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Editorial

Fandom and/as labor

Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, United States

[0.1] *Keywords*—Community; Gift economy; Media industry; Value; Work

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1. Introduction

[1.1] It has long been recognized both within academia and in the various communities organized around fandom that the practice of being a fan does not merely consist of passive consumption. Rather, fans are also producers, making everything from interpretations of their favorite television shows to extratextual products like wikis, fan fiction, and fan videos to data about their own consumption habits and those of their peers that can be used to market new products. It is now well established that watching television can usefully be conceptualized as work (Jhally and Livant 1986; Smythe 1977), and a labor framing has been applied to user-generated content by critical media studies scholars (Andrejevic 2009; Fuchs 2012; Hesmondhalgh 2010). However, fans have not often been approached this way. This disjuncture partially comes from the fact that fan activity is by all appearances both freely chosen and understood as pleasure, neither of which is typically associated with work. Instead, fan action has been framed as being active or participatory, and while these conceptualizations have been productive, when the lens of labor is applied, unique and crucial questions come into view.

[1.2] To speak of labor is to attend to the value fans generate—an antidote to surprisingly tenacious notions of fan activity as a valueless pleasure. Once we have conceptualized fan work as generating value, we can also inquire into how that value is distributed and whether work circulating between fans in gift economies or among fans and industry is potentially exploited labor. This special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* takes the premise that if fans are a vital part of the new economy, then we have to take the economy part as seriously as the vital part. When such a stance is taken, it turns out that fan labor, like duct tape or the Force, has a dark side and a light side, and it holds the universe—or at least fandom—together. The contributors to this special issue demonstrate a wide variety of ways that labor functions in fandom.

2. Come to the dark side (We use cookies—see our privacy policy)

[2.1] In the contemporary moment, labor issues are once again coming to the forefront of many people's political consciousness. When we proposed this topic, the February and March 2011 Wisconsin union protests were recent events, and Occupy Wall Street and its discourse of the 1 percent versus the 99 percent was still to come. Since then, this sort of conflict around labor and the distribution of resources to workers has become ever more central, with Walmart and fast-food worker strikes forming part of an increasingly mainstream struggle over dignified working conditions and a living wage.

[2.2] Labor conditions in media are also in the midst of a large-scale transformation. There was a marked increase over the first decade of the 21st century in what used to be called runaway production (and is now maybe just production), with TV series increasingly being produced in Canada and films increasingly being made in New Zealand. The same period saw an explosion of unscripted series. Both of these production strategies employ writers, actors, directors, and other personnel in ways that skirt the terms of union contracts in order to lower labor costs (Lotz 2007). One major issue in the 2007–8 Writers Guild of America strike was an insistence that Web content was creative work and creators were thus eligible to be paid at creative rates, rather than promotional work that creators were obligated to participate in for free (Gray 2010; Leaver 2013; Russo 2010). The kinds of paratexts or pieces of ancillary content that were at stake in the WGA strike are quite like what fans produce, and turning to fans rather than paid staff for such work thus looks increasingly good for the bottom line. After all, even against the baseline of declining labor strength in Hollywood, fan work is a bargain for industry.

[2.3] Fan value creation—in terms of meaning, loyalty, commitment, and promotion—is not new, but industry recognition and encouragement, as well as the contemporary expansion of monetization, are. The contemporary era has seen technologically enabled visibility of fan practices that in many instances existed before current media technologies (Bacon-Smith 1991; Coppa 2008; Jenkins 1992). One of the first to make sense of user activity on the Internet as labor was Tiziana Terranova (2000, 37), who contended that "free labor is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time shamelessly exploited." We find that simultaneity of pleasure and exploitation to be key.

[2.4] For example, the video game industry has long been working to blur the line between labor and play in its own ranks by recruiting fans as beta testers for games that are about to be released. Companies routinely emphasize the benefits and the prestige associated with early access: alpha and beta testers are said to have the ear of game makers, to be influential in shaping the final product. Similar rhetoric abounds in recruitment materials aimed at young workers looking to break into the industry. Entry-level workers, like game testers (otherwise known as QA, for quality assurance), are promised a paying job that hardly feels like work at all. Who wouldn't want to spend their day earning money for doing something that they were already doing just for fun? Game industry workplaces are designed

to create an atmosphere that further reinforces a playful aesthetic. Employees describe "an ambience of 'cool' built up around unregulated hours, lax dress code, studio pranks, free food, fitness facilities, lavish parties, funky interior design, and an array of other perks and promises" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2006, 604). Some gaming companies have built entire marketing strategies around the notion that they are fun places to work: Sony, the maker of Playstation game consoles, made three seasons' worth of reality television competitions called *The Tester* in which it gave away QA jobs as the grand prizes (*The Tester* 2014).

[2.5] Unfortunately for fans who aspire to become industry professionals, the realities of game testing are far less glamorous than they initially appear. Game testing is a brutal, monotonous, repetitive, poorly paid, insecure job—and testers aren't the only ones in the games industry with grievances. Even workers with more prestigious, higher-level jobs in the industry run afoul of exploitative labor practices, such as crunch time, an "industry term that indicates an apparently unusual period of crisis in the production schedule" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2006, 609). According to the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), crunch time is "omnipresent" in the gaming industry (2004, 18). Gaming companies justify crunch time by pointing to looming deadlines such as a release date that will be in time to catch the Christmas rush (IGDA 2004, 18), and yet Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter describe crunch time as "apparently" unusual because, in fact, companies in the tech industry rely on crunch time as a cost-saving mechanism that is built into the corporate culture. Indeed, "normalized crunch time...points to a very elementary economic fact: it is a good deal, a steal in fact, for game companies" (2006, 609). In other words, from the perspective of games companies, crunch time panics are a planned feature of the working environment, not a bug. Such working conditions are made possible in large part by the exploitation of the blurry boundary between labor and fandom.

3. The light at the end of the tunnel may be you: Valuing fan work

[3.1] If one trajectory locates fan work as generating surplus value that is ultimately extracted and exploited by industry, a second would focus on the proliferation of value generated by fans for fans. Fandom runs on fan labor, and this work produces enjoyment, collectivity, and various material and immaterial goods that give fandom shape as a practice, community, or culture. Calling attention to this action as labor stakes an important claim to that production precisely as a production of value.

[3.2] It can be difficult to think of fan activities and labor in the same register. Fans freely engage in these activities—or they are at least not coerced by the intractable need to earn a living. People enjoy doing them. Thus, it seems as if it isn't really labor and fans don't require payment because enjoyment is enough, or because fandom rejects capitalist logics (De Kosnik 2012; Fiske 1992; Noppe 2011). However, fan labor also dovetails with contemporary labor practice through the rise of pleasurable work as a widespread or even normative phenomenon. Eran Fisher (2012, 173) describes nonalienated work as carrying the "possibility to express oneself, to control one's production process, to objectify one's

essence and connect and communicate with others." Fan work is precisely this sort of self-expression and connection, which fans produce under their own control. This lack of alienation has frequently been noted as common in, if not endemic to, contemporary labor in general (Cohen 2012; Postigo 2009), but because of the heretofore rigid separation of leisure/pleasure from labor/drudgery (Meehan 2000), pleasurable labor often does not register as labor at all, as indeed it does not tend to with fan work.

[3.3] Rather than conceptualizing fan activity as labor, the production and circulation of goods in fandom has generally been described as a gift economy (Hellekson 2009; Scott 2009). Participants in such an economy use gift giving as the means to circulate goods and services; this exchange does not typify the colloquial notion of a gift as a freely offered expression of affection but rather is obligatory (Hellekson 2009; Mauss [1925] 2000; Pearson 2007) and is organized by status (Boyle 2003; Hyde [1983] 2007; Mauss [1925] 2000). To modify the open source software saying "Free as in free speech, not as in free beer," fan work is "For free as in a gift, not for free as in without pay." The emphasis in fan circulation of gifts is in producing and reinforcing fannish identities and relationships. As Abigail De Kosnik (2013) frames it, "'Free' fan labor (fan works distributed for no payment) means 'free' fan labor (fans may revise, rework, remake, and otherwise remix mass-culture texts without dreading legal action or other interference from copyright holders). Many, perhaps even most, fans who engage in this type of production look upon this deal very favorably." Because of the way fan gift economies run on identity, connection, and production according to one's own desires in a way antithetical to our usual beliefs about work, labor has not been a prominent conversation thus far.

[3.4] However, recognizing and valuing fan work as work is vital. Fan labor, for example, has enabled the crown jewel of online fandom, the Organization for Transformative Works' fan fiction archive, the Archive of Our Own, to recently pass the milestone of a million fan works uploaded (AO3 2014). Fans built it; fans maintain it; fans produce and auction off creative works to raise funds for it (ao3auction 2013). The light side is the work fans do for each other. Fans produce wikis and episode transcripts, allowing a depth of knowledge and engagement with objects of fandom that industry products alone could never satisfy. Fan work also produces things for other fans more concretely, as can be traced in the dedications and shout-outs appended to fan artworks. Perhaps most importantly, fan work creates fan community—fandom itself—through the production and maintenance of affective ties. Calling this work "work" opens up appreciation for the skills involved, much as with feminist insistence on care work as labor (Arber and Ginn 1995; England and Folbre 1999; Hochschild 1989). The labor framework provides a powerful way to value what fans are doing, in contrast to the dismissals that have long attended fandom. If industry has not framed fan action as work to avoid payment, then the pleasure framework sells fans short vis-à-vis what they do for each other. This special issue examines these considerations as well.

4. About this issue

[4.1] One theme running through the articles collected here is that of promotional labor. Matthias Stork discusses the ways the Fox series *Glee* has recruited its fans to do both the work of distribution for official promotional content and the creation of their own content that promotes the show, parsing how different kinds of labor are called for across what he calls *Glee*'s transmedia geography. Rose Helens-Hart similarly describes how the design of the Web site for the Comedy Central program *Tosh.0* teaches users to share its brand with their personal social networks. Christina Savage's analysis of the "save our show" campaign around the NBC TV series *Chuck* notes the promotional labor fans did to get others to not only watch but watch visibly—during the regular airing, by buying the sponsor's products, and by using a hash tag when making online posts.

[4.2] A second common refrain among the pieces gathered here is a consideration of gift economies and volunteerism. Bethan Jones's analysis of *Fifty Shades of Grey* demonstrates the ways in which much of the fan outrage over converting a fan fiction story into a commercial novel has to do with violation of the expectations of fandom as a gift economy. This, she argues, is why selling fan crafts is considered vastly more acceptable, as it is clearly a market transaction rather than a gift transaction. For her part, Bertha Chin contends that calling fan work "exploited labor" misses the role of the gift economy in organizing fan production; to understand this social phenomenon, she argues, we must attend to fans' own explanations of why they do what they do. Likewise, Robert Moses Peaslee, Jessica El-Khoury, and Ashley Liles contend that motivations of fan volunteers at media festivals include the desire to be a good citizen of the fannish community. Moreover, Stork notes that *Glee* positions its transmedia materials as gifts in exchange for fans' devotion, which he notes has been quite effective in getting fans to join in. Tisha Turk's Symposium piece is a careful thinking through of gift economies. She advocates moving beyond considering only traditional items such as fiction or vids to be gifts, suggesting that fans take seriously such gifts as an archive, a link, or an AO3 kudo. She also advocates getting past the traditional notion of one-to-one gifting to think about how fans give gifts to the community writ large.

[4.3] Other articles collected here focus on the dark side—the potential for harm to fans around or through their labor. Giacomo Poderi and David J. Hakken describe how pleasurable undertakings like the creation, play testing, and distribution of video game mods can cause fans to reconsider their relationship to the objects of their fandom by structuring that relationship as an act of labor as opposed to an act of play. Stork describes fans as being given false promises of interaction and access when *Glee*'s production staff had no intention of actually including them. Jones notes the ways in which the conversion of gift economics to market economics undermines fan collectivity and trust. In addition, the roundtable discussion between Bertha Chin, Bethan Jones, Myles McNutt, and Luke Pebler questions the ethics of Hollywood's use of crowd funding tools like Kickstarter to generate funds for major motion pictures like the forthcoming *Veronica Mars* feature film and Zach Braff's *Wish I Was Here*. In the book review section, Stephanie Ann Brown asks in her review of Trebor Scholz's edited collection, *Digital Labor: The Internet as Factory and Playground*, whether fannish labor necessarily entails exploitation, and whether that exploitation resembles that described

by traditional Marxist models. Simone Becque questions how it is that popular texts beloved by fans seem perfectly able to imagine any number of fantastic end-of-the-world scenarios even as they seem unable to imagine the end of capitalism in her review of Michael A. Peters and Ergin Bulut's edited volume *Cognitive Capitalism, Education, and Digital Labor*.

[4.4] In contrast, several of the other pieces focus on the savvy exhibited by fans. Savage describes how the fans of *Chuck* used their knowledge of how television is financed to convince the network to keep their show on the air by making a visible, public display of support to brands like Subway that advertised during the show. Joly MacFie provides a fascinating personal history of punk button badges and zines, discussing how the relationships between fan producers and artists in that era were relatively symbiotic. Chin describes the careful navigation of fandom and professionalism that gives the fan site runners she interviewed access and status. Indeed, status is a key counterpoint to harm, with Chin, Stork, and Peaslee, El-Khoury, and Liles all noting the desire to increase one's own social standing and influence in the community as something that should be taken seriously as a major factor in motivating fans to do such work. Finally, the book reviews also grapple with the potential for political upheaval that is sometimes hidden in popular culture. For example, Anne Kustritz's review of J. Jack Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* considers how silly or trashy pop culture vehicles, from romantic comedies to animated children's movies to Lady Gaga's concert performances might be martialled toward feminist and queer activist ends.

5. Coming up

[5.1] The next issue of TWC, No. 16, will appear in June 2014 as a guest-edited special issue: Bob Rehak edits a special issue on Materiality and Object-Oriented Fandom. TWC No. 17, to be released in September 2014, is an unthemed issue.

[5.2] TWC welcomes general submissions. We particularly encourage fans to submit Symposium essays. We encourage all potential authors to read the submission guidelines (<http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/about/submissions#onlineSubmissions>).

6. Acknowledgments

[6.1] It is not possible to properly acknowledge the depth of appreciation we feel toward everyone who has helped make this issue of TWC possible. They have suffered hard deadlines, late nights, and short due dates. As always, we thank the authors in this issue, whose original work makes TWC possible; the peer reviewers, who freely provide their time and expertise; the editorial team members, whose engagement with and solicitation of material is so valuable; the board members, listed in the journal's masthead, for their support; and the production team members, who transform rough manuscripts into publishable documents.

- [6.2] The following people worked on TWC No. 15 in an editorial capacity: Megan Condis and Mel Stanfill (guest editors); Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (editors); Cameron Salisbury (Symposium); and Louisa Stein (Review).
- [6.3] The following people worked on TWC No. 15 in a production capacity: Rrain Prior (production editor); Shoshanna Green, Karen Hellekson, and Christine Mains (copyeditors); Rrain Prior (layout editor); and Carmen Montopoli, Amanda Retartha, and Vickie West (proofreaders).
- [6.4] TWC thanks the journal project's Organization for Transformative Works board liaison, Andrea Horbinski. OTW provides financial support and server space to TWC but is not involved in any way in the content of the journal, which is editorially independent.
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Praxis

Fifty shades of exploitation: Fan labor and *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Bethan Jones

Aberystwyth University, Wales, United Kingdom

[0.1] *Abstract*—This exploration of the debates that have taken place in fandom over the ethics of pulling fan fiction and publishing it as original work draws on the notion of the fannish gift economy, which postulates that gifts such as fan fiction and fan art have value in the fannish community because they are designed to create and cement its social structure. Tension exists between fans who subscribe to the notion of a fannish gift economy and those who exploit fandom by using it to sell their pulled-to-publish works. An examination of E. L. James's 2012 *Fifty Shades* trilogy (comprising the books *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker*, and *Fifty Shades Freed*), which began as *Twilight* fan fiction, in addition to *Twilight* fan art sold through sites such as Redbubble and Etsy, demonstrates a tension between the two modes of fan expression: sale of artworks appears to be an acceptable practice in fandom, but the commercial sale of fan fic, even when marketed as original fiction, is widely contested.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Commercialization; Fan art; Fan fiction; Gift economy; E. L. James; *Twilight*

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0501>.

1. Introduction

[1.1] In April 2012, UK media was overrun with reports about a book series that had recently hit the shelves. *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its two sequels, *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*, authored by British writer E. L. James, proved wildly successful; much of the media attention devoted to the series focused on its erotic content. The books center on virginal college student Anastasia (Ana) Steele and her BDSM relationship with billionaire CEO Christian Grey. A second area of media interest, however, lay in the series' genesis as *Twilight* fan fiction. Debates took place in fandom on the ethics of pulling fan fic and publishing it as original work. Implicit in this conversation were the notions of a gift economy versus Web 2.0 notions of fans as prosumers, this making evident the tensions between these concepts of fan production.

[1.2] James originally wrote and published *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its sequels as a multichapter fan fic under a pen name. The fic was well known in the Twilight fandom; it had been published on FanFiction.net before moving to James's personal Web site after FanFiction.net removed the work for violating its terms of service on mature content. After this move, the series was picked up by The Writer's Coffee Shop (<http://www.thewriterscoffeeshop.com/>), an online publishing house formed by Twilight fans that specialized in publishing pulled-to-publish fan fiction—that is, fan fiction that has been removed from the Web, has character names and descriptions changed, and is published commercially as original fiction (Tan 2012) (note 1). The Writer's Coffee Shop published the Fifty Shades novels in e-book and print-on-demand format until they were picked up by Vintage, a Random House imprint, in 2012.

[1.3] *Fifty Shades* became the best-selling book of all time in Britain, with e-book and print sales topping 5 million copies by the end of summer 2012, not to mention the more than 65 million copies it has sold worldwide to date (note 2). Despite this, however, the book has been derided by critics, readers, and Twilight fans alike, although not always for the same reasons. The *Fifty Shades* trilogy brought BDSM to a wider mainstream audience, and with that came both feminist and BDSM critiques of the series. The blogger Smash (2012) argues that *Fifty Shades*' promotion of BDSM reveals the way in which BDSM is culturally identical with domestic violence. Similarly, an English domestic violence charity called for copies of the book to be burned in protest against its normalizing of violence against women (Flood 2012a). BDSM activists have countered these arguments, however, arguing that the series demonizes, rather than depicts, BDSM. Pamela Stephenson Connolly (2012) suggests that the character of Grey is "portrayed as a cold-hearted sexual predator with a dungeon (that word has been wisely swapped for 'playroom'), full of scary sex toys. Worst of all is the implication that his particular erotic style has developed because he is psychologically 'sick.'" The quality of the writing was also criticized in the mainstream press. The *Guardian* announcement that the trilogy had been nominated for the National Book Award in the category of popular fiction book of the year (Flood 2012b) garnered comments such as, "With the greatest of respect, why don't they just call it the Shit Books Award?"; "*Fifty Shades of Grey* is hilarious...full of clichés and so contrived," and "Can I submit a copy of *Razzle* or *Penthouse* for the NBA, if it's open to pornography?" Both popular and critical discourses thus denigrate the novels as lacking in literary merit while positioning the commenters as in possession of more cultural capital than *Fifty Shades*' fans (Harman and Jones 2013).

[1.4] Fannish commentary also shares these critiques, criticizing the books for their bad prose, but fandom also has its own set of concerns, which draw on different discourses than those of the mainstream press. A search for *Fifty Shades of Grey* on the blogging platform LiveJournal reveals a number of communities dedicated to

criticizing the series. Positioned as sites of antifandom (Gray 2003, 2005, 2006), these communities contain links to parodic videos such as those in the "X reads" series as well as dedicated entries sporking the trilogy (note 3). Among the critiques raised against the series in these entries are Grey's predatory and abusive actions; the presentation of stalking and controlling another person as romantic; the misrepresentation of BDSM; and the poor quality of the prose. With the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, fans expressed concerns about its impact on fandom. As blogger audreyii_fic (2012) writes, James is "embodying the worst stereotypes about fan fic writers. That we're lazy, that we lack talent, that we're leeching off the 'real' creativity of others. It makes every last one of us look bad." Beyond fandom at large, however, Twilight fans are critical of James and Fifty Shades. Bonnie, commenting on Aja Romano's article "*50 Shades of Grey* and the Twilight Pro-fic Phenomenon," writes,

[1.5] Terrible plot, terrible character development, and terrible writing are what "Fifty Shades" is, and many of us in the Twi fandom are truly embarrassed that this is the fic that puts us on the map. There are far better writers in the Twi fandom who deserve this success—Debra Anastasia and Jennifer DeLucy are a few. Unfortunately this poorly written and poorly edited soap opera that was "published" to line James's and TWCS's [The Writer's Coffee Shop] pockets gains fame. It's a truly sad day for our fandom...On the other end of this is the growing number of our writers leaving our community, either pulling published and WIP fics in the hopes of becoming the next E. L. James, or out of disgust for the now mercenary attitude of some writers. Some have, in fact, posted that if you want to know the end to their story you have to "buy the book." What makes a fandom work is the respect and trust that the writers and readers have for one another. James and TWCS have betrayed this, and many of us fear this will destroy the fandom we love so much. (March 26, 2012; <http://www.themarysue.com/50-shades-of-grey-and-the-twilight-pro-fic-phenomenon/#comment-476564778>)

[1.6] For fans, then, the success of Fifty Shades raises concerns beyond those evidenced in mainstream media. The series is not simply badly written, poorly researched, misrepresentative of BDSM, and antiwoman; it is also not representative of fan fiction and is potentially damaging to fandom. These conversations have been largely ignored by the mainstream press and framed through the lens of fan exploitation.

2. Fan production and the gift economy

[2.1] The fannish gift economy may be used as a framework for understanding how fandom can function in opposition to a capitalist economy. Fan cultural production is perhaps most commonly thought of—at least in the wider media—in relation to fan fiction, but within fandom, it takes many forms. From fan fic to videos, meta to fan art, and icons to memes, the range and style of fannish work is as varied as the fans. Much academic work on fan production to date has drawn on Henry Jenkins's concept of textual poaching. Jenkins positions fans as active consumers of media products and challenges the existing stereotypes of fans as "cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers" (1992, 23). He further argues that fans "actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions" (23–24). Jenkins and other scholars of fandom (Bacon-Smith 1992; Baym 1998; Chibnall 1997) have made much of fan activity as resistant, but not everyone is convinced of this analysis. Christine Scodari and Jenna L. Felder (2000) suggest that some claims of resistance made in early examinations of fan fiction have been overstated, while others (Kaplan 2006; Parrish 2007) emphasize the role played by the communal nature of fandom. Melissa Gray (2010) writes,

[2.2] This is why fandom is so rewarding: the vast sharing of points of view and creativity that makes it *our* universe, belonging to the fans as well as the creators of the canon, with our own characters and settings and situations. I can no longer watch episodes the way TPTB [The Powers That Be] likely intended. I bring not only my unique experiences to my viewing, but also the wealth of fanon background material that I've absorbed over the years.

[2.3] The notion of fandom being the fans' universe speaks to this communal nature. Fans do not simply upload art, fic, or vids; they also beta read each other's work, correspond with readers and other writers in mailing lists and discussion forums, respond to challenge communities, upload fan art as bases for icons, create videos based on other fans' song requests, meet in conventions, and share advice on cosplaying, among other activities. These activities work to foster a sense of community within fandom. This allows those engaged in fannish production to bounce ideas off each other; it also allows them to work collaboratively to create stories, art, music, and vids. Seen this way, fan production becomes less about acts of resistance than a means of reinforcing community. In other words, it forms part of what Lewis Hyde (1983) refers to as the gift economy. Hyde suggests that gift economies are distinguishable from commodity culture as a result of their ability to establish a relationship between the person giving the gift and the person receiving it. This giving and receiving creates a communal bond founded on a sense of obligation and reciprocity (Scott 2010). Drawing on Hyde, Karen Hellekson (2009) argues that

fandom can be seen as a gift economy, in that exchange in the fan community is made up of three elements related to the notion of gift: giving, receiving, and reciprocating. She argues that the notion of the gift is central to fan economy, not simply because "the general understanding is that if no money is exchanged, the copyright owners have no reason to sue because they retain exclusive rights to make money from their property" (114), but because the gifts themselves have value in the fannish community. They are designed to create and cement its social structure:

[2.4] Fans engage with their metatext by presenting gift artworks, by reciprocating these gifts in certain approved, fandom-specific ways, and by providing commentary about these gifts. Writer and reader create a shared dialogue that results in a feedback loop of gift exchange, whereby the gift of artwork or text is repetitively exchanged for the gift of reaction, which is itself exchanged, with the goal of creating and maintaining social solidarity. (115)

[2.5] Suzanne Scott (2009, ¶1.1) notes that "recent work on online gift economies has acknowledged the inability to engage with gift economies and commodity culture as disparate systems, as commodity culture begins selectively appropriating the gift economy's ethos for its own economic gain." This commodity culture is perhaps best exemplified through the case of FanLib, which sought to commodify fan fiction at a newly created archive. FanLib's creators targeted and e-mailed fan fic writers and encouraged them to upload fic to the site in exchange for prizes, participation in contests leading to e-publication, and attention from the producers of TV. As Hellekson (2009) and Jenkins (2007) both note, FanLib's persistent misreading of community as commodity alienated fans, illustrating that "attempts to encroach on the meaning of the gift and to perform a new kind of (commerce-based) transaction with fan-created items will not be tolerated" (Hellekson 2009, 117).

[2.6] However, it is not simply the binary of commodity culture and gift economy that work with (or against) each other. Milly Williamson argues that fan culture itself is influenced by two opposing sets of values that dominate the cultural field and that fans take positions in line with: cultural value based on the profit motive, and cultural production for its own sake—that is, the gift economy. This can lead to a split in fandom, with some fans influenced by economic principles and other influenced by "fandom-for-fandom's-sake" (Williamson 2005, 119). This split is epitomized in the controversy over James's *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

3. *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the ethics of pulling to publish

[3.1] Analyzing the reactions of fans to the publication and widespread success of the *Fifty Shades* series reveals two results: fans either applaud James for making the leap from fan fic to pro fic, or they criticize her for exploiting her fans and bringing fandom into disrepute. Both of these results are crucial to understanding the debates around fan labor and fan exploitation, but I will focus on the latter first. To do so, however, requires a deeper understanding of the genesis of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy.

[3.2] *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its sequels were originally written as an all-human alternate universe *Twilight* fan fiction called *Master of the Universe*, in which Edward Cullen was a rich CEO and Bella a college student. The fic was well known within *Twilight* fandom, and James, writing under the name Snowqueens Icedragon, had amassed her own fan following. Tish Beaty (2012), *Fifty Shades*' editor with The Writer's Coffee Shop, writes that by the time she got into the story, it had over 2,000 reviews on FanFiction.net, and Anne Jamison (2012) notes that although it is difficult to know for certain how many readers *Master of the Universe* had—the story moved from FanFiction.net to James's own Web site—it certainly had tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of readers. As Jane Litte (2012a) comments, "During the height of its popularity, an auction for the series raised \$30,000. The author appeared on a fan fiction panel at the 2010 ComicCon and attended a three day conference in DC thrown by her fans" (note 4).

[3.3] When James contracted with The Writer's Coffee Shop to publish *Master of the Universe* as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the work was pulled off-line and the *Twilight*-specific details removed. When the series was picked up by Vintage, its fan fiction origins were acknowledged but downplayed, with the publishing house issuing a statement declaring, "It is widely known that E. L. James began to capture a following as a writer shortly after she posted her second fan-fiction story. She subsequently took that story and rewrote the work, with new characters and situations. That was the beginning of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy" (quoted in Litte 2012b). Vintage had asserted that *Fifty Shades* was wholly original fiction, deviating substantially from the original fan fic, and Vintage stated that *Fifty Shades* and *Master of the Universe* were two distinct pieces of fiction. In March 2012, however, the Web site Dear Author (<http://dearauthor.com/>) carried out several comparisons on both pieces (figures 1 and 2), concluding, "Vintage says of MOTU and 50 Shades 'they were and are two distinctly separate pieces of work.' Turnitin (an internet-based plagiarism detection tool used by schools and universities) says they are 89% the same" (Litte 2012b). *Fifty Shades of Grey* was thus not substantively different from the fan fic it had originally been published as—a point that remains a bone of contention for James's critics.

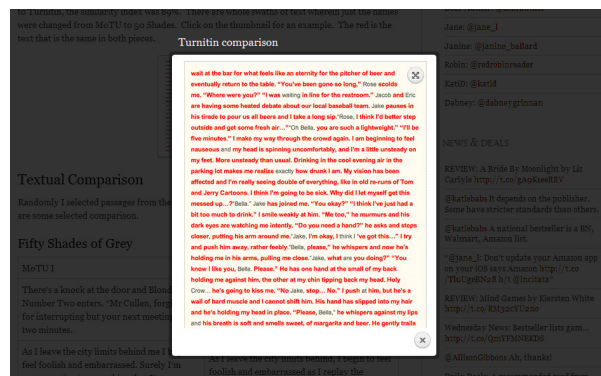


Figure 1. Screen shot of Turnitin comparison of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Master of the Universe* posted on Dear Author Web site, March 13, 2012. [View larger image.]

Fifty Shades of Grey	
MoTU I	Fifty Shades of Grey
There's a knock at the door and Blond Number Two enters. "Mr Cullen, forgive me for interrupting but your next meeting is in two minutes.	There's a knock at the door, and Blonde Number Two enters. "Mr. Grey, forgive me for interrupting, but your next meeting is in two minutes.
As I leave the city limits behind me I begin to feel foolish and embarrassed. Surely I'm over-reacting to something that I'm imagining.... Okay, so he's very attractive, confident, commanding, so at ease with himself. But on the flip side he's also arrogant, and in spite of his impeccable manners, he's very autocratic, and cold... well on the surface, and an involuntary shiver runs down my spine. He may be arrogant but then he's accomplished so much at such a young age, and I can tell he doesn't suffer fools gladly, why should he? I am irritated again that Rose didn't give me a brief biography.	As I leave the city limits behind, I begin to feel foolish and embarrassed as I replay the interview in my mind. Surely, I'm overreacting to something that's imaginary. Okay, so he's very attractive, confident, commanding, at ease with himself – but on the flip side, he's arrogant, and for all his impeccable manners, he's autocratic and cold. Well, on the surface. An involuntary shiver runs down my spine. He may be arrogant, but then he has a right to be – he's accomplished so much at such a young age. He doesn't suffer fools gladly, but why should he? Again, I'm irritated that Kate didn't give me a brief biography.
"What about our arrangement?" "We don't have an arrangement yet." He narrows his eyes at me, then seems to remember himself. Releasing my hand, he takes my elbow and	"What about our arrangement?" "We don't have an arrangement yet." He narrows his eyes, and then seems to remember himself. Releasing

Figure 2. Screen shot of comparison of *Master of the Universe* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* posted on Dear Author Web site, March 13, 2012. [View larger image.]

[3.4] The central issue in relation to fan exploitation and labor is that fan fic readers and reviewers did some of the work in creating *Master of the Universe*, but James took sole credit for its success. The role that the fannish community played in shaping what would become *Fifty Shades of Grey*, often discounted by the mainstream media, which asks how other fan fiction writers can become pro, is discussed and contested within fandom. As Has notes, "E. L. James has used and taken advantage of *Twilight* fandom, yes she's got her fans and supporters but overall she's left a huge wankfest on her road to publication...when you are writing a FF [fan fic], you are writing for that fandom and the universe which you love, no profit should be made from it because isn't that is [sic] taking advantage and using a fanbase to get a step up" (March 13, 2012; <http://dearauthor.com/features/industry-news/master-of-the-universe-versus-fifty-shades-by-e-l-james-comparison/#comment-356698>). Ros expresses a similar viewpoint:

[3.5] I cannot imagine ever taking one of my fan fics and rewriting it as original fiction. Not even the ones where I invented my own characters and plots, let alone the ones where I used characters from the source material and imagined them in new situations. Not because I am afraid that I would be breaking copyright—I'm pretty confident I could do a good enough job of the rewriting to avoid that—but because I would be breaking the trust of my fannish readers. Those were the people for whom I wrote, the people who loved the same fandoms I did and wanted more from them. They were the people who encouraged me and gave me feedback and let me do my learning and making mistakes without giving up on me. Those stories were freely offered and I was grateful for every single person who read them, commented on them or recommended them to others. In some way, those stories belong to my early readers as much as they belong to me. I do think that this is a huge difference between the way that fan fic works and the way that published fic works. Readers are much more involved in the process. Feedback comes with every chapter. Writing prompts are set and challenges posed by readers. And so on. It is an interactive process in a way that published writing is not. So if I were a Twilight fan who had read MOTU, I would be feeling seriously betrayed by the author. (March 13, 2013; <http://dearauthor.com/features/industry-news/master-of-the-universe-versus-fifty-shades-by-e-l-james-comparison/#comment-356702>)

[3.6] Sarah Wanenchak (2012) notes that "given that fannish works are driven primarily by collective love for a particular media property, there is a sense among most members of fandom as a whole that the seeking of monetary gain from fannish works is not only legally questionable but sullies the respect that fans ideally have for the object of their fandom." She suggests that this collaborative process—the production of work, its consumption, the production of a response, its consumption, the production of new work—is the point at which copyright issues intersect with the ethics of fan culture and necessitate the consideration of prosumption. Discussing prosumption—that is, the simultaneous role of being a producer of what one consumes—George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgensen (2010) argue that Web 2.0 facilitates the process through such examples as Wikipedia, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and the blogosphere. With the advent of these new media technologies and the way in which they affect fannish engagement with objects of fandom, producers are becoming more reliant on fan labor to build their brand and increase their product's longevity, as Alexis Lothian (2009) points out:

[3.7] In recent years, media producers have explicitly sought to solicit fan participation as labor for their profits in the form of user-generated content that helps build their brand. Many fans perceive these developments as a

desirable legitimization of fan work, but they can also be understood as an inversion in the direction of fannish theft. Rather than fans stealing commodified culture to make works for their own purposes, capital steals their labor—as, we might consider, it stole ideas from the cultural commons and fenced them off in the first place—to add to its surplus. (135)

[3.8] Fifty Shades complicates the concept of prosumption, however, as James "built a following within a community founded in part on the explicit rejection of monetary gain in favor of fannish love, and then used that community and the work it helped her to produce in order to make a name—and a fair amount of money—in mainstream publishing" (Wanenchak 2012). James thus straddles the line between producer and fan, stealing from commodified culture to create *Master of the Universe* while stealing from fandom to make a success of Fifty Shades. The question of whether James's fans would have been so involved in supporting and reviewing her work if they were aware that their efforts would result in her profit—although ultimately unanswerable—is nevertheless a valid one, and I would suggest that these debates suggest a subtle change in the relationship between fan and producer. From being in a position of cultural marginality where they poach from texts, fans are now the ones potentially being poached from (Andrejevic 2008; Milner 2009). Milner (2009) notes that as active audiences become more prevalent, producers of media texts are fast recognizing the value of courting niche groups of prosumers. Julie Levin Russo (2009) details how Video Maker Toolkit invited fans to be part of the *Battlestar Galactica* TV reboot (2004–9) by making a 4-minute film, the best of which would be aired on television—in return for fans giving up their rights to the vids. J. J. Abrams, creator of *Alias* (2001–6) and *Lost* (2004–10), has commented that he regularly reads Internet fan message boards; he claims that listening to real-time audience feedback gives his shows some of the characteristics of a live play (Andrejevic 2008). Similarly, James's reading of reviews and engaging in a dialogue with fans creates an author/editor dynamic. Andrejevic (2008, 26) suggests that as a result of this more active, critical approach to viewing, "fan culture is at long last being deliberately and openly embraced by producers thanks in part to the ability of the internet not just to unite far-flung viewers but to make the fruits of their labor readily accessible to the mainstream—and to producers themselves."

[3.9] Andrejevic (2008) further suggests that the promise of accountability, which forums like Twilighted (<http://twilighted.net/>) and FanFiction.net (<https://www.fanfiction.net/>) provide, also works to foster identification on the part of audiences with the viewpoint of the producers. Similarly, James's involvement in fandom provided her with the opportunity to use fans' knowledge while also causing fans to identify her as one of them. Tish Beaty notes that the Twilighted forum on which James posted *Master of the Universe* is where James built her original fan base.

She writes, "The Bunker Babes are a group of *Fifty Shades* fans that supported and backed James no matter what direction she took the story. They promoted *Fifty Shades* all over Twitter and the fan fiction communities. They were her sounding board and cheer squad, and were a force to be reckoned with" (2012, 300). The role of the Bunker Babes here aligns with that of fans participating in a gift economy. As Hellekson notes, "In terms of the discourse of gift culture, fandom might best be understood as part of what is traditionally the women's sphere: *the social, rather than the economic*" (2009, 116; emphasis added). By promoting and backing James, the Bunker Babes were also policing the boundaries of fandom and its subjects, with their motivations being "ultimately about protecting, rather than controlling, the ideological diversity of fannish responses to the text" (Scott 2009, ¶3.2).

[3.10] Reading the Bunker Babes' support in terms of prosumption, however, results in a different understanding of the relationship between them as fans and James as a producer. As Jenkins (2006, 134) notes of the delicate relationship between the producer and productive consumer in the age of the active audience, "The media industry is increasingly dependent on active and committed consumers to spread the word about valued properties in an overcrowded media marketplace, and in some cases they are seeking ways to channel the creative output of media fans to lower their production costs."

[3.11] Fandom's position in Web 2.0 and its use of new media technologies means that publishers working with pulled-to-publish fic already have a source of fan labor that they can use to build their brand and increase their product's longevity. However, "enlisting unpaid customers to co-produce the products and services, which are converted to money in the market...corresponds to the expropriation of surplus value from consumer labor" (Zwick, Bonsu, and Aron 2008, 180). James's use of fannish resources, coupled with her failure to acknowledge that support, is, for some fans, an exploitation of fandom. As AlwaysLucky1 notes,

[3.12] I only bought the book because I did [read] MOTU when it was original. I paid to buy Fifty because I felt I was supporting a fan fiction "friend." She didn't "force" me to buy her book, as you put it. But, I am disappointed that she didn't somehow acknowledge her fellow fan fictioners in the Fifty acknowledgement...Here's the thing. She's a writer. As she was writing the fan fic...people were reviewing it. That's why her publishing company paid attention to her. There were so many reviews on the story already. She was getting alot of positive feedback on something so racy. As she posted a new chapter every week. We reviewed every week. As much as she fed us, we fed her with our comments AND suggestions in how far she could or couldn't take the story. (May 29, 2012;

http://www.mediabistro.com/galleycat/fifty-shades-of-grey-wayback-machine_b49124#comment-540658007)

[3.13] However, some fans, such as Debra Conway, have applauded James for turning fan fiction into successful original fiction:

[3.14] Do you honestly think the "captive audience" of Twilight is the same one buying Fifty Shades of Gray? Not unless they've found Twilight fan fic. I'm laughing out loud. And that she somehow cheated her fan fic readers, somehow forcing them to buy her books?...Ms. James wrote an original story—the characters themselves and their experiences were original. She used names from her favorite book and put her story online for free for a while. She still owns the story. Period. James is now a published, successful author. Her book busted the boundaries for the acceptance of what women read and is a phenomenon. I applaud her. You should too. (May 28, 2012; http://www.mediabistro.com/galleycat/fifty-shades-of-grey-wayback-machine_b49124#comment-540641358)

[3.15] The possibility of fans monetizing their own modes of production is posed by some scholars as an alternate form of preemptive protection. Abigail De Kosnik (2009, 123) argues that the "rewards of participating in a commercial market...might be just as attractive as the rewards of participating in a community's gift culture" and puts forth the idea that fans initiating the commercialization of fan production "gifts" insiders, rather than outsiders, the right to profit. Scott (2009, ¶1.3) suggests that De Kosnik's model "clearly identifies the value of fan labor and encourages fans to develop a competitive model to profit from their labors of love rather than continuing to feed an industrial promotional machine." I examine this next.

4. Twilight fan art on Redbubble and Etsy

[4.1] John Fiske (1992) notes that while most fan producers gain considerable prestige in the fan community, with a few exceptions, they earn no money for their work; the main historical exception appears to have been fan artists who sell their paintings and sketches at conventions and fan auctions. The increase in commerce sites such as Redbubble (<http://www.redbubble.com/>) and Etsy (<http://www.etsy.com/>), however, has resulted in what Brigid Cherry calls "an extremely commercial niche for entrepreneurial fans" who sell, among other things, T-shirts, prints of artwork, jewelry, shoes, bags, notebooks, yarn, and patterns (2011, 137). Cherry's analysis of vampire fandom knitters on Ravelry (<https://www.ravelry.com/>) demonstrates the ways in which fan production can be commodified, as members are able to sell patterns in the marketplace, with costs

ranging from \$3 to \$12. However the arguments that Cherry makes can also be applied to other fan-produced objects. Just as ads often appear in vampire fan knitting forums, and just as yarns produced by a specific dyer develop a cult status, becoming highly sought after in their own right, so too do specific producers of fan-made jewelry or T-shirts become well known within their specific fandoms. Furthermore, sites like Teefury (<http://www.teefury.com/>) and Qwertee (<http://www.qwertee.com/>), which offer fan-designed T-shirts for \$8, feature interviews with the artists and encourage a cult status by both limiting the sale of T-shirts to a 24-hour period and encouraging users to vote for their favorite designs for potential sale again in the future. This cult status is dependent not only on the quality of the products but also on the shared love of the fannish text between producer and consumer. This problematizes the market/nonmarket dichotomy that appears in accounts of fandom as a gift economy and in fandom's reaction to pulled-to-publish fan fic.

[4.2] The ethical prohibition against selling work in such a way as to exploit fans is further problematized when taking into account these art-commerce sites. Historically, fanzines were sold at cost rather than for profit, a result of the ethical prohibition against profiting from the object of fandom. The argument could similarly be made that the sale of fan-produced objects like jewelry is acceptable because the items cost money to make: electrons are perceived as free, but creating a Harry Potter-themed scarf requires buying yarn and equipment. It is possible that any money made selling these items only covers the cost to produce them, thus positioning these products similarly to fanzines. The rise of sites like Redbubble problematizes this, however, because the cost of producing the item falls on Redbubble itself rather than on the fan producer. On Redbubble, artists upload designs and choose which items they would like those designs applied to. An artist might create a Doctor Who image using digital art packages, upload the design to the Web site, and specify that she would like it to be made available on T-shirts, bags, and phone cases. There is therefore no cost to the fan producer in creating the piece of work; instead, Redbubble takes a percentage of the sale cost. In that respect, posting work to Redbubble is closer to fan fiction than physical fan art. Yet the sale of fannish goods on Redbubble remains acceptable among fans, whereas pulling fan fic to publish it professionally is not.

[4.3] Sal M. Humphreys (2008) suggests that we should consider "hybrid market environments where there is no such clear distinction between the social and commercial economies—where instead they co-exist in the same space, and where some people occupy different positions over time within the same markets." Humphreys's analysis of the Ravelry discussion boards suggests that the social matters as much as the commercial and the financial, and indeed in many ways influences both production and consumption. Similarly, Etsy's community forums function to provide a social space where Twilight fans can discuss the text while

sharing links to the Twilight items they produce and sell. The "Show me your favorite Twilight item" thread in the Twilight Ladies group contains both discussion of favorite characters (with Edward and Jacob featuring strongly) and links to items to buy. Members of the group thus combine fannish interaction with commercial interaction, often with no line dividing the two.

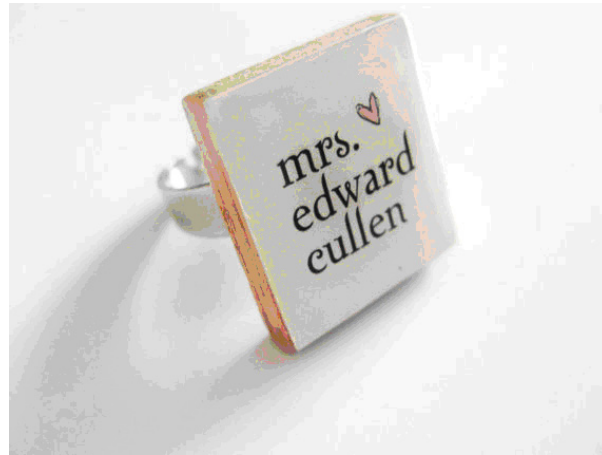


Figure 3. Mrs. Edward Cullen ring by danandesigns, sold on Etsy. [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.4] This fannish/commercial interaction also takes place on sites that are more commonly thought of in relation to fan fic. The twilight_crafts LiveJournal community, for example, encourages sales posts and stipulates that all items must be related to Twilight ([note 5](#)). Many users of the community who also sell Twilight-themed items on Etsy offer free shipping to buyers directed to their shop by the LiveJournal site, thus recognizing the fannish gift economy while commodifying fan labor. As Humphreys (2008) notes, "It's possible to identify people who both give away and sell their content. People negotiate and occupy positions within social, reputational, gifting, and commercial economies—sometimes simultaneously, sometimes sequentially."

[4.5] The rise of e-publishing is of particular interest in relation to these producers, as is its role in the success of the Fifty Shades series. J'Aimee Brooker (2012) notes that e-publishing gives writers much more control over their work in terms of content, distribution, marketing, and pricing. She writes that the financial benefits of e-publishing are also markedly higher than those of traditional publishing: "Self-published authors listing their product with Amazon are privy to a royalties rate of 70% compared to 15–20% of royalties offered by traditional publishing houses." Penguin's 2012 acquisition of the self-publishing platform Author Solutions (<https://www.authorsolutions.com/>) also suggests that traditional publishers are becoming aware of the opportunities afforded by self-publishing platforms. At the time of this writing, Amazon had just announced that it was launching a new platform, Kindle Worlds, where fan fic writers can upload and sell their work. Kindle Worlds enables companies such as Warner Bros. to license their copyrighted material and

allows fans to publish their fan fic as e-books for the Kindle e-reader (<https://kindleworlds.amazon.com/>). Royalties will be paid to both the original author and the fan fiction writer. Although full details remain to be published about how this will work, fans may be able to publish their work on Kindle Worlds while also posting it on free sites such as FanFiction.net, thus negotiating and occupying a range of positions (note 6).

[4.6] Not all fan entrepreneurs give away and sell their content, however. Redbubble, although containing forums similar to Etsy's, is much more commercial in appearance. Whereas Etsy forges its identity as a site for handcrafters, Redbubble markets itself as a site for independent artists. Cornel Sandvoss (2005) contends that while fandom per se is not necessarily gendered, specific fan activities, interests, and communities are often marked as feminine or masculine. The differences between the Etsy and Redbubble sites appear to reinforce that gendered difference—and the ways that fan labor is commodified on each of them.



Figure 4. Superiorgraphix's "Bite Me Edward" T-shirt on Redbubble. [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.7] Craig Norris and Jason Bainbridge (2009) note in their study of cosplayers that the wearing of "t-shirts or caps with logos such as the Autobot or Decepticon insignias from the *Transformers* [is] connected to a more general *otaku* experience, marking out people as fans of a certain manga/anime property." Similarly, wearing T-shirts featuring logos such as the team emblem from *Gatchman* or the NERV symbol from *Neon Genesis Evangelion* marks the wearer as a member of fandom, although through a play with identity where others have to be able to recognize the design to recognize the property being emulated. This consumption as classification (Holt 1995) is a fruitful way to understand fan consumption of art, clothing, and jewelry. Unlike the purchase of a book of pulled-to-publish fan fiction, fannish-themed clothing and accessories mark the wearer as belonging to a specific group or community. Ruth Deller and Clarissa Smith (2013, 937), in an analysis of reader responses to *Fifty Shades of Grey*, note that "the ebook format and the paperback books' understated cover designs...were cited by several of our readers as a key appeal of the novels,

either for themselves or others, because they 'disguised' the books' content." Among the responses given by readers were the following:

[4.8] You can read it on your kindle and nobody knows that you're reading it! The classy covers also help because they don't look like genre fiction, more like literary fiction. (Reader 5)

[The covers are] Genius. If you know what the images represent, then it's very cheeky, a subtle reminder of all their "kinky fuckery." But if you don't, it's completely innocuous, and not cheesy. (Reader 10)

They are anonymous, fit quite well with books but not too embarrassing on train! (Reader 47) (quoted in Deller and Smith 2013, 937–38)

[4.9] These responses suggest that a Fifty Shades community did not exist among readers of the books; there were no moments of recognition between passengers on the subway, as there would between *Neon Genesis Evangelion* fans—although Deller and Smith do point out the contradiction that lies at the heart of the anonymizing covers and their recognizability. There are, however, Fifty Shades-themed items on Etsy and Redbubble, suggesting another contradiction between readers consuming the books anonymously on Kindle and readers consuming fan-made items.



Figure 5. FrillsByStudioK, *Fifty Shades of Grey* party signs on Etsy. [[View larger image.](#)]



Figure 6. JcDesign, "Keep calm and stow your twitchy palm" T-shirt on Redbubble.

[\[View larger image.\]](#)

[4.10] The alternative consumption objects made and sold on Etsy and Redbubble have a similar amount of prestige attached to them as to the more traditional, resistive forms of consumption objects such as fan fic. Unlike fan fic, however, in which fans express their love of a text, fans are expressing a love of a brand in the consumption of fan-themed clothing and accessories. This difference accounts for the differing reactions to pulled-to-publish fan fic and fan art sold online. Pulled-to-publish fan fic, unless its origins become part of the metatext surrounding its publication, loses the identification with fandom that it had as freely available fan fic. This distancing from the source object causes some of the tension evident within fandom when authors profit from a formerly free piece of work. It is not—or not simply—the fact that it had been published for free online that fans take issue with. Nor is it the fact that the author is profiting from another writer's work. Rather it is the refutation of the fannish space that comes when fan fic is published as original fic that becomes problematic. This can be contrasted to the reinforcing of fandom and community that comes from buying and wearing a piece of clothing or jewelry. In discussing Liverpool fans, Brendan Richardson (2011) notes that

[4.11] the manner in which goods are used, and the prestige attached to them, varies in accordance with the need to maintain the sacredness of fan identity and experience. A clear distance must be established to separate sacred fan identity from the profane marketplace. In the case of members of the "Real Reds" Liverpool fan community, co-production that relies excessively on consumption of official merchandise is regarded as far less meaningful than co-production that utilises alternative consumption objects, such as home made banners, as part of the process of production.

[4.12] Richardson (2011) suggests that to these fans, the market is seen as something incapable of delivering unique experience. This sentiment applies equally to The Writer's Coffee Shop's appropriation of *Master of the Universe* and its subsequent publication as the Fifty Shades series: it becomes simply one more erotic novel rather than an important contribution to Twilight fandom.

[4.13] The market of The Writer's Coffee Shop or the market of the football premiere league are thus different than the idealized fan marketplaces of Ravelry and Etsy. Cherry (2011) suggests that these sites exist outside of the industries that see fans as an exploitable market, but no such space seems to exist for fan fic writers ([note 7](#)). Where does this leave those authors who pull to publish, as well as the fans who see that as a betrayal? Aja Romano (2012) writes,

[4.14] Fans are extremely divided as to whether publishing fan fic as original fic is a natural way to capitalize on a well-deserved fan following, or whether it's a betrayal of the principles of free exchange that keeps fandom healthy and independent. It's probably somewhere in the middle. Lots of fan fic authors have converted their fandom audience into a wider audience for their original writing. And even if they didn't profit *directly* from a single fic with the names and settings changed, they still profited immensely from fandom experience. Fandom gave them writing workshops, networking skills, critiquing experience, and maybe even professional connections. All of that is a form of profit. And then there is *actual* published fan fiction, such as movie adaptations, branch-off comic universes, and franchise tie-ins. The truth is that the line between fan fiction and commercial fiction has been blurry for centuries, and neither original fiction nor fan fiction are in any danger of vanishing as a result of the overlap.

[4.15] Romano's final point—that neither pro fic nor fan fic is in danger of disappearing—although valid, misses the point of fan arguments against pulling to publish. Twilight fans felt betrayed at James's earning millions of pounds from their communal input, but they were also concerned at the impact that the publication of a not very well-written work would have on fandom. Many fans were at pains to point out that good fan fic does exist and that fan fic writers are not lazy, unimaginative, or unable to come up with their own original fiction.

5. Final thoughts on the self-commodification of fandom

[5.1] The positioning of fans as resistant, which has dominated much of the field of fan studies, has tended to be interpreted as a form of ideology-based consumer resistance. As Richardson (2011) outlines, the possibility that the motives for fan resistance are grounded in the same root causes that inspire fan commitment and loyalty has not necessarily been fully explored. Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998) have applied the term "petty producers" to those who have moved from being enthusiasts to becoming full-time producers, thus placing fans as producers and fans as consumers at opposing ends of their incorporation/resistance paradigm. I find this too simplistic. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998, 140) suggest that as the enthusiast moves out of enthusiasm toward being a petty producer, "he/she is returned more to general capitalist social relations; as producers, they are as much at the mercy of structural forces as the consumers at the other end of the continuum." Constructing producers and consumers or commodity culture and gift economies in binary terms, however, is problematic. Garry Crawford (2004) suggests that it is preferable to view modern fan culture as an adaptable and dynamic social "career," arguing that individuals in sports fandom increasingly draw on sports for both identity

construction and opportunities for social performance. As more traditional sources of community identity decline, the sense of community offered by contemporary sports becomes increasingly important and is increasingly commodified. Richard Barbrook (2005) argues that "money-commodity and gift relations are not just in conflict with each other, but also co-exist in symbiosis," even though each model "threaten[s] to supplant the other." Commodity economies and gift economies are thus already enmeshed. Paul Booth (2010, 131) refers to this as a digi-gratis economy and suggests that it "assumes that both [market and gift] economies are crucial for the functioning of a complete economic system, and work together, always. Fans create 'gifts' out of the products they purchase in the market economy, and the market caters to the fan culture by offering free services that fans can interpret as gifts."

[5.2] This analysis is still largely problematic because it means engaging in a capitalist system, as Cornel Sandvoss (2011) notes,

[5.3] Enthusiasts in any realm of cultural production are thus confronted with the inescapable logic of the capitalist system: fans whose textual productivity holds commercial value to third parties, yet wish to opt out of the system of monetary exchange and preserve their fandom as non-commercial space, inevitably open themselves to the exploitative utilisation of their productivity by others. Only if they subscribe to the principles of capitalist exchange in the first instance, are fans able to avoid such exploitation, yet thereby erode the pleasures of the fan-object of fandom relationship based on control and appropriation of fan texts that operate outside such principles and that cannot accommodate the material separation between fan and fan object manifested through monetary exchanges. (54)

[5.4] This self-commodification of fan labor is not necessarily a good thing when fan labor is already exploited. De Kosnik (2009) asserts that the commercialization of fan practice might actually be empowering for female fan authors, but this suggests that fan production is only legitimate when viewed through a capitalist lens. Not all fans wish to become media producers, just as not all fans are working in resistance to corporations when writing fan fiction.

[5.5] Writing about the *Battlestar Galactica* Video Maker contest, Will Brooker suggests that the largely female practice of fan fic remains resolutely separate from the new dynamic of producer-controlled fan content. He also notes, however, that

[5.6] the fan fiction community now has an urgent choice to make: whether its separate sphere should tool up and monetize its practice before someone else does; or stubbornly float free, refusing to engage with

mainstream structures, sticking to its own currency and maintaining an older notion of "fandom" at a time when the word's meaning may have shifted beyond its previous definitions. (2014)

[5.7] The rise of pulled-to-publish publishing houses, e-publishing, and initiatives like Amazon's Kindle Worlds appears to be forcing some fan fic writers to monetize their practices, and James's success with *Fifty Shades of Grey* clearly demonstrates that fan fic writers can make a lot of money by adapting their works. The difference in attitudes toward the sale of fan art and the sale of fan fic is still prevalent within fandom, however, and these new developments are likely to continue the debate. Certainly the cost of producing fan-made items such as jewelry plays a role in the different attitudes between the sale of fan art and the sale of fan fic, although the cost of labor in making scarves, jewelry, and artwork may be equally as unpaid as the cost of producing fiction. However, a larger difference comes in the transparency offered by the sale of fan art. Fan fic is published and freely available online; to pull it only to republish it as original fiction suggests an element of dishonesty on the part of the author. In contrast, fan art—particularly in the form of jewelry or clothing—is rarely offered for free elsewhere first. Further, the role that the fannish community plays in the creation of fan fic is more defined than in the creation of fan art. Although fan artists may post their pictures and ask for advice or feedback, this is much less common than fan fic writers posting works in progress or using beta readers to review their work. For one person to profit from the work of a community, as James did with *Fifty Shades*, can be seen far more clearly as exploitation.

[5.8] Finally, I wish to return to the idea of pulled-to-publish fan fic being a refutation of a fannish space; I question whether this raises larger issues than simply the commodification of fandom. Pulled-to-publish fan fic loses the identification with fandom that it had as freely available fan fic. *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Sylvain Reynard's *Gabriel's Inferno* (2012), Christina Lauren's *Beautiful Bastard* (2013), and myriad other pulled-to-publish works are no longer tied to the fannish objects that inspired them. Furthermore, the adoption of pen names and the removal of the text's fannish history from writers' Web sites increase the divide between the fannish and the professional writer. If we accept the idea of fandom as a gift economy, as well as the notion that fandom involves some level of community, the ability for one person to profit from a potentially multiauthored piece of work is indeed problematic. This has wider implications for fandom than producers exploiting fan labor.

6. Notes

1. "Pulled to publish" is also referred to in fannish circles as "filing off the serial numbers."

2. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* remains the top-selling UK book of all time in terms of print copies, with over 4 million sales. As of fall 2012, *Fifty Shades of Grey* had sold 3.8 million print copies and 1.5 million e-books in the United Kingdom (Singh 2012). By year's end, over 65 million copies (print and e-book) of the trilogy had been sold worldwide, and James was named the publishing person of the year by *Publishers Weekly* (Deahl 2012). It was an unprecedented honor for a single author to have made the greatest impact on the publishing industry in a single year.

3. Sporking involves writing and posting mocking and/or critical commentary on a work which is considered extraordinarily bad. Closely linked to hate reading, in which a text is read for the express purpose of ridiculing it or indulging the reader's disdain for the author and/or the content, the term takes its name from the utensil, which is the right size and shape to dig out an eye.

4. The auction in which James participated was The Fandom Gives Back, which raised money for Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation for Childhood Cancer. James wrote an outtake that sold for over \$28,000 (<http://teambbbbof.blogspot.co.uk/2010/06/teaser-for-motu-outtake-for-fandom.html?zx=7e2ae4fe5dbca010>). Reports on James's attendance at the fan convention are less clear, however, with comments on Jami Gould's "When Does Fan Fiction Cross an Ethical Line" (<http://jamigold.com/2012/03/when-does-fan-fiction-cross-an-ethical-line/>) demonstrating the disagreements that happen within fannish communities. The importance of community is enforced through both of these activities, however, with auctions a common element within fandom, particularly in response to disasters like the 2010 Haiti earthquake. This raises further questions about the ethical nature of pulling to publish, particularly as James attended Comic-Con and the Washington, DC, conference in her honor, where she had a free vacation, before publishing *Fifty Shades of Grey*. How is it ethical for the author to accept these as a fan fic writer but unacceptable for her to profit from rebranding the fan fic?

5. It is interesting to note, however, that the guidelines also state that anyone posting pictures of the items they have for sale recognizes that they are also sharing their ideas, which may inspire other users to recreate their work.

6. For some early analyses of Kindle Worlds, see Caroline Siede, May 22, 2013 (<http://www.avclub.com/article/finally-fans-can-make-money-from-their-emgossip-gi-98106>), Rebecca Pahle, May 22, 2013 (<http://www.themarysue.com/amazon-fanfic-kindle-words/>), Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, May 22, 2013 (<http://www.dailydot.com/business/kindle-words-amazon-fanfiction-problems/>), and the Fanlore wiki, n.d. (http://fanlore.org/wiki/Kindle_Worlds).

7. Kindle Worlds' terms and conditions place it within the bounds of the traditional market rather than the idealized marketplace of Etsy and Redbubble. Among the information provided in its announcement is the following: "When you submit your story in a World, you are granting Amazon Publishing an exclusive license to the story and all the original elements you include in that story. This means that your story and all the new elements must stay within the applicable World. We will allow Kindle Worlds authors to build on each other's ideas and elements. We will also give the World Licensor a license to use your new elements and incorporate them into other works without further compensation to you" (<http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html?ie=UTF8&docId=1001197431>).

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Praxis

The media festival volunteer: Connecting online and on-ground fan labor

Robert Moses Peaslee, Jessica El-Khoury, and Ashley Liles

Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—In this initial attempt to bring volunteering, or what we call on-ground fan labor, into the ongoing discussion of fan productivity, we examine volunteer motivations as elicited through interview and participant observation data collected at a 2012 genre film festival, Fantastic Fest, held in Austin, Texas. This case study is a first step toward integrating the volunteer and fan labor literatures and interrogating the role of social capital and civic engagement in volunteerism. We conclude that the media festival (a term intended to encompass such sites as film festivals and fan conventions) is a site of particular and emergent importance for those studying the audience's increasing delivery of free labor.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Media anthropology; Media conduction; Media rituals

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1. Introduction

[1.1] We examine individuals' motivations for participating in fan labor situations as volunteers (Wilson 2000). We also investigate relationships between volunteering for fan labor opportunities and social capital gain, and how the accrual of social capital may lead to civic engagement while, importantly, still creating advantages for corporate players in the media industries. In considering volunteerism as fan labor, we suggest that the latter can be either an online or on-ground experience (Cool 2010). Online fan labor occurs via interactive media devoted to objects of fan esteem (De Kosnik 2009; Hellekson 2009), while on-ground fan labor is best illustrated by the act of volunteering at a media-related festival or event, for example a film festival, a comic con, or a technology expo. Because such events are increasingly ubiquitous and consistently underresearched, we emphasize the latter and examine how the festival or convention serves as a mechanism where such on-ground fan labor can occur; we remain mindful, however, of the notion of collocation (Cool 2010), wherein communities exhibit both online and on-ground interaction, since the festival

environment also provides opportunities for the building and sharing of texts that utilize networked media in such a way as to labor for the festival's industrial partners.

[1.2] We approach these goals through qualitative research data gathered at Fantastic Fest in Austin, Texas, in September 2012, including participant observation and interviews conducted with 18 Fantastic Fest volunteers. Our data suggest that paying attention to volunteerism—much like paying attention to fan fiction—is crucial for understanding fandom in the context of an increasingly decentralized and user-powered, though not user-owned, media industry, and that consideration of the media festival or fan convention environment is crucial for understanding relationships between the volunteer impulse, social and cultural capital, and power. We conclude that volunteering at Fantastic Fest, and by extension at other media-related festivals, is an ambivalent activity: while it promotes the building of social capital and thus aids a kind of civic engagement, it often simultaneously encourages those communities to provide unpaid, on-ground labor to the industries of which volunteers one day hope to be a part.

[1.3] We engage three overarching dualities as a way of exploring the slash at the core of this special issue's theme. We feel this slash is important for seeing binaries as heuristics rather than empirical realities, a feeling underpinned by an extensive literature in fandom and gender studies and supported, we think, by our data. The first duality, social capital and/as civic engagement, we examine in order to understand how each is said to be constituted (particularly in the volunteer literature) and how each one relates to the other. Secondly, we consider fan labor and/as volunteerism and review the important distinctions and similarities between them, a consideration, we would argue, that is overdue. Finally, we come back to the duality of online and/as on-ground labor in an attempt to account for the opportunities and complications presented by the collocation of a networked social space, on the one hand, and a placed node in a network of media, access, and power, on the other.

2. Duality 1: Social capital and/as civic engagement

[2.1] The existing literature on volunteerism, the bulk of which is quantitative, examines the definition of a volunteer, effects of participating, and motivations for involvement. First, volunteerism is frequently defined as a prosocial behavior, meaning it is a voluntary action that a person commits with the sole intention to benefit others (Marta and Pozzi 2008; Marta, Pozzi, and Marzana 2010; Omoto and Snyder 1995; Clary et al. 1998). Several authors discuss the common characteristics of volunteers, noting correlations between extroverted personalities and high levels of volunteer participation. Specifically, volunteers tend to have higher levels of emotional stability and a more positive sense of self-esteem, attitude, and ethics; they also tend to show

more interest in the well-being of others (Marta and Pozzi 2008; Smith and Nelson 1975; Allen and Rushton 1983). Unsurprisingly, satisfaction with volunteering tends to correlate with motivation to continue volunteering; increases in self-esteem, self-acceptance, and self-efficacy also correlate with recurrent volunteer involvement (Degli Antoni 2009; Marta, Pozzi, and Marzana 2010). In terms of motivation, desires for professional advancement, networking, personal growth and development, opportunities to socialize, and altruistic feelings are said to promote volunteer behavior (Marta and Pozzi 2008; Farzalipour et al. 2012; Luping 2011; Ullrich 1972). Finally, in an interesting tension (given the primary attention given altruism in the volunteer literature), desire for social capital is also cited as a main reason for volunteer participation (Degli Antoni 2009; Sherman et al. 2011; Marta and Pozzi 2008). This tension is emblematic of volunteer encounter, we argue, at many levels: between altruism and self-interest, between producer and volunteer, and between social capital and civic engagement.

[2.2] According to Pierre Bourdieu, social capital is "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources, which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (1986, 248). This definition has two dimensions: first, that there is a distinct quality instilled in the resources; second, that the social relationship permits people to obtain capital belonging to organizations. For example, via social capital, festival volunteers can directly obtain admission to movies—material benefit or economic capital—during film festivals such as Fantastic Fest. Also, through social capital, individuals can increase their cultural capital through networking and being affiliated with a particular organization. For instance, volunteering at a film festival allows people to network with a multitude of talent, organizers, and other publics. Social capital in these terms thus benefits the individual most directly, while benefits to the social whole may be present but largely indirect.

[2.3] Bourdieu (1986) posits that social capital is made up of group membership and the connectedness developed from the social networks (quoted in Siisiainen 2000). He further argues that social capital works through the entirety of the relationships among the different individuals who share the same interests instead of the simple monolithic power of the group. It is for this reason that groups poor in extrinsic social capital, such as fan fiction communities, can nonetheless be made up of members more or less rich in intrinsic social capital: "the creation of social capital through participation in voluntary associations is not indifferent to the motivations which induce the volunteer to start his/her unpaid activity...[but] the intrinsic motivations enable people to extend their social networks by creating relations characterized by a significant degree of familiarity" (Degli Antoni 2009, 1). Therefore, although people are often assumed to volunteer because of the individual benefits gained, following Bourdieu we might

consider how the resourceful associations make social capital a communal occurrence, particularly in the embodied context of on-ground fan labor. In addition, social capital assumes identification, the mechanism that develops the capacity for symbolic exchange (Bourdieu 1998); it is in this sense that the symbolic constitutes distinction between groups or classes and hence becomes operationally significant.

[2.4] Robert David Putnam defines social capital as "features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (2000, 65). Putnam distinguishes between vertical and horizontal social networks. A horizontal network "bring[s] together agents of equivalent status and power" (1993, 173). Two components make up the horizontal network as specified by Putnam. The first is sociability, which emphasizes the intrinsic elements of social relations or linking experiences. Simply having others around gives people a sort of gratification, but there is also an expectation that the relationship involves some kind of mutual feeling, a shared sense of need for the other. The significance of this type of relationship is that the people involved are more or less strangers to each other, because it is through this type of involvement that civic intent and the beginnings of democratic practices are born (Shah, Rojas, and Cho 2009; Song and Lin 2008; Wilkinson and Bittman 2002).

[2.5] The second component in the horizontal framework is reciprocity (Putnam 2000). Putnam posits that reciprocity refers to civilized interactions and a willingness to cooperate fairly with the other. In addition, people engaged in mutual exchange allow themselves to be submissive to others. While they engage in a type of activity such as volunteering without immediately wanting something in return, they know that they will benefit somehow at a later time (Putnam 2000). Thus, reciprocity functions on the social instead of the individualistic level: one thinks positively of social interactions with others who share similar interests and are willing to volunteer in the same event or place. Reciprocity is directly related to trust, in the sense that one is confident that the other will live up to expectations. According to Putnam, trust is not unique to intimate relationships; it also exists among strangers who share similar interests (reciprocity), in what becomes a shared citizenship (quoted in Wilkinson and Bittman 2002). We can see evidence of this shared citizenship in both online and on-ground fan labor situations, in which both sociability and reciprocity are needed—the first to desire a relationship and the second to have a shared interest. Between sociability and reciprocity, trust is formed, and civic engagement may occur.

[2.6] Putnam (1995) proposed that civic engagement can renew a society and can be achieved through involvement in community organizations; he also focused on the negative impacts of media use, arguing that increased media usage (for example, television) results simultaneously in less civic engagement and a decrease in social

capital. Both fan fiction communities and the festival complicate this thesis, since audiences are volunteering their time and building trust in both organizations and each other. It seems uncontroversial to suggest that media, rather than simply keeping people atomized in their homes, also provide opportunities for them to intermingle with people of common interests both online, such as in fan fiction communities, and in on-ground spaces such as festivals and fan conventions. Putnam's argument on the decline of social capital, moreover, focuses on the number of people's civic organizations instead of the quality of their involvement. This involvement is often quite deep where fan communities are concerned, and the creation and maintenance of a contributory impulse within such communities, to the benefit rather than to the detriment of the corporate producer, is increasingly common.

3. Duality 2: Fan labor and/as volunteerism

[3.1] The literature linking online fan communities to the notion of free labor (Terranova 2004) is by now well established. Fan fiction forums like LiveJournal are especially well represented in a discussion that tends to characterize the content at the center of such communities as gift objects exchanged outside the established parameters of the commodity structure. As Karen Hellekson points out,

[3.2] Fans insist on a gift economy, not a commercial one, but it goes beyond self-protective attempts to fly under the radar of large corporations, their lawyers, and their cease-and-desist letters. Online media fandom is a gift culture in the symbolic realm in which fan gift exchange is performed in complex, even exclusionary symbolic ways that create a stable nexus of giving, receiving, and reciprocity. (2009, 114)

[3.3] In such communities, the creation and maintenance of identity discourses oppositional to the patriarchal, litigious structure of copyright and transaction is quite common (Hellekson 2009).

[3.4] Over time, numerous corporate players, composed in turn by acquisitive decision makers at a variety of levels, have taken notice of this activity. This is unsurprising, of course, but what is more emergent is that this attention has slowly morphed from being surveillant and penal in nature to being what some commentators see as a potentially corrosive inclusivity. As Alexis Lothian (2009) suggests,

[3.5] In recent years, media producers have explicitly sought to solicit fan participation as labor for their profits in the form of user-generated content that helps build their brand. Many fans perceive these developments as a desirable legitimization of fan work, but they can also be understood as an inversion in the direction of fannish theft. Rather than fans stealing

commodified culture to make works for their own purposes, capital steals their labor—as, we might consider, it stole ideas from the cultural commons and fenced them off in the first place—to add to its surplus. (135)

[3.6] Abigail De Kosnik has termed this shift the fan fiction community's Sugarhill moment (2009, 119), referencing the precedent of hip-hop's mainstreaming and commodification by corporate outsiders rather than the innovators who brought the form—"a genre fundamentally based on artistic appropriation" (119)—into being. Many of these appropriative attempts are rather overt, but as Suzanne Scott (2009) points out, many other corporate practices—what she terms the regifting economy of ancillary content models—also amount to co-optation. As De Kosnik (n.d.) summarizes in an essay for *Spreadable Media*, fan activities "create value for media producers, distributors, and marketers. And let us not forget that fans are also consumers and that some of the value they create for media corporations is in the form of their own spending on media products. Yet...fans are happy to labor for free."

[3.7] Such activity echoes the behavior of volunteers, and volunteerism, not limited to charity events and fund-raisers, often occurs at for-profit events designed to celebrate a media figure or object. Existing literature asserts that these volunteers have different motivations for participating than do corollaries in traditional situations. These motivations are not necessarily tied to altruistic intentions or a desire to achieve professional advancement (Postigo 2003). Ryan M. Milner states that "many fans are active, creative, productive participants within the labor system they esteem" (2009, 494). In other words, fan labor is essentially driven by fans' connection to the object of their fandom. Henry Jenkins (2008) posits that "the media industry is increasingly dependent on active and committed consumers to spread the word about valued properties in an overcrowded media marketplace, and in some cases, they are seeking ways to channel the creative output of media fans to lower production costs" (134). Milner (2009) suggests that fan laborers see themselves as serving the object of their fandom, making them eager to participate and not generally expectant of compensation. In other words, unlike traditional volunteers who help with a non-media-related fund-raising event because their actions benefit others, these fan laborers are characterized as driven in large part by a kind of hedonistic object-pleasure, a desire for the accumulation of cultural capital, or some amalgam of both. Part of our interest here is to investigate how the particular interface of media-related persons and practices, on the one hand, and embodied presence within social and physical space, on the other, produces a power-laden, circulatory reaction within both online and on-ground spaces.

4. Duality 3: Online and/as on-ground spaces

[4.1] Fan labor, moreover, can take place in either online or on-ground spaces. Jennifer Cool uses the term *on ground*, rather than *off-line*, to more accurately describe "the contemporary anthropological subject implicit in the challenges of the posthuman" (2010, 3), where one finds it increasingly difficult to be truly off-line. She further uses the notion of collocation to describe the empirical lifeworld of the postmodern subject, one in which both mediated and face-to-face relationships intertwine and complicate the facile division between online and off-line subjectivities. While individuals can participate in fan labor through online fan communities or forums, there are also designated places where highly involved fan labor activities occur. Thus such communities are often—though certainly not necessarily—collocated. Several taxonomies (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998; Fiske 1992; Sandvoss 2005) situate visitation and pilgrimage activities toward the most involved end of the fandom spectrum. The fan often feels and communicates a sense of pilgrimage that creates a special ritualized event upon visitation (Peaslee 2013, 812) and generates attendant cultural capital within the community, thus spawning hierarchical relationships within the fandom (Peaslee and Miles 2012). Event attendance is an intimate experience; fans enjoy the opportunity to be close, in terms of both physical and emotional proximity, to a text or object they esteem. Meanwhile, this committed involvement by fans helps the industry achieve its goals in cost-efficient ways (Pearce 2006; Postigo 2003; Taylor 2006).

[4.2] Media festivals are prime examples of contexts where fan labor can be encouraged and maximized. Here volunteers can enjoy pleasurable incursions into discursively constituted regions of a very special quality, movements across "the boundaries that emerge when a place is re-created as something special via mediation...boundaries [which] are reified through the embodied practice of visitors" (Peaslee 2013, 812). By volunteering, the fan laborer is at least partially backstage, both spatially and socially nearer to the fandom object than the average fan, even more so—and this is particularly important—than the fan who pays for entry to the event. Fan laborers are behind the scenes, engaged in the text, and the festival provides the opportunity to achieve that higher level of fandom, an opportunity to engage in practices that Peaslee (2013) suggests reify power structures and flows. Media conduction, which describes the simultaneously consumptive and productive practices of the festival attendee, is defined as "the movement of information due to a difference in level of access (from a region of higher access to a region of lower access) through a transmission medium (e.g., festivals, conventions, events) that simultaneously reifies the value of that access" (Peaslee 2013, 811). Fantastic Fest, as only one example among many, offers graduated incentives depending on the number of hours the person labors, as well as giving preference of job selection to returning volunteers over newcomers. These incentives are used as a kind of leverage, since

returning volunteers are well placed to further transcend boundaries and gain greater access to the backstage.

[4.3] Our questions, then, derive from these dualities and attempt to account for the ambivalent nature of the fan labor/volunteering relationship. Do volunteers at media festivals build social capital and thereby experience civic engagement? If so, how does such an outcome—positive from the perspective of democratic ideals—live alongside the possibility that volunteers at such events are co-opted to the benefit of powerful media interests in the name of the objects, personas, and boundaries they produce? We have attempted to address these questions with a case-study, fieldwork approach influenced by the tenets of constructivist media anthropology (Clark 2004; Peaslee 2009).

5. Participants and procedure

[5.1] Qualitative research methods were used to capture volunteer motivations, incentives, and experiences. One of the authors attended Fantastic Fest as a first-time volunteer while another returned for the third time as a festival attendee. We conducted participant observations and interviewed 7 female and 11 male volunteers who ranged from 18 to 45 years of age and came from varied backgrounds and career paths. There were approximately 150 volunteers at Fantastic Fest, though never that many at any one time. Some volunteered in the morning or afternoon, others during the evening and late-night shifts. Since not all of the volunteers were available to interview during the 4-day data collection period, the sample is composed of 12 percent of the total number of volunteers and two-thirds of the active volunteers working at any one time.

[5.2] Fantastic Fest, started in 2005 with a collaboration between Tim League, CEO of Alamo Drafthouse Cinemas, and Harry Knowles, owner and principal writer of the renowned fan blog Ain't It Cool News, is the largest genre film festival in North America. Specializing in a very particular brand of international, niche content featuring horror, science fiction, martial arts, and fantasy films, Fantastic Fest is held in the highest esteem by aficionados from around the world and is one of only three North American festivals granted membership status within the prestigious European Fantastic Film Festivals Federation (<http://melies.org/>). While its profile has grown steadily over the past 7 years—the presence of mainstream films and celebrity guests serving as a yardstick—Fantastic Fest has maintained a relative intimacy when compared to other festivals such as Sundance or Toronto. With the exception of a few screenings scheduled in larger theaters and the many themed parties for which Fantastic Fest is equally known, the festival is housed entirely in the Alamo Drafthouse theater on S. Lamar Boulevard in Austin. The characteristics of Fantastic Fest are thus

somewhat unique in that the community surrounding it is highly localized in both a geographic and psychographic sense: it is very much a product of Austin's self-described weirdness while also serving as an annual, multinational mecca for fans of (mostly) independent genre film (note 1).

6. Findings: Volunteers motivations and fan labor

[6.1] Review of interview transcripts and field notes by each of the three authors revealed several overarching categories of volunteer motivation. The categories, in order from most prevalent to least, include the accrual of cultural capital; the establishment and maintenance of communities; the attainment of social capital in the form of friendships; overt attempts at professional advancement; achievement of proximity to ritually significant people and practices; hedonism; and altruism.

[6.2] *Volunteering as a means toward accruing cultural capital.* By a considerable margin (44 coded instances), the accrual of cultural capital (experiences and material artifacts) emerged as the leading motivation for engaging in fan labor in the Fantastic Fest environment. Responses were coded as examples of an attempt to increase cultural capital when they included as reasons for volunteering the opportunity to consume a discrete text (such as an elusive film or a video game) or genre, to purchase controlled-access materials (such as limited-edition prints of special movie posters), or to meet and engage a particular actor or director. "There are a lot of movies here that you couldn't see anywhere else," said Couper, a volunteer and previous employee of the Draffhouse. "People talk about them a year later and [I say] 'I already fucking saw that,' that's awesome." Couper is interested in the object itself (the film), the rarity of which in the mainstream film marketplace becomes a marker for its value. But the act of seeing the film becomes even more valuable because he sees it earlier than do others in the community. In terms of the collection of festival relics, while no interviewees expressed an interest in material culture, it is significant that each morning a line formed outside the Mondo poster shop, connected to the Alamo Draffhouse, long before it was open for business. The availability of new posters was publicized through online channels only briefly before the posters became available, so attaining a poster (and standing in line to do so) became implicit markers of status within a subset of the festival community. Louis, as an example of the last tendency in those coded as seekers of cultural capital, has always

[6.3] been interested in the people that work on the movies themselves—directors, writers, producers and camera operators, all the way down to the assistant and the actors...I've always been fascinated by all these people who are responsible for creating something that I like, so this is the opportunity to actually either say "Hi," or "Thanks...keep up the good work."

[6.4] "Elijah Wood is fantastic. He is always here," said Couper. "I haven't seen him yet, but it will be good to see him again. He actually recognizes me, and we would sit there and mostly talk about movies and smoke cigarettes." Interestingly, many volunteers explicitly derided volunteer or attendee motivations related to simple proximity. "There is this easiness. There aren't people fighting to see celebrities, there aren't people doing that kind of stuff," said Samantha. Just seeing celebrities, which is of course dependent on the on-ground, physical proximity afforded by the festival environment, is not enough. "We are here," Samantha summarizes, speaking for her community, "because we appreciate film, and I think that is part of the reason why Fantastic Fest is so great." One of the ways this community identifies itself is through its low propensity toward being starstruck, and rank celebrity worship was seen by many core Fantastic Fest constituents as inauthentic behavior.

[6.5] *Volunteering as a means toward establishing ritual communities.* In 27 instances, responses were coded as examples of volunteerism related to feelings of group affinity. These interviewee comments referred to the value obtained through volunteerism as it related to the community of volunteers, like-minded audiences, Alamo Drafthouse devotees, or Austin residents. Moreover, such responses often saw the sustenance of these communities as the ultimate end for volunteering. Many volunteers anticipate reuniting with the same people year after year. "You meet a lot of cool people," said Couper. "I have friends that I have made through this festival that don't live in town, and when they come in they call me." Cool people, it becomes clear, are those that share an affinity for the genres, filmmakers, and practices that populate the Fantastic Fest environment. This affinity is related, of course, to the aforementioned attitudes toward outsiders or newcomers who see the festival space as one where access or proximity to celebrity is the paramount value of attendance or volunteerism. When volunteers express a motivation related to the maintenance of the community, they name not a particular film, practitioner, or genre specifically, but rather the social space of the festival as a kind of ritual center, one where the normally deviant practices of avid appreciation of violence, cosplay, or rabid overconsumption of film material are seen as quite normal. John states, "I moved here 5 years ago from Athens, Georgia and in my search for trying to find a place to belong here in Austin, volunteering kind of create[d] a safe space to meet new people and, you know, find commonalities and kindred spirits in a large metropolitan city." While it is beyond the reach of this article to explore systematically the degree to which this motivation for volunteering is akin to the feelings many fan fiction writers have expressed regarding their respective communities (Busker 2008; Ross 2008), we would suggest provisionally that a similarly supportive, reassuring structure is in play here.

[6.6] *Volunteering as a means toward establishing friendships.* Nearly as many (26) responses referred clearly to the act of connection as a means toward establishing or

maintaining bonds or friendships. While the previous category is limited to those responses displaying a kind of pleasure in simply being affiliated with or surrounded by other brand loyalists, in this case what is celebrated by respondents is the opportunity afforded by Fantastic Fest to meet new people or reconnect with old friends, a reconnection that often happens only at annual intervals at Fantastic Fest. In these cases, friendship and fellowship are ends unto themselves. According to Samantha, for example, "What is so great about the festival circuit in Austin is you see a lot of familiar faces. So I work with the same people at other festivals [as well as] Fantastic Fest." Many volunteers enjoy volunteering at several different events together. Bethany, a lead volunteer, adds that, as volunteers, "we say we are going to hangout during the year, which we never get around to, so around Fantastic Fest, it is almost like a high-school reunion. We've been volunteering 3, 4, 5 years together, and it is a great time to spend with those people again every year." Fantastic Fest leaves a strong impression on volunteers, and participants will tell their friends about their experiences there. Several first-time volunteers reported intentions of encouraging their friends to join them next year when they return.

[6.7] *Volunteering as a means toward achieving professional advancement.*

Conversely, responses were coded as emblematic of a desire for professional advancement when they expressly illustrated the utility of the Fantastic Fest physical and social space for furthering their careers. Some volunteers aspire to attain recognition: "I'm shooting other [material], and just going to submit everything I get," said John. "Hopefully [Fantastic Fest] will throw some of the stuff I shoot on the blog." Other volunteers said they wanted to gather film clips for a video they were working on. John said, "I'm on the audio visual [group]...trying to get archival footage for the Alamo to use in the future." Murph, an aspiring movie maker said, "All I want to do is make movies. My dream is that I want my movie to be in the next Fantastic Fest."

[6.8] For the slightly less ambitious (or perhaps slightly more realistic), the festival is seen to provide a source of business and networking opportunities. Marcus, a fourth-year returning volunteer, said he returns because he can meet people in the field and create relationships. Marcus said he and a few friends moved to Austin a few years ago to network and start film careers. At Fantastic Fest they've "networked with so many [screenwriters and directors] who have been willing to look at our work and actually talk shop with us," said Marcus. "That alone has been worth coming here every single year." Another aspiring filmmaker, Janet, hopes to submit a film for next year's film festival. "I'm working on a feature right now. I have a script that I want to produce," said Janet. "I'm hoping it will make it next year here, maybe." Festivals also provide opportunities to observe or participate in the daily functions of hosting events beyond the film industry. University of Texas event planner L.T. said that part of her motivation to volunteer at the festival was to "get a chance to learn more about the

event planning side, because that is what I do professionally. So, I get to see the real professionals do it, and no one does it better than the Alamo Drafthouse does."

[6.9] *Volunteering as a means toward establishing spatial proximity.* Proximity as a generator of value from the perspective of the volunteer respondent refers to those responses that mention the aura and positioning of media persons present in the festival space. Says volunteer John, "Fantastic Fest seems like it's got a lot of...you know, you meet a lot of wonderful people...like I just shot Tim Burton with my camera and he walked right past me and stuff. And last year...what's his name, from *Lord of the Rings*? I forget the actor's name, but it was fun shooting him." The name, for John, is not important, or at least not as important as the celebrity status behind the name. The list of Fantastic Fest talent mentioned in our interview transcripts includes Burton, Wynona Ryder, Elijah Wood ("what's his name, from *Lord of the Rings*"), Kevin Sorbo, Joseph Gordon Levitt, Doug Benson, and Ron Perlman, among others. It is clear that for many volunteers the opportunity to encounter such people—to collect such encounters as other fans might collect comic books, indicating their similarity as forms of cultural capital—is paramount. "My favorite part is famous people. I love famous people," said Nick. "I want to be around them. I got to see Tim Burton, Winona Ryder and Doug Benson. That made my day. So that's why I'm here."

[6.10] *Hedonism.* A few respondents summed up their motivations with reference to rather simple notions of fun that seemed to be positioned on a spectrum between, on the one hand, enjoying an exciting environment to, on the other, partying hard and taking advantage of sensory stimuli. "The staff and volunteers want to keep it fun and unstuffy as possible, which I really appreciate," said Nicole. "It just complements the Austin atmosphere in general." Fantastic Fest volunteers—many of whom work other events in the city like South-by-Southwest—believe the festival lacks the traditionally high tensions of those experiences.

[6.11] Being a volunteer has many tangible rewards as well. Not only do volunteers get free admission to the event, a value between \$200 and \$300, but Fantastic Fest volunteers also receive a limited number of movie and dinner vouchers that they can use any time after the event, and the volunteer coordinator hosts a party for the volunteers. Volunteers are also welcomed into the same parties and special events as are badge holders and VIPs, provided there is room. "The closing night parties are fucking awesome, like free booze, free food," said Couper. Marcus added, "There is hard work, but [if you] party fifty times harder you will not see the likes of these parties at any other festival, period."

[6.12] *Altruism.* Responses were coded as altruism when they exhibited a desire to do good for others free from attendant motivations unrelated to altruism. A key finding in our data is that only one instance of altruism occurred in the interview transcripts.

Nicole, when asked if she would like to snap any pictures of celebrities while she's volunteering, replies, "No, I would never do that...I just like being helpful and knowing that I've got people in positions that if they need a lot of back up, I can be helpful." In this sole instance, a desire to help others was found unattached, meaning within the same conversation turn, to one of the other response categories listed above. To be sure, in several other cases, expressions such as "I like to help" or "it feels good to help" were found in the transcripts, but their connection to other motivations through linguistic linkages within single conversation turns ruled them out as truly altruistic. This of course begs a much longer analysis of how we define altruism more generally; we have simply chosen to operationalize it in this way in order to more clearly define the degree to which volunteerism is self- or other directed in this context.

7. Conclusion

[7.1] Pierre Bourdieu claims that social capital is the "aggregate of the actual or potential resources, which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential,' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word" (1986, 190). James S. Coleman (1998) suggests that social capital depends on relationships beyond the individual. Instead, it depends on group interactions. The relationship of the group members is bounded by two main principles: trust and common values.

[7.2] Several of the volunteers felt that volunteering at the Fantastic Fest allowed them to be part of a group or community indicative of strong social capital. Austin's festivals appear generally to encourage volunteerism and engagement in public activities ([note 2](#)), a strategy underpinning civic engagement in the relevant state, municipal, and taste communities. That people volunteer is reassurance for the greater community that people want to help out, supporting their society both at the personal level and, indirectly, at the economic level. "I think that being a participant here," said John, "being a stakeholder here and trying to make something better each year than it was before [creates] a positive vibe, it's an upward spiral." In addition, the festival not only builds a community among its participants, but also adds to the value of the greater Austin community and culture. Hence, volunteering appears to support civic engagement, in the sense that communities are being built and sustained through the labor of enthusiastic participants.

[7.3] Volunteering, or on-ground labor, has traditionally been characterized as prosocial behavior exhibiting the potential to "reduce destructive levels of self-absorption" (Oman, Thoreson, and McMahon 1999, 303). People who volunteer assist

others, which can be considered a "self-validating experience" (Krause, Herzog, and Baker 1992, 300). Likewise, volunteering can increase individuals' self-efficacy, their belief that they can make a difference in their communities, which past research indicates can protect against depression (Mirowsky and Ross 1989). Previous studies have indicated that an increase in self-confidence due to volunteering has the potential to boost satisfaction in life (Harlow and Cantor 1996). There are many advantages to volunteering, whether direct (through admission to a premiering movie) or indirect (boost of self-efficacy). Online fan labor, meanwhile, as shown by several scholars (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Jensen 1992), far from a hermetic pathology, has provided opportunities for the creation of communities wherein (mostly female) participants can "reach out and be heard" (Bacon-Smith 1992, 6).

[7.4] Despite these similar outcomes, previous literature has suggested a substantive difference between the motivations of the traditional volunteer and those of the fan laborer. Volunteerism is frequently defined as a prosocial behavior, meaning it is a voluntary, altruistic action a person commits with the sole intention to benefit others (Marta and Pozzi 2008; Marta, Pozzi, and Marzana 2010; Omoto and Snyder 1995; Clary et al. 1998). But the literature also suggests that this altruism is tempered by desires for professional advancement, the accrual of social capital, and other tangible benefits. Our research suggests that festival volunteer motivations are not so different from those of traditional volunteers. Fan laborers also act out of a limited sense of altruism most often connected to rather more pragmatic benefits such as meeting new people, networking, personal growth, and the accumulation of social capital. Although the cultural capital attained through particular modes of consuming the object of their fandom was shown to be the primary reason for their volunteering, Fantastic Fest volunteers appear to encounter further advantages beyond the replication of cultural capital hierarchies and the sale of merchandise.

[7.5] At the same time, however, the data also suggest that the on-ground context of Fantastic Fest, like the fan labor undertaken in online spaces devoted to the circulation of fan works, is a kind of generator for productive activity on the part of audiences activated by their roles as volunteers. Volunteers occupy a border position between the festival insiders and outsiders, a position described by Peaslee (2013) as an attending rather than a media or absent public, which is particularly well situated for and particularly encouraged toward conductive activity such as word of mouth, blogging, Tweeting, and other forms of online and on-ground value creation. Like the journalists, badge holders and ticket buyers who attend the festival, volunteers generate considerable value through these activities, activities made to seem like play rather than labor via the incorporation of the community (festival) identity into that of the volunteer (fan) self: Fantastic Fest, to those involved in its successful presentation, becomes a reflection of who they are. Hellekson (2009) posits that there are three

components that define a gift community: the giving, the receiving, and the reciprocation. Like the fan laborer, volunteers give their time and efforts, they receive incentives, such as access to movies, stars, parties, theater passes, and they gain (or at least they perceive the attainment of) a reciprocal, authentic relationship with Fantastic Fest and Alamo Drafthouse. We would argue that this distinction between the perceived and actual accrual of status vis-à-vis the media publics is a key dimension of understanding the on-ground fan labor of volunteering (and, for that matter, paying) members of the attending publics, and further research on this dimension of fan or audience culture is overdue. A critical approach remains crucial in exploring the degree to which power holders are utilizing the fan event to maximize the perception of status while managing carefully, if not minimizing, its actual attainment; moreover, we should remain observant of the degree to which on-ground fan labor is either consciously or effectively disruptive of this effort. That volunteers' activity is at once valuable to them, crucial to the success of the festival and, by extension, supportive to the entertainment industry (as a corporate structure, an amalgamation of practices, and a network of individuals), and potentially, given the above results, to civic engagement, emphasizes the ambivalent nature of the volunteer impulse as a dimension of fan labor.

8. Notes

1. Fantastic Arcade, a simultaneous gaming festival and convention devoted to promoting independent game design, began running concurrently in an adjacent space in 2010.
 2. South-by-Southwest Film, celebrating its 20th year in 2013, designed all of its prescreening bumper films as tributes to their volunteer pool.
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Praxis

Chuck versus the ratings: Savvy fans and "save our show" campaigns

Christina Savage

University of Texas, Austin, Texas, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—Fans rarely have the opportunity to affect the production of their favorite television shows, but sometimes they can save them. "Save our show" campaigns provide an example of fan labor that can influence the decision to renew or cancel a show. These campaigns have previously appeared as fans wrote to the networks en masse and sent in paraphernalia related to the show. The "Finale and a Footlong" "save our show" campaign for NBC's *Chuck* (2007–12) demonstrates a change in the way that fans understand their role in television consumption and production. By examining this campaign and situating it within a history of these types of campaigns, we can see how the "save our show" campaign for *Chuck* emphasizes the role of fan as both television viewer and advertisement consumer in a way that privileges the power of the fan as never before.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fan community; Fan labor; Television

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1. Introduction

[1.1] The relationship between fans and the television they love is often complicated—even more so when dealing with a potential cancellation of their favorite show. The literature on fan culture is rich with examples of fans claiming ownership over their favorite media texts. The production of fan-made paratexts surrounding these media products further suggests the idea of fans' perceived ownership, which becomes particularly complicated when the fans' favorite television shows are rumored to be canceled. Often in this situation, fans attempt to persuade network executives to keep airing the show in a "save our show" campaign.

[1.2] In examining fan-run "save our show" campaigns, we can arrive at a better understanding of the power relationships existing between fans and network executives as television audiences continue to become more fragmented. "Save our show" campaigns have had a long evolution as fans adapt their practices when what may have worked previously fails. These campaigns, which have moved from writing letters to sending in items connected to the show, emphasize fan fervor as a way of indicating the size of the audience. At the heart of these campaigns lies fan labor, which continues to change along with the differing types of campaigns. The "save our show" campaign for NBC's *Chuck* (2007–12) established a new style of campaign that focused its attention outside the network. By placing this "save our show" attempt within the history of these types of campaigns, we can better understand the changing power relationship between fans and executives.

2. *Chuck* versus the Nielsen ratings: Questions of labor in fan viewership and support

[2.1] There have been many fan campaigns to save a failing show throughout television history. Some failed as a result of their inability to organize cohesively; some did not show a network that there was enough support for a show; some that succeeded only managed to bring a show back for a few episodes. These campaigns typically stem from a place of fans wanting their favorite show to continue, and as more information about the industry and the way it operates becomes available to these groups, fans can improve their strategies for "save our show" campaigns. In the US broadcasting industry, networks develop programming that will serve as a way to attract a certain type of audience so that advertisers can market their

products to that audience. A better understanding of "save our show" campaigns comes from not only an understanding of the mutually beneficial structures in place between networks and advertisers in support of television programming but also from an understanding of television as having three legs of support: the networks, the advertisers, and the audience.

[2.2] Marxist political economic thought is useful to understand this approach to studying television structures. Sut Jhally (1987) looks at watching television as a form of labor not unlike the labor performed in a factory. The ability to perform labor is highly valued within this model. With regard to television, television audiences sell their watching powers to advertisers in the same way that laborers sell their ability to work to capitalist organizations. In Jhally's model, television programming exists as a mediator between advertisers and audiences. Television shows provide space for advertisers to reach a particular audience, but the programming itself needs to be attractive to the specific audience desired. This model helps to explain why "save our show" campaigns work at all. If audiences are not attracted to the programming provided, networks are unable to obtain advertisers to finance the shows and thus fail as a mediator between production and consumption. The evolution of "save our show" campaigns has led to negotiations between audiences and advertisers for television content as a result of the fans' increased understanding of their power as television viewer and consumers. If fans recognize their power and desirability as an audience, their ability to negotiate as active consumers can often provide them with a stronger voice and a more reliable method of persuasion in obtaining the renewal of their favorite show.

[2.3] Fan campaigns to "save the show" position fan labor within this Marxist construct as the ability to consume the products advertised. Their labor then is twofold: the labor of television viewing itself and the labor of selling the size and desirability of the audience in exchange for desirable programming content. Fans are selling their viewing and consuming powers to the networks through their efforts to convince them that there is an audience for the show and that the audience is demographically desirable. This is necessary when the size of the audience is less than ideal. As campaigns evolved, the fans moved beyond demographics to sell their labor to advertisers as a more effective way to negotiate for desired content. In their campaigning, fans are working to sell their viewing and buying power to the television networks as a way to leverage their desired programming.

3. *Chuck* versus the past: Previous "save our show" campaigns

[3.1] "Save our show" campaigns are a fairly common practice for much-beloved shows with small audiences. These campaigns have taken different forms as fans have learned various methods to successfully persuade the networks to save their shows. One of the earliest "save our show" campaigns was for the cult television show *Star Trek* in 1968. In its second season, the ratings began to decline, and fans began to hear rumors that the show would be canceled. They wrote letters to the producers and NBC to assure them that there was a desirable audience watching the show. The network ultimately received over 115,000 letters from fans to save the show, and the show was successfully renewed for a third season (*Broadcasting* 1968; Beck 1968a, 1968b).

[3.2] Although fans wrote in multitudes to save *Star Trek*, the "save our show" campaign may have been entirely unnecessary. The show had reasonable ratings in its time slot, and TV critics at the time wrote that NBC had other shows that were more at risk of cancellation (*Broadcasting* 1967; Lowry 1968). Moreover, NBC needed no persuasion to believe that the audience was desirable; they already knew that the show attracted an appropriate demographic: young, well educated, and passionate (Pearson 2011). Show creator Gene Roddenberry also continued to promote the desirability of the viewers by positioning them as a quality audience, suggesting that despite its small size, the demographics were more appealing than those of other, larger shows (Kmet 2012). For the third season, the show was moved to a more difficult time slot and ratings fell, leading to the cancellation of the show (Gowran 1969). Despite the desirable audience, the show did not have the audience size to justify renewal.

[3.3] In working to save *Cagney & Lacey* (1981–88), fan labor was able to make the show more visible and attract a larger audience. The "save our show" campaign in 1983 resulted in the construction of the Viewers for Quality Television (VQT), a group that worked to save various television productions that they deemed were of high quality (Swanson 2000). *Cagney & Lacey*, which was based on a popular 1981 TV movie, was initially canceled after its first season until the producers convinced the executives to attempt a second season that replaced star Meg Foster (TV Guide News 2002). The second season, even with the replacement, Sharon Gless, did not fare better in ratings or critical reception, and the show was canceled again in May 1983 (Swanson 2000). It was after the second cancellation that the campaign to save *Cagney & Lacey* began. Fans like Dorothy Collins Swanson wrote letters to various members of the production team to find out what they could do to encourage renewal and were told to write letters to the president of CBS, Bud Grant (Swanson 2000). Swanson, the founder of the VQT, wrote over 500 letters that summer, under various names, to persuade the executives that many people were watching the show (Swanson 2000). She also recruited friends and family to help write letters, and they in turn recruited others. The campaign was published by the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization of Women, who urged their members to write (D'Acci 1994). The letter-writing campaign, as well as the response from television critics, helped increase public awareness of the show, and ratings for the summer episodes of *Cagney & Lacey* started to improve (Swanson 2000; O'Connor 1984). When the show was eventually renewed in late September, Bud Grant and other CBS executives credited the letters they received as part of the reason they were renewing the show (Swanson 2000). By persuading the network that the show had an audience and increasing the show's visibility, the fans of *Cagney & Lacey*, through their letter-writing efforts, saved the show for another season. The show continued to perform well in the ratings and ran for five more seasons. Swanson went on to work to replicate the success of the campaign for other quality shows with the VQT.

[3.4] Julie D'Acci (1994), in her discussion of the *Cagney & Lacey* "save our show" campaign, emphasizes the role that producers of the show played in orchestrating the show's renewal. While not ignoring the impact that the letter campaign had, D'Acci suggests that the producers ultimately organized the fan labor force while also working to increase advertising for the show. The campaign occurred along with increased marketing to build the audience. Although fan labor was influential in showing the network that there was support for the show, the higher ratings may have been as a result of increased advertising between March and April 1983.

[3.5] In examining the letters written by *Cagney & Lacey* fans working to get their show renewed, D'Acci (1994, 94) uncovered that the women writing these letters understood "how they fit into the economic operations of the TV industry and how they functioned as an 'audience' in the network's definition of the term" even though these writers often "mocked the network's notion of audience and bemoaned the fact that, coupled with a devoted adherence to ratings, it resulted in such series as *The Dukes of Hazzard*" (1979–85), a show that was seen as typical TV fare and not quality television. Despite their frustration with the network's perceptions about audiences, the women who were trying to save *Cagney & Lacey* worked to make themselves seen as a desirable audience as a way to capitalize on their viewing power. Writing letters ultimately worked for the *Cagney & Lacey* campaign because they could leverage the letter writers' power as an audience to be both viewers and recruiters for the show. They effectively sold their viewing power to the network and were rewarded with the programming they desired. The fan labor, coupled with the publicity surrounding their campaign and the increased advertising, helped enlarge the audience for the show and ensure that the show would be saved.

[3.6] The campaigns for *Twin Peaks* (1990–91) and *Jericho* (2006–8) are examples of what fans moved to after letters proved ineffective. After the initial cancellation of *Twin Peaks* in the middle of the second season (Entertainment Weekly 1991), fans sent in 10,000 letters, a log, a plastic hand, several boxes of doughnuts, and chess pieces, items that signified to the network the fans' attention to detail and devotion to the show (Boone, n.d.). ABC chose to air the remaining six episodes of the second season as a result of the fan campaign, but they canceled the show after continued low ratings. After *Twin Peaks*' early example of fans sending objects to the network to convince the executives to save the show, the fans of *Jericho* made that strategy the centerpiece of their own campaign. The show, which premiered in 2006, had lackluster ratings and was canceled in May 2007 (Adalian 2007). Utilizing online message boards, fans of the show grouped

together and decided to send peanuts to the network to protest the cancellation. Ultimately, over 20 tons of peanuts were shipped to CBS executives (Elber 2007; Filgate 2007; Hyman 2010). In June, in response to fan efforts, Carol Barbee, executive producer of *Jericho*, announced that the show would return for eight episodes in midseason with the hope that ratings would rise and the network could pick up additional episodes of the show (Fernandez 2007). However, when the show returned to the air, the ratings did not improve, and despite fan effort, the show was canceled (CBS News 2009). Fans fought for a third season and sought responses from other channels, hoping they would pick up the show, but their continued efforts were unsuccessful, and the second season was also the final season. For both shows, fans labored to save their show through not only writing letters to assure the network that an audience existed but also showing their devotion to the show by sending in objects referencing the show. The acts demonstrated the fans' close attention to detail, positioning them as an engaged audience.

[3.7] The campaign for *Farscape* taught fans that they did not have to rely only on the network to save the show. Observing that writing letters and sending items to networks to demonstrate audience size and intensity was no longer working as effectively, fans began to focus on appealing to different needs of the industry. *Farscape* (1999–2003), an international joint production by the Jim Henson Company in the United States and Nine Films and Television in Australia, was a science fiction show that was canceled by cable channel SciFi (now SyFy) in 2003 as a result of a declining audience and high licensing fees (Hughes 1999; Wright 2004). Fans, with some guidance from the show's producers, started to work to bring the show back, focusing on what they could do to sell their viewing power as an audience (Ross 2008). In her analysis of the campaign, Maureen Ryan (2004) comments that fans "essentially acted as an advertising street team for the show, in an effort to make it a more attractive property to anyone who wanted to invest in it." Fans collected demographic information on the income and education of the audience and worked to persuade other channels to pick up the show for the desirable audience. They also targeted sponsors and advertisers with this information, and purchased products and mailed copies of the receipts to these sponsors and advertisers, convincing UPS, Kia, and KFC to express interest in advertising on the show if it returned (Ryan 2003). The campaign attracted the attention of some European financiers, who provided the backing for a miniseries to wrap up the show (Ryan 2004). By focusing their efforts outside of the sci-fi genre, fans worked as advertisers for their power as an audience, selling their consumer power by eating at KFC and touting their collective income and education levels. However, their efforts were only capable of attracting support for a miniseries and not an additional season, thanks to the high production costs of the show (Hughes 1999).

[3.8] *Star Trek*, *Cagney & Lacey*, *Twin Peaks*, *Jericho*, and *Farscape* all had campaigns that were successful to some degree, thus demonstrating important trends in fan-inspired show renewal. *Star Trek* had a campaign that showed what the network already knew: the audience was young and educated, and therefore desirable. The show was renewed for a third season, but factors such as the difficult time slot led to lower ratings and ultimately cancellation. *Cagney & Lacey* had fan labor that was organized by the producers and that was accompanied by increased advertising in the supposed final months of the show. It was most likely the result of the increased awareness of the show, likely achieved through a combination of these two efforts, that the ratings began to grow during the summer months, leading to the show's renewal. Although writing letters and sending in objects such as logs and peanuts informed the networks of the size and devotion of the audiences for *Twin Peaks* and *Jericho*, the inadequate size of the audience was the reason for cancellation. Fan labor was enough to garner attention and hope that maybe the audience size would grow; however, when ratings did not improve for these shows, they were quickly canceled again. With *Farscape*, fans started a new focus outside the channel in order to emphasize the potential for profit if a new channel picked up the show or for advertisers who supported the show's return. For all five of these shows, fan-run "save our show" campaigns were able to persuade the network to air more episodes, but only *Cagney & Lacey* had increased viewership and was renewed for more seasons. Fan labor can bring a show back from cancellation, but letters and show-related items that suggest there is an engaged audience for the show are simply not enough to keep the show from being canceled. These campaigns provided the networks with knowledge of the engaged audience that existed for these shows, but on the basis of the evidence from these campaigns, the campaign needed to result in a far more extensive audience to justify keeping the show on air.

4. *Chuck* versus the 2000s: Television in the age of DVRs

[4.1] Changes in technology allowed for fragmented audiences, forcing "save our show" campaigns to rethink their strategies in selling audience size. The 2000s were a time of transition for television as new home video technologies allowed viewers to consume television in nontraditional ways. By 2007, over 85 percent of US households subscribed to distribution services such as cable or satellite, and over 55 percent had access to over 100 channels (Lotz 2007). By 2005, broadcast channels were only drawing about 46 percent of the total television audience (Lotz 2007). Digital video recorders (DVRs), popularized by TiVo Inc., provided a way to record television digitally and were first introduced in 1999. By 2007, up to 17 percent of American households were using this technology (Bourgeault 2007). DVRs allowed television viewers to record shows as they aired and watch them at their leisure. DVR owners tended to be within the ideal television audience for advertisers because they were mostly people with high levels of education and household income; however, in using their DVRs, these viewers were less likely to watch the show during its scheduled airing, and they were less likely to watch the advertising (Digital TV Weblog 2006).

[4.2] Recording television for later, time-shifted viewing was not the only new technology to arise during this time that would change how audiences watched television. Various channels started to offer their episodes online the day after airing. Hulu, an online streaming service created by the networks, was introduced in 2007. Online streaming of video was on the rise during *Chuck*'s run on NBC (Jones 2009). NBC also offered the pilot episode of *Chuck* for free online from Amazon and iTunes before airing it on television—a new approach to attracting viewers in this transitional time period (Schiller 2007). During the regular season, episodes would start streaming on Hulu and NBC.com the day after their initial airing on television. Throughout this period of television history, the networks were in a time of transition as viewership patterns began changing as a result of new technologies.

[4.3] With multiple means of viewing episodes after they aired, audiences moved toward nontraditional television viewing patterns. Although the Nielsen ratings started accounting for DVR numbers for later viewing in 2006, advertisers would not accept these numbers because it was less likely that audiences watched the ads. Networks thus did not initially include later viewings in their ad rates (Levin 2006). This would slowly change throughout the latter half of the 2000s; however, advertisers remained less interested in DVR viewers, who were more likely to fast-forward through commercials (Herrman 2011). Additionally, viewers watching episodes online using Hulu or NBC's Web site were left unrepresented in Nielsen ratings because they were not watching the same advertisements as the live viewers (Herrman 2011). As television viewing fragmented as a result of the new technologies, audiences not watching episodes live were less likely to be counted in the ratings numbers used to determine whether a show would be canceled.

5. *Chuck* versus the network pickup: Cancellation and the campaign

[5.1] In 2009, NBC's *Chuck* was in need of a "save our show" campaign. *Chuck* was a show about geeks and nerds, specifically the Buy More Nerd Herd, *Chuck*'s equivalent of the Best Buy Geek Squad, members of which worked out of a big-box electronics store to fix various devices. As a nerd turned superspy, title character Chuck would use his geek-specific skills to save the world, with each episode featuring a "Chuck Versus" title. The show was full of jokes and references to action movies, sci-fi movies, and geek culture in general, and it featured cameos by various actors and actresses from cult film and television. The first season of *Chuck* ran during fall 2007; during the first 13 episodes, it was picked up for a full season of 22 episodes. Because of the 2007–8 Writers Guild of America strike, the first season was shortened, and the last nine episodes of the commissioned 22 were never constructed (Sepinwall 2007). Ratings for the first season were unsatisfactory, but the show was given a second season thanks to the strike. The last episode of season 1 aired in January 2008, after which fans received no new episodes until the end of September 2008. NBC clearly supported the show, as it committed to a full 22-episode second season after seeing only six episodes and before any of the season aired in the United States, despite the weak ratings of the first season (Adelian 2008). Ratings overall for this season were not very strong and did not improve upon the ratings from the first season, save for an

episode that aired after a huge advertising push during the Super Bowl (Sepinwall 2008). It appeared that the show was headed for cancellation.

[5.2] During its second season, *Chuck* had to battle a very difficult time slot. That time slot in fall 2008 was home to ABC's *Dancing with the Stars* (2005–present), one of the most popular shows on air that season; Fox's *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008–9), which did not do as well but still performed better than *Chuck*; and the CBS comedy block of *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–present) and *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–14), which were both in the top 50 shows of the year (Wikipedia 2013). In the winter, that slot became even more perilous for attracting new viewers as *Dancing with the Stars* was traded out for the very successful *The Bachelor* (2002–present) in midseason and then returned for the spring, and *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* was replaced by the more popular *House M.D.* (2004–12). The show also aired during the football season and had to compete with *Monday Night Football*. NBC was regularly fourth for this hour, and *Chuck* simply could not compete with the other networks' programming.

[5.3] Further complicating *Chuck*'s renewal was NBC's plan to give the 10 PM time slot to Jay Leno. Conan O'Brien was slotted to take over for Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (1992–2014) starting in 2009, and Leno was looking to move on to a new show. In attempt to not lose Leno to a competitor, NBC worked to make a new space for him on the network. This resulted in a new show created specifically for Leno that would air five nights a week at 10 PM (Carter 2008). This cut the hours available for both scripted and reality programming from 22 to only 17. This limited the space NBC had for shows that were not successful and put *Chuck* closer to cancellation.

[5.4] In April 2009, with only a few episodes of season 2 of *Chuck* left to air, critics started to write to their viewers to persuade them not only to watch *Chuck*, but to watch it live to try to help improve the ratings. For the networks, the time for making renewal decisions was fast approaching, and viewers had few opportunities to prove they were watching certain shows that were on the bubble. Dan Fienberg, of HitFix.com, wrote on April 6, 2009, "It's always a good night to watch *Chuck*, but this Monday's episode is a particularly opportune time," before suggesting that the rest of the spring might turn into a "save our show" campaign. Kath Skerry of Give Me My Remote declared that week "Give Me My *Chuck*" week, with daily posts of show reviews, *Chuck* news, and videos (Skerry 2009). Alan Sepinwall, a TV critic for the New Jersey *Star-Ledger* and blogging at *What's Alan Watching*, joined in the fervor to attempt to persuade readers to watch the show (Sepinwall 2009a). It was through posts like these that online fans began to realize that they might need to work to save their favorite show, not simply watch.

[5.5] Hints of what the campaign would be are found in these particular blog posts. Skerry (2009) suggested that the only real way to get the network's attention would be to get people watching the show on Monday nights at 8 PM, even as she recognized the difficulty of the time slot with the various other popular programs competing for viewer attention. Fienberg offered a little more optimism, believing that the show would probably be renewed as a result of its younger audience and its performance on nontraditional viewing platforms. He also suggested that continued product placement might be the way to go regarding ways to help fund the show and that NBC executive Ben Silverman "likes shows that allow him to spread costs around and bring in money through alternative streams, so why would he jettison a series where the characters all love their iPhones, where they're eager to play any new video game on the market and where a Subway \$5 Footlong is considered acceptable bachelor party grub" (Fienberg 2009). The creative team behind *Chuck* had already worked to embrace these types of product placement; viewers would most likely be comfortable with more.

[5.6] Fearing cancellation, these critics used their platforms to appeal to the executives to renew the show. Sepinwall (2009b) wrote an open letter to NBC executives Ben Silverman, Marc Graboff, and Angela Bromstad with the reasons why, despite the low ratings, the network should keep airing the show. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Josh Schwartz, cocreator of the show, emphasized to the fans that "save our show" campaigns, by showing that their particular show had a strong, committed audience, could be influential in saving a show (Itzkoff 2009). He proposed that the fans send in Nerds candy to the network. Nestlé

Confections and Snacks, owners of Wonka, the makers of Nerds, also believed the show should be saved; they sent NBC 1,000 Nerds and a novelty box, and advised fans to do the same (Pitch Engine 2009).

[5.7] The fan campaign took off through various fan-run Web sites like ChuckTV.net (<http://chucktv.net/>) and We Give a Chuck (<http://www.wegiveachuck.com/>), which provided places where fans could come together to talk about the show. These sites featured discussion boards where fans could analyze and critique the show, as well as blog posts assembled by the site's moderators. Fans on these sites advocated for the watch/buy/share method of getting the show renewed: watching the show when it was on, buying the first season DVD and preordering the second season, and sharing their love of the show with their friends (ChuckTV.net, n.d.). This aligned with previous methods of showing fan support through monetary means and attempting to encourage more viewers to watch to increase ratings. The forums were full of ideas and recommendations for how to write letters to the executives and what to include in them. Fans suggested that these letters should be personal; that they should write about their own connection to the show; that they should provide some demographic information about themselves; and that they should tell the network how they watch the show especially if they watched in a nontraditional way. Above all, they should be respectful (ChuckTV.net 2009). They understood that the networks would be looking for data on who made up the audience, rather than simply knowing that people liked the show.

[5.8] It was in these forums that fans began to discuss the idea of not just trying to appeal to the network but also attempting to persuade the sponsors to work to get the show renewed. Initially, fans simply worked to encourage more people to write letters to both the NBC executives and some of *Chuck*'s sponsors, but it evolved into something that would affect the understanding of what "save our show" campaigns were. In the season 2 episode "Chuck versus the First Kill," Morgan Grimes attempts to persuade his boss to share some information on another employee by bribing him with a Subway sandwich (YouTube 2009a). However, this was not just any Subway sandwich; it was a Chicken Teriyaki \$5 Footlong, and it was treated on the show as if it were the greatest sandwich ever created, complete with slow-motion shots and swelling classical music. After what was essentially an ad within the show, more overt than mere product placement, audiences proceeded to purchase Subway sandwiches (Steinberg 2009). This in-show ad, airing during one of the last episodes of *Chuck*'s second season, and others like it gave fans an idea.

[5.9] A campaign that became known as "Finale and a Footlong" was conceived by fan Wendy Farrington. On April 8, 2009, she posted in the Television Without Pity forums that she wanted to "give NBC/Universal a legitimate business justification for keeping their quality programming on the air. It's more likely that the network and sponsors will hear our pleas for a *Chuck* renewal if we speak their language ... \$\$\$," suggesting that utilizing the fans' power as consumers might be the best way to get the network's attention (<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3184274>). The plan would be for *Chuck* fans to go to Subway on the night of the finale, order a \$5 footlong, and drop off a comment card to Subway, letting them know that the footlong was purchased in support of *Chuck*. Then fans would watch the season finale live to try to boost the ratings. This was to be accompanied by the fans writing letters to the executives of NBC and the chief marketing executive of Subway in support of the show and telling them about the campaign. Farrington got her message out by posting on numerous fan forums for the show and sending the message to various critics who had supported the renewal attempts. The idea was simple: demonstrate to both the network and the sponsor that there was not only an audience for the show but also an audience that was paying attention to the advertising for the show and supporting those sponsors. This would leverage the power of the audience: in addition to fan viewers, the sponsors would also work to persuade the network to renew the show on the fans' behalf. By focusing on *Chuck* as a business transaction, fans used their knowledge of the television industry to garner support for their goals.

[5.10] Fans spread the word of the campaign across various Web sites in an effort to both inform other fans of the campaign and to encourage nonfans to watch the show. Subway supported the campaign, with Tony Pace, the chief marketing executive for the Subway Franchisee Advertising Fund Trust, saying that Subway could not start this campaign, "but if the behavior is already out there, you can encourage it without being too heavy-handed. And that's what we've tried to do" (York 2009). As a brand supporting the show, Subway

wanted to emphasize their support for the show without seeming to be running the campaign; they wanted to avoid being seen as manipulating fans into buying their product. Zachary Levi, the star of the show, took over 600 *Chuck* fans in the United Kingdom to Subway to support the show, even helping make some sandwiches for fans (YouTube 2009b). James Poniewozik (2009) wrote in *Time* that this particular style of campaign might actually work because "plead as lyrically as you want; you ultimately keep a show on the air by assuring the network it will make money. And it does that by assuring its advertisers that they will make money." Between the support from the fans, support from the critics, and pressure from the advertisers, NBC and Warner Bros., the production company for the show, made a deal to bring back *Chuck* for a 13-episode third season (albeit one with a reduced budget) (Sepinwall 2009c). In an interview with Sepinwall, cochairman of NBC Ben Silverman said that this campaign was one of the most creative he had seen, and as a result, Subway would increase its presence within the show (Sepinwall 2009d). At the cost of increased product integration, fans would get more of their favorite show.

6. *Chuck* versus the tempting fates: Five seasons and a bunch of finales

[6.1] *Chuck* ran for five seasons and a total of 91 episodes, 56 of them airing after the "save our show" campaign. Yet the ratings for the show never improved, and viewership tapered off throughout the remaining run of the show. Ratings were low enough for the creators to be concerned about not providing their audience with an ending with some degree of closure. Many of the midseason finales and season finales were written to provide a coherent ending for the show if the show were to be canceled (Sepinwall 2012). So why did the show last beyond a third season? Previous "save our show" campaigns demonstrated that if a show's fans managed to get the network to renew the show for a season, the only way to ensure more seasons for the show was to improve ratings through increased viewership. Both *Twin Peaks* and *Jericho* were canceled shortly after renewal because the audience for these shows did not grow, although *Twin Peaks* was only brought back to air the remaining six episodes of season 2 and not renewed for a third season. However, the majority of *Chuck* aired after the campaign to save it and aired with a smaller audience, so something else must have been occurring to convince the network to keep renewing the show.

[6.2] Part of the need to renew the show came from the failure of NBC to produce many successful new shows while *Chuck* was on air. There was speculation in fall 2009 that NBC might bring the show back earlier than planned because many of the shows for their 2009–10 season were not performing well (Ausiello 2009). Shortly after, NBC announced that *Chuck* would indeed get an additional six episodes (Adalian 2008, 2009) and would be coming back earlier than planned (Sepinwall 2009e). In the spring, after new episodes started airing, *The Jay Leno Show* (2009–10) was canceled, opening up five more hours a week for programming (Levin 2010). Although NBC needed reliable programming, season 3 of *Chuck* did not rapidly improve its ratings, and many feared that the show might again need saving (Hyman 2010). Despite its low ratings, *Chuck* was renewed for a 13-episode fourth season (ChuckTV.net 2010). Throughout the 2010–11 television season, NBC would continue to have many low-rated scripted television shows; this would result in *Chuck* getting an order for 11 additional episodes, bringing the season 4 episode count to 24 (Ausiello 2010). In May 2011, *Chuck* received its final renewal, when it was determined that a 13-episode final season would air in the 2011–12 television season (Hibberd 2011). In this final season, the show was moved from its Monday night 8 PM time slot to Friday at 8 PM in what is commonly referred to as the Friday-night death slot.

[6.3] Throughout most of *Chuck*'s run, it battled the same series of shows in that Monday night time slot, making it difficult for the ratings to improve. NBC, during this time period, besides not producing television shows that would become hits, was in turmoil as the network was being sold to Comcast. The Comcast deal was agreed to in December 2009, with 51 percent of the company sold to Comcast and the remaining 49 percent still controlled by General Electric (Arango 2009). The merger was approved by the Federal Communications Commission in January 2011, at which point the executives were replaced with new Comcast-approved executives (Hamill 2011). All of this suggests that it was a wise idea for the network to hold on to certain shows despite low ratings, but it does not quite explain why *Chuck* was one of those shows.

[6.4] The "Finale and a Footlong" campaign to save *Chuck* after season 2 did more than just prove to the network that the show had fans. Although the campaign may have been only one part of the ultimate decision to renew *Chuck* for a third season, by showing support for the sponsors as well as petitioning the network, it increased the audiences' negotiating power. This told the network that while the audience for the show may be small, it was loyal to both the show and the advertisers. Advertiser loyalty was key, as product placement became a more effective way to advertise in television to avoid viewers who were fast-forwarding through commercials or viewers watching in nontraditional methods. Sponsorship accompanied by fan loyalty could create a mutually beneficial relationship, providing desirable content to viewers, business for advertisers, and more outside funding and support for network programming.

[6.5] The show became known for its stable audience; Fienberg (2010) referred to it as "one of the network's most consistent and dedicated audiences, producing nearly identical weekly ratings regardless of its competition." Sepinwall (2011) argued that even when *Chuck*'s ratings were slipping, it was "still a known quantity," noting, "It's never going to be a hit, but its audience is its audience (even if it's been smaller this spring than it was in the fall), and NBC can put it on the schedule and not worry about having to promote it at all." Sepinwall uses the phrase "a known quantity" to suggest that while the show may have had a small audience, it was loyal, and renewing the show may have been less of a risk than having a new show be a flop. Because *Chuck* was a known quantity that delivered stable ratings, NBC had an understanding of how well it would perform and could focus its marketing efforts elsewhere. The campaign helped establish *Chuck*'s audience and its value to the network, and it proved the fans' loyalty to the show and its sponsors. When it came time for NBC to pick up shows for a full season or to renew shows for the new season, the low-rated *Chuck* was a safe bet thanks to that viewer loyalty. NBC could air it and guarantee that it would have a small but dedicated audience—something it could not necessarily guarantee for their other shows. NBC could then better market the loyal audience to advertisers as desirable viewers because more attentive viewers (such as fans) were more likely to watch the advertisements (Ryan 2003). In a time where broadcast channels were collectively losing audiences to cable channels, altered viewing patterns, and nontraditional consumption methods, an engaged audience was valued, often over the potential for an unknown extensive potential audience.

7. *Chuck* versus the future: Savvy fans and future "save our show" campaigns

[7.1] Unlike previous "save our show" campaigns, *Chuck* managed to be continually renewed despite a lack of increase in the size of the audience thanks to the change in labor featured in the "Finale and a Footlong" campaign. *Chuck* fans had a difficult battle when attempting to leverage their viewing power and market desirability. They were fortunate because their numbers were made up of desirable viewers in the demographic of 18- to 49-year-olds, but fans understood the difficulties of the time slot and the importance of watching the show live on television. *Chuck* was a show that performed well on "all of the various off-network viewing platforms"; however, those viewing platforms did not affect the Nielsen ratings, the only measurement that the networks and advertisers were interested in (Fienberg 2009). The *Chuck* "save our show" campaign leveraged not only its viewing power as an audience but its buying power as a consumer audience by speaking directly to the sponsors of the show. With support from the sponsors, the network ultimately faced less risk in show renewal, and the fans received more of their desired programming. This campaign utilized fan labor as buying and viewing power in a way that had never been done before and would change how future "save our show" campaigns would be run.

[7.2] The "Finale and a Footlong" campaign had its roots in part of the campaign to save *Farscape*, as both fan bases used industry logics within their campaigns. As part of their work advertising the show and its valuable audience, *Farscape* fans appealed to advertisers who sponsored the show. Many fans would eat KFC while watching new episodes and mail the receipts to the company, thanking them for their support of the show. They also made cards that said, "I supported your business today because you are one of *Farscape*'s sponsors" and left them behind for sponsors (Freek 2013). Although this was only part of the campaign strategy, it was international financing that ultimately brought back the show for a final miniseries. This

showed fans that they could appeal to sponsors to gain financial support and therefore stronger negotiating power for their show. The success of both campaigns relied on the cost of the show. The financial deal between NBC, Warner Bros., and Subway to renew *Chuck* for a third season included a reduced budget for the show. Because *Farscape* was the most expensive show airing on a cable network at the time, fans could only attract enough money to support a four-episode miniseries (Hughes 1999). Fans spoke using industry logic to argue for their value as an audience, focusing on the desirability of their ability to act as consumers.

[7.3] The evolution of fan campaigns taught fans that audience attention would often not be enough. Fan labor only mattered if it also was accompanied by financial support for the network. "Save our show" campaigns that appealed to advertisers were a valuable method for fan labor to bring about financial support. Even the "save our show" campaign for *Chuck* continued after the show's renewal with a Twitter campaign called #NotANIelsenFamily. Each week, while watching the episode live, fans would tweet to sponsors based on advertisements that aired during the episode (We Give a Chuck, n.d.). These tweets involved thanking the sponsor for their support of the show and included the hashtag #NotANIelsenFamily. There was also a photo campaign that involved fans tweeting pictures of themselves with the sponsored product and the hashtag. This campaign was developed as fans realized how many of these products they were either willing to purchase or already purchased on a regular basis. The effort recognized the sponsors as supporters of the show, thanked them for their continued support, and showed both the sponsors and the network that there was an audience that may not be accurately represented by the Nielsen rating system.

[7.4] This style of campaign was picked up by the fans of Fox's *Fringe* (2008–13), who modified their Twitter usage to attempt to save their show. Each week on the Web site More Than One of Everything, a new hashtag would be given out that would be used to discuss the show (<http://morethanoneofeverything.net/?p=1955>). One hour before the episode, the fans would tweet a thank-you to one of the sponsors of the show. Then during the episode, the fans would tweet *Fringe*-related items and episode-related tweets to attempt to get the new hashtag trending worldwide for the duration of the episode. The fans who run this particular site have worked out the best way to get their hashtag trending on Twitter and have worked with other fans to ensure that many people were talking about the show on Twitter. This effort continued to recognize the sponsors for their advertisements and product placements and thanked them for their support of the show. It also worked to show the network and the advertisers that there were people talking about the show while it aired who may not be counted in the ratings. *Fringe* was another show that was perennially on the cancellation bubble and had an active fan base that showed support for the show, and the sponsors certainly helped encourage renewal.

8. *Chuck* versus the end: Fan power, fan audiences, and where we go from here

[8.1] Television requires an audience in order to be produced; it is funded through advertising and corporate sponsors. With the assumption that there will always be an audience for television, the power of the audience is deemphasized in the minds of networks and sponsors. It is in "save our show" campaigns where the power of the viewers and the effects of fan labor for their favorite shows are at last recognized. Campaigns like the one for *Cagney & Lacey* recognized that there was an audience that was desirable to the network, and they worked to increase the size of that audience, thus allowing the show to have seven complete seasons. The "save our show" campaign for *Jericho* showed that fans were not only passionate about their favorite shows but that they would also spend money to support them. *Farscape* fans worked to advertise their value as an audience to sponsors and networks who might help pick up the show. *Chuck*'s campaign continued the idea of what a "save our show" campaign could look like by appealing directly to the sponsors to persuade the networks on their behalf. Through their power as consumers, fans' labor influenced the decisions of the networks regarding their favorite shows.

[8.2] This particular type of power—the power of audience as consumer—is problematic because it requires the viewers to actively participate in the desired capitalistic system already in place. This becomes even more complicated as "save our show" campaigns move toward fans using their power to consume to appeal to the advertisers. The audience has limited control over what network their show is shown on or which companies

are advertisers for the show, which can lead to problems if the viewer does not agree with the sponsor's policy but wants to support the show. However, this current strategy offers the most agency and voice to the viewers; having an active role in the renewal process is something that was previously considered to be inaccessible to fans.

[8.3] Despite the problems inherent in this new attempt at wielding fan power, it is still a step forward for fan culture. Fans had previously been considered fringe TV viewers. Fans are improving ways to navigate the existing systems of power in order to negotiate more control and opportunity to influence network programming. Engaged audiences of fans, although often small, through their dedication and labor ultimately have the opportunity to have more power in the television-advertiser-consumer relationship. As television increasingly relies on niche audiences, television shows are going to lend themselves more to fan culture and will be recognized as fan commodities. Recognizing that fans can have a voice regarding renewal of their shows, even if it is a problematic voice, is important, and the "save our show" campaign for *Chuck* helped make that voice heard by those in power.

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Praxis

Modding a free and open source software video game: "Play testing is hard work"

Giacomo Poderi and David J. Hakken

University of Trento, Trento, Italy, and Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—Video game modding is a form of fan productivity in contemporary participatory culture. We see modding as an important way in which modders experience and conceptualize their work. By focusing on modding in a free and open source software video game, we analyze the practice of modding and the way it changes modders' relationship with their object of interest. The modders' involvement is not always associated with fun and creativity. Indeed, activities such as play testing often undermine these dimensions of modding. We present a case study of modding that is based on ethnographic research done for *The Battle for Wesnoth*, a free and open source software strategy video game entirely developed by a community of volunteers.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Add-ons; *The Battle for Wesnoth*; Fan productivity; Gaming

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1. Introduction

[1.1] By conceiving of video game modding as a form of fan productivity and by focusing on free and open source software (FOSS) modders, this article investigates a phenomenon that is heavily underresearched (Sotamaa 2010a): the meanings that modders attach to their practices and the way that modding influences their relationship with the object of fandom, the video game. In computer games, the word *mods* (modifications) refers to player-made alterations and additions to preexisting video games. Mod makers, or modders, are typically passionate and skilled players who usually form online teams and cooperate with one another or with game companies to create such mods (Sotamaa 2007; Postigo 2007). Recently, modding practice and modders' creative work have been more commodified by the video game industry. This makes understanding how this form of fan productivity blurs traditional dichotomies between players and game designers, and between play and work (Ducheneaut et al. 2006), more important.

[1.2] Early studies of modding used a conflict model to analyze it, framing modding as, for example, a form of resistance from the bottom against the restrictiveness of corporate game design (Huhtamo 1999; Schleiner 1999), or as a form of exploitation and unwaged work (Terranova 2000; Postigo 2003). More recent studies started framing it in symbiotic terms, stressing corporate attempts to sustain and promote the practice (Sotamaa 2007) as well as the mutual benefits that gamers and game companies can receive from it (Postigo 2007). In our view, two crucial topics common to fan studies and video game studies—the meanings that actors (modders) themselves attach to modding in their everyday activities (Sotamaa 2010a) and how their modding changes their play—are generally ignored in this debate. Here, we investigate the question: How does the practice of modding change modders' relationship with the object of their fandom?

[1.3] Thus, the original contribution of this work to fan studies is evidence that serious modding can radically change the modder's relationship to the game. Modders commonly lose the desire to play the video game, have fewer chances to play it, or even develop a conflicted, love-hate relationship toward modding, an endeavor usually portrayed as both engaging and creative. If these findings are demonstrated to be general, they will be relevant to the study of other important phenomena, such as gamification (Deterding et al. 2011) and playbor (Kücklich 2005). Indeed, this would further suggest that using game-design elements to make nongaming activities (e.g., work or education) more fun or more engaging, and trying to extract labor from playful activities, should be approached more cautiously than is the case now.

[1.4] Play testing is a method of quality control that can take place at many points during the video game design and development process: "It is the design equivalent of bug fixing, though it is considerably less cut and dried. When playtesters look at the game, they try to see if the game is any fun and try to find faults in the game mechanics" (Rouse 2004, 484). In the case of *The Battle for Wesnoth*, investigated here, the specific activity of play testing video game mods revealed the changes in modders' relationship to the game, and it will be at the center of our arguments below.

[1.5] Our work proceeds as follows: Section 2 defines modding as a form of fans' explicit and expressive productivity. The third section examines the emergence of video game modding and its relationship with FOSS development. Section 4 explains the ethnographic methodology used for the research and describes why *The Battle for Wesnoth* was chosen as the case to be investigated. The fifth and sixth sections, which are empirical, report modders' statements about how modding changed their relationship to the game, leading them to endure activities that they came to consider anything but fun. The discussion and conclusion sections summarize the most important findings and point toward directions for further inquiry.

2. Video game modding as explicitly expressive productivity

[2.1] Fandoms are now understood to be much more than passive aggregates of passionate fans who merely gather around their favorite TV shows, comics, or video games. Rather, they are now seen as performing active roles in the reconfiguration, appropriation, and expansion of their objects. Theorists such as Jenkins (1992) and Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) have suggested various ways to frame these more active roles, but Fiske's (1992) tripartite model of semiotic, enunciative, and textual productivity has received the widest attention in fan studies. Fiske's categories serve to classify things that fans produce while consuming their object of fandom; meanings and interpretations of those objects, conversations about them; and written artifacts that expand and are integrated into them.

[2.2] However, analytic applications of Fiske's model to fan productivity in video games have proven to be problematic. First, video games are a participatory medium: they require gamers to play, and playing is widely acknowledged to be both a performative and a productive practice (Wirman 2007). It has been difficult, however, for analysts to distinguish between players' productivity in game and out of game (i.e., where does one locate video game fans' semiotic productivity?). Second, like many current types of user-generated content, modding is manifest mainly online. Therefore, the use of Fiske's model may reinforce an analysis problem identified by Hills (2013). Although, according to Fiske, any fan productive action may well span all three categories, contemporary inquiries into online participatory culture generally use them as if they were mutually exclusive. Further, nearly every online interaction is associated with a (digital) text. Perhaps for this reason, semiotic and enunciative productivity have been neglected, while textual productivity has become the all-embracing label for all types of fan productivity (Hills 2013). For instance, Crawford (2012, 120) labels many aspects of gamers' production as fan textual productivity, including "the production of websites, mods and hacks, private servers, game guides, walkthroughs and FAQs, fan fiction and forms of fan art." However, these three types of productive output require very different skills and commitments on the fans' side. Analysis of fan productivity must demonstrate the specific ways in which each type has different implications for the fan-game relationship.

[2.3] To avoid flattening video game fans' productivity under one all-embracing label, it is useful to define such productivity along two axes. The first distinguishes implicit from explicit productivity. This dimension reflects how most participatory cultures (Jenkins 2006) demand of fans a relatively high degree of commitment, awareness, and mobilization of skills. Consequently, producers often explicitly claim their productions, in a way that demonstrates their self-consciousness. In contrast, in many popular Web 2.0 applications and Web sites, users' participatory productivity is

generally only implicit, and is rarely demonstrably self-conscious (Schafer 2011). The second axis distinguishes between instrumental and expressive productivity. The first extreme reflects artifacts that gamers produce to advance more effectively in the game (e.g., documentation, walkthroughs, or tools). The second relates to game-specific outputs that extend, enrich, and reconfigure the video game (e.g., customized player models, skins, game levels) (Wirman 2007).

[2.4] Because modders are video game fans who consciously commit their time and mobilize their skills to create digital artifacts that enrich their object of fandom, we suggest that video game modding be analyzed as a form of explicit, expressive fan productivity. Broadly speaking, a shared feeling of belonging and affiliation with the object of fandom, and enjoyment of the expressive affordances that this object provides, are at the basis of game fans' engagement practices (Jenkins 2006). More specifically, Sotamaa (2010a) suggests that playing, hacking, researching, artistic expression, and cooperation are key motivations for modders. Modders play because they desire to extract as much as possible from the game. They see modding as a manifestation of a hacker legacy. They research because they need to investigate not only the details of the source code, but also the background and contextual information that impinge on and even define the mod. The game is a medium of expression, and modding can be aesthetically (and also politically) motivated. Finally, for some people, modding is a primary way to cooperate and connect with like-minded people.

[2.5] It is safe to say that modifying games through modding has been a recognized part of game industry practice and mainstream gaming cultures at least since the early 1980s. *Castle Smurfestein* (1983), a total conversion of the video game *Castle Wolfenstein* (1981), is usually considered the first mod ever created (Kücklich 2005). At that time, video games were relatively unsophisticated software artifacts with simple design and mechanics. They were mainly a niche product, within the reach of only technically skilled computer geeks and hackers. However, even in these early days, a few software companies provided development tools or construction kits to help players customize game characters and levels. An example is *The Shoot 'Em Up Construction Kit* (SEUCK) available for Commodore 64 video games (Sihvonen 2009).

[2.6] The modding phenomenon received a mid-1990s boost with the arrival of first-person shooters mods, initiated by the public release of the source code for Id Software's *Doom*. This release was so successful in fostering an emerging modding community that Id Software released a Doom Editor Utility to help gamers produce levels, and did the same for its subsequent successful games, *Quake* and *Quake II*. Several mods emerging from these first-person shooters (e.g., *Half-Life* and *Urban Terror*) brought new life to the original video games while providing career

opportunities to the authors of successful mods. This was particularly visible in the success of *Counter-Strike* (1999), which was originally circulated as a mod of *Half-Life* (which, in turn, was a mod of *Quake II*). Later, as a result of its unexpected success, *Counter-Strike* was reproduced and sold as a stand-alone video game (Kücklich 2005).

[2.7] Nowadays, video game modding has been consolidated into a game resource that is highly appreciated by gamers and game companies. Video game mods feature several levels of design and implementation complexity and integrate with the video game at different software levels. They can affect the physics of the game's virtual world, modify play, and introduce new story lines and game types. Typically, mods introduce new characters, maps, or levels into the game (Postigo 2007), but they can also provide improved interface components or address shortcomings in game design (Nardi 2010). Furthermore, because modders are not constrained by budget plans and market revenues and are therefore much more free to take creative and innovative risks (Postigo 2007), attempts by the game industry to take advantage of modding should not surprise us. These attempts include nurturing modder communities through sponsored events, such as modding contests (Sotamaa 2007), and integrating modding directly into the design of games, making it a concrete part of game play (note 1).

3. Video game modding and FOSS

[3.1] Contemporary modding clearly converges and partially overlaps (e.g., *Doom*) with FOSS, either as cultural practice or as a form of software engineering. First, as highlighted by Sihvonen (2009) and Sotamaa (2010a), video game modding displays a hacker legacy of tinkering and engaging deeply with technology production for the sake of self-expression, learning, and harnessing. This legacy is also at the basis of much FOSSing (i.e., tinkering and engaging with the practices of FOSS development and culture) (Coleman 2012). Second, FOSS has always manifested a highly modular and customizable approach to software design. Recently, modding and software extensions have emerged as effective software development methods in FOSS (Scacchi 2011). Third, although FOSS video games occupy a small niche compared to the domination of the market by corporate (proprietary) video games, they represent an increasingly relevant portion of FOSS products. For instance, in one of the most used FOSS development portals, SourceForge.net, "Games" has recently come to constitute the second biggest category of FOSS projects. It is therefore reasonable to contend both that the creation of FOSS games and of related game development tools is a central element in the cultural world of computer games, and that gaming is central to FOSS (Scacchi 2011).

[3.2] As acknowledged by Scacchi (2004), FOSS game development includes all the fundamentals of the FOSS paradigm; that is, it is a transparent, iterative, collaborative, and Internet-mediated development model (Weber 2004). Thanks to specific software licenses, the availability of the software source code, and an infrastructure of shared tools, FOSS programs can be and are developed by communities of volunteer developers and skilled users who commit their skills and efforts to the betterment of the software, "to scratch their own itches" (Raymond 1999, 23) or "just for fun" (Torvalds and Diamond 2001). Two aspects set modding in FOSS apart from modding in typical corporate, mainstream video games. First, FOSS permissive licenses and the availability of the source code allow modders to work on their mods without having to reverse engineer code or enter a legal gray area. Second, because FOSS modding is open and collaborative, it takes place in a space where participatory practices (e.g., reporting and fixing bugs, and providing translations and feedback) are welcome, encouraged, and supported (Scacchi 2004). Indeed, FOSS end-users are allowed, expected, and even urged to take part in projects, and they are often provided with the means (e.g., documentation, tutorials, mentors, tools) to do so. After some time making only marginal contributions, users often find themselves involved in more central development activities (Ducheneaut 2005).

[3.3] Certainly, FOSS core developers maintain more power and control over the source code than do co-developers or participant end users, but development happens in less formal, less clear-cut, and more transparent ways than in the case of proprietary, closed source software. In this latter case the boundaries between companies' development efforts and the gamer community's enthusiasm are much clearer and more impermeable (Nardi 2010). Ultimately, because participating in FOSS means socialization, learning, and career development, we suggest that modding in FOSS can be considered an institutionalized practice for fan involvement.

4. An ethnographic approach to modding in *The Battle for Wesnoth*

[4.1] But what are the patterns typical of fan modding involvement in FOSS games? To investigate these patterns as they are experienced and performed by modders in daily activities, and to go beneath a surface reading of the digital traces left by their interactions, we developed an ethnographic study (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) of a FOSS video game project: *The Battle for Wesnoth*. As our primary means of gathering data, we did 14 months (December 2010 to April 2012) of participant observation, including Internet-mediated interviews as the primary methodology for gathering data (Garcia et al. 2009; Kivits 2005).

[4.2] As the existing literature stresses, the online traces generated by social formation—project Web sites, instant messages, e-mails, and forum messages—supply only a partial picture of FOSS modding. For this reason, our empirical research required deeper and longer engagement than unobtrusive or automated data gathering techniques would have (Demazière, Horn, and Zune 2011; Hakken 1999). Of course, the benefits of focusing on a single case and using these methodologies come at the cost of results that are easily generalized.

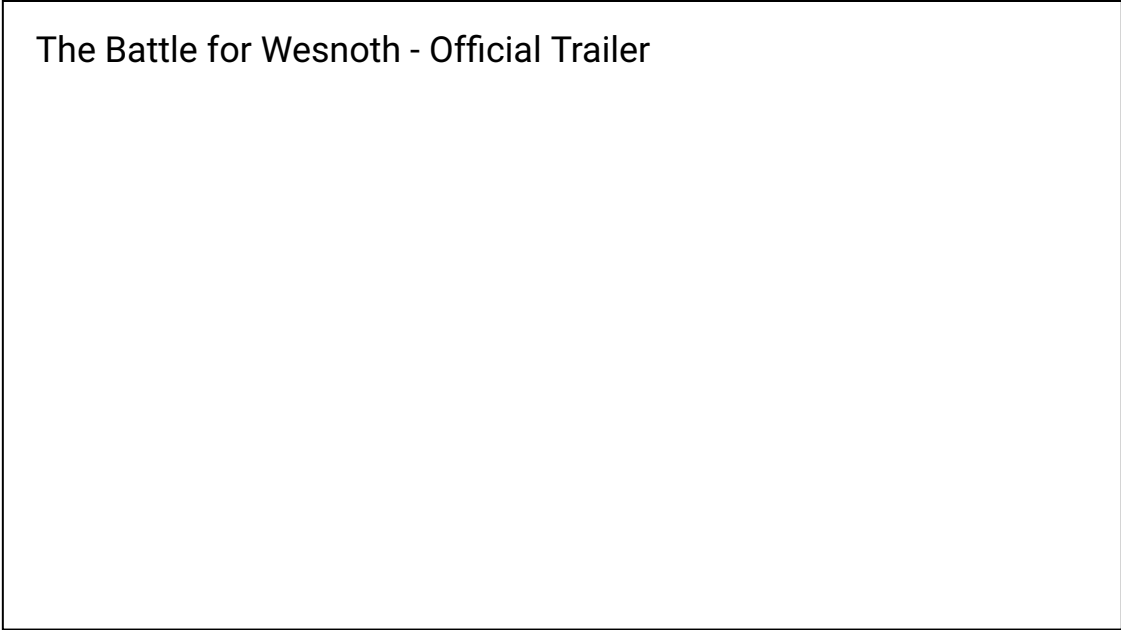
[4.3] The empirical research was conducted overtly. We announced our presence and intentions through a few public messages. No complaints were raised in response. The fieldwork involved long periods of observation, participation in the collective infrastructure (e.g., reading forum discussions about the creation of add-ons and discussing, via IRC or e-mail, improvements to add-ons and *The Battle for Wesnoth*), game play (e.g., multiplayer and competitive matches), and off-line interactions (e.g., a couple of face-to-face interviews and attendance at a FOSS conference).

[4.4] We conducted 29 Internet-mediated interviews (note 2). To put informants at ease and to create an egalitarian research setting that would promote trust, interviewees were able to choose their preferred interview medium. The majority opted for asynchronous communication media (either e-mail or the private messaging system built into the *Battle for Wesnoth* forum), with five choosing a synchronous medium (IRC). As already documented in the literature, asynchrony promotes a more intimate and reflexive process of knowledge construction than does synchrony, but it has the drawback of lengthier and more cumbersome management work (Kivits 2005; Wirman 2012). All interviews began after informants had read, understood, and agreed to explicit procedures regarding interview management, data handling, privacy, and confidentiality. Informants are referred to by aliases.

[4.5] *The Battle for Wesnoth* is an original "turn-based tactical strategy game with a fantasy theme" (<http://www.wesnoth.org/>) inspired by the classic turn-based games *Warsong* (Nippon Computer System 1991) and *Master of Monsters* (System Soft 1991). The strategic dimension of the game involves fighting on a favorable terrain, at a favorable time of day, and matching one's forces against weaker or disadvantaged enemies. In game, players build up armies by gathering resources and recruiting new units and then use them to meet the objectives set for campaign scenarios or to challenge other players over the Internet. Two game modes are available: single player and multiplayer. The former provides 16 official campaigns, each one with its specific plot, characters, and number of connected scenarios. The latter provides 54 multiplayer scenarios with different game forms (1 vs. 1, 2 vs. 2, 4 vs. 4, free for all, collaborative). Video 1 is a promotional trailer for the video game that shows different combat situations and the basic game layout.

[4.6] Launched in 2003 as a prototype, *The Battle for Wesnoth* slowly gained success in the niche area of strategy games and reached version 1.10.5 in November 2012. Currently, only a couple dozen developers are actively working on the project, but 60 have contributed to it over the years. About 200 people are officially credited with making helpful contributions. The official Internet forum, which is the primary support channel for gamers, modders, and project participants, has 24,500 registered members, with an average continuous presence of 35 visitors.

The Battle for Wesnoth - Official Trailer



Video 1. *A presentation trailer for The Battle for Wesnoth (v.1.8). The trailer provides a basic introduction to the game play and game content availability while showing different battle situations.*

[4.7] The possibility of creating add-ons for *The Battle for Wesnoth* is widely advertised and encouraged through the project infrastructure. The Internet forum is used primarily to support modders' work, and vast documentation for add-on creation exists, in the forms of technical guides, how-tos, and coded examples. Technically, all add-ons are coded in a special markup language, Wesnoth Markup Language (WML), which is developed and maintained by *Battle for Wesnoth* developers. The add-on distribution and installation system is highly integrated into the video game, and the starting interface allows players to connect to servers able to download existing add-ons or upload new ones. Figure 1 shows the interface for downloading add-ons.

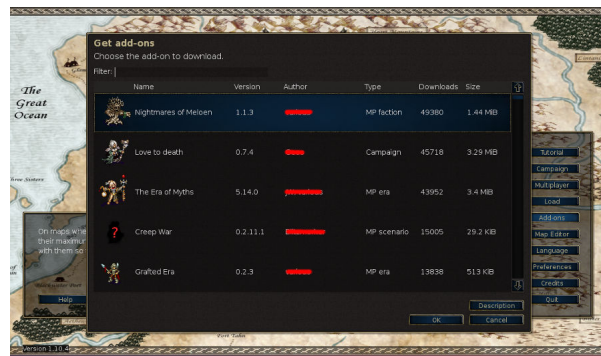


Figure 1. Interface for downloading add-ons. Available content is sorted by number of downloads. The interface shows each add-on's name, version, authors, number of downloads, and file size. [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.8] Currently, the add-on servers for the two most recent versions of *The Battle for Wesnoth* include 400 and 100 add-ons respectively ([note 3](#)). The most common add-ons are the mods of single-player campaigns, multiplayer scenarios, and factions (i.e., collections of battle units). Less common ones concern map packs, soundtracks, and authoring tools. This additional content represents a valuable and highly appreciated *Battle for Wesnoth* gamer resource: it extends the longevity of the video game and expands strategic gameplay. The two most recent *Battle for Wesnoth* versions introduced only one new official campaign, although developers had formerly provided gamers with more content elements. These add-ons provide players not only with more content to play but also, more interestingly, with new strategy-related mechanics. For instance, add-ons for nonlinear campaigns exist, in which the results of the battles directly influence the story lines that may unfold in the campaign. Nontraditional scenarios also exist, in which the composition of the map terrains and of the customized unit factions drive players to radically change their playing strategies. Finally, a few highly appreciated add-ons emerged recently that blend the pure turn-based strategy design elements of *The Battle for Wesnoth* with elements oriented more toward role-playing games (RPGs).

5. Passionate gamers converge toward modding; busy modders diverge from gaming

[5.1] When we discussed how they had moved from being gamers to becoming involved in *Battle for Wesnoth* development activities, particularly creating add-ons, all informants acknowledged that they were initially spurred on by passion for the game, either in general or for specific aspects of its design. They all expressed enthusiasm for *The Battle for Wesnoth*. Modders were more than just players; they started as fervent supporters of the game.

[5.2] I was first exposed to *Wesnoth* about 4 years ago, when a friend of mine told me about this awesome fantasy game he had downloaded. When I got home, I downloaded it for myself. I played the tutorial, and found myself completely hooked. I went on to complete *Heir to the Throne* and *Sceptre of Fire*. I have been playing/involved with *Wesnoth* more or less continuously ever since then. (Krellis interview, May 31, 2011)

[5.3] I was instantly drawn to the small download size of the game, and (of course!) the fact that it was free. I downloaded it and was instantly sucked into simple mechanics and game play that led to a wealth of strategies and replay value. Today I am still in awe of not only how *Wesnoth* manages to produce such fun and at times complex game play and strategies using very simple mechanics and rules, but also how moddable *Wesnoth* is and how sophisticated the engine has become. To be honest, I really find it hard to say anything negative about *Wesnoth*, simply because there is very little negative about the game, in my experience. (Cylanna interview, June 1, 2011)

[5.4] Furthermore, as shown in the two following excerpts, add-on creators confirmed that they find modding fun:

[5.5] I would say that the point where I moved from being a player to a member of the community was when I joined the forums in hopes of getting help in writing WML and creating a campaign...There I found extensive, user-friendly documentation, and a forum full of helpful, friendly people. The forum community was extremely welcoming, and gave me a good first impression. It was then that the solitary learning process ended and I began "really" learning and having fun with WML. (Krellis interview, May 31, 2011)

[5.6] I just wanted to make a role playing game [add-on]; one-scenario quests aren't interesting enough, character development needs to be infinite (still haven't figured out how best to handle that ;-)) and actions should have consequences...For me, part of the fun is that the game engine is not meant for this. ;-)) I like that I'm twisting something to a completely new purpose...So far, I haven't found anything that I absolutely needed that I was not able to do with WML and LuaWML. As far as I can remember. There's so much that I want to do and *can* do that I try not to spend time worrying about the things that I *can't* do. (Erlornas interview, June 29, 2011)

[5.7] These two add-on authors' claims are very similar to those of others. Indeed, all informants said that they enjoyed modding for one or more of the following

reasons: (1) WML is flexible, allowing them to experiment with innovative add-ons, (2) the infrastructure supports modding, offering documentation and tools for authoring and collaboration, and (3) the environment is supportive and welcoming, with a community of friendly and experienced peers who can be relied on for help.

[5.8] However, when modders were asked about their current relationship with the game, a slightly different picture emerged: modders were spending more time creating add-ons for the game than on playing it and, when they did play, they did so for testing purposes.

[5.9] You can create your own add-ons such as maps, units and even entire campaigns. Before I started making my own content, I had been studying the game, its mechanisms and potential. I used to play regularly... Now I play this game occasionally. Maybe this is because I prefer creating to playing. (Kalenz interview, May 14, 2011)

[5.10] I'm one of those people that's more interested in creating than playing, so it doesn't really bother me if I spend more time working on this campaign than I do playing other campaigns. Granted, it does sometimes feel like I made too much work for myself, but I still enjoy actually working on the project. (Owaec interview, August 19, 2011)

[5.11] The amount of time I spend actually playing the game (aside from play testing my own campaign) has gone down considerably since I started contributing. (Elurin interview, June 30, 2011)

[5.12] Over time, the incompatibility of playing and modding emerged. This is not surprising, as both activities are time-consuming. With limited time to spend, modders make decisions about which activity to favor, choosing the one they describe as more fun. However, as shown in the next section, this "fun" is problematic, because modding also includes activities that are considered anything but fun, play testing above all.

6. "Play testing is hard work"

[6.1] In most video games, game content must be balanced in order for players to enjoy an intriguing experience. Because the strategic dimension of *The Battle for Wesnoth*'s design is largely regulated by the relationship among the variables defined for each content type or element (e.g., the sizes of maps, the composition of different terrains, the characteristics of factions and units), it is important for each element of playable content (both official ones and those provided by add-ons) to integrate smoothly with the others. Players, modders, and developers all stress balance as one

of the key points of the game. In general, they praise, support, and call for efforts to improve balance. And play testing is fundamental to achieving it. It is also hard work, as most modders point out.

[6.2] Play testing is a relatively collaborative activity. It is usually differentiated into self-testing, play testing with confidants, play testing with strangers, and play testing with the target audience (Fullerton, Sawain, and Hoffman 2004). However, as this section shows, play testing *The Battle for Wesnoth* is more complex. Indeed, although *Battle for Wesnoth* modders are in theory able to play test directly with their target audience, and although such testing is critical for the game mods to be broadly accepted, they still often find themselves play testing with very few confidants or, more likely, alone. Practically, play testing an add-on involves the repetitive tasks of (1) playing the add-on to discover how well it balances with other game elements, as well as how enjoyable it is, (2) tweaking it to improve balance and the playing experience, (3) playing it again to check the effect of the changes, and (4) repeating the sequence again when necessary.

[6.3] Play testing may reveal that map resources have been misplaced, allowing one player to go ahead to the detriment of another. Play testing a faction add-on may make clear that the faction has an unfavorable ratio of cost to skills that will make it unappealing. Modders tweak mods to improve these aspects, but they consider this process boring and repetitive, the least attractive activity in the whole process, the one that can lead them to abandon add-on projects.

[6.4] I agree with those others that "developing" [add-ons] doesn't leave much time for "playing," and that play testing is very repetitive and not much fun. It's not really an exaggeration to say I haven't "played" *Wesnoth* in years. (Arne interview, May 16, 2011)

[6.5] I'm surprised that people would contribute to the game when they were not enjoying it. I certainly wouldn't! I have never felt *obligated* to contribute. (I suppose I could feel obligated to fix a bug, but I haven't yet.). I have gotten pretty bored with play testing before, and when I did, I did something else for quite a while. (Nym interview, February 3, 2012)

[6.6] Largely, play testing produces only approximate results. As there is no certainty of achieving balance (and thus of being effective), play testing cannot be done well individually; it requires collaboration.

[6.7] In *The Battle for Wesnoth*, play testing is a trial and error process in pursuit of an undefined goal: balance. It is not the same as debugging, as most bugs are evident, and fixes either work or they don't. During a public conference, a leading

Battle for Wesnoth developer described balance as undefined, a subjective goal pursued repeatedly:

[6.8] Balance is mainly a feeling in your community. People say a game is not balanced when it's "not fair," when it's not challenging, but if it's too easy [it] is not balanced either, probably even when [it] is not fun...Balance is a moving target. We have been doing this for years and we are still doing it, because whenever we change something it has also a ripple effect throughout the game. So your game is never balanced, your game is about [i.e., approximately] balanced...It's not a science, you have to try stuff: if you see something doesn't work in release X, then you change it and you see what happens in release X+1. Did it work? Did it make things worse? Did it have side effects you didn't want? You can try it. (Deoran, talk given at FOSS conference, February 5, 2012)

[6.9] Resources can be reduced when they are too numerous or increased when they are too few. Similarly, an unbalanced cost/skills ratio among faction units can be adjusted by changing a unit's cost, or redefining another unit's skills. Nonetheless, changes create a new equilibrium that is not necessarily better balanced. A map overflowing with resources may upset strategy play more than a map on which misplacement of resources puts one player at a clear advantage over others. Therefore, modders play test an add-on to identify balance problems, change some variables, play test it again, change some variables again, and so on, until the add-on seems to be relatively well-balanced. Modders and other players are tightly bonded by their shared perceptions of how well mods are balanced. Indeed, as Deoran claims, "balance is a feeling dispersed in the gamers' community." There is no algorithm to evaluate or achieve balance; gamers and modders collectively construct it.

[6.10] *The Battle for Wesnoth* modders have good practices for designing and developing balanced add-ons and thus lessening the need for play testing, but these are not enough to avoid it completely. They use the design and the code of existing game content to guide that of their own add-ons. They often examine official game elements and well-considered add-ons and keep them in mind when creating their own, and documentation offers tips and tricks for creating balanced content. Furthermore, game elements are only balanced in relation to official and default specifications, so modders can ignore balance concerns among add-ons and don't have to play test them. However, although modders keep balance in mind throughout the process of designing and implementing add-ons, play testing remains a necessary step in their creation and enhancement. This is because players are the ones who collectively decide whether add-ons are balanced or not. This puts modders in a catch-22:

[6.11] The main obstacles we faced developing [the add-on] was getting art and getting play-testers. I did a lot of the art myself, but I couldn't do the play testing myself, and though the Era had tens of thousands of downloads on the add-on server, we rarely got feedback on balancing, so it was difficult to improve anything or get the balancing up to mainline quality—which was pretty frustrating, since the main reason the "serious" MP [multiplayer] players didn't try out [the add-on] was that they considered it poorly balanced, and thus not as fun to play. (Cleodil interview, June 13, 2011)

[6.12] Involving serious players in the play testing phase and integrating their feedback has become fundamental to *The Battle for Wesnoth* modding. The most established procedure by which modders gather feedback is to open forum threads calling for it. This is a standard practice, usually covering the whole add-on development process. Modders often use general-purpose threads with titles such as "Feedback thread for [add-on X]," where players can provide bug reports, positive and negative comments, and suggestions for further improvements. However, for the play testing phase, modders start specific threads (typically named "Balancing [add-on X]") that are used exclusively for balance issues (note 4). Using forum threads to gather feedback not only requires players to find the add-on among the many others and decide to play it, but also, having played it, to report balance issues. As the quotation above suggests, finding play testers is not easy: good players want good content to play with and in general avoid unbalanced add-ons, while new, inexperienced players cannot provide reliable feedback.

[6.13] Modders seem to start play testing when their add-ons become playable and attract a few first players. Answering a question about the precise moment one can talk about balance, Deoran replied,

[6.14] I would say: at the point where your game start[s] to be really playable. It doesn't have to be good, but it should not be a prototype. Once you start having players who come and play the game, at this point you should start thinking about balance. (Deoran, talk given at FOSS conference, February 5, 2012)

[6.15] However, although a large user base makes attracting play testers for the official content easy, it is more difficult to find them for add-ons. Add-ons must stand out from hundreds of others to gain renown and be consistently played by gamers. As a consequence, modders often find themselves doing something alone that should be done collaboratively. At the same time, they may receive occasional feedback from random play testers that calls into question some already-completed aspect of play testing.

7. Discussion

[7.1] The arguments presented above suggest that where fans' expressive productivity (modding) is institutionalized (as it can be in FOSS development), what was once experienced as mostly fun can get loaded with expectations (e.g., pursuing balance), responsibilities (e.g., reacting to gamers' feedback), and dependencies (e.g., relying on play testers). For these reasons, the practice of modding becomes a more serious form of work. Far from being cheerful hobbyists, modders become more similar to small-scale game designers. However, unlike such designers, modders remain committed to the idea that modding should be fun.

[7.2] Describing the tenets of game design and development, Rouse (2004) depicts play testing as

[7.3] one of the most exhilarating parts of the game development cycle. It is then that you take the project you have been working on for months or years, during which time only the development team has played the game, and show it to people outside the team...Playtesting is not just a minor stepping-stone to getting the game shipped to the duplicators or uploaded to the Internet. Instead playtesting is a key time during which you can transform your game from average to excellent, from something that shows promise to a game that is truly great. Few games ever came out of the developer's hands in absolutely perfect shape. Ideally, it is the playtesting cycle that gives your game the extra push to be the best it possibly can. (483–84)

[7.4] Our fieldwork showed that, although it is crucial, play testing is anything but exhilarating. Its repetitiveness, together with the difficulty of gauging its effectiveness, make this part of the work quite different from the initial designing or the actual coding of the add-ons, which modders still find pleasant and creative. For some modders, play testing is so boring that they may stop developing the add-on altogether, even though the broader effort is usually fun. For others, it spoils the very activity of playing: even though it involves playing the game, play testing is a completely different way of experiencing play.

[7.5] For gamers who became modders, the video game is no longer an artifact to be played. Rather, it is a platform with participatory affordances. However, even though they enjoy most of the creativity involved in modding, they also face more challenging and less fun phases. In this light, the sociotechnical context in which gaming take place emerges as crucial. This means that authoring and collaborative tools, support channels, and extensive documentation and tutorials, together with a supportive and

friendly environment, are necessary to reinforce and support the enjoyment of modding, so that the tedious bits can be better endured.

[7.6] Since I joined the developers I don't play much anymore. Testing the stuff I am responsible for is just enough and I don't even enjoy it anymore. Play testing is hard work. (Drogan interview, May 12, 2011)

8. Conclusions

[8.1] Contemporary participatory cultures increase the significance of fan production. If our conclusions here can be shown to be generally applicable, they will underline the value of attending to FOSS modding. By conceiving video game modding as a form of fans' explicit and expressive productivity, and by focusing on the way FOSS modders experience and reflect upon their work in practice, we suggest the following critical conclusions: (1) modding can seriously alter fans' traditional way of relating to their object of fandom, (2) even though modding involves designing elements of the game, these design activities are quite different from how they are formally described in research literatures, and (3) modding is a complex endeavor that includes several phases. Although some of these phases promote enjoyment and creativity, others do not and can even trigger estrangement.

[8.2] Altogether, these results may bear important implications for phenomena other than fandom that are similarly transformed by contemporary participatory culture, such as gamification, playbor, and professional gaming. Rooted in game practices and culture, these phenomena are reconfigured in ways that the traditional separation between play and work no longer captures. These refigurings call into question, for example, the extent to which making nongaming activities like work or education more engaging by using game-design elements, or extracting workforce and labor value from playful activities by designing them in a work-like fashion, may be efficient and sustainable over the medium and long term.

[8.3] In implicit or instrumental productivity, fans' value expresses itself either unconsciously or as the result of the overcoming of concrete needs. In contrast, explicit and expressive productivity implies a higher degree of awareness and expectation on the fans' side. Indeed, the case of modding in FOSS that we examined here shows how explicit and expressive forms of productivity can benefit the object of fandom by enriching and extending it. However, we also showed that the more fans' productive output is valued and integrated into the object, the more fans' efforts are accompanied by expectations and responsibilities toward the collectivity. In this case, their efforts may cease to be creative and fun.

[8.4] Finally, we note a few directions for further inquiry. First, sociotechnical contexts that sustain fans' productivity but also may lead to their detachment should be better investigated. Understanding this would illuminate what makes fans' involvement either endure or wane over time. Secondly, we need to know whether (and, if so, to what extent) implicit and instrumental forms of fan productivity also promote change in the relationship between fans and their object of fandom. Finally, we need to study modding in corporate, proprietary video games, where fans' productive practices are more marginal to the creation of the objects of fandom, and compare those studies to this one. Such a comparison may provide valuable insight into divergent participatory trajectories.

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10. Notes

1. For example, in *Little Big Planet* by Media Molecule and *Mod Nation Racers* by United Front Games, a core part of play consists of creating additional levels and original characters that can be shared with, showed to, and played by other players. Thus modding in the contemporary game industry functions both as a game design novelty and as a form of outsourced work (Sotamaa 2010b).
 2. The interviewees comprised eight developers (three retired), whom we treated as privileged informants, and 21 participant users involved in noncore development activities (three of whom were newcomers with less than 6 months' involvement).
 3. Because add-ons are unlikely to be compatible across different versions of the game, there is one dedicated server for each of the major versions. As a result of software changes in the video game engine, add-ons need to be validated (and edited if necessary) to ensure compatibility with each new version.
 4. For play testing purposes, modders and players typically put saved game files of actual matches in the feedback threads. These files can be loaded and played back, like recorded sporting events.
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Praxis

Sherlockology and Galactica.tv: Fan sites as gifts or exploited labor?

Bertha Chin

London, United Kingdom

[0.1] *Abstract*—Current scholarship on fandom has been preoccupied with examining the changing relationship between media industry professionals and fans. Media producers, celebrities, and industry insiders are increasingly establishing contact with fans, bypassing traditional media entertainment outlets to provide them with information directly. This contact is facilitated by social media networks. Fans serve as grassroots campaigners, promoters, and sometimes even public relations officers, acting as liaisons between media producers, celebrities, or industry insiders and fandom in general. In doing so, they take on roles traditionally fulfilled by professional PR and marketing personnel, and they do it for free, resulting in accusations that they are being exploited for their labor. However, fans do not necessarily view themselves as being exploited. We need to consider the possibility that they may regard their contributions as a service—or gift—to fandom. In examining the roles played by two popular fan sites, Sherlockology and Galactica.tv, I propose to examine how fan labor may be considered an act of gift giving in fandom.

[0.2] *Keywords*—*Battlestar Galactica*; Fan labor; Gift culture; *Sherlock*; TV

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1. Introduction

[1.1] When fans blog about or discuss their favorite media texts, they are performing labor, generating word-of-mouth promotion for TV shows, films, books, celebrities, musicians, and bands. More than that, fans also manage Web sites, Facebook pages, Tumblrs, and Twitter accounts, sometimes collaborating with celebrities and their management team to provide news and information to their fandoms. These practices have raised concerns that fans, in their roles as promoters and publicists, can be exploited. In consuming and producing media content, fans are performing labor that benefits the media industry in some way, whether by delivering audience numbers or by utilizing their contacts in fandom to promote a text; and they are providing this labor without any form of compensation from the media industry. Banks and Humphreys talk of the "need to move beyond commentary that frames user-created

content that becomes commercially valuable as a marker of exploited labour" (2008, 402). They argue that this content is often messier, and that its creation is driven by a different set of motivations, than is normally assumed, and they emphasize the need to take into account fan voices and fans' motivations. On that note, I want to consider the gift economy framework as an alternative viewpoint from which to explore the notion of fan labor.

[1.2] Fan studies scholars have, in recent years, started to engage with the theory of the gift economy (Hyde 1999; Mauss 1954). This provides an alternative approach to seeing fans as poachers, a concept that Henry Jenkins (1992) used to describe how fans appropriate characters and universes, inserting their own meanings into TV shows, films, literature, comics, and other texts as a way of resisting the multinational corporations that own the copyright on these texts. Within the context of fandom's gift economy, these creative fan cultural productions—artefacts that include not just fan fiction and fan art, but also essays, fan Web sites, and wikis that serve as repositories of knowledge for the fandom—are exchanged and circulated as gifts among fans and within fan communities. Lewis Hyde maintains that "when gifts circulate within a group, their commerce leaves a series of interconnected relationships in its wake" (1999, xiv). In fandom, the "gift economy [certainly] builds social bonds" (Booth 2010, 24).

[1.3] The gifts exchanged in fandom earn status and reputation both for the individual and for the community—or the fan site—the individual is associated with. The worth of a gift is determined by its quality, by fans' expertise in both the technology used to create it (such as the software used to create Web sites) and the cultural text(s) it references, and by the reading of the text(s) agreed upon by members of the fan community (such as specific shipper groups). Offering gifts enables fan creators, such as authors, vidders, gamers, Web site owners, and so on, to build on and elevate their status in their respective fan communities.

[1.4] Some of these fans who have attained skills and a good reputation within fandom occasionally go on to collaborate with media producers, participating in (and sometimes even organizing) grassroots marketing campaigns or assisting in the production of extra fan materials, such as contributions to official wikis and the production of extra DVD or Blu-ray specials (note 1). Derek Johnson (2007), however, reminds us not to "uncritically accept this shift as evidence of growing audience power" (73), as the proximity that arises from these collaborations often produces conflicts. Johnson also warns that the supposed empowerment of fans is ambiguous, a point that Henry Jenkins (2006) concedes when he comments on the perfunctory mixed signals sent out by a media industry that is unable to decide what kind of relationship

it wants to have with its audience. In the eyes of the industry, Johnson warns, fans are more like "domestic help, invited in so as to perform labour" (2007, 78), than guests.

[1.5] But are these forms of fan labor exploitative? Fans who participate in these collaborations or run the fan sites may consider their work not exploitative but a service to fandom. Their Web sites provide a repository for knowledge and information, sometimes gathered firsthand from their relationships with the media producers or other industry insiders. The importance of fan voices in examining the complexities of fan labor is crucial here. Baym and Burnett note how little we know about "how fans perceive their own contributions or how they reconcile this tension between empowerment and exploitation in their own lives" (2009, 435). Here I will look at fan labor by examining the roles played by the fan Web sites Sherlockology (<http://www.sherlockology.com/>), dedicated to BBC's *Sherlock* (2010–present), and Galactica.tv (<http://www.galactica.tv/>), dedicated to the original (1978–79) and reimagined (2004–9) series of *Battlestar Galactica*. I propose to examine how fan labor, although seen by some scholars as potentially exploitative, may be considered an act of gift giving by those involved in the fandom, serving not only to build social relationships but also to enable the fans giving these gifts to acquire status and build a reputation within their fandoms.

2. Methodology

[2.1] As a fan of both BBC's *Sherlock* and the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica*, I also consider myself a consumer of both fan sites. I have interacted with Sherlockology on various social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, and have tirelessly read the in-depth convention reports and interviews posted and conducted by Galactica.tv over the years. In the course of preparing this paper, I contacted Sherlockology, asking for permission to speak to its owners and maintainers about their successful Web site. An e-mail interview was organized and conducted in October 2012. My questions focused on the site and on how things have changed for the four team members—Leif, Emma, Jules, and David—who run the site from the time Sherlockology was first launched to its current popularity and the reputation it has garnered within *Sherlock* fandom. One of the questions specifically asked the members about their views of labor in fandom, and whether they consider it exploitative. Additionally, as part of my PhD dissertation research, mutual acquaintances put me in touch with Marcel Damen, the cocreator of Galactica.tv, in December 2008. In e-mails between December 2008 and March 2009 we discussed both his work on the Web site and *Battlestar Galactica* fandom in general. While the term *fan labor* did not come up in our conversations, Damen touched on the work and effort that went into creating the fan site, explaining how he and his Web site partner had carefully built and

maintained relationships with various cast and crew members who worked on the show in the course of *Battlestar Galactica*'s long broadcast history.

[2.2] I chose these two Web sites to study because of their unique positions within their respective fandoms. Neither Sherlockology nor Galactica.tv are official Web sites, especially since the latter show ended its television run in 2009. Yet the owners of both Web sites maintain connections to the media producers and actors of both franchises, despite remaining independent. Unlike *Supernatural* fandom's popular resource, the Supernatural Wiki (<http://www.supernaturalwiki.com>), which invites fans to contribute to the site and collectively amass information, both Sherlockology and Galactica.tv are run and managed by a set group of fans. Therefore, contact with the industry remains within the core group, and their labor appears more intensive, even as these fans maintain close contact with their respective fandoms (Sherlockology via various social media networks, and Galactica.tv via direct interaction with fans during conventions). This allows us a more complex view of fan labor; these groups of fans are not being co-opted into collaborating with media producers, but are themselves attaining connections with the producers and building a reputation as a result of their hard work and dedication.

3. Fandom's gift economy, capitalization, and exploitation

[3.1] Marcel Mauss, an anthropologist whose book *The Gift* forms the foundation of all subsequent work on the gift economy, argues that gifts contain power: "the material purposes of the contracts, the things exchanged in them,...possess a special intrinsic power, which causes them to be given and above all to be reciprocated" (1954, 49). The basic tenets of a gift economy are to give, to receive, and to reciprocate; when these are completed, a social relationship between the gift-giver and receiver is established (Cheal 1988; Booth 2010). Lewis Hyde extrapolates that "gift exchange tends to be an economy of small groups, of extended families, small villages, close-knit communities, brotherhoods and, of course, of tribes" (1999, xvi) parallels that can be extended to fan communities ([note 2](#)).

[3.2] In the context of fandom, gifts appear in the form of artworks, fan fiction, podcasts, and videos, as well as fan fiction archives, picture galleries, Web sites, wikis, forums, Tumblrs, and Facebook pages, created and maintained on a voluntary basis. Rachael Sabotini (1999) declares them to be the "centerpiece of the fandom," taking skill, dedication, and effort to create. "The gift economy articulates the establishment of relationships among its participants, the formation of a community" (Booth 2010, 130). Hellekson (2009) argues that the adoption of the gift economy within fandom can also be seen as a form of legal and social protection. Because fans are often making use of copyrighted material, remixing content from various intellectual

properties, defining fan cultural exchange as a gift economy protects fans from media conglomerates' often trigger-happy legal departments.

[3.3] Tanya Cochran, for example, observed how Universal Pictures capitalized on the enthusiasm of fans of Joss Whedon's *Firefly* (2002–3) in the months leading up to the 2005 release of the movie tie-in *Serenity*. Universal Pictures constructed a "members-only online community that awarded points and eventually products (tshirts, hats, movie tickets, etc.) to those able to recruit more members" (Cochran 2008, 246). Members of the online community were encouraged to promote the film via word of mouth as well as to create merchandise, such as bumper stickers, to accompany the DVD release of the film and series. Simone Murray argues that incorporating fans into marketing strategies is beneficial to film studios and TV networks by enabling them to "capitalise on elaborate extant fan networks to distribute project publicity more rapidly and cost effectively than could conceivably be achieved through traditional film marketing channels" (2004, 8). However, soon after the DVD release of *Serenity*, Universal Pictures sent out cease-and-desist letters to the *Firefly* fan communities, demanding retroactive licensing fees for fans' use of copyrighted materials and licensed images, leaving many fans who had participated in the viral marketing campaign feeling exploited by the studio. Baym and Burnett point out that "the concept of exploitation implies that there is a cost to its victims" (2009, 442). In this case, *Firefly* fans were courted by the studio to generate word-of-mouth promotions for the film, and the cost of this was the legal threats and demands for fees.

[3.4] Murray sees this as a worrying trend as media companies "conflate highly conditional granting of fan access to media properties with a legally enforceable *right* to comment creatively" (2004, 21). Scholars such as Henry Jenkins (2007), Abigail De Kosnik (2009), and Karen Hellekson (2009) have also commented on the ways in which commercial culture has encroached into fan culture, bringing the risk that fans will be exploited for their (creative) labor. All three scholars referenced FanLib, which was established in 2007 and closed down a year later in 2008, as an example of this attempt at monetizing fan cultural production, particularly fan fiction. In the case of FanLib (which failed), fan fiction authors were sought and encouraged to upload their written fiction to the site with the promise of compensation in the form of prizes, e-book publication, and the opportunity to collaborate with participating media producers (such as those of *The L Word* [2004–9]). Various fan communities across different fandoms and platforms were quick to denounce the site, seeing the actions of its creators as attempts to profit from the fruits of fans' labor, which fans considered to be produced out of love or as gifts for fellow community members. As Hellekson summarizes, the "FanLib debacle illustrates that attempts to encroach on the meaning

of the gift and to perform a new kind of (commerce-based) transaction with fan-created items will not be tolerated" (2009, 117) ([note 3](#)).

[3.5] Fans' reluctance to participate in FanLib recalls Hellekson's earlier point about social protection. If adopting the gift economy in fandom is a form of social protection, it can also be seen as a form of protection from exploitation. Further, it can also function as a form of exclusion, as a way for fan communities to preserve their "own autonomy while simultaneously solidifying the group" (Hellekson 2009, 117). In viewing fandom this way, however, we overlook the complexity of fan labor and risk positioning fans within the strict dichotomy of resistance and complicity. We are still left with the assumption that all the various fan communities, with their varied interpretations of the text and their support for various characters and relationships, present a united front against a perceived external threat: that of commercial culture. This renders null and void hierarchies within fan communities and between fandoms, where fans' positions and roles depend on the status they have accumulated from creating, for example, an exemplary work of fiction or art, or a popular Web site. As Jenkins, Ford, and Green propose, we need to consider the complexity of fans' labor as it "may be exploited for the profit of the 'owners,' even as fans also benefit from what they create. Such is the nature of collaboration in the belly of the beast" (2013, 175).

[3.6] Furthermore, Hellekson also concedes that "social cohesion may not be the only goal" (2009, 116) in the gift economy of fandom. Sabotini argues that "all participants vie for status" in the process of the gift exchange. This is similar to Claude Lévi-Strauss's argument on the "besting" of reciprocity in the cycle of gift giving, where the motives behind the act are not always conscious:

[3.7] Goods are not only economic commodities but vehicles and instruments for realities of another order: influence, power, sympathy, status, emotion; and the skilful game of exchange consists of a complex totality of manoeuvres, conscious or unconscious, in order to gain security and to fortify one's self against risks incurred through alliances and rivalry. (1996, 19)

[3.8] In other words, fans are constantly, perhaps even unconsciously, vying for status within their fandoms. Fan fiction, artworks, and videos reflect on the skills and talents of their creators, so the more shares, reblogs, recommendations, feedback, and likes the work receives, the higher the status of the creator. Similarly, a professional-looking fan Web site whose creator has garnered a reputation for reporting accurate information or having access to a media producer, celebrity, or industry insider and thus being able to provide exclusive interviews and information will be deemed authentic and granted higher status in fandom. This relative positioning results from the various forms of labor fans perform. As media producers

and celebrities become more able to reach out directly to their fans (reducing fans' dependence on fan sites for such access), and as fans become more public about playing the role of promoter, public relations officer, or sometimes even financier, questions about exploitation rise into prominence: Are fans being exploited by the media industry, providing free labor when they should be compensated? Or is access the reward for fans who have labored diligently and built a solid reputation in their fannish community?

[3.9] Suzanne Scott remains cynical of this development, particularly since the media industry has started to make use of the shared symbolic technological space to invite fans into collaborating on viral marketing and promotional campaigns ([note 4](#)). Scott (2009) argues that the media industry has a narrowly defined and contained version of fandom. The industry carefully cultivates a parallel fan space that exists alongside grassroots fandom, selling it to the unsuspecting general audience, co-opting them into commercialization with the promise of participation: "Media producers, primarily through the lure of 'gifted' ancillary content aimed at fans through official Web sites, are rapidly perfecting a mixed economy that obscures its commercial imperatives through a calculated adoption of fandom's gift economy, its sense of community, and the promise of participation" (Scott 2009, ¶1.5). The desire to collaborate puts fans in a vulnerable position, where they might be exploited by the media industry into performing labor for free ([note 5](#)).

[3.10] However, Baym and Burnett also remind us that "fans articulate a complex system of costs, rewards and relational interpretations that motivate their continued engagement in voluntary practices that provide economic value for others" (2009, 445). In other words, we need to take into account notions of fan agency, or fan choice in participating or providing labor, even if we remain skeptical about the media industry's stakes in fandom. We must not disregard the possibility that fans might even be aware of the rhetoric on fan exploitation, but disagree with it, choosing to continue providing the service or the labor anyway. Might we not be able to consider that fan sites like *Sherlockology* and *Galactica.tv* are created not merely out of love for the source texts but also as a service—a gift—to the fandoms of *Sherlock* and *Battlestar Galactica*, especially for fans who are seeking the specific types of information provided by these sites?

4. Fans as knowledge workers

[4.1] Tiziana Terranova (2003) argues that "free labor is not necessarily exploited labor," because compensation is often "willingly conceded in exchange for the pleasures of communication and exchange." Jenkins, Ford, and Green speak of the morally complex nature of collaboration, arguing that it is "crucial to move beyond

seeing the relations between producers and their audiences as a zero-sum game" (2013, 174). Indeed, in my e-mail interview, the four friends who run and maintain the Sherlockology Web site explained to me,

[4.2] At the end of the day, no one asked us to do this, and certainly no one pays us to so we can stop whenever we want. It is true Sherlockology has grown far larger than any of us dreamt was possible when we began it, and the time and financial commitment is enormous, but we continue of our own accord because we enjoy it and do not have the limitations imposed on us that we do in our daily jobs. (e-mail, 2012)

[4.3] Ryan Milner (2009) argues similarly, noting that work on fan labor is missing an important criterion: that of fans' own perception of their labor contribution or collaboration with the media producers, the celebrities, and the media industry. As the statement above indicates, fans derive pleasure from the labors they perform in building Web sites, just as fans do from writing fan fiction or creating fan art or fan videos. Similarly, Marcel Damen, who co-runs the Galactica.tv Web site, enjoys the stories that actors and crew members share with him, and it was this enjoyment that prompted him to archive those stories digitally, a move that signaled the beginnings of Galactica.tv. It can also be argued that the creators of both Sherlockology and Galactica.tv created the Web sites because they saw a lack in their respective fandoms and thus wanted to provide a service for fans. As Damen clarifies, his idea for Galactica.tv was born out of discontent with fans of the original series:

[4.4] Many original series fans...order people around...because they've been a fan for three decades and feel people should respect them because of it. They're sitting high upon their thrones, but don't do anything. Galactica.tv was born out of discontent for this group of fans who deleted the new series part of their forum because they feel the new BSG is GINO (Galactica In Name Only). They feel better than this new group of fans and now made rules in their original series fan group that the new series can't be discussed. If you do, you get warned and then banned. (e-mail, 2008)

[4.5] The Sherlockology team, on the other hand, discovered that they could not find much information on BBC's *Sherlock*, nor was there a central hub for information on the show that the official BBC Web site did not provide, particularly about the show's filming sites. Londoners themselves, they wanted to visit filming locations but discovered that no information on them was provided to the show's fans. Therefore, they told me, by "following media reports, fan sightings and the use of Google Maps... [they] decided to create a 'small website' to document the locations [they] found" (e-mail, 2012).



Figure 1. *Sherlockology screenshot. [View larger image.]*

[4.6] Milner identifies fans as "knowledge workers" and calls for the use of a new paradigm to explore producer-audience interaction in the current technological age. He makes use of the concept of the New Organization, which "emphasizes the specialized labor of self-motivated 'knowledge workers'" (Milner 2009, 492); Damen and the Sherlockology team had specific motivations for building their fan sites. In this New Organization, fans have the potential to be "developer, public-relations specialist, focus group, technical support, journalist, and consultant all in one" (Milner 2009, 497). For instance, Damen talks of how he established the reputation of Galactica.tv by approaching not only the main cast of both the original and reimagined series for interviews, but also guest actors and crew members:

[4.7] No one ever thought of talking to them, so they all were honoured and agreed to doing interviews the minute we contacted them. The number of interviews we did later got us the reputation [as] a serious interview site and...[the] main cast (especially their agents) were impressed by that...Our reputation and number of interviews was noticed by [convention] organisers who asked us...to get them certain actors that they themselves were not in contact with...Sometimes agents e-mail us since they think their client will benefit from an interview on our website. (e-mail, 2008)



Figure 2. *Galactica.tv screenshot. [View larger image.]*

[4.8] The discontent that urged Damen to create Galactica.tv and the motivation to create a fan site that emphasizes in-depth interviews with both major and minor cast and crew members of all versions of *Battlestar Galactica* have earned him a high status in fandom, particularly among those who regularly visit his Web site and those who attend *Battlestar Galactica* conventions. Damen recalls the pleasure of attending conventions as a representative of the site, there to report on the event as well as to interview the guests: "At this point," he explains, "it's just about seeing friends again (who happened to be actors I admired at first but became friends through meeting them all the time)" (e-mail, 2008).

[4.9] Although the Sherlockology team cites the long hours and significant personal expenses as drawbacks to running the site, they maintain that the perks far outweigh the disadvantages. The reputation that Sherlockology has gained has allowed them to "apply for press passes to some events" (e-mail, 2012). The members had met the creators of *Sherlock* when the site first launched and had begun building a relationship with the production company as well as the BBC. Despite running an unofficial fan site, they are endorsed by the producers, who have used it to clarify rumors about BBC air dates and relay information to fans about London location shooting for season 3. Still, its members insist that

[4.10] Sherlockology is an independent website, neither run nor financed by the makers of *Sherlock*. [We] do work closely with them to ensure all information on our website is accurate. Therefore the wardrobe, jewellery [sic] and accessory information has been supplied to us by *Sherlock* Costume Designer Sarah Arthur, similarly the props listed are from the Production Designer Arwel Wyn Jones. Although we could contact the locations manager, we do in fact source all the filming locations ourselves, wishing to bother the crew as little as possible. (e-mail, 2012)

[4.11] This insistence complicates the notion that fans are vulnerable to exploitation as soon as they start performing labor for media producers. Fans also use their relationships with industry insiders to their advantage, obtaining information and disseminating it to the fandom. As Baym and Burnett contend,

[4.12] To argue this is exploitation, one must assume that the rewards that fans attain are less valuable than those they deserve, and that the fans' perceptions of their practices are evidence that they have been seduced by the power dynamic that exploits them...To claim that these people are exploited is to ignore how much these other forms of capital matter...and to deny the capacity of these individuals to stop doing what they do. (2009, 446)

[4.13] Furthermore, it is also important to note that they must remain professional and maintain the quality of their coverage to preserve their relationships with the media producers. Elsewhere, I have argued that while fan sites like XFilesNews.com—which came into existence in 2008, in the postseries fandom of *The X-Files* (1993–2002)—frequently collaborate with the show's former producers, cast, and crew members, they occupy an in-between position; the fans who run these sites similarly maintain close ties to the fandom but must also demonstrate the professionalism required and expected by the media industry in order to sustain their connection to the producers, cast, and crew members. Their contact with the media industry, particularly the producers and cast of *The X-Files*, also means that other fans view them as intermediaries between fandom and the industry. The team at Sherlockology reveals that they constantly receive inquiries from fans about "filming schedules and locations, and contact details for the casting director...cast fanmail, twitter accounts and appearances" (e-mail, 2012). Similarly, Damen says that Galactica.tv receives many e-mails asking for help getting in touch with the actors. Acting as gatekeepers controlling access to the producers and celebrities, these fan collaborators "obtain a certain status in their fan communities" (Chin 2013, 97), a status that derives from their roles in running and maintaining popular fan Web sites that have caught the attention and trust of media producers (note 6).

[4.14] Therefore, rather than merely performing labor for the industry, these fans are also acting as intermediaries for other fans who wish to gain access to producers, or who want to know filming locations. In other words, the labor is continual and intensive, but that does not necessarily mean that it is exploitative, or that these fans consider it so. Milner reminds us that media producers maintain interest in fans because fans work for the text rather than the (media) industry at large, and all forms of productivity, no matter how unofficial, build the brand of the text.

[4.15] While it might be slightly utopian to claim that fan labor always comes from or results in fan pleasure (Terranova herself points out that it does not), creative consumption very naturally leads to a degree of production, and the goals of this production (implicit ownership, status, esteem, community, social capital, etc.) are often outside the realm of monetary gain. (Milner 2009, 494)

5. Fan sites as products of free labor

[5.1] Milner's research into fans of the video game *Fallout* (Interplay Entertainment, 1997) leads him to conclude that fans' allegiance is to an ideal of what the text can be and what it can achieve. It is not to the corporations that own their favorite texts. Damen's extensive interviews with actors on his Web site, for instance, often

concentrate on the craft of acting and on how each actor approaches his or her role, suggesting that it is important for fans to know that these actors are building on the quality of the text. In performing the labor of creating the fan sites, these fans see themselves as providing a service to their fandoms by offering information. More importantly, they are also providing a service that is traditionally fulfilled by third-party institutions of the entertainment media that, unlike fans, may not be interested in franchises that are no longer on the air, or, worse, may be more interested in idle gossip, which will not benefit the brand. However, coverage, whether by word of mouth or otherwise, by those who are motivated by love and integrity will benefit it. As Will Brooker declares, "fandom is built around love" (2002, 52).

[5.2] Thus it can be argued that, although maintaining these sites can be seen as preserving the integrity of the brand, it can also be interpreted as a gift from fans like Damen and the team at Sherlockology to their respective fandoms. As Booth suggests, "instead of reciprocity, what the gift in the digital age requires for 'membership' into the fan community, is merely an obligation to reply" (2010, 134). Thus, in building a fan site that aims to include fans from all generations of a franchise or in building a central hub where episode guides and information about filming locations and props can be accessed, fans like Damen and the Sherlockology members are offering a gift to their fandoms, where reciprocity means interacting with these fans on social media or via e-mail, thus making their labor for the fandom (and for the text) worthwhile.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] My intention has been to explore the concept of fan labor through the context of the gift economy, in the process complicating the notion of exploitation that is often assumed. I argue that rather than merely assuming that fans are exploited by the media industry when collaborating with media producers, it is important to acknowledge their voice in this collaboration, and that there may be other motivations at play. As Baym and Burnett note, "rewards are undervalued in the rhetoric of exploitation and labour" (2009, 444), but as we take into account fans' own explanations of why they perform labor, we must also concede that other rewards, such as status and recognition, are also important to fans.

[6.2] Milner's criticism of the lack of fan voices is essential. Not only is it relevant in the context of fan labor, it also helps us understand how fans view their cultural production and their concept of gifts to the community. In thinking of fan labor, we should also remember that fans are allegiant to the text rather than to the industry; remembering this may help us take seriously the notion of pleasure, which is so often absent in fan studies. The notion of fan voice within the context of fan labor is clearly exemplified in the two case studies here, where the fans, while noting their sacrifices

in time and money, stress that they choose to create and maintain their fan sites. Their voices caution us not to assume that fans performing labor are always being exploited by the media industry. It is vital that we acknowledge that fans often perform labor because there is something beyond monetary gain to be achieved: something like status and access to the media industry.

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8. Notes

1. For example, in the Blu-ray edition of Christopher Nolan's 2010 film *Inception*, there is a special documentary on dreams produced collaboratively by actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt's production company, HitRecord, and his fans. Gordon-Levitt frequently collaborates with his supporters through HitRecord, producing short films, animation, music, and other creative works. Artists are compensated if their materials are used in these productions.
2. While the permeation of fandom by blogs and social media networks has, as Busse and Hellekson declare, made it "harder to get a comprehensive sense of a fandom and harder still to build a truly inclusive sense of community" (2006, 15), it is also important not to rule out fan spaces such as forums and LiveJournal communities. While Tumblr may seem to be the most common choice in fandom today, there is still a sense that interaction between fans occurs among a core group of people whose relationship may have been established elsewhere or who have moved beyond Tumblr to other social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook.
3. In June 2013, Amazon launched a publishing venture called Kindle Worlds (<https://kindleworlds.amazon.com/>), which looks to be another attempt at monetizing fan fiction. Fan fiction writers are invited to submit their stories, and the authors of the original work will earn royalties on sales of the fan fiction for it. Amazon Publishing began by establishing licensing deals with three popular television series belonging to Warner Bros. Television's Alloy Entertainment: *Gossip Girl* (2007–12), *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–present), and *Pretty Little Liars* (2010–present), which have since been joined by other properties. It remains to be seen whether Kindle Worlds will be successful or will suffer the same fate as FanLib.

4. See, for example, Tanya Cochran's (2008) work on *Firefly* fans and the promotion of the follow-up film *Serenity*.
5. The concern about fan exploitation is particularly poignant after the success of the Kickstarter campaign in March 2013 to create a film sequel to the TV show *Veronica Mars* (2004–7). The campaign met its \$2 million target in less than 24 hours, and it went on to raise \$5.7 million from fans. The film is slated for release in 2014.
6. Sometimes this reputation extends beyond fandom to the mainstream as well. Sherlockology won the Shorty Award for best fan site in 2012 and 2013.

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Praxis

Promoting fan labor and "all things Web": A case study of *Tosh.0*

Rose Helens-Hart

University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—Television programs are increasingly paired with interactive media platforms in attempts to reach fragmented audiences through a medium where millions are now seeking entertainment—the Internet. Programs' online presences are cultivated and promoted by paid staffers and unpaid fan laborers. Producers monetize fan activity by guiding its form on their sites. Utilizing the concepts of sticky and spreadable media, an analysis of the Comedy Central show *Tosh.0* Web site demonstrates how producers can promote particular types of interactivity through the content and architecture of a multimodal Web site. By designing a site that centralizes the use of popular social media, the producers of *Tosh.0* concentrate fans and benefit from their creative labor. Furthermore, this study serves as a test for the scope and usefulness of the concepts of sticky and spreadable media in revealing strategic Web site design that encourages specific types of user participation.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Audience participation; Multimodal Web site; Spreadable media; Sticky media

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0491>.

[0.3] The only thing the Internet didn't ruin was my career. I jumped on that train and rode it all the way to verified status on Twitter.

—Daniel Tosh, *Tosh.0*, season 3, episode 14

1. Introduction

[1.1] Rapid convergence of Internet and televisual technologies has altered audience viewing habits and behaviors. Television programming has evolved, attempting to reach increasingly fragmented and Internet-based audiences with the addition of new media platforms to their brands. Gillan (2011) explains these efforts as part of the "Must-Click TV" model, describing "new media-influenced network programming, marketing, broadcasting, and distribution strategies and audience reception practices" (1). This model relies on Web 2.0 infrastructure and fan involvement and highlights an

interactive relationship between program producers and fans. The interaction can be described as a feedback loop where the means of media production have expanded into the hands of the fans, and fan practices are imported and translated back into the industry (Watson 2010). This translation links the concept of fan labor to the maintenance of emerging multimodal brand Web sites. In other words, fan labor such as summarizing, editorializing, and modifying texts is monetized through a new technological and economic regime that has been developing over the past two decades (Gillan 2011; Milner 2009).

[1.2] The extraction of economic value from user-generated content is, as Banks and Humphreys (2008) suggest, "a dynamic and emergent process which transforms the practices of businesses and capital" (2). Sites may structurally position content to "spread" and navigation to "stick" users to the site (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). The concepts of sticky and spreadable media are becoming increasingly popularized and are positioned as rivals to the dominant viral metaphor for content that spreads quickly. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) have discussed a series of examples to conceptualize stickiness and spreadability, but the concepts must be further applied in research to determine the degree to which they are useful for studying new media and fan phenomena.

[1.3] This article examines how the *Tosh.O* Web site employs social media and interactive platforms to engage fans in creative labor to benefit the brand. Through a design that centralizes the use of popular social media, the *Tosh.O* site concentrates fans and supports particular types of creative labor that contribute to and benefit the *Tosh.O* brand. This study serves as a test for the scope and usefulness of the concepts of sticky and spreadable media for revealing strategic Web site design that encourages specific types of valuable fan labor. Toward this end, research was guided by the following questions: What aspects of the *Tosh.O* Web site design support fans working for the brand? How do the concepts of sticky and spreadable media clarify the strategic form and function of the *Tosh.O* Web site? In the following sections I will first discuss *Tosh.O*'s intermedia context and the organizing principles of sticky and spreadable media. Next, I explicate the method employed for data collection and analysis. After a presentation of findings, I assess the presence of sticky media and spreadable media strategies on the Web site. Finally, I discuss how the recognition of these strategies is useful for understanding the form and content of the Web site and how fan labor is guided and used.

2. *Tosh.O*'s Intermedia Context

[2.1] *Tosh.O* self-declares that it is "cable TV's most trusted source for exhibitionist weirdoes, injurious idiots and all things Web" (*Tosh.O* 2012). The show stars stand-up

comedian Daniel Tosh and features an array of video clips collected from the Internet and produced by both the show and fans. As the clips are played, Tosh engages the videos by commenting on them in a sardonic comedic style that Tosh euphemistically described in one interview as "honest and unguarded" (Parker 2009). Videos are also edited and parodied, and select "celwebrities" (the people in particularly embarrassing, bizarre, or unbelievable clips) are interviewed and given a chance to "redeem" themselves to viewers in segments that the show calls "Web Redemptions".

[2.2] The *Tosh.0* Web site includes a blog, videos, images, and Twitter and Facebook comments from viewers. Tosh's comedy is crude, deliberately offensive, and sarcastic. A similar style of comedy is encouraged in fan-submitted comments on videos and photos and through specific calls for themed video submissions. Fan-submitted content adds value to the brand as an essential supplement to the site. If this content were removed today, the Web site would only host content from aired *Tosh.0* episodes and what limited amount of material is gathered by the two staff bloggers. Fan-submitted content regularly updates the site for the benefit of fans who want to be entertained and for *Tosh.0* whose producers want people to stay on the site longer in order to consume and contribute.

[2.3] This participation is the essence of fan labor when fans are what Milner (2009) describes as "active, creative, productive participants within the labor system surrounding the text they esteem. Simply put, fans work for the text" (494). He argues that activities are labor when they "build the brand" of the media text. Fans engage in value-enhancing labor by taking on part of the work of updating a text and making it interesting for themselves as well as providing feedback on content to producers (Andrejevic 2008). In addition, the more fans stick to a site, the more likely they may be to engage in activity that produces value for the brand such as sharing their own or others' videos to the site, clicking on ads, watching commercials that precede video clips, spreading videos that are branded with the *Tosh.0* logo and contain ads, and buying *Tosh.0* merchandise or tour tickets.

[2.4] Many television shows have Web sites that provide opportunities for audiences to "talk back" to each other and producers through comments, e-mail, and, in the case of competitive reality shows, voting for their favorite contestants (Andrejevic 2008; Gillan 2011; Jenkins 2006). Shows such as E!'s *Talk Soup* and ABC's *America's Funniest Home Videos* predated *Tosh.0* and utilized a comedian host, clips from other programs, and audience members. MTV's *Ridiculousness* (premiered in 2011) and G4's *Web Soup* (premiering just days after *Tosh.0*) also highlight rapidly spreading content while hosts provide comedic commentary, but their Web sites offered limited opportunities for fan interaction. The *Tosh.0* Web site is a better representation of the

Web 2.0 model and was selected for study because of its unique design and heavy reliance on rapidly spreading material and user videos as main sources of content.

[2.5] Descriptions of Web 2.0 vary because the concept does not have hard definitional boundaries but a "gravitational core" (O'Reilly 2005, 1). The core consists of a set of principles and practices such as strategically positioning the Web as a platform for promoting, distributing, and redefining products where users control their own data (O'Reilly 2005). Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013, 297) describe Web 2.0 as a business model through which "commercial platforms seek to court and capture the participatory energies of desired markets and harness them toward their own ends." Pauwels and Hellriegel (2009, 52) define it as "Web development and Web design supporting interactive information sharing and collaboration on the World Wide Web." User participation is a hallmark of Web 2.0 and as social networking applications proliferate, users online are in a perpetual negotiation to determine where and how they will spend their time. Web sites that are designed to tempt users to stay longer and pay more attention to one place take on a quality that Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) describe as sticky. Content can also be positioned to spread among Web sites and users and acquire a spreadable quality.

[2.6] Audiences desire interactive entertainment where as users they can "navigate, explore, create and construct" (McRae 2006, 6). The results of a 2011 longitudinal study on the influence of computers, the Internet, and related technologies on families and society reported that 46 percent of users visited social networking and video-sharing sites weekly, and the importance of the Internet to maintaining social relationships was at an all-time high (Lebo 2011). This demonstrates users' desires for socialization and interaction with others and arguably their interest in amateur content on video-sharing sites. *Tosh.0* capitalizes on these desires and has crafted a site where fans are encouraged to work for the brand by gathering and creating content for the site, communicating with others about site content, and spreading content marked with the *Tosh.0* brand to other sites, fans, and Internet users.

3. Spreadable and sticky strategies

[3.1] Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) describe sticky strategies as techniques to centralize audience presence in particular online locations. Web sites operating under sticky philosophies attempt to grab and hold the attention of audiences, which is important for advertising revenue and sales. Traced back to the term's popularization in Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* (2000), stickiness broadly refers to "the need to create content that attracts audience attention and engagement" (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 4). Stickiness models attempt to concentrate audience attention to a particular location by putting material in centralized places. Similar to an all-inclusive

resort, stickiness attempts to provide the user with a homogenous experience and all the content needed to keep users on the site. Prestructured activities for visitors assist in creating a homogenous experience and holding the interest of individuals. For example, sites may post games, quizzes, and contests to hook a user into interacting with the site. Users and audiences are often treated as passive individuals that can be controlled.

[3.2] Spreadability emphasizes the dispersion of content across multiple sites and to users so that they do not have to visit the content's original site in order to interact with it. Spreadability serves a heterogeneous environment where users can circulate media texts for different purposes, and social connections communally shape their experiences with material. In other words, it embraces the practices of "textual poaching" where fans "appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests" (Jenkins 1992, 23). Participation is open ended and audiences can utilize content in unrestricted ways. Spreadability values audiences being active participants in "spreading the word" about brands and assumes that "anything worth hearing will circulate through any and all available channels" (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 7). The roles of producers, marketers, and audience members are blurred.

[3.3] The conditions for sticking audiences to a site and promoting the spread of content may seem to be at odds with one another, but it is possible to promote certain aspects of stickiness and spreadability simultaneously (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). This creates a sticky site with spreadable content. Fans stick to the site while spreading its content. The right combination of stickiness and spreadability may maximize corporate gain while satisfying users' need for control, interactivity, and community. Participation on the *Tosh.O* Web site suggests that producers may have found such a combination that presently serves their needs as well as that of their fans. An assessment of the site is necessary to reveal strategies that encourage fan activity and community. Toward this end, I again highlight the research questions guiding this study: What aspects of the *Tosh.O* Web site design support fans working for the brand? How do the concepts of sticky and spreadable media clarify the strategic form and function of the *Tosh.O* Web site? In the next section, I explain how data were collected and how the concepts of stickiness and spreadability were used to guide the qualitative coding process.

4. Methodological justification

[4.1] Up until its midseason break, season 4 of *Tosh.O* consisted of ten 22-minute episodes that aired weekly from January 31, 2012, to April 3, 2012. These episodes (4.01–4.10) and the corresponding *Tosh.O* Web site activities were targeted for data

collection. This selection of texts was appropriate for analysis for two reasons. First, the episodes made a logical grouping because they included the array of recurring segments such as Web Redemptions, Video Breakdowns, and calls for fans to submit videos to the Web site. Since the focus of this study is on the design of the Web site rather than the meaning of its content, viewing ten episodes was sufficient to determine the form of regular segments. The episodes were reviewed and detailed notes were taken on the structure of the show to reveal segment patterns. Segments were then watched again from the Web site along with other content from past episodes not in the targeted season in order to verify patterns.

[4.2] Data collection on the Web site focused on two areas of "web internal analysis" for data collection: structure (hierarchy and flow of elements), and links to other sources (expressions of affiliation) (Pauwels 2005; Pauwels and Hellriegel 2009). The first step in data collection was to investigate the structure of the site to determine the hierarchy and flow of elements through common architectural design principles such as emphasis, subordination, hierarchy, and dominance (Kimball 2013). I began by taking an inventory of content on each of the main pages. I indicated in notes when content and titles repeated and where they were placed on the pages. Eyetracking visualizations studies assisted in understanding elements of structure. Studies reveal that users typically read Web sites in a roughly F-shaped pattern: two horizontal stripes at the top of the page followed by a vertical stripe down the left hand side (Lorigo et al. 2008). Content placed in this pattern should theoretically be viewed more regularly and thus may be potentially more dominant to users of the site than other content.

[4.3] The second phase of data collection focused on links within the site. I systematically clicked on links present in the site's main pages to experience and record how users might move through and off of the site. Two types of links were focused on in this phase. The first type of link was internal and sent the user to content and pages within the site. For example, one might be directed to the *Tosh.0* blog page from a number of other main pages. The second type of link was external and sent the user to other pages such as Facebook, Tosh's Twitter account, or other Comedy Central show sites.

[4.4] Screen shots and detailed descriptive notes on structure and function served as the raw data for coding. Spreadability and stickiness were the major concepts that drove initial code development. Spreadability codes focused on movement of content off and to the site. Examples of these codes are spread, collect, and create. With these basic codes in mind, data were opened up and codes became more specific such as spread to other site, spread to other user, spread to other SNS, request for collection, and request for creation. Stickiness codes focused on attempts to draw the user into

the site and keep them occupied. Examples of these codes are creative investment, internal redirection, and continuous feed. These codes were also later diversified into more specific codes such as creative commentary, creative contest, redirect to home, and redirect to blog. Some data were ambiguous or served dual purposes to stick fans and spread content such as video play lists which ran continuously to draw users in yet allowed them to easily spread content off the site.

[4.5] Although coding was initially directed by preformed categories, it was not completely restricted. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how sticky and spreadability concepts may be useful to the study of fan labor, but it became apparent that advertisements and other information such as user agreements were not clearly sticky or spreadable. While clicking on advertisements may open new pages and generate value, they did not necessarily direct users to push or pull content to the site or engage in creative activities. This type of content was still important in determining where user activity led to value for the brand (advertising is a revenue source), but it could not be discussed in terms of stickiness or spreadability. In these cases codes often reflected movement and purpose such as "external link to advertisement" or "internal link legal user information."

5. *Tosh.0* Web site features

[5.1] The *Tosh.0* Web site contains a basic structure of navigational options and design strategies to assist users in accessing thousands of videos. The main entry point is the home page (figure 1) where at the top there are six main tabs available: Home, Blog, Video, Submit a Video, Shop, and About. The Home, Blog, Video, and Submit a Video pages all immediately offer visitors the most recent or most viewed videos or content. These items are placed prominently at the top of the pages. Next to these options are Facebook and Twitter icons and feeds of the most recent posts and tweets from Tosh's Twitter and Facebook pages. Above the tabs is a basic search function for the site.

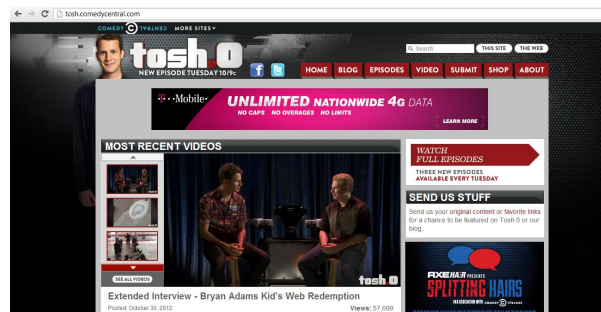


Figure 1. Screenshot of *Tosh.0* home page, 2012. [[View larger image.](#)]

[5.2] The Video tab exclusively features clips from the television show while the Submit a Video tab contains over 160,590 viewer-generated or gathered videos which can be sorted by most recent, viewed, shared, and top rated. This creates a clear separation between official content produced by *Tosh.0* and user-submitted content (figure 2). The blog features videos, pictures, and the latest Twitter and Facebook comments about *Tosh.0* gathered by two regular *Tosh.0* bloggers (figure 3). Users may comment on but not post content to the blog area. The blog also contains calls for users to "Rename This Video" and participate in photo Caption Challenges. The blog also displays *Tosh.0* clips that have become Fan Favorites. Running along the right side of the blog is the Blogroll, a list of 34 other blogs and content aggregators such as *Boing Boing*, *College Humor*, *Digg Comedy*, *Fark*, and *Reddit Funny*. At the top of the blog page are highlighted categories so that users do not have to scroll through the blog to access Fan Favorites and Caption Challenges. Sandwiched between these two boxes are commercial-oriented links for Tosh Twenty Twelve Tour dates and tickets and the Shop that sells *Tosh.0* apparel, CDs, and DVDs. Users are given navigation options to see merchandise for other Comedy Central shows.

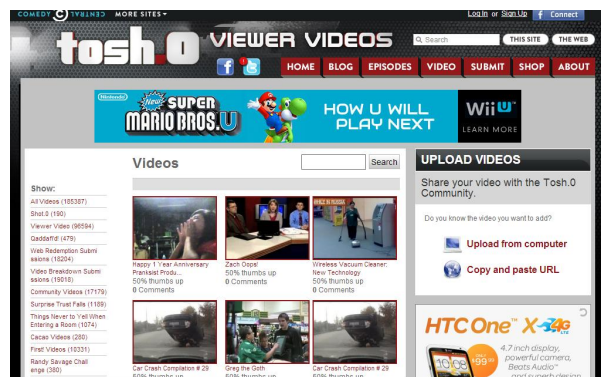


Figure 2. Screenshot of Tosh.0 viewer videos, 2012. [[View larger image.](#)]

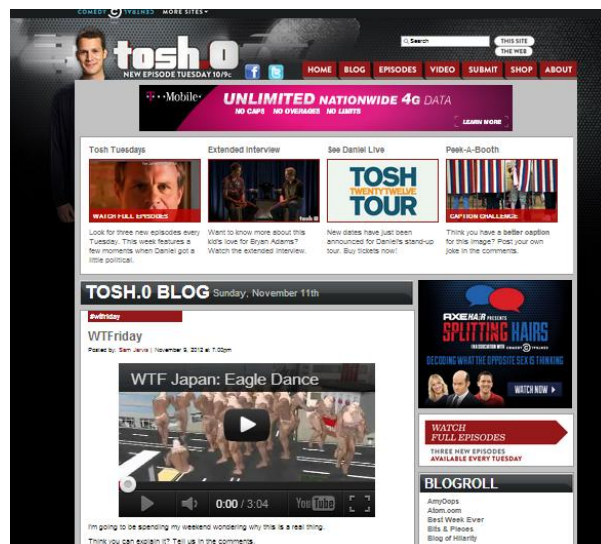


Figure 3. Screenshot of Tosh.0 blog, 2012. [[View larger image.](#)]

[5.3] This same set of four boxes also appears on the Home Page, but they are positioned underneath the box for Featured Videos from the show. The Home Page attempts to include a little of every section. A What's Hot box includes three tables for recent clips, blog posts, and clip playlists. The blog is featured to the right of this box and below it is the What's Happening box, which contains Twitter and Facebook feeds. Below the blog box is a featured Twitter or Facebook comment about the show and a picture that has been recently posted to the blog. During the week, ten blog posts are usually submitted each day by blog staffers. These same posts are also usually posted to the *Tosh.0* Facebook page. After reviewing Tosh's Twitter account, which is linked to the main site, I determined that Tosh tweets about 50–60 times on days when an episode airs. Most of those tweets are responses to fan tweets during the show.

[5.4] At the bottom of each page is a bank of numerous *Tosh.0* links that offer alternative navigation to featured content as well as other Comedy Central Shows. The bank also consists of Friends of Comedy Central links as well as Viacom legal and business links for job postings, copyright compliance information, and terms and conditions. Repetition of content and links is a design strategy for the site and Home Page in particular. Excluding the original set of navigational links, content that is contained in the blog was featured separately six times on the Home Page. Videos of the show were featured three times and the Shop was featured twice. This may make the site seem as if it has more content and viewing options than it really does and may lead fans to view particular content more regularly.

[5.5] Once episodes are released for online replay, the segments are posted individually on the Web site so that audiences can select specific segments to view. In fact, one cannot even see an episode in its 22-minute form. The use of short segments on the Web site may be a deliberate choice to increase the likelihood of browsing archived content, viewing ads, and spreading clips to other users and Web sites. Singular clips are short and easy to share and once one has finished playing, another will automatically begin, ushering the user into a rabbit hole of video viewing. The Web site acts as an aggregator and distributor of the bizarre, shocking, and grotesque material that users may seek online. Fans are encouraged to share content to Facebook, Twitter, and digg.com (a social news Web site) by the placement of a social media button set located on each content submission. The site is designed to accumulate videos and photos for the blog and to allow for content to spread.

6. Discerning the sticky and the spreadable

[6.1] The *Tosh.0* Web site utilizes both sticky and spreadable strategies to engage fans in forms of labor such as watching and commenting on videos or submitting videos of their own. It is a place where content is centralized into areas to concentrate

and capture attention through prestructured interactivity. Yet it also encourages the flow of ideas and content through user-driven social interaction. The Web site utilizes stickiness by centralizing content in one location. With repetition of content on each tab, most navigational tools will take the user to similar content areas. Facebook and Twitter are also frequently linked to so that users do not have to leave the Web site in order to see *Tosh.0* social media activity or to share content to their own social media profiles.

[6.2] Spreadability is also supported by easily allowing content to disperse across multiple sites. The Web site is a repository for collected materials, meaning that it is a destination for content that has been spread. While this can also be interpreted as a sticky feature, the site's easy-to-use uploading mechanism supports spreadability through encouraging the quick spread of content from other sites. Content is packaged into easy-to-share formats. In fact, many videos have a YouTube marker on them and give the user the option to watch them there. If a user wants to share a video or a picture on Facebook or Twitter, share options are available to them on the Web site, but the *Tosh.0* name and Comedy Central markers travel with the content in order to spread the brand. The blog page directs fans to spread content with a list of other popular content aggregators and blogs.

[6.3] The structural design of the *Tosh.0* Web site demonstrates stickiness because it provides a relatively homogenous experience to fans. The site is not a social networking site (SNS) since users do not become members or make profiles which can be linked to one another, but Facebook and Twitter are popularized on the site. The site can be interpreted as more spreadable when it is engaged through those SNSs and when fans comment and contribute to the site thus making their usage more personalized. By voting for favorites (captions, videos, titles) and by passing content to and from the site, users are shaping the *Tosh.0* community and brand.

[6.4] The *Tosh.0* Web site blends spreadability and sticky strategies through its efforts to guide audience participation and interaction. Voting on videos to make them fan favorites and submitting titles and captions to photo and video challenges are the most structured activities on the site. Yet each requires users to engage creatively with content, meaning that activities are also open ended. When fans create videos in response to calls from Tosh on the show, they are also participating in partially open-ended activities. Perhaps the most open-ended activities available are video submissions not associated with specific calls, tweeting to and about Tosh and *Tosh.0*, and making other unsolicited comments on posted content. While these activities seem very open ended, they still exist within a constrained environment. Fans can only post videos to the site because the designers have decided they should have the ability to

do so. These activities have been deemed to benefit the show and the brand and can be laborious and time consuming for fans.

[6.5] The site's style of comedy suggests that the Internet offers a place to create a carnivalesque space to share and ridicule embarrassing, graphic, and extraordinary content. This is emphasized through spreadable strategies because they increase the visibility and prominence of such content. Users are provided with convenient collections gathered by fans and *Tosh.0* staff, which they can easily share. The sticky strategies encourage them to stay interacting with content for longer periods of time, which may limit their exposure to other types of content.

7. Feedback loops

[7.1] The *Tosh.0* Web site's use of sticky and spreadable strategies assists in the aggregation of particular types of content for the show and Web site. Tosh's politically incorrect and offensive humor is positioned as ideal humor for the site, and fans are encouraged through contests and potential recognition to find videos and make comments that complement his style. To affirm what ideal content is, user videos and comments are cherry-picked to be highlighted on the show and Web site. The site cultivates activity through offering rewards of celwebtrity status and exposure of fans' submitted material.

[7.2] Tosh and his staff find rapidly spreading content (commonly referred to as viral videos) and use it for the show or post it to the Web site blog. These videos may be original creations such as home videos, original short movies, and music (O'Brien and Fitzgerald 2006). Obscene material, however, is a staple for the show and Web site. Although some images or words may be edited when the show airs on Comedy Central, the *Tosh.0* Web site hosts unedited content. In the clip "Teabag a Mousetrap" (4.02), a man's scrotum placed in a mousetrap was blurred on Comedy Central, but producers deemed the uncensored clip acceptable for the Web site; this practice emphasizes it as a carnivalesque space.

[7.3] In a 2010 interview, Tosh outlined the checklist for videos he uses for the show where the first criterion was that it should feature "someone really getting hurt" but in practice, not all videos feature injuries (Stelter 2010). Perhaps a better stipulation is that videos should feature content that will make audience members uncomfortable or shock them in some way. For example, episode 4.02 featured a video titled "Legless Ninja" showing an amputee performing martial arts. The man, missing his body from the waist down, was targeted by Tosh with jokes emphasizing his handicap. Similar to the longest running comedic reality-clip show, *America's Funniest Home Videos*, now called *America's Funniest Videos* or just *AFV*, *Tosh.0* capitalizes on injury as well as

embarrassing and tragic moments put online or created by viewers for the show. These celwebbrities are "converted into monetary value through their capacity to perform their misery" (Terranova 2000, 52). The difference between the two shows was articulated in a fan's tweet to Tosh's twitter account that said, "AFV is for watching someone fall down. Tosh.o [sic] is for watching that same person break their leg when they fall. Then throw up."

[7.4] Viewer videos are spread from other Internet sites for a general video submission or may be gathered or created by fans for a particular purpose, such as to nominate a video for a Web Redemption or respond to a call for audience members filming themselves engaged in a particular activity, such as impromptu trust falls or parkour. Typically, Tosh will introduce activities in segments on several shows spaced throughout a season and make a call for fans to submit videos of themselves performing the activity. In episode 4.07, Tosh featured a Web Redemption for a woman videoed injuring herself while performing parkour, which is an activity where people vault, roll, run, climb, or jump to overcome obstacles in their environments. At the end of the Redemption segment and after Parkour Girl successfully navigated an obstacle-laden area, Tosh called for viewers to submit videos of themselves doing parkour. Two episodes later and with 120 videos submitted to the Web site, Tosh featured a mashup of viewer submissions in episode 4.09. The mashup, along with all of the submitted videos, are available to be viewed on the *Tosh.0* Web site.

[7.5] Tosh also uses collected videos to produce Video Breakdowns and 20 Seconds on the Clock. Video Breakdowns start with showing the entirety of a clip. Then Tosh will replay the clip in shorter intervals, making jokes about its content. Similar to the Video Breakdown, 20 Seconds on the Clock is a segment where Tosh puts 20 seconds on the clock to see how many jokes he can make about a video while it is played in real time. The short, rapid jokes mirror the style of comments one might find attached to the videos on other SNSs, and fan comments on these videos mirror Tosh's one-liner biting comedy style.

8. Fan labor

[8.1] Online entertainment communities sponsored by prominent media brands (such as NBC, CBS and Comedy Central) are an increasingly powerful presence online (Gillan 2011). David Nieborg argues that many corporate practices are cleverly combining "capital-intensive, profit-oriented industrial production with labor-intensive, non-profit-oriented peer production" (quoted in Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 49). The *Tosh.0* program and Web site are an example of this type of combination.

[8.2] When fans spread content to the site, the show receives clips eligible for use on future episodes though Tosh has no obligation to feature submitted content. This extraneous content is valuable, however, as it assists in building the video collection, which is a staple of the site. *Tosh.0* demonstrates that there is value in this type of content and humor because the show is economically viable and popular. The Web site already employs two bloggers that post to the blog during the week, but fans are posting content every day, at all hours. The profit motive for the *Tosh.0* site is further demonstrated through its prominent commercial elements such as the frequent push to sell Tosh Tour tickets and show merchandise and advertisements that are placed along content and at the beginning of videos.

[8.3] In order for fan activities to be profitable, the site must attempt to guide them into producing texts that are considered valuable. Activities such as video challenges and video playlists may stick users to the site longer, requiring them to view more ads. Comments and video submissions keep content in flux with new things to see and read every day. This allows producers to maintain the novelty of site content with potentially little effort. The practice of continuously updating and adding or creating new content to sites has been described by Terranova (2003) as essential for Web sites to "fight off obsolescence." Additionally she argues that most of the Internet's updaters are unpaid. Researchers have questioned and attempted to address whether or not fans are "duped" into performing acts of labor that are unpaid and unequally benefit brands (Banks and Humphreys 2008; Terranova 2000). It seems that fans are not united on the benefits and drawbacks of providing free labor but that there are nonmonetary rewards to be gained. Fans may produce for the texts they love for personal enjoyment, as a way to give back to a fan community, gain social capital or notoriety, or develop and publicize their skills. In studies on fan fiction, fan subbing, and game modding, some individuals were found to have used skills developed in fan activities to break into industries and develop careers (Coppa 2008; Mittell 2009; Postigo 2007; Yang 2009). In the context of *Tosh.0*, it would appear that fans are producing texts for personal enjoyment and a chance for brief fame if their content is used or highlighted on the show or Web site.

[8.4] According to *Tosh.0*'s User Content Submission Agreement (Viacom Media Networks 2010),

[8.5] Comedy Central acquires no title or ownership rights in or to any User Content you submit and nothing in this Submission Agreement conveys to us any ownership rights in your User Content. Comedy Central is acting only as a host, bulletin board or conduit for submitted User Content, with all of the specific rights granted by you hereunder. Although by your submission of any User Content you are requesting and directing us and any of the Parent

Companies or the Affiliates with whom we have made arrangements, to take advantage of and exploit all of the rights and privileges granted hereunder (including, without limitation, the right to display and post the User Content on the Platforms), neither we, nor any of the Parent Companies or the Affiliates have any obligation to do any of these things.

[8.6] Although Comedy Central will not own user content, users should expect that it can be used without further permission. During the coding process, a review of fan tweets to Tosh indicated that a number of users want their content to be used in so far as they desire recognition for it from Tosh or other users. For example, fans' tweets may have explicit requests for acknowledgment by asking Tosh to tweet them back. In the parkour user video mashup, one star of a submission is asked "what are you doing?" after he tumbles off a porch and he responds, "getting on *Tosh.0*." In this case, the fan who filmed himself engaged in labor for the show. In exchange for his time (and possible injury) he hoped for and received the chance to have his video used.

[8.7] The dangerous and potentially unethical nature of user video requests is that fans may be willing to jeopardize their safety and social standing offline in service of the show and their reputations as fans. In addition to putting themselves in physical danger performing parkour or impromptu trust falls, Tosh has also asked users to send in videos that break social norms. For example, one call asks fans to film themselves approaching women from behind and reaching around to touch their stomachs. Fans may have a better chance of getting on *Tosh.0* the more extreme their behavior is and have a shot at becoming a celwebtrity if they comply with official Comedy Central agreements, terms and conditions and post their videos to the site. Further analysis of the type or subject matter of content spread to and from the site would clarify danger as perhaps an element of content that motivates people to spread it.

9. Conclusion

[9.1] Television industries are strategically embracing convergence with Internet technologies and social media platforms. Online brand presence is not cutting edge, but sticky and spreadable strategies recently conceptualized by Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) to rival the dominant viral media metaphor illuminate ways in which Web sites attempt to engage audiences and fans. Sites operating under sticky philosophies are attempting to structure user experiences and concentrate them on their sites to keep eyes on sanctioned content and advertisements. Spreadability strategies encourage users to personalize their engagement and easily spread content and the brand to a number of sites. Although theorized through a number of examples, sticky and spreadable concepts deserved further consideration to test their

scope and usefulness to design analysis. In this study, they proved to be useful for determining the strategic design of the *Tosh.0* Web site.

[9.2] The *Tosh.0* Web site was targeted for such a test because of its unique focus (even when compared to shows with a similar format) on online videos and fan-generated content as an inspiration for original and creative work. The Web site demonstrates characteristics of stickiness and spreadability and these concepts were useful in identifying how the site provides opportunities for fans to engage in open-ended activities that benefit the brand. Since the show is predicated on the usage of social media and amateur video, audience engagement and participation is essential to its popularity. I examined the navigational structures and site design that promoted the push and pull of content to and from the *Tosh.0* Web site. The site depends on fans to participate in the circulation of content and hooks them in with the promise of a potential carnivalesque spectacle and brief celwebtrity status. The show's online and broadcast success may indicate that relinquishing some control over content and supporting user autonomy can facilitate the growth of a fan base and community.

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Praxis

The cultural economics of performance space: Negotiating fan, labor, and marketing practice in *Glee*'s transmedia geography

Matthias Stork

University of California, Los Angeles, California, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—The Fox television show *Glee* (2009–present) constitutes a cultural phenomenon of the digital age. Through its multiplatform marketing of musical and theatrical performance, the show has attracted a substantial fan base and created a self-sustaining economy of cultural expression. As a serialized narrative with a focus on the underdog's struggle for fame, it constructs a populist forum for fans to live their dream of becoming a star vicariously and learn how to realize it in real life—how to make it. *Glee*'s marketing approach postulates performance as the essential element in forming an intimate relationship between the show and its core fans, the Gleeks. Performances are distributed across several spaces, including a multitude of video and audio channels, to satisfy Gleeks' desire for maximum content. The show's cast and crew further offer to discuss these performances and grant special insights into their creation. *Glee*'s promotional discourse overtly characterizes fans as equals, positioning its programming as a gift to them. The overarching message of this marketing methodology is that *Glee* rewards its fans for their investment and loyalty by offering up content and interaction in a variety of performative spaces—a transmedia geography—that transcend television. By using an interdisciplinary framework of political economy, cultural geography, and transmedia communications, *Glee* may be examined in relation to its diegetic and nondiegetic conceptualization and commodification of performance space. Doing this illuminates how the show negotiates—indeed exploits—the concepts of fan and labor practice in contemporary media industries.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fan community; TV

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1. Introduction

[1.1] With a show like *Glee* that starts with a cult following, you have your hard-core fans who we love very much [...], it's important to have the fans feel like they have an inside look into who we are along with our characters. It's really important to be attached to your fans [...] and to share things with them.

—Jenna Ushkowitz (Tina on *Glee*)

[1.2] Everything we put online gets a push right away. We see people sending it to their friends and commenting on it. We've had this amazing thing happen on *YouTube* where people are actually using the music from the show in the background and then they sing their version.

—Laurel Bernard, senior vice president for Fox Marketing

[1.3] I think it's a show that the fans made. They found it, they loved it, they bought the music, they turned it into a phenomenon, they bought the tickets for those concert tours, they created the ability to do multi-platforms, they had a really strong proprietary grasp on it.

—Ryan Murphy, *Glee* show creator, executive producer, writer

[1.4] The Fox network's musical show *Glee* (2009–present) has established itself as one of the leading pop culture sensations in the television landscape of the 21st century. Currently in its fifth season, *Glee*'s legacy includes live appearances at the White House and the World Series, a tied-in casting show, a comprehensive set list of cover and original songs, consistently high ratings with competitive market shares, and a unique merchandising profitability, with 30+ million digital downloads and 15+ million CD albums sold worldwide to date. Through its multiplatform marketing of musical and theatrical performance, the show has attracted a substantial fan base and created a self-sustaining economy of cultural expression, meaning its product consistently inspires fan engagement on multiple levels.

[1.5] The official spaces of *Glee*'s transmedia geography (figure 1) include the Fox Web site, a Facebook page, a Columbia Records Web site, Twitter accounts, a YouTube channel, a Tumblr page, a MySpace site, a Comic-Con presence, digital distribution channels, and live-tour performances. Unofficial spaces include fan practice across all of these channels as well as, to a lesser extent because not visually oriented, fan fiction Web sites.



Figure 1. *Glee's transmedia geography map.* [[View larger image.](#)]

[1.6] As such, *Glee* has positioned itself as a space for *American Idol* (2002–present) acolytes, teenage digital citizens who approach TV entertainment harboring the dream of gaining fame by breaking into the much-mythologized culture industry. In fact, there are several ties between *Glee* and *American Idol*: both shows offer up the dream of becoming a star, both feature highly stylized stage performances, and both are situated in the musical genre. Within this genre, musical performance and the commonly televised teenage dream of stardom are neatly packaged as pleasurable, easily consumable, and inspirational pop culture. *Glee* not only presents a narrative that explicitly reflects and caters to this specific emotional moment in contemporary American youth culture but also equally constructs a forum that allows audiences—fans in particular—to live their dream vicariously through the show and, purportedly, learn how to realize it—how to make it. *Glee's* marketing approach postulates performance as the essential element in forming an intimate relationship between the show and its core fans, known as Gleeks. Performances are distributed and shared across several spaces, including a multitude of video and audio channels, to satisfy the Gleeks' desire for maximum content. The show's cast and crew further offer to discuss these performances and grant special insight into their creation. *Glee's* promotional discourse characterizes fans as like-minded peers, and by positioning its programming as an act of benefaction, it asks them to engage in the show's engineered sharing economy. The overarching message of this marketing methodology is that *Glee*

thanks/compensates its fans for their (emotional/discursive) investment and loyalty by offering up both content and interaction in a variety of performative spaces that transcend television. Within this gift economy (Caldwell 2009), *Glee* essentially cultivates a business model that exchanges content for fan labor and the attached cultural buzz.

[1.7] By examining this approach more closely and analyzing defining features of *Glee*'s corporate and fan culture through a framework incorporating cultural studies and political economy, the show's creation and usage of a transmedia geography may be seen as a site for extensive interrelated narrative and promotional practices designed to address specific fan sensibilities. By carefully studying and illustrating *Glee*'s marketing vis-à-vis the show's conceptualization and commodification of performance space, I illuminate how it negotiates—indeed exploits—the concepts of fan and labor practice.

2. Creating the *Glee* community—The integration of cultural and economic space

[2.1] *Glee*'s aesthetic framework marks it as an emblematic artifact of the postnetwork era in American television. Although the show's core commercial text primarily centers on a serialized narrative revolving around amateur musical performances and creative (self-)expression in a fictional Midwestern high school setting—a trope fans have enthusiastically embraced, as evidenced by their music purchases, vidding, and performance videos—its overarching conceptualization of textual content is designed to have it flow beyond the box (Ross 2008) in the form of interrelated paratexts (note 1). These paratexts complement, extend, and/or enrich the original text, thus adding value of both cultural and economic import (Caldwell 2008). This value is cultural in that it provides more information about the show's narrative and mythology, and economic in that it promotes and markets the show as popular entertainment to growing audiences. *Glee* is thus to be understood not simply as one self-enclosed televisual text but, as Jennifer Gillian (2001) notes via her model of multiclick TV, a multiplatform network of texts designed to address a digital fan base. Fans are seen not only as active receivers but as large-scale distributors. The *Glee* text network is thus engineered to facilitate the spreading of content.

[2.2] The notion of a multiplatform network does more than add nuance to the concept of the text in contemporary media culture. It introduces and posits the concept of space as a crucial component in understanding media texts and their industrial dimensions. *Glee* represents a volume of commercial texts—the core text and its (un)official paratexts—that manifest themselves across multiple platforms, both analog and digital, in a set of transmedia spaces. Per Henry Jenkins (2006a,

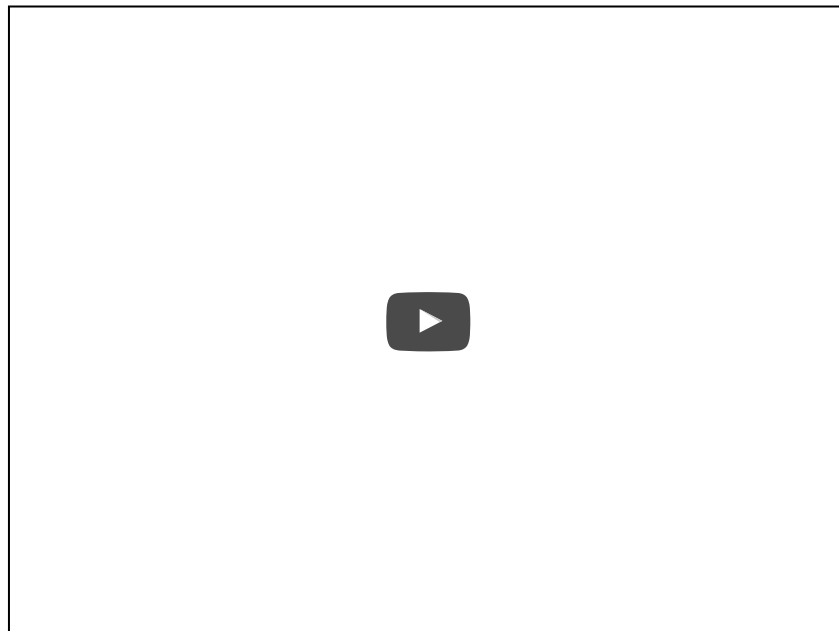
2006b), such a transmedia environment, composed of real and virtual spaces, constitutes a construct in which integral textual elements are coordinated and dispersed systematically for storytelling and marketing purposes. These spaces primarily function as delivery channels for the process of entertainment reception and promotion, a crucial component of which is the interaction between the show and its audience. Thus, these spaces enable—indeed ask and invite—audiences not only to receive but also to spread, create, and send information. Within this culture of converging spaces, they are able to engage with a show's text on several levels, to act as active consumers as well as producers/distributors—that is, laborers.

[2.3] Fans are the central agents within the paratextual dimensions of transmedia spaces, rigorously tracking information. They view videos (including online previews and trailers, deleted/bonus scenes, interviews, films, and DVD bonus features), play games (console or Internet based), use online applications, read (electronic) books, Web sites, and/or blogs, and listen to music via MP3 or CD. They make an effort to consume the additional content provided by official paratexts, partially or entirely, and their efforts are reflected in the show's revenue figures. Moreover, many fans are also inspired to create (produce) new paratexts hosted in similar yet unofficial (not originally corporate driven) transmedia spaces. This includes writing fan fiction, discussing scenes and/or characters in online message boards or social media networks, and reediting/recording and uploading video footage on YouTube, all practices that admittedly had currency with active audiences before the digital era but have now become more widespread and even de rigueur. Whether they consume or produce, by acting within these spaces, fans interact with and participate in the show's text, performing a labor of love. They derive and share extra information and contribute new information. The properties of transmedia spaces thus reconfigure the formerly passive (one-dimensional) relationship between texts and their audiences as an active, spatially framed interaction and discourse, one of teleparticipation (Gillian 2011). *Glee* is especially notable in this context because it cultivates a variety of transmedia spaces, all of which are designed to engage a specific audience and extract promotional labor in exchange for transmedia pleasure.

[2.4] *Glee*'s focus on popular music and dance ensures wide mainstream appeal. The show's core audience, although substantial, still comprises a niche group of spectators with distinct cultural sensibilities. Known as Gleeks, these young fans, coveted by advertisers, are reflected in the show's celebration of the underdog: the trials and tribulations of the social outcast, the (self-referential) emphasis on pop culture, music in particular, and the art of showmanship (Kjus 2009). This mix of narrative and performance is postulated as *Glee*'s essence, its brand; thus it is consistently emphasized in its promotional campaign. It is extravagant entertainment that encourages teenage fan viewers to channel their energy and talent into musical (and

digital) performativity as a form of fun labor. Essentially, *Glee* narrativizes the format of reality competition shows such as *American Idol* (Rickman 2010), cultivating a new approach to commercialize the reality TV juggernaut's popular youth appeal. Not coincidentally, *Glee*'s pilot pre-premiered after the *American Idol* finale in May 2009, several months before its official premiere in September.

[2.5] This release strategy served two purposes: first, to broadcast the show in a manner that capitalized on Fox's synergy and the substantial viewership of *American Idol*; and second, to narrowcast it to reach, or even create, a niche fan base, and then to anchor it within online fan discourse. After the pre-premiere, Fox made the pilot available in several commercial transmedia spaces, including its Web site, Hulu, and iTunes. The marketing campaign specifically touted this service as a gift for Gleeks. Fox also asked the show's producers ([note 2](#))—including cocreators and writers Ian Brennan, Brad Falchuck, and Ryan Murphy; actors Lea Michele, Cory Monteith, and Dianna Agron; and many other above-the-line personnel—to talk up the show on Facebook and Twitter, directly engaging fans of the pilot. At the same time, Fox increased the personalized Gleekian media campaign by circulating a short TV spot (simultaneously released on YouTube) that tapped into the pilot's narrative about performance and teenage dreams.



Video 1. *Glee* season 1 promo teaser.

[2.6] The 1-minute video features a stylized musical montage of the main characters reciting the phrase, "You're a Geek! I'm a Gleek!" set to an updated version of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. This short paradigm of televisuality (Caldwell 1995) established the identity of the *Glee* fan: a pop culture geek who likes *Glee*, the teenage outsider with a dream about fame who constantly faces challenges from peers and authority figures—the Gleek. With the introduction of the Gleek, Fox reacted to

the early fan buzz surrounding the *Glee* pilot, directly addressing fans' sensibilities and tailoring the show's public image to their interests. The Gleek is a concept created for fans, a model they can identify with that fosters their investment in the emerging show and its characters, and that provides an opportunity for corporate gain by containing audience fragmentation. The video further provides a social meme by disseminating an identifying gesture (and device for social bonding) for Gleeks: the actors shape an L with their fingers and place their hand on their forehead. By using this gesture, *Glee* appropriates and redeems the former negative connotation of the term *loser*, situating the show within a historical discourse about the underdog and the high school outcast (Lewis 2012). Fox subsequently launched the Biggest Gleek Challenge on Facebook, offering a prize to the fan who most frequently and vigorously discussed the show in their Facebook profile, including status updates, "likes," friend invitations, and threads, thus offering a reward for active engagement or competitive consumer labor. The official text of the original Facebook post (<https://www.facebook.com/notes/glee/fox-invites-glee-fans-to-join-the-biggest-gleek-competition-at-wwwfoxcomgleek/136157066788>) emphasizes the Gleek community in order to increase fans' engagement with the brand, addressing fans as Gleeks to underscore the validity of the concept, solidify its cultural significance, and solicit measurable fan responses in various media channels. A week before the pilot's official September premiere, a longer director's cut aired in the form of a tweet-peat. A live-tweet event, the broadcast compiled many of the tweets fans had generated about the show since its pre-premiere, with the writers and cast members responding to questions and comments in real time (note 3). Fox incorporated real spaces in the transmedia marketing campaign, organizing a *Glee* panel at the San Diego Comic-Con (engaging in an already established hard-core fan milieu) and taking the cast on a Gleek tour across youth-oriented Hot Topic stores performing songs from the pilot and selling "I am a Gleek" T-shirts.

The 'Glee' Team Storms Hot Topic



Video 2. *Glee Hot Topic store performance on October 5, 2009 (TalkofFame Video Report).*

[2.7] Fox's overarching goal was to create a Gleek community of fan-producers and distributors to create visibility and buzz for the show in an increasingly permeable transmedia environment. The initial marketing was very successful. In fact, it yielded more than just visibility and buzz; it created discursivity. The show's perceived uniqueness, its appropriation of contemporary youth culture's desire for fame through performative musical talent à la *American Idol*, and its effective corporate branding and opt-in marketing techniques turned the text into a media phenomenon. *Glee* evolved from a text into an ongoing discourse that generated additional texts. This formation of other texts manifested as a form of concrete labor. As fans engaged with the Gleek community, they began to adopt the show's aesthetic of performance by creating and uploading sing-along videos, musical montages, and scene remixes, organizing flash mobs, and forming singing groups, all the while creating "performative copies of the original" (Leavitt 2013) in an impressive display of collective authorship and showmanship—essentially a uniform labor practice. They openly performed their fandom by emulating the style of the show, thereby establishing alternate transmedia spaces—fan-driven spaces—to interact with the show in a more production-oriented fashion (Lancaster 2001). The Gleeks' cultural expression—labor as leisure and fun that manifests itself as an ongoing practice of discursivity—sustained the show's public momentum, cementing it as a hit. For some fans, *Glee* evolved from a TV show into an outlet for their artistic ambitions.

[2.8] Many of the early fan videos showed Gleeks performing *Glee*'s version of Journey's 1981 classic song, "Don't Stop Believin'," while others repurposed scenes from the pilot. Yet Fox did not take any legal action against the materials circulated within these fan spaces, ignoring issues of copyright infringement in favor of a large-scale free-for-all marketing campaign that fostered discursivity, though certain types of fan activities were not encouraged, particularly slash fiction (Hellekson 2012). Fox integrated the cultural space of fan performance into its economic-centric marketing space, capitalizing on the aforementioned labor of fan love. Thus, niche fan space was centralized and rendered economically productive. Referencing a narrative tidbit from the pilot—Rachel Berry's (Lea Michele) personalized award system—Fox publicized a so-called Gold Star contest online, asking fans to submit their *Glee* performance videos and photos with the prospect of winning a trip to the Kid's Choice Awards accompanied by members of the *Glee* cast—again requiring competitive performance labor as a prerequisite for the corporate gift. Fox thus set out to, as Clarke (2012, 11) terms it, "operationalize fan activities," rather than discounting or penalizing them, as is often the case, thereby constructing a new space of cultural economics in which creative performance—whether professional or fannish—functions as promotional commercial

product while masquerading as intimate Gleek producer-fan interaction. This choice reflected Scott's (2005, 1) point about "the aestheticization of the economy and the commodification of culture." The Gleek community evolved into a social marketing network with ideal producers and consumers who would persistently advertise the show's Gleek brand (Jenkins 2007).

[2.9] Fox's formative marketing campaign for *Glee* constructed a transmedia environment with sites of interaction for Gleeks (both *Glee* producers and fans), incorporating both official and unofficial spaces. Focusing on the act of performance—both musical (singing and dancing by characters, actors, and fans) and discursive (social media activities)—these spaces are operationalized as promotional venues for the show, although paradoxically they are generally touted as interactive spheres of fan self-expression. Fans saw their own performances as an opportunity to express and interact, but Fox openly utilized them as marketing labor. In this sense, the transmedia discourse facilitated both promotion and self-expression; however, its overall purpose remained economically rather than artistically driven. This unspoken contract between fans and the corporation, based on mutual benefit, defines *Glee*'s cultural economics of performance space. Fox expanded the Gleek spaces during season 1, leading to a proliferation of fan spaces. Fox's marketing team then set out to create a hub to organize and coordinate this expansion to optimize *Glee*'s brand promotion.

3. Synergizing Gleek performances—*Glee*'s geography of transmedia marketing

[3.1] Fox continued to foster the ostensible intimacy of the Gleek community by furnishing more opportunities for producer-fan interaction. The spectacular success of the first season (with an average of 15 million to 17 million viewers per week) (note 4) had demonstrated, in Green and Jenkins's (2009, 213) more general observation, that fans represent "the drivers of wealth production in the digital economy." *Glee*'s marketing accordingly sought to increase fan involvement in—and labor for—the show through the construction and implementation of a type of ritual media space (Moore 2009) that promotes the spectacle of performance, designed to ensure consistent fan engagement by specifically targeting one of the fans' favorite element of the show: the display of musical talent and the vicarious pleasure of dreaming oneself into this performance space. Iterations of *Glee*'s musical vignettes therefore came to dominate the show's paratextual marketing. Fox used these as building blocks for expanded transmedia spaces, establishing a vast geography.

[3.2] *Glee*'s transmedia geography is predominantly composed of virtual spaces, which include televisual and filmic channels. Within these spaces, paratextual

promotional content is regularly distributed to fans in order to foster their engagement with the show and substantiate the Gleek community. The spaces differentiate between corporate-driven marketing and producer-driven branding. The former refers to official Fox spaces, while the latter points to personal virtual channels maintained by certain producers of the show, which are put in service of the show's marketing. All of them are performance-centric and enable fans to interact with and feel part of *Glee*—and Gleeks make an active decision to support their show by directing their attention, energy, and creativity to these various spaces of media consumption, willingly opening themselves to the practice of fan labor and fostering discursivity.

[3.3] The central spaces of *Glee*'s transmedia geography are the official Fox *Glee* Web site, the show's Facebook group, the Twitter account GleeOnFox, the eponymous YouTube channel and Tumblr blog, and a (rarely updated) MySpace page (figure 1). Except for the MySpace page, Fox has enlisted the service of the most popular virtual sites of social interaction (MySpace, a now obsolete network, is mostly included because it is owned by the media conglomerate News Corporation, just like Fox) (**note 5**). All of these virtual spaces are interrelated—synergized—via hyperlinks and offer similar promotional paratexts via daily and weekly updates. The following are released in all spaces: preview videos, videos of musical performances from specific episodes, preview posters, cast and crew interviews, episode photos, music samples, and calls to preorder *Glee* merchandise (mostly DVDs and CDs). However, each individual space has specific offers as well; by this diversification, Fox ensures an even distribution of fan engagement across the transmedia geography. This sustained engagement is ultimately achieved by sustained labor. The Fox Web site functions as the merchandise hub. Although it incorporates a library of fully viewable episodes (four at a time), numerous performance clips, *Glee* episode recaps, and behind-the-scenes footage, it primarily supplies links to free downloads and places to purchase Gleek memorabilia, such as quizzes, games, wallpaper, iTunes content, iPhone apps, the karaoke video game, DVDs, CDs, and clothing. It thus offers physical objects designed to create an additional sphere of material fan devotion.

[3.4] The Facebook group is international, reaching fans all over the world. It currently has 24 million subscribers. Although it equally advertises *Glee* merchandise, its focus rests on measurable fan labor and discursivity, encouraging Gleeks to "like," post or repost, or thread the show. It creates daily updates to maintain consistent interest and buzz, thus further cultivating distinct media rituals such as the Gleek of the Week contest (fans share their personal *Glee* stories to enter), which honors one *Glee* fan with a post on the official page every week (yet another gift/reward for high-class work performance), daily episode lead-ups, and photo-video streams addressing fans who have questions about favorite characters, performances, and story lines. Occasionally the group hosts contests for live video chats with actors, enabling the

most interactive/productive users to meet their heroes in person. The Twitter account GleeOnFox (2.75 million followers) fulfills the same functions, but it equally creates intertextual links to the accounts of fans and producers, again emphasizing the communal nature of Gleek culture. Twitter hashtags allow Fox to centralize and direct fan discourse over longer periods of time. The account organizes official live tweets for every episode, pre- and postviewing discussions, and daily reminders about the latest episode. *Glee*'s Tumblr blog puts up posters and videos on a weekly routine, resulting in numerous reposts from fans who use this social media service.

[3.5] The Fox YouTube channel (over 1 million subscribers and over 200 million video views) constitutes an exceptional marketing space, as it provides an abundance of copyrighted material, featuring promos, cast and crew interviews, Comic-Con footage, and full performances from every *Glee* episode. Furthermore, it hosts the Fox *Glee* Lounge, featuring short conversations between the show's actors about their personal lives. Although Fox licenses *Glee* episodes to Netflix and Hulu, it offers the essential parts of each episode—the musical performances—free of charge, all to satisfy a large community of fans and to encourage them to maintain a high degree of discursivity and labor by sharing these videos and/or reproducing them by creating similar amateur ones.

[3.6] The corporate-directed spaces are complemented by the personal spaces that individual *Glee* producers occupy. *Glee*'s show runners and writers, casting agent, choreographer, and the entirety of the cast maintain Twitter accounts where they foster the brand of the show by engaging the Gleek community. Of course, their rhetoric is still corporate directed, yet their tweets have a more personal touch because they not only share *Glee*-related information but also give insights into other professional projects as well as their private lives. This strategy serves both corporate branding and self-branding, as Weprin (2009) has noted. Although not all of the Twitter accounts are regularly active, the most popular are, including show runner Ryan Murphy (600,000 followers) and actors Chris Colfer (2.6 million), Darren Criss (1.6 million), and Lea Michele (4 million). These producers present themselves as professional Gleeks who give back, offering information not available in other spaces of the transmedia geography, particularly an inside look into the show's mythical production space. *Glee* is shot on the Paramount lot in Los Angeles. It is a closed-set production. The producers regularly offer photos or videos from the set, allowing fans to become a (passive) part of the production process yet an active part of the promotional process. They enable fans to see through their eyes, then pass that information on. This illusion serves to mythologize *Glee*'s production space in order to generate more fan discursivity about the show as a whole.

[3.7] Although the geography is mostly composed of virtual spaces, it features a small set of real-world sites with a media component. These sites complement the virtual dimension of the marketing geography in that they offer tangibility, thus deepening the ostensible intimacy within the Gleek community as fans receive an opportunity to meet the show's producers in person. The *Glee* live events are invariably characterized as an expression of the producers' gratitude toward the fans, although ironically, they are not free of charge. Thus, *Glee* has regularly offered a Comic-Con panel since its inception, providing Gleeks with tantalizing tidbits about upcoming seasons. Furthermore, the show's producers frequently attend question-and-answer sessions in and around Los Angeles, many of which are open to the public. At the end of the first season, *Glee* embarked on a 21-city live North American tour, giving a total of 31 concert performances. In 2011, at the end of season 2, the cast gave nine more concerts, eight in England and one in Ireland (note 6). The content performed in these real-world spaces only reaches a limited fan base, however. The producers thus distributed this content via transmedia geography, synergizing the performances across multiple spaces—a concert movie in theaters and on DVD; CDs; YouTube videos; photos on Facebook and Twitter—again facilitating fan labor as fans disseminated the content.

[3.8] *Glee*'s transmedia geography utilizes the new role of the producer in the postnetwork era of television. Although *Glee*'s producers regularly appear in official media outlets such as premieres and TV and radio interviews, they are equally expected to promote the show in virtual spheres, not only acting for fans but also interacting with them on a regular basis, forming a community that emphasizes intimacy. Furthermore, this construction of a commercially interrelated and overtly fan-centric marketing macrospace is designed to invite fan participation and position the corporate network as a mediator between stars and fans. Thus, "by emphasizing the active participation of the viewer ..., the show positions itself and its network as 'benevolent' ... —graciously inviting the viewer to be producerly" (Ross 2008, 89)—that is, to labor. The Gleeks largely embraced the interactive opportunities of the official spaces, but they equally engaged in typical grassroots fan practice, creating a vast amount of unofficial spaces, ranging from individual *Glee* blogs and YouTube channels to large-scale Web sites, the most comprehensive of which is Gleeksource (<https://www.facebook.com/gleeksource>), which centralizes all the spaces from the show's transmedia geography, bundling the content, including merchandising, in one place. The overarching fan tenor thus reflects Fox's marketing strategy of discursivity: to have fans act as multipliers (McCracken 2005). Fans primarily reproduce the content of the official transmedia spaces, reposting and commenting on corporate-released videos and photos on their social media sites and engaging with the producers on Twitter. Their enthusiasm mirrors what John Fiske describes as

"empowering play" (1987, 236), the affect of wishing to be a part of *Glee*, to be a member of the community.

[3.9] However, the Gleeks also feel inspired by the show, which has led to an influx of creative *Glee* performance videos on YouTube. These videos can be divided into two categories: the *Glee* song video with lyrics and photos, and the fan performance covering a *Glee* song, some of which generated millions of views during the first two seasons. Fans created the videos to further increase their ties to the show and the Gleek community while refashioning their identities as hard-core Gleeks. They are consumers as well as producers; they are not necessarily laborers but rather devout fans who live and breathe the show, dreaming about an opportunity to be in the limelight (Carpenter 2012). Stein (2010, 138) aptly says of this type of fan behavior: "Media fans understand themselves as authors and performers in online spaces, and often take pleasure in blurring the lines between diegetic and non-diegetic performance." Although those fan-producers—"the people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen 2006)—utilized the videos as a source for fan and self-expression, Fox perceived them as additional promotional paratexts, with creative fan-producers acting as brand advocates for the show, especially for the music covers (Edwards 2012, 2). Fox thereby created synergy between the official corporate and unofficial fan spaces, prodigiously expanding the scope of its transmedia geography. The network's willingness to release vast amounts of copyrighted material is attributable to the corresponding rise in user-generated content, which at almost no point opposed or counteracted what Baughman and Wood (2012, 341) aptly characterize as "the commercial and ideological practices of dominant culture." In fact, it immensely contributed to them. The Gleeks, consciously or unconsciously, accepted their role as *Glee* marketing agents in exchange for the manufactured intimacy of the interactive Gleek community. Gleeks thus largely represent an affirmational fan base, although fans of noncanonical scenarios are equally active in a transformational vidding practice, albeit in a more furtive manner; and much of their work, while unconventional, ultimately exists within the boundaries of the *Glee* system, as no narrative or stylistic risks are taken. (For the affirmational/transformational divide, see *obsession_inc* 2009; it should be noted, though, that *Glee* reconfigures the author's gender argument about affirmational/transformational fans in that the show projects a stronger female affirmational audience.) They follow, indeed celebrate, the official rhetoric set forth by Fox and the *Glee* producers. Gleeks rarely have any communal schisms, although they see themselves as gatekeepers for the show's public perception, policing its dominant discourse in order to contain resistant readings and misreadings (Hills 2002; Johnson 2007). This is not to suggest that all Gleeks are the dupes of Fox. Gleeks might be viewed as a romantic fan base, but all of them make a conscious choice to support the show, realizing that their engagement sustains their beloved product and provides them with more content while experiencing interactive

labor as fun (De Kosnik 2013). In this regard, it can be argued that fans potentially choose not to confront the show critically because of the personal gains afforded to them by the show and its transmedia geography. Nevertheless, some Gleeks expect more from the network-authored *Glee* experience than others, and Fox, through its creation of a controllable environment that mobilizes fan activity as a form of marketing labor, has actively seized on these expectations. I do need to acknowledge here that *Glee*'s legacy includes instances of fan resistance and agency in non-Fox-affiliated online forums, particularly with regard to the show's gender politics.

[3.10] *Glee*'s transmedia geography can thus be defined as a synergy of corporate and fan spaces, all of which communicate the acts of expression and performance as promotional material to sustain discursivity about the show. The corporate message is that fans form part of an intimate Gleek community that fosters interaction between audiences and producers. Although this is true, the community's primary agenda is to capitalize on these interactions to market the show. In this regard, the community resembles a market that economizes culture. On the outside, *Glee*'s transmedia spaces appear to form what Lessig (2008) defines as a sharing economy—a market devoid of monetary concerns that distributes goods altruistically. Indeed, it does offer gifts/rewards to its users. Behind this benevolent veneer of cultural discourse, however, is revealed an elaborate commercial economy. Labor is partially rewarded, albeit noneconomically, but more is constantly asked for. To use French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) terms, the transmedia geography rigorously fosters *Glee*'s cultural capital to be cashed in as economic capital. Its social construction effectively operationalizes fans' involvement in the show, economizing their emotions and cultural activities as marketing rhetoric. This pseudo-collaborative (one might even call it protoexploitative) practice went to further extremes after the zenith of *Glee*'s popularity at the end of season 1.

4. Commodifying the Gleek—Spatial convergence and nouveau professionalism

[4.1] In light of the proliferation of Gleek fan videos on the Internet, Fox reconfigured the geography of its transmedia spaces to yet again maximize discursivity, complementing the concept of interaction and communal intimacy between producers and fans with the process of mobility—upward mobility, to be precise. The marketing thus seized on both the show's generic ties to live musical competition shows and fans'—as well as mainstream youth audiences'—enthusiasm for (and active engagement in) online video singing performances, introducing an open MySpace casting call for Gleeks. The call offered up the dream most of them share: to become a star like their favorite actors on *Glee*, to truly become part of the show, to evolve from a fan Gleek into a producer Gleek. Although this marketing ploy openly

revealed the social hierarchy within the supposedly equal Gleek community (which was divided into Gleek producers, active Gleek fan-producer-distributor-consumers, and mere Gleek consumers), it also lowered the boundaries between the professional and fan spaces, which had direct ramifications on the show's on-air narrative. The prospect of choosing an amateur to become part of a professionally produced, multimillion-dollar narrative TV show intensified the established practice of what I term *nouveau professionalism*, cultivated on reality TV shows like *American Idol*. *Nouveau professionalism* denotes the process of an amateur transforming into a corporate entity with cultural and economic capital. Fox's strategy aimed to select a fan from within its niche audience and posit (groom, market, promote) him or her as an emerging star. In this regard, the spaces of *Glee*'s transmedia geography not only expanded but converged, ostensibly facilitating the possibility for fans to break into the show and, by extension, the TV industry, albeit not as a fresh outsider but as a corporation-created and -directed product.

[4.2] The Fox-MySpace-News Corporation synergy launched the casting call for one of three new roles on the show at the end of season 1 in 2010, effectively setting out to co-opt the show's fan spaces, complementing its gift economy with the (ludic) principle of rewarding performance. Clear rules were formulated and publicized online; they asked fans to perform a song that had been featured on *Glee* (thus ensuring continued commercial investment) and to explain why they wanted to be on the show. This approach underscores the motif of the underdog, particularly social alienation and the chance of a lifetime; *Glee* effectively calls on this motif to recruit belief in the show. Promoted by the *Glee* cast by Internet videos directly addressing the audience as Gleeks, the call received 34,000 submissions, along with 23 million video views and 1.3 million MySpace friends ("*Glee* Launches Casting Call on MySpace" 2010). The project generated a lot of media attention, exposing *Glee* to an even wider audience and increasing fans' emotional ties to the show and its aesthetics of stylized "amateur" performance. However, the project ultimately did not come to fruition. Whether submissions were reviewed remains unclear, yet *Glee* returned to its second season with three new traditionally cast industry professionals (performers with representation), thus exposing the call as a potential marketing scheme (O'Neill 2010). Fox's until then effective customary strategy of disguising its marketing as a benevolent gift/competitive reward for fan labor had, to a certain degree, publicly failed. Yet Gleeks did not engage in any resistance to the show. Rather, they embraced it even more vigorously, making the season 2 debut an enormous success. There was no call for public resistance against Fox or the show; the issue just faded away. I advance the assertion that, at this stage, the Gleek community had reached a point of evangelical devotion, blindly (and, granted, in some cases grudgingly) accepting corporate dictum, regardless of its ethical implications. Of course, it is equally possible that fans cared more about a passive form of teleparticipation than an active form of

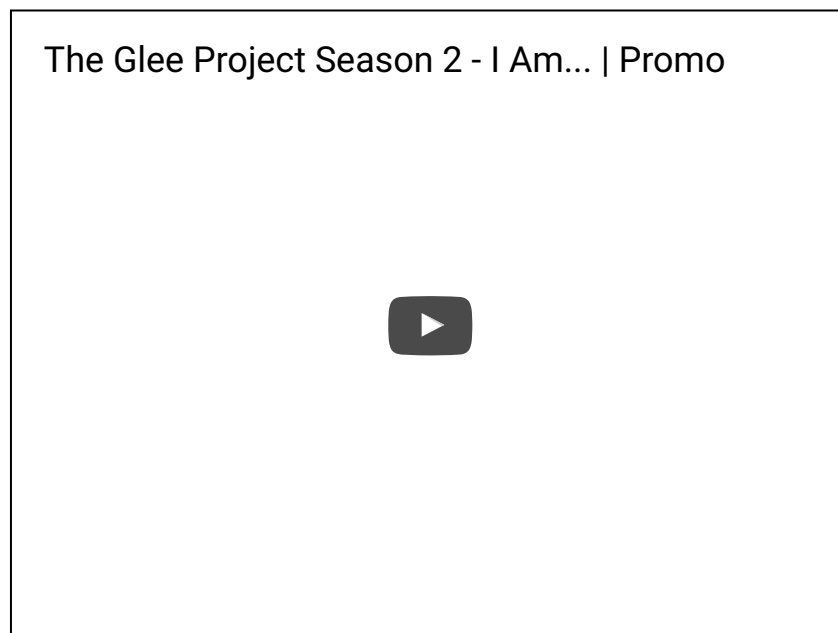
nouveau professionalism. At any rate, Fox had established a type of fan ecosystem, subject to the outside control and calculated input of the network. Fans' investment in the show was so strong that the prospect (hope, desire) to become part of the show itself effectively contained any efforts at large-scale resistance.

[4.3] The casting call had another major impact on *Glee*'s fan culture, earning the producers of the most-viewed videos what Mark Deuze (2009) calls a networked reputation—a high amount of cultural capital measured quantitatively in video views and qualitatively in "likes" (termed Gold Stars). This form of capital further increased the layers of social hierarchy within the Gleek community and added an additional dimension to its discursivity: that of self-promotion. As a consequence, the myth of spatial convergence, although now proven to be an illusion, manifested itself in the consciousness of hard-core Gleeks. Fans began using Twitter and Facebook to circulate their videos to the show runners and actors, hoping mostly for a professional compliment and more virtual face time (a form of cultural capital in itself), or even the miracle of being offered a role and realizing spatial convergence. *Glee*'s transmedia geography thus evolved into a marketing forum for both the show and its fans—a sphere of artistic expression and labor. The myth of spatial convergence grew even more. Fans turned their attention to *Glee*'s production space, traveling to the *Glee* set, perhaps harboring the hope of somehow finding a way to make it on the show despite the closed set. I interviewed three seasoned tour guides at Paramount studios, all of whom reported of a few instances when fans left audition DVDs and letters on the lot or asked the guides to pass them along to Ryan Murphy. Generally, visitors asked the guides questions about how to audition for the show, erroneously considering the guides to be industry insiders. The guides further stated that about 30 percent of visitors, in their estimation, attend the tour to see *Glee* specifically, in many cases well knowing that the set is closed. The belief in spatial convergence, as set forth by the faux casting call, emphasized the notion of capital within the *Glee* fan spaces, with fans positing their videos not only as expressions of Gleekian devotion but as forms of cultural capital potentially enabling them to move from fan to professional, corporate space. The notion of labor was thus fully realized. Although the transmedia geography overall served as a marketing construct for *Glee*, both the show's producers and fans commenced to utilize its spaces for self-branding. Or, to recontextualize Mark Andrejevic's (2004, 196) work, *Glee* practiced "the paradigm of active participation as a form of self-commodification" on all spatial levels.

[4.4] In 2011, *Glee* cocreator Ryan Murphy reacted to the fan craze and returned to the idea of amplifying fan interest through nouveau professionalism. He conceived of a new show, titled *The Glee Project*, to cast new talent from the Gleek community, now fully embracing the show's generic ties to the *American Idol* formula. Although Fox did not believe enough in the project to finance it, in order to retain the possibility of

creating major marketing hype, it outsourced the production to NBC Universal's network, Oxygen, receiving licensing fees in return (and thereby externalizing risk in case the show underperformed). The show's principle was the same as that of the MySpace casting call. Fans were asked to perform official *Glee* songs and upload them to the Oxygen portal with the prospect of being cast to compete for a seven-episode arc in *Glee*'s third season. This time, however, the involvement of Ryan Murphy, cocreator Ian Brennan, choreographer Zach Woodlee, vocal arranger Nikki Anders, and casting agent Robert Ulrich, as well as members of the cast serving as guest mentors, lent authenticity to the new endeavor. Furthermore, the online video auditions were complemented by live casting calls in select major American cities, further underscoring the legitimacy of the venture.

[4.5] *The Glee Project*'s (2011–12) marketing campaign underlined the show's conceptualization as fan service, with the promo footage consistently emphasizing the concept of spatial convergence within *Glee*'s transmedia geography as well as fans' ability to transition from fan to professional space through sheer talent and devotion to *Glee*; the show's rules even intimated that those familiar with the show's style and music would create performances that appeal to the jury, hence underscoring the significance of *Glee* viewing knowledge and merchandise ownership.



Video 3. *The Glee Project season 2 promotional trailer.*

[4.6] The 1-minute TV spots repeatedly feature the phrases, "Do you want to be on *Glee*?" and "You can be on *Glee*!," directly targeting hard-core Gleeks as well as a mainstream audience of *American Idol*-weaned teenagers. (All of the spots also fetishize the *Glee* set through long shots of and slow track-ins to the McKinley High School stage and auditorium, creating an aura of performance that unites Gleeks.) In this regard, *The Glee Project* marketing directly tied in with Fox's strategy of

promoting performance space. For season 1 of *The Glee Project*, 12 contenders were chosen, all supposedly amateurs. During the course of the show, they received professional singing, dancing, and performance lessons from *Glee* producers. These manufactured moments of contact constituted the main appeal for Gleeks watching the show, catering to its communal and intimate sense of fandom. Overall, season 1 of *The Glee Project* functioned as a nine-episode-long advertisement for *Glee*'s upcoming season, averaging 800,000 viewers and a high share in the show's key demographic as well as a breeding ground for new talent. (The second season of *The Glee Project* consisted of 12 episodes and marketed *Glee*'s upcoming fourth season.) The show chose a talented Gleek to be part of *Glee*; it simultaneously created a new star type, the former fan turned *Glee* professional. Elizabeth Ellcessor (2012, 48) provides a functional framework to analyze the overarching marketing strategy of *The Glee Project* as making a star through the lens of the "discursive construction of the star." She argues that in the digital era, the creation of a star persona requires a set of interconnected sites of expression and that the constructed "transmedia story of the star is formed through repeated *connections* between these discursive sites." *The Glee Project* and *Glee* itself aim to create these subcultural forms of stardom through their convergence of performative marketing spaces.

[4.7] The fan-turned-professional-Gleek concept was rigorously marketed within *Glee*'s transmedia geography. *The Glee Project* had its own Web site, Facebook group (over 1 million fans), Twitter account (420,000 followers), and YouTube channel (55,000 subscribers, 14 million views), and all of them were connected with Fox's official marketing spaces. *The Glee Project*'s focus rested on the fan community, further cultivating an already strong sense of solidarity among Gleeks, with the contenders now actually working/laboring for the fans (in achieving their commonly held dream) rather than for the corporation that owns, commodifies, and profits from *Glee*—at least in idealistic terms. The transmedia spaces enabled Gleeks to follow their favorite Gleek on *The Glee Project*. The Gleeks on the show, in return, regularly posted personal messages to their fans (who could join teams on the Web site), fostering the sense of communal interaction that has come to define *Glee*'s (fan and marketing) culture. The winners of the respective two seasons of *The Glee Project* who went on to appear in several *Glee* episodes (and indeed received extended contracts) subsequently shared their now-professional insights with the Gleeks on how to succeed on the show and make it to *Glee*. These videos, clearly corporate driven, consciously evoked the style of a self-made home video (released in YouTube's commons, and not an official channel), underlining that those who made the video just want to give back, thus continuing Fox's gift economy marketing, which posits freely circulating transmedia materials as gifts for fans' devotion to the show. It also referenced the new reward system by emphasizing the competitiveness of *The Glee Project*.

The Glee Project Casting: Message from Damian McGinty and Sa...



Video 4. *"The Glee Project Casting."*

Cameron & Damian Tips



Video 5. *"Cameron and Damian Tips."*

[4.8] Video 4 presents the actors in a studio setting (code: official and real), while video 5 shows them in a private space (code: intimate and real). Although the two videos are stylistically different, they carry the same connotation. The Glee producers want others to succeed in the competition. This manufactured intimacy is a key component of the show's marketing.

[4.9] Although the show mirrored *Glee*'s rhetoric in ostensibly celebrating the underdog—the raw musical jewel with a heart of gold and a dream—the main contenders had at least some professional experience in the entertainment industry. In fact, the finalists of both seasons did not even go through the initial application stages

of the public casting call but were discovered through industry channels. Moreover, the show's proclamation that contenders should display their own personality in order to win was undermined by an obvious typecasting process; the contenders all exhibited characteristics known from characters on *Glee*. Hence, *The Glee Project* can be accused of negating its call for diversity through the fabrication of *Glee* clones as well as undercutting the notion of nouveau professionalism because the winners were in fact (quasi-)professionals—or at least more professional than the average Gleek. However, this information never entered the official Gleekian discursivity, as Gleeks continued to embrace and celebrate the show, leaving little room for critical reflection (or deliberately choosing not to engage in critical reflection) (note 7). Uncertainty and suspicion must have surely existed within the fan community, but the strong emotional investment of the Gleeks (a natural fan reaction) still dominated the discourse.

[4.10] *The Glee Project* continued *Glee*'s notion of the empowered fan, the Gleek, being given the opportunity to move from fan to professional through performative labor and spatial convergence within an industrial transmedia geography. At the same time, it commodified the Gleek as a commercial entity to generate ratings and revenue while it acted as a promotional engine for the show. On the one hand, it extends the promise that fans have a shot at fame, an opportunity to realize the common teenage dream that *Glee* narrativizes in its stories about social outcasts, thereby deepening fans' emotional investment. On the other hand, it subverts this promise, exploiting fans' emotionalism and creative activity as corporate promotion.

5. Gleek-x-ploitation—Confronting the dichotomy of fan agency and corporate labor

[5.1] With the marketing for *Glee* and *The Glee Project*, Fox and Oxygen aimed to position themselves as benevolent networks that enable fans to interact with the people they admire in a communal and equal space while facilitating and legitimizing creative fan practice in form of media performance as a way to break in and get on *Glee*. The overarching effect of this network strategy, however, was the integration—indeed exploitation—of fans' cultural activity as promotional labor. Although this approach seemingly fosters fan-producer collaboration with mutual benefits for both groups (and these benefits indubitably exist, particularly in terms of emotional economics), its implications for fans as consumers and new media producers ought not be misinterpreted. *Glee*'s increasing interest in human capital and the modern consumer (Hartley 2009)—a widespread phenomenon in the digital economy of culture—manifests itself most explicitly in its conceptualization of fans as media outlets (note 8), mere data channels that produce objects measured exclusively in economic value.

[5.2] *Glee*'s transmedia geography of marketing effectively illustrates Mark Andrejevic's (2004, 197) critical observation that "the contemporary deployment of interactivity exploits participation as a form of labor." This does not only apply to fans. Before the 2007–8 Writers Guild of America strike, producers of mainstream network and cable television shows did not receive compensation for their work on a second screen, so they were not ensured a constant revenue stream (Mann 2009). Although these above-the-line workers are now compensated for their efforts and have a platform to promote themselves, fans' reward for contributing to a marketing campaign is dispensed in emotional economics only. They are rewarded in the paratextual realm, with the ability to be close to and interact with professionals and stars, and they are provided with opportunities for cultural reputé within the Internet sphere. However, the emotional value may be based on false promises. The strategic exploitation of fan activities as labor—their emotional investment in a pop culture product and the creative expression of said investment—portends a marketing strategy that promotes "the colonization of consumer/producer agency by markets" (Deuze 2009, 148).

[5.3] Viewed through the lens of the Frankfurt School, this dialectic of fan agency and fan labor assumes an even more pessimistic dimension. The notion of a community between producers and fans that empowers fans to actually become a professional constitutes an elaborate system of emotional direction. The emphasis on space within *Glee*'s transmedia geography further strengthens this system in that it facilitates a control over access to specific areas and the forms of capital attached to them. Fans are in fact not part of a corporate-directed community. The Gleeks may rather be regarded as a hive within Fox's media industry, a post-Fordist construction that externalizes risk and generates promotional material without costly employment contracts. Their performances within *Glee*'s transmedia spaces have cultural significance, especially for like-minded peers, but overall, they are predominantly solicited, viewed, and promoted as corporate marketing boosts. Ultimately, *Glee*'s performance registers as an explicit form of cultural labor.

6. Conclusion—Following the Gleeks ... further

[6.1] John Caldwell (2009, 161) notes that we need to understand "media industries not just as corporate institutions, but as collective cultural activities and embodied social communities as well." *Glee*'s transmedia geography encapsulates Caldwell's argument through its ties to Fox and News Corporation, its focus on performance as cultural expression and economic value, and its construction of a conformist fan base. *Glee*'s marketing has created elaborate techniques to solicit, control, and exploit fan contributions that serve as additional promotional material for the show. The show promises fan-producer engagement and exchange within an intimate community of

Gleeks and extends the possibility of joining the Gleek elite by transitioning from fan into nouveau professional space. *Glee* thereby enlists fans through an exploitative play with their emotions. Although it is certainly true that the network of interrelated spaces generates emotional reciprocity—fans' input is rewarded with responses from producers and abundant media materials they love—the overarching practice of positing a benevolent veneer of magnanimity for the sheer purpose of economic revenue, while ultimately capitalizing on false illusions, is dubious and needs to be examined critically, especially in the interest of fans whose emotional investment outweighs their critical perception—a state that could potentially result in psychological damage.

[6.2] My analysis has only explored the surface of *Glee*'s transmedia geography of marketing; a more in-depth study is necessary for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Interviews with Gleeks who underwent the casting calls for MySpace or *The Glee Project* constitute the main desideratum of such a project. Furthermore, it is crucial to add a more personal dimension that investigates *Glee*'s transmedia spaces from within, adopting a detached yet informed fan perspective in an effort to learn how Gleeks perceive the dichotomy of fan practice and labor. The affirmational, corporate-centric dimension that the Gleek community exhibits needs to be rendered more lucidly as well, especially because it directly correlates with the input of the corporate institutions that oversee the marketing practices of the show. The model must also be systematically examined across the contemporary TV landscape.

[6.3] Overall, the intricacies of *Glee*'s marketing approach, notably its conceptual use of performance and space, offers a framework through which to analyze fan cultures and their ever-growing ties to the media industries' production of culture. The Gleeks create, traverse, and operate within today's space of cultural economics—and many do so willingly and quite astutely, building their own fan profile, absorbing extra content, and communicating with their idols. They essentially get what they want in exchange for emotional and practical forms of labor. In following their footprints from the inside, we might be able to learn more about the dynamics that inform this space of cultural economics and how they shape fan practice and labor.

7. Acknowledgments

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8. Notes

1. According to Jonathan Gray (2010, 4), "Paratexts can amplify and/or clarify many of a text's meanings and uses, establishing the role that a text and its characters play outside the boundaries of the show, in the everyday realities of viewers' and non-viewers' lives." Gray's predominantly textual analysis of paratexts effectively establishes the relation between the extra text source and the audience. I focus on how the economic dimension of paratexts factors into this equation.
2. Although the term *producer* refers to a specific job description, I am using a broader, cultural studies-oriented understanding of the term as someone involved in creating creative (media) content. This thus involves people involved in creating *Glee* as entertainment spectacle, including below-the-line workers and fans.
3. The tweet-peat was largely targeted at Gleeks, reminding them that the show valued their tweets (questions, comments). As a result, *Glee* became the most tweeted-about show of 2009.
4. Over the course of its four-season arc, *Glee*'s ratings have steadily decreased, with the fourth season averaging 5 to 6 million viewers per week. Nevertheless, iTunes and CD sales remain high, regularly topping the download and sales charts.
5. This large-scale implementation of popular social networking sites supports Fox's strategy to shape fan reception and production. Hartley's (2009) concept of the economics of attention captures the minutely orchestrated, systematic approach to fan activity very well.
6. In the press release for the initial four-city live tour, cocreator and show runner Ryan Murphy emphasized the concert as the show's thank-you to Gleeks: "The response of the fans to our little show has been so immediate and so gratifying, we wanted to get out and *thank* them live and in person. And what show lends itself more to a concert than *Glee*? We can't wait to take this show on the road and the actors couldn't be more excited to perform live for audiences in these four cities" (Weintraub 2010).
7. In fact, the Gleek community is strictly policed, with fans generally ignoring, marginalizing, or openly attacking any critical viewpoints on the show. Ironically, the show itself celebrates diversity and tolerance—qualities that are not commonly displayed in critical discourses revolving around the show.
8. Clay Shirky (1999) argues that the digital age has rendered consumers more powerful in that they now represent media outlets that can either embrace and advertise or reject and undermine the marketing of a media product. Shirky does not mention, however, the dimensions to which this paradigm shift enables media industries to exploit the consumer anew through the controlled illusion of

empowerment. *Glee's* transmedia geography effectively practices this exploitative new labor economy.

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Symposium

Fan work: Labor, worth, and participation in fandom's gift economy

Tisha Turk

University of Minnesota, Morris, Minnesota, United States

[0.1] *Keywords*—Community; Gift culture; Participatory culture; Work

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Fandom has often been discussed, by both scholars and fans themselves, as a sharing economy, and specifically as a gift economy based on giving, receiving, and reciprocating (note 1). Within this economy, art objects—fan fiction, fan vids, fan art—have typically been the most obvious and appreciated gifts; Rachael Sabotini (1999) calls these art objects "the traditional gifts" of fandom. Reciprocation of these gifts may take a number of forms, both tangible (other art objects, feedback for the creator) and intangible (attention, recognition, status). This ongoing, reiterative process of gift exchange is part of what makes it possible to experience and analyze fandom as a community, or rather an overlapping series of communities, rather than simply a large and shifting number of people occupying the same affinity space.

[1.2] While art objects may be the gifts most publicly recognized or validated by fellow fans, and while these gifts are indeed a crucial part of fandom's gift economy, 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. We can better understand the relationship between gift exchange and community formation if we see fandom as a system not just of reciprocal giving but of circular giving. And we can better evaluate the relationship between fandom and production if we attend to not just the giving but the receiving of gifts.

2. Production: Acts of labor

[2.1] Generally speaking, media fandom operates on a labor theory of value—not necessarily in the Marxist sense of the phrase, but in the sense that value derives from work. Fandom's gift economy assigns special worth to "gifts of time and skill" (Hellekson 2009, 115), gifts made by fans for fans. The worth of these gifts lies not simply in the content of the gift, nor in the social gesture of giving, but in the labor that went into their creation. Commercially purchased gifts, such as the virtual cupcakes and balloons that can be purchased in the LiveJournal shop, may be given and appreciated, but will generally be worth less, in the context of fandom, than gifts made by the giver (note 2). This labor theory of value is often invisible or unarticulated until something goes wrong: a site skin doesn't work as anticipated, a vid is plagiarized, a story in progress—or an entire archive—is abandoned. These events remind us that our experience of fandom depends on the labor of others: "A gift is a thing we do not get by our own efforts. We cannot buy it; we cannot acquire it through an act of will. It is bestowed upon us" (Hyde 1979, xi).

[2.2] In practice, of course, not all labors are equally appreciated or even acknowledged. The phrase *fan work* is typically used, by both fans and academics, in the sense of *work of art*; it refers to fan fiction, fan vids, fan art. Within fandom, these objects are "the main focus of most discussion outside of the show itself" and are "highly prized" because they "require some level of artistry to master" (Sabotini 1999). They are the objects, and thus the labors, most likely to be publicly assigned value (in the form of comments, kudos, likes, reblogs, recommendations, etc.) by other fans and to be studied by academics.

[2.3] But there are many other forms of fan work, including work that does not necessarily result in objects for recirculation. Media fandom runs on the engine of production, but much of what we produce is not art but information, discussion, architecture, access, resources, metadata. Think about all the behind-the-scenes labor, for example, that goes into commenting on stories, beta-ing vids, writing essays and recommendations, reviewing and screen-capping episodes, collecting links, tagging bookmarks, maintaining Dreamwidth and LiveJournal communities, organizing fests/challenges/exchanges, compiling newsletters, making costumes, animating .gif sets, creating user icons, recording podfic, editing zines, assembling fan mixes, administering kink memes, running awards sites, converting popular stories to e-book formats, coding archives, updating wikis, populating databases, building vid conversion software, planning conventions, volunteering at conventions, moderating convention panels—and the list could go on.

[2.4] Such activities and their outcomes tend to be less discussed and commended, in both fannish and academic circles, than fandom's "traditional gifts," even though in many cases these activities facilitate the creation of art objects or provide the

infrastructure that enables the dissemination and discussion of those objects. The sheer volume of fan work, in the inclusive sense of the phrase, necessitates further fannish labor; the navigation of online fandom is made possible by the creation of metadata, access points, links, and so on: important though sometimes underacknowledged work. These labors, too, are gifts.

3. Community: Gifts of labor

[3.1] Most discussions of fandom's gift economy have conceptualized gift exchanges as one-to-one transactions, what Lewis Hyde calls "reciprocal giving" (1979, 16): an author's gift of a story is reciprocated with a reader's gift of a comment (or, in a smaller number of cases, with the gift of fan art or another story). In fact, most fannish transactions, and fandom's gift economy as a whole, are considerably more complicated than that. While some gifts are made for and presented to specific fans, whether in the context of a preexisting friendship, a prompt or request, or a fest or challenge, they are typically made available not only to that individual but to the community as a whole, to be taken up by whatever subsets of the community are interested. (There are exceptions; some user icons, for example, are made for one person only and are therefore marked as "not shareable." However, the very fact of this designation demonstrates the extent to which, within fandom, "shareable" is the default—and commercial gifts, unlike fannish gifts, are generally not shareable in a fannish context.) Put another way, gifts within fandom are not simply given but distributed—and potentially, via links and reblogs, redistributed, sometimes well beyond the corner of fandom in which they first appeared. Fandom gifting is not just one-to-one but one-to-many.

[3.2] Community, therefore, is not just an abstract byproduct of the fannish gift economy but a recipient within that economy; Sabotini's metaphor of the potlatch, the community feast, as discussed by Marcel Mauss (1967) and Hyde (1979), is thus especially apt. Many or even most of the art objects distributed within fandom are not gifts meant for specific individuals; they are meant for everyone who wants them, and once presented, all in attendance are welcome to help themselves. This open-ended gifting is even more true of non-object gifts: it would be highly unlikely, to say the least, for someone to create an archive or organize a convention or maintain a newsletter for just one fellow fan. And in those cases, gifting may well be not one-to-many but many-to-many, either because the work is done by a team or because the full effect of the gift depends on the aggregated labor of many individuals (note 3).

[3.3] Many large-scale fandom endeavors involve multiple types of gift. To take just one example: the organizers of Festivids (<http://fanlore.org/wiki/Festivids>), the annual rare-fandom vid exchange founded in 2009, match participants offering vids to

participants requesting vids for the same shows or movies. Each participating individual both gives and receives at least one vid (one-to-one). Each vid is also publicly posted and therefore available not just to the intended recipient but to any interested fans, including fans not participating in the exchange (one-to-many). And the cumulative effect of Festivids—the festival effect—relies on the participation of many givers doing parallel work (many-to-many).

[3.4] Fandom's gift economy is therefore fundamentally asymmetrical: because a single gift can reach so many people, and especially because it can go on reaching people well after the initial moment of distribution, most fans receive far more gifts than we give. Even the most productive fans generally don't make as many vids as we watch, code as many sites as we use, moderate as many convention panels as we attend, or create as many links as we follow. This asymmetry is critical to fandom's functioning because it balances out the asymmetry in the other direction: not every gift recipient will reciprocate with "the gift of reaction" (Hellekson 2009, 116), and even when recipients do respond, few fans would argue that a single reblog or comment, however detailed, constitutes full reciprocation for the gift of a carefully crafted vid or an expertly recorded podfic or a painstakingly compiled rec list.

[3.5] From a systemic point of view, the inconsistency and unreliability of full reciprocation is not a failure of the gift economy but an integral part of it. Hyde points out that "if a man gives a second-rate necklace in return for a fine set of armshells, people may talk, but there is nothing anyone can do about it. When we barter we make deals, and if someone defaults we go after him, but the gift must be a gift" (1979, 15). While fully reciprocal giving does occasionally take place within fandom, the fannish gift economy as a whole more closely resembles what Hyde calls "circular giving": "when the gift moves in a circle no one ever receives it from the same person he gives it to...When I give to someone from whom I do not receive (and yet I do receive elsewhere), it is as if the gift goes around a corner before it comes back. I have to give blindly...When the gift moves in a circle its motion is beyond the control of the personal ego, and so each bearer must be a part of the group and each donation is an act of social faith" (1979, 16). Fandom's gift economy is not just an accumulation of contiguous reciprocal relationships between individuals but a complex system in which the reciprocation of gifts, and by extension the reward for labor, is distributed across the community rather than concentrated in a single transaction ([note 4](#)).

4. Reception: Uses of labor

[4.1] Although not all fan gifts, and therefore fan labors, are equally likely to be publicly acknowledged or specifically reciprocated, that doesn't necessarily mean that those gifts and labors are not valued. Gift economy exchanges are made up not only of

giving and reciprocating but, importantly, receiving gifts. As Hellekson demonstrates, "gifts have value within the fannish economy in that they are designed to create and cement a social structure" (2009, 115), but the way in which they create and cement that social structure is not just by being given but by being accepted—which is to say, consumed or used. We see the value of fan labor, then, in fans' consumption of the gifts produced and distributed by fellow fans. Fans may write stories or essays or make vids or art because we feel an internal compulsion to do so, but we distribute them for other fans to read and watch. It's hard to imagine fans maintaining an archive or designing new vid-encoding software purely for the sake of doing so or even for exclusively personal use; fans make these things for other fans to use. Use is therefore the clearest sign of a gift accepted.

[4.2] Thinking about the gift economy as a matter of not just giving but receiving allows us to reexamine what constitutes "participation" within fandom. Fandom has famously been described and discussed by many fan studies scholars, beginning with Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers*, as a "participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts" (2013, 46). In recent years, however, some scholars have criticized the narrowness of this definition of fandom. Matt Hills argues that emphasizing production has resulted in a misguided "attempt to extend 'production' to all fans" when in fact, as he notes, some fans "may not be producers" in the sense that they "may not be interested in writing their own fan fiction or filk songs" (2002, 30). Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington concur when they argue that "petty producers" are "only one, and possibly the smallest subset of fan groups on a wide spectrum" (2007, 8).

[4.3] It is certainly true that not all fans produce art objects or, for that matter, any of the other forms of fan work. Fandom has a long tradition of lurkers. But Hills's dismissive reference to fan fiction and filk obscures not only the fact that fans, collectively speaking, produce far more than fic and filk but also the fact that many fans who are not producers participate in fandom's networked gift economy by consuming the gifts of fan works—and perhaps even reciprocating occasionally in the form of kudos on the Archive of Our Own, reblogs on Tumblr, or other low-threshold forms of feedback and redistribution. What, after all, are the lurkers doing if not reading episode commentaries, searching archives and rec lists, downloading podcasts, streaming vids, admiring cosplay, enjoying fan art, and so on? This concept of participation may still exclude "fans who merely love a show, watch it religiously, talk about it, and yet engage in no other fan practices or activities" (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007, 3–4), but it does allow us to recognize the ways in which even nonproductive fans can participate in fandom's gift economy through their engagement with the fruits of fannish labor.

5. Notes

1. For a brief overview of this concept (including its roots in the work of Marcel Mauss, Lewis Hyde, David Cheal, and others) and its application to fandom from a scholarly perspective, see Hellekson 2009. For recent academic discussions of the future of fandom's gift economy and its intersections with commercial economies and commodity culture, see Scott 2009, Booth 2010, 130–38, and Noppe 2011. For a few examples of fannish accounts of the gift economy, see Sabotini 1999, Purpleyin 2006, Mazar 2007, Doctor Science 2012, and lady_songsmyth 2012.
2. There are exceptions; some gifts, such as donations of money or objects, may be highly valuable in both commercial and fannish economies: a check to offset web hosting costs, a new computer to replace a vidder's damaged one, an e-reader for reading fic during hospital stays. Such gifts are not necessarily fandom-specific, though they may be organized and funded through fannish networks or used by the recipient for fannish purposes.
3. Many-to-one gifts are possible but tend, like one-to-one gifts, to be distributed publicly, thus becoming many-to-many in practice while still retaining a special connection to the original, singular recipient. For example, if a group of friends creates a private community for collecting or recommending fan works created or curated with the recipient's tastes in mind, that gift might remain private but is more likely to become public and shareable at the time of gifting.
4. This may or may not be a consolation when, say, the vid into which you put so much effort gets fewer than ten responses.

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Symposium

Better Badges: Image as virus

Joly MacFie

New York, New York, USA

[0.1] *Keywords*—Fan community

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[1] In 1976 I founded Better Badges, a publisher/marketer of promotional button badges based in London, UK. I had a background in the British underground, and I was very much inspired by "people power" campaigns—the principle, embodied in the protest movement, of bottom-up change—which I wanted to apply to music. It happened to coincide with the first stirrings of punk rock, and badges became a mainstay of that movement, especially in the early days when little else in the way of product was available.

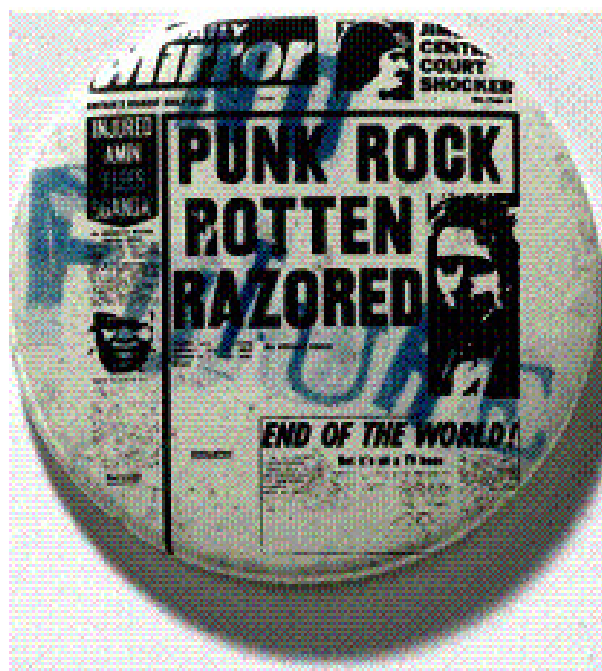


Figure 1. A rare Better Badge, part of a batch that sold for \$500 at Christie's in 2008.
[[View larger image.](#)]

[2] My founding principle was "Image as Virus, Elitism for All," suggesting that fans could wear and support whatever they liked, without either (a) being at the mercy of promotional largesse, or (b) being gouged by merchandisers. The idea was that fans, rather than industry gatekeepers, could dictate trends.

[3] Some designs I created; some were supplied by bands; some by fans. I had a stall at the London Roundhouse concert venue, and mail order took off. I ran a Top Ten of the most popular badges in the weekly music newspaper, *NME*.

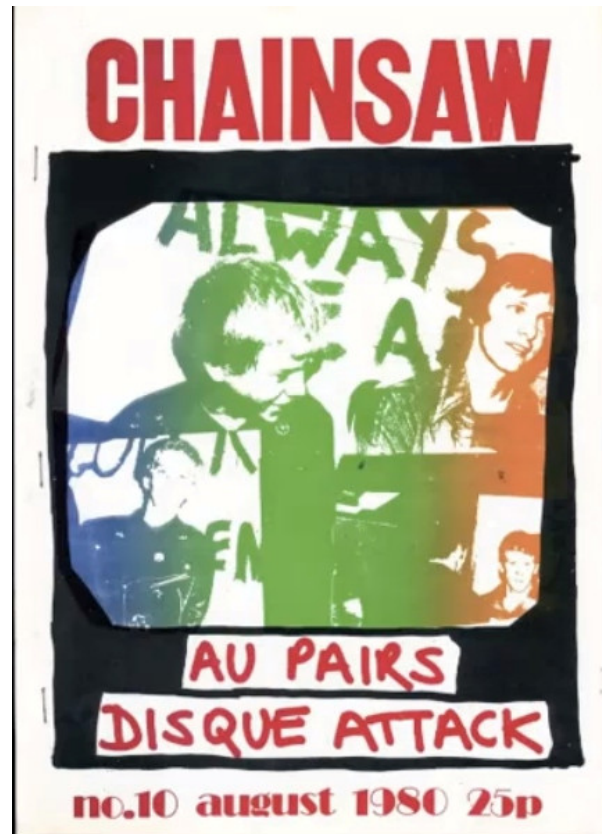
[4] I attempted, after a fashion, to pay royalties, to designers, bands, or both, but it was patchy and impossible to administer. The reality was that if, say, Patti Smith needed help with her hotel bill, or The Clash needed to get their van to Europe, I coughed up. Others, like the Sex Pistols, took payment in kind. The acts that did demand accounting were somehow never those that had wide support, so it was never an issue.

[5] However, things came to a head with Joy Division—not over money, but over the Factory Records policy of treating all output as fine art. In the early days, they had supplied designs; later I did them. They were in a dilemma whether to give the badges FAC numbers like the rest of their catalog. Eventually, after a sit-down, it was concluded that the badges were, like fanzines, outside activity. It was not, as Stiff Records, another close associate, termed it "dumping on the people" but a form of feedback and back-channel promotion. So I threw out royalties and established a fresh system. Any new design accepted would get awarded 200 free badges to the band and samples provided to the designer. This worked very well.



Figure 2. The original Joy Division set. [[View larger image.](#)]

[6] I was successful enough to purchase a printing plant. As badges became more common and commoditized, I turned to printing fanzines as a way to maintain street cred as an underground medium. I settled on a similar deal for fanzines. I would cover setup, plates, and camera work, and finance the print run. There were flat rates for publisher, wholesale, retail. Rapidly, we were producing a steady stream, three or four titles and 10,000 copies per week.





Figures 3–5. Fanzines produced at Better Badges. [[View larger image \(3\)](#). [View larger image \(4\)](#). [View larger image \(5\)](#).]

[7] The economics were always peculiar, in that one could print 24 badges on one sheet and sell them at 20p each, or print one fanzine on 12 sheets double-sided, which still sold for the same 20p. The badges subsidized the zines with ads and a distribution avenue, and the zines did practically break even.

[8] Of course, and this addresses the fandom as labor theme, the fanzine publishers were never paid beyond what they made from hawking a few copies. I used to good-humoredly mock them when they would arrive breathless from Rough Trade (the music store a block away) clutching a couple of promo 45s. "Oh look, they gave me review copies!" The fact was the rapidly growing UK independent record business had established itself almost entirely via peer promotion, seeded by cassette swapping, fanzines, and badges.

[9] There is a wider truth that it was new technologies, widely available dual-cassette decks, cheap "instant" printing, and Xerox (especially for resizing graphics) that enabled all that pioneering p2p, the sum of which led to a hijacking of the cultural agenda beyond my wildest dreams.

[10] At the end of the decade, just like notes being passed round at the back of class eventually becoming adopted as curricula, the underground became overground, and thus beyond such activity. The most egregious example of this was Adam and The Ants, in 1980 the top-selling badge act and fanzine subject. Overnight, they suddenly went from cult heroes to genuine chart toppers. The result was that the punks dropped them like a stone. Badge sales stopped dead. Kids everywhere were painting out the Antz logos on their jackets and replacing them with Theater of Hate or Killing Joke.



Figure 6. Ants badges. [View larger image.](#)

[11] So the other truth, which I learnt early, was that it is not fame that drives fan support but leverage—coolness over hotness.

[12] I gave it up in 1982, having made around 40 million badges, maybe 100,000 zines. I could see the future was online, but that took another 12 years to arrive ...

Dialogue

Veronica Mars Kickstarter and crowd funding

Bertha Chin

United Kingdom

Bethan Jones

Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, Wales, United Kingdom

Myles McNutt

University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, United States

Luke Pebler

California, United States

[0.1] *Keywords*—Crowd sourcing; Ethics; Fan agency; Fan exploitation; Fan labor

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1. Introduction

[1.1] In March 2013, social media was abuzz with news of the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter, and each of our Twitter and Facebook feeds were filled with speculation from fans about what the movie would be about, questions from media scholars about how the Kickstarter might affect the relationship between fans and producers, and cynicism from others about what Warner Bros. might get from the film. Within just a few hours of the Kickstarter campaign being announced, blogs had been published by academics, including Jason Mittell and Mel Stanfill; industry professionals, including Richard Lawson and Joss Whedon; fans, including James Poniewozik and Willa Paskin; and of course the four of us (note 1). But what exactly did the Kickstarter entail, and why were we so interested in it?

[1.2] Launched by Rob Thomas and Kristen Bell on March 13, the project was an attempt to fund a *Veronica Mars* feature-length film entirely through a crowd-funding platform. Thomas (2013b), in his "Day One" message, discussed the reasons behind the project, noting, "Kristen and I met with the Warner Bros. brass, and they agreed to allow us to take this shot. They were extremely cool about it, as a matter of fact. Their reaction was, if you can show there's enough fan interest to warrant a movie, we're on board. So this is it. This is our shot." The fact that Warner Bros. had given their permission for the Kickstarter to take place added an interesting facet to the debates around crowd funding and fandom, but within 11 hours, the campaign had reached its initial \$2 million goal and eventually went on to raise \$5,702,153, making it, as Kickstarter noted, "an all-time highest funded Kickstarter film project." The campaign also boasts the most backers at 91,585, among other Kickstarter records that were broken.

[1.3] Smashing Kickstarter records aside, Thomas and Bell's success also brought into question for each of us the issue of fan labor. Bertha raised this question in her blog, noting that "fan agency always gets left out in arguments which purports concern that fans are being duped by studios and networks," a point Bethan took up in a post, writing, "In this case I would agree that fans are well aware that they are donating to a large studio—the difference is that *it doesn't matter*." Both Myles and Luke also addressed this issue of the importance of the Kickstarter, with Myles writing, "I could hear dozens of media studies professors mentally adding to their lesson plans on fan cultures," and Luke arguing that "the creation and subsequent success of the *Veronica Mars* Movie Kickstarter represents a troubling landmark in the emergent history of crowdfunding." The importance of the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter to issues around fan labor and exploitation is thus one that stood out to each of us immediately; this thread continues to run through this piece. No longer merely acting as grassroots promoters, celebrity gatekeepers, subtitlers, and such, fans are now financing feature-length film projects on crowd-funding platforms. What are the implications of this, not just to fandom, but also to the industry? Each of us understands the issue of fan labor and exploitation in different ways, and this conversation entails both trying to understand what we mean by each of those terms and how they can be related to the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter specifically and crowd funding more generally.

[1.4] In this dialogue, we gather academics and industry professionals to reflect on four issues that underpin the debates on crowd funding: fan agency, the Kickstarter platform, crowd funding itself, and finally the media entertainment industry. The dialogue took place primarily through a master document stored on Google Drive, although Twitter and e-mail were also used to

share ideas and links, as press coverage, particularly on the ethics of Zach Braff's Kickstarter campaign and crowd funding, continues. Braff launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund his film *Wish I Was Here* in April 2013. In the introduction to the Kickstarter, Braff (2013) wrote,

[1.5] I was about to sign a typical financing deal in order to get the money to make "Wish I Was Here," my follow up to "Garden State." It would have involved making a lot of sacrifices I think would have ultimately hurt the film. I've been a backer for several projects on Kickstarter and thought the concept was fascinating and revolutionary for artists and innovators of all kinds. But I didn't imagine it could work on larger-scale projects. I was wrong.

[1.6] After I saw the incredible way "Veronica Mars" fans rallied around Kristen Bell and her show's creator Rob Thomas, I couldn't help but think (like I'm sure so many other independent filmmakers did) maybe there is a new way to finance smaller, personal films that didn't involve signing away all your artistic control.

[1.7] Much more controversy circulated around Braff's Kickstarter than the one for *Veronica Mars*, however, with many commentators asking whether it was ethical for Braff to use Kickstarter to fund the campaign given that he had been about to sign a deal and could afford to fund the film himself if he wanted to retain creative control. We return to Braff and the differences between his Kickstarter and that for *Veronica Mars* later in this conversation, and raise the issues of both antifandom of a producer/writer and the ethics of each campaign.

[1.8] The participants in this conversation are Bertha Chin, Bethan Jones, Myles McNutt, and Luke Pebler. Bertha Chin graduated with a PhD from Cardiff University; her thesis explored the notion of community boundaries and construction of the fan celebrity in cult and sci-fi television fandom. Her published work has appeared in the *Journal of Science Fiction Film and Television*, *Social Semiotics*, and *Intensities* as well as the edited collection *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. Bethan Jones is a PhD candidate at Aberystwyth University, researching fan fiction and gender. Her work has been published in the journals *Participations*, *Sexualities*, and *Transformative Works and Cultures* as well as the edited collection *The Modern Vampire and Human Identity*. She has recently coedited a journal special issue on the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series. She blogs at <http://bethanvjones.wordpress.com>. Myles McNutt is a PhD candidate in media and cultural studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where he serves as a contributing editor and administrator for Antenna: Responses for Media and Culture (<http://blog.commarks.wisc.edu/>). He can be reached via his personal blog, Cultural Learnings (<http://cultural-learnings.com/>), and on Twitter @Memles (<http://twitter.com/memles>). Luke Pebler is a television editor working in Hollywood, currently on the CW drama *Hart of Dixie*. He holds an MFA in film production from the University of Southern California and a BA in communication arts from the University of Wisconsin.

[1.9] The discussion was moderated by Bertha Chin, who blogs for On/Off Screen (<http://onoffscreen.wordpress.com/>) and is on Twitter as @bertha_c (https://twitter.com/bertha_c), and Bethan Jones, who can be reached on Twitter at @memories_child (http://twitter.com/memories_child).

2. Fan agency

[2.1] **Q:** A lot of debate has taken place around crowd funding being a form of fan exploitation. What are your thoughts on this?

[2.2] **Jones:** I've been thinking about this a lot lately, in part because of what something a friend of mine said on Facebook, in response to Stacey Abbott's blog post on the Kickstarter. Abbott (2013) argues that the darker side to the debate is "the potential that this is a case of the fans being financially exploited, by getting them to fund a Hollywood movie from which they will not earn any profits or even recoup their money." My friend, however, said that since the film isn't likely to come out where she lives, she's more than happy to pay the \$35 to get a digital copy, plus another \$15 for the DVD which she'd buy anyway. And that's something that I hadn't considered when thinking about the VM Kickstarter. I had assumed (always a dangerous thing to do) that fans would be paying to see the film in the cinema, and some of them will. But others won't, and so this gives them another way of getting to see it, as well as the DVD which they'd buy anyway. I think that a lot of the time, academics (me included), the media, and the industry forget that fans actually do have agency, and a lot of the fans being exploited rhetoric seems to come from a similar place to the fans as cultural dopes discourse. Fans can be pretty savvy—we're not all the screaming fangirls the media likes to make us out to be—and I think something like the VM Kickstarter shows that. Yes, there's a lot of emotion or feeling there, as far as the object of fandom is concerned (and here I'll admit to seeing the second *X-Files* film in the cinema nine times because I wanted to put as much money into the box office as I could), but there is also a line that fans won't cross. For me it was buying multiple copies of the DVD as part of the XFN campaign.

[2.3] **Chin:** I always cringe when the term *fan exploitation* is thrown around—not that I don't think it happens (Tanya Cochran's 2008 piece on *Firefly* fans is a good example that comes to mind), but I think Bethan made a great point there about it coming from a similar place as the fans as cultural dopes discourse. I think it's important that we don't assume fans' complete ignorance about what they're doing when they reach into their wallets and donate to the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter campaign. And I'd go back to Jason Mittell's argument of this being an extension of preordering DVDs, merchandise, and/or (fan) experiences.

Figure 1. Jason Mittell's *Veronica Mars* tweet, March 13, 2013. [View larger image.]

[2.4] In this case, for the fans, it may not necessarily be about funding a studio film (which seems to be attracting some of the criticisms) but more about funding the creative vision of the man who brought them the beloved universe and characters of *Veronica Mars* (which, admittedly, was my gut reaction when I donated to the campaign). I think a more interesting question might perhaps be on fan expectations, now that fans are backers. Would fans now feel entitled to the project now that they've invested money in it? Would Rob Thomas—or any other filmmaker who received his funding via Kickstarter for that matter—now be obligated to create a piece of work that they think fans want, and would that affect forms of artistic integrity?

[2.5] **McNutt:** Fans are exploited every day. When they tweet about a show using a hash tag, or when they tell a friend about that show, they're completing free labor for the television network whose show they're watching. Of course, we subject ourselves to this exploitation because we've accepted that the value we get from participation—the enjoyment of social media, the satisfaction of sharing things we love with other people—is worth giving part of ourselves over to the industry. "Save our show" campaigns are an extension of this: when *Chuck* fans bought Subway sandwiches, or when *Jericho* fans purchased peanuts to send to CBS, they were protesting an industry decision by using money—and time, and energy—to reassert the series' value to their respective networks (and hopefully get more of what they love).



Figure 2. Bring Jericho Back campaign poster. [View larger image.]

[2.6] The *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter is certainly an evolution of this principle, asking fans to do more than send Mars bars—which, to their credit, they had to import from other countries—to the CW and instead "funding" production, but the way the Kickstarter was framed very much placed this into the context of fan activism: the logic was not that Rob Thomas and Kristen Bell needed fans' money to make this movie, it was that they needed their money as a symbol of their fandom which would convince Warner Bros. the movie was viable. And so while the end result of the campaign was fans funding the production of the *Veronica Mars* movie, Thomas and Bell's rhetorical pitch to fans was comfortably within the logics under which they had previously engaged—and on some level continued to engage, after cancellation—with the show; combined with the existence of tangible goods being exchanged for their pledges, I find it hard to consider this exploitative of fans (or, rather, I find it hard to differentiate this form of exploitation from the daily exploitation that we've commonly understood as part of television culture).

[2.7] **Pebler:** Of the four of us, I have probably been the most critical of the VM Kickstarter up to this point. All your points are well taken: fans are, by and large, a smart and actualized group. They wield real power, they've got good bullshit detectors, and they're not generally in need of protection from the evil content producers. And, yes, you can broadly view almost all fan activity (online evangelism, auxiliary product consumption, etc.) as exploitation that is weighed against the enjoyment fans derive from their participation. But this is different. Traditional preordering is one thing, but this amounts to an auction wherein Warner Bros. effectively gets to set prices based on the intensity of each individual fan's devotion. Instead of maximizing revenue by courting more customers at fixed prices, which is the way things normally work, they get to maximize on a per-fan basis. Even better, they can bid up their customers with soft talk of not only the reward premiums but the actual product. The more vague they are about the tees and posters and the very movie itself, the more people will imagine the best and be willing to pay! The fact that Kickstarter allows unlimited funding beyond the initial goal is, to me, a huge problem. It's a loophole that makes this sort of exploitation possible. Bethan, your friend may be happy to pay \$35 for a digital copy of 90 minutes of *Veronica Mars* (marginal cost to producer = \$0), but that doesn't make it right for Warner Bros. to ask her for it. I'll be getting the same movie, likely on the same release day, for no more than \$5 or \$6 at Amazon or iTunes. Fans' devotion to the series was used as leverage to get them to massively overpay for goods they won't see for a year, at least. That is absolutely exploitation, as far as I'm concerned.

[2.8] **Jones:** Does the VM Kickstarter become more about a question of ethics than exploitation, then, in that it's unethical for corporations like Warner Bros. to exploit both loopholes in the system and fannish attachment to a text in order to profit from it? If so, I think that's an interesting shift from the way that fan exploitation has typically been analyzed (fans as dupes rather than corporations as unethical). As Bertha and Myles have noted, fans aren't ignorant of what they're doing when they put money into a Kickstarter or use official hash tags, and fandom can be extremely vocal about and critical of texts. I'm sure there are VM fans who won't have contributed to this Kickstarter because of issues around how it's been framed, Warner Bros.' involvement, or a variety of other reasons. I think that, on the whole, if fans think they are being exploited, they will make their feelings known. I do think there are issues with the VM Kickstarter (i.e., fans are funding a studio film), and I can see your point, Luke, about Warner Bros.' actions, but I think Bertha's point about the fan experience is an important one (Myles also wrote about the Kickstarter as a social experience, which I think is useful in thinking about the fan experience). By contributing to the VM Kickstarter, fans don't simply get a script, T-shirt, copy of the DVD, etc.; they become part of the success of the project. That affords them cultural capital within fandom (though of course, the more they contribute, the more capital they accrue, which I do think has interesting repercussions for hierarchies in fandom and the amount that gets contributed to the Kickstarter), at the same time as consolidating a feeling of community between fans who have contributed. I don't think that can be ignored when we talk about things like exploitation. I also wonder whether we need to take fan voices into account more in these discussions. If we're having fans telling us no, they don't feel exploited, is there value in us as academics and industry professionals telling them that actually, they are? Do things like the VM Kickstarter mean that we need to reevaluate how we study fandom and the language that we use?



Figure 3. "I saved Veronica Mars on Kickstarter" sticker, one of the stickers offered as a reward for backers pledging \$10 or more. [View larger image.]

[2.9] **McNutt:** Connecting two of your points, Bethan, is there a risk of reinforcing fans as dupes if we insist on their exploitation despite their insistence they are willing participants? It's slippery territory, although I would generally resist telling fans anything—rather, I think anything I write about fans or fandom which is then consumed by fans is designed as the start of a conversation rather than an intervention. I don't know if we have to reevaluate how we study fandom, but I do think this is an area where our understanding of its exploitative qualities might need to wait until discussions like this one have taken place within fandom. Even just a few months later, we're still in the glow of the Kickstarter's success, and a lot of this will come down to how the *Veronica Mars* fan community participates in this process over the course of the next year or so.

[2.10] **Pebler:** You're probably right, Myles, that we're in a rose-tinted honeymoon period. Perhaps it will self-correct; certainly the success of future campaigns will be contingent on (fans' judgment of) the results of today's. That said, it's often voices from outside the community that spark subsequent debate within it. Starting the conversation is a worthy pursuit, as you say. In that spirit, I think it's important to point out that there are other creators exploring alternative models for continuing their stories and distributing content direct to fans—ones that eschew leveraging their fame through crowd funding. Look at Joss Whedon's *Buffy* season 8 comic or *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* Web series, or Brian K. Vaughn's new Web-optimized comic *The Private Eye* (<http://panelsyndicate.com/>).



Figure 4. *The Private Eye* issue 1 cover. [View larger image.]

[2.11] Vaughn refers to crowd funding in the afterword of issue 1: "[Private Eye artist] Marcos and I really like sites like Kickstarter, but as relatively old hands in this biz, we didn't want to shake the tin cup until we had a finished product to share." Fans are encouraged to "name your price": casual readers can try the work for free, while those that crave the experience of helping to support future issues can do so to any degree they desire. Granted, it costs more up-front money to make a movie than an online comic, but if the ultimate goal is continuing a story that fans love, by hook or by crook, with less meddlesome suits in the middle, then these methods achieve that goal without placing an unethical financial burden upon the consumer. I think that's to be applauded.

[2.12] **Chin:** I do wonder if those rose-tinted honeymoon period is starting to fade, though, with the recent backlash against Zach Braff's Kickstarter campaign (Gadino 2013). Or is this a case where, in terms of Hollywood hierarchy, Rob Thomas is seen as the underdog whereas Zach Braff isn't? Luke, your mention of Brian K. Vaughn's name as your price model reminded me of a similar thing the British band, Radiohead, did with their 2007 independently released album. Interestingly enough, Radiohead's front man, Thom Yorke, recently spoke of how much he regretted going down that route, suggesting that their experiment with the model actually helped companies like Apple and Google devalue music (Sandoval 2013). Although music is a wholly different industry, I wonder if the same thing would eventually happen with other creative industries. Bethan's point about ethics is also an important conversation to have, I think, and Kickstarter's unlimited funding beyond the initial goal, which Luke highlighted, can be argued as an ethical issue as well, particularly for campaigns like VM's and Braff's. But it becomes a complicated issue, as the unlimited funding would certainly allow creators without any industry connection to put more into their project.

[2.13] In terms of reevaluating how we study fandom, or at least reconsider the language and terminology that we use, I think this is something that is already happening. In terms of thinking where the study of fandom began, from justifying the cause of active audiences to the current work on fan activism and fans turned producers, fan-ancing, to borrow the term from Suzanne Scott (2013), is likely going to be the next step, especially seeing as we're already having this conversation right now.

3. Kickstarter (as a platform)

[3.1] **Q:** What are the benefits and/or drawbacks to the crowd funding model offered by Kickstarter and other sites like it?

[3.2] **Jones:** One interesting thing I've found now is almost a backlash against Kickstarter. I noticed a conversation someone had retweeted into my timeline the other day which illustrates this really well, and it does seem to be the case that the more well known projects on Kickstarter are the ones where there are big names attached (VM, Amanda Palmer, etc.).



Figure 5. Twitter conversation about Kickstarter being overtaken by celebrities. [[View larger image.](#)]

[3.3] I wonder whether this will cause problems either for Kickstarter or for the indie projects that want to use it. Is it likely that indie projects will get sidelined and not raise the money they need? Or will Kickstarter start changing the way they run in order to make more of a profit from the larger names?

[3.4] **Chin:** I actually got to know about sites like Kickstarter and Indiegogo via friends who are indie filmmakers, so I've donated to quite a few of these myself. It's certainly a great platform for indie filmmakers, for people who are making short films and Web series to get their material seen as long as they manage to get it funded. It also allows them to work outside of the studio system. Having said that, I've seen how fulfilling perks to backers have taken its toll: if you're already strapped for cash for a project, imagine having to spend even more on printing T-shirts, DVDs, and shipping. I often wonder how much of the money I

donated actually went into the production costs instead of delivering the perks. There's also the issue of accountability: what happens when perks aren't delivered on time? Or if things change and you lose an actor you've cast but fans have already donated money?

[3.5] **McNutt:** There's no definitive answer to this question, which is itself both a benefit and a drawback to Kickstarter and other sites. For every indie developer whose video game gets a new lease on life through fan support and online promotion, someone like Zach Braff—successfully (<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1869987317/wish-i-was-here-1>)—or Melissa Joan Hart—unsuccessfully (<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/318676760/darcis-walk-of-shame>)—uses his or her celebrity to help fund passion projects, and in the process our perception of crowd funding is shaped and reshaped. The *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter was received as a triumph of audiences—which is not to say that Luke and others haven't expressed their reservations, but rather that the press around the project has been largely positive—while Braff's effort to retain final cut on his follow-up to *Garden State* was considered a bastardization, even though one could argue that Braff's desire to maintain his independence from the demands of studio financiers is actually closer to the spirit of Kickstarter than *Veronica Mars*' Warner Bros. production account. The uncertainty of Kickstarter's value allows a project like *Veronica Mars* to emerge and catch the Internet by storm, but the same uncertainty of value could lead to other worthy projects—projects that lack the same promotional push—going unfunded as the site is flooded with projects that shift the value of crowd funding in different directions. The free-for-all nature of the site enables huge success stories, for content creators to redefine value to their benefit, but it also makes it impossible to pin down a consistent logic of crowd funding on the platform (or on any platform).

[3.6] **Peblar:** I agree with Myles—Kickstarter is a platform, and its rise to prominence is at least partially due to its flexibility. It's able to serve the needs of a variety of users, large and small. I doubt that backlash against high-profile campaigns will somehow soil the platform and negatively affect the ability of smaller projects to find funding because campaigns are generally promoted through separate channels controlled by the artists themselves (social media, personal Web sites, word of mouth). Bethan, your idea of KS trying to use big projects to generate revenue is a really interesting one. It's a sort of progressive tax, where the bigger the project total, the bigger the Kickstarter share gets, while the smallest projects have their fees waived. It could be a way to make the system a little more self-regulating and even the playing field. You'd have the Amanda Palmers and Zach Braffs of the world indirectly subsidizing the tiny projects. Matt Honan's 2013 article in *Wired* posits a future of proliferating crowd-funding sites geared toward specific niches, and I think he's right on. If Kickstarter does turn off part of their user base by deciding to somehow cater to large, high-profile projects, surely another site will pop up as the place for true independents, and so on, as is the circle of life in the age of software and social networks. As crowd funding matures, it will likely stratify in order to court different user bases, just as social media and fandom itself have.

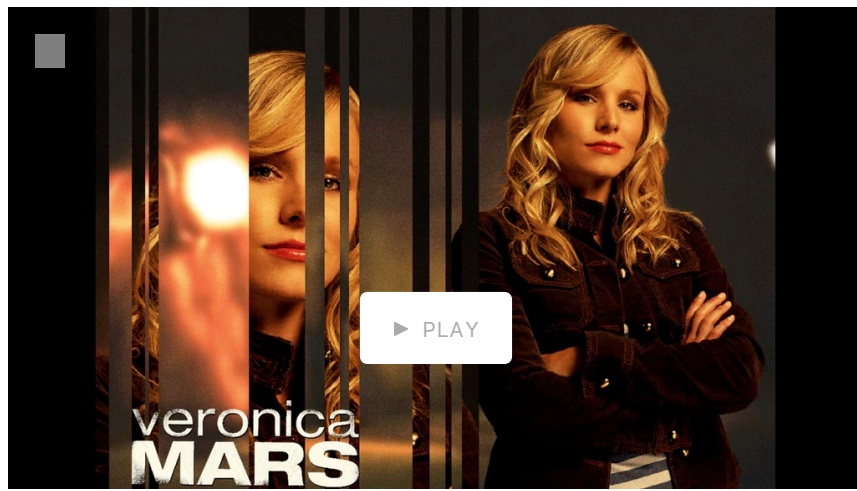
[3.7] **Jones:** I think the points you make, Bertha, about production costs versus the cost of perks and accountability are really important ones. I'd be interested in seeing a full breakdown of the costs of a crowd-funded project to look at how much time and money is spent on the promotion (including the perks) and the actual production. If it's the former, is Kickstarter better seen as a means to promote and publicize a project rather than raising money to fund it? I also think the question you raised earlier about fan expectations is relevant in relation to accountability. I know Rob Thomas said in an interview with Hitfix that he had to seriously consider what kind of film he wanted to make:

[3.8] There was a real internal debate, for me, about what kind of movie I wanted to make. Just by way of example, I really enjoyed "Side Effects," and that sort of noir thriller that I could see Kristen Bell as Veronica Mars in something like that. I liked the plotting of that movie. I had some desire, as a filmmaker, to take Veronica in a slightly new direction and do something adventurous with her. Or, there's the "give the people what they want" version. And I think partly because it's crowd-sourced, I'm going with the "give the people what they want" version. It's going to be Veronica being Veronica, and the characters you know and love...but it was a creative debate I had with myself, and I finally made the decision that I'm happy with it, to go with, "Let's not piss people off who all donated. Let's give them the stuff that I think that they want in the movie." (Sepinwall 2013)

[3.9] Here, at least, there seems to be some element of accountability toward fans, but how much will this impact upon the story being told in the film? How will Thomas giving people what they want affect future big-name Kickstarters? Will it actually have any effect?

[3.10] Also thinking about what you said about value, Myles, how are we defining value in relation to Kickstarter and crowd funding? Who determines what is worthy and what isn't? And is this another case where we need to look at the terms we're using and whether they're relevant to what we're actually discussing?

[3.11] **McNutt:** Value is a huge question, one that obviously we don't have room to answer here, but your example raises a good point: does Rob Thomas still get to define the value of his own projects when he's accountable to tens of thousands of backers? However, I would argue that by creating a Kickstarter built on nostalgia (the video featuring the previous actors), and by choosing to directly appeal to fans, Thomas was very clearly accepting of fan-determined value from the moment the campaign began.



Video 1. *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter video.

[3.12] I'd actually argue, though, that this gives him greater space in which to define value, in that he is allowing fans an opportunity to guide broad discussions of value in order to allow him some wiggle room. As Thomas has spoken of Veronica's romantic entanglements and returning cast members, he has been very careful to speak around certainties in favor of a promise that it will be true to the series, something that fans can trust knowing that the project as a whole is positioned as "more of what they love." Any continuation of a canceled TV series would have to handle this balance in the same way, whereas I think original big-name Kickstarter projects are possible provided they are up front about how much value backers have within the creative process. Thomas used his appeal to fans as a way to encourage them to participate, ensuring them their participation was already being valued as he wrote the film, which I think is a big part of the Kickstarter's success as it relates to cultural capital; not every project could do the same, but the definition of value remains open for interpretation within the platform.

[3.13] **Chin:** I agree with Myles that the definition of value is open for interpretation. Thomas pitched the campaign as a continuation of the VM universe, and his updates to backers have been quite detailed thus far, with promises of more. In his last update, for example, he wrote: "We want to find new and better ways to keep you involved. We want you to feel like you're part of the process. And while we don't want to spoil the fun of the movie, we do want you to see as much as you can." Just as backing Braff's project is about ensuring that the filmmaker has full artistic control of the project, as he detailed in his project's rationale: "I want you to be my financiers and my audience so I can make a movie for you with no compromises."

[3.14] I think it'll be interesting to see—perhaps after the final cut of the VM film has been released—how accountability fits into the conversation, particularly among fans, which brings this back to my earlier point about fan expectations, especially now that they have a financial stake in it. I know of one other Kickstarter project that may have lost one of its main cast, and whose fund-raising pitch was rather dependent on the casting of the actor. Nothing has been officially announced by the filmmakers on this change as yet, so it remains to be seen how, and if (or when), accountability—and fan expectations—comes into the picture when that happens.

[3.15] **Pebler:** A recurrent theme in these discussions seems to be, how will it all look once it's over and the thing kickstarted is complete and released? Will backers ultimately be happy? Will producers be happy? Will it all have been worth it? It's going to be an excruciatingly long wait to find out, in many cases. There seems reason to be bullish on the future of crowd funding in general, though. Kickstarter's official response (Chen, Strickler, and Adler 2013) to the VM/Braff backlash is, "Look how many people join as a result of these headline grabbers and end up giving to lots of other smaller projects as well!" And I think that's great news, if it proves to be true in the long run. Perhaps, regardless of ethical implications or quality of final products, the big names are to be tolerated because of the halo effect they generate.

4. Crowd funding

[4.1] **Q:** Crowd funding isn't a new phenomenon, so why do you think it has become so successful and widely known in the last couple of years?

[4.2] **Jones:** I'm going to say that social media has played a big part in this. I certainly heard about Kickstarter through Twitter (more so than Facebook), and it being used and promoted by big names (Neil Gaiman, for one) means that a lot of Kickstarter

projects pop up on my feed regularly. It's a quick and easy way of getting information about projects out there to a lot of people, and that makes a big difference, I think.

[4.3] **Chin:** I think the VM project certainly propelled the concept to the mainstream consciousness. But as I understand, it's been common in the music and games industry. The success of Joss Whedon's *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* very likely made people aware that it's possible to make a creative piece of work without the backing of a studio, but because not everyone is Joss Whedon, the existence of crowd funding seems like the next best (practical) thing. Furthermore, we're in a climate where user-generated content and the idea of the collective intelligence and crowd sourcing are becoming increasingly recognized and cultivated.

[4.4] **McNutt:** In the case of the media industries, one of the factors has been how new forms of distribution have made the logics of crowd funding much easier. Within the video game industry, new platforms like Apple's App Store, Valve's Steam, or even the major console maker's respective digital distribution setups have all given small independent developers the ability to reach wide audiences without the need of a large publisher and physical distribution. Similarly, the rise of the Web series *Video Game High School* (<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/freddiew/video-game-high-school-season-two?ref=live>), which was, before *Veronica Mars*, the highest-earning film/video Kickstarter, has created a new space for content creators where they can turn to crowd funding to make something they can then release on their own terms without the need for networks or studios. The *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter is perhaps outside of this development, given that the film will be distributed through traditional means, but I think the larger move toward crowd funding has been the result of nontraditional ways of delivering content to audiences who lend themselves to nontraditional ways of funding that content.

[4.5] **Pebler:** I see crowd funding's rise in profile as a natural side effect of technological progress and the maturation of online culture. You've got more people with more connected devices, more comfortable with technology, and invested in online communities. The customer base is increasingly receptive to a media landscape that includes nontraditional content sources consumed in a myriad of ways. Meanwhile, artists seeking patronage are as old as art itself. As people increasingly live their lives online, it's only natural that they start to look for seed funding online as well. Kickstarter, on its surface, represents a way for fans and creators to get closer together, cutting out the corporate middlemen, so it's no wonder that it's become a great white hope for fans of media properties cut down before their time. The trick will be to wrest the underlying intellectual property of these shows from the giants that own them. Otherwise any appearance of independence will be an illusion, as it is with *Veronica Mars*.

[4.6] **Jones:** Reading your responses made me think of the way that Amazon is making self-publishing much easier. Although it's not crowd funding, it certainly comes under the umbrella of nontraditional ways of delivering content as well as technological progress. Crowd funding does seem to be a more acceptable way for getting your film, Web series, or game out there than self-publishing is. Whether that's to do with the history of traditional publishing and the idea of what literary work is I'm not sure, but do you think crowd funding will make other areas of nontraditional content delivery more acceptable?

[4.7] **McNutt:** While it might make them more acceptable, it doesn't make them easier. The logistics of crowd funding—as noted above—are a challenge, such that anyone who could secure solid terms on more traditional capital is likely to take that opportunity. It's similar to self-publishing in that way: if you could get reasonable terms with a real publisher, you would probably take that deal. There have been a number of video game kickstarters that have backed out of crowd funding after their campaigns brought investments from traditional sources, which removes the burden of fulfilling rewards and the like. As a result, while nontraditional content delivery is absolutely part of what makes crowd funding possible and in many cases desirable, the legitimacy and efficiency afforded by traditional publishing continue to hold value.

[4.8] **Chin:** Myles definitely made a great point there. The symbolic capital attached to traditional content delivery still holds great value. That's not to say that nontraditional content delivery isn't equally important. I think in terms of your comparison to the self-publishing industry, Bethan, perhaps the difference is that films, games, and music are often a collaborative effort compared to a self-published book, whereby it's easier to be accused of vanity publishing.

[4.9] **Pebler:** You've hit upon another reason it's difficult to make generalizations about crowd funding, Bertha: the huge variety of projects it's being used for, and the accordingly wide range of collaborative and capital needs of those projects. Production costs of different mediums don't always correlate nicely with the relative fame/support level of the artist Kickstarting. This leads to situations such as Amanda Palmer raising \$1.2 million—12 times her goal—to produce a record, and being subjected to (presumably) more scrutiny than if she'd only raised what she initially set out to. Again, the uncapped nature of Kickstarter could be considered a boon or an albatross, depending on how things play out. With increased funding comes increased accountability and increased exposure to criticism. The media properties we currently enjoy are products of the industrial systems that produce them; it will be interesting to see if a change in the nature of funding precipitates any change in the content itself.

5. (Media/entertainment) industry

[5.1] **Q:** Are crowd-funded projects really likely to change the entertainment industry?

[5.2] **Jones:** They already are, aren't they? We're having a dialogue about a VM Kickstarter that raised close to \$6 million—that's a big change, and I think regardless of what happens next, the industry is going to have to adapt in some form.

[5.3] **Chin:** It probably is, but I don't think they're big changes that we can see right away—it is enough for us to be having this particular dialogue right now though. But I also think VM happened because all the industry players agreed to it, chief of which is Warner Bros., which may not necessarily be the case for other fan favorites out there—Bryan Fuller said a *Pushing Daisies* film will need at least a \$10 million budget, and *X-Files* fans who immediately asked former executive producer Frank Spotnitz about the possibility was told that it isn't likely going to happen (note 2). More importantly, I think the big studios would want to look at ways of taking opportunities with this which probably culminate in the criticism that Kickstarter has come under lately, for being a playing field of the big boys now instead of the darling of the independents.

[5.4] **McNutt:** More broadly, the answer is no: crowd funding will still represent a small percentage of projects within the entertainment industry, high-profile examples of crowd funding like *Veronica Mars* still depend on the industry for distribution/promotion, and there remain enough concerns over the logistics and ethics of Kickstarter and other crowd-funding platforms that any sort of wide-scale implementation would be both ill advised and ill received. However, I do think it changes how we conceptualize value and how we understand the audience's place within film and television production, prompting new questions we'll pose to students when considering concepts like Derek Johnson's (2013) notion of co-creativity; at the same time, however, the industry has always worked to subsume audience labor and audience contributions within its preexisting logics, and the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter—while empowering on a surface level—represents a case where the industry isn't being threatened by crowd funding so much as they are evolving to work crowd funding into their existing logics. That's a change, certainly, but not a substantial one (at least not yet).

[5.5] **Pebler:** If you define the entertainment industry as large, established players, then probably not—certainly not in the short term. At its core, crowd funding is about just that—money—and the studios don't lack start-up capital. Being too cash strapped to produce content is not a problem they have. Also, keep in mind that the people who raise millions on Kickstarter can do that because they already have mainstream media identities. Without the fertile loam of Hollywood shows and movies and music, there'd be no one famous enough to reap giant crowd-funding harvests. I've thought about it a lot, and I'm still not quite sure what Warner Bros. is hoping to gain by letting Rob Thomas crowd fund VM. It may be simply good press, which they (briefly) got. But I predict it's going to be a long, strange road for them to get this movie out, with too much accountability to the legion of people whose money they accepted. I doubt that they'll think that a paltry \$5.7 million was worth it, in retrospect. That said, social media has put content producers in close proximity with their audiences. Continued evolution of that relationship is inevitable, and potentially a great thing. I've often wondered whether TV networks might find a way to start showing pilots to the public before they decide which ones to pick up for broadcast. (Challengers like Amazon are doing it already; see Thomas 2013a.) Instead of jilted fans coming together after a show has been canceled to beg or bribe the network to bring it back, we might have viewers' voices helping decide what goes on the air in the first place.

[5.6] **Jones:** I realize I should have been more clear on the terms I was using! I'm thinking about the entertainment industry in its broadest conception, so not just the large, established players like Warner Bros., but indie producers, fans, and to an extent the academy which studies fans and audiences. I do think that for the latter, crowd-funded projects will change the way we study audiences and how we conceptualize the terms we use, as Myles said. I think you're right, Luke, in saying Warner Bros. have a long and strange road ahead of them, and it will be interesting to see how that develops and whether any other studios decide to follow in their footsteps.

[5.7] **McNutt:** I also think that a lot of this depends on a sort of self-regulation: as I write this, a new video game crowd-funding experiment by Precursor Games—for a new game called *Shadow of the Eternals* (<http://www.precursorgames.com/>)—is using a self-made platform with its own terms of use, which stipulate that "a donation cannot be canceled or returned once it has been completed, whether or not Precursor Games completes the Game or fulfils the specified reward." Online users criticized this legalese, forcing one of the developers to reiterate that they would, in fact, refund any donations should the game not be completed, but it created controversy around the project that could threaten its reputation (as the terms of use are far more legally binding than a FAQ page). I definitely agree that Warner Bros.' experience will be watched very closely by other studios before making a move—we're not the only ones watching this situation closely, and we're not the only ones who are working to conceptualize its uncertain impact on the industry.

6. Notes

1. McNutt's blog on the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter can be found at <http://blog.commart.wisc.edu/2013/03/15/kickstarting-veronica-mars-a-moment-in-a-movement/>; Pebler's blog can be found at <http://www.suzanne-scott.com/2013/03/15/guest-post-my-gigantic-issue-with-the-veronica-mars-kickstarter/>; Chin's blog can be found at <http://onoffscreen.wordpress.com/2013/03/13/the-veronica-mars-movie-crowdfunding-or-fan-funding-at-its-best/>; and Jones's blog can be found at <http://bethanvjones.wordpress.com/2013/03/15/fan-exploitation-kickstarter-and-veronica-mars/>.

2. Bryan Fuller's comments on a *Pushing Daisies* Kickstarter can be found at <http://www.filmschoolrejects.com/features/bryan-fuller-on-kickstarter-pushing-daisies-would-need-10-million.php>; Frank Spotnitz's response is available at

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Book review

Digital labor: The Internet as playground and factory, edited by Trebor Scholz

Stephanie Anne Brown

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, United States

[0.1] *Keywords*—New media; Playbour; Prosumer

Brown, Stephanie Anne. 2014. *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, edited by Trebor Scholz [book review]. In "Fandom and/as Labor," edited by Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0551>.

Trebor Scholz, ed. *Digital labor: The Internet as playground and factory*. New York: Routledge, 2013, paper, \$37.95 (258p) ISBN 978-0-415-89695-5; hardcover \$150 (258p) ISBN 978-0-415-89694-8.

[1] As I write this, I'm fighting, as I so often do, with my compulsive urge to check my Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr feeds. On the one hand, I need to be productive, but on the other hand, I feel an intense desire to find a new message in my inbox telling me I've been retweeted, commented on, or reblogged. As Trebor Scholz and his fellow scholars illuminate in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, many of us conduct labor online for nothing in return save the affective and social capital earned when we receive measurable attention for our content. Meanwhile, the monetary capital for our labor is funneled into the pockets of corporate Internet gatekeepers like Google and Verizon. The underlying question these scholars seek to tackle is one that many scholars working in areas of fan creativity and transformative digital authorship wrestle with: does the unpaid labor Internet users and fans put into writing 140-character tweets or producing full-length fan films constitute exploitation? Furthermore, is it appropriate to use a theory often equated with physically punishing factory labor as a framework with which to study types of labor generally undertaken by those privileged enough to have both access to the Internet and the time to spend laboring online?

[2] In this essay collection, Trebor Scholz, associate professor of culture and media at the New School in New York City, author of a forthcoming monograph on the history of Orwellian economies of the social web, and the coauthor (with Laura Y. Liu) of *From*

Mobile Playgrounds to Sweatshop City (2010), gathers a group of prominent scholars in the areas of labor, digital networks, technology, surveillance, and critical cultural studies including McKenzie Wark, Lisa Nakamura, Christian Fuchs, and Tiziana Terranova, each of whom brings a "commitment to understanding the complex implications of new forms of waged and unwaged digital labor" (1). This collection was precipitated by the international Internet as Playground and Factory conference that Scholz chaired at the New School in 2009. The goal of the conference (and the resulting book) was to explore "whether Marxist labor theory, with its concept of exploitation of labor, is still applicable to emerging modes of value capture on the Internet" (1).

[3] The book comprises 14 chapters divided into four sections that replicate the structure of the original conference. The first section, "The Shifting Sites of Labor Markets," covers what Scholz considers the overarching issues in the debate, including defining free labor and exploitation, along with other terms; discussing gamification rhetoric, gift economies, and the fight over technical standards; and assessing the ways that historical examples of corporations profiting from unpaid labor can illuminate issues in the current monetization of unpaid digital labor. Andrew Ross and Tiziana Terranova provide the book's first two chapters; their contributions act as a solid primer on issues discussed and debated throughout the rest of the book. For example, Ross argues that although new technologies did not create the idea of free labor, the Internet has made it easier to capitalize on its existence. Terranova builds on Ross's discussion of free labor by recommending the use of Maurizio Lazzarato's term *immaterial labor* to describe and more fully understand the ways in which the tremendous amount of user activity that makes the Internet monetizable to corporations might constitute exploitation. Terranova argues that immaterial labor severs digital labor from a set class association and frees it from any parameters of what constitutes a knowledge worker. Even more so than free labor, immaterial labor allows for the conceptualization of online space as a site where knowledge, art, and cultural ideas and norms are often produced collaboratively, but with only a few actually being compensated.

[4] These accessible opening chapters provide arguments and keywords that subsequent contributions build on and refer back to. The second section, "Interrogating Modes of Digital Labor," narrows the focus to specific case studies and sites of digital labor, including fandom, blogging, and Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk (<https://www.mturk.com/mturk/>), a crowd-sourcing operation launched in 2005 wherein workers from around the world choose and complete discrete human intelligence tasks. The third section, "The Violence of Participation," examines the stakes involved in digital labor exploitation by relating online practices to forms of physical exploitation and by illuminating the ways in which a discussion of digital

exploitation can help us to more clearly theorize other contemporary forms of labor exploitation. The book concludes with the section "Organized Networks in an Age of Vulnerable Publics," which looks into the near future at possible alternatives to the current capitalist and neoliberal logic of the network and tangible solutions to the issues and critiques raised in the volume. In this section, Michel Bauwens proposes the creation of benefits-driven institutions, which participate in market exchanges but do not accumulate capital. He hopes they might spur an entire countereconomy focused on the commons and based on the ideology of peer-to-peer production. Fuchs points toward commons-centric projects like Wikipedia as cells of struggle against capitalism that could potentially be harnessed into a full-scale revolution of communication and of society itself.

[5] It is within sections 2 and 3 that the most specific attention is paid to fans and fan labor. Abigail De Kosnik argues in her chapter on the free labor undertaken by fans that although fans often think of their activities as residing outside of any economic framework, there should be methods of providing compensation for this work—or at least potential paths to employment given by corporations who benefit from the buzz and transformative works created by fans. In her chapter on the practice of gold farming within the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*, Nakamura discusses the racialization of the practice and certain specific instances of racist rhetoric within fan-made machinima created to express players' disapproval of the practice.

[6] The essays in this collection conceptualize the landscape of digital labor as a continuation of traditional workplace social structures while also exploring discontinuities and intensifications of those often exploitive relations. As Scholz explains in the introduction, "These are new forms of labor but old forms of exploitation" (1). A key thread throughout the collection is that the Internet, technology, and related labor are not new or neutral. Rather, they are scaffolded by societal structures and rules. Like other societal structures, they contain both the potential for exploitation and the potential for revolution; as Ross puts it, "Like any other technology, they are facilitators, not causes of changing social forces" (16). Similarly, Terranova draws our focus to what she refers to as the outernet, the social, cultural, and economic relationships that connect the Internet to societal power structures. She argues that characterizing cyberspace as an escape risks ignoring the reality of how deeply the Internet is both embedded in and is a cause of the structure of postindustrial society. This sentiment, echoed throughout the book's essays, is summed up nicely in the final chapter by Ned Rossiter and Soenke Zehle, who argue that "a misunderstanding perhaps exists—that new technologies call for radically new forms of political organization" (235).

[7] Although the book seeks to apply familiar theories of labor to newer technologies, a major source of the book's tension is the focus on the exploitation and monetization of social behavior that does not "feel, look, or smell like labor at all" (2) rather than on more familiar discussions of factory and physical labor. From Dallas Smythe's 1981 argument that television audiences are produced and sold as commodities to advertisers to Lazzarato's conception of immaterial labor, there has long been a blurring of the lines between work and pleasure—and in our current digital world, everything, from Facebook to fandom, "is put to work, unfairly harnessing implicit participation for wild profits" (2). However, the contributors to this volume differ in their views on how zealously we ought to focus on the digital labor being performed by largely middle- to upper-class laborers. Scholz addresses this issue up front, arguing that although the ability to call for resistance to the more capitalistic implications of the Internet is a privileged position, the digital divide is shrinking with the growing use of cheap cellular phones across the globe, and the degree to which participation in digital labor is voluntary varies widely across the global and socioeconomic spectrum. Many essays grapple with similar juxtapositions of digital labor and factory labor, with varying levels of success. Mark Andrejevic sums up his position by explaining, "The point of running them alongside one another is not to diminish the brutality of the exploitation of industrial capitalism but to add depth and urgency to the critique of exploitation in the emerging information economy" (162). Therefore, focusing on digital labor and exploitation can shed light on the larger implications of exploitation in the current global economy as a whole.

[8] Another issue inherent in a discussion of labor that does not always look like labor is the question of false consciousness. As Ross argues in the opening chapter, work for nothing has become normal because it is not experienced as work. Money has been replaced by the "affective currency" (19) of retweets, blog comments, and page views; the real currency goes to those who own the domains and bandwidth. As Wark puts it, "We have to pay for the privilege of producing our own spectacle" (71). But is it fair to say that Internet users are being exploited if they are enjoying their labor? Is it a form of false consciousness for fans to feel satisfied running a fan site that likely contributes to the bottom line of a major movie studio when they do not see any of that money themselves? "The Internet is fun" seems to some of the book's scholars to be the most dangerous ideology surrounding digital labor. Yet as Terranova argues, "free labor isn't necessarily exploited labor" (47). Andrejevic calls for work to be done to more clearly define exploitation in free labor contexts in order to respond to accusations that such critiques fail "to acknowledge the benefits and pleasures received by those engaged in various forms of free labor" (154). Indeed, several arguments throughout the book would have been bolstered by at least acknowledging the agency and pleasure of those doing the digital laboring while still interrogating the ways in which those users are being exploited. Wark, for example, describes *World of*

Warcraft as "the fantasy version of the power of the vectoral class perfected," where players "pay for the privilege of laboring to acquire objects and status that are only artificially scarce," but he does so without taking account of any of the reasons behind players' love of the game (71). Some essays, however, do acknowledge and attempt to deal with this tension by bringing in relevant notions from cultural studies. Nakamura, for example, argues that if scholars are going to take game worlds seriously, they "must be willing to take their racial discourses, media texts, and interpersonal conflicts seriously as well" (201). However, an absence of discussion of agency and specific Web content is to be expected in a book focusing largely on political economy.

[9] There are moments when the opposing side in a debate is exaggerated, distorting the picture of whom the author is speaking to. I would expect a scholarly book on the political economy of the Internet to speak to a target audience of relatively like-minded digital scholars interested in delving into political economy, or political economists interested in exploring the Internet as a site of labor exploitation. However, there are points when the debate is framed in such a way that this assumption is called into question. For instance, Ross contends that "many readers will no doubt conclude" that the exploitation of Internet users by corporations is a trade-off for the amenities offered by the Internet (21), when it would be fair to assume that most readers would not in fact come to that conclusion. Similarly, in her chapter on blogging, Jodi Dean spends several paragraphs arguing that "word clouds aren't revolutionary" (144), when those reading this book would likely similarly not make the argument that they are. Overall, this volume provides a nice entry point for those interested in political economy, the Internet, or both, although jarring moments such as these gave me pause and made me wonder about the book's target audience. The collection's intended audience of political economists likely necessitates that its only direct discussion of fan labor is overly broad. De Kosnik takes as a starting point the refutation of the idea that fan activity is "a waste of time at best and pathological at worst" (99), which makes for a useful starting point in an essay directed at Marxist academics uneasy with situating the exploitation of digital labor alongside the more abject working conditions that are often their focus, but which is not a helpful or convincing argument for fan studies scholars.

[10] Although Scholz and the scholars in the collection are obviously not going to take a utopian view of the Internet, they fortunately do not go so far as to disregard the Internet as a site of possible resistance either. As Ross argues, "Technologies are not simply weapons of class war, designed to control and deskill workers, they also harbor the potential to eliminate wage labor, socialize production, and free up our time" (16). The world the collection paints certainly isn't sunny, but it isn't entirely without optimism. Scholz agrees with Henry Jenkins that a Marxist solution to the current state

of the capitalist Internet is not to "live in the woods, eating acorns and lizards" (8), but instead to come up with tangible steps toward a more open and free version of the Internet. The solution could be to more fairly compensate labor within the current system, as De Kosnik suggests in her discussion of fan labor; to create a communist Internet countereconomy, as Bauwens champions; to do away with the idea of intellectual property, as Wark suggests; or to lead a revolution to overhaul society, as Fuchs argues, noting that "a communist Internet requires a communist society" (222). Whether these solutions are possible or even feasible is up for debate, but at least Scholz and the essayists in his collection are looking for solutions.

Book review

Cognitive capitalism, education, and digital labor, edited by Michael A. Peters and Ergin Bulut

Simone Becque

Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois, United States

[0.1] *Keywords*—Biopolitics; Cognitive capitalism; Digital labor; Education

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Michael A. Peters and Ergin Bulut, editors. 2011. *Cognitive capitalism, education, and digital labor*. New York: Peter Lang, 2011. \$38.95 (341p) ISBN 978-1-4331-0981-2.

[1] As I sit to write this review, the lead story in the local paper is about the elementary school board's plan to sell advertising space in the schools. Placement of ads include locations such as the ball fields, gymnasium, and school entrances. This single example shows the prescience of the intersection of education and capitalism discussed in the essay collection *Cognitive Capitalism, Education, and Digital Labor*, edited by Michael A. Peters and Ergin Bulut. Cognitive capitalism is a response to earlier conceptualizations of capitalism: mercantile and industrial. In this newest phase, accumulation focuses on ephemeral or immaterial objects, such as an idea in the form of a patent. The editors have this to say about how cognitive capitalism and digital labor link to education: "in this environment, public universities, community and schools become the public infrastructure for knowledge capitalism" (xxxii). In other words, these educational systems are linked to an economy dominated by the production of knowledge. These essays explore the connections between cognitive capitalism, education, and digital labor. Although the book does not specifically deal with fandom issues, I do think the issues raised by the individual essays can be of use to fans and fan scholars, primarily because of the way in which fandom intersects with an economy of ideas. In an economy of ideas, all spaces are commercialized, and so the selling of advertising space in schools and product placement in movies become issues for all of us to think about.

[2] The editors have arranged the essays into two groups: the first four tackle the theoretical foundations of immaterial labor, and the next 11 essays focus on specific examples relating to education and labor with regard to cognitive capitalism. The authors come from different disciplines—education, cultural studies, mass communications, and sociology, to name a few—and the wide variety of essays in the collection reflects this interdisciplinarity. Although the essays lean more to practice than theory, overall, the collection comes across as a balanced take on the issues at hand. The book begins with an engaging essay from luminary scholar Antonio Negri, "The Labor of the Multitude and Fabric of Biopolitics," which sets the tone for the essays that follow. In the essay, he argues for the postmodern consideration of multiplicity; capital cannot collapse identities as it once did (i.e., to a class or a set of people), so we must instead contend with multiple identities. In my view, the essays take on this challenge and offer different understandings of a postmodern consideration of multiplicity.

[3] Perhaps the most provocative statement in the collection of essays comes in Jonathan Beller's essay, "Cognitive Capitalist Pedagogy and Its Discontents." Beller writes: "Today we can more easily imagine the death of the planet than we can the end of capitalism" (131). For Beller, the power structures of production depend on this inability to imagine the end of capitalism. However, this formulation struck a chord for me; I think this imaginary failing is reflected in our current media culture. One needs only to glance at the spate of television shows, books, and movies that are fascinated with imagining an end to civilization as we know it —*Revolution* (2012–present), the Hunger Games series (books published beginning 2008, films released beginning 2012), *World War Z* (2013), and the Divergent series (books published beginning 2011, films released beginning 2014), just to name a few. However, most of these imaginings maintain the spirit of capitalism and its power structures. Often, of course, these stories exaggerate power structures to help enhance the drama, as in *The Hunger Games* or in the 2013 film *Elysium*. Although I am not denying the dramatic power of the dystopian narrative, it can also be difficult to imagine a way outside of the genre's inherited structures.

[4] As a media studies scholar, I found the collection's emphasis on the creative economy and on social media to be a refreshing approach to the idea of digital labor. Indeed, the definition of cognitive capitalism offered in the introductory essay includes the importance of Web 2.0 technologies. The essay by Mark Coté and Jennifer Pybus, "Learning to Immaterial Labour 2.0: Facebook and Social Networks," takes on a specific example of Web 2.0 technology, Facebook, in order to examine the free labor of users that such sites require from their participants. This essay and several others in the collection offer further examination of Foucault's conceptualization of biopower and biopolitics. For Foucault, biopower and biopolitics are related concepts that refer to

the managing of populations—their physical bodies, and hence the prefix *bio*—by those in political power. The mechanisms of power commonly conceptualized by Foucault and others in regard to biopower are traditionally thought of as institutions, such as hospitals, health care, and other governmental regulatory groups. Coté and Pybus use a less physical idea of biopower and investigate the ways by which social media sites like Facebook can be used to harness the biopower toward collective action while at the same time recognizing the commodified nature of the platforms that are enabling some collective movements. To put it another way, if you heard about the movement on Facebook, does that mean there's already something commodified about its goals? Or are social media sites, such as Facebook, places for action, change, and a gathering of biopower—where a company just happens to make money on the side? Coté and Pybus conclude their essay by emphasizing the possible liberating nature of social media sites. We have seen hints of the power of digital technologies in organizing, with events such as the Arab Spring. From my perspective, and with my interest in media studies and fandom, I can't help but think of the possibilities of this line of thinking with regard to immaterial labor and fandom. For example, how might social media chatter about a television episode influence the perceived value of the show for a network?

[5] Also related to the issue of education and social media is Michael A. Peters's "Algorithmic Capitalism and Educational Futures," which gets at the issue of the "googlization of education" (255) and raises questions about the intersections among Google's dominance, their algorithms, and the organization of knowledge. This googlization, Peters implies, has led to a greater centralization of the knowledge economy than has previously existed. Furthermore, when so much of our information is stored in the realm of cybernetic capitalism, what does this mean in regard to information ownership? Who owns the information stored on the cloud? Facebook, for example, has faced numerous problems relating to user privacy and ownership of digital materials. In another example, Google has recently started a program linking items users have liked on the Web and uses people's images and names to recommend those items to others during specific search queries. As the amount of information continues to grow exponentially, this kind of knowledge organization and presentation is very important.

[6] Although I find the discussions brought up in the collection thought-provoking, I had been hoping that one of the essays might grapple more directly with the idea of fan labor as it relates to education. The closest would be Toby Miller's essay, "For Fun, for Profit, for Empire: The University and Electronic Games," which discusses the relationship between universities and the Pentagon through academic journals and institutes that use research to test recruiting and training of members of the public as potential military recruits. However, with regard to fan labor, for example, what do we

make of the labor performed by Wikipedia editors? Although academics are often quick to dismiss the site, it represents the organization of knowledge in a Web 2.0 culture as well as the culmination of thousands of hours of work by individuals. Wikipedia is just one instance of fan labor; others deserve further consideration. For example, the success of E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012) and its sequels, which originally started as Twilight fan fiction, began as free fan labor and then turned a profit. Recently, Amazon has started Kindle Worlds, an attempt to monetize fan fiction stories and avoid legal issues by acquiring licenses. Although the stakes for military training and gaming seem higher for education than those posed by fan labor, understanding both is important for our digital future.

[7] As a graduate student teaching and working at a state school in a state with budget problems, I have witnessed the intersection of student learning and capitalism. The results, which turn students into commodities to be processed through a system at maximum value, are occasionally less than stellar. Certainly administrators and faculty do not always intend to approach students as commodities, but such an approach highlights the contradictions in a knowledge system that is also required to support itself financially. As Ergin Bulut states in his essay on the creative economy, "students and academics' work are becoming objects of quantification, surveillance and standardization; payments are becoming related to performance" (161). This volume succeeds in its goal of illuminating the links between this new form of capitalism and education, which has ramifications for young scholars like me hoping to inherit the keys to the academic kingdom.

[8] However, as someone without an extensive background in Marxist theory, I occasionally found the essays challenging, especially the first four focusing on theoretical underpinnings. Although I think the issues explicated in these essays are important reading for those in the field of education, they are also perhaps not for the uninitiated. It would probably not be an ideal volume for beginning students but better for graduate students and scholars. As the creative economy continues to grow, social media technologies continue to develop, and capitalism continues to reign, understanding this new era of capitalism will be useful for everyone. These questions will also continue to be relevant for fans and fan scholars as the economy of ideas continues to become more commercialized.

Book review

Gaga feminism: Sex, gender, and the end of normal, by J. Jack Halberstam

Anne Kustritz

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

[0.1] *Keywords*—Lady Gaga; Popular culture; Queer theory

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J. Jack Halberstam. *Gaga feminism: Sex, gender, and the end of normal*. Boston: Beacon, 2012, hardcover, \$26.95 (192p) ISBN 978-0807010983.

[1] It's an easy mistake to make, but *Gaga Feminism* by J. Jack Halberstam is not about Lady Gaga. Instead, it might best be considered the populist companion text to his previous book, *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Much of Halberstam's early work centered on drag kings, female masculinity, butch identity, and rural queers, using these largely overlooked subjectivities to challenge the limitations of queer theory and construct theoretical frameworks like "queer time" to make sense of nonhomonormative lives. These concerns have not disappeared, but in Halberstam's recent work, popular culture takes center stage. Thus *The Queer Art of Failure* argues for creating accessible scholarship that steals from the academy to benefit "life's losers," those systematically relegated to failure by capitalism and social normativity. To do so, Halberstam explores what he terms the "silly archive" of popular culture, especially animation, both because of its relevance to many people's everyday cultural life and because he finds there a kind of anarchic, childish ability to forget or refuse understanding of social systems and thereby to invent new modes of life unhampered by adults' learned social assumptions. Yet *The Queer Art of Failure* itself is highly theoretical, engaged in a direct rebuttal, or at least a strong modification, of queer theory's negative turn, argued most prominently in Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004). Even its readings of cartoons serve largely academic ends, and its rallying cry largely urges academics to think beyond the normative career path and disciplinary boundaries of the university.

[2] In *Gaga Feminism*, Halberstam attempts to put the theoretical insights and social prescriptions of *The Queer Art of Failure* into action, directly addressing a broader public audience and centering on questions of popular culture and politics rather than academic debates. He therefore approaches the same perilous crossroads of academic and popular audiences, popular culture and academic theory, where fan scholars often work. *Gaga Feminism* can thereby become a good addition to fan scholars' theoretical tool kit, offering timely and accessible approaches to popular culture, gender, sexuality, and public scholarship, as these themes repeatedly surface in fan studies. The book builds a model for public political engagement using the metaphor of Lady Gaga, although often in tension with the specific actions and positions taken by the actual person of Lady Gaga. Rather, what Halberstam identifies as useful in the Lady Gaga phenomenon is, first, her ability to speak directly to a new generation of "women," broadly defined, and second, her mind-bending propensity to twist expectations: to turn meat into dresses, an awards show into performance art, sexploitation into feminism—to generally take the assumptions of normal life and go gaga.

[3] The preface, introduction, and first chapter of *Gaga Feminism* outline a tentative definition of gaga feminism and situate it within modern politics as "the feminism (pheminism?) of the phony, the unreal, and the speculative," engaged not in second-wave "coming to consciousness" as women but in unbecoming women in the wake of destabilizations of the gender system wrought by the visibility of trans people, the economic collapse, and alternate family structures (xii). Halberstam frames the project as a timely form of feminism for postcapitalism. He then goes on to outline the book's central paradox: that recent demographic transformations such as the rise of divorce, women's entrance into higher education and the workforce, and the increased visibility of gay, lesbian, and trans people should help us all rethink normative standards for a successful life path and for satisfactory family and living arrangements. Yet often these very transformations increase dissatisfaction with heteronormative marriage and nonetheless reinforce and reinvest in marriage's hegemony, despite its acknowledged flaws. At this juncture, Halberstam takes up the figure of the preenculturated child who has not yet internalized or understood social hierarchies and categories, nor the shame of living outside their boundaries, and so engages in fanciful and imaginative improvisation to make sense of the unpredictable world. In the childish ability to accept and accommodate all human variation, and to constantly question accepted common sense, Halberstam sees a potential model for retraining adults in a practice of critical nonsense that refuses to yield to the authority of social discipline. The first chapter ends with a list of five tenets for gaga feminism: first, discard "basic assumptions about people, bodies, and desires"; second, "transformation is inevitable" but is often invisible in everyday life; third, "think counterintuitively, act accordingly"; fourth, "practice creative nonbelieving," because Halberstam ties the political

entrenchment of religion to the major historical disasters of gender and sexuality oppression; and fifth, gaga feminism requires a bold, abrasive refusal of shame and an embrace of the outrageous (27–29).

[4] Chapters 2 through 4 deal with case studies organized by gender, sexuality, and marriage. Chapter 2, "Gaga Genders," frames its argument with a discussion of the media frenzy surrounding Thomas Beatie, who was billed as the first pregnant man. Halberstam reminds readers that trans men had babies before 2007 without alerting the media, but he continues to tease apart a variation of the theme outlined in the introduction: given the existence of artificial insemination, why have so few social gender norms surrounding reproduction and parenthood changed? Via feminist scholar Shulamith Firestone, Halberstam presents a vision of a future free from any theoretical connection between biology, gender, reproduction, and parenthood roles. Halberstam skewers romantic comedies like *The Switch* (2010) and *The Back-up Plan* (2010), in which women utilize alternative reproduction technologies only to nonetheless be reincorporated by the narrative happily-ever-after of heterosexual monogamy. He then champions the radical possibilities raised by butch fatherhood, as distinguished from the more media-friendly "two daddies" or "two mommies" framework. Reading against *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), Halberstam argues that butch-femme parents present "authority without patriarchy" and "gender polarity without compulsory heterosexuality," providing their children an education in the "arbitrariness of all gender roles" (58). From this basis, Halberstam argues that the butch-femme dynamic can denaturalize heterosexuality by offering an alternative that is just as—if not more—compelling, equitable, and sexy.

[5] In chapter 3, "Gaga Sexualities: The End of Normal," Halberstam explores sexual fixity versus fluidity over a life span and questions how the combined challenges of divorce and straight men's persistent preference for younger women as partners might lead some straight women to seek lesbians or trans men as partners. Halberstam questions the universality of the gay/straight binary and calls attention to popular press reports that women's desires are commonly flexible. He concludes by suggesting that straight men might learn from butch masculinity to regard gender identity as constructed, and, as it is in the animated 2009 film *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, constantly contingent and subject to transformation.

[6] Chapter 4 lays out Halberstam's critique of the mainstream gay and lesbian rights movement's positioning of gay marriage as the preeminent political priority. Under five headings, Halberstam points out that the marriage push is not a universal priority among queer people. First, he states that "reactive politics are weak politics," arguing that gay marriage only became central because of right-wing opposition (104). Second, under the dictum "inclusion maintains the status quo," he questions

marriage's deliberate decoupling from a broader civil rights agenda, indicating that marriage will only benefit gays and lesbians who already benefit from race and class privilege (104). Third, examining the bundle of health care and parental rights wrapped into marriage, Halberstam asserts that "rights should not be marriage-dependent" (108). Fourth, arguing that "alternative intimacies are not served," Halberstam explores the many models for allocating rights, responsibilities, and resources that people might devise if freed from the hegemony of the marriage system, allowing people to share health care, child rearing, and homes in any way they see fit (109). Finally, Halberstam argues that "marriage is an oppressive ideology," noting that a radical critique of marriage has been central to the history of feminism, making it "ironic to see marriage as an unquestioned good and a worthy goal in a gay imaginary" (111–12). He then reviews the many romantic comedies that excoriate marriage as a trap for both genders and then uses that dissatisfaction as merely an illusory obstacle for the happy couple to overcome on their inevitable path to wedded bliss. He argues that this outcome sutures the fissures within marriage caused by demographic shifts and the legacies of feminism, ideologically insisting that despite a changing world, marriage must remain sacrosanct. For Halberstam, gay marriage rhetorically strengthens marriage just when other social changes might have led to its ultimate decline and transformation.

[7] Chapter 5, "Gaga Manifesto," sums up Halberstam's intention to create a feminist platform for the contemporary world, wracked by uncertainty and danger, by championing not a return to safety but instead further commitment to instability, crisis, and inventive new dreams emerging from the ruins of business as usual. He finds shared purpose with the Occupy movement (which began in 2011), anarchy as imagined by the Invisible Committee, and Lady Gaga's live performances. Returning to formulations from *The Queer Art of Failure* and *The Wire* (2002–8), Halberstam explains that by recognizing the ways the social game is rigged in favor of the powerful, "gaga feminism is for the failures, the losers, those for whom the price of success is too high"; the inevitability of defeat thereby lends itself to bold action under the principle that if you're going to lose, then lose big—lose fabulously (147). Halberstam therefore calls for a process of social unlearning inspired by the anarchy of children and for alternative models of family. He advocates an ethos of flexibility, improvisation, and inclusivity in solidarity with multiple global revolutions. As he began, Halberstam ends by reminding readers that this book is not about Lady Gaga and that "what is gaga today will be something else entirely tomorrow," requiring that gaga feminism constantly reinvent itself to remain just at the edge of what is currently unnamable at the horizon of a queer new future (149).

[8] Although *Gaga Feminism*'s greatest strengths are its personal approach, engaging writing style, commitment to popular culture, and unabashed appeal to

general audiences, these very characteristics often undercut its coherence and persuasiveness. *Gaga Feminism* often seems like only the punch line to a larger story, or a sequence of coded references for which *The Queer Art of Failure* serves as the decoder ring. This sense of déjà vu is compounded by the fact that many of the examples and close readings in *Gaga Feminism* were first performed in *The Queer Art of Failure*. When it is read in isolation, popular audiences may find aspects of *Gaga Feminism* inspiring, exciting, and relevant, but it is also likely that full understanding of crucial sections of *Gaga Feminism* hinges on having previously read *The Queer Art of Failure*. Further, although the introduction decries earlier generations of feminists' refusal to engage with contemporary popular culture and figures that contemporary young women find inspiring, such as Lady Gaga and Beyoncé, *Gaga Feminism* ultimately finds very little to celebrate in the person of Lady Gaga apart from the music video for "Telephone" (2009) and a metaphorical spirit of inventiveness. This selectiveness and critical rejection of so many staples of popular films, although perhaps well deserved, may also alienate precisely that popular audience that the book originally targeted by centralizing Gaga and the popular pleasures she represents.

[9] Likewise, the fact that many of the chapters are framed by personal anecdotes makes *Gaga Feminism* an enjoyable read. Yet it also raises the specter of nongeneralizability; because Halberstam stages each argument through the lens of his own experience, readers may wonder how many of these insights are limited to his own life and are not applicable to other people's. This limitation becomes particularly evident when Halberstam explains his theory that unenculturated children's anarchic subjectivities allow them to construct unexpected and novel ways of inclusively understanding human variation, as represented by his own experience being accommodated into the sex/gender system as a "boygirl" by his partner's children and their friends. He explicitly states that this formulation acknowledges the danger in using children as a political cipher of innocence, but one might also easily imagine that encounter going very differently with a different group of children. Would a group of cruel children who exclude a gender-variant playmate prompt us to reconsider the entire politics of unlearning that Halberstam advocates? Perhaps not, but that possibility also calls into question this founding metaphor of childish progressive anarchy in a space sealed off from the taint of adult culture and shame.

[10] Of similar theoretical concern is the way that Halberstam's centering of butch identity stigmatizes and erases other social and sexual possibilities. Butch identity hardly holds institutional or social sway, and in that sense the description of political and social possibilities tied to butch subjectivities is welcome and necessary. However, it is unfortunate that these moments often occur at the expense of other often sidelined sexual and gender subject positions. By constantly returning only to butch

identities and butch-femme relationships as the most important engines of social change and possibility, Halberstam undermines solidarity with numerous other life paths, embodiments, and relationships. This particularly becomes an issue in chapter 2, when Halberstam evacuates any political or social utility from gay and lesbian parenting that follows a same-gender model as "gay daddies or lesbian moms." Although these styles are more often portrayed in the media than butch characters, and in that sense could be argued to have been reincorporated into the system, that does not mean such arrangements cannot teach straight couples or other same-sex couples something worthwhile about how gender could function differently. Capitalism, as the saying goes, sells everything, including the rope for its own repeated ritual hanging; if we insist on finding political utility only in things that can't be sold by Hollywood, we will never do politics again. Halberstam acknowledges this in most of the book as he finds such productive pleasures in Pixar and Gaga.

[11] Further, the entire book commits a rather curious erasure of bisexuality, a term that appears only twice: once in the editors' foreword and once in a quotation from another scholar. Halberstam includes the requisite B in LGBT, but when he actually spells out the identities of nonheteronormative people, he writes only "gay, lesbian, and trans people," leaving *bisexual* unstated. This is especially ironic because bisexual most closely describes Gaga's own sexuality, so its lack is keenly felt in a book bearing her name. One can only speculate about this conspicuous absence and wonder how the discussions of straight, gay, lesbian, and trans lives would have been complicated or further elucidated had Halberstam also addressed bisexuality. This suppression of bisexuality becomes especially problematic in chapter 3, when Halberstam seems almost to invent the concept of bisexuality from scratch in his thorough description of people who desire more than one gender or whose desires fluctuate over their life span; yet he does this without ever actually using or engaging with the word *bisexual*. In part this elision becomes a critical part of the argument, as Halberstam argues that men's sexuality is fixed while women's is fluid, with the exception of the stone butch. Yet this dichotomy is only possible precisely by ignoring bisexual men and men who identify as gay or straight but have sex with both men and women. Rather than critique the quasi-scientific foundations of the popular press study that asserted that men's arousal follows a rigidly homo-hetero binary, Halberstam accepts that assertion and reinforces the biphobic notion that real bisexuality is a myth.

[12] Thus, in sum, *Gaga Feminism* successfully addresses a popular audience in tone and structure; yet in doing so, it often undercuts the depth of its arguments and may seem unsatisfying to academic audiences already familiar with Halberstam's other works. However, scholarly work suited to pressing political issues and responsive to the challenges of average people's lives remains a worthwhile goal, and *Gaga Feminism* may offer lessons and inspiration to fan scholars who likewise seek to

engage a hybrid audience of academics and fans. *Gaga Feminism* may motivate other academics to go gaga and reimagine how theory can serve the public, and how academic work might be repurposed to engage with the everyday politics of modern life.