ARTICLES

Limit Play: Fan Authorship between Source Text, Intertext, and Context

Louisa Stein

San Diego State University

Kristina Busse

Independent Scholar

Fans create fiction and art in a space between their imaginative expansive impulses and various restrictions. Indeed, limitations of culture and technology are at the heart of fan creativity. These constraints come in many forms, from the constraints of the source text to those of community expectations, from the broader cultural expectations of genre to the limitations of technological interfaces. These multiple restrictions of text, intertext, and interface help generate the immense spectrum of fan fiction, art, and analyses. Fan creativity thus publicly challenges long-held cultural values of originality, creativity as newness, and ownership of ideas and style.

INTRODUCTION

[W]e like writing fiction within a set of peculiar constraints and sharing it with like-minded friends. Sonnets have to be written within fourteen lines and using one of a small set of defined rhyme schemes. Fanfic has to be written using a preset list of characters and situations. Ready, set, go! (Jonquil, blog comment, http://whatever.scalzi.com, December 15, 2007)

Fans create fiction and art in a space between their imaginative expansive impulses and various restrictions. In this essay, we consider how fan authorship and artistry thrive on limitations of technological interface, genre, cultural intertext, and community. Creativity within boundaries has become a dominant mode of cultural engagement in our current moment of user-generated content, media convergence, and transmedia storytelling. When we share photos on Flickr.com, videos on Youtube.com, or e-mails on Google mail, we engage with the limits of interface and culture, technology, and

Correspondence should be addressed to Louisa Stein, Assistant Professor, School of Theatre, Television, and Film, San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Dr., San Diego, CA 92182. E-mail: lstein@mail.sdsu.edu

community. Fan textual creativity offers us a specific example of the way contemporary cultural engagement not only depends on but is shaped by the stimulating limits of context and interface.[1]

Indeed, fan texts testify to a key dynamic in our cultural moment: intertextual production. Developments in digital media technology facilitate easy reproduction, dissemination, and manipulation of media representations. Within this shifting technological context, fans rework and reshape popular films, television programs, and books in fan fiction and art. As part of their mediated authorship, fans emphasize and foreground the intertextuality of their creative work. Fan authors and artists embrace repetition as a central mode of creative production. We can draw a useful parallel between the dynamics of fan authorship and the aesthetic frameworks established in postmodern theory (Busse, 2005).[2] In fact, fan authors and artists can be understood as part of a larger aesthetic tradition that celebrates reproduction (whether mechanical or digital) and, consequently, as part of a threat to both the concepts of original artistic creation and the idea of aesthetic ownership.[3]

Like fan producers, postmodern theorists and artists emphasize pastiche, appropriation, and intertextuality, often challenging themselves to create within firmly established boundaries.[4] In *Exercises in Style* (1981), proto-postmodernist and later Oulipo founder Raymond Queneau takes a brief story of an accidental meeting on a bus and retells it in 99 different ways, altering narrative styles in every one of them. Fan fiction writers similarly celebrate repetition as they tell the same story again and again, while setting themselves limitations of style, length, or narrative device. With their emphasis on (often voluntarily) enforced restrictions, fan productions revel in the inspirations borne of intertextuality and repeated cultural reference points.

Indeed, intertextuality has emerged as important for fans and scholars of fandom alike. As fans embrace and theorize their use of tropes and literary and cultural intertexts at sites such as LiveJournal.com and Dreamwidth.org, scholars of fandom examine the relationship between fan texts and intertextuality. Cornel Sandvoss (2005, 2007) considers the role of aesthetic value and textual interdependence in fan studies, bringing into dialogue literary theory and cultural studies. Through this synthesis, he creates a reader-response theory that is able to encompass the self-reflexive intertextuality of an interpretive fan community. Likewise, Abigail Derecho's (2006) consideration of fan fiction as ever-expanding archive, and Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse's (2006) characterization of fan texts as extensive, multi-authored "works in progress," stress the interdependence and multiplicity of fan textual creativity. In the following, we suggest that fan authorship signifies a broader cultural transition away from a celebration of originality and newness, of creativity in a vacuum, and of individuals owning creative ideas and styles. Instead, fan authorship reveals a broader cultural embrace of the stimulating limitations of intertextuality.

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[1] For discussions of fan culture and fan creations, see Jenkins (1992), Bacon-Smith (1992), Hills (2002), Sandvoss (2005), Hellekson and Busse (2006), and Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007). For convergence culture, see Jenkins (2006a). For transmedia storytelling, see Jenkins (2003) and Mittell (2006).

[2] Despite their resonance with postmodern theories, fan texts rarely if ever are considered in academic discussions of postmodern exemplary texts. The lowbrow status of the sources may be one of the reasons fan texts have never been studied as postmodern artifacts unlike popular texts that riff off more traditionally respected sources in the literary, art, or film canon.

[3] See Benjamin (1988) for the classic discussion of art and reproduction. Underlying this essay is, in fact, a larger philosophical conversation about the relationship between *Difference and Repetition* as Gilles Deleuze (1995) describes it. We will return to the larger question of an aesthetic that values not only difference but also repetition in our conclusion.

[4] For a concise overview of postmodern theories, see Bertens (1995), who traces both the philosophical responses to modernity such as those of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Julia Kristeva, as well as the artistic reactions to modernism in such critics as Ihab Hassan, Charles Jencks, and Frederic Jameson.

METHODOLOGY

This essay focuses on media fandom, by which we mean the evolving traditions of fans of film and television programs, as well as of certain books, musical groups, and film and TV actors. These diverse media texts have inspired interconnected communities and ongoing literary, analytic, and artistic output.[5] The rich cultures of media fandom authorship have developed over four decades in a range of specific material contexts; most recently, over the past decade, fans have deployed online interfaces such as journaling and open source fiction archiving software to share their creative works and processes. To a certain extent, these overlapping online networks join together fans from different countries and backgrounds; however, they are predominantly English-language based and contained within an Anglo-American cultural context.

As we consider the role of limitations in the development of fannish literary and artistic traditions online, we foreground the materiality of fan works as aesthetic entities in their own right while emphasizing the influence of their surrounding fan communities and the technologies on which they depend. We focus specifically on the work of media fans who consider themselves part of multifaceted but interconnected communities of viewer-producers, communities within communities that have developed traditions of textual analysis, production, and creation.

Before we go further in our analysis, we feel it is important to identify ourselves as scholar-fans or acafans, to draw on the terms and ideas established by Alexander Doty (2000) and Matt Hills (2002), respectively. Fan studies encompass fields that invite self-reflexivity with all of its inherent (and valuable) complications. Most fan scholars are fans of their given topics and thus have multiple, at times contradictory, investments in their work. We believe that our active involvement in the communities whose texts we study offers specific forms of insight. For this project in particular, our joint experience over years in multiple fandoms potentially offers a sense of scope difficult to achieve otherwise. Whereas our previous work has joined together our academic and fan perspectives in close studies, in this essay, we instead trace the dynamics of fan creativity across multiple fandoms and artistic forms. We by no means intend to flatten the diversity of fandoms and fannish authorship into a monolithic entity. Indeed, we have no doubt that future work will continue to engage with the significant particulars that emerge from specific communities, subsets of fans, and specific outlets of fan works. Such micro-attention will unlock the richness and diversity of fan cultures across interface, cultural context, and decade. For this essay, however, we offer a reading of the workings of media fan creativity that, while not monolithic, is robust enough to resonate in a range of specific contexts.

Thus, in this essay we map out continuities that extend beyond individual fandoms to shape media fandom more broadly. Many media fans move from one source text to another, creating and enjoying fan artifacts in multiple fandoms. This fandom migration results in similarities in both form and content across different fandoms. Certain fannish formal norms, such as headers, warnings, and archive preferences, may differ in specifics but often manifest in surprisingly similar ways across seemingly unconnected fannish arenas. Likewise, generic tropes and literary and aesthetic styles remain remarkably consistent across many fandoms. Pointing to these

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[5]We have chosen to use this self-nomer to describe the collective that encompasses multiple specific fandoms that nevertheless interact and overlap. For a detailed layout of the way these groups have intersected and evolved, see Coppa (2006a).

consistencies across varied fan spaces, we reference a wide range of examples, many of which are highly visible and familiar to fans within these communities.

CREATIVE LIMITS

The constraints of fan textual artistry come in many forms, from the constraints of the source text to those of community expectations, from the broader cultural expectations of genre to the limitations of technological interfaces. Most obviously, the commercial media source texts that inspire fan authorship play a role in shaping fan response. No matter the media fandom, fans create texts, including fan fiction, computer wallpapers, avatars, fan music videos, reviews, analyses, and much more, in conversation with and against the background of the source text that inspired them in the first place. As fan-authored texts circulate, fan communities form out of both those who create fan works and those who offer feedback and recommendations. These communities in turn develop their own norms and expectations, imposing equally strong limits within which new authorship takes place. Furthermore, broader discourses such as genre inevitably shape and limit fan authorship; indeed, media fans constantly draw on broader cultural generic discourses such as romance and science fiction that circulate beyond fandom and across a wide range of media texts. Finally, the tools that media fans use to create and circulate their fiction and artwork present their own sets of technological and ideological restrictions. In our contemporary moment, fans often appropriate interfaces and digital tools created for other purposes, finding ways to deploy them for their own needs. Examples of this include fannish use of Livejournal.com and Imeem.com, or Final Cut Pro and Adobe Photoshop. These multiple restrictions of text, intertext, and interface help generate the immense spectrum of fan fiction, art, and analyses.

However, the appeal of media fan creativity is not solely about limitations or restrictions. While a fan may relish the delicate dance of filling perceived gaps in the source text (or what fans call "canon"), many also celebrate the rejection of cultural constraints such as the authority of the initial author or of a media corporation or publishing company. Fannish creativity thrives not only because of the sense of pleasure of play within limits but also because of a sense of productive freedom borne of transformation. Indeed, while fan fiction communities may voluntarily impose a range of constraints, they also remove or invert others. It is partially this sense of freedom, specifically from industrial and corporate constraints, that, for example, fuels slash fan fiction's queering of nominally heteronormative narratives (Jones, 2002; Kohnen, 2008; Willis, 2006). Thus, fannish creative engagement spins on an axis of the embrace of limits and perceived rejection of limits. For the remainder of this essay we will explore the different levels of limitations invoked and at times rejected in the processes of fan creativity.

LIMITS OF THE SOURCE TEXT

Fan artists and authors contend most obviously with the limitations of the official source text. Fans of media texts ranging from books to films to television programs (as well as of converged media texts that traverse multiple media forms) engage with their source text of choice when they write a piece of fan fiction or create a vid, icon, wallpaper, or other fan text. The existence of the source text offers a framework of requirements which most fan writers choose to obey to a degree at least. For example, fan authors writing stories inspired by the television program

Supernatural must contend with the source text's unfolding narration of brothers Sam and Dean's childhood and young adulthood, told through intermittent flashbacks. Similarly, fans of *Harry Potter* must take into account a complex rubric of details regarding the laws and policies and history of the universe set forth by J. K. Rowling in her seven novels, while at the same time seeking inspiration if not canon specificity from what many perceive as the second-order Harry Potter films. While fans will not always adhere to all of the details of what they consider their primary source text, they must at least contend with the fact that many of their readers will read their fan fiction with knowledge of the source text as a background and a filter.

Sometimes fans create works of art or fiction that stray significantly from the source text. They may create an alternate universe with characters cast in completely new roles, or they may decontextualize video clips in a music video to tell a story quite unlike the one told by the source text. Even in these cases, the initial source text delimits and delineates the work: the author's choice to clearly mark a text as "alternate universe" or "constructed reality" signifies notable changes to the reader, thus maintaining the source text as discursive referent. Be it an alternative universe story or a constructed reality vid (or, for that matter, a careful coda picking off where an episode left off), fans recognize fan fiction or art as such based on its engagement at some level with the source text. Indeed, when a fan work is revised for professional sale, fans may recognize fannish tropes but will not consider it fan fiction or fan art per se (Woledge, 2005). Manna Francis's novel *Mind Fuck* (2007), for example, was originally based on a *Blake's 7* fan fiction; as the story expanded, it departed further from the source text and the author renamed the protagonists and finally published it as an original novel. In the eyes of fans and publisher alike, its departure from the source text as referent and limiting guide moved *Mind Fuck* from the domain of fan fiction to the domain of professional fiction.

Fan writer Isis describes the constraints of the source text as the very basis for her creative impulses:

> What it comes down to, for me, is that I can't create a story out of nothing — I can't just make up a premise and go from there, I need constraints. I need the starting point of two characters, or two worlds, a source text and a fandom [. . .] These types of fic give me more boundaries, and help me define the story I want to write, by looking at how these elements interact. (Isis, LiveJournal.com, August 10, 2005)

Isis thus emphasizes the benefits of source textual limitations; she describes them as offering both framework and challenge. Indeed, the immediate intertextuality with the source text provides a structural framework many fans relish. The appeal of writing with and against the source text offers the pleasurable challenge of creating a compelling narrative while following certain rules. Thus, the pleasure in the source textual constraints frame fan creativity from the outset.

LIMITS OF THE FANTEXT

Interpretive Communities

Some fans of media texts create in solitude, but many, especially those who choose to share their work with other fans, are aware of and engage with already existing fan communities and traditions during their creative process. These fan communities constitute discursive contexts that join the official source text as intertextual referent. Fan communities function as a context for

fan production and as such offer further limits to fan authorship and artistry. Fan texts often compellingly respond not only to source text but also to limitations based on the assumptions and expectations of the community. Thus, fan communities provide indirect constraints based on shared interpretations, constraints which impact much if not all authorship of fan texts.

Fan author/reader communities form through and around shared interpretations, becoming what Stanley Fish (1980) defines as *interpretive communities*, an imagined group of readers who share certain interpretations and interpretive strategies. For Fish, interpretive communities denote a collection of interpretive strategies rather than actual readers. Fans, however, create not only imagined networks but also socially interactive communities in the form of online networks around mutual interests. Fans' shared interpretations of the source text work to delimit and define fan communities and subcommunities. These communities join together readers who share interpretations, readers who in turn become writers of fan fiction or creators of fan art, and as such contribute to and in turn transform community-held expectations. As such, the web of ever-changing, ever growing fan texts, including fiction, art, music videos, and even theory and criticism, create and contribute to the formation of interpretive communities.

Fannish interpretive communities define themselves around shared readings of a character, a pairing, or a particular aspect of a fictional universe. Communities may form around central interpretive moments such as the celebration or rejection of a central plot point or a particularly aggressive reading of a controversial source text event. Subcategories of stories exist in which *Harry Potter*'s Sirius was never killed, where *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s Angel never left Sunnydale, and where *Gilmore Girl*'s Rory and Jess never broke up. Some *Due South* fans only consider the first two seasons "canon" and not the last two, and not a few *Smallville* fans stopped watching the show when the friendship between Lex and Clark turned to open hostility, preferring their "no rift" version of the two. Preferences for particular romantic pairings also clearly delineate interpretive communities; indeed, many fans identify themselves primarily as fans of one or another pairing. As such, they agree on the centrality of particular events, characteristics, and interpretations that support their favored romantic pairing.

Media fans encounter and create fiction and art in a context of ever more varied interpretations within their community; the growing repository of ideas in any given interpretive community shape fan creativity and the reception of fan texts. As new writers and artists offer new interpretations, interpretive community expectations change over time. Whereas J. K. Rowling's portrayal of Draco Malfoy in *Harry Potter* was mostly negative, large parts of *Harry Potter* fandom revised him early on into a misunderstood, abused, or otherwise more complex character. As a result, in a number of *Harry Potter* communities, fans now expect a redeemed Draco and would be quite upset to see Rowling's less pleasant version in a fan work. Every new story or piece of art thus contributes to a multifaceted fannish intertext, which in turn shapes a given fan community's expectations. In a continuous process, the ever-shifting expectations of an interpretive community limit and stimulate fannish authorship.

At the same time, community norms restrict individual interpretations and their reception and, in so doing, allow both creator and reader to rely on expectations that have already been established intertextually. For example, some fandoms center on unconventional romantic pairings; in these communities, participants have already collectively established that two unlikely characters belong together. New stories in such a fandom work within that accepted framework. Fans who have engaged with an interpretive community that has formed around a romantic pairing of on-screen enemies, such as *The X-Files*'s Krycek and Mulder, will often not require any

explanation about how those two have become lovers rather than trying to kill one another. Members of the community already take the characters' love for each other for granted. Such stories can be quite confusing for outsiders who do not share the same deeply held beliefs and expectations. This delineation, however, is perhaps part of the point; such established presuppositions are vital to the community's sense of cohesiveness, clearly demarcating the intended readers as those that share a common reading of the source text. Debates over "canonicity" and appropriate character representation often reveal differing interpretive communities that may have emphasized varying aspects of the source text or may have adhered to the limitation of the source text in divergent ways.

As with the source text, the implicit limits of community expectations hold sway whether a fan author adheres to or breaks with these conventions. One fan author may write a story that employs tropes important to a given community, while another writer may purposefully or accidentally violate community-agreed upon interpretations of events or characters. Both of these authors still face the fact that their story's reception will be impacted by community expectations. Fans may greet a divergence from community expectations positively, as a subversion of clichés that in turn may influence later fan expecations, or negatively, as being out of character or in other ways not canonical. An evil Clark Kent who uses his superpowers to take over the world, for example, is clearly an interpretation that rejects both the show and its surrounding mythology as well as predominant fan interpretations. Yet a number of highly praised stories have succeeded in expanding community expectations to include a power-hungry Clark Kent. Indeed, the *Smallville* fan community has introduced intertextual expectations precisely for the possibility of such a character interpretation. In this way, interpretive communities and their collective readings are never static, but rather function as ever-shifting intertexts for current and future fan interpretation and authorship.

Challenges

Beyond the indirect limitations of community-held assumptions, fans also purposefully impose restrictions on creativity, magnifying the limitations already implicit in the source text and in interpretive community expectations. Overt community-imposed limitations can occur at the levels of form, structure, style, and content. Most obviously, fannish communities often require stories to be presented in a specific format, preceded by a predetermined list of header information, labeled with pre-given categories, and containing or avoiding certain types of formatting. Archives, mailing lists, and even journaling communities tend to have clear formatting guidelines and rules regarding the inclusion of paratextual material. While some of these limits are due to interface requirements (e.g., artificial breaks dictated by the limits of newsgroup post length), others are elements that are not required but still enabled by the interface and enforced via community conventions (e.g., standardized post headings or tags controlled by list or community maintainers).

Some of the community constraints so vividly on display in fan challenges resemble those at play in nonfannish artistic circles. Just as poetry classifies different poems with quite rigorous rhyme scheme, scansion, and meter, fan fiction has developed its own conventional forms. For example, the drabble is a popular, highly restrictive fannish writing form that serves as many fans' entry into authorship. An author writing a drabble must tell a story in exactly 100 words. Like poetry, drabbles challenge the writer to offer an insightful narrative, characterization, or reverie in a highly circumscribed space. While their brevity may make drabbles seem easy to

write, authors must often revise and edit extensively in order to achieve the exact word count as well as an effective narrative.

Moving beyond formal protocols, fandoms also develop structural tropes which provide overt limitations with which fans may choose to engage. For example, many different fandoms contain stories with titles that begin "Five Things." While "Five Things" originated as a specific fan community challenge, it has since become a more broadly recognizable story format with implicit rules and regulations. The title convention outlines the basic plot and structure as well as the central character; for example, "Five Things That Never Happened to Blair Waldorf" would offer readers five alternate scenarios that offer insight into this particular *Gossip Girl* character. "Five Ways Starbuck Didn't Die" would present five distinct hypothetical death scenes within *Battlestar Galactica's* universe. Often the five scenes are further organized in a methodical way, from short to long, from happy to sad, from likely to unlikely. In all "Five Things" stories, the writers voluntarily submit to a restrictive narrative structure while creating five imaginative alternate universes.

Over the past few years, media fan communities have featured more and more formalized community-based limits in the form of fiction and art exchanges, challenges, themed and seasonal festivals (*fests*), remixes, and similar organized writing or artistic practices. Fans set themselves restrictions systematically through fan challenges, forcing participants to obey more rules and limitations as part of the act of production. A challenge may dictate any of a wide range of limitations: writing challenges may specify the amount of time a writer has to create her story; the story length, style, and/or structure; the inclusion of particular plot points and characterizations; even the use of a given word or object. An art challenge might dictate similar restrictions and might specify the interface or source materials upon which an artist may draw. Where a fiction challenge might demand a sonnet, a character with wings, a movie scenario, the use of a particular object, or a random three words, an art challenge could demand a specific subject matter and, in addition, the artwork dimensions necessary for banner use at a bulletin board.

In addition to participating in explicit challenges, many fans request short story prompts to inspire them to write, using the constraints as encouragement. The demands of the fan challenge echo the investments of fan authorship in general, including the pleasures to be found in creating with and against the limitations of the source text. For example, the popular *remix challenge* illustrates the potential of purposefully established limits. In remix challenges, a coordinator assigns participants to rewrite someone else's fan fiction. Remix stories range from close retellings (e.g., with a different character's point of view) to radical re-conceptualizations, at times switching pairings, universes, or major plot points of the story. In a way, then, remix challenges double the constraints of fan fiction, demanding that the remix writer not only take into account canon characterization and plot but also acknowledge the limits offered by a particular story's interpretation. Indeed, remixes push the writer to creatively negotiate these various constraints.

Looking at the limitations within and against which fan creators produce fan works, communities emerge as pivotal sites of creative constraint. Whether implicitly, as is the case in community limitations, or explicitly, as in various requests and challenges, fan creations must engage with the demands of the communities in which they are created, disseminated, and enjoyed. By definition, fan fiction is in intertextual communication with the source text; however, in practice it also engages with a host of other texts, be they clearly stated requests, shared interpretive characterizations, or even particular instantiations of the universes that the fan writer chooses to

expand upon. These multiple intertexts impose further limits on fan creativity but also engender further ideas and expansion.

LIMITS OF GENRE CONTEXT

Every media fan, of course, is embedded in a variety of cultural contexts. Media fans do not engage with source and fantext in a vacuum but are also cultural agents in their own right. As such, every fan creation — and its reception — filters through myriad contextual frameworks. One key, structural contextual framework is what we understand as genre. Fan authorship evokes complex webs of recognizable genre associations, appropriating concepts from commercial media beyond direct reference to a particular source text.[6] The diversity of fan fiction and art over time and across fandoms reflects a wide range of generic tropes shared with other media texts. Indeed, fans label and organize fan fiction using genre terminology, or introduce familiar genre tropes (such as noir or fantasy) into television programs that do not already include or highlight those tropes. For example, fans of the criminal procedural television program *Criminal Minds* may write romantic stories whereas fans of historical naval drama *Master and Commander* may include fantastic or science fiction elements in their fan fiction.

Fan fiction and art also feature recognizable tropes uniquely specific to fandom. These tropes may have a history in broader literary and cultural contexts and may be available in the source text as part of these generic traditions. Fan authorship, however, engages with and mobilizes already meaningful generic tropes in specific and new directions. Terminology and motifs such as *mpreg* (male pregnancy), *hurt/comfort* (stories in which one or both characters suffer severe trauma and the healing process creates ties between them), or *domestic discipline* (stories which establish a dominant/submissive pairing with disciplinary encounters) have evolved in conversation with wider cultural genre discourses but have developed their own histories and meanings within fandom. Male pregnancy, time travel, and animal transfiguration all have precedents in science fiction literature, but they have also developed as specific generic discourses within fandom, with clearly recognizable subtropes and characteristics. These fan-specific genre tropes move far beyond simple adaptations of pregiven scenarios. The most popular of such motifs span across fandoms and often are awarded their own categories in archival search engines, thus structuring fannish spaces. One of the more popular fiction archiving softwares, the fan-coded Automated Archive, allows the archivist to delineate specific inclusion and exclusion of search categories: a reader can thus easily search the 852 Prospect Sentinel Archive, for example, for a story with their chosen pairing that is drama but not an alternate universe and will include violence yet exclude rape and partner betrayal.

Fans create fiction and art with generic tropes in mind. Genre discourses thus function as limitation and impetus for creativity on multiple levels, as they are adapted and adopted to fannish purposes. Sometimes, source texts meet fannish appreciation precisely because the generic elements offer a rich playground for fan specific tropes and traditions. For example, several fandoms have

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[6]We approach genre as culturally constructed, shifting sets of labels, meanings, tropes, and associations. Such an interpretation allows us to use genre to study the aesthetic characteristics of fan texts without ignoring their cultural context. See Mittell (2004), Stein (2006a), and Naremore (2008).

canonical situations that provide the potential for post-apocalyptic dystopias.[7] *Blake's 7* is completely set in a dystopian future; *Stargate-SG1* features myriad parallel or potential realities, such as one in which Earth is destroyed by aliens and one in which peaceful archeologist and explorer Daniel takes over as not-so-benevolent dictator of alien worlds; and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creates the canonical "Wishverse," in which vampires took over Sunnydale at the end of the first season. Fan fiction has mobilized all of these source textual dystopias, and some have reached the point of earning fan-specific categorizations, such as *X-Files*'s postcolonization or *X-Men*'s post-Mutant Registration Act stories. These fan specific generic terms are used as search criteria in archives, as story headers, and in fan discussions about stories.

Dystopias are a popular science fiction trope within and beyond media fandom, often manifesting as a scary future threat that the heroes are fighting to prevent. The dystopian elements in television programs such as *Buffy* and *X-Files* resonate strongly with media fans, allowing them to envision their beloved characters suffering and resisting oppressive regimes, be they alien, demon, or human. In so doing, fan fiction stories negotiate the generic constraints invoked by the larger trope of dystopia as well as fan specific expectations, merging the two to appeal particularly to media fans who are also well-versed in science fiction. Thus media fans draw from wider generic structures and in turn impose their own additional layers of generic expectation. These multi level generic expectations, like those of the source text and community intertext, serve as stimulating limitations for fan creativity. The productive limits of shared genre discourses join the limits of source and fan texts, guiding and shaping fan authorship.

LIMITS OF TECHNOLOGY AND INTERFACE

We have considered how source text, community context, and generic heritage provide limits that shape and spur fan creativity; technological tools likewise facilitate the production, distribution, and reception of fan texts. Complicating popular notions of the Internet as an utopian, experimental playground, digital media theorists illustrate how limitations of code and technology shape the rubrics of Internet usage and delimit the cultural formations that depend on digital media.[8] For fan authorship, the content and aesthetics of fan texts are intimately tied to the constraints of interface and technology. While this is as true of, for example, fanvids made with two VCRs in the 1990s as it is in today's digital arena, we will dwell here on the digital media frameworks which shape much of contemporary fan production.

Interface and Fan Art

Technological affordances and interface specifics perhaps most obviously affect the work of fan artists. Contemporary fan artistic creation is directly dependent on the digital tools which fans

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[7]Science fiction, of course, has a strong dystopian heritage, both in literature and film, encompassing many novels and films that fans repeatedly cite as influential, most recently *Children of Men* (2006) and *V for Vendetta* (2005). Not all fans are necessarily science fiction fans, but, as Pearson (2003) has argued, media fandom maintains strong roots in science fiction fandom and a surprisingly large number of fannish shows contain science fictional or fantastic elements. In fact, fans often introduce science fictional or fantastic elements into more mundane worlds such a cop dramas as well.

[8]Manovich (2002), Galloway (2004), Lessig (2006), and Chun (2006) address the implications of technological interfaces and hardware and software constraints.

use to create, publish, and view these artworks. The increase in computer processing and Internet upload and download speeds as well as the spread of more user-friendly editing programs has allowed greater numbers of fans to try their hand at visual media. Many of these new artists might never attempt a drawing yet feel comfortable creating an icon, learning how to use Photo-Shop or other imaging software to do so. As an evolving art form, icons — 100 by 100 pixel user pictures employed in LiveJournal and other social networking sites popular among fans — play specific social roles and have developed a range of fan-specific aesthetics. As an aesthetic form, icons reach beyond fandom: avatars are crucial to a wide range of present-day Web interfaces.[9] However, icons have developed specific social uses and aesthetic trends within fandom. Fans use icons to express their own sense of online identity as well as their investment in commercial media texts. Icon making has incorporated approaches from layered slide shows (animated GIFs) that incorporate text and image to stylized images recognizable as favored characters only to those with a fair amount of knowledge of the fantext or source text.

Similarly, fan music video authorship—the art of recombining clips from a commercial media source text—is deeply impacted by the development and availability of new technologies and interfaces. Indeed, fan vids have changed significantly over the past two decades: where vidding used to be the highly expensive and intensive fannish practice of a few artists and collectives, more easily accessible and easily mastered computer tools have helped transform vidding into a widespread phenomenon. Early vidders (1980s and 1990s) used VCRs as editing tools, but contemporary fan artists draw on professional digital video editing software such as Adobe Premiere and Final Cut Pro to construct highly complex, layered, rhythmic combinations of images, effects, and soundtrack. Vidders select and juxtapose clips to highlight particular moments in the source text, deploying, selecting, arranging and filtering these elements to tell a story or to analyze a particular character or theme.

Like all media fan creations, vids are produced in the interplay between the material provided by the source text, the expectations of the community, its internal and external genre traditions, and technological limitations. Fan artists push every one of these limits and, in turn, challenge themselves by adding new restrictions. Some vids use the clear constraints of finite visual material to create stories that move beyond those told in source text. Such vids provide yet another example of the ways fans use a limited amount of source text to render highly creative artistic works. In such *constructed reality* vids, the vidder must use the available footage, decontextualize the familiar images, and then recontextualize them to create a new and different narrative. The constraints involved are extensive; indeed, it is the ability to reinterpret the limited material within those constraints that makes these vids immensely effective.

T. Jonesy and Killa's *Star Trek* vid "Closer" illustrates the effects of working with and against such multiple restraints.[10] Replicating the original NIN video tone and color scheme, "Closer" immediately distances viewers from the familiar *Star Trek* visuals. Opening with the epigraph "what if they hadn't made it to Vulcan in time," "Closer" creates a narrative in which Spock is overcome by his (canonical) sexual urges and sexually assaults Kirk. Juxtaposing *Star Trek* footage with NIN's provocative lyrics, "Closer" reinterprets images of violence into images of sex. Choices of editing, video speed, lighting, and filters similarly rework and inflect

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[9]For analyses of avatars and their role in game playing and story creation, see Meadows (2008) and Ryan (2006).

[10]For discussions of "Closer" and its reception, see Jenkins (2006b) and Coppa (2008).

the multiple source texts. "Closer" showcases a powerful combination of defamiliarized source text images, fan community's slash reading, and the song's evocative lyrics, all of which play out in conversation with our culture's proximation of violence and sexuality.

The aggressive de- and re-contextualization in "Closer" anticipates a trend in vidding in which vidders now use customized software to actively manipulate images above and beyond editing and sound/image juxtaposition; software such as After Effects enables vidders to create scenes and events that never occurred in the source text, and manipulate the actors' bodies in ways only fiction could do heretofore (Coppa, 2006b). In her summary of a panel on the future of vidding at the 2008 annual vidding convention Vividcon, Seperis describes how vidding has come to exemplify "the celebration of limits, the expansion of them, and the breaking of them" (LiveJournal.com, August 18, 2008). With their direct dependence on technology, vids may be the most obvious example for the close ties between interface and creativity, one engendering the other in turn: as more sophisticated software becomes more accessible, vidders exploit their possibilities to the fullest, while fannish desires to tell different stories in different ways forces fans to engage with software in ever expanding ways.

Interface and Fan Fiction

Although visual and audiovisual fan artistic forms like manips, icons, wallpapers, and vids most obviously demonstrate the key role of interface in shaping fan creativity, interface also shapes the writing of fan fiction. The interfaces of the different new media outlets that fans use to distribute their writing such as mailing lists, social networking sites, or archives shape many dimensions of fan authorship, from structure to meaning. For example, e-mail and journal posts often have interface-enforced length restrictions. When posting their stories online via mailing list or social network, writers need to decide whether to present their longer stories in parts or to link to a Web site that can present the text in total. In turn, authors may create with technological or interface restrictions in mind, for example, composing stories whose plots advance in suspenseful increments over short chapters.

While technology imposes limits on particular forms and types of stories, it also encourages and creates new categories of storytelling. Because these interfaces are often designed to link users, they encourage forms of multiauthored narrative. Instant Messenger programs allow writers to engage directly with co-writers, facilitating a style of joint story creation that highlights multiple points of view. Likewise, LiveJournal-based fiction posting has encouraged new forms of writing like *drabble trees*, in which multiple authors build a multithreaded larger story out of short stories that adhere to the culturally enforced 100-word length. Several alternative story lines come into being out of evolving clusters of many smaller drabbles. LiveJournal's comment function, which nests unfolding replies, directly enables and inspires this story format.

Historically, fan choice of interface has shaped the development of fan fiction writing traditions. In the 1990s, fans primarily used Usenet and mailing lists to distribute their writing and provide feedback. Both of these interfaces work in ASCII code only, making it nearly impossible to disseminate stories which depend on multilinear narrative progression or stories that embed nontextual elements. In the 1990s, when these interfaces were the primary tools of growing fandoms, their specific constraints thus affected form and content, preventing authors from exploring multimedia storylines. Since the late 1990s, the distribution of fan works online has shifted from text-only newsgroups and mailing lists to environments that are more image-laden and

visually oriented, such as bulletin boards and journal-based social networking sites such as LiveJournal.com or Dreamwidth.org. Contemporary media fan cultures on the Web now interweave the visual and the textual, with art omnipresent in the form of wallpapers, user icons or avatars, banner and header images, and multimedia works.

Understanding the technological history and its influence on fannish creative traditions may help to explain why, in contemporary online fan authorship, much of fan fiction still follows the text-centric model that evolved in Usenet and mailing lists, even though contemporary spaces facilitate hypertextual and multimedia narratives. Although change may have come slowly, the increasing complexity of online interfaces has encouraged the merging of visual and literary art forms into a complex multimedia fantext. Fannish role-playing games (RPGs) exemplify the multilayered use of digital media for fannish storytelling.[11] The most performative versions of fannish RPGs create journals or twitter accounts for each of the characters in a story world and then tell a complex story through the characters' recounting of narrative events and through their interactions with each other. Readers follow the narrative through the textual traces of character interaction/performance, and sometimes even directly comment in the characters' journal or to the character's twitter, thus directly interacting with them. RPG characters also use the icons and mood settings of journaling interfaces to express emotion, thus inserting yet another layer of communication between author and reader. Rather than presenting a linear, holistic narrative, the saga is communicated in fragments, through posts and comment conversations, and sometimes through the added dimension of hyperlinks to online images, articles, or other journals.

The interfaces of social networking tools frame these daily-unfolding, serial narratives, imbuing them with a sense of everyday intimacy. In many journal-based interactive stories, readers can "friend" or "follow" (subscribe to the posts of) the individual characters. Readers who have the characters on their friends list can watch as their conversations unfold in the comments section of each post, often playing out in real time. Thus, RPGs make use of the many technological affordances of social networking tools, incorporating hyperlinks, embedded sound and image, icons, and threaded comments as part of their narrative process. The resulting texts cannot be explained in terms of narrative alone, nor can they be easily classed as games. Fannish RPGs constitute a fascinating new transmedia artistic/literary form that has been generated by and relies upon the particular interfaces of social networking sites. These complex multi-authored narratives use the limitations and possibilities of the interface to create a multilayered, multimedia story world (Stein, 2006b).

RPG-style stories' use of social networking interfaces complicates the lines between fiction and reality, character and fan — lines that are already uncertain at best (Turkle, 1995). Indeed, we can draw analogies between characters in RPGs and the mostly pseudonymous fans who narrativize their actual lives, often using similar avatars and icons as visual accompaniments. Online identities are textual performances just like their fictional counterparts, and as such they too are confined and shaped by the interfaces on which they depend (Busse, 2006). As such, journal publishing and online interaction itself can be understood as a complex web of given and created restrictions that generate creative impulses.

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[11]Media fannish RPGs owe as much to traditions of fan fiction — in concerns, theme, narrative structure, and creative process — as they do to their namesakes, table top role-playing games. The dynamics of group or shared writing has a long history in fan fiction, encompassing feedback traditions, round robins, and author partnerships. For contemporary approaches to role-playing games, from table top to digital games and playable media, see Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin (2007).

CONCLUSION

Media fan creativity, encouraged and shaped by the limits of the source text, intertext, context, and interface, exemplifies the ways participants in contemporary media culture engage with commercial media structures in a more general sense. In particular, fan authorship triggers broader cultural anxieties surrounding threats to originality and idea ownership in the age of digital media reproducibility. Popular discourse often derides fan authorship casually for lack of "originality" or more heatedly for its theft of others' creative work. Science fiction writer Robin Hobb (2005) states her condescension more explicitly than others when she describes in her "Fan Fiction Rant" how "[f]an fiction is to writing what a cake mix is to gourmet cooking," and calls fan fiction "Paint-By-Number art." Students introduced to fan works in introductory media studies courses often echo similar sentiments regarding perceived sins of fan authorship, questioning why we should respect and study creative texts that are simply a remixing of professional artists' original work. Moreover, even fans themselves tend to downplay the remixing aspects of their works in favor of their original characteristics when making aesthetic and, more importantly, legal argument for the validity of fan artifacts.

The *Organization for Transformative Works* (OTW), a nonprofit fan organization dedicated to archiving and documenting fannish artifacts, exemplifies this tension: although OTW is dedicated to archiving fan works in all of their repetition and multiplicity, the name itself suggests a valorization of the transformative aspect of fan creativity, integrating the ideologies of originality that are at the heart of popular cultural discomfort with fan authorship. OTW's emphasis on the transformative properties of fan creativity is strategic: the transformative dimensions of fan works enable them to be included in fair use exemption against copyright violations. OTW's valuation of transformation (and implicitly originality) reflects a legal culture that upholds values of originality, linking originality with idea ownership. However, no matter how strategic the rationale, this turn to language of transformation (and implicitly originality) suggests that even in its cultural embrace of repetition and limitation, media fandom (or at least the parts of it represented by OTW) still remains at least tenuously invested in more traditional notions of originality, transformation, uniqueness, and progress.

With their continued (or perhaps residual) investment in more traditional notions of authorship and originality, media fans model the conflict between remixing and originality, between creativity within limits and creativity beyond limits. While fannish discourse may emphasize modernist notions, fannish traditions of creativity celebrate the possibility of creativity held between transformation, multiplicity, and repetition. In the end, the collective creative energies of media fans showcase artistic prototypes that emphasize intertextuality, community, and a creativity that is not invested primarily in notions of originality.

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