Kristina Busse
The Organisation for Transformative Works: I want us to Own the Godamn Servers
(Presentation at Writercon 2009)

I'm not sure how much back story I need to give on OTW, the Organization for Transformative Works and how many of you are familiar with its history or are even members, but I figure I'll give a very brief overview and then elaborate if y'all have any questions.

In spring of 2007, so a little over two years ago, FanLib became a much debated topic in fandom. FanLib was a commercially driven fan fiction archive and the first large scale attempt to commercialize fan fiction. Moreover, it was an archive that did not arise from within the media fandom community but instead was a venture capital project that advertized itself to media corporations while requiring fans to "color within the lines" (that's a quote!) all the while not offering any legal protection.

Metafandom probably had a dozen to two dozen links a day through early May '07, and it quickly moved beyond our LJ community into the general blogosphere. The (all male) FanLib founders were unresponsive to communication requests until Henry Jenkins stepped in asking for an interview. That, of course, was indicative, because a respected male academic could go where fangirls, many of us academics of our own but existing in fandom under pseudonyms, could not.

One post was astolat's entitled "An Archive of Our Own," clearly resonating Virginia Woolf's feminist manifesto. In it she said (and I cite her fully here):

> We need a central archive of our own, something like animemusicvideos.org. Something that would NOT hide from google or any public mention, and would clearly state our case for the legality of our hobby up front, while not trying to make a profit off other people's IP and instead only making it easier for us to celebrate it, together, and create a welcoming space for new fans that has a sense of our history and our community behind it. (5-17-07)

Within days the post had hundreds of comments, people excited and willing to do something, to become active. What became clear pretty quickly was that fandom had reached a tipping point in terms of a number of areas that then were to become the various aspects of OTW:

1. Media fandom had long watched other fan endeavors getting more or better publicity, getting acknowledged at times for things we'd long been doing (cf. Harvard conference anime and vidding), and many of us were starting to wonder whether we might not, indeed, be better off controlling the stories told about us. Moreover, some of the copyright lawyers in and around transformative works had been arguing that fan fiction was not copyright infringing and out of that grew the OTW's **Legal Assistance**.

2. Controlling the message was thus a driving force behind OTW's public and community relations and the wiki project, **Fanlore**. After all, we've all probably seen badly researched articles where yet another journalist discovers Dumbledore/Harry NC17 mpreg, and I can't be the only one who'd wished they'd talked to some fans maybe more articulate or with a wider understanding of our past and context. Fanlore would ideally let people get a better understanding of our community while allowing us to

document and share our experiences. Meanwhile the organization has already helped fans who have been asked to speak about their work in public, such as vidder Luminosity's interview with *New York Magazine*, for example.

3. Academic fan studies had reached its own tipping point in the summer of 2007. After a pretty aggressive and somewhat bitchy blog post of my own in May 2007 decrying some of the experiences of female fan scholars within media and TV and fan studies, Henry Jenkins suggested to me that we organize a gender fan debate, to be held in his blog. Pairing a male and female fan scholar every week, these debates were a starting point for many of us to meet people in different areas of fan studies, to open up our close-knit (and gendered) communities, and to raise some of the burning issues many of us felt had been too long ignored. When OTW decided to start an academic journal exclusively for fan studies and related topics, there was the beginnings of a community already in place and a field that needed a journal. Coming out of this, **Transformative Works and Cultures** (TWC) ended up being Open Source, Open Access, Creative Commons, with a radically liberal copyright policy in regard to embedded media and a section that bridges fan and academic concerns.

4. The central feature, the one that had gotten things started, was the **Archive of Our Own** itself. Noncommercial and nonprofit, this multifannish archivewas to be built on open-source archiving software designed and built by and for fans. Also of central importance from the very beginning was ownership of the servers. Cesperanza's battle cry "I want us to own the goddamn servers" reflected that need to not be not vulnerable to a commercial hosting company or to commercial exploitation. So, created by and for fans, the archive has been coded from scratch, teaching many media fans how to program. In fact, at the just concluded OSCON [O'Reilly Open Source Convention], keynote speaker Kirrily Robert points to OTW as one of the two biggest female-dominated Open Source projects (DW being the other one): "The OTW project boasts 60 thousand lines of Ruby code and 20+ coders who *are all female*!" The archive coding project thus not only creates an archive that hopefully will do some of the things most of us would like to see in terms of accessibility, search functions, tagging, etc but in the process teach fans to code and to teach others to code.

5. The last two official projects are not as visible maybe, but they are crucial for a more long-term look at the role of OTW in terms of documenting and preserving media fan cultures. One is **Open Doors**, the historical preservation project which offers the possibility for older archives to be moved entirely, something vital considering the ephemerality of the web such as the current GeoCities closing. Also part of open doors is the fan culture preservation project, working with the University of Iowa to preserve zines whose owners may want to discard them or, as is happening sadly more often, have passed away. The other official project is **Vidding History**. It recently allowed OTW to collaborate with the MIT media lab on a teaching tool for students on vidding that's available online for download. In general it is working on an oral history project to document the past of this particular art form.

In order to do all of these things, Naomi Novik, speculative fiction writer and media fan, sat down with some other volunteers who had agreed to constitute the first board of OTW to found a nonprofit fan organization. Within a year the OTW was incorporated and had received US 501(c)

(3) qualification for tax deduction. (I know nothing about this, but I've been told by people who work in the field that even nonprofits with paid staff usually take longer than that).

Very quickly, the call for volunteers went out, and while the quasi-professional, heavily bureaucratic model can be somewhat offputting, it has yielded results pretty fast. Within a year from announcing incorporation, the first journal issue was out and the wiki went live. The archive entered a limited beta release shortly after. Several of the board members have been interviewed by various newspapers, magazines, and NPR—and in an unforeseen move, several board and OTW members went to testify at the U.S. Government Copyright Office's DMCA [Digital Millenium Copyright Act] Hearings on Noncommercial Remixes.

The first election that replaced the first two members of the board was held last November with the second election replacing the next two coming up this fall. By 2010 then the entire board will have been elected by OTW members. (At last membership drive in April there were just under 400 registered members.) Every fan can become a member with a $10 tax deductible membership but all services (archive, wiki, journal, legal counsel, PR advice) are free. Everyone can volunteer—and everyone's needed.