands during a time when in-person events did not take place" (2020). In virtual activations, companies like Amazon and FX were able to capture data in two ways: first, via the built-in requirements like registration for games and swag that asked for personal information, and second, via the tracking mechanisms that are standard for commercial websites.

[2.6]   Two major players were absent from Comicon@Home in 2020: Warner Bros. and DC Comics. Previously, both brands maintained large booths in the exhibit hall and activations outside the convention center. In 2020, both brands jointly hosted DC FanDome, a twenty-four-hour online fan convention consisting of a prerecorded eight-hour programming block that was repeated three times in order to enable fans from around the world to watch it (the program was only available during this twenty-four-hour period) (note 1). Fans were invited to live tweet their reactions. A selection of tweets

was featured alongside the video stream, providing a sense of interactivity and liveness (figure 7). As the name suggests, DC FanDome retained an emphasis on space by creating a virtual dome called the Hall of Heroes in which hosts appeared (figure 8). Hosts repeatedly stressed how the event brought DC's global fan community together. In 2020, DC FanDome took place on a dedicated site created specifically for the event that was free for all fans and that did not require any registration (site visitor tracking via cookies was active, however). In 2021, visitors to DC FanDome were greeted with a landing page demanding that visitors enter their birthday (figure 9), followed by a pop-up encouraging them to sign up for exclusive content that was only accessible to registered users. The shift toward requiring registration in exchange for access to content mirrors shifts that had already happened for in-person activations. DC FanDome thus incorporated elements of in-person activations, like the emphasis on experiential space and the pursuit of fans' personal data, but its disassociation from SDCC in 2020 also hinted at what was to come for activations more broadly in 2021, namely the creation of stand-alone branded fan events.
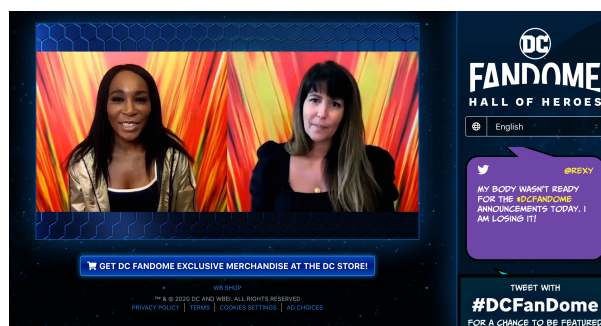

Figure 7. DC FanDome live stream. Screenshot by the author.
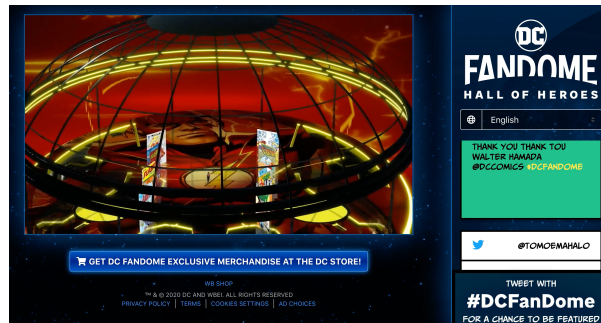

Figure 8. The virtual Hall of Heroes. Screenshot by the author.
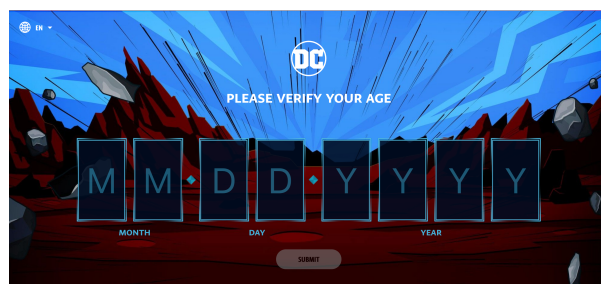

Figure 9. DC FanDome's landing page in 2021. Screenshot by the author.

[2.7]   In 2021, stand-alone online events by previous SDCC stalwarts proliferated. DC FanDome once again took place in October, Netflix's WitcherCon happened in early July, and Netflix's Tudum, a global fan event, launched in September. Major retailers also hosted their own events, including Funko's

FunKon (August), Hasbro Pulse Con (October), and LegoCon (June). FX and Amazon did not create any fan events. Dragon Ball (https://en.dragon-ball-official.com/special/sdcc2021) remained as the lone virtual activation officially affiliated with Comic-Con@Home. Creating an elaborate 3D shopping experience, Dragon Ball's activation retained an emphasis on space but deviated from the promotion-only function of most other activations by foregrounding the sale of action figures and games (figure 10). The shop also included a link to the Dragon Ball SDCC panel, which became the most-viewed panel by the end of the convention, reaching 234,000 views by July 28, 2021 (in comparison, *The Walking Dead* (2010–present), a fan favorite at SDCC, received 93,000 views).

Figure 10. A view of Dragon Ball's 2021 3D store. Screenshot by the author.

3. Fans' reactions to activations

[3.1]   While fans embraced Comic-Con@Home in 2020, they did not pay much attention to virtual activations. Fans' lack of interest suggests that activations that emphasize immersion and interactivity cannot be successfully replicated online, or at least not in the short turnaround time that companies had to reconfigure their planned in-person events into virtual activations. At a time when the sprawling worlds of AAA video games offer enticing verisimilitude and immersion, the simple game mechanics and graphics in *Guillermo's Stakeout* do not measure up. Instead of engaging with the virtual spaces of online activations, fans reminisced about their favorite spots in and near the San Diego Convention Center. For example, in a July 25, 2020, thread, Twitter user Anysia (@aisyna) shared that what they missed the most was not the panels—the core feature of Comic-Con@Home—but "all those weird moments you experience walking around the convention center at any hour." Tweets like this underline that for many fans, the shared communal experience anchored in the convention center is central to SDCC. Panels and activations change from year to year, but the space of the convention center remains a constant. Considering fans' fondness for the building that hosts SDCC, it is perhaps unsurprising that more than any of the virtual activations, a video released by the San Diego Convention Center attracted fans' attention. Stating that "we are the building, but you are Comic-Con," the video featured interior and exterior shots of the convention center during previous cons and elicited emotional reactions from fans, such as "I literally started to tear up," "Excuse me while I cry at work," and "I'm crying over missing a building" (figure 11). Fans' love for the convention center also manifested in their desire for a pin featuring the distinct roof of the convention center with the line "I miss SDCC" beneath it. The pin became one of the fastest-selling exclusives of Comic-Con@Home 2020.

Figure 11. SD Convention Center 2020, https://twitter.com/SDConventionCtr/status/1285632280409628672. July 21, 2020. Screenshot by the author.

[3.2]   The importance of downtown San Diego as the place that grounds fans' memories and experiences of SDCC also comes through in the SDCC Shrine (https://web.archive.org/web/20210720064235/https://sdccshrine.com/), which was put together by local fans on the fly in 2020 and expanded into an organized three-day event in 2021. The SDCC Shrine was a fan-organized in-person "offsite" (the fan term for an activation) that was set up near the Tin Fish restaurant, NBC's usual activation location across from the convention center. While the industry was only able to create virtual activations in 2020 and 2021, fans in San Diego were able to take over a location usually reserved for branded activations and created their own activation capturing memories of Comic-Con. The Shrine featured Comic-Con mementos like T-shirts, posters, personal photos, and the souvenir book (Saunders 2020). In 2021, a group of fans and cosplayers coming together as the SD Causeplayers worked with the San Diego Blood Bank to host a blood drive, a nod to the blood drive that traditionally takes place at Comic-Con (figure 12). Funko donated five hundred vinyl pops as gifts, the Tin Fish handed out french fries, and transit to the shrine was free for people giving blood. Much like with branded activations, SD Causeplayers and other visitors to the Shrine relayed their experience on social media, generating 266 tweets under the hashtag #SDCCShrine (Kohnen 2021). The 266 tweets suggest a close correlation between who visited and who tweeted about the Shrine if Shawn Richter, one of the Shrine's coorganizers, is correct in his assertion that the San Diego Blood Bank received 277 blood donations that weekend (@batcap50, July 26, 2021). This ratio differs sharply from brand activations, where social media posts far outweigh the number of activation participants. Brand activations are designed to generate social media conversations as posts, likes, and impressions are quantifiable measures of success of an activation. At SDDC, press and influencers are often the first to experience activations during an exclusive preview night in order to start buzz on social media. In contrast, the SDCC Shrine was created as a gathering spot for the local fan community without the goal of generating traction on social media. The desire to spend time together near the Convention Center and the adjacent Gaslamp Quarter also manifested in a small number of fans travelling to San Diego with the specific purpose of reliving Comic-Con memories, which once again underlines that SDCC means more to fans than the promotional content presented by the media industry, which was easily accessible via Comic-Con@Home's YouTube channel.

Figure 12. SDCC Shrine 2021. Photo by Shawna Kidman. Used with permission.

4. A return to activations and larger implications

[4.1]   In 2020 and 2021, when SDCC shifted online, brand activations followed suit but increasingly detached themselves from a direct affiliation with Comic-Con and began hosting their own direct-to-fans online events, often to great success in terms of social media buzz and fan engagement. With the return to an in-person Comic-Con in 2022, activations are poised to return to San Diego as well. The resurgence of in-person activations at Comic-Con: Special Edition in November 2021 and at SXSW 2022 suggests that activations persist, and that marketers, like fans, believe that the localized, in-person experience is crucial to activations. Companies like Amazon that did not follow the turn toward online, in-house fan events have resumed their elaborate in-person activations, if their appearance at SXSW is an indication of what one can expect at SDCC 2022.

[4.2]   At the same time as in-person activations experience a resurgence, branded virtual cons may also persist. A look at the gaming industry is instructive in this context. While E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo) took on a similar role to SDCC for many years in bringing together industry professionals and fans in Los Angeles for the latest in game news and development, the convention has canceled the last three years of in-person events (Valentine 2022) and may not return. Direct-to-fans events like Nintendo Direct (beginning in 2011), Playstation State of Play (beginning in 2019), and Xbox Showcase moved to the center of each brand's global marketing efforts, and former E3 host Geoff Keighley launched his own online Summer Games Fest to much positive reception (Shanley 2021). DCFanDome and Tudum were major successes when measured in viewing numbers and social media impressions (D'Alessandro 2021; Yuma 2021). While neither Warner Bros./DC Comics nor Netflix have announced 2022 versions of their online fan cons, their previous successes could indicate a continuation of them.

[4.3]   Whether activations continue to exist as largely in-person events or become integrated into branded online fan conventions, the collection of fan data remains a core goal. Discussing FX Unlocked in 2020, marketer Ryan Coan predicted that a return to in-person activations would see a stronger integration of digital and physical layers, thus combining the ease of online data collection with the appeal of in-person immersive experiences (quoted in Zelaya 2020). CBS's announced hybrid activation at SDCC 2022 exemplifies this strategy: as a promotion of the sitcom *Ghosts* (2021–present), the activation features an in-person component and the online "Metaverse Woodstone Mansion," a 3D virtual space that fans can explore (Bradley 2022). While the virtual space mostly addresses fans who are not able to be at SDCC, one can also imagine fans in line in San Diego exploring the online mansion

as the wait times for SDCC activations can extend to several hours.

[4.4]   The closer connection of online and off-line spaces is also Amazon's goal. According to Ukonwa Ojo, Chief Marketing Officer for Prime Video/Amazon Studios, Amazon's 2022 SXSW activation targeted hardcore fans intent on experiencing the world of select Prime Video shows and influencers who would document the activation for their own fans and followers (quoted in Boorstin 2022). The value of activations is about bridging in-person experience and social media platforms with the ultimate goal of leading people to Prime Video's programming and then to other segments of Amazon's brand. In Ojo's words, "after the credits, you have the opportunity to sample Amazon Music…to shop on Amazon.com…to live stream on Twitch" (quoted in Boorstin 2022). The use of Amazon Prime Video as touchpoint for the entire brand has been a core strategy for Amazon (Petruska 2018). Ojo omits that guiding fans toward the entirety of Amazon's family of brands is only partially the goal. In addition, tracking fans both in the space of the activation and on Amazon's websites is equally important.

[4.5]   As Nicholas Carah and Sven Brodmerkel have argued, activations function as brand atmospheres that depend on location-based, in-person experiences and on digital technologies like smart phones and RFID tags (2020). The collection of first-party data and the translation of human experience into machine-readable data via social media platforms—data that can be analyzed for targeted digital advertising—are crucial components of activations. While scholars and journalists have discussed the practice of extracting user data on behalf of brands as part of the increasing platformization of the web and as central engine of the social media economy, activations demonstrate how physical spaces and events like SDCC function like online platforms and have become a key strategy for brands to initiate or increase fan loyalty.

5. Note

1. For more on DC FanDome, see Erin Hanna's contribution to this Symposium.

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Roller Coaster Dream: A Chinese roller coaster enthusiast community

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[0.1]   Abstract—Roller Coaster Dream, a Chinese roller coaster enthusiast club, is a good example of an emerging fanbase in a rapidly developing theme park market.

1. Introduction

[1.1]   One of the underdeveloped areas of theme park scholarship is the subset group of roller coaster fans. While there are certainly fans who participate in several related fandoms (for instance, Disney theme parks, Universal theme parks, theme parks in general, or dark rides), there are fans who prefer roller coasters to other amusement and theme park elements (placemaking, storytelling, landscaping, other ride types, etc.). Roller coaster enthusiasts have had a robust fandom for decades now, with both communities and practices that could be explored in more depth. An emerging area in the literature is the booming theme park industry in China (Freitag and Liu 2019; Zhang and Shan 2016). The existence of a formalized coaster-based fan community in China, however, is of recent origin.

[1.2]   One Chinese roller coaster enthusiast club, Roller Coaster Dream, is an example of the kind of group that can shed light on how theme park fandoms are likely to form and practice in China. Visitation behavior for theme parks is developing in mainland China. Staged authenticity is an aspect of park presentation with historical reenactment, merchandise consumption, and cute culture features of guest preferences (Cheng, Fang, and Chen, 2016; Ong and Jin 2017; Wei 2018). Roller Coaster Dream and groups like it, however, are focused on thrill rides and thus a different aspect of the amusement industry than the more discussed elaborately staged designs in well-known theme parks; roller coasters, rather than theming and storytelling, are the most common subjects of discussion. Like theme park fandom, coaster enthusiasm represents a material type of fandom where the objects of enjoyment are impossible to truly replicate in digital spaces. It likewise signals middle-class consumption values but is an addition to (or a potential divergence from) the qualities of theme parks theorized as aligned with Chinese cultural values (e.g., perceived harmony with nature, nostalgia, good over evil) (Tuan and Hoelscher 1998). If studying Chinese theme parks assists in comprehending "middle-class landscapes in contemporary China" (Ong 2017, 188), then understanding more about this kind of community would

benefit the fuller picture of a nation with an ever-expanding theme park industry, park visitation culture, and related fandoms.

2. Roller coaster enthusiasm

[2.1]   Since the rise of the amusement park in the mid-nineteenth century, there have been people fascinated by roller coasters. Roller coasters connect with human psychological needs (Lukas 2008) and can signify greater societal attributes. Judith Adams (1991) contends that coasters built in the 1920s "reflect the culture and collective psyche of the period" (17) with aspects like speed, thrill, and conquest. Coordinated fandoms are more recent, with contemporary generations seeing the advent of the roller coaster enthusiast. There are several notable roller coaster fan organizations: the American Coaster Enthusiasts (1978), the Western New York Coaster Club (1982), the Roller Coaster Club of Great Britain (1988), the European Coaster Club (1996, but magazine *First Drop* dating from 1988), the Florida Coaster Club (1998), and others. Affinity groups for roller coasters became solidified after the arrival of the internet. Communities were started online instead of only in person or through print media, though physical meet-up components remained. Conversations online began with Usenet groups like rec.roller-coaster (1991) and grew through sites with discussion forums such as Theme Park Review (1996), Thrillride (1996), Ultimate Rollercoaster (1996), Coasterbuzz (2000), and several successive entries. It continues today with social media including the subreddit r/rollercoasters (2010) or multiple Facebook groups. Information on roller coasters' whereabouts and manufacturers became easier to find with the index site Roller Coaster Database (1996) or the news site Screamscape (1998).

[2.2]   Though enthusiast groups vary in character, there are some common practices. One of the most frequent is coaster counting, a form of collecting wherein the enthusiast tracks and compiles the coasters they ride; for instance, I am around the 600 mark. Fans may count the number of circuits they take on a particular ride while others do not. Some focus on getting the best quality rides (or "credits"), while others focus on getting a high quantity of rides and will ride any coaster (with these enthusiasts pejoratively or jokingly titled "credit whores"). Enthusiasts often have bucket lists and holy grail coasters that may be rare or hard to achieve. Attending park- or club-sponsored enthusiast events is an activity for some community members, and most will go on personal trips that consist of going to theme or amusement parks with roller coasters. Coaster enthusiasts span the globe and come from varying backgrounds in terms of age, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, though anecdotally Western communities trend cisgender male and Caucasian. Enthusiasts are also diverse in terms of their objects of fandom. One group prefers wooden versus steel roller coasters, for example, and others are fans of specific parks (Cedar Point is a popular one) or particular ride manufacturers such as Bolliger & Mabillard, Intamin Amusement Rides, or Rocky Mountain Construction. Within these categories, preferences can vary, with some preferring certain ride elements to others, for instance more or less "air time" or weightlessness/negative G-force, intensity of positive G-force, or specific types of inversions/"upside down" elements.

[2.3]   For those who choose to engage online, discussion areas are used to post advice, ask questions, share trip reports (where one reports on a park visit and reviews rides), engage in critique, and rank roller coasters. Fan creation activities are popular in these communities, with frequent examples being designs for new coasters or park maps (or "armchair engineering"), the making of attractions in simulation video games (e.g., the *Roller Coaster Tycoon* series, *No Limits*, or *Planet Coaster*,) and the posting of photos and videos (such as on-ride videos, off-ride videos, history, critique, rankings, news, ride construction and testing progress, humor, and tributes). Like most fandoms, coaster enthusiasts have a common vernacular. This features acronyms for park/ride names and ride elements or terms like "GP" (general public, a term occasionally used derisively to indicate the regular/majority of guests at a park),

"bad ops" (when a park is operating a ride inefficiently), or "staple" (indicating coaster lap bars pushed down to the point of discomfort). Also like other fandoms, there are hierarchies, celebrity fans, and both encouraging and toxic behaviors.

3. Roller Coaster Dream/过山车之梦

[3.1]   Since the 1990s and on, China has been emerging as one of the largest sites of the amusement and theme park industry in the world. They possess more than one hundred major parks, have dozens more in the pipeline, and are expected to be the largest market for visitation in the future (Li 2018; Rubin 2019). This theme park boom has helped to spur roller coaster enthusiasm in China. One of the noteworthy Chinese enthusiast clubs is Roller Coaster Dream, known on Weibo as 过山车之梦_RCD, on Twitter as @RCDclub, on Facebook as @rcdchina, and on YouTube as Roller Coaster Dream. Founded in 2011 by Candice Fu, Roller Coaster Dream (henceforth RCD) states that they are the oldest and largest coaster enthusiast club in China. Their former tagline was, "We take you to the virtual and real coaster and park experience in China." Their current description, "This channel is featuring high quality roller coaster/major rides/POVs—mostly in China and amusement industry related videos," reflects a widening scope. Also of interest is the fact the group was founded by a female, something less common in the West (as indicated on the "about us" pages of the organizations listed in this article), but fandom has been shown to be appealing to Chinese women (Fung 2009b; Tian 2015; Wu 2019; Zhang 2021).

[3.2]   To learn more about this enthusiast group, I interviewed Candice Fu (via email, with permission). I learned about some similarities to Western communities. One aspect was the nature of the club itself. They kicked off with a meetup at the Joyland theme park in 2011, but as the group expanded, virtual meetings were added to "enable members to make friends with each other." The group produces many ride videos, includes interviews with manufacturers and other specialty pieces, and posts "roller coaster super talk," frequent discussions on coaster news and trivia. Some of the activities of the members are comparable as well. Candice explains these: "They like visiting parks all around the country for more ride credits. Also, they like visiting parks with enthusiasts who can ride a coaster for many times, but the rest of the time they just chat on the web." Generally, RCD seems to "borrow existing expressions" of Western coaster enthusiasts rather than create their own at this stage (Wang 2020, 1). The group shows pride in its knowledge of coasters and its discerning taste. A Weibo post from July 2019 (https://weibo.com/1977215914/HBr8Mwcs4?refer_flag=1001030103) mentions a ride (Celestial Gauntlet) that "captured the heart of the group" who are picky about rides; as the message quips, "Delicacies must be tasted by people who know how to eat, and the roller coaster is of course no exception."

[3.3]   While there are some similarities between Western groups and RCD, there are also some distinctions. In the West, the advent of the internet brought roller coaster fans together and spawned a more public and coordinated enthusiasm. By the time Chinese coaster fandom arose in earnest due to the industry's expansion, the internet and social platforms were already ubiquitous. Remarking that industry expansion gave visitors more choices, Candice also believes that public transit got more convenient and "shortens the distance between homes and parks." These together are "why the number of enthusiasts increased." When my husband and I lived in China, we also took public transit (primarily trains) to parks in several provinces, something we have also done in Europe, whereas US-based enthusiasts are more likely to travel by automobile or plane. RCD began because Candice wanted to "introduce the roller coaster culture to Chinese roller coaster enthusiasts," so the beginning of the group was purposeful rather than organic, though it has adopted its own practices now. For instance, forum discussion is common, but videos are posted on the video websites rather than in the forums, and unlike in other

communities, Candice finds that trip reports are not common. Neither are more negative behaviors such as flame wars, banning for different opinions, or fan leaders attempting to control opinions. Though Wang (2021) explains that politeness and face-saving have been a part of Chinese fandoms, negative behaviors have been witnessed in fan communities (Wu 2021). Nonetheless, fan leaders using the common dialogue of Western fandom will still inevitably shape perspectives and ways to practice in the fandom. Also noticeably rare are lifestyle influencers that fans watch going through their day at a park and riding or ranking rides, something that has become common in the West. The lack of this thus far is interesting considering previous literature has found that there is a celebrity fan culture in China (Lai 2021; Lee and Yoo 2015). At ten years old, this fandom is still in its infancy, so it is possible these things will materialize over time or that completely new practices will emerge.

[3.4]   Nevertheless, many facets of coaster fandom are observed in RCD. A look at some of the posts reveals discussions common to most of these communities, such as excitement about new rides and different kinds of experiences. For example, an average guest would be worried or frightened if a ride experienced a "rollback" or a "relaunch," but an enthusiast knows that it is a safe but sporadic occurrence. A post on RCD explains this (figure 1) with a use of emojis along with the video showing what happened. Also common is critique, in one case of a coaster in the middle of a new paint job (figure 2), though in this instance it is rather light ribbing as opposed to ridicule and is prefaced with a positive statement.
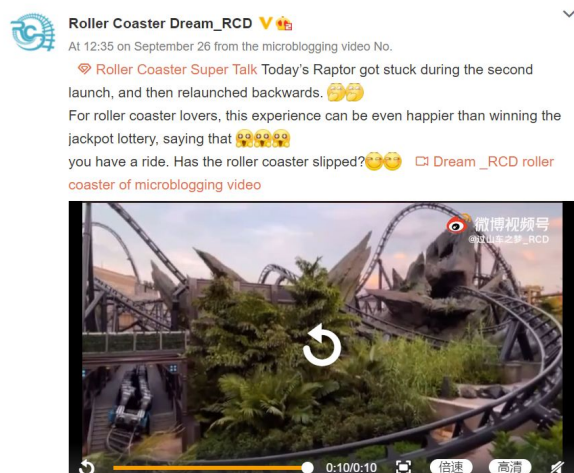

Figure 1. Screenshot of an RCD Weibo post about a roller coaster not making it through the course, requiring it to relaunch (translated from Chinese on Google Translate). Link to the video discussed: https://video.weibo.com/show?fid=1034:4685655457071114.

Figure 2. Screenshot of an RCD Weibo post about a roller coaster appearing less-than-stellar during a paint update (translated from Chinese on Google Translate).

[3.5]   The platforms that Chinese enthusiasts engage with may be a bit different. Candice finds the

most regular platforms to be Bilibili and TikTok, with YouTube also popular for those who have access to it (from experience, one needs a VPN to use that Google-owned platform as it is included in the Great Firewall). Candice speculates that roller coaster enthusiasm has been the most formalized park-based fandom in China thus far. There are also WeChat and QQ groups with visitors who go to popular theme parks (such as Shanghai Disneyland) rather than focus on thrills, and there are fans of local park companies like Fantawild or Happy Valley, but these have not necessarily formed as distinguishable groups yet. It was particularly interesting to see the focus on roller coasters in RCD as the Chinese market itself is generally concentrated on themes and storytelling over amusements (whether Western properties such as Disney and Universal or Chinese brands like Fantawild, Songcheng, and Sunac) (Baker 2021; Li 2018). In general, though roller coasters may be present, there tends to be a focus on theme, decor, and story-based shows or dark rides, especially those tied to history and legends. Another fascinating trait of RCD is its presence with enthusiasts in the West. Their content is available on Western platforms, they engage with Western enthusiasts through sharing and reposting, their content addresses rides in the West in addition to China, and they have followers from other countries. This has increased interest in Chinese rides and parks for the Western audience and influences opinions in those communities.

4. Further inquiries into Chinese theme park fandoms

[4.1]   Shuyu Kong (2012) explained nearly a decade ago that Chinese fandom online emerged as a kind of "creative energy and interpretive practice among the younger generation of Chinese in the digital age" and as a "new kind of social bonding and communication through cultural consumption" (4). Citing Henry Jenkins's notion of participatory culture, Kong argued that these fan spaces would become valuable ethnographic sites, providing a window to understanding aspects of contemporary China. In the case of theme parks, they are part of a rise in consumerism, though it is a more intangible leisure consumption (Fung 2009a). Roller coasters, however, have essential materiality; while videos and photos of roller coasters are popular on these sites, the fan-object relationship cannot be digitized in the same way as in other fandoms (Yin 2020) due to the loss of multisensory and physiological components of riding. It has been questioned whether fandoms, for instance that of Japanese anime, can impact the values of the fans in other contexts (Fung, Pun, and Mori 2019). This would be an interesting question to ask with coaster fandom, which emphasizes collecting, fun, thrill, and leisure time. These are slightly different than theme park aspects that have been associated with Chinese values, such as feng shui (Groves 2011), romanticized historical reenactments (Ludwig and Wang 2020), or the trifecta of "culture, nature, and heritage" (Erb and Ong 2017). If some fan activities and creations are stigmatized as a waste of time (Lai 2021), how are the less tangible practices such as collecting ride experiences perceived?

[4.2]   Further inquiries should be made into what the Western context-based practices of this fandom are, how these will translate or be altered in a Chinese context, and whether their interactions with Western enthusiasts will be reciprocally influenced. Will coaster fan communities continue to be rather separate from, say, Disney park fandom in China? As China becomes the biggest visitation market, what will the ramifications be for Chinese roller coaster enthusiasts? It is Candice's prediction that "as the number of enthusiasts increases rapidly, you may find more and more sites and clubs from China in a few years." As Chinese theme parks develop their own design ethos (Baker 2019), it follows that theme park-based fandoms will also acquire a clear regional identity.

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Working with fannish intermediaries

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[0.1]   Abstract—Fannish intermediaries occupy a unique position between individual fans and industry stakeholders, since they have affective ties to the fan object as well as commercial interests in the ways that individual fans interact with that fan object and related content. These differences raise new questions regarding the ethics of fan studies work conducted in collaboration with such fannish intermediaries, as demonstrated by the reach and results of the 2021 Anime Con Survey.

[0.2]   Keywords—Data collection; Digital research; Ethics; Outreach

1. Introduction

[1.1]   In February 2021, we launched "A Survey of Anime Convention Attendance in Response to Covid-19," a data collection project that we hoped would capture a snapshot of how people were thinking about anime cons during a time when most of these fan-oriented events were either going virtual or else had been canceled altogether because of the Covid-19 pandemic (Alberto and Tringali 2021).

[1.2]   Though we initially anticipated a response count in the double digits, we ultimately ended up with 1,191 valid responses. This was a tremendous turnout for a fandom survey, and these results are largely thanks to interested parties publicizing our efforts in specific ways. With this brief essay, we intend to offer our reflections on this experience of collaborating with a particular subset of fandom whom we are calling fannish intermediaries. We use this term to describe people who are simultaneously fans but also hold highly visible organizational, community, or even quasi-industry roles that are fannish in nature without necessarily being fan identities first and foremost.

[1.3]   When we launched the Anime Con Survey, our limited social media reach meant that we had little success in reaching out to fan communities directly. However, stakeholders such as con organizers

were also interested, and when they circulated the survey on our behalf, far more people responded. To us, this is worth noting because despite their highly visible fandom presence, these informal collaborators were neither quite big name fans (BNFs) nor entirely industry professionals at the level of the studios and corporations that produce anime and related products. Instead, their role in organizing community events and resources meant that while these people were fellow fans of anime as a shared "fan object" (Williams 2015, 2), they also had a certain amount of credibility and visibility that their participation then lent to the Anime Con Survey.

[1.4]   This experience stood out to us because fannish intermediaries have both fan interests and market-oriented ones in the shared fan object. This positionality places them somewhere between two important lines of thought about working with fans: the first concerning researchers who work directly with fans, and the second regarding corporations who seek to capitalize on fan labor.

[1.5]   The first approach often articulates its points in terms of either the ethics of such work (see Busse 2018; Deller 2018; Dym and Fiesler 2020; Kelley 2016; and Zubernis and Davis 2016; among others) or the researcher's own embeddedness in a fan community, often as an acafan (see Cristofari and Guitton 2017; Garner 2021; Lee 2021; Raw 2020; and Roach 2014; among others). Meanwhile, the second approach is exemplified by concerns such as those posed by Abigail De Kosnik (2009) regarding fan fiction and official publication venues, Suzanne Scott (2009) on ancillary content, and Mel Stanfill (2019) on corporations' treatment of fandom as a biopolitical entity deemed useful when companies incite "participation and production of value (emotional and monetary), but only in particular, circumscribed ways" (10–11). Broadly speaking, we might summarize these two approaches thus: the first is concerned about how fans can be exploited or misrepresented by researchers, while the second is apprehensive about how corporations have tremendous capacity to exploit fans and benefit from uncompensated fan labor.

[1.6]   Fannish intermediaries, though, are not quite one or the other, even though their interactions with fans may evidence some similarities to those of both researchers and corporations. For instance, fannish intermediaries often do have interests in data-driven research about fans, because such insights can help them improve their own organizational strategies; however, they are not completing this research for scholastic or theoretical ends, and they tend to be highly visible to the fan communities they are embedded within. Likewise, fannish intermediaries almost always have commercial interests at stake in their interactions with individual fans, since this group is the target audience for products and services that are too specialized for most general viewership. At the same time, though, fannish intermediaries' solicitations of fan labor tend to take place on a smaller scale and depend on fans' clear knowledge and buy-in, since this labor is then drawn upon to improve the intermediary's offerings in ways that suit fans' own interests.

[1.7]   Because of these differences, we maintain that somewhat different questions of ethics and reciprocity come into play when collaborating with fannish intermediaries like we did during the Anime Con Survey.

2. A brief look at the Anime Con Survey and our approach

[2.1]   For context, the Anime Con Survey was an institutional review board (IRB)–exempted survey built using Qualtrics and circulated online from March 27 to September 1, 2021. It included thirty-four questions that collected limited demographic information, asked participants to select the pregenerated response(s) that best matched their experiences, or were fully open-ended so that participants could share whatever they wished. During the time that the survey was open, we collected 1,191 valid

responses. Our full questionnaire and the qualitative data it collected are both freely available through The University of Utah's data repository the Hive (https://hive.utah.edu/concern/datasets/qj72p722r). We chose this route for hosting because the Hive was able to issue us a DOI, ensuring greater digital sustainability.

[2.2]   As mentioned earlier, we planned this survey in the hopes of capturing a more objective snapshot of a phenomenon that we were seeing affect our own networks and friend groups in 2020 and 2021: the cancellation of anime conventions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Between our anecdotal knowledge on the one hand, and the ongoing news coverage of con cancellations on the other (note 1), we quickly realized that truly effective data collection would need to happen in the moment as much as possible, while people's impressions and experiences were fresh in their minds.

[2.3]   This all sounded well and good, but we quickly found it was easier said than done. Recruiting qualified participants can be a challenge for any research survey, but in our case, we also found ourselves racing against the clock to reach fellow anime fans and con-goers during the months in which cons were being canceled.

[2.4]   When we first launched the Anime Con Survey, we took to promoting it on social media using our own personal accounts, particularly Twitter and Tumblr. However, our own fairly limited visibility translated to a similarly low success rate, despite continued promotions and judicious use of relevant tags and hashtags. In fact, from March through April 2021, only eight respondents—including the two of us!—completed the survey.

[2.5]   Our next step, begun in May 2021, was to advertise more widely in other online spaces, such as anime subreddits and forums. This was a modest success, netting us forty-nine additional responses. Later that month, we also began contacting sites that served as public-facing providers of content about anime and other popular culture texts. We used contact forms and listed email addresses to reach out with a pitch on our survey and an offer to write copy about our work. Our thought process here ran along two related lines: for one thing, these fannish intermediaries could reach larger swathes of fans more quickly; and for another, fans might be more inclined to take our survey seriously if the request was coming from such sources because they would already recognize these intermediaries' names.

[2.6]   This is where we got our biggest break in the form of Project Anime, a business-to-business or B2B conference organized by the Society for the Promotion of Japanese Animation. After an enthusiastic response to our inquiry, Project Anime circulated the survey to over a dozen other con organizers, retweeted our content regularly, and published three pieces of our copy on its own website.

[2.7]   Thanks to Project Anime's involvement, our results transformed overnight. Besides gaining hundreds of new respondents, we also finally began seeing the participation of anime fans beyond our own smaller social networks. While some degree of snowball sampling and its effects were inevitable here, this new reach would still help us gain a far more comprehensive picture of how anime con cancellations were affecting their usual attendees.

3. Initial thoughts

[3.1]   All things considered, much of our tremendous success with the Anime Con Survey is directly related to the efforts that fannish intermediaries such as Project Anime put into sharing our work. However, this did raise certain questions on our side: What did we owe our unexpected and much appreciated informal collaborators?

[3.2]   In some ways, we think, we were encountering a situation similar to Katja Lee's (2021) quandary following a study of adult Lego fans. For Lee, the desire to avoid "the researcher merely taking information out without giving anything to the community in return" (Cristofari and Guitton 2017, 727) led her to wonder, "Can sharing the research be a way to give back? And if so, how might that be done?" (Lee 2021, ¶ 1.1). As her study wrapped up, Lee decided to prepare "both academic and fannish gifts" (¶ 4.1) for her participants in order to reciprocate the time, knowledge, and community access that they had contributed to her work. Because of "a distinct absence of examples or methodologies for this in the scholarly literature save vague allusions to sharing research" (¶ 4.1), though, Lee instead turned to the kinds of expertise and interests that she had observed among her participants, referencing these to create artifacts that she hoped would be "appropriate, useful, and feasible" for this specific community (¶ 4.1).

[3.3]   Though we only encountered Lee's work after the Anime Con Survey had concluded, and our respective studies differ in various procedural ways, we are still struck by the similar focus on sharing results as well as the comparable thought process behind this drive to share. Here, though, is another area where our work diverges from Lee's. For one thing, Lee's study entailed research conducted directly among a fan community and its normal activities, and her reciprocal gifts addressed community members' interests and community moderators' needs. For us, though, our work was conducted from beyond a fan community's normal spaces (cons, forums, etc.) and primarily asked them to participate in the irregular activity of sharing certain information. In addition, we were also interacting with two levels of participants: the fans who actually took the survey and the fannish intermediaries who often pushed it out to them, leveraging their greater credibility and visibility. So although we took a route similar to Lee in trying to think of what might be "appropriate, useful, and feasible" (2021, ¶ 4.1) to offer our various participants, we also faced the challenge of determining what such reciprocity could be, given that anime fans' and fannish intermediaries' stakes in both our research and our shared fan object are often so noticeably different. Also by contrast, Lee's question regarded only the moderators and participants of the same fan community, which is a significantly lesser difference of visibility and even power.

[3.4]   Cognizant of the central role that fannish intermediaries have played in the success of the Anime Con Survey, we consider it essential to attempt some balance among the academic origins/methods, the industry distribution/channels, and the personal/fan interests that have driven this work.

[3.5]   Most notably, when we began reaching out to fannish intermediaries like Project Anime in late May 2021, we also adjusted our data management plan (DMP) and redoubled planning for ways to share our data in open access venues. In these ways, we reasoned, our methodology would be fully transparent and our results would be available for anyone interested in the insights they could reveal. This data could be put to purely commercial ends, such as noting which fans are most interested in their local cons reopening, but it is also available for understanding people's concerns about these events reopening and for planning safety measures during the ongoing pandemic. We are also continuing to look into industry-specific promulgation methods such as white papers, given their faster time to publication and their differing impact for event organizers, planning committees, and distributors.

[3.6]   As we continue this line of our work, though, we also return to stressing how the gifting impulse that often accompanies fan studies work may entail quite different outcomes for fannish intermediaries—a quasi-industry role—than it would for individual fans, and certainly for corporations. Still, we hope that our experience with and reflections on the Anime Con Survey can offer a preliminary basis for engaging with these kinds of questions.

4. Acknowledgment

[4.1] We would like to thank Meg Amo Tsuruda, whom we collaborated with at Project Anime to promote this survey. Without her, this magical girl transformation would not have happened.

5. Note

1. We were ecstatic to learn later that Benjamin Woo and a team at the Research on Comics, Con Events, and Transmedia Lab (RoCCET Lab) were also working to collect and analyze this information. We look forward to potentially comparing their findings from the industry and media side with ours from the fan side at a future point.

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Creative versus technical work in virtual series

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[0.1]   Abstract—When a group of fan volunteers created StillFlying.net, a site that hosted Virtual Firefly (VFF), a continuation of the Fox 2002–3 series *Firefly*, they organized their labor in a way that mirrored actual television production crews, dividing contributors into those with above-the-line creative titles like head writer and those with below-the-line technical titles like art director. By mapping industry hierarchies onto themselves, the VFF community reproduced problematic distinctions between creative and technical work, isolating the site's technical/infrastructural contributors from collaborative support.

1. Introduction

[1.1]   In January 2006, a team of more than twenty contributors launched Virtual Firefly (VFF), a fan enterprise that promised to give its readers a taste of what might have been had the cult series *Firefly* (Fox, 2002–3) completed its first season and gone on to a second. Between 2006 and 2009, VFF contributors published twenty-nine episodes in script form on StillFlying.net, the now-defunct site created to host VFF. StillFlying also featured DVD packaging designs for the virtual series, various behind-the-scenes materials, and an active forum where VFF fans and contributors discussed everything VFF. In their mission statement, contributors characterized the project as a "virtual continuation" of the series that aimed to provide readers with as close an approximation as possible of the actual series. On their staff page, contributors even likened themselves to a "crew," a term that playfully referenced the fictional spaceship crew at the heart of the series—but that also mapped industrial hierarchies of work onto VFF contributors.

[1.2]   Framing themselves as a television production crew, the VFF team took on industry titles that approximated what their contributions to a commercial series might have been, a hierarchization of fan labor that Nannicelli (2013) argues is typical of virtual series. For example, VFF's lead writer took on the titles of executive producer and head writer, while other VFF writers were credited as producers, writers, or staff writers. However, the VFF crew also included contributors whose work lacked clear parallels in the television industry. These infrastructural workers received below-the-line industry titles that only obliquely reflected their actual contributions to VFF. For example, the site's designer and

primary administrator, Sean Young, was credited as the art and technical director, clearly highlighting his contributions to the series as technical rather than creative. Whenever the work that went into VFF exposed the distance between the project's needs and those of a commercial television production, that work was framed as below-the-line labor in an effort to maintain the illusion that the virtual series was a commercial television product.

[1.3]　　VFF serves as a case study to consider what it means to be a below-the-line worker within a collaborative fan enterprise. Analysis of the StillFlying forums, which VFF contributors used to discuss site business, reveals how VFF contributors conceived of their project in relation to both *Firefly* and the broader range of fan fiction. How did VFF writers frame their own creative work in relation to the technical work undertaken by the site's infrastructural contributors? How did VFF contributors and fans characterize infrastructural contributions to the site, and how did they treat infrastructural workers differently than VFF writers? Creative problems, including writer's block and episode delays, were regularly framed on the StillFlying forums as inevitable and collaborative, with writers turning to each other and to readers for help. By contrast, VFF contributors and users alike framed infrastructural problems as urgent and unacceptable—the responsibility of particular below-the-line members of the site's volunteer staff. In other words, industrial discourses of work among VFF contributors reproduced problematic distinctions between creative work and technical work, isolating the site's infrastructural contributors from collaborative support.

2. Below-the-line fan studies

[2.1]　　Fan work is labor in the sense that it generates value (Turk 2014; Stanfill and Condis 2014). For some fan scholars, the stakes of research into fan labor have been tied to the question of whether fans are exploited by commercial media industries that profit from the value their work generates (Baym and Burnett 2009; Chin 2014; Stanfill and Condis 2014). Not all freely given labor is exploited, however (Terranova 2000), and not all forms of exploitation are equally exploitative. There are degrees of exploitation, just as there degrees of suffering and systemic unjust advantage that result from exploitation (Hesmondhalgh 2016). As Chin (2014) argues, scholars should be cautious about identifying exploitation at work in fan communities simply because fans work for free. Fans often seek out other forms of compensation: making friends, learning new skills, getting recognition, or simply passing time pleasurably (Baym and Burnett 2009; Ito 2012; Baruch 2020).

[2.2]　　Rather than focus on the exploitation of fans by commercial media industries, I want to make a case for locating the stakes of fan labor in the discursive construction of work among fan communities. Which forms of fan work are constructed by fans as more or less valuable? VFF is just one case study, but it is a useful example of a fan community that mapped industrial worker hierarchies onto itself. Fan communities are often distinguished from commercial media industries by their respective economies: while labor in a commercial media industry is commodified and exchanged for pay, labor in fan communities often contributes to a gift economy in which goods and services are circulated freely (Hellekson 2009; Scott 2009). Although VFF contributors participated in a gift economy in that nobody was paid and everybody contributed freely to the site, they nevertheless hierarchized their work in ways that purposefully mirrored the hierarchization of work in professional work communities.

[2.3]　　Rendered below-the-line workers discursively within their fan community, the infrastructural contributors to VFF are below-the-line laborers in a different sense than the one typically used by media scholars. As Mayer (2011) writes, professional status and creative worker status in media industries are used to distinguish between workers of more or less value, regardless of their actual contributions to their industries. Below-the-line workers in commercial media industries are not only perceived as less

creative than their above-the-line counterparts; they're also paid less, work in more precarious conditions, and are frequently treated as external to the very industries that rely on them (Mayer 2011). All fan laborers are thus below-the-line workers in the commercial media industries in that their work contributes to media industries while being positioned as external to them. VFF's infrastructural contributors are below-the-line workers in an additional sense, however, in that they were discursively positioned as less creative and more marginal within the VFF community itself.

[2.4]   Even in a gift economy, laborers form hierarchies (Chin 2018), in part because discourses of work render some contributions more or less valuable. Infrastructural work on fan sites, for example, often goes unnoticed and unacknowledged—at least until something goes wrong (Hadas 2009; Turk 2014). Characterizing such work as "invisible," Turk (2014, ¶2.1) calls on scholars to pay more attention to infrastructural fan workers: "We can better appreciate the scope of fandom's gift economy if we recognize that fannish gifts include not only art objects but the wide range of creative labors that surround and in some cases underlie these art objects" (¶1.2). As I examine in this study of exchanges between VFF contributors online, VFF embraced industrial discourses of creative work in ways that distinguished between the expectations and perceived value assigned to different forms of work on the project. Below-the-line contributors were recipients of significantly more pressure and less acknowledgment than their creative counterparts.

[2.5]   Although virtual series have not often been the subject of fan scholarship, Nannicelli (2013) examines VFF within the context of screenwriting studies to argue that screenplays should be recognized as a form of literature because virtual series are read as such. Nannicelli also offers a useful definition for a virtual series: "a web-based, fan-authored television series that 'airs' in the form of uploaded texts that usually either present an entirely original narrative (original virtual series), continue the story-line of an actual television series that has ended (virtual continuations), or use certain elements of an actual series as jumping-off points to tell an original story (virtual-spin-offs)" (138). Nannicelli makes a compelling case that screenplays can be read as literature, but his emphasis on scripts as the primary texts of VFF neglects the invisible text—the StillFlying site—that made distributing the virtual series possible. As Nannicelli acknowledges, his argument considers the value of VFF for screenwriting studies "and not its relevance to theorizing fan fiction more broadly" (140). My analysis here of VFF helps fill that gap by examining a virtual series in the context of scholarship on fan labor.

3. It's not fan fiction; it's virtual TV

[3.1]   In October 2005, shortly after the release of the *Firefly* spin-off film, *Serenity* (2005), a user on the site FireflyFans.net created a forum post expressing interest in writing a "virtual season 2" for the series (Ananti 2005a). Within a month, the thread was adopted as an intensive collaborative enterprise: Virtual Firefly, or VFF. Commenters offered suggestions for what VFF would include and, more insistently, how the virtual series should be constrained. For example, multiple commenters suggested that the season should be written in script format, "like a real season" (TheAccolade 2005), and that its narrative should mirror that of the film *Serenity,* since the show's creator, Joss Whedon, had claimed that the film told the story of what would have been *Firefly*'s second season. Commenters also insisted that the project needed its own website, a space that would allow them to post scripts but also virtual packaging designs, special features, and behind-the-scenes materials. A dedicated site would also allow VFF contributors to demarcate official contributions to the project from the broader range of *Firefly* fan art on sites like FireflyFans.net. VFF contributors sought to distinguish not only their content but also their community as one with a particular structure and set of goals: the precise recreation of the second season of *Firefly* as it might have been.

[3.2]   In their efforts to recreate that second season, VFF participants formed a fandom that affirmed canon, what obsession_inc (2009) calls affirmational fandom, in opposition to the more transformational *Firefly* fandoms they perceived around them. Other virtual seasons of *Firefly* were in the works at the same time, but VFF participants distinguished their project by noting that it would complete the unfinished first season *as Whedon intended* (gwek 2005). Whedon's intentions and distinctive authorial voice were of paramount importance to VFF contributors, who frequently referred to the *Firefly* showrunner as "Joss" or "the BDH" (Big Damn Hero). VFF readers active on the StillFlying forums also valued the virtual series for its fidelity to the original series, contrasting the script format of VFF episodes favorably to the prose format used for most fan fiction: one reader wrote of VFF, "I can actually imagine my actors saying things on here" (Kelai 2006a). There was even a running joke among StillFlying users that the head writer for VFF had been able to recreate the distinctive voice of the original series because he had Whedon locked in his cupboard. Implicit in these comments was the suggestion that VFF did more than further the story of *Firefly;* it seemed to recreate the experience of watching the original series as it was released, with the industrial trappings of the original series' distribution playing an important role in that experience.

[3.3]   VFF contributors sought to recreate *Firefly* not only by mimicking the aesthetic qualities of the original series but also by structuring themselves into a community of workers and consumers that resembled a network television production. During the initial forum discussion on FireflyFans.net, a commenter offered his services as head writer. Eventually, the project would take on multiple producers, several staff writers, and apparent below-the-line workers, including a casting director and an art and technical director. These roles hierarchized VFF contributors while also siloing their contributions. Anyone could contribute to the body of *Firefly* fan fiction hosted on sites like FireflyFans.net, but defined positions and hierarchies of work among VFF contributors structured the fan fiction community in such a way that only some were able to contribute, and only in proscribed ways.

[3.4]   In its efforts to mimic a commercial television production, VFF complicates scholarly models of fan labor that are based on transformational rather than affirmational fan work. Examining more egalitarian fan communities, Turk argues that gift economies among fans are "fundamentally asymmetrical" (2014, ¶3.4) because the people who receive the gifts outnumber those who provide them. Turk argues, however, that this asymmetry is "not a failure of the gift economy but an integral part of it" (¶3.5) because the continual circulation of gifts throughout fan communities benefits everyone by facilitating endless future contributions. Although Turk's arguments make sense for fan communities where barriers to participation are low, the same asymmetries have different meanings in fan enterprises like VFF. Writers who wished to join the VFF staff first had to audition, and the strict mission statement of the series foreclosed diverse takes on the *Firefly* universe. While administrators and moderators for sites like Archive of Our Own (AO3) and Wikipedia may be able to position themselves as public servants for their readers, infrastructural workers for sites like VFF participate in hierarches seeking to create a product first and a community of creators second.

[3.5]   In December 2005, with a head writer and several staff members on board, the only thing keeping VFF from its launch was the lack of a website. The original poster from the FireflyFans.net thread had followed up with only one comment back in October, offering "to see about getting a domain/website set up" before asking, "Anybody here good with web designing?" (Ananti 2005b). Similarly, the head writer for the project acknowledged that he was "not particular [*sic*] tech savvy" and solicited "tech folks" on FireflyFans.net to ask if someone could "set up a forum or something for us" (gwek 2005). From the project's beginnings, VFF contributors distinguished between their creative expertise and the work that would need to be done by "tech folks" to create the site that would host the series. By year's end, *Firefly* fan Sean Young had signed on to create and run the StillFlying site, with the site launching in January 2006. Young's work, however, was not over.

4. "Help!"

[4.1]   The hypervisibility of Young's work maintaining the StillFlying site often put him in a position of public pressure. Of the forty-four threads on the StillFlying "site business" forum, seventeen raised concerns about technical problems, with most addressed to Citizen, Young's StillFlying handle. Young was expected to deal with these problems quickly and on his own. Forum users often affectively expressed their frustration with all-caps letters and exclamation marks. For example, the StillFlying site was plagued by spam accounts. One post addressing the issue was entitled "Bot Hunt Please!!!!!" (gorramshiny 2007), while another was entitled "We Need to Fix the Spam Problem. NOW" (Kelai 2006b). Multiple posters hailing Young for technical work ended their posts with "Help!" (gwek 2006; JennS 2006). These technical issues were framed as urgent not because they made StillFlying.net unusable—as one user noted, "I'm ok just ignoring the f*cking spammers" (pizmobeach 2006b)—but rather because they threatened the status of the site as a legitimate fan enterprise.

[4.2]   As Chin notes, "Fans are constantly, perhaps even unconsciously, vying for status within their fandoms" (2014, 15). VFF contributors were insistent about their distinction from ordinary fan fiction and their desire to create an immersive virtual series. Although spammers on the StillFlying forums arguably had little effect on VFF, they uncomfortably exposed the amateur status of the site's creators by drawing attention away from VFF's primary content—its scripts—and toward those aspects of the site that were meant to be invisible. By contrast, "creative" problems tied to the writing of the series were typically treated with patience by contributors and users alike as inevitable by-products of a volunteer enterprise. For instance, the release of VFF episodes was often delayed. It would take nearly three years after the launch of StillFlying.net for the site's contributors to finish writing the second season of VFF. When VFF readers asked about the expected release dates for new episodes, contributors would often remind readers that VFF was being written for free by contributors with day jobs.

[4.3]   Conversely, technical issues were often positioned by users and contributors alike as urgent and unacceptable. When one StillFlying user pointed out a minor issue in the site interface (unread scripts being marked as read, and vice versa), Young was nudged by a contributor within twenty-four hours to respond and deal with the issue: "Uh, Citizen? Is your network crashing again? If she crashes, you crashed her" (dcwashington 2006). Yet VFF writers often used the StillFlying forums to solicit help from each other and even their readers for "creative" problems, Young's status as a technician isolated him from such collaborative support. VFF contributors sometimes offered Young broad suggestions about how to handle technical issues, but they left the work entirely to him. Phrases like "I'm not a coder" (pizmobeach 2006a) or "I'm hardly one to consult on technical matters" (cohnee 2006b) were used by writers as expressions of respect for Young's skills as a programmer, but they also indicate that the site's infrastructure, in contrast with its content, was not a collaborative responsibility.

5. Conclusion

[5.1]   Of course, Young was not without agency. In his comments on the StillFlying forums, Young expressed the same love for *Firefly* and the same desire to see the series continued as the "creative" contributors to VFF. In his response to a post asking VFF users why there were so invested in keeping *Firefly* alive, Young described how the first run of the show in the United Kingdom had him "bushwhacked," how learning that the show had been canceled pulled the "proverbial rug" from under him, and how the film *Serenity* had renewed his fascination with the series and his desire to see it continue (Citizen 2006). Participation in VFF thus allowed Young to contribute to a fan object he desired as much as anyone. The purpose of this article is not to suggest that Young was exploited by his

contributors but instead to critically examine how discourses of work among VFF contributors and users isolated him from collaborative support.

[5.2]   VFF provides a useful counterexample to fan fiction communities offered on sites like AO3, where site administrators strive to create an egalitarian creative community rather than an end product. In contrast with fan fiction communities built around communal contributions, team-based enterprises like VFF draw on discourses of professionalism and creativity to hierarchize their contributors into above-the-line creatives and below-the-line workers, marginalizing below-the-line workers without the benefit of the authorial agency enjoyed by infrastructural contributors on more egalitarian fan fiction sites. For fan enterprises like VFF and for fan workers whose labor doesn't easily map onto above-the-line work in media industries, creative hierarchies and discourses of professionalism can put infrastructural fan workers in positions of public pressure and collaborative isolation.

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BuBu fandom and authentic online spaces for Chinese fangirls

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[0.1]   Abstract—Considering BuBu fandom to be an authentic online fan space has implications for the transformative cycle of literacy production, social exchange, and identity formation as fangirls appropriate new materials and make new meanings. Specific illustrative data from two informants demonstrate that the site of BuBu fandom engages fangirls both in interest-driven literacy practices and social activities, with both rooted in a Chinese cultural context.

[0.2]   Keywords—Baidu; BuBuJingXin; Chinese fandom; Chinese media; Fandom of color

1. Introduction

[1.1]   As China plays a greater role in the world economy and more people seek to communicate in Chinese (Thussu, De Burgh, and Shi 2017), Chinese popular culture and fan worlds are impacting the world (Rojas and Chow 2008; Wang 2021; Yang and Bao 2012). However, fan cultures have traditionally been studied in Eurocentric ways (Khachidze 2021), as Chinese fandoms may be hard to understand from a Western perspective because Chinese language, culture, history, and social realities are unfamiliar and difficult to learn for Western fans (Huang 2017; Huang and Lammers 2018; Tang 2013). At the same time, from a feminist perspective (Hannell 2020), media and communication scholars are interested in understanding alternative non-Western fan spaces so that the field of fan studies can extend beyond its Western-centric, flattened, homogenized boundaries (De Kosnik and carrington 2019; Hellekson 2009). This study of Chinese fangirls and their engagements with online spaces and communities (Yang and Bao 2012) seeks to fill this knowledge gap.

[1.2]   Given the restrictions in formal education of learning Chinese history and culture regarding the Qing dynasty in China (Huang 2014; Yang and Bao 2012; Yu 2009), authentic online fan spaces might be an alternative and effective venue for fangirls (Magnifico, Lammers, and Curwood 2020) to engage in literacy development and various social activities associated with the fondness of Chinese history and

traditional culture both in and out of the classroom. In addition, online media play a number of important roles in communication and literacy development activities (Bahrani 2014; Furlong and Davies 2012), including providing access to authentic audiences for writing (Black 2008; Magnifico, Lammers, and Curwood 2020) and engaging language learners in informal settings (Thorne, Black, and Sykes 2009). Authentic Chinese online spaces could be equally powerful for nurturing Chinese literacy and communication activities, and it is to this end that I address Chinese fan writing communities.

[1.3]   Although there is a growing body of research on media studies in China (Chen 2021; Yang and Bao 2012; Yu 2009) and on the use of Chinese media for pedagogical purposes (Huang and Lammers 2018), similar research on literacy practices and social activities of Chinese online fan sites is not available. To address this gap, as well as to shed light on digital literacy and make meaning of feminist, non-Eurocentric media spaces, I explore Chinese literacy practices and social activities offered by the fans of a popular Chinese media fandom space, BuBu (https://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%E6%AD%A5%E6%AD%A5%E6%83%8A%E5%BF%83), by answering the following research question: Which of fangirls' literacy and social activities are recruited for participation?

2. Theoretical framework: New literacy studies and affinity spaces theory

[2.1]   This study aligns with research in new literacy studies (NLS) (Barton 2017; Gee 2012; Gee and Hayes 2011; New London Group 1996; Street 1993, 1997, 2003) and affinity spaces theory (Lammers, Curwood, and Magnifico 2012). By specifically following the concept of literacy as a social practice in NLS—which considers the importance of context, specifically as it relates to how ideological, social, and political forces of institutions shape fangirls' social and literacy practices (Street and Street 1984)—the work of NLS researchers interested in making sense of everyday literacy practices in a variety of contexts may be informed (Barton 2017; Barton and Hamilton 2012; Street 1995, 1997).

[2.2]   NLS theory is a great match for this project because of its online media focus and its consideration of literacy development and socially, historically, and politically situated fangirl activities (Black 2008; Lam 2004) in BuBu fandom. NLS theorist James Paul Gee (2012) conceives of affinity spaces as physical, virtual, or blended sites of engaging learning, which he uses to describe video game–related sites. Participants gather in affinity spaces to pursue a common passion and have fun. In this study, I draw on a later iteration of the defining features of affinity spaces, that of Lammers, Curwood, and Magnifico (2012), to focus attention on how BuBu fandom allows fangirls to pursue self-directed participation in literacy development, how knowledge is constructed and shared among its members, and how socialization operates in this space.

[2.3]   Existing research related to Chinese online spaces with a focus on fangirls' literacy and social activities is scarce. NLS and affinity spaces theory have been used to gain rich understanding of online fan sites in the Western world (Black 2008; Curwood, Magnifico, and Lammers 2013; Thorne, Black, and Sykes 2009). I extend this to research using a Chinese perspective by making BuBu literacy and social practices visible in order to examine what BuBu fandom might tell us about Chinese fangirls.

3. Research methods

[3.1]   I chose affinity spaces methodology because the concept of affinity spaces is specifically designed for researchers studying online spaces with a particular interest in fangirls and their participatory culture. Lammers, Curwood, and Magnifico (2012) explicate features of affinity spaces

research and argue that studying fangirls in affinity spaces (in their case, fangirls in *Sims* and *Neopets* games) affords us access to participants outside our geographic proximity, a readily available web-based historical record, and a way to trace social and literacy practices across portals, modes, and texts.

[3.2]   Using the lens of affinity spaces, in 2014, I conducted virtual interviews and observations to develop a contextualized understanding of fangirls' experiences in BuBu fandom. Interviews provided access to the participants' thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values. Systematic observations of how the fandom worked provided direct evidence of the fans' experiences on BuBu fandom.

[3.3]   To provide research context: BuBu fandom is a fan discussion forum website for *BuBuJingXin*, a hit time-travel dynasty drama (and a novel with the same title by Tong Hua, published online in 2005 on Jinjiang Original Network), which aired in 2011 in China. At the time of data gathering, January 31, 2014, there were more than 166,000 individual site members. There were 2,562,507 posts spread across five main topics: posts, pictures, collections, videos, and groups. On this site, fans write, read, offer feedback on fan fiction, share artwork, chitchat, and engage in other activities related to the BuBuJingXin franchise.

[3.4]   To collect data, every day, I observed BuBu fandom, including its chat rooms on QQ (an instant messaging tool popular before WeChat) and other related portals, for 3.5 months, which enabled me to witness, understand, and participate in BuBu fandom and to get to know the participants well. These participatory observations (Creswell and Poth 2016) captured the rich experiences of participants in the context of how the experiences happened and were constructed in their lives (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011).

[3.5]   During the process of observation, according to the relevance to social activities and literacy practices online, I collected communication records, entries of postings that fans made, screenshots, memos, and my own reflections of researching. I also conducted and transcribed two online interviews with each informant, during which the informants relayed the richness of their dynamic, changing BuBu experiences through retelling and meaning making.

[3.6]   The two informants I selected for this study were both longtime site users, each representing a different key aspect of BuBu fandom participation: fan fiction writing and moderating. Xiaomeng, age thirty, a popular fan fiction writer from Taiwan, had posted 28,000 posts during her nearly three-year membership on the site. Shishi, age twenty, originally from mainland China but at the time an international student in Canada, was a fan with a particular interest in reading historical texts who had served as head of the site for 3.5 years when interviewed. The interview with Xiaomeng took place via multiple email exchanges. The interview with Shishi began via email exchanges and eventually moved to a forty-seven-minute audio recorded QQ chat session. All interviews were conducted in Chinese; translations are my own.

[3.7]   For analysis, data were coded both holistically and line by line. Then themes were created from the repeating categories and codes, permitting me to come to a newly theorized understanding of this online fan space.

4. Findings

[4.1]   I identified various literacy practices that were available via BuBu fandom. BuBu fangirls were writing, reading, connecting, and socializing with peers who shared a Chinese traditional cultural mindset and a feminist perspective that promoted free sharing (Hannell 2020). Fangirls led their communities and connected with others over their fondness of traditional Chinese culture. For example,

fan stories included various types of popular historical romance for the community to consume, but with feminist negotiations including alternative ways to shift attention away from women as objects of the gaze and instead toward women as having agency (Hannell 2020). These literacy activities were predominately based on Chinese historical knowledge, despite which many events were not factual.

[4.2]   In what follows, I highlight a activity that I observed within BuBu fandom and link it to not only fan-shared literacy but Chinese-specific modes of practice. I observed fans engaged in a number of literacy activities imbricated with identity formation, socialization via knowledge transfer, self-directed social learning driven by an affective passion for the topic, and friendship, all while relying on Chinese contextual differences and a unique Chinese culture. In addition to fan remarks made on the website, I rely on the interviews I conducted with Xiaomeng, the fan fiction writer, and Shishi, the reader/moderator.

[4.3]   First, to address identify formation, the example of my first informant Xiaomeng's fan fiction thread illustrates how BuBu fandom encouraged self-directed, multifaceted, and dynamic participation and identity development. For example, Xiaomeng's "Another Time Travel Back to the Dream," a fan fiction sequel to *BuBuJingXin* (the novel), involved descriptions of Ruoxi's love/sex stories with the Yongzheng emperor. As Yang and Bao (2012) argue, from a sociopolitical perspective, Confucian and communist asceticism still affect Chinese girls' attitudes toward sex, although nowadays restrictive attitudes about sex are opening up, particularly in urban China and among a new generation of young girls. BuBu fandom is an example of how female writers use writing fan fiction as a way to express their gender and sex identities, their sense of self, and their affective lived experiences. Xiaomeng's writing affectively celebrates such sexuality-related freedom, along with the ability to rebel against taboos and heterosexual norms in the Chinese world. However, I, like Yang and Bao (2012), find it concerning that certain writings that trivialize women, such as harem stories, actually reinforce gender and sexual stereotypes and hierarchies—values deeply embedded in traditional Chinese culture.

[4.4]   Because fangirls are a passionate audience and motivated fan fiction writers, they shared social knowledge on the site, the second feature I observed in my study. Socializing via gift exchange in the form of fan fiction was a key form of participation. Xiaomeng took the main characters from the original BuBu novel and created her own time-travel fiction in the same historical moment, which she shared with BuBu fandom. Her engagement with the site included weekly updated chapters, interaction with readers, and chitchatting. Hundreds of interactions happened every day within this thread. For example, from 9:00 p.m. on February 23, 2014, to 9:00 p.m. on February 24, 2014, the thread grew by 1,420 posts. Numerous secondary threads followed each chapter update, with readers providing support, feedback, and interactions, to which Xiaomeng replied by directly addressing the readers' responses.

[4.5]   Relatedly, knowledge is shared in the context of the fan site via socializing. For example, one reader, 小two, asked whether Yongzheng should be a "*wangye* (prince of the first rank), not a *beileye* (prince of the third rank)." Xiaomeng replied by noting that Yongzheng had not yet been promoted (BuBu posts, February 12, 2013). Such interactions allowed readers and writers to situate their fan literacy practices within the historical context of the Qing dynasty. As Street and Street (1984) note, literacy practices are social in nature, and within BuBu fandom, fans were able to interact in a space where historical knowledge is collectively constructed, shared, and valued, all while being situated within their interest in BuBu stories.

[4.6]   Third, social activities and literacy development in BuBu fandom are driven by interest and self-directed informal learning. Xiaomeng shared her feelings about how readers pushed her: "I had to force myself to adhere to what I had promised the readers" (interview, February 28, 2014). Xiaomeng self-directed her writing on BuBu fandom: she worked whenever she had a break from her job, and she

worked to fulfill her initial promises, with regular engagement and textual updates. At the time of the study, this effort had lasted a year and a half.

[4.7]   The fourth element, friendship, which is valued in Chinese collectivism culture, is exemplified by BuBu fandom's sociality. For my second informant, Shishi, a college student majoring in finance at a university in Canada, BuBu fandom offered a space to share her interest in classical Chinese culture. After she left China, her friendship with a particular BuBu friend continued, which evolved from sending postcards to sharing valuable items, such as signature photos from Cecilia Liu, the actress who plays Ruoxi, a BuBu character.

[4.8]   For the fifth element, Chinese contextual differences, my analysis identified interactional patterns unique to Chinese online spaces compared to their Western counterparts. For example, Shishi noted that she engaged in BuBu fandom largely because of her passion for classical Chinese culture. She agreed to serve as a site moderator "because I have a passion for Chinese traditional culture, and this passion makes my life colorful" (interview, March 30, 2014). To this end, the inherent Chinese-ness of the BuBu fan community could be seen as a way of emphasizing that fan communities are not always transnational, transcultural, and Westernized. The fan stories that BuBu fandom archives may not always be accessible, understandable, and available for a transcultural and transnational perspective.

[4.9]   The sixth and last element important to BuBu fandom literacy is the uniqueness of Chinese culture, which fans must understand and negotiate in order to properly engage. Of course, fans' debating canon-specific or culturally specific details that appear in fan fiction is not unique to BuBu fandom (Black 2008). Yet BuBu fandom shows that originary culture and history are deeply important. By extension, this means that the fandom is necessarily closed to many who do not know enough about these cultural and historical details to understand the TV show, much less the fan works.

[4.10]   During my research, I found that a fondness for specific handmade Chinese classical artifacts was a common passion among those engaged in BuBu fandom. A traditional hairpin is a good example of the uniqueness of this Chinese cultural aspect in BuBu fandom. Learning how to craft such traditional hairpins, then sharing the process and result online, is a form of engaging in literacy practices connected to historical China. Fan-made pins like those in figure 1 are displayed on the BuBu fandom website because the users proudly made them. Crafting them requires specialized tools and jade materials, both of which are hard to get. Further, making them in this particular artistic style requires special research, because it is not a common, contemporary style that today's people would DIY.

Figure 1. Chinese Mulan flower hairpins, one red and one white, handmade and then posted by an anonymous BuBu fan. Downloaded March 27, 2014, from BuBuJingXin Baidu Tieba.

[4.11]   Further, the Mulan flower hairpins in figure 1 exemplify the passion for classical Chinese language, art, and culture. They look exactly like the white plum flower pin in the BuBu TV series, so they directly refer to that text, but they also act tacitly as a Chinese cultural symbol of integrity—a moral standard in traditional and modern China. Within BuBu canonical texts, such hairpins were used as love

token between the fourth prince (Yongzheng, real in history, fictionalized for the TV show and novel) and Ruoxi (a fictional BuBu protagonist). Making, sharing, gifting, and otherwise exchanging these historically inflected pins was an enjoyable process that let fangirls share artwork, make friends, and play in BuBu fandom while also harking back to Chinese associations and culture.

[4.12]   In summary, these literacy practices, working via socialization, positive interactions with peers, classical Chinese culture, and multivocal art pieces created by BuBu fans, are distinctively rooted in the culture of China and this affinity space. To engage is to click, read, comment, write; to make up a song and sing it; to hotlink; and to create a video related to Bubu Jinxing. As Hellekson (2009) has demonstrated, these kinds of exchanges are made up of three elements related to the fan community: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. Within BuBu fandom, fangirls develop literacy and gender identity, socialize with friends, connect with a unique Chinese traditional culture—and most of all, have fun.

5. Conclusion

[5.1]   BuBu fandom is an affinity space (Gee 2012; Lammers, Curwood, and Magnifico 2012), where fangirls socialize with friends, connect with their passion for Chinese traditional culture, and develop interest-based literacy. To add to the Western fan site research (Black 2008; Hellekson 2009; Lammers, Curwood, and Magnifico 2012; Thorne, Black, and Sykes 2009), I use an Eastern-inflected sensibility to study BuBu fandom and found that it displays unique features. It is a Chinese fangirl space that allows fangirls to develop their collective and feminist literacy, to create artworks, to build building friendships in and out of online spaces, and, as Shishi put it, to make their everyday life "colorful." These activities are rooted in a specific logic that springs from Chinese history and Chinese narrative traditions. Fan spaces like Bubu have implications for the transformative cycle of literacy production, social exchange, and identity formation.

[5.2]   In conclusion, this project, by incorporating affinity spaces (Lammers, Curwood, and Magnifico 2012) and NLS (Street 1997, 2003) from a feminist perspective (De Kosnik and carrington 2019; Hannell 2020), fills a void in Eurocentric fan fiction research by adding an emphasis on Chinese social activities and digital literacy development. I see the potential for literacy educators to introduce students to such an authentic Chinese space in order to develop students' contextual understanding of China. Authentic Chinese online spaces offer valuable opportunities through culturally engaging practices, such as reading and writing fan fiction. BuBu fandom is an example of Chinese cultural connection for fangirls, which, however, may not always in progressive in nature (Barton 2017; Barton and Hamilton 2012; Street 1995, 1997, 2003). Echoing existing feminist theorists (Hannell 2020), I consider topics on fangirls' gender formation and writing of hierarchies of gender roles to deserve future research attention.

6. Acknowledgments

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Fandom, now in color: A collection of voices, edited by Rukmini Pande

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[1]   Rukmini Pande has been working to break the white default around fan studies and end the forced silence of nonwhite fans. Discussing race, especially when it is intermingled with gender, sexuality, disability, or other vectors of oppression, is fraught with risks and challenges for researchers. The subject matter of Pande's new collection, *Fandom, Now in Color: A Collection of Voices,* reveals the courage and competence of the authors and editor. In this collection, authors from various ethnic backgrounds explore different fandoms, such as TV drama fandom, K-pop fandom, comics fandom, game fandom, cosplay, and fan work, to discuss questions such as: What exactly do race, racism, racial identity in fandom mean? In what context are these terms being discussed? What kinds and forms of fandom are being encompassed within Anglocentricism, generalization, and essentialism? In today's transnational and globalized world, can elusive and contested categories like racial identity be accurately mapped out? What is the status of intersectionality in fandom? How should intersectionality be studied? The essays in this collection draw on methodological frameworks such as critical race studies, postcolonial theory, and postracist theory, providing further frameworks for the fan studies toolbox. This book presents a full spectrum of diversity: methodological diversity, theoretical diversity, fan culture diversity, fan identity diversity, and author ethnic diversity. The world of fan studies unraveled in this book is no longer monotonously white but colorful.

[2]   The thirteen essays in this collection are divided into four sections: methodology, otherness, affirmative/transformative, and identity/authenticity. The titles of these sections indicate the four focal points of the editor's concerns: the methods and theories applicable to conducting race-related research in fan studies; the impact of history and geopolitics on race in fandom spaces; issues such as race and gender as embodied in fan practices; and the conflicts and anxieties of representation, identity, and authenticity around matters of race, sexuality, linguistic politics, and other related topics in fandom

spaces.

[3]   The first section, Methodology, is set up in response to the editor's concerns over the phenomenon of "a politics of declaration of whiteness," that is, the tendency of scholars to declare the absence of race in their analysis without meaningfully embedding race as an identity in research methodology. This section includes three case studies that explore the construction of meaning, affective engagement, and discussion spaces of race, racism, and racial identity in different fan spaces (television series, films, and American college classrooms). Elizabeth Hornsby's research employs a meaning-making framework and methodology based on critical race theory to interrogate how individual fan experiences, prejudices, and racial ideologies accomplished meaning-making in specific situations and moments in fandom. Korean-American scholar Sam Pack explores the authenticity and affective engagement of minority audiences and film creators through a methodology of ethnographic reception studies, challenging the definition of "who is a fan" in fan studies. Finally, Katherine Anderson Howell, an American college teacher, explores spaces for discussing race and racism in the college classroom through a self-reflexive approach using nonwhite students as her subjects. All three studies use, to a greater or lesser extent, a research framework centered on methods such as critical race studies and postcolonial theory, which undoubtedly provides relevant and valid lessons for fan studies scholars attempting to discuss race.

[4]   The second section, Otherness, is a double metaphor, both in the sense that fans are seen as other to the public and in the sense that fans of different races are regarded as other in fandom. The two studies in this section coincidentally choose to look at colonial histories and postracial ideologies to examine the ways in which fans, as the racial and cultural other, negotiate their position in fandom spaces and popular culture media, then relate this discussion to politics. In discussing the situation of Korean wave fans in Japan, Miranda Ruth Larsen adds a geopolitical perspective and, like Joan Miller's analysis of the cross-racial cosplay controversy, places fan studies in a broader sociological context, attempting to glimpse the differences in the self-representation of the other fans under different modes of racialization. Going further, Miranda Ruth Larsen criticizes the oversimplification and generalization of the other by local culture. This criticism echoes the flattening of nonwhite characters by the media in the next section.

[5]   The issues discussed in the following section are more complex, as they involve not only race but also other intersecting vectors of oppression, such as gender. The affirmative/transformative division binarizes two different philosophies of fan practice. Affirmative practices are concerned with preserving the original work, while transformative practices aim to completely reconstruct the work according to fans' will. The ideas of both affirmation and transformation often provoke controversy within fan spaces. This section of the edited collection explores how fans respond when more complex external social contradictions, such as race, gender, and sexuality, are projected into such disputes. The section presents four studies of fan works in different fandom spaces. Investigations by Angie Fazekas and Indira Neil Hoch simultaneously uncovered a depressing truth: Even when radical fans rebel against patriarchal and heteronormative society through their transformative works, they rarely deal with race in similar ways. Samira Nadkarni and Deepa Sivarajan's study of racebending fan works based on the musical *Hamilton* exemplifies the complexity of fans' playing with racial identity. While fans question the default of whiteness by bending white characters into people of color, racebent characters are often flat and abstract. While this play has imagery of racial inclusion, it hardly touches the cornerstones of the dominant social structure operating in the subcultural space. Finally, Carina Lapointe's study gives us a glimpse of dismantling and challenging structural racism in *Dungeons & Dragons* fan work. In this section, we see three responses to the matter of racism in fan practice: avoidance, mitigation, and active resistance. The logic and mechanisms by which these three responses are formed deserve further exploration.

[6]   The title of the final section, Identity/Authenticity, implies a growing conflict between the idea of representation and authenticity, fan identity and belonging, and ownership of fan texts in fan spaces and fan studies scholarship. Three of the four essays in this section—Rukmini Pande and Swati Moitra's, McKenna James Boeckner et al.'s, and Al Valentin's—address the same issue: how fans with different identities perceive racial, gendered, sexual, and physical diversity in canon characters. These chapters ask whether "plastic representation" is an advance in diversity or whether it exacerbates the generalization and flattening of minorities and marginalized groups while intensifying fans' anxieties about authenticity, identity, and belonging, thus aggravating exclusivity among fan groups. Such debates require further consideration and clarification by fan studies scholars and fans themselves. The fourth piece in this section, by Jenni M. Lehtinen, on the other hand, traces the paths through which fan texts flow and are exchanged among fan groups with different linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, revealing how language shapes hierarchies, inclusiveness, and exclusions within fan groups from the perspective of linguistic politics. As the editor of the collection emphasizes, the anxieties, struggles, exchanges, and conflicts among fans with different identities do not exist in isolation in fandom space but rather mirror the conflicts and politics of cultures outside of fandom, in particular, the rise of identity and sexual politics in a broader sociocultural context. Because this section is the final one of this collection, the questions posed here are especially challenging.

[7]   Overall, this collection encompasses many voices from different fields of fan studies and authors of various ethnic backgrounds. The collection supplements classic works in fan studies focusing on fan identity, fan subjectivity, and fan practices, broadening the identities, subjectivities, and practices considered by addressing them from the intersecting contexts of race, gender, and sexuality. Unfortunately, however, the popular cultural objects addressed in this book remain predominantly Anglocentric, with only a tiny proportion of the fandoms discussed coming from other ethnic and regional backgrounds. This leaves non-Anglophone readers and those living outside the global north feeling ignored. In addition, many authors in this collection rely on a white/nonwhite dichotomy that ignores the diversity and specificity of nonwhite identities. Although some authors are clearly aware of this issue, they do not explore it in depth. Moreover, there is a lack of clarity in the structure of some of the essays, such as Hoch's chapter on customizable video game characters, making it somewhat confusing for readers to grasp the authors' points. Finally, some of the research designs were insufficiently rigorous, such as Howell's exploration of teaching practices or Larsen's consideration of K-pop fandom in Japan, which somewhat weakens the reliability and validity of the studies.

[8]   Nonetheless, the collection covers a wide range of topics, is rich in theory, includes a variety of research methods, and is written in easy-to-understand language, making it ideal for beginners in fan studies and fans themselves. In addition, as the authors are diverse and the subjects covered are varied, the collection is also useful for scholars who want to understand the identities and practices of nonwhite fans. Finally, the book distills some of the core issues in fandom studies related to race and diversity, making it worthy of reference for fan studies scholars interested in these issues.

Gaming sexism: Gender and identity in the era of casual video games, by Amanda C. Cote.

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[1]   In *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games,* Amanda Cote explores a paradox. In recent years, video game audiences have become more diverse than ever while at the same time video game culture and fandom have become more exclusionary. Cote proposes that this paradox has arisen due to the responses of some groups in games culture whose identities have been defined by their fannish love for games, individuals whom Cote refers to as traditional core gamers. These gamers now feel threatened by the increasing number of nontraditional casual players and a perceived diminishment of their power and privilege that the growth of the gaming audience represents. In particular, Cote notes, these responses have primarily taken the form of sexism and misogyny against women, who are frequently positioned as the largest demographic in the growing casual games audience. The goal of *Gaming Sexism* is to analyze the impact of this sexism on women players and fans, as well as to identify ways in which women find and make spaces for inclusive gaming and participation despite resistance to their presence. Cote argues that sexism and misogyny have become inherent mechanics in video game culture. Because the assumed dominant gender identity in games is masculine, women are positioned as a threat to the structure of gaming. Therefore, women players and fans are punished for attempting to intrude where they are not perceived as belonging.

[2]   What *Gaming Sexism* offers are lessons learned from women who have chosen to negotiate the conflicts of a masculine exclusionary space like gaming fandom. To gather these insights, Cote conducted discourse analysis of game industry practices and documents—primarily magazines aimed at video game developers and fans—and performed interviews with thirty-seven self-identified women gamers. In a chapter on the aftermath of GamerGate, Cote conducts follow-up interviews with eleven of her original participants. This combination of methods allows Cote to contextualize the popular discourses about women and casual players in games against the perspectives of those most affected by these discourses.

[3]   The cover of *Gaming Sexism* features a depiction of the iconic propaganda poster from World War II, Rosie the Riveter, wearing a Nintendo Power Glove. The Power Glove was a short-lived console peripheral that represented Nintendo's first foray into motion-controlled gameplay mechanics over twenty years before the launch of the Wii. As Cote describes in the introduction of her book, Nintendo and the Wii console were influential in ushering in what Cote refers to as the "casualized era" (1) of video games. This is a period of approximately three years between 2005 and 2008 when video game companies began to seek out broader audiences and the idea of video games as a masculine technology was more overtly questioned. The image of Rosie wielding the Power Glove, which was created during a time when video games were advertised as a masculine hobby, therefore suggests a history of women in video games and acts as a visual contradiction to the idea of women as simply casual players. The concept of casual as both a temporal and an identity category—and its intersections with gender—runs throughout the book as a major structural element of the chapters and analysis.

[4]   The first chapter of *Gaming Sexism* explains the binary between core and casual players and how both positions are popularly defined and constructed in games. Core, derived from "hardcore," carries connotations of centrality, importance, and the prioritization of masculine interests. Cote demonstrates how this connection between hardcore and masculinity can also be seen in other media, such as punk music and pornography. Casual, on the other hand, suggests marginality, frivolity, and a cheapening of experience due to femininity and its presumed unimportance. What Cote illustrates, however, is how this binary is not and has never been so clear cut. Casual players often take up some aspects of core play and ignore others in what Cote described as a process of denaturalizing the binary. For example, if one aspect of the core identity is dictated by time—hundreds of hours playing one game as emblematic of fannish affect and expertise—how do you describe players who have hundreds of hours invested in a casual game like *Candy Crush*? Many players are playing so-called casual games in very core-like ways; for Cote this is how casual players and casual games can act as a counterhegemonic force, by tactically adapting and ignoring normative practices. This chapter is the distillation of an argument Cote makes throughout the book—that however you slice it, a population of video game players and fans is never monolithic or neatly categorized, but many of the divisions made between players and fans are nonetheless meaningful due to the impact that they have on audience participation.

[5]   The second and third chapters continue this consideration of audience differences by detailing the different overt and covert ways that women encounter sexism in video games and in game cultures. While these sexist challenges are often "divided according to the traditional media studies lines of text/content, audience, and industry" (57), Cote argues that concerns of sexism and hypersexualization for women in game are intertwined across these lines, and they cannot be neatly separated. Cote outlines how presenting hypersexualized women characters in video games, creating games based on stereotypes about girls and women, encountering sexism and harassment from other players, and having all those things supported by the games industry aid in maintaining the appearance of gaming—particularly core gaming—as a masculine space. As a result, many women adopt avoidance behaviors that will help them avoid conflict with gaming's masculine hegemony. These behaviors include not playing multiplayer games with strangers, ignoring sexist comments or game content, or quitting games altogether. Consequently, these avoidance behaviors reinforce the narrative that women who play core games are rare and that the lack of presence of women in gaming audiences and fandom is due to a small number of women being interested in games.

[6]   Nevertheless, women have always been present in the history of video games and enjoy playing so-called core games as well as casual games. In fact, Cote describes women players and fans as uniquely situated to weaken the binary between core and casual because of the frequent identity negotiations between player, woman, and woman player that women already manage. In chapter four, Cote analyzes participant interviews to highlight ways that women navigate the masculine spaces of

games through fluid and contextual combinations of masculine and feminine, core and casual characteristics in their gameplay practices. Of necessity, women are often called to inhabit game characters that do not represent them or play in groups that are not designed to include them, but many women find pleasure in these activities despite the challenges. For Cote, their adaptive practices can be used as an example for hegemonic players to learn about the different forms of identity exploration, pleasure, and affinity building that can be found in games.

[7]   The fifth chapter shifts to a focus on the strategies women engage in to choose content and support positive experiences in gaming and fandom. The strategies women used for selecting games rely on a combination of personal skill, knowledge of developer and genre conventions, previews of content, and social networks. Their strategies for managing the play experience within those games and avoiding harassment include—in addition to those introduced in chapter three—hiding their gender or adopting an aggressive masculine gameplay performance. It is worth noting that there is plenty of research and debate in game studies around the benefits and drawbacks of women's-only gaming groups and competitive tournaments (Chess 2017; AnyKey 2017). While these tactics at an individual and group level are often enough to create a sense of safety during gameplay, on the meta level they are not enough to undermine the hegemony of trash talk, harassment, and sexism in games. Just as a lack of engagement with race in fandom more broadly encourages a default whiteness (Pande 2018), so too does a lack of confrontation with the problems of gender bolster a masculinity as a default in games. But as Cote observes, women who do confront the default masculinity in games often find themselves without support from the gaming community and the industry who should be sharing the burden of resolving this problem.

[8]   Confronting the status quo and making a complaint visible carries its own problems (Ahmed 2021). That has been proven time and time again in fandom in a number of contexts. In the sixth chapter, Cote returns to some of her interview participants to inquire as to how the events of GamerGate may have impacted their gaming habits. Cote positions GamerGate as a backdrop which highlights the prevalence of sexist and gatekeeping practices in games discussed in other chapters. She finds that dramatic events like GamerGate are less troublesome for women in games than everyday "garden-variety" experiences of sexism they encounter.

[9]   Video game fandom is of course not the only area that has dealt with—and continues to deal with—deep wells of sexism and misogyny in its population. Comics and film have both recently experienced high-profile challenges to the inclusion of women creators and stories about women (note 1). The strategies women gamers use to find inclusive spaces detailed in *Gaming Sexism* have parallels within broader fannish practices of forming fan communities and modifying canonical content to be more representative. Fan and audience scholars outside the magic circle of game studies may find it useful to consider further parallels between the practices of women in games and in other fandom contexts. I am thinking particularly of broader attempts to hide gender or gendered impressions that clash with the dominant expectations of a fandom group. Cote's work offers another way for scholars to approach questions around gatekeeping, participation, tokenism, and self-reflexivity in fan culture (note 2).

[10]   One of the strengths of *Gaming Sexism* is also Cote's consideration of the ways that many women are unbothered by sexism or actively buy into exclusionary rhetoric in games culture and fandom. Cote advocates for the agency of women to choose to participate in masculine spaces and seek to be traditional core gamers without condemning their choices. Furthermore, she stresses the need to include these perspectives in discussions around changing and challenging the masculine hegemony of games rather than exclude them in favor of a neater narrative of women's oppression in games. Amanda Philip's recent publication *Gamer Trouble* takes a similar position recognizing the complex variations of identity

and politics for women in gaming. These two projects mark an important and necessary turn in interdisciplinary and feminist analyses of video game culture and fandom. This scholarship complicates a trend in game studies to exclusively focus on women who claim harm or actively campaign against harm. *Gaming Sexism* provides an important model for scholarship that includes perspectives which may contradict the researcher's own way of thinking in feminist research.

[11]   *Gaming Sexism* complements other recently published work that has addressed the gender binary in video games and its control over the field, particularly Shira Chess's *Ready Player Two*. *Gaming Sexism* extends this work to not only consider how that binary is constructed and policed in games but also detail the ways in which women complicate and resist the binary. Overall, *Gaming Sexism* is a useful introduction for any scholar seeking to understand the basis of ongoing issues of sexism, misogyny, and gendered stereotypes in video games. For game studies scholars, *Gaming Sexism* offers deeper complexities of the current knowledge on women in games and suggests further avenues for research around players, the industry, and the impact of the crisis of authority on the participation of women in the casualized era and beyond.

Notes

1. In particular I am thinking of ComicsGate and the separate but related harassment campaigns against actresses Leslie Jones and Kellie Marie Tran. For more details on these events, their intersections with games culture, and their consequences in fandom and fan studies, please see Miller 2020 and Pande 2020.

2. Michelle Cho's review of *Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies* was useful to me both as a template for how to construct a book review for *Transformative Works and Cultures* and as an invitation for reexamining linkages between trends in games and the commodification of minority perspectives for fannish consumption in other media content.

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Fanvids: Television, women, and home media re-use, by E. Charlotte Stevens

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[0.1]   Keywords—AMV, Fan labor, Gender, Historiography, Participation, Vidding

[1]   E. Charlotte Stevens's *Fanvids: Television, Women, and Home Media Re-Use* (2020) presents a welcome and overdue long-form analysis of the subcultural yet widely popular practice of fan vidding. Fan vidding, or vidding, pertains to remixing and recontextualizing live-action, animated, or illustrative footage in a video editing program. Fan vids are engaged in a constant state of change relative to available technology and source footage, branching out over time into different technical methods, editing styles, genres, and varieties of source footage. Thus, scholastic research of fan videos has tended to be relatively short-form, mostly with articles and book chapters tackling specific aspects of vidding culture, contents, audience, and distribution. Stevens's newest work, however, contributes to this complex conversation a valuable introduction to fan videos for invested scholastic newcomers, practitioners, and experienced researchers alike.

[2]   Stevens's previous work has concerned the history of specific forms of contemporary mass media, with recent studies on twentieth-century television documentaries (Stevens and Wyver 2018) and online gaming communities (Stevens and Webber 2020). *Fanvids: Television, Women and Home-Media Re-Use* emerges from her previous works on vidding (Stevens 2017a, 2017b). A recurring approach in Stevens's work, also present in *Fanvids,* is researching multiple fan videos at once rather than viewing them in isolation, which enables an examination of the wider culture these artifacts represent. Stevens examines fan vids as distinct forms of subcultural art, merging historiography and audience studies to do so.

[3]   *Fanvids* is split into six chapters, sans the inclusion and introductory sections, as well as a reference section that features an extensive list of fan videos. While the book has no illustrative graphics or screenshots, Stevens uses in-depth descriptions of the fan videos in question. Stevens begins in chapter 1 by plotting out a history of vidding's emergence, starting with the work of Kandy Fong in 1970s *Star Trek* (1966–1969) convention spheres. The chapter is a strong start, showing how tightly wound the historic relationship between fan vids and television broadcast/distribution methods is, as

well as how this reflects vidding's relationship with gender, which remains a strong thematic undercurrent throughout the book.

[4]   In chapter 2, Stevens asserts her approach to vids as not seeing them merely as an appropriation of the source footage but as both an artistic form and culture "with [their] own formal history and aesthetic strategies" (2020, 49). This approach is particularly salient given scholastic tendencies to view fan vids in the shadow of what they are remixing and reframing, giving less weight to the vids as standalone alternative art. Approaching vids as interpretations of the source text is valid, especially in the context of examining broader fan receptions to film and TV. Yet, direct analysis of the technical language and dialects of fan videos and fan vidding communities—which Stevens demonstrates here—is noticeably rarer in scholarship. Her push toward looking at fan vids as self-contained forms of art rather than a purely subcultural practice is particularly compelling, drawn from her autoethnographic approach as a vidding fan herself. Her reflection on this leads into a detailed account of her methodology for close textual analysis of vidding, which can be used as a model for future research.

[5]   Chapter 3 expands Stevens's history of vidding by examining vids' "proximate forms," or media running parallel to vids that informed their emergence (e.g., found footage, music videos, and collage films, among others). As Stevens threads together the history of experimental collage/appropriative /remix films and vids as a subcultural art form, she distinguishes vids as "moving image re-use" as opposed to solely appropriation and recontextualization. This term seemingly advocates for a semantic push away from orientating the meaning of vids around how they reinterpret the footage they utilize. Stevens does not do this to erase or distance them from the original material but rather the opposite. Throughout the chapter, she advocates for their status as works to be researched in their own right, as works that inform not only fannish interpretation of media texts but also fannish consumption and interpretation methods, demographics, tastes, and inner desires.

[6]   Chapter 4 builds on this merging of historiography and audience by looking at fan vids and personal home media collections in relation to archiving and memorializing past media. It highlights how fan vids displace traditional space/time barriers of media objects relative to traditional media distribution, storage, and use. For example, it was common for television series to be recorded from their original broadcasts between the 1980s and 2000s, and this evolved into users choosing to experience media whenever they desire, as seen in contemporary streaming services. We also see this in the storage of offline media files, which are the basis of fan vidding. Stevens argues that the very acts of curating, collecting, and repurposing clips push vids into having archival qualities because they are being actively used to create a critical commentary. To Stevens, this distinguishes them from collections because they are works exhibited for open viewing.

[7]   On this subject of time, Stevens posits that "digital duplication" avoids leaving traces of the wear of time, as can be seen in physical (or, rather, chemical) celluloid or videotape in the context of understanding audience viewing habits. Stevens does not, however, fall into the trap of arguing that there are no traces of the passage of time in digital files. Their traces can be present in their paratextual framings, such as watermarks, poor image quality, or pirated camrips, which can reflect fan vids' illegitimate, pirated contexts. Stevens uses this to discuss fan vids' "tacky" bootleg aesthetics that produce visual dialects in fan vidding communities, allowing them to be distinguished and recognized as subcultural artworks. Stevens's excellent observations here have much potential for future research, with the ability to apply it to other case studies, such as in anime music video (AMV) communities that contain their own distinct bootleg framings and traces of the past.

[8]   Stevens employs externalized memory as a theoretical framework for her archival examination of vidding. While chapter 4 doesn't focus on memory studies, it is a highlight because little scholastic work

has been done on memory and vidding culture. Stevens interlaces an analysis of the fan as an active interpreter/curator with examinations of the footage itself, informing the reader about how memory derived from fannish modes of intense engagement is fundamental to understanding the vid form. She employs Alison Landsberg's (2004) prosthetic memory theory, wherein externalizing our past in objects can result in "prosthetic" memories of events we never experienced, to illustrate the externalized memory of vids. This demonstrates their potential as a resource in future studies. Looking at externalized cultural memory also gives credence to the chapter's argument of how media collections frame the fan vid and how studies of a fan vid can give insight beyond the contents of the video itself. In understanding what we remember of vidding history, we can imagine how we understand future retro fan vids in their digital archives.

[9]   In chapter 5, Stevens continues her method of taking one aspect of vidding and expanding it for a wider insight into vidding spectatorship and meaning, this time examining the appeal of multifandom videos. Multifandom videos use media from multiple sources or fandoms, typically based around a central theme. Stevens argues that the thematic resonance between clips produces not only critical commentaries but spectacle and "excess." She provides three respective sections examining erotic and bodily spectacle, multimedia/franchise texts, and celebrity to explore what characterizes this excess and its value for scholarship. Multifandom vids are presented as transmedia spectacle, a pleasurable mode of viewing that can recognize and foreground parallels, provide critical arguments on franchise media, and show a curated, "historical depth" to their chosen subject choice. This chapter stands as a refreshing analysis of fan videos, moving away from trying to prove their value through their critical arguments. Stevens's analysis moves the reader into that fannish lens to understand the pleasures of recognizing clips and their meanings—even when densely packed together—derived from fans' intense engagement.

[10]   Importantly, in moving away from framing videos as valuable for critical commentary, Stevens highlights not only the contents of the videos but also the methods of producing and remixing said content. She applies thorough technical analysis in her vid case studies, describing what aspects of the composition the viewer's eyes and ears are drawn to (or taken away from). This combination of drawing out the emotional spectacle of vids while acknowledging the technical methodologies the fan editor utilizes to draw it out in the first place is still novel territory. Mainstream scholarship sometimes tends to orient around the original footage the fan vid is reusing, acknowledging cuts and montaging but less so the precision involved in scene selection, parallels, and flow. Francesca Coppa (2008) once argued that fan vids allow female viewers to take control of the camera lens, and Stevens asks what vidders' methodologies are once they are in control and how this affects both the critical argument and emotional spectacle (at times these are easily intertwined). This chapter exemplifies the value of Stevens's methodology laid out in chapter 2 and the analytical merits of taking a microscale lens to these short-form works of art.

[11]   In the final chapter, Stevens employs her established theoretical and methodological footing to provide an applied, close reading of Dualbunny's Battlestar Galactica Trilogy, a three-part character examination of Kara "Starbuck" Thrace from the TV series *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009). The videos examine, subvert, and recontextualize Kara's narrative with respect to the three seasons she is present in *Battlestar Galactica*, providing a clear lens into feminist fan responses to gendered shortcomings in the show. Stevens examines her case study by looking at both gender and music, with the trilogy utilizing three P!nk songs that produce an alternative, remixed narrative for Kara. Using her close textual reading methodology, Stevens shows how vids allow female fans to produce artworks close to what they would wish to see in popular culture, reflective of themselves and their desires. As such, it provides an apt finale to Stevens's central thesis and what can be produced by looking at vids as art by demonstrating both the merits of a close textual reading and what it can reflect of both the vidding editor and audience.

[12]   In the context of Anglo-American live-action vidding, the gendered lens to this argument is very well researched, but it does reflect a limitation that Stevens readily admits to in chapter 1: the use of live-action popular culture and what she terms "English-language Western popular culture." Indeed, fan videos have subcategories of AMVs, manga music videos, and game music videos (which Stevens herself desires to research in the future), to name a few. Stevens's approach is justified, as live action has the most extended history and, arguably, popularity: AMVs emerged after Kandy Fong's work and have their own distinct history relative to the more underground historic distribution of anime internationally (Milstein 2007; Roberts 2012). Yet, the gender demographics are slightly different in AMV cultures, with the prolific shounen action AMV genre having a large proportion of male editors (Witmer 2016) or, at least, a relatively masculinized lens (Close 2016). Stevens's focus on live-action vids is appropriate, especially for an introduction to the medium. However, those seeking to discuss gender in fan videos more broadly or for subcultures outside of live-action vidding may want to use this book as more of a supporting text because of that limitation.

[13]   Overall, *Fanvids: Television, Women, and Home Media Re-Use* is a timely, critical, and foundational work to the future study of fan vidding. Its merit cannot be understated in terms of Stevens's analytical breadth, covering past and present vidding in relatively little space while similarly leaving plenty of questions for future research. Stevens's strengths are on display when she positions videos as artworks with their own cultural histories and meanings. This enables her to shift the focus onto what vids reflect of the editors and viewers through both the technical specifics of what they make and their exhibition practices, rather than focusing solely on radical changes in meaning relative to the original media source. This approach more adequately accounts for changes in vidding culture as a result of its spread through the internet over time. It allows me to recommend this book for the uninitiated scholar in particular, as it provides a greater and more updated context for fan vidding beyond discourses concerned with their relationship to the emergence of MTV culture in the 1980s (see Jenkins 1992, 237; Karpovich 2007).

[14]   Despite Stevens's broad approach, I was surprised to find only small, brief references to remix culture. Stevens seems to imply that this is to attempt to move away from orienting vids around modern digital remix culture in order to explore their analog roots as well. As stated in the discussion of chapter 2, one of Stevens's central aims is to understand fan vids as art in their own right, giving their unique subcultural properties more space to breathe. While this is understandable for her analog historiography of vids, one could potentially draw upon remix culture studies in combination with Stevens's methodologies to understand the contemporary framings and distribution of fan vids. For example, in chapter 4, it would have been interesting for Stevens to have interrogated fannish editing methods (an aspect of the bootleg vidding aesthetic) as reflective of the passage of time, such as effect plug-ins no longer commonly used due to their dated look.

[15]   The manipulation of footage and application of effects all comprise remix methodologies, or fans "writing" to the footage, to use Lawrence Lessig's term. Remix studies texts, such as Lessig's (2008, 2004) conception of our (digital) transition to "read/write" and "free culture" and Lev Manovich's (2005) conception of "modularity" in digital media, aid in clarifying the form of the digital networks, distribution, and pirated collaborative digital subcultures fan vids currently inhabit. By looking at fan vids as a form of art beyond solely interpretation, there is by extension great potential for researchers to examine how fan vids contain aesthetic movements of their own that transform and emerge from decade to decade. I highlight this not as a critique or absence in Stevens's work but rather to say that future studies could benefit from digital remix research particularly when exploring contemporary vidding cultures.

[16]   No work on a subject as broad as fan vidding can be entirely comprehensive, especially when it

touches the complications of hyper-connective internet cultures, but I reiterate that scholars can use Stevens's work as a foundation for future study. This is due to its acuity in understanding both past and present vidding forms and culture, with its thorough critical analysis of vids as artworks derived from the author's sincere autoethnographic appreciation and experience with them.

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A portrait of the auteur as fanboy: The construction of authorship in transmedia franchises, by Anastasia Salter and Mel Stanfill

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Anastasia Salter and Mel Stanfill, *A portrait of the auteur as fanboy: The construction of authorship in transmedia franchises.* Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2020. Paperback $30 (234p) (ISBN 9781496830470).

[1]   In *A Portrait of the Auteur as Fanboy: The Construction of Authorship in Transmedia Franchises*, Anastasia Salter and Mel Stanfill map the shape and boundaries of the industrial authorial figure of the fanboy auteur in the late 2010s. In doing so, they demonstrate both the central tension between fan identity and auteur status and how the legitimacy and authority of the role is differently accessible to creators based on identity factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Following Suzanne Scott (2013), Salter and Stanfill understand the fanboy auteur as a discursive authorial figure who both functions as an industrial guarantee of quality—the writer, director, producer, or showrunner can be trusted by fans because they themselves are fans—and as an organizing figure through whom interpretation of the franchise can be guided. Media industries, and Hollywood in particular, increasingly rely on transmedial franchising as a less risky industrial strategy that taps into a guaranteed audience base. In this landscape, the fanboy auteur figure has gained increasing prominence and importance. The focus on the fanboy auteur builds on Stanfill's 2019 work on industrial management of fans (*Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*) and Salter's 2017 work with Bridgett Blodgett on toxic geek masculinity (*Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing*).

[2]   The role of the fanboy auteur has overwhelmingly been the province of white men. *A Portrait of the Auteur as Fanboy* introduces a taxonomy for categorizing creators that productively expands the concept to include many more instantiations of this kind of authorial positioning. Salter and Stanfill categorize author-figures along two axes: whether they are more affirmational or transformational in their fandom (obsession_inc 2009) and whether they are known for being fans of the franchises they create in. While the affirmational/transformational divide has been productively challenged as overly

rigid and reductively gendered (see, for example, Hills 2014; Cherry 2016), here the authors deploy it to provide a useful framework through which to understand the discursive construction of authorship and authority in an industry where access to power and authority is still problematically gendered. The concept of the fanboy auteur was always specifically gendered (as indicated by the term fan*boy*) and implicitly raced, and it remains disproportionately available to white men. However, by examining a variety of creators through this taxonomy, the authors reveal the role to be somewhat flexible, potentially opening up aspects of authority and legitimation to more marginalized creators over time.

[3]   The text consists of a series of case studies in which Salter and Stanfill perform discursive analysis on a corpus of press coverage, supplemented by internet sources, tweets, and the occasional textual analysis of the auteurs' work. It is organized into seven main chapters, with the first six chapters focusing on a single fan auteur figure, while chapter seven and the conclusion offer briefer comparative readings of more marginalized auteur figures. The case studies address well-known figures who should be accessible to readers both familiar and unfamiliar with the field of fan studies, with each chosen figure occupying a different point along Salter and Stanfill's proposed fan and auteur axes. These relatively short but robust and readable case studies can easily be read separately, which makes the text particularly useful for upper-level undergraduate teaching. When taken together, however, the case studies form a fuller, interconnected picture of the ways that the fan auteur is discursively created and the limited way that many are allowed or able to access its legitimacy and authority.

[4]   The introduction outlines the current franchise-heavy media landscape, establishes the fanboy auteur as a function of the rise of the fan (implicitly white, male, affirmational) as the ideal audience, and introduces Salter and Stanfill's fan/auteur taxonomy. Chapter one jumps right into the first case study, focused on an almost quintessential fanboy auteur, Steven Moffat. Known best for his work on British television series *Doctor Who* (2005–2017) and *Sherlock* (2010–2017), Moffat has a distinctive authorial style, and his authorial legitimacy comes from his oft-proclaimed deep fannish knowledge of these franchises. Though the series he works on can be highly transformative in many ways, his fanboy positioning is particularly affirmational. He demands a similarly deep knowledge base and celebratory response from fans of his work and is abrasive and dismissive of fans when their modes of fandom, interpretations, opinions, or expectations do not align with his own. Moffat thus claims to create for the fans while dismissing the opinions of actual fans, demonstrating the tension between imagined and real fans that undergirds the media industry's perception of fans today.

[5]   E. L. James, known for turning her *Twilight* fan fiction into the enormously popular yet derided *Shades of Grey* novels, provides a contrast in chapter two. This case study ably reveals the gendered nature of the fanboy auteur figure: whereas fanboy auteurs are able to use their fan identities to support their positions, James's fan*girl* identity (her association with fandom through fan fiction) is leveraged against her authority and legitimacy. Her work, which exists at the already-maligned crossroads of romance, erotica, and fan fiction, is seen as negatively derivative and she is thus denied authorship; paradoxically, however, she is also seen as overly controlling (especially in the adaptation of her novels to film) and is blamed for every unsatisfactory decision or outcome. James may be the "purest example of the fangirl auteur" (38), and as an inverse example of the fanboy auteur strikingly reveals who is and is not allowed to access the legitimating function of the fan auteur identity.

[6]   Considering her continued place as the lone authorial figure in the Harry Potter franchise, J. K. Rowling is a clear example of a transmedia auteur figure. Unlike the others examined in the book, Rowling is not a fan of her own franchise, nor does she claim a fan identity more broadly. Nevertheless, Salter and Stanfill read her interactions with fans on the internet as modeling "proper" (41) fan engagement, continually centering herself as the locus of meaning and interpretation of her texts. Kevin Smith, in contrast, is both highly defined by his fandom and highly affirmative in his approach and has

crafted a distinct authorial style through his fannishly inflected work. However, he lacks a "necessary reverence" for his objects of fandom, and as a result has not been granted authority over blockbuster franchises in the way that Joss Whedon and Zack Snyder, the next two case studies, have.

[7]   The fifth chapter examines Joss Whedon's combination of a feminist auteurist persona with a fanboy identity. The first section interrogates Whedon's feminist persona in light of long present but recently growing evidence suggesting such an identity is "more style than substance" (88). Since publication, even more testimony has come to light, including Whedon's alleged treatment of actors (especially Ray Fisher) on the set of *Justice League* (2017), which augments the reading here. Nevertheless, Whedon's ostensibly feminist work on shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1996–2003) amassed him an army of dedicated fans. Since then, Whedon has combined a casual style with a seemingly accessible online presence to leverage that army of fan labor into supporting and promoting more fanboy-based projects, from parodies of the superhero and horror genres (*Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* in 2008 and *Cabin in the Woods* in 2011) to his involvement with Marvel's Avengers and DC's Justice League franchises. Salter and Stanfill argue, however, that Whedon's feminist-inflected auteur status sits in constant tension with his fan identity.

[8]   In the sixth chapter, Salter and Stanfill explore Zack Snyder's fanboy auteur persona. Snyder has a distinct (if one-note), dark, violent, and misogynistic authorial style, and his directorial career has consisted of remakes, adaptations, and blockbuster superhero franchise entries considered faithful by many. His fanbase deems him "a pure fanboy anointed" (118) and his fans reject criticism of his work as stridently as he himself does. Salter and Stanfill wrote this chapter during the campaign to release the Snyder cut of 2017's *Justice League* but before HBO's 2021 release of Snyder's version. As a result, this chapter might be particularly useful in the classroom, as a starting point for discussion or as the basis of an exercise examining more recent coverage of the campaign and discussions of fan(boy) entitlement.

[9]   The final chapter examines three directors recently added to Marvel and DC's Hollywood superhero franchises, all distinguished by their outsider status—whether as a woman (Patty Jenkins) or person of color (Ryan Coogler and Taika Waititi). While these directors stress their long-term fandom of or emotional connection to the superhero franchises they adapt, this claim to fan identity does not afford them the same level of legitimacy as other figures examined in this text. Further, they tend to be considered exceptional and are made to represent minority categories. The conclusion similarly considers outlier cases of fangirl auteur figures Ava DuVernay and the Wachowskis, who have moved from traditionally auteur positions into more fannish projects. Salter and Stanfill conclude that while these examples seem to indicate that the role of the fan auteur might be opening up to more diverse creators, change is slow. The legitimacy and authority ostensibly provided by the fanboy auteur construct is still far less accessible to creators like Coogler and Jenkins.

[10]   The final chapter and conclusion are likely the most interesting to fan-studies scholars. While the rest of the examples cover fairly well-trodden ground in fan studies, the creators in the last two sections push the boundaries of who can be considered a fan auteur and how, in productive and intriguing ways. The text overwhelmingly focuses on the loudest, most influential examples of fan auteur figures, mostly drawn from the ranks of big-name directors, producers, and writers of Hollywood geek-driven "tentpole media" (160)—though even within this bubble, readers will likely note the absence of the Star Wars (2015–2022) universe (as recognized by the authors themselves, 161) and Star Trek (2009–2016) franchise. As the first book-length examination of the concept, and in terms of the authors' goal to map out a discursive construct, the choice to focus on these figures makes sense. However, it also runs the risk of reifying the role as the province of the mostly white, mostly male creators who are granted the status at this level. Nonetheless, this is still important groundwork to lay. As Salter and Stanfill point out, all creators must reckon with the patterns set by fanboy auteur figures at this largest scale (160–61).

There may currently be more diversity both representationally and authorially in smaller scale productions (such as television shows or streaming platform content). However, celebrating these spaces as better for diversity can also serve to take pressure off Hollywood and relegate diversity to more peripheral spaces (161). The authors' choice to focus on the most overt instances of fanboy auteurs therefore refuses to shy away from the unequal state of the industry. The book's limited focus on Hollywood and UK-based figures primarily working in film (and secondarily television and literature) also leaves a wide field for future work to explore; not only are there likely to be interesting examples of creators expanding and complicating the fanboy auteur figure at smaller scales of film and television production, but also other fields entirely (for example, independent and internet media production, or video games—itself a somewhat surprising omission in this text, considering Salter's wealth of work in game studies). Examinations of transnational and transcultural figures would also be particularly illuminating.

[11]   *A Portrait of the Auteur as Fanboy* provides a snapshot of the fanboy auteur figure at a specific moment in the late 2010s. Since its writing, new information has and continues to come to light about many of the figures examined here, further complicating their standing as fan(boy) auteur figures. Nevertheless, the text remains valuable as a mapping of the discursive field at this moment and as a jumping-off point for future work examining the role. Reflecting the current landscape, the text reveals how, in Hollywood geek-driven franchises, the fanboy auteur role is still mostly the province of white men. Ultimately, however, the fan and auteur axes that Salter and Stanfill introduce as a taxonomic strategy will prove a useful tool for understanding and analyzing how elements of the role might be used by a variety of author-figures as legitimating strategies.

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