10. Writing Bodies in Space
Media Fan Fiction
as Theatrical Performance

Francesca Coppa

ABSTRACT.—I argue that that fan fiction develops in response to dramatic, not literary, modes of storytelling and therefore can be seen to fulfill performative rather than literary criteria. By recognizing drama instead of prose as the antecedent medium for fan fiction, and by examining fan fiction through the lens of performance studies, three highly debated things about fan fiction become explicable: (1) fan fiction’s focus on bodies; (2) fan fiction’s repetition; and (3) fan fiction’s production within the context of media fandom. Fan fiction, whether written in teleplay form or not, directs bodies in space: readers come to fan fiction with extratextual knowledge, mostly of characters’ bodies and voices, and the writer uses this to direct her work. In theatre, there’s a value to revisiting the same text in order to explore different aspects and play out different scenarios; in television, we don’t mind tuning in week after week to see the same characters in entirely different stories. Similarly, fan fiction retells stories, but also changes them. If traditional theatre takes a script and makes it three-dimensional in a potentially infinite number of productions, modern fandom takes something three-dimensional and then produces an infinite number of scripts. This activity is not authoring texts, but making productions—relying on the audience’s shared extratextual knowledge of sets and wardrobes, of the actors’ bodies, smiles, and movements to direct a living theatre in the mind.
Introduction

I explore a relatively simple proposition: that fan fiction develops in response to dramatic rather than literary modes of storytelling and can therefore be seen to fulfill performative rather than literary criteria. This may seem obvious, as the writing of fan fiction is most strongly and specifically associated with the nearly forty-year-old phenomenon of media fandom,¹ which is to say, the organized subculture that celebrates, analyzes, and negotiates with stories told through the mass (mainly televisual) media, and whose crossroads has long been the annual MediaWest convention held since 1981 in Lansing, Michigan. But the importance of media fan fiction being written in response to dramatic rather than literary storytelling has been overlooked for at least two reasons: first, that fan fiction is itself a textual enterprise, made of letters and words and sentences written on a page (or, more likely these days, a screen), and it therefore seems sensible to treat it as a literary rather than an essentially dramatic form; and second, that media fandom has its origins in science fiction fandom, which is a heavily textual genre. Media fandom spun off from science fiction fandom as a direct result of the original Star Trek television series (1966–1969),² and although fans and scholars have catalogued many similarities (in fannish organization, jargon, and interests; even today, most media fans maintain a strong interest in science fiction and fantasy) and differences (most strikingly in terms of gender, but also in attitudes toward profit and professionalization) between the two fannish cultures, the impact of the switch in genre from prose to drama is rarely discussed or even noticed. But whereas fans of literary science fiction often take to writing “original” science fiction themselves, fans of mass media write fan fiction — which, I submit, is more a kind of theatre than a kind of prose.

In making this claim, I should note that I am defining fan fiction narrowly as creative material featuring characters that have previously appeared in works whose copyright is held by others. Although the creative expansion of extant fictional worlds is an age-old practice, by restricting the term fan fiction to reworkings of currently copyrighted material, I effectively limit the definition not just to the modern era of copyright, but to the even more recent era of active intellectual property rights enforcement. Although fans themselves often seek continuities between their art-making practices and those with a much longer history (Laura M. Hale starts her History of Fan Fic timeline with “0220 The Chinese invent paper”),³ this conflation of folk and fan cultures may blur important distinctions between them, not least of which is the relatively recent legal idea that stories can be owned. It is only when storytelling becomes industrialized — or, to draw upon Richard Ohmann’s definition of
mass culture, produced at a distance by a relatively small number of specialists—that fan fiction begins to make sense as a category, because only then are “fans” distinguished from Ohmann’s distant “specialists,” just as amateurs are differentiated from professionals (1996, 14; and see Garber 2001).

The line between amateur and professional writing is both sharply defined and frequently crossed in science fiction fandom, because science fiction is a literature itself written by fans of the genre; to be an amateur science fiction writer is therefore merely a step on the way to becoming a professional science fiction writer, and professional writers still go to conventions to hobnob. From this perspective, the professional is superior to the amateur, who is serving a kind of apprenticeship. Conversely, MediaWest prides itself on being a convention run by fans and for fans, without any paid guests (professional authors, actors, or producers), and fan fiction writers tend to be defiantly amateur in the sense of writing precisely what they want for love alone. In this schema, to be a professional is to write at the command of others for money. There are exceptions to this in creators like Joss Whedon or Aaron Sorkin, who are seen as relatively fannish auteurs trying to make personal shows within the confines of the industry. However, fans mostly shake their heads in bemusement at television shows that can’t keep track of basic continuity, or films that miss obvious dramatic opportunities; it’s understood that this is the by-product of creating a dramatic universe for profit and by committee. Bemusement can give way to an angrier sort of frustration when creators visibly command the resources and power necessary for good mass media storytelling and are judged to have botched it anyway (George Lucas and Chris Carter come to mind).

In the infamous “Get a Life” (1986) sketch on Saturday Night Live, William Shatner framed his involvement with Star Trek as purely professional: “You’ve turned an enjoyable little job, that I did as a lark for a few years, into a colossal waste of time!” Shatner’s professionalism is tied to his refusal to take mass media storytelling seriously. But what of the fan who does take mass media storytelling seriously? What response is available to her? The science fiction fan may challenge her literary forerunners by becoming a professional writer, but the media fan is less likely to become a producer, screenwriter, or director. Science fiction is produced from among “us,” but the mass media is still produced at a distance by “them.” Few fan fiction writers will ever have access to the means of production for mass media storytelling. The bar is much higher; the funds needed are enormous; one still has to move to Los Angeles or Vancouver; the odds of writing a show you like, as opposed to one you’re assigned to, are small; until relatively recently, the gender bias in Hollywood was astounding. There is, in short, a very small chance of a fan fiction writer becoming a professional
mass media storyteller, even if she was inclined to do so. Defiant amateurism in this case is both realistic and structurally smart, but that doesn't stop some science fiction fans from scoffing at the media fan's refusal to write something potentially salable.

Not only has "derivative" fiction been scoffed at within science fiction fandom, but drama has historically been a belittled category as well. Despite the popular sense of science fiction as a genre with space battles, laser guns, and voyages to the moon, these dramas have been traditionally scoffed at by science fiction writers, whose allegiance is to idea-based narrative fiction. Magazines and novels are at the heart of science fiction fandom, not stage, film, or television (Ohmann 1996; Zimmerman 2003). In January 1976, an essay by Harlan Ellison appeared in the Science Fiction Writers of America newsletter urging the membership to take drama, and the SFWA's Nebula Award for Best Dramatic Presentation, more seriously:

We haven't been quite as concerned with the Drama Nebulas as with the more familiar categories, chiefly because a small percentage of our membership has been employed in the areas that Nebula touches, and so it has been something of an illegitimate offspring. But sf films and tv shows and stage productions and sf-affiliated record albums reach a much wider audience than even our most popular novels and stories. And to a large degree the public image of sf is conditioned by these mass-market presentations [Ellison 1984, 82].

Ellison pointed out the historic "snobbishness on the part of our older, more print-oriented members toward film and tv" and noted that "everyone else seems to understand the power of film/tv. SFWA doesn't" (84). However, when the group chose not to award a Nebula for drama in 1977, Ellison resigned from SWFA and gave a speech in which he berated his audience for "worrying about a lousy 5 cents a word" while ignoring the much more lucrative fields of stage, television, film, and audio recordings (87–98). But Ellison's concern was for the strategic and financial importance of drama, not for drama's artistic value. In fact, Ellison is blatant about his allegiance to prose: "Tragically, the illiterates keep multiplying, and the audience for books must be kept alive! ... Books are my first interest, books should be your first interest. They count. But the way to support the writing of books is to get some of that film and TV money" (93).

This is hardly an enthusiastic defense of performative storytelling; Ellison merely argued that SFWA members should profit from the current boom in dramatic science fiction—1977 being, of course, the year Star Wars was released. Ellison not only wrote the hands-down most popular episode of Star Trek, "City On the Edge of Forever," but is now also famous as a fierce defender of writers' intellectual property. However, the snobbishness against drama Ellison was fighting in the 1970s is still alive and well in the new
millennium. Orson Scott Card (2005) celebrated the recent (and surely temporary) death of the Star Trek franchise by attacking the original series as mere visual "spectacle" for people who weren't readers of science fiction, although he does end by granting that "screen sci-fi has finally caught up with written science fiction." This is offensive to the female sf fans who created Star Trek fandom in the late 1960s; as Justine Larbalestier (2002) has shown, women were always present as readers of sf, though they weren't always visible on the zine letter pages that were the public face of the sf fandom (23-27). In fact, the subset of female sf fans who founded Star Trek fandom had multiple literacies and competencies: like many readers (and writers) of science fiction, they were likely not only to be avid readers but also to have advanced degrees in the hard sciences at a time when this was much less common for women (Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom," this volume).

Most media fans still maintain at least a (ritual) allegiance to print over film; the two most recent large-scale media fandoms—Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings—are listed at the multifandom archive site Fanfiction.net under "Books" rather than "Movies" even though both fandoms grew exponentially only after film versions appeared. Ask a fan, and she'll generally express a preference for the book over the "movieverse," but over and over, dramatic, not literary, material generates fan fiction. Although creative fannish practices have become familiar enough to be applied to practically every genre of art—fanfic exists about books, movies, television, comics, cartoons, anime, bands, celebrity culture, and political culture—it's only when stories get embodied that they seem to generate truly massive waves of fiction.

It is a truth almost universally acknowledged that fan fiction is an inferior art form and worthy of derision—oh, for kids, maybe, sure, to get them reading and writing, but writing fan fiction is nothing that any respectable adult should be doing. Fan fiction, from this point of view, is neither art nor commerce. Instead, it is charged with being derivative and repetitive, too narrowly focused on bodies and character at the expense of plot or idea. That may sound like failure by conventional literary standards, but if we examine fan fiction as a species of performance, the picture changes. Fan fiction's concern with bodies is often perceived as a problem or flaw, but performance is predicated on the idea of bodies, rather than words, as the storytelling medium.

Scholars of performance studies often refer to their object of study as "the movement of bodies in space," and the behavior of those bodies is never unique or "original"; all behavior, as Richard Schechner (2002) explains, "consists of recombining bits of previously behaved behaviors" (28). For this reason, Schechner defines performance as "twice behaved" or "restored" behavior (22), so a focus on the importance of repetition and combination as well as a focus on bodies is intrinsic to performance as a genre. As Schechner explains:
Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the casual systems (personal, social, political, technological) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original "truth" or "source" of the behavior may not be known, or may be lost, ignored, contradicted — even while that truth or source is being honored [28].

This decontextualizing of behavior echoes the appropriation and use of existing characters in most fan fiction; in fact, one could define fan fiction as a textual attempt to make certain characters "perform" according to different behavioral strips. Or perhaps the characters who populate fan fiction are themselves the behavioral strips, able to walk out of one story and into another, acting independently of the works of art that brought them into existence. The existence of fan fiction postulates that characters are able to "walk" not only from one artwork into another, but from one genre into another; fan fiction articulates that characters are neither constructed or owned, but have, to use Schechner’s phrase, a life of their own not dependent on any original "truth" or "source."

What better tool to apply to studying Star Trek and its derivative artistic productions than a form of criticism dedicated to explaining the semiotic value of bodies in space? By recognizing drama and not prose as the antecedent medium for fan fiction, and by examining fan fiction through the lens of performance studies, we are able to begin explaining three highly debated things about fan fiction: (1) Why does fan fiction seem to focus on bodies? (2) Why does fan fiction seem so repetitious? and (3) Why is fan fiction produced within the context of media fandom? What is the relationship between a fanfic writer and her audience?

**Embodying the Geek Hierarchy**

I begin a more detailed argument about the conflict between textual and embodied meanings with a quick close reading of the Brunching Shuttlecock’s "Geek Hierarchy" (Figure 10.1). The Brunching Shuttlecocks are an online comedy troupe popular among a broad spectrum of geeks, nerds, fans, programmers, and hackers. The "Geek Hierarchy" is one of their most circulated jokes, but a revealing joke, one that gets at something true about fannish hierarchies and social structure.

The Shuttlecocks place "Published Science Fiction Authors" at the very top of the chart, to be followed by "Science Fiction Literature Fans," "Science Fiction Television Fans," "Fanfic Writers," "Erotic Fanfic..."
Writers," and "Erotic Fan fic Writers Who Put Themselves in the Story" (all italics are my emphasis). To frame it another way, the Shuttlecock rank the dramatic below the literary and the erotic below the dramatic. The hierarchy supports traditional values that privilege the written word over the spoken one and mind over body. The move down the hierarchy therefore represents a shift from literary values (the mind, the word, the "original statement") to what I would claim are theatrical ones (repetition, performance, embodied action). As we descend, we move further away from "text" and more toward "body," and, at least on the media fandom side of the diagram, toward the female body (because fan writers are likely to be women). At the very bottom of the hierarchy are the "furries," or fans who enjoy media involving anthropomorphic animals. These fans indulge a fantasy of pure body that asserts a connection between our human bodies and animal bodies. The mainstream discomfort with that idea is straight out of Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents.

Even the Geek Hierarchy's comparison between "Science Fiction Authors" and "Fan fic Writers" makes its distinction in terms of embodied action—because writing is a visible physical activity, a verb, while "authoring" (derived from the Latin auctor, "creator") is something more complex. To author a text is to have power over it, to take public responsibility for it, regardless of whether or not one did the actual work of selecting words and putting them in order. Authorship is a sign of control rather than creation. This distinction is gendered, because there is a larger tradition of seeing the female writer in terms of body rather than mind. Consider, for instance, Hawthorne's famous denigration of female authors as "scribbling women"; the slur conjures a picture of these women as engaged in frenetic activity, as if women's writing must be more physical than mental. Scribbling women are like skiing women, cleaning women, dancing women—not minds, but bodies in space.

Moreover, Henry Jenkins, in Textual Poachers (2002), explains that one of the earliest uses of the word fan was in reference to "women theatre-goers, 'Matinee Girls,' who male critics claimed had come to admire the actors rather than the plays" (12)—or, to gloss the idea another way, bodies rather than texts, or to have given a somehow wrongful emphasis to the body in space. Similarly, Joan Marie Verba, in her 1996 history of Star Trek zine culture, Boldly Writing, notes that by 1975, ever-increasing numbers of fans saw Star Trek not as science fiction but as a 'buddy' show, or as a heroic/romantic saga, in which Kirk and Spock were the focus." She continues, "Many of these stories reminded me of the ancient Greek
legend of Damon and Pythias, with Kirk and Spock substituted” (23). This allusion is interesting, because practically speaking, the legendary characters aren’t so much “characters” as a set of actions, a behavioral script; to offer to exchange places with a comrade who is facing death is to be Damon and Pythias, and so this sort of fan fiction “casts” Kirk and Spock as the legendary friends in a performance of the myth. From this viewpoint, Kirk and Spock aren’t characters firmly enmeshed in a narrative, but performers whose twice-behaved behaviors might (like Schechner’s behavioral strips) be rearranged or otherwise reconstructed. The result of this reconstruction wouldn’t be “original” behavior, however, because according to Schechner, there’s no such thing. Rather, Kirk and Spock are well cast to perform Damon and Pythias. One set of twice-behaved behaviors is exchanged for another. This emphasis on character, behavior, and relationships is often framed as a female value; it’s certainly a theatrical one.

We can see these theatrical and performative values in the very earliest creative contributions to Star Trek zines. The first Star Trek fanzine, Spockanalia (1967, edited by Devra Langsam and Sherna Comerford), included the creative artwork “The Territory of Rigel,” by Dorothy Jones (Figure 10.2). In Boldly Writing, Verba describes this as a “poem,” but it is, in fact, a song with an explicit stage direction that tells us it’s a ni var to be performed by two voices and a Vulcan harp, no doubt influenced by the scene in the Star Trek episode “Charlie X” where Uhura sings while accompanied by Spock. Perhaps some readers actually sang the song with their friends, or perhaps the reader was merely supposed to direct the performance of the song in her head—but the key thing is that the reader of this song can do these things because she has an image of Leonard Nimoy as Spock with a Vulcan harp accompanying a singer. The performance of this song has already been cast; we know the behaviors of both singers and harpist. To read this song is therefore to supplement the written words with the mental image of the appropriate bodies. This “text” is overtly performative and relational; two voices, ni var, two people singing; as the songwriter explains, ni var means “two form,” comparing and contrasting two aspects of the same thing (Verba 1996, 11). This ni var features two people singing, a third if the Vulcan harpist isn’t one of the singers, and a fourth if you, the reader/director, isn’t part of the performance. It’s not a poem, it’s a party; it’s an artwork that implies a community.

Opposite Fig. 10.1. Brunching Shuttlecock’s “Geek Hierachy.” Available at http://www.brunching.com/geekhierarchy.html (accessed June 1, 2006). Used with permission.
The Territory of Rigel
(*A ni var to be performed by two voices and Vulcan harp*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Voice</th>
<th>Second Voice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rigel in the scanner, blue-white and crystalline, shining. Light born in the corona pours into space.</td>
<td>Dark and silent is the field of space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instruments whisper, the panel lights flicker. The stars are still and clear.</td>
<td>The bridge is empty. The time, three hundred.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their song is deliberate, long years to a cadence.</td>
<td>The instruments tell little. The computer absorbs in silence trivial patterns meaning nothing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dust in their paths moves in their wake like water. and Rigel shines.</td>
<td>Three-twenty. The night is very long.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The stars like ancient trees, heavy with planets, blazing with life.</td>
<td>In the dark gulf is the ship, in the sleeping ship is the bridge on the bridge am I, silence upon silence, as quiet as memory, and dark as death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wander the bright roads whom no planet claims: live in the open Galaxy I have clarity before me, and Rigel full of light.</td>
<td>I am far from my beginning and my end. Four hundred and the watch is changed. I leave the bridge and go from darkness into darkness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Similarly, some fan fiction has been written in script or teleplay form, often by fans who aspired to write for the produced show (and there is a perception among fans that a greater proportion of these script-writing fans have been men [Cynthia Walker and Laura Hale, personal communications, June 8, 2005]). An actual theatrical play based on *Star Trek* was put on at the Denham Springs Community Theatre in 1971; the fact was widely reported in zines, as was Gene Roddenberry's approving letter: "I have no
objection to plays similar to _Star Trek_ or even identical to _Star Trek_ if done by students or community groups on a non-profit basis as long as the appropriate credit is given to the source material and individuals. Or as long as a production remains a community theatre venture’ (Verba 1996, 6). Roddenberry’s coda insists on the play’s nonprofit status; then as now, to write in script form would be a sign of a writer’s aspiring professionalism. Although some fan teleplays were probably written as spec scripts for the industry, others ended up published in zines, and when online fan fiction archives became popular in the mid-1990s, the fiction was categorized not only as “gen,” “het,” or “slash,” but by such categories as “romance,” “drama,” “humor,” “poetry,” “filk,” or “teleplay.” But the script form has always been unpopular among readers, so a fan whose primary audience was other fans rather than the television industry was more likely to tell her dramatic story in prose. Arguably, the teleplay form declined as media fandom broke away from science fiction fandom, becoming more defiantly amateur as television writing grew more professionalized, but the current fracturing of the television market due to competition from cable, satellite, DVD, video games, and the Internet seems to be reversing this trend once again. Newer shows (and older shows that have had time to evaluate the creative and economic value of their fan base) increasingly invite the creative participation of fans, and many seem to want to blur the lines between amateur and professional, fan and specialist. As an example, the Web site for the television series _The Dead Zone_, a show helmed by longtime _Star Trek_ writer and producer Michael Piller, offers to fans not only free copies of the aired scripts, but a writer’s guide for the show and explicit instructions on how to send in your teleplay for professional consideration. In this climate, fans may become professional movie or teleplay writers while still maintaining their identities as fans and while writing fan fiction.

The existence of the teleplay and other performative forms helps to demonstrate fan fiction’s roots as an essentially dramatic literature, but the larger part of my argument is that fan fiction directs bodies in space even when it’s not overtly written in theatrical form. Readers come to fan fiction with extratexual knowledge, mostly of characters’ bodies and voices. Jane Mailander (2005) argues that fan fiction is an ideal medium for erotica because “the audience knows the characters; they’ve walked that mile in their shoes, they are primed. The dynamic between these two people is clear to the audience.” A fan fiction writer has “the challenge of expressing that dynamic, of taking it to a place that would make the producers blush—but a place that must follow logically from that baseline development.” Mailander is talking about character, but she might as well be talking about bodies; we know who these characters are because we know the actors who play
them, and we bring our memories of their physicality to the text, so the reader is precharged, preeroticized. But the actor’s body, as much as the words on the page, is the medium of even nonerotic fannish storytelling. In making her point that we come to fan fiction “primed,” Mailander also identifies something we might correlate with Schechner’s twice-behaved behavior. We’re primed because we’ve met these characters already, and now we’re seeing them again. In theatre, we call that a production, and it isn’t a problem.

Repetition and the Derridean Supplement

From a literary perspective, fan fiction’s unusual emphasis on the body seems like a thematic obsession or a stylistic tic, but in theatre, bodies are the storytelling medium, the carriers of symbolic action. Similarly, in literary terms, fan fiction’s repetition is strange; in theatre, stories are retold all the time. Theatre artists think it’s fine to tell to tell the same story again, but differently: not only was Shakespeare’s Hamlet a relatively late version of the tale (previous versions include the “Amleth” of Saxo Grammaticus, its translation by Francois de Belleforest, and the Ur-Hamlet attributed to Thomas Kyd), but we’re happy to see differently inflected versions of the tale. Moreover, there’s no assumption that the first production will be definitive; in theatre, we want to see your Hamlet and his Hamlet and her Hamlet; to embody the role is to reinvent it. We also want to see new generations of directors and designers recast the play without regard for authorial intent or historicity, putting Hamlet into infinite alternative universes. What if Hamlet was a graduate student? What if Hamlet had an (entirely ahistorical) Oedipal complex? What if Hamlet was a street kid in the Bronx? Hamlet has been portrayed as an action hero/medieval warrior (Mel Gibson, dir. Franco Zeffirelli, 1990), the avenging son of a Japanese CEO (The Bad Sleep Well; Toshiro Mifune, dir. Akira Kurosawa, 1960), an angry young man (Peter O’Toole, dir. Laurence Olivier, Old Vic, 1963), and a university student home on break (Alex Jennings, dir. Matthew Warchus at the RSC, 1997).

In theatre, there’s a value to revising the same text in order to explore different aspects and play out different behavioral strips; similarly, in television, we don’t mind tuning in week after week to see the same characters in entirely different stories. We don’t mind new versions of Hamlet the way we don’t mind new episodes of Star Trek. We don’t say, “Oh, Star Trek again? We had Star Trek last week!” We don’t mind if Kirk and Spock visit—as they did on the aired series—a planet based on Roman gladiator culture, or Native American culture, or America during the Great Depression. Most
people happily watch televised repeats—identical replayings of dramatic action. How much more interesting would different performances of the same scripts be if the actors and directors explored the limitations of the text and tried to elicit different readings, different embodied meanings? And because fan fiction is an amateur production accountable to no market forces, it allows for radical reimaginings: plots, themes, and endings that would never be permitted on network television. One could imagine Star Trek by David Lynch, Star Trek by Stanley Kubrick, Star Trek by Woody Allen—and what I’m getting at here is that that’s what fan fiction is.

But you don’t even have to attend multiple productions to understand doubling and repetition in theatre. Most productions were scripts first: theatre is an art form where we read something with the goal of making something else out of it. The script isn’t the final product in theatre; in fact, one of the questions that theatre theorists have had to debate is the location of the work of art. Is it in the author’s original script? Probably not: the original script goes through innumerable changes in performance and is rarely seen outside of library archives. The published script of a theatrical or teleplay is usually a postproduction draft that takes into account changes that were made during production by actors, director, and designers; far from being evidence of a single authorial vision, a published play is one of the most collaborative genres in existence. And most theatre works never result in a published script at all, so it’s difficult to argue for text as the central object in a theatrical art experience.

Far from being a sacred text, a play’s script is more like a blueprint for a production—a thing used to make another thing. Like any architectural blueprint, a script provides the directions for building something three-dimensional and situated in space. But one can’t point to theatrical production as the center of dramatic art either, because the question then becomes: which production? A script isn’t simply directions for building something in space, but also in time—not just a single production, but a potentially infinite series of productions. Marvin Carlson (1985) theorizes the complicated relationship between all the multiple and vastly different works of art that can be associated with a single dramatic story in terms of the Derridean supplement, and the supplement also serves as an excellent model for fan fiction as well (see Derecho [this volume], who uses the Derridean term archontic to describe this same supplementarity).

The best way to explain a supplement is by pointing to a concrete example of one; Roger Laport used a French dictionary, but let me substitute for that the more familiar example of an encyclopedia. When you buy an encyclopedia, you buy a complete set, volumes A–Z. But the world keeps progressing, and knowledge keeps expanding, and so this “complete” set
of encyclopedias is outdated the second you buy it; it doesn’t include today’s news and discoveries. So when you buy an encyclopedia, they generally also include a yearly supplement — 2005, 2006, and so on — that you can slot into your bookcase after “Z.” So with that image in mind, consider what the supplement does: it reveals the original thing, the encyclopedia, in this case, as incomplete, but also prophesies future supplements. In fact, a supplement suggests that completeness is actually impossible, as the presence of a 2005 supplement suggests the need for one in 2006, 2007, 2008, and on into the future, indefinitely.

We can apply this concept to theatrical performance, and then to fan fiction as performance. In theatre, a working script becomes a staged performance, but as Carlson explains, “A play on stage will inevitably display material lacking in the written text, quite likely not apparent as lacking until the performance takes place, but then revealed as significant and necessary. At the same time, the performance, by revealing this lack, reveals also a potentially infinite series of future performances providing further supplementation” (1985, 10). Fan fiction works much the same way. Once a story supplements canon — giving us something the original source did not by filling in a missing scene, getting inside a character’s head, interpreting or clarifying or departing from the story as originally told — future supplements become inevitable, and they aren’t any more redundant than multiple productions of Hamlet.

A conservative critic might argue that Shakespeare can support that level of interpretation and invention, whereas your average — or even better than average — television show simply can’t. We tell certain stories over and over because they’re brilliant and continue to be relevant. I don’t share that point of view. I agree with Alan Sinfield when he argues that Shakespeare seems relevant because he is constantly interfered with (1994, 4–5). It is Shakespeare’s endlessly creative fans — be they theatre practitioners carrying the stories on their bodies or literary critics teasing out new textual interpretations — who keep Shakespeare going. An endless number of Shakespearean productions supplement the texts, adding meanings that Shakespeare never intended and making them meaningful to twenty-first-century audiences. There’s no reason not to see this as a perfectly valid artistic activity; and if it is so for theatre, why is it not for television?

Before a Live Audience

The third theatrical quality I want to discuss in terms of fan fiction is the need for a live audience. A live audience has always been a precondition for
fandom. Longtime fanzine editor and archivist Arnie Katz (n.d.) explains that science fiction magazines—particularly their letter pages—were essential to the genesis of science fiction fandom. As Katz notes, “Science fiction and fantasy were widely available for many years before fandom erupted.... Those who wanted to be more than readers couldn’t do much while books remained the main delivery vehicle for science fiction. It’s hard to interact with a book, other than to write a letter to the author in care of the publisher.” Science fiction fans have a saying: “fandom is a way of life”—which is to say, science fiction literature fandom is more than a celebration of texts: it’s a series of practices. This may be why most academic works on fandom are ethnographies, or analyses of social organizations and cultural performances. As Katz points out, fandom is essentially interactive in a way beyond the traditional reader-writer relationship.

Fan fiction, too, is a cultural performance that requires a live audience; fan fiction is not merely a text, it’s an event. Whether published in a zine, on a mailing list, to an archive, or to a blog like LiveJournal.com, there’s a kind of simultaneity to the reception of fan fiction, a story everyone is reading, more or less at the same time, more or less together. Over the years, technology has allowed television viewers to reconstitute themselves as an audience; now, you can watch television while you post to the boards at TelevisionWithoutPity.com, or sit in an IRC channel, or send updates to your mailing list; you don’t have to wait for the next issue of a zine to be mailed. Similarly, fandom gathers together a live, communal audience for stories, and fans have adopted and adapted every mode of communication in an effort to ensure that fan fiction quickly reaches its target audience.

Compare this to John Ruskin’s definition of a “true” book:

A book is essentially not a talked thing, but a written thing; and written, not with the view of mere communication, but of permanence. The book of talk is printed only because its author cannot speak to thousands of people at once; if he could, he would—the volume is mere multiplication of his voice.... But a book is written, not to multiply the voice merely, not to carry it merely, but to perpetuate it [1885, 259–60].

Most books—including most mass market fiction—are not “true books” by this standard. Most books merely convey the storytelling voice to an audience that cannot be gathered together to listen simultaneously, as they do in theatre. A book’s audience is generally dispersed over both space and time; people in different places read a book at different times, and reading is—at least in the last hundred or so years—a pretty solitary activity. This didn’t used to be so; the line between reading and theatre was thinner in the days when a family patriarch might read aloud to his family after dinner, or a group of middle-class women might stage a tableau based on a
favorite text. Ironically, the rise of literacy and the greater availability of printed matter are largely responsible for fracturing the communal reading audience and encouraging the solitary consumption of stories. Consider Isaac Asimov’s prophetic description of “the perfect entertainment cassette”:

A cassette as ordinarily viewed makes sound and casts light. That is its purpose, of course, but must sound and light obtrude on others who are not involved or interested? The ideal cassette would be visible and audible only to the person using it. We could imagine a cassette that is always in perfect adjustment; that starts automatically when you look at it; that stops automatically when you cease to look at it; that can play forward or backward, quickly or slowly, by skips or with repetitions, entirely at your pleasure. Does this remain only a dream? Can we expect to have such a cassette some day? We not only have it now, we have had it for many centuries. The ideal I have described is the printed word, the book, the object you now hold. Does it seem to you that the book, unlike the cassette I have been describing, does not produce sound and images? It certainly does. You cannot read without hearing the words in your mind and seeing the images to which they give rise. In fact, they are your sounds and images, not those invented for you by others, and are therefore better [quoted in Ellison 1984, 51–52].

Asimov, writing years before VHS, let alone DVD, frames the book as an improvement over other forms of dramatic storytelling (“sounds and images”) precisely because it’s more individualized (“visible and audible only to the person using it”). Asimov’s prophetic description illustrates how the book, taken as a technology, anticipates the virtual reality so feared by those who worry about the effects of video games and the Internet on children; it’s interesting that those same parents are often keen to encourage immersive reading of the kind Asimov is valorizing. But immersive reading is generally not the kind encouraged by literature departments, which teaches students to attend to language. To read critically is to see a text not as “sounds and images” but as specific words placed on a page in a particular order; to closely read a text is to make meaning out of those particular words and no others. To look at, rather than through, the specifically defined words on the page is to see a story as a written rather than a “talked” thing.

Fan fiction is Ruskin’s “talked” thing, or Asimov’s “perfect entertainment cassette.” Fan fiction writers generally use a relatively transparent style of prose conducive to an immersive reading experience. There are marvelous exceptions: many fan fiction writers are great prose stylists or even poets. But historically the fan fiction writer has tried not to get in the way of the reader’s view of the characters, and in this, fan fiction writers are part of a more general literary trend. In an article in the Washington Post, Linton Weeks (2001) complains about the “No-Style style” of many best-selling authors and quotes book reviewer Pat Holt as noticing that “the
style of commercial fiction has shifted over to a television mentality,” with “short paragraphs, a lot of switching of locations and lots of dialogue,” without ever questioning to what extent this might make it not simply “inferior” prose but prose put to a different and nonliterary purpose. In her introduction to the forthcoming Reconstructing Harry: “Harry Potter” Fan Fiction on the World Wide Web, Jane Glaubman observes J. K. Rowling’s “transparent” prose style without judgment, concluding that “the impression of transparency must stem in part from continuities with visual culture” and these continuities “call on devices ubiquitous in commercial media that themselves aspire to transparency.” Certainly, Rowling’s visual style may explain why the Harry Potter books were adopted by media fandom; they share fan fiction’s theatrical values. For instance, Glaubman notes the unusual extent to which Harry was embodied in Rowling’s text: “An awareness of the body is everywhere in these books.... Rowling expresses [Harry’s] feelings somatically, ‘his heart twanging like a giant elastic band,’ ‘as though he’d just been walloped in the stomach.’... By giving us immediate access to his sensations, she contributes ... to the effect of transparency.”

Harry Potter comes to us as the embodied protagonist of a series of stories that retell Harry’s adventures during a series of school years. By the time of the fourth installment, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, the simultaneous, worldwide release of the book was the occasion for something very like a public festival, with people coming out at midnight, sometimes in costume, not simply to purchase the book but also to formally constitute themselves as an audience. The ongoing series of novels was then made into an ongoing series of films. In all of these ways, the Harry Potter books resist the status of “finished literary text” made up of particular words in a particular order, and instead construct themselves as the open-ended inspiration for future performative supplements that will allow its audience to reconstitute itself on a regular basis. Harry Potter has already resulted in numerous translations, four sequels, three films, and, as of June 13, 2005, at least 190,994 fan fiction stories—so far.

Why stop there? Can it be stopped there? This is no longer a phenomenon within a single author’s control; “Harry Potter” is now an entire creative universe within which millions of people are writing, reading, drawing, reporting, discussing, analyzing, criticizing, celebrating, marketing, filming, translating, teaching, theorizing, playacting. Although Rowling may be responsible for putting together a initial series of words in a particular order, only in the legal sense is she the “author” of all of these other creative productions. Or, to put it another way, she’s the author in the sense of taking responsibility for these productions, but she’s not the writer of those specific other expressions of the idea of a boy wizard at
school. There are other creative players involved, some paid (the artists who illustrated the text; the scholars who are writing the critical studies of the series) and some unpaid (the fans who participate in heated analytical discussions on Harry Potter Web sites or mailing lists, fan fiction writers). Similarly, a film like Star Wars or a television show like Buffy the Vampire Slayer have become rich art worlds quite apart from the authorial or auteurial efforts of George Lucas or Joss Whedon.

One last word about the complex relationship between the author, these other creative writers, and the audience: in traditional literary studies, the author is dead, and has been for some time. The phrase alludes to Roland Barthes's essay “The Death of the Author” and to Barthes’s argument that “as soon as a fact is narrated ... the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (1977, 142). From this perspective, language always means more than an author intends, and we cannot evaluate writing as an expression of a “person’s” ideas or thoughts. Rather, we should look at writing as a separately existing linguistic performance that does/says more than any one person ever could. Barthes concludes by saying that what meaning there is to a text is made by the reader, and “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148).

But not the writer. In fandom, the author may be dead, but the writer — that actively scribbling, embodied woman — is very much alive. You can talk to her; you can write to her and ask her questions about her work, and she will probably write back to you and answer them. She might enjoy discussing larger plot, style, and characterization points with you if you engage her in critical conversation. You can tell her that her story is bad and hurt her feelings, or you can flame her as someone who shouldn’t be writing at all. Moreover, the writer may well have worked with a team of editors or beta readers; the fiction might well be not only derivative of an author, but written collaboratively by a group, or crafted as a birthday present for a fellow fan — in short, the writer is part of an interactive community, and in this way, the production of fan fiction is closer to the collaborative making of a theatre piece then to the fabled solitary act of writing.

I believe that fandom is community theatre in a mass media world; fandom is what happened to the culture of amateur dramatics. In the days before television, people often made theatre in their homes, for fun, and in fandom, we still make theatre together, for fun, except we cast the play from our television sets. Theatre — actual, three-dimensional theatre that moves bodies in space — is expensive and requires tremendous social capital; you’ve got to have the power to make those bodies move under your direction and at your command. We discover women’s poetry in attic trunks and women’s novels written under male pseudonyms, but we still find that women are
underrepresented in the roles that orchestrate and dictate the actions of (male) bodies in performance. Consider the ongoing underrepresentation of women playwrights, composers, directors, and symphony conductors. If traditional theatre takes a script and makes it three-dimensional in a potentially infinite number of productions, modern fandom takes something three-dimensional and then produces an infinite number of scripts. This is not authoring texts, but making productions—relying on the audience’s shared extratextual knowledge of sets and wardrobes, of the actors’ bodies and their smiles and movements—to direct a living theatre in the mind.

Notes

1. Media fandom, although probably best the known and most studied as a result of the popularity of the mass media it is based around, is not the only kind of fandom. Comics, anime, and gaming each have well-established fandoms with different histories. However, the Internet has encouraged crossover among these groups.

2. Or possibly as a result of the double whammy of Star Trek and The Man from U.N.C.L.E. (1964–1968), another television series that was hugely popular with science fiction fans; see Walker (2001) and my own “A Brief History of Media Fandom” (this volume).

3. When possible, I have chosen to cite the online work of fan-critics and fan-historians rather than the published scholarly works of professional academics. As a fan, I am wary of “distanced professional expertise,” even my own; the position of the media fan is one of defiant amateurism. In that spirit, I therefore note that fandom has always done an excellent job of explaining itself to itself, producing its own canon of theoretical literature, its own roster of fannish scholars, and its own critical apparatus for reviewing, analyzing, and recommending fan fiction.

4. Although the social value of live theatre has historically been greater than that of mass media dramatic forms, both have been marginalized. Literature and theatre are often grouped together as “high art” against film and television, but in practice, textual values are often opposed to performative ones. Drama has been seen as appealing to the working classes, women, children, and illiterates; also, until recently, there was no way to record and distribute it. In the specific context of science fiction, plays like Karel Capek’s R.U.R. (1920), which introduced the word robot into the world’s languages, are often left out of the sf canon, even though they antedate the rise of prose magazine fiction.

5. I am indebted to my conversations with Georgina Paterson for these insights.

References


11. “This Dratted Thing”
Fannish Storytelling
Through New Media

Louisa Ellen Stein

ABSTRACT.—I link together three avenues of thought relating to online fan texts: (1) new media theory’s focus on technology, specifically understandings of interface—that is, the point of interaction between a user and a computer at the level of the software with which we engage with new media; (2) genre theory’s conception of genre discourse as shared, shifting, cultural category; and (3) fan studies’ focus on fans as users and authors of media texts, who engage with and build on already existing media texts in various ways. I propose that, through the merging of these three avenues of inquiry, we can find a new, more tangible, way to understand fan engagement with new media and popular media texts. From the interplay among fan culture, genre discourse, and new media interfaces, fan-created fiction and art are born. The histories and traditions of fan fiction intersect with broader cultural (generic) discourses as fandom moves online. In turn, as fans use the tools of new media to write and share fannish narratives, new forms of fan creative expression come into being. I look at how this trifold process is exemplified in two fannish uses of interface to create new modes of storytelling: diary-based fan fictions that use interactive blogging sites such as LiveJournal.com to create daily diaries kept by fictional characters; and fictional narratives created by fans out of images from The Sims, a computer game where players create characters and control various aspects of their lives.
Introduction

One wouldn’t expect Harry Potter’s school yard bully, Draco Malfoy, to be an introspective, memoir-writing type, nor would one expect him to be particularly technologically savvy; and yet, as it turns out, he does indeed keep an online diary, in which he records his thoughts, hopes, and dreams. Among his first words in cyberspace were, “Time to tweak around a bit with this dratted thing. I do hope they have my colours in stock. Or however you’re awarded your combo ... leave it to a Muggle device to make your decisions for you” (Dracolicious, LiveJournal.com [LJ], February 26, 2003). To translate for the uninitiated, the Muggle (nonmagical) device he complains about is a Web-accessing PDA, from which he is posting to his online journal. His complaint focuses on the limitations of technology, which “makes your decisions for you.” However, as he better learns to use this technology, he succeeds in setting his PDA appropriately to Slytherin green, thus making his voice known on the Web in true Malfoy style.

Truth be told, this is only one of many Draco Malfoys online, all of whom share cyberspace with a variety of Buffy Summerses, Spikes, Mulders, and the like. Even Darth Vader has a blog. These fictional online voices are part of new developments in fan storytelling spurred by the rapid growth of online media culture. Such new narrative forms build on traditions within fan fiction and at the same time are shaped by the technologies of the new media with which they are created and shared. They also draw on generic structures within popular media and culture in general, as well as within fan fiction specifically.

To explore the shifting and layered terrain of these new modes of fan- nish storytelling (including, but not limited to, online diary-based narratives), in this essay, I link together three avenues of thought relating to online fan texts: (1) new media theory’s focus on technology, specifically understandings of interface—that is, the point of interaction between a user and a computer at the level of the software we use to engage with new media; (2) genre theory’s conception of genre discourse as shared, shifting, cultural category; and (3) fan studies’ focus on fans as users and authors of media texts, who engage with and build on already existing media texts in various ways. I propose that, through the merging of these three avenues of inquiry, we can find a new, more tangible, way to understand fan engagement with new media and popular media texts.

Out of the interplay of these three cultural forces—fan culture, genre discourse, and new media interfaces—fan-created fiction and art are born in various forms. As fan cultures and fan creative texts evolve online, the histories and traditions of fan fiction intersect with broader cultural
(generic) discourses. In turn, as fans use the tools of new media to write and share fannish narratives, new forms of fan creative expression come into being. This trifold process is exemplified in two fannish uses of interface to create new modes of storytelling: diary-based fan fictions that use interactive blogging sites such as LJ to create daily diaries kept by fictional characters, and fictional narratives created by fans out of images from The Sims, a computer game in which players create characters and families and control various aspects of their lives.²

Within the many diverse forms of fan creativity online, we can identify a central tension between two defining fannish concerns: expansiveness and limitation. On the one hand, fannish imaginations and creativity both draw on and create a sense of expandability. Fan creative texts expand the world of the source text in potentially infinite directions, and, as Roberta E. Pearson (2003) has argued, fans often focus on texts that have expandability built into their structure. On the other hand, fannish authorship is also driven by a sense of limitation and restriction, as fannish storytelling plays out in relation to the original source text on which it is based. This negotiation between limitation and expansiveness shapes fan creativity. Both the source text and culturally shared codes of genre provide structures and limitations within which fans write and from which fans draw. As fandom and fan fiction have grown in the cultural spaces carved out by new media in the past two decades, new media interfaces provide another layer of limitation and expansiveness, and it is within this context that fan creativity flourishes online. I consider how the dynamics of online fan creativity play out in specific fan texts, exploring instances in which new media interfaces are especially crucial in the shaping of emergent modes of fannish storytelling.

**Impetus and Limitation:**
**Canon, Fantext, Genre, Interface**

Fan fiction is always created in relation to an outside media text; however, to say that fan fiction is derivative oversimplifies the relationship between the fan fiction and the source text. At the most obvious level, fans write fan fiction in relation to canon. In their fan fiction, authors play with the limitations and possibilities offered by their source text of choice. Obviously, canon comes in many forms and is found across media. In turn, the many different fan creative texts which circulate online compose what fans and fan scholars call the *fantext*, the combined, flexible whole of the fans
imagination (related to but not quite the same as fanon, which carries with it the negative connotation of overused cliché). All of these fan texts, which together make up the larger fantext, build on and move beyond canon to different degrees. Canon restrictions are used as both creative impetus and delineation. Some authors write carefully within canon, valuing fan fiction that fills in canonical spaces without breaking any canonical characterization or plot. However, other authors define their fan fiction precisely as it breaks from canon, as is most evident in the fan understood category of the alternate universe (AU), in which fan authors take recognizable characters and place them in noncanonical contexts, so that the protagonists are recast as Roman gladiators or undercover agents. But even when the expectations created by canon are disregarded, fantextual or fanon understandings of characters and relationships often provide a new set of limitations within which an author must work. For example, the various fan-favored romantic pairings develop their own set of specific fantextual expectations as well as perceived limitations or restrictions that fan authors then follow or break: Smallville slash fans’ investment in the romantic union between teenage alien/Superman-to-be Clark Kent and young billionaire Lex Luthor comes complete with its own set of expectations and even clichés.

Such fantextual expectations often extend beyond specific fannish investments in a particular pairing or character. Instead, they draw on larger fan concerns that surface across fandoms. If we take a step back, we can also see the proliferation of pairings and similar characterizations in fan fiction as part of broader textual expectations that we might understand as genre discourse. Indeed, the ever-shifting fantext stretches beyond specific fandoms, drawing on and establishing widely shared generic structures in fan-specific ways. This in turn provides a new set of expectations and limitations to be followed. For example, labels such as “slash” or “het” signal fantextual expectations that cut across fandoms and pairings. Thus, within fan culture, these terms function as generic discourse that is used to categorize, to distinguish, and to communicate expectations.

Indeed, genre itself functions in a similar way to canon and fantext in terms of restriction and impetus; shared understandings of generic codes and tropes contribute story possibilities and yet also limit the ranges of types of stories told. For example, both Smallville and Harry Potter fan fiction draw on fantasy, romance, and adolescent angst, invoking elements associated with the teen genre in their stories’ conflict and resolution. Fan fiction narratives evolve from this interplay of canonical, fantextual, and generic expectations. A slash author pairing Draco with Harry may break both canonical and generic expectations—for example, forgoing Draco as
bully—to embrace him in a different, if related, role as bratty yet ultimately sympathetic romantic hero. A fan fiction with Lex Luthor at its center may shed any vestiges of the character’s supervillainy in favor of the misunderstood, thoughtful, but alcoholic Lex favored by Smallville fans of slash and het alike, many of whom have transformed Lex into a redemptive figure, someone who, like Draco, has lost his way. In such a transformation, varying levels of generic and fanontextual codes are brought into play, ranging from broader cultural generic constructs like teen romance and redemption narratives to fan-specific generic constructs like domesticic.

But what of the tools used to create and share fan texts? Fan authors use a range of technologies, interfaces, and forms in their creative authorship, from the word-processing program Microsoft Word to write fan fiction, to Photoshop to create icons and manipulated figures, to pen, paper, and a digital camera to capture hand-drawn illustrations. In so doing, the original canon/fanontext relationship is now compounded not only by the broader structures of genre but also by the varying technologies, software, and interfaces used by the fan author. Of course, restrictions in terms of medium existed before the digital age; the limitations of communication through writing rather than images, for example, has always been at issue for fans writing about nonliterary media texts such as television series and movies. Similarly, the VCR presented its own set of technological limitations as rudimentary video-making technology. In fact, one could argue that such limitations of technology and interface were (and are) as crucial to the specific dynamics of fan creativity as the stimulating restrictions of canon.

In the introduction to this volume, Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson note the importance of “the creation of free, easy-to-use online tools that permit easy authoring of beautiful and accessible sites with little technical expertise” (16). At this moment, fans creating and sharing fan art and fiction online have the extensive layers of limitations and possibilities offered by a range of technologies and software—personal Web page creation tools, Photoshop, Premiere, digital games that lend themselves to fannish use such as The Sims, and online community forums such as LJ, FanForum.com, TelevisionWithoutPity.com, and EzBoard.com. The interplay between the limitations and possibilities of varying interfaces and the limitations and possibilities of the fan authors’ relationship to canon and fanontextual expectations intersect in the creation of online fan texts and fannish modes of storytelling. Superimposed on this synthesis, we have the fluctuating structures of generic discourse, which provide a shifting yet culturally shared set of possibilities and limitations. Together, all three lenses focus the process of fanontextual creation.
Character Diary Networks as Storytelling

As Francesca Coppa notes in her “Brief History of Media Fandom” (this volume), over the past few years, online journaling sites such as LJ and JournalFen.net have become increasingly central forums for fan engagement and have all but replaced older forms of interactions for large parts of many fandoms. LJ facilitates the construction not only of personal journals but also of communities that link together participants, thus creating shared personal spaces. Although some use LJ primarily as a space to keep a traditional diary of their daily experiences or to stay in touch with friends and family, others use it pseudonymously to participate in virtual communities. Fan communities in particular have found many uses for the LJ interface, and LJ has in turn changed and shaped forms of fannish storytelling and creativity. Authors post stories as works in progress in their journals and receive ongoing feedback from readers through LJ’s commenting system, which in turn may be incorporated into the writing process. Communities for fan fiction written in specific alternate universes or with specific themes or rules, such as drabbles (comprising exactly one hundred words), flourish in the LJ framework. The narrative mode I’m concerned with here is the diary-based multiauthored fan fiction network.

Busse and Hellekson’s introduction to this volume provides an overview of terms used in the LJ blogsphere, but let me quickly run down the features of the software relevant to my argument. LJ offers a space for a user to post her own diary entries and, if she chooses to post her journal publicly or semipublicly, to engage in conversation with her readers by using the comments function. Journals appear in chronological order of posting on one’s friendslist. Clearly the use of the term friend to name the relationship between different LJ users suggests a social networking dimension to the LJ experience; other journal sites, such as Diaryland and Blogger, do not emphasize this to the same extent. This social networking facilitates the interpersonal engagement necessary for the process of group authoring. Such social dimensions of the LJ interface also translate into the depiction of fictional social networks in online fictional journal communities.

Online diary-based fan fiction uses LJ to create first-person fragmented narratives told in many voices and written by many authors. These journal networks create unfolding, serial, expansive universes where fannish narratives play out. One might at first primarily associate such communities with role-playing games (RPGs), which have evolved from a Dungeons and Dragons gaming heritage to encompass a wide scope of computer-based and live-action interactive gaming. Certainly some participants do think of these
projects as specific incarnations of RPGs, but others contest such labeling. They prefer to call their process of storytelling *interactive fiction*. However, online diary-based fictional journaling communities, whether they call themselves RPGs or not, also owe much of what they are to traditions of fan fiction—in concerns, theme, narrative structure, and creative process. The dynamics of group or shared writing has a long history in fan fiction, including feedback, round robins, fiction author partnerships, shared alternate universes, and team-written alternate television seasons or virtual seasons. LJ diary-based fictions thus merge practices of fannish role playing with traditions of fan fiction cowriting, creating a synthesis that is part game, part narrative, with the boundary between game and story blurry at best.

Online diary/journal-based networks vary greatly from project to project, but virtually all function as unfolding fiction. Some are intended to be followed only by the writers themselves; others are followed by a broad audience of readers. Several such communities exist for *Harry Potter*, as do countless RPGs for a wide range of media sources, including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, *Smallville*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. Each of these diary-based fictions or RPGs is quite specific in its mode of storytelling and in its use of chosen interface. Within LJ, some RPG fiction projects use the LJ interface to provide an opportunity for readers to interact with the characters; others do not make use of the comments function, or use comments only for interaction between characters, with separate communities set up for readers to comment on the unfolding narrative.

The interface of LJ contributes to readers’ experience of these narratives as unfolding, serial, and everyday. Interested readers can follow the narrative by “friend-ing” Harry, Draco, Hermione, and even Narcissa. Each character’s periodic journal posting then appears on one’s friendslist, alongside personal narratives of the nonfictional sort, as well as quizzes, fan reviews, fan art, and other more traditional installments of fan fiction. In fact, characters sometimes post the quizzes and memes that are informally circulating in LJ communities, thus further confusing the boundary between the fictional and nonfictional: the diaries appear exactly as if a person, not a narrative construct, were posting. Depending on the RPG, readers may also be able to interact with the characters as they do with the other LJ users on their friendslist, giving them support and advice or chastising them for self-destructive behavior. Sometimes they may receive comments from the characters, thus interacting with fictional characters as if they were other LJ users. Alternatively, a reader coming upon an RPG fiction with an established history can read all the previous posts
by moving through the archive, which organizes posts and comments by date. Although this removes the narrative from its nonfictional LJ counterparts, it still frames the narrative within real time, and the constant links to other journals contextualize each thread within the whole of the RPG fictional network, if not the whole of LJ.

The Draco example with which I opened this essay is a part of an RPG fiction that takes advantage of LJ’s capacity for capturing and communicating the periodic unfolding of everyday experience. Readers of this RPG follow the evolving interactions between Harry, Draco, and their family and friends as they post, comment, and engage in conversation on their LJs. The added dimension of hyperlinks leading to images related to the narrative, as well as to other characters’ LJs, creates a sense of verisimilitude, providing details that function to emulate the expansiveness of real-life experience. Readers who have Harry and Draco on their friendslist can also watch as their conversations (or, as often is the case, arguments) unfold in the comments after each post, moving from no comments to more than two hundred comments over the course of a few hours across multiple threads. These threads explore character depth, showcase Harry and Draco’s romantic relationship, and advance the plot. They do so at times nonlinearly; plot elements unfold within one journal in multiple threads, or in multiple journals, extending even beyond both Harry and Draco’s journal into Blaise’s, Snape’s, or Ron’s. Within this context, even the role of magic itself becomes infused with the everyday and the domestic: the major narrative thrust of this RPG includes the marriage of Draco and Harry, followed by Draco’s magically enabled pregnancy and the birth and growth of their daughter.

In this instance, we can see clearly how canon, fanfiction, genre, and interface come together in the narrativization of Draco’s experiences of pregnancy. The daily nature of LJ interweaves mundane concerns with the fantasy inherent to *Harry Potter* canon, with fantasy used to explore the everyday. Not only do Draco and Harry’s magically enhanced life narratives appear on one’s friendslist alongside other, nonfictional, journal entries, but also the magical elements of Draco and Harry’s life instigate real-life concerns connected to pregnancy and child rearing, such as decorating a nursery and hearing a baby’s heartbeat for the first time. The following excerpt exemplifies this concern with the everyday, the patterns of daily posting, and the emotional content of the narrative being told. The use of the LJ mood listing to signify Draco’s current emotional state at the time of posting (he specifies his mood as “lonely”) indicates how the emotion and experience centered cultural uses of the LJ interface shape the nature of Draco’s narrative.
Current mood: lonely
Update, of sorts.
I feel rather foolish bothering with this “updating” business, as I’ve no business of any sort to report. I simply want communication. I’m lonely. And this is tedious. Someone leave me a note before I go mad.
While I wait, I suppose I should catalogue my day in full, for anyone who may care.
I woke promptly at one o’clock in the afternoon, vomited into the dustbin, and staggered to the bath, where I cat-napped for some time, and returned to bed to suffer the heat in semi-comfort. However, this quickly proved boring [Dracolicious, LJ, July 18, 2003].

In this entry, Draco narrates the events of his day, even as he insists he has “no business of any sort” to report—the result of limitations incurred because of his pregnancy. This recounting of the everyday experience of pregnancy uses the LJ interface, with its emphasis on transitory emotional states and the periodic posting of everyday experience, to convey the serial experience of pregnancy.

The role of genre here is evident; in addition to the romance and adolescent angst affiliated with teen generic discourse, we also have the fan-specific generic construct of the domesticic, as well as the domestic possibilities inherent in the fantastic element of male pregnancy (in fan terms, an Mpreg), a generic trope that cuts across fandoms and that raises complex issues of gender, identity, and experience. More broadly, we can see the fantastic elements of the situation as enhancing the possibilities of realism inherent in the cultural uses of the LJ interface, with realist social issues evoked through metaphor. Hyperbolic epic narratives (the magical birth of a daughter to Harry and Draco) play out through the intervention of fantasy and magic, but they produce everyday concerns such as Draco’s worry about gaining weight with the pregnancy, which he communicates in the daily, interpersonal context of LJ.

The inclusion of fantasy in this RPG enables a magical yet domestic coming-of-age narrative, and with it an extensive exploration of character depth, as we see Harry and Draco struggle to become fathers and adults. The extended serial narrative created out of the combination of (and interplay between) character journals facilitates the daily development of characters and relationships, and the expansive comments allow for less linear character exploration. In this way, the various cultural uses of the LJ interface intersect with fannish traditions interwinding domesticity and fantasy as well as with the fannish focus on character development. As a result, through the interplay of generic discourse, fan text, and the LJ interface, the narrative created by this RPG explores and expands on already established fannish foci.
Expansive Domesticity:
The Sims as Fannish Storytelling

To further elucidate the relationship between canon, fannertext, genre, and interface, I turn my attention next to a significantly different interface: the popular cross-platform video game, The Sims. Sims players create characters and guide or micromanage their lives. Whereas some players approach The Sims as a strategy game, it lends itself to the creation of narrative and the telling of that narrative. Some players do play The Sims as a linear game with a goal, if not an end point, and certainly many strategy guides have been written from this viewpoint. But it almost seems as if such a use of The Sims is working against its implicit design. Indeed, Sims creator Will Wright has called The Sims a sandbox game rather than a game with a singular goal or way to win. In fact, the newer version of the game, The Sims 2 (TS2), features a category called storytelling, which facilitates the capturing, ordering, and textual narrativizing of Sims images. Like Lj, The Sims is a home well fit for expansive fannish imaginings.

Fans have put both versions of The Sims to use, creating fannish universes and characters and playing out fannish narratives. The differences between the two versions of the program have led to varying types of fannish play and narrative construction. Both versions encourage the creation of unique characters. The first edition of The Sims enables characters to be created from photographs of people, thus lending itself to media fandoms—that is, a player can use the face of an actor in the creation of a sim avatar, also known as a sim skin. TS2 skins are not based from photographs, and therefore a realistic look is more difficult to attain. However, the game provides the tools to create a nuanced, if not realistic, avatar, as one can choose from a vast selection of facial features and wardrobe. Because of this, TS2 lends itself to literary fandoms where the characters exist visually only in the imagination of the reader, and it also encourages the creation of fannish textual versions of televisual and cinematic fan-favored characters who may not look exactly like the canon incarnation on whom they are based.

Because The Sims doesn't actually depict the workplace, many of the narratives created in both editions are domestic, with the majority of character interactions taking place within the home. In this way, the fan generic category of domestic fiction, with its concern with the everyday and the familial, finds a good fit in The Sims, just as it did within Lj. Although in the first edition of The Sims the players created characters as either children or adults, with children staying permanently young, in the newly released TS2, avatars age from birth to death and are connected to one another through
extensive family trees. This new focus on aging characters and family relationships to some degree shapes the nature of the narratives created by *Sims* players, so that many fan stories are devoted to creating networks of families and documenting their developing relationships. As with the minutiae of daily lives played out in LJ, here too is a concern with the serial and the everyday, the familial and the communal. And while TS2 has essentially turned on the sands of time, rather than trading in a sense of expansiveness for a linear single narrative, the emphasis on multiple families and generations transforms *Sims* family narratives into something we could almost see as navigable space in the form of the family tree. Thus, TS2 molds to fannish concerns in a variety of ways.11

The first expansion pack for *The Sims 2*, entitled “University,” depicts university life, creating a new age category, “young adult,” and introducing new spaces such as the dorms, the cafeteria, and the frat house. This plays into fannish imagination and already existing fannish categories, as what fans refer to as collegiate can now be depicted through *The Sims*. *Sims* fan stories now often draw on adolescent generic themes such as leaving home, making college friends, joining a fraternity or sorority, and graduating. Along the same lines, TS2 includes an element that fits all too well into the *Smallville* slash fantext: men can become pregnant when abducted by aliens, which has, perhaps unsurprisingly, led to a profusion of abducted and then pregnant Kent-Luthor domestic partners.

But creating a fannish world in *The Sims* is only the first step. The telling of the story engages with yet another level of interface. TS2 interface provides one mode of storytelling, as I mentioned: one can share images at the official site for TS2, taking from the infinite database of possible snapshots to create a smaller selection of images, out of which one then creates a narrative with the addition of text. However, for many reasons (not least of which is the presence of already existing fan-created spaces for shared *Sims* storytelling, combined with the lack of ability to community-build within the design of the official TS2 “story exchange”), *Harry Potter* fan communities, and fan communities in general, rarely use *The Sims*’ official site, but instead use LJ to share their stories. Fans have set up journals and communities to share their fannish *Sims* narratives. These communities define themselves in different ways in relation to canon, fanfiction, and the projects of fan fiction. One LJ community dedicated to the representation of literary sims posits as its central rule that participants need to have created *The Sims* skins themselves, thus valuing a sense of authorship and individuality in interpretation of canon text. Another community created for the posting of *Harry Potter* sims has no such rule, stating only that one does not need to replicate the film actors in one’s imagining of the
characters, thus emphasizing the expansiveness of fan imagination rather than the limitations of canon, specifically overthrowing any reign of the _Harry Potter_ films as canonical for characters' physical appearances.

What types of narratives are told within these spaces? How do they position themselves in relation to canon and to their specific new media context? How do the various intervening interfaces (of _The Sims_ and _LIJ_) affect the nature of the story being told? As one might suspect, many _Sims_ fan narratives focus on family and domesticity. For example, one story with a large readership documents the “Marauders” generation, depicting the adolescence of Harry’s parents and their friends Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. With the introduction of the “University” expansion pack, the Marauders went to college; Sirius and Remus formed a college band and rehearsed in their dorm’s common area. Thus, the TS2 interface guides the narratives that are told, but at the same time, the story draws extensively on various fanfactual foci. Similarly, _Smallville_ slash _Sims_ stories tend to focus on domesticic, with Clark and Lex raising little green babies, learning how to change their diapers, and otherwise engaging in the trials of parenthood as envisioned by TS2.

Other _Sims_ authors push more at the limitations of TS2, as in one user’s re-creation of the first book of _Harry Potter_, chapter by chapter, through _The Sims_. Although from a fan fiction perspective such a canonical recreation might seem predictable, from a _Sims_ authorship perspective, this task is both impressive and inventive. This specific re-creation of the _Harry Potter_ narrative closely follows the book’s storyline and its structure: it re-creates the book’s very chapter breakdown. Sections of the book that can’t be represented by the game (such as a snake speaking to Harry in snake language, called Parseltongue) are filled in through text rather than image — what we could perhaps think of as fans scribbling in the margins of their own text, although in this case, the scribbling is necessary to re-create canon as closely as possible given the limitations of _The Sims_.

However, this _Sims_ author also includes what she calls outtakes, which show things that her _Harry Potter_ sims did on their own while she was trying to re-create the _Harry Potter_ canon narrative. That is, while she was attempting to set up her careful re-creation, her sims did things that didn’t fit in the careful canonical narrative she was creating, and she recorded these moments. The humor of these outtakes is found when sims do something out of character — for example, the normally dour and scary Professor Snape dances in front of his class. Such an instance creates a sense of narrative spontaneity that is amusing precisely in its absurd relation to canon. However, humor is also consistently born when the sims themselves (or, rather, the unpredictable gameplay as carried out through the actions
of the Sims characters) seem to re-create fan textual patterns rather than simply straying from canon. So when Harry and Draco spontaneously hug rather than fight, their actions affirm a fan textual slash vision of the characters and the sense that the fan textual characters have lives of their own—lives that may even override canon.

Mia Consalvo (2003) investigates how the quality of emergent gameplay in the first version of The Sims creates an awareness of the possibility of queerness as it disassociates sexuality from identity, making sexuality an act rather than a self-defining (or sim-defining) factor. This possible queerness of The Sims through the unpredictability of its gameplay certainly facilitates the easy rendering of slash narratives. But more generally, The Sims' quality of unpredictability contributes to a perception of the independent existence of Sims-created characters beyond the original source text, and beyond even the specific captured narrative being told through Sims images. As Sara Gwendall Jones (2000) and Roberta E. Pearson (2003) have pointed out, this sense of character depth is of vital importance to fannish engagement. In this way, The Sims beautifully fills fannish concerns through its creation of characters who seem to have lives of their own.

In LJ-based RPG fan fiction, the LJ interface itself contributes to a perception of verisimilitude, encouraging daily posting in real time, thus creating a sense of the expansive, everyday existence of fictional characters. In contrast, in the case of fannish storytelling through The Sims, authors use LJ to narrate and share their fannish interpretations of Sims gameplay and images, with verisimilitude coming more from The Sims than LJ. Sims-created, LJ-shared fannish narratives are made of two layers: the images, and the author's commentaries explaining and narrativizing those images. Through this interplay, another character comes to the fore: The Sims author, who comments on, interprets, and sets the tone for the unfolding Sim-based narrative. The database of possible Sims images functions as an expansive palette onto which the Sims author can dip her brush, but at the same time, it also provides the type of restrictions and specific limitations against which fannish creativity blossoms. We can see this fruitful tension play out at the micro level in the dialogue between a Sims image and the author's textual narration.

**Conclusion**

Media phenomena around which fandoms thrive often center on media texts that mix genres and that incorporate fantasy. Jones (2002) points to the prominence of the fantastic as a reason why programs like
Xena and Buffy are often slashed, suggesting that fantasy increases the possibilities of representations of otherness. Although I would argue here that the possibilities of both fantasy and queerness can instead lead to representations of the everyday and domesticity, the understanding that fantasy contributes new possibilities of character development and interrelationships remains sound. Similarly, as I mentioned before, Pearson (2003) speaks of the expansiveness of cult television metatexts, arguing that the fantastic possibilities of cult television contribute to fannish nonlinear exploration of character. From this perspective, we can see how both LJ and The Sims serve as welcome homes for new articulations of fannish concerns. Both are similarly expansive in nature, well suited to the exploration of fannish themes and to the affirmation of a sense of fully developed characters, and yet at the same time replete with the types of challenges and restrictions within which fannish play flourishes.

Just as Draco initially encountered difficulties programming his PDA but soon found a way to inscribe what he perceived as an expression of identity through the technological options available, so fan authors encounter and then use the interface of LJ to express a creative and expansive vision of the fictional characters with whom they are engaged. Similarly, through The Sims, fans create fannish universes in which, as a result of the unpredictability of gameplay, the characters seem to have full existences, enabled by—but not fully controlled by—The Sims player/author. In turn, Sims authors inscribe narratives by capturing, reorganizing, and building on these Sims-created images. These Sims narratives are shaped by the foci, limitations, and possibilities of The Sims, just as they draw on canonical, fantastical, and generic structures. Thus in both cases fans draw on and are guided by each interface to create new narrative forms and complex imaginative universes that engage and expand on already existing fannish concerns.

Notes

1. On new media’s concern with technology and interface, see Manovich (2001). Jenkins’s Textual Poachers (1992) is the seminal work in fan studies focusing on fans as media users. See the general bibliography in this volume for contemporary work from this approach. For work on genre as discourse, see Mittell (2004); and Naremore (1998).

2. I draw on a range of online fan texts. I do not give specific URL references to LJ spaces out of consideration for the maintenance of these spaces as fan spaces and the privacy of the participants. For a discussion of methodological issues involved in studying online communities, see King (1996) and Boehlje (1996).

3. Alternative universes are but one of many ways in which authors play with and at times reject various levels of canon; another example would be the recasting of
Harry Potter's Draco as actor Boyd Holbrook by a subcommunity of fans who reject the Harry Potter films as canon, favoring the casting of Holbrook because he suits their fan-cultural vision of Draco better than Tom Felton, the actor cast in the film.

4. See Jenkins (1992, 223-49) on fan vids made with VCRs.

5. In addition, LJ uses open-code software, and other, similar sites have sprung up in its wake, such as GreatestJournal.com and JournalFen.net. The latter is specifically envisioned as a space for fans and for journal-based role-playing games.

6. Dana Boyd's (2004) study of Friendster provides a similar analysis of how an interface encourages and/or discourages social networking among individual users.


8. The fantasy component of the story plays a crucial function here in terms of gender, placing the voice of the female experience of pregnancy into the male subject. Fan fiction's female authorship—specifically the fact that mostly straight-identified women write slash—has been the subject of much commentary by scholars of fandom and by fan authors themselves. In the case of Dracolicious, we have a female experience—pregnancy—being written onto a male body, by way of an Interface that encourages a soap opera-like seriality, with no evident narrative closure, as the emergent nature of LJ suggests no end to this narrative of experience. Modleski's (1982) much-contested work on soap operas suggests that the serial structure of soap operas mirrors female experience; and Mumford (1995) argues that soap's excessive closing gestures have ideological implications. The ideological implications of this RPG may come precisely from the combination of form, theme, and gendered subjectivity. Although such an analysis is beyond the scope of this essay, this is exactly the type of work that a methodology combining fan studies with genre and new media studies should pursue.

9. The question of the role of narrative in games has been much debated. Some game theorists, such as Frasca (2003), have argued against the focus on narrative in the study of games, proposing instead that we consider games as "simulation." Whether or not we consider games themselves as narrative, we can understand each instance of gameplay in The Sims as constructing a narrative that the player to some degree both follows and authors. Even more so, we can understand fan/fish reconstructions and reformulations of gameplay through screencaps and text/intertitles as a form of storytelling, in which the player becomes author to an audience of fellow fans. As such, these Sims-based fan stories come close to Cassell's (1999) vision for a future of games as interactive storytelling. See also Jenkins (2004) for an overview of these debates on ludology versus narratology and for a discussion of the narrative possibilities in The Sims. For more on the relationship between story and game, see also Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan (2004).

10. For a discussion of The Sims as sandbox game, see an interview with Will Wright, "Will Wright Speaks Simlish" (http://pc.gamespy.com/pc/the-sims-2/591767 p7.html, accessed June 1, 2006).

11. See Jenkins (2002) on Sims fan storytelling as part of a new participatory culture that redefines the relationship between media consumers and media producers. Also see Mia Consalvo's (2003) work on queerness as an emergent quality in The Sims.

12. An expansion pack for the first edition of The Sims, "Making Magic," enabled the easy representation of magic, as the name suggests. However, even before the release of the expansion pack, Sims users had made objects such as flying brooms for use in Harry Potter sims gameplay. Although to date TS2 has no such magic-oriented expansion pack, this does not stop fans from creating a representation of the Harry Potter Simsverse that incorporates magic; they only need to be creative in how they represent it. Sometimes they fill in blanks with words in order to communicate what Sims images cannot represent.
References


12. From Shooting Monsters to Shooting Movies
Machinima and the Transformative Play of Video Game Fan Culture

Robert Jones

Abstract. — Machinima represents one of the most important outgrowths of video game fan culture. Through the manipulation of video game engines (the architectural code of a video game), players take control of the characters and use them to create short animated films within the game's 3D virtual environment. These films are then distributed and shared over the Internet. Creators of machinima films engage in transformative play, an act of altering the rules and structures of designated play spaces to suit their individual needs. The video game possesses unique qualities that separate it from traditional forms of media. The video game's interactive nature creates a different relationship between consumers and producers, which requires the reconsideration of previous theories of fan cultures that were based on traditionally passive relationships to media (such as film and TV). Because gamers are capable of fundamentally manipulating the medium of the video game in ways that other fans of traditional media cannot, notions of fan "resistance" must be reexamined within this new context. Moreover, transformative play (a term borrowed from game design theory) offers new ways of understanding consumer-producer relationships.
Introduction

What is machinima? Is it filmmaking? Animation? Gaming? Or just the latest form of fan-produced media that owes its roots to fan fiction and resembles the more recent fan films? As one of new media’s more recent manifestations—some might even say mutations—machinima poses some interesting questions regarding our understanding of the medium of the video game and our conceptualization of its fans. The term itself is a portmanteau of machine and cinema—some say animation as well—that designates “animated filmmaking within a real-time 3D environment” (Marino 2004, 1). Although much of the popular discourse on this burgeoning group of gaming/filmmaking fans has been enthusiastic, the understanding of what it is has not found much consensus. Mirapaul (2002, E2) refers to it as “animation as improvised performance.” Bloom (2002, 6) calls it “a cross between Fritz Lang and anime.” And Azhar (2003, 21) says, “The format is still experimental and reflects its gaming roots. Science-fiction plots with action and overly excitble camera work seem commonplace.”

Despite machinima’s ambiguous status as a new medium, the fans who enjoy making it and watching it know precisely what it means to them. Most would agree that it is a form of filmmaking; more specifically, it is a form of 3D animation. At its center, machinima relies on the manipulation of video game engines, or the core software that allows developers to construct the characters and the environments, as well as to determine the rules that govern how characters and environments interact. These engines also enable players to control those characters on the screen. Through the manipulation of these engines, video game fans can create animated films without any animation skills (see Busse and Hellekson's introduction to this volume for a sketch of fans' use of technology to fannish ends). After adding music and voice-overs for the characters, the result is an animated film that usually—although not always—resembles the game used to create it.

The production of these machinima films by video game fans offers a new direction in the study of fan cultures, one aspect of which is the stark contrast in the gender difference between the producers of machinima and the producers of fan fiction. As documented by Coppa in “A Brief History of Media Fandom” (this volume), the history of media fandom has been largely populated by the production of texts by women. Although a full investigation into the nature of this gender divide exceeds the scope of this chapter, a tentative answer can be found in the literature on gender and video games. Many of the explanations for the gender divide among video
game players draws from the developmental literature on gendered play spaces. Jenkins (1998) suggests a logical progression from E. Anthony Rotundo’s notion of “boy culture” (outlined in American Manhood, 1993) as an escape from the domestic setting to the exploration made possible through video games. Cassell and Jenkins (1998) propose that lack of access to computer technology also plays a large part in the lack of participation on the part of women. However, Bryce and Rutter (2005, 302) contend that too much of the research on participation by girls and women in video games has “consistently taken a media effects or text-based research perspective that fails to interrogate the everyday practices of being a ‘computer gamer’ or being excluded from being so.” Moreover, Yates and Littleton (1999, 567) insist that focusing research on the lack of female gamers “ignores the voices of those women and girls who do engage with computer games.” And although most of these studies draw from data suggesting that a majority of video games are played by boys and men, the most recent surveys released by the Entertainment Software Association state that girls and women account for 43 percent of all game players (http://www.theesa.com/facts/top_10_facts.php, accessed October 22, 2005).

So when we talk about machinima as a primarily male-dominated form of fandom, it is important to separate it from video game fandom. Because machinima began from the first-person shooter (FPS) genre (Bryce and Rutter 2002), known for being overrun with male players, it makes sense that the majority of machinima would come from men. In addition, the technical skills necessary to manipulate a video game engine in order to produce machinima also presents the same barrier to potential female producers of machinima as does the entry into male-dominated arenas of computer programming. Graner Ray (2004, 11) suggests that this is because women “are more comfortable working with machines rather than attempting to master them.” This mastery over computers serves as a defining quality of hacker culture, which is a precursor to the fan culture of machinima. Therefore, the discrepancy between the large number of women who participate in fan fiction and the lack thereof in machinima can be explained by mere access alone. The skill set necessary to write fan fiction does not pose the same barriers as the technical skills needed to make machinima. However, the recent creation of user-friendly technologies has begun to change this (see Stein, this volume; http://www.sim-movies.com, accessed June 1, 2006).

In addition to the gender difference, machinima also makes us reconsider fandom within the age of new media, particularly in interactive media.
As an interactive medium, the video game requires the participation of the gamer. This disrupts the normal relationship between the media consumer and media producer. Although typical consumers of traditional media products have maintained this paradigm, fan cultures have sought to change this by becoming actively engaged in their own production of their favorite cultural products. Jenkins’s crucial study, *Textual Poachers* (1992), refers to these as “participatory cultures” that engage in textual poaching for their own purposes. The participation on the behalf of the fan exceeds mere consumption and transforms the object of fandom; slash fan fiction, where the sexual orientation of characters is altered from straight to gay to suit the fan’s needs, is perhaps one of the more common examples. It is important not to conflate this kind of fan participation with the interactivity of a video game. When players make choices within games, the rules and narratives within those games confine them. Although a level of authorial control exists for the player, it is not the same as participation exercised by an author of slash fiction. These choices constitute play within the system of the game, what Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 300) define as “the free movement within a more rigid structure.” When players alter the game so that the game is different for others, they call this transformative play. Through the use of advanced skills, gamers can modify, or *mod*, a game to suit their needs (for example, removing the clothes of a character like Lara Croft), or they can use those skills to manipulate the game engine and create machinima. Both serve as instances of transformative play and can also be understood as forms of participatory culture.

I want to suggest that this model of transformative play, which explains how machinima came about, offers not just insight into the nature of the video game medium and its users, but also a new way of understanding more traditional fan cultures. If we assume that the typical consumption of old media like TV and film allows for a certain amount of play through interpretation, as Fiske (1989) suggests—a level of interpretation made possible through the polysemic nature of mass media texts—then the participatory exercise of fan fiction would be an act of transformative play. Video games, however, differ from traditional media in that they build this element of transformative play into their design. Through tracing the history of machinima and transformative play’s role in that history, I hope to provide a useful explanation about consumer/producer relationships as the medium of the video game reconfigures them, thus extending the definition of fan culture. This analysis will, I hope, offer other scholars of fan cultures new ways to understand how power gets relocated when we talk about audiences of new media, such as video games, and how they differ from traditional audiences.
Demos, Mods, and Machinima

The history of machinima began in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the demoscene (Tasajarvi 2004; http://www.freax.hu, accessed June 1, 2006). Hackers on Commodore 64 and Amiga personal computers would “tag” software they had cracked with introductory sequences they called intros. So that those who used it would know who hacked it, hackers manipulated the code to produce visual effects containing their names at the beginning of the software. Hacker teams like Future Crew, Pulse, and Haujobb became increasingly competitive in these displays of technical prowess, to the extent that they would bypass hacking the software altogether and just create the intros. Because these intros served as a demonstration of a hacker’s ability, they later became known as demos, and they spawned hacker communities solely dedicated to creating them. As the technology grew and visual graphics evolved, demos became more complex and garnered fan followings. Once 3D virtual environments became more advanced, teams made more elaborate demos; some even used the form to construct their own little narratives. These narratives were the first primitive machinima films in that they used virtual 3D space to construct their narratives; however, they differed in their construction. Although demos began to take the shape of short animations and music videos, akin to the machinima produced today, they were built by hackers from the code. Casual computer users could not create these texts; in fact, the driving force behind most of the hacker teams in the demoscene was the prospect of creating a demo that exceeded the abilities of all other hackers (Thomas 2002). These displays of digital dexterity marked the beginning of the performative quality of computing that would pave the way for gamers to show their stuff through demos.

As the demoscene continued, hackers became (among other things) new media artists; meanwhile, a small software company called id Software, founded by John Carmack and John Romero, began developing a game engine for a 3D FPS (Kushner 2003). Wolfenstein 3D, released in May 1992 and an update of the 2D original, proved to be a milestone in game development, offering a three-dimensional world for the player to navigate from the first-person perspective. Although FPS as a genre of video games dates as far back as the 1970s, id Software’s update of Wolfenstein set the standard for how shooters look and play today (Galloway 2006). However, not satisfied with the “realism” of the game, Carmack and the id Software designers decided to develop a better engine. This new engine had a modular design so that gamers could edit and create their own levels, as well as fast networking capabilities for multiplayer gaming,
and it featured the famous “deathmatch” mode that permitted competitions. In December 1993, id Software released \textit{DOOM}. It changed the face of computer gaming: gamers could both \textit{play} the game and \textit{play with} the game’s design:

id Software didn’t stop there, the team of innovators also made \textit{DOOM}’s source code available to their fan base, encouraging would-be game designers to modify the game and create their own levels, or “mods.” Fans were free to distribute their mods of the game, as long as the updates were offered free of charge to other enthusiasts. The mod community took off, giving the game seemingly eternal life on the Internet. In fact, id discovered many of their current employees and development partners based on mods that were created and distributed over the Internet. [id Software 2005].

The ability to create these mods enthralled gamers on a new level and tapped into their hacker sensibility, enabling them to demonstrate their mastery of code as they had done previously, during the demoscene (Figure 12.1).

Mods reveal one of the unique qualities of the video game as a medium—one that separates it from traditional forms of audio/visual media. Although the primary function of a game may be to play through the levels as they are designed, in effect following the path provided by the designer the same way that readers read and filmgoers watch, the ability to freely play with the medium presents a challenge to previous notions of how audiences conventionally behave. The authorial shift that occurs between gamers and designers differentiates it from other traditional media and thus positions the video game as an important site of investigation into fan cultures. Gamers’ freedom to \textit{play with} and \textit{repurpose} the video game text through modification permitted as a direct result of the game’s design evokes Jenkins’s (1992) notion of textual poaching: it is an instance of a fan’s altering—or in this case \textit{modding}—the object of his obsession. The two, however, diverge on two separate accounts. First, Jenkins’s formulation of the textual poacher relies on a metaphor of resistance borrowed from De Certeau’s (1984) model of consumer appropriation in which consumers use “tactics” as a
means of popular resistance to the stronger “strategies” used by producers. This resistance model of fan appropriation has since been problematized by a number of critics (Scodari 2003; Hills 2002; Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). Scodari in particular insists that “the very act of fans creatively laboring to adjust commercial texts to their interest is remarkable, but their particular adjustments or the motives behind them are not always resistive, despite the fact that much of the incipient work tends to frame such reservations as minor caveats rather than as emphatic claims” (113).

Because modding a video game like DOOM becomes part of the producer’s intended use of the product—as indicated by the source code being made available to gamers—such activity hardly seems resistive. In fact, the case could be made that id Software’s move to make the source code available was an ingenious marketing strategy that galvanized interest in their product. However, inviting gamers to alter the game does not mean that there is no resistance. Video game modding artists like Jodi (an acronym formed by joining the first names of the group’s two members, Joan Hemskerk and Dirk Paesmans) perform acts of countergaming by creating mods that challenge the nature of the medium in a way that Galloway (2006) finds comparable to the counter cinema of French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard (Bosama 2002; http://www.jodi.org, accessed October 22, 2005; Wollen 1982). So although resistance may not be inherent in the act of creating mods, the potential is certainly made available through the unique technologies of video games, particularly their open-source code design. The second and perhaps most profound way that mods diverge from Jenkins’s textual poaching focuses on the means of production. For Jenkins and De Certeau, the power that producers hold over consumers derives from their exclusive access to the means of production. Therefore, the move that fans make from being consumers to producers (as is the case in fan fiction) represents an act of empowerment for Jenkins. Hills points out that this may not be the case for De Certeau: “It seems too rigid to deal helpfully with any blurring of consumer and consumer-as-producer identities. De Certeau denies the possibility that the consumer can occupy an official and production-based space (since spatialisation belongs to strategy, while ‘tactical’ consumption strays across the territory of the other without making any space or place of its own)” (2002, 39).

The degree to which fans empower themselves by becoming producers has since become highly contested within the literature on fan cultures (Hills [2002] provides a comprehensive discussion of these tensions). Rather than siding with any one position, I propose to complicate the matter even further. Because most literature on fan culture has focused on traditional
media such as film and TV, the power that fans maintain over their chosen media products seems marginal at best. Fan fiction certainly offers a creative outlet to those looking to expand and explore the narratives of their favorite films and TV shows. Fan films take this creative exploration even further in that these new narratives try to replicate the production as an audiovisual medium (Jenkins 2003). Nevertheless, in both cases, the original medium stays intact. Within video games, the means of production are placed within the hands of the consumer because as software, video games function as both tool and product. So when players create mods for DOOM, they do not just alter their own experience of the medium; they also potentially alter the experience of others—mods for DOOM, as well as many other games, are available throughout the Internet (for example, http://planet doom.gamespy.com, accessed June 1, 2006). Armed with the actual means of production—in the case of DOOM, the source code that created it—players become producers in a way that is arguably far more empowered than that of fanfic writers or fan film producers (Postigo 2003; Schleiner 2005).

Although mods complicate how we understand consumers and producers within the context of fan research—and this is an area that requires further investigation—they are only part of the story of machinima. The DOOM game engine offers far more than just the ability to mod the game’s design. More instrumental to the development of machinima is the capacity to record gameplay. This provides an opportunity for seasoned gamers to capture their runs through the various levels of the 3D virtual world and save their gameplay as files that can be reviewed. These demo movies,² known as speedruns, function as highlight reels among the game’s fan base. Because the game’s networking capabilities allow for multiplayer play, competitive play is fierce, and the ability to record these “deathmatches” fuels competition further. Matches carry more than just boasting rights against defeated opponents; they are instances of true performance that engender unprecedented spectatorship and that live on in recorded form. As is the case with most FPSs, DOOM requires high levels of manual dexterity and often requires extensive practice. Speedruns of exceptional players offer newcomers insight into the tricks of the game. Demo movies of top players also elevate their status within the gaming community; this eventually led to the formation of the DOOM Honorific Title (DHT) Program in 1994. The DHT, created to determine the best DOOM players by distributing their demos (also called LMPs, named after Little Movie Processing, the format for recording gameplay) online, offers even more reason for gamers to record their gameplay:
The DOOM Honorific Titles, based on LMP recording with an authentication mechanism, are the means by which good players can objectively prove to the world that they are as good as they claim. The DHT system also has the beneficial side effect of promoting the production of amazing LMPs—if you want to see some superior DOOM action, turn to the ever-growing repository of DHT exam files [http://www.cf.ac.uk/~fms27/dht/dht5/#dht5, accessed June 1, 2006].

The creation of the DHT demonstrates the type of cultural exchange that the DOOM software invokes as a unique model of gaming. Along with the trading of mods that perpetuates the game’s life beyond the initial release, these demo movies foster what Manovich (2001) calls a cultural economy. Implementing De Certeau’s (1984) notion of “strategies” and “tactics,” Manovich explicates the relationship between the DOOM fans and the game’s designers: “The producers define the basic structure of an object and release a few examples as well as tools to allow the consumer to build their own version, to be shared with other consumers” (245). Demo movies are seen as a currency within these fan communities: greater status is awarded to gamers who perform the most amazing runs. This interactive exchange permitted innovations to quickly develop. This led to the evolution of the game and how it was played, followed by the growth of mods, and eventually to the transformation of what constituted the medium through the emergence of DOOM demo movies. The moment when gamers began recording their play is crucially important—not just for history of machinima, but also for the medium of the video game. Although it is easy to reduce the definition of what a video game is to mere software, the nature of the video game as a medium is far more complex. Because of its interactive quality, the end product becomes a variable outcome, one that embodies performance on par with theater (see Coppa, “Writing Bodies in Space,” this volume).

Within gaming communities—and particularly the competitive tournaments for which DOOM has become famous—this sort of spectatorship reveals the ephemeral quality of this end product. Before the ability to record gameplay, gaming spectators had to be in the room to witness these performances. The demo movies, and later machinima, mark a distinct shift in this mode of spectatorship. Players transformed from mere players into the producers of tangible media: they used the game not just as a medium but also as a tool. Manovich (2001, 258) is particularly sensitive to this quality of not just video games but new media in general: “In the case of new media, we should look not only at the finished objects but first of all at the software tools, their organization and default settings. This is particularly important because in new media the relation between production tools and media
objects is one of continuity; in fact, it is often hard to establish the boundary between them.” If we understand the video game not merely as a medium of consumption but also as a means of production, the communities it prompted—demos, mods, machinima—seem inevitable.

Although the release of DOOM set the stage for what would become machinima, the demos that were produced by the game’s record function were all in first-person. This perspective seemed natural to gamers: it was the vantage point they had grown accustomed to as they navigated three-dimensional space. However, although such first-person navigation seemed natural to players—Manovich (2001) suggests that the process of navigating space is a defining characteristic of new media—it did not adhere to the viewing expectations of the watchers. In his chapter on “Gamic Vision,” Galloway (2006) traces the history of the first-person perspective in film, what he identifies as the “subjective shot,” citing early examples like The Lady in the Lake (1946) and Dark Passage (1947). He goes on to say; “Further, more often than not, this type of shot is used to show the vision of criminals, monsters or killer machines. This analysis shows that the merging of camera and character in the subjective shot is more successful if the character in question is marked as computerized in some way” (12). So although the subjective shot used in FPSs like DOOM felt natural as a mediated experience of navigation for the player, the cultural viewing habits as perpetuated through traditional Hollywood cinema, which relies on third-person perspective, required one last modification in order for them to become something that could be watched rather than played. The demo movies made famous in the DOOM community were shot from the perspective of the player; therefore, seeing as a shooter also meant seeing as a camera. Once gamers realized that they could use their character purely as the camera within the 3D virtual environment, capturing the images of other players from the more traditional third-person perspective, machinima was born. A group of gamer-hackers known as The Rangers was the first to do this, following the release of id Software’s next big contribution to machinima history: Quake.

The Rangers were the first group to take advantage of the many improvements id Software had made to the DOOM game engine. Quake was the richest 3D virtual environment to date; it also offered the capacity to set up client-server networking, thus enabling multiplayer gameplay over the Internet. Before id Software released production tools that enabled modifications for players, such as QuakeC and QuakeEd, The Rangers created their own hacks to allow them to make a demo captured from the perspective of traditional Hollywood cinema (Figure 12.2). The result was the now-famous “Diary of a Camper.” According to Paul Marino (2004), this was the first machinima film:
The Rangers choreographed the players as actors, hitting their marks while another player acted as the camera, recording the actors as the scene progressed. The actor playing also typed in dialogue that appeared in the recording. (This is also a feature of the multiplayer game—the ability to send text messages to the players that appear on screen.) Once completed, the demo served as the very first Machinima film—a narrative story told within the game space [6].

This important shift from the first-person perspective of a player to what essentially becomes the first-person perspective of a director, shooting and recording the action of other players, reflects the transition from the demo movie as a cultural product designed to broadcast a player’s gaming prowess to a mediated form of storytelling. These narratives, which were originally referred to as “Quake movies” before becoming machinima, were acts of performance and displays of technical skill. But the move to storytelling rather than showing off reassigns the role that spectatorship plays within gaming communities. The DOOM speedruns were esoteric, competitive forms of media targeted specifically to the members of that community. Machinima offered a potential for expression that would appeal to an audience beyond the gaming communities. This attention to audience concerns (the move from first to third person and the addition of narrative) indicated a need to expand the gaming community. More importantly, machinima films represent quite literally a transformation of the medium from an interactive game that is played to a more traditional film that is watched. Although the final product does not take the shape of an interactive game, the process of creating a machinima film constitutes an act of play. It represents the culmination of the performative aspects indicative of the medium of the video game. By exploring the notion of transformative play within machinima, we stand to gain a better understanding of video game fans in particular and fan cultures in general.

Fig. 12.2. “Diary of a Camper,” The Rangers (1996).
“The Magic Circle” and Transformative Play

In 1950, Huizinga wrote, “All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course” (10). Although he offers many ways to describe this demarcated space of play (card tables, stages, tennis courts), the universality of his use of the “magic circle” is a useful metaphor for discussing the boundaries between areas of play and nonplay. Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 94), building from Steve Sniderman’s notion of frame (a way of delineating between the artificial world of play and the real world), use the magic circle as way of discussing the negotiation between these distinct spaces: “It is responsible not only for the unusual relationship between a game and the outside world, but also for many of the internal mechanisms and experiences of a game in play.” The magic circle helps us to understand the artificiality of games and the rules that govern them. Playing any sort of game requires agreement on the rules of play. Otherwise, chaos ensues. Players abide by rules so that the game can take shape; they have no other reason to do so. Suits (1990, 34) defines playing a game as “the voluntary effort to overcome unnecessary obstacles.” The rules of play thus stand in opposition to rules that govern human behavior (that is, laws, norms, and etiquette) inasmuch as they do not carry the same weighty consequences. Violation of a rule of play merely warrants a penalty within the game — another arbitrary construction — whereas the violation of a “real” rule has consequences that extend beyond the realm of play.

The cultural meaning within a game (inside the circle) is separate from the context (outside the circle) in which the game is situated. Thus, the permeability of the magic circle depends on how games are framed, which determines whether or not the game functions as either a closed or open system (Littlejohn 1989). Salen and Zimmerman offer three contexts for understanding games: games as rules (closed systems), games as play (open or closed systems), and games as culture (open systems). The last category provides the most useful way of thinking about transformative play. Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 97) note, “The internal functioning of the game is not emphasized; instead, as a cultural system the focus is on the way that the game exchanges meaning with the culture at large.” The transformative play inherent in the design of architecture-enabled open-system video games like Doom and Quake requires that we consider them as cultural systems, which allow players to freely traverse the space between the inside and the outside of the magic circle. Salen (2002, 1) states that transformative play occurs when “the free movement of play alters the more rigid structure in which it takes shape. The play doesn’t just occupy the interstices of the system, but actually transforms the space as a whole.”
Game designers who learned from the open-system models pioneered by innovators like id Software began to realize the importance of transformative play because it allowed players to participate in the construction of these increasingly complex game systems. The open-system approach not only saved the designers money on extensive beta testing (see Karpovich, this volume), but also created brand loyalty among their fans by allowing the players to actively participate in the production of the games. This new philosophy in game design encapsulates what Salen and Zimmerman (2004) refer to as the player-as-producer paradigm. It is important to understand this notion of the player as producer differently from earlier discussions of the performative quality of gameplay. Video games differ from traditional forms of media in that the actions of the player produce what is on the screen; these performances only existed in the moment until the recording of DOOM demo movies. The player-as-producer paradigm goes beyond these acts of performance to the level of actually changing the game (for example, the many mods produced for DOOM). Whereas in the performative model players are behaving as players, the role gets flipped in the latter model, where players function as designers. Not all video games fall within the player-as-producer paradigm; only games that function as open systems posses this quality.

The open-system game design thus proposes a radically different relationship between media producers and media consumers. Despite the video game’s unique interactive quality, which already separates it from traditional forms of media, the open-system design of games like DOOM and Quake, which paved the way for machinima, shifted the power from the producer to the consumer. Salen and Zimmerman, aware of this important shift, insist that open-system games are important because “the permeability of the magic circle feeds innovation, resulting in rich systems of cultural production and new forms of creative expression” (2004, 544). The potential of these rich systems through the technology of open-system game design may seem utopian—a charge that also plagues Jenkins’s optimistic view of participatory cultures. Critics could challenge the notion that the player-as-producer paradigm primarily functions as a marketing strategy designed to induce a false sense of autonomy within consumers as a means of galvanizing their commitment to the brand. At the end of the day, gamers are still just buying a piece of software and playing with it.

These same criticisms leveled at the consumer-as-producer model of resistance put forth by Jenkins, which most would agree are valid, do not hold up as well with the transformative play model of video games. As previously discussed, the video game as a medium functions in ways incomparable to traditional media. Although the differences in this new medium
are hardly unassailable, they require that theories of consumer and fan cultures need to be reexamined with a thorough understanding of how new media function in ways previously unimagined. Studies of fan cultures online have provided the most recent forms of exploring these recent relationships with new media. Consalvo’s (2003) study of Star Trek and Buffy the Vampire Slayer fans in online communities offers a skeptical view of the freedom that this new technology offers fan cultures: “They provide telling examples and evidence of how that new media environment is changing and how users are limited by increasing control of the Web. The architecture of the Web allows fans some ‘resistant’ activities but, at the same time, works to constrain these activities in important ways” (68). Consalvo continues by arguing that the Internet’s architecture operates within structures designed by corporate interests, which work against any emancipatory potential offered to fans. She draws on Lawrence Lessig’s (1999) argument about restrictive capabilities written into the foundational code of the Internet. Both Consalvo’s and Lessig’s concerns about the illusions of autonomy that are generated through new media technologies like the Internet could apply to the open-system game design that makes machinima possible. Although these concerns hold some weight with respect to video games, the ability of hackers and gamers to overcome such restrictive barriers has demonstrated itself through the history of the medium, beginning with the demoscene and on through mods and machinima. The model of transformative play as a case of fan cultures merging with new technology thus withstands criticism that such online communities as documented by Consalvo may not.

Not Just Playing Anymore

The Rangers’s 1996 release of “The Diary of a Camper” spawned a new breed of video game fan and marked a turning point in the history of the medium. These innovators, distinguished by their penchant for play and their appetite for control, redefined the boundaries of gaming. And although the creation of these first films dates back nearly a decade, machinima has only recently made a blip on the radar of mainstream media (Thompson 2005; Bray 2004; Buchanan 2003). But machinima is growing. In fact, in March 2002, Paul Marino (cofounder of the ILL Clan, a group of machinima artists) and several other members of the machinima community established the Academy of Machinima Arts and Science (http://www.machinima.org, accessed June 1, 2006). On the Web site for the 2005 Machinima Film Festival (http://festival.machinima.org/modules.php?name=Content&pa=show-page&pid=3, accessed June 1, 2006), Marino states, “It is our goal to both
make the current creative industries aware of Machinima as well as bring support and credibility to independent Machinima productions as a whole.” In efforts to garner this support, the academy held the first annual Machinima Film Festival later in 2002 in Mesquite, Texas (home of id Software). Although the majority of the entries were the typical short film length, Jake Hughes debuted his feature-length sci-fi opera, *Anachronox: The Movie* (Figure 12.3), which won for best picture that year. Hughes, originally a student of film, found that the machinima format offered him possibilities otherwise not available to him: “I sort of always thought it would be neat to make a space opera, but I don’t have $100 million. Suddenly I was able to create this story. You can make any story you want, and it doesn’t cost you thousands or millions of dollars” (Slagle 2002, 4).

Video game fans and fledgling filmmakers are not the only ones who have harnessed the affordability of machinima. During preproduction for his film *A.I.*, Steven Spielberg used the game engine of a popular FPS, *Unreal Tournament*, to block scenes and camera movements that, had conventional computer animation been used, would have otherwise taken more time (Wilonsky 2002). These games—demonstrated to be powerful tools capable of constructing entire 3D virtual worlds—have moved beyond the mere play of gamers and hackers. The fact that an established icon within the Hollywood elite has adopted a professional use for game engines testifies to the empowering capability that open-system games offer to its fans. Despite Spielberg’s use of *Unreal Tournament*, machinima has not yet found a home within Hollywood. Perhaps the closest to commercial success for machinima so far came in 2003 when Fountainhead Entertainment produced a machinima music video for the band Zero 7’s song “In the Waiting Line.” Fountainhead used the *Quake III Arena* game engine in conjunction with proprietary software developed in house, called Machinimation (http://www.fountainheadent.com, accessed June 1, 2006), and created characters in a world that hardly resembled...
the game’s original design. In March 2005, they released Machinimation 2, which uses *DOOM III*, currently the most advanced game engine available and lauded for its advanced ability to render graphics. Like the original version, Machinimation 2 gives users who have little or no skill in hacking the ability to create machinima (Figure 12.4).

The history of machinima has demonstrated that although the producers of these films were primarily consumers, these gamers possessed talents that enabled them to transform their play into these narratives. So although the case can certainly be made that gaming fans had the tools to make these films presented to them by open-system game design, a threshold of programming knowledge still separated those early innovators from casual gamers. The people at Fountainhead Entertainment recognized this and decided to make a piece of software that no longer functioned as a game, but rather as a specific tool whose sole purpose is to create machinima. In addition to the formation of the Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences, the release of the Machinimation software illustrates the machinima community’s attempts at legitimacy (Figure 12.4).

As the audience for machinima grows, legitimacy will follow. However, once machinima becomes profitable, the freedom that gaming fans are currently experiencing may cease to exist. Video games represent a multibillion-dollar industry, and the open-system games that allow for players to function as producers have persisted only because they do not run contrary to the fiscal needs of the software companies. When and if that does happen, Consalvo’s (2003) skepticism about the nature of the computer code may rear its ugly head. As it stands, current primary concerns have to do with intellectual property rights. Fans have long since fought producers along these lines for their appropriation of texts to create their own forms of popular culture. Machinima introduces new concerns to this ongoing dialogue.

Fig. 12.4. Machinimation 2, Fountainhead Entertainment (2005).
because the product itself functions as a tool of production. Machinima producers like Fountainehead Entertainment use game engines to create music videos (a commercial purpose), which is different from the hundreds of machinima films that can be found for free on the Internet at sites such as http://www.machinima.com (accessed June 1, 2006). Both benefit from the work of the game designers who developed the Quake III Arena engine used to make the film. Paul Marino spoke about these issues at the Signal or Noise 2k5 Conference sponsored by Harvard Law School. Although the industry wants to protect itself from others profiting commercially from their labors, it seems to be willing to work with the machinima community because it is aware that machinima has had a positive effect on the gaming industry. These concerns will become more pressing as machinima develops as a medium, particularly as audiences expand. Consumers becoming producers with large audiences may also draw the attention of the game designers. Once the machinima audiences expand beyond the gaming community, the commercial potential will very likely be reconsidered. The most widely popular machinima series to date is Red vs. Blue, a series of films first released in 2003 (available at http://www.machinima.com). The series, created with the Xbox game console using the game Halo, boasts a staggering audience—more than 900,000 downloads a week (Allen 2004). Although an audience of this size does not represent the majority of audiences that machinima films draw, the potential power that machinima offers consumers seeking to be producers is undeniable.

By repurposing the game engine and using it as a means of animation/film production, machinima producers take transformative play to its most extreme level. If the machinima phenomenon were merely the result of forward-thinking filmmakers looking for a cheap alternative to the growing appetite for 3D animation, it would not offer much significance to those of us who study fan cultures or video games. As such, I contend that the history of machinima is not the story of filmmaking innovators, but rather of gamers as insatiable fans. That is to say, the development of machinima was an inevitability of the medium because of the very nature of the relationship formed between game designers and gamers. The transformative play that became a defining quality of the modern video game offered both the opportunity and the invitation to drastically change the medium. More importantly, the player-as-producer paradigm proposed by open-system games offers tremendous potential for fan cultures across all media. The agency afforded to players and the need that it fills within this relationship is perhaps telling of all audiences and their relationship to their chosen media—the body of work on fan cultures certainly supports this. So as machinima grows and becomes more widespread within mainstream culture,
it will be interesting to see what the outgrowths may be for both fan cultures and the medium of the video game. In addition to learning from the study of new media such as the video game, where audiences get reconceptualized, the model of transformative play offers a great deal to scholars of fan cultures. Because transformative play insists that cultural production is an ongoing organic process that ebbs and flows between producers and consumers, it presents a new theoretical approach to fans that requires further exploration.

Notes

1. Admittedly, the use of repurpose here could be problematic for some inasmuch that the end results do not deviate that far from the game’s original design. The mods that change the avatars and add levels to a game do not necessarily equate to the kinds of “modifications” that fic writers use. The mods that I discuss here in relation to DOOM represent only a portion of the kind of modding that takes place within the gaming community. The countergaming movement uses these tactics to political or social ends (Galloway 2006).

2. It is important to distinguish the use of demo here in the DOOM demo movies from that of the earlier discussed demos of the demoscene. Both visually represent a person’s ability; however, demos were displays of hackers’ ability to hack code, whereas the demo movies were a visual record of a player’s ability. The former is a display of intellectual capacity; the latter depicts the agility of hand-eye coordination. Regardless, they are both bound as performative expressions of competition.

References


