

Qualifying Field Examinations – November 9, 2020

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Written Exam #2 – Juan Llamas-Rodriguez

Fandom Studies

Exam Question #2

Write an essay where you critically evaluate the economics of fan production and its interactions with corporate media production. Questions to consider include: What are the incentives and disincentives for media industries to engage with fans? How do different fan communities understand their relationship to established industries? When is fan labor valued or devalued? How do different groups (e.g. industry producers, academics, fans themselves) conceptualize what counts as “fan labor”? How do different platforms monetize fan participation? Could there be modes of fan production that resist commodification from established industries, and what would these look like? You may not need to answer all of these questions. Rather, focus on what you think are the key issues in the economics of fan production and argue why these must be central to our studies of fandom. In addition to referring to the authors on your list, choose **at least two** fan practices as examples in your argument.

If one were to listen to some of the loudest fans on any given social media platform, fandom is in trouble. This past summer, long-time hosts and entertainers on Twitch, one of the largest streaming services in the world, were recently swamped by DMCA claims filed by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) for using copyrighted music during their streams. Many of these notices targeted videos that were published years before the filing of the DMCA claims, and rather than allow streamers to scrub the audio out of the offending videos or to submit counterclaims, Twitch has instead begun to systematically wipe the videos from their platform, deleting potentially hundreds of thousands of hours of content. Fans on YouTube have long felt the sting of major corporations shutting down channels due to copyright law via the RIAA, but movie studios, game developers, other YouTubers, and YouTube's Content ID algorithm regularly shut down fan activity on the grounds of protecting their copyright and trademarks. While some creators have found ingenious ways around the problem of copyright, the broader issue is clear: media industries desire complete control over their intellectual property in online spaces while simultaneously asking fans and creators to practice fandom under their terms. And, as of writing, fans have largely capitulated, using Twitch and YouTube's subscription features (of which the companies get a sizable cut) to support creators on those platforms while said creators are scrambling to comply with the platforms' draconian, yet inconsistently applied mandates. As fandom becomes a major source of revenue for creators, fans, and platforms, fandom is bound in a precarious position between their object(s) of fandom and those that create and control the creation of those objects.

But why does the media industry even bother with fandom in the first place? What drives fans to bow to the whims of their corporate overlords? Or should this reading be reversed, as corporations are desperate to appeal to fans and tap into fandom's increasing economic power?

Could the relationship between fandom and the media industry ever be reciprocal, where both sides give and take in equal measure? These questions revolve around politics of power and capital but elide the everyday realities of many fans, some of whom struggle to put into words why exactly they like what they like. Neither fans nor media producers are homogenous entities in single-minded pursuit of the Fandom Jackpot. Fandom studies must acknowledge the multiplicities of fans, creators, and Powers That Be that influence and craft the stories, music, art, films, games, and other media that we enjoy throughout our lives as well as the multitude of reasons both fans and media industries opt to engage or disengage from one another.

Perhaps the largest incentive for the media industry to continue to cultivate fandom is that nearly everyone in the world is a fan of *something*. With Internet access expanding around the world, fandom has gone global. Japanese anime, Bollywood musicals, British dramas, American musicians, African films, and Polish video games make up only a fragment of the cultural and economic exchange that transpires even now. To imagine a work's audience as limited only to the nation it was primarily created for (e.g. anime as just for Japan) is to completely ignore the vibrant fan cultures that span the globe. Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto note that despite the difficulty of access, language barriers, and cultural differences, fans will nevertheless find affinity with the object of their fandom as well as "a world that facilitates both fan activity and the dissemination of popular texts across borders" online (104). This affinity is driven, in part, by the growth of online spaces and the rapidly dropping barriers to entry for new fans to participate in fandom, but the drive to connect results from the affective connections between the fan, the media work, and the fandom.

Affect possesses a complicated relationship to fandom, the media industry, and the wider culture. An amalgamation of emotion and feeling sometimes escaping our linguistic capabilities

to name them, affect shapes our interactions with one another and the world around us, including the communities, possessions, professions, and media we connect to. When a work of fiction brings us to tears or a passerby's yawn evokes the same response in ourselves, we feel the bodily impact of others on ourselves. Susanna Paasonen describes affect as a powerful force that "grabs, appeals and disturbs, attracts and repulses" (40). Affect drives us towards media in the first place, granting us jolts of connection to the people around us. Paasonen explains why so many of us online search for these affective engagements: "These movements are fast inasmuch as they are persistent, driven by a desire for something that will grab and stick, rather than just slide by—no matter how contingent and temporal such attachments may be" (40). "Stickiness" is integral to thinking about the relationship between media industries and fandom, working to describe the ways fans latch onto media objects so tightly. Jodi Dean posits that the stickiness of media keeps us in an "affective circuit":

The loops and repetitions of the acephalous circuit of drive describe the movement of the networks of communicative capitalism, the ways its flows capture subjects, intensities, and aspirations. Accompanying each repetition, each loop or reversal, is a little nugget of enjoyment. We contribute to the networks, as creative producers and vulnerable consumers, because we enjoy it. In fact the open architecture of the internet enables and requires the capture of enjoyment insofar as it is premised on users' contributions, alterations, and engagement. ... For communication networks to function at all (as is abundantly clear in Web 2.0 and 4G mobile networks) people have to use them, play with them, add to them, and extend them. Our participation does not subvert communicative capitalism. It drives it. (94)

This affective circuit recognizes how fans (willingly or unknowingly) contribute to our current media and technological ecology; as we immerse ourselves in media through our phones, computers, radios, televisions, bookcases, pictures, paintings, and roadside billboards, we perpetuate the existence of the media we stick to, what we are fans of, at the expense of others that lack those qualities of affect we crave.

Media industries facilitate this “natural selection” by churning out more works than any one person or fandom could experience in a single lifetime. New franchises pop up every week, fashion trends can shift at a moment’s notice, and older media are brought onto newer platforms every day. All this production means that companies gamble considerable funds to produce media that few people (if anyone) will connect to. Quibi, for instance, published thousands of short-form videos yet folded in October of 2020 after only six months of operation and over a billion dollars in investments, blaming the COVID-19 pandemic but acknowledging that their content didn’t drive enough people to their platform. This is business as usual. John Fiske contends that while “[official] culture likes to see its texts (or commodities) as the creations of special individuals or artists” that are safeguarded in museums and kept in constant, albeit guarded circulation, pop culture industries are “well aware that its commodities are industrially produced and thus do not have the status of a uniquely crafted art-object,” a status that allows them to generate media objects in ridiculous supply with little to no investment in their long-term sustainability (47). Another reason for this lack of investment is that many media companies expect fandom to rally around them and perform the work of preservation in their stead. Matt Hills notes how this “cult fandom” extends well beyond the production of the media object, often persisting years after the television show’s cancellation, the musician’s death, or the book series’ final installment, but he also warns that cult fandom cannot be willed into existence by the industry (170-186). Of course, media companies pay little heed to that warning, for it doesn’t matter if anyone remembers James Cameron’s *Avatar* in ten, twenty, or thirty years if there is a potential ravenous consumer bloc waiting to purchase every Extended Edition DVD box set, pay extra for the 3-D experience in theaters, and continually (re)engage with other like-minded fans

to keep interest in the intellectual property alive should a sequel ever be released. If no one sticks, the industry can keep right along until something does.

This perpetuity may make media industries seem too-big-to-fail, but they pay very close attention to the reactions of fans and often tailor their releases to better suit their audience. When Paramount Pictures released a trailer in 2019 for their cinematic take on Sonic the Hedgehog—starring a more “realistic” appearance compared to the character’s cartoony video game aesthetic—fans vehemently panned the design to such an extent that the film was delayed for several months and Sonic was redesigned to be closer to his “classic” look, a process that took an estimated five million dollars to complete. Conversely, the 2016 entry to the DC Extended Universe *Suicide Squad* saw fans giddy over the release of multiple trailers that painted the film as a fun, villain-led romp—which led Warner Bros. Entertainment to demand over ten million dollars of reshoots and edits to bend the film into the shape that they believed fans wanted. *Suicide Squad* was released to much derision and disappointment as Hills’ warning about forcing fandom came to pass once again, but fan interest in the characters and a follow-up film has led Warner Bros. to try again with *The Suicide Squad*, to be released in 2021. These examples show how much fandom impacts the development of media as well as the various attempts of producers to “get it right.” Though fandom may be fickle, it also cannot be ignored. Media companies attempting to distance themselves from fandom or to control it will inevitably find themselves unable to do either. As Henry Jenkins states, “Corporations imagine participation as something they can start and stop, channel and reroute commodify and market. ...Consumers, on the other side, are asserting a right to participate in the culture, on their own terms, when and where they wish” (169). This may be as simple as boycotting a single publisher to as complex as starting their own lobbying groups.

One of the most notable fan lobby groups, the Viewers for Quality Television (VQT), organized letter-writing campaigns in 1984 to “save” television shows from cancellation such as *Cagney & Lacey* that they classified as quality television. Sue Brower records that what “quality television” was for the VQT was “linking a taken-for-granted set of ‘enlightened’ middle-class, liberal, feminist values with a repeatedly examined set of aesthetic concerns—writing, acting, ‘realism,’ and authorship” (172). This group sought to distance themselves from being “merely” fans and instead desired “a position of privilege—*clout*—in relations to the networks, based on its status as an elite minority” (176, original emphasis). The group managed to work its way into the networks’ good graces, often by taking a “something for everyone” approach to criticism and discrediting negative fan reactions to “quality” shows. But VQT fractured from within as some argued that the intellectual and critical rigor of their discussions warranted additional privilege and cultural status while others struggled “to reconcile ‘quality’ with *pleasure*,” unable and perhaps unwilling to explain why “bad” television gave them joy (177, original emphasis). While neither *Cagney & Lacey* nor the VQT survived the turn of the century, many fans continue to express their appreciation for television, film, video games, and other media in a similar “elite” style of tastemaking through reviews, researched opinions, and professional organizing.

The VQC’s push to be more than “just fans” is quite common, as fandom bears quite a bit of shame around it. To avoid this prevailing sense of shame around fandom and fandom practices, most fans opt not to get involved with the industries beyond the point of sale. Fandom carries a stigma of fanaticism, excessive emotion, and hyper-consumerist behavior, while individual fans are belittled for the crime of liking something “too much.” Admitting to one’s participation in fandom has been likened to “coming out of the closet;” likewise, some members of the VQC even found themselves “confessing” to liking shows that did not meet the standards

of quality programming (Brower 179). Joli Jenson traces this fear of being “found out” to the pathologization of the fan as either “an obsessed loner, suffering from a disease of isolation, or a frenzied crowd member, suffering from the disease of contagion” (13). Fandom and pop culture have also been accused by moral entrepreneurs of everything from organizing new religious cults in the 1970s, criminal Satanist organizations in the 80s, to transforming teenagers into “super predators” in the 1990s (Laycock 6). These characterizations revolve around the demonization of excess emotion and a perceived lack of rational thought. Pop culture, likewise, is viewed as “low” culture with little to no moral value or promoting dangerous or anti-social behavior. Nicolle Lamerichs’ exploration of fans of Japanese popular culture or “otaku” finds that although sentiment around fandom has improved in recent years, “otaku are still stereotyped as loners who may be involved in otaku subculture to some degree, but generally stick to themselves. These representations may be carried out further to the degree that otaku are depicted as having phobias or mental illness” while also “believed to be either desperate, single fanboys, or virgin fangirls” (256, 259). With this characterization, it is no wonder why no one wants to admit they are a fan, but, as Cornel Sandvoss asserts, “it has become next to impossible to find realms of public life which are unaffected by fandom—from the intermingling of showbusiness, sports and politics to the everyday talk about one’s favorite music, television show or film” (3). If, then, everyone is a fan of something, why does this stereotype persist?

Class is among the most significant factors of fandom’s poor standing. Debates over “low” (working and middle-class) and “high” (or “official”) culture mirrors that of the “fan” and the “aficionado.” Jenson relates the dissonance between the two: “Apparently, if the object of desire is popular with the lower or middle class, relatively inexpensive and widely available, it is fandom (or a harmless hobby); if it is popular with the wealthy and well educated, expensive and

rare, it is preference, interest or expertise” (19). This can be seen in discourse about football or soccer fans as destructive hooligans whereas the culture around, say, golf or chess is framed in polite rationality. Perhaps fandom’s ill reputation stems from the productivity of the media industry itself, as cult fandom’s fascination with “dead” media can cut into profits for the new. In any case, fandom is put into opposition with dominant bourgeois culture and relegated to the position of subculture. If consumers are asked to consistently consume every instance of media, then fandom contributes “noise,” which Dick Hebdige describes as “interference” in the ideological messaging of those in positions of power (84). Though Hebdige cautions that subcultures are not entirely separate from the structures that brought them into existence, he describes them as “mutations and extensions of existing codes” of conduct and culture that can appear “monstrous and unnatural” as a result of their dissonance with larger cultural norms (119). So long as fandom is set apart from “culture,” the distinction between “high” and “low” culture (and those who participate in them) is maintained, as Jenson relates: “Fandom, instead, is what ‘they’ do; ‘we,’ on the other hand, have tastes and preferences, and select worthy people, beliefs and activities for our admiration and esteem. Furthermore, what ‘they’ do is deviant, and therefore dangerous, while what ‘we’ do is normal, and therefore safe” (19).

But class is only one angle of shame; gender is another. Women are far more likely than men to be harassed, mocked, and shamed for their fandom if they are even acknowledged at all. Suzanne Scott notes that while women continue to be hounded for their love of media and fandom, the media industries and culture at large have picked up on the economic power of male fans and have sought to rehabilitate the image of the fan as a “normal” pursuit for men when in reality “their privilege as a consumer base is equally inherited and entrenched, and often remains unacknowledged in discussions of the newly ‘empowered’ fan...” (80). Although women

continue to fight to be seen as legitimate fandom, their plight is viewed by these male fans as a “zero-sum game” where representation for non-male fans means that any cultural clout gained will have to be taken away and given to the usurpers, or as Scott puts it, “more for someone else will inevitably mean less for me” (3). The Gamergate controversy illustrated this mentality to a sharp degree. Under the guise of advocating better ethics in games journalism, thousands of male fans sent death threats and hateful messages to female and non-binary developers such as Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, and Brianna Wu in a bid to force them out of the gaming industry. Other “-gates” have followed suit, such as Comicsgate, but all such attempts center on a single goal: “to virally poison the communal body of fan culture against women, who are themselves presented as a virus that must be quarantined or eradicated” (Scott 84). In doing so, male fans hope to preserve their privileged relationship to media industries *and* their status as subcultural renegades.

If one’s gender can radically shape their experience with fandom, age is a frequently overlooked factor. Daniel Cavicchi finds that older women “are expected to settle into the more mature behavior of work or motherhood” and leave fandom behind once they leave their temporary “hormone-driven” teenage years (qt. in Deller 197). Janice Radway’s ethnography of romance readers in 1991 records how many older women were afraid of wasting time instead of being “devoted to children, house, or husband,” criticized by their husbands and children for spending money on their own pursuits and regularly derided by their communities and by news media for reading “soft-core pornography” (103-104). Expected to devote mind, body, and soul to their roles as mothers, the Smithton women sought out these romance novels for “selfish” reasons and were subsequently persecuted for this small infraction. Alternatively, Ruth Deller found that media representations of older female fans positioned their fandom as “teenagers

who've never really grown up" as well as "drooling grandmothers throwing their deeply unsexy lingerie at old-aged stars" (206). In both Deller and Radway's work, older women's attachment to media was a deficiency of morals, character, mental health, and relevance.

Queer fans face similar discrimination, often just for their queerness but doubly so for being a queer fan. While queer fans regularly reinterpret popular texts and make known queer subtext (see Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer*), positive representation of queer experience is still seen as "pandering" by some elements (read: straight cismale) of fandom, and media industries instead instill queerness in singular characters that are relegated away from the spotlight or tease queer fans with potentially queer characters only to affirm the heterosexuality of the characters through romance or death, a trope known by many as "queerbaiting." As Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen relate, queer fans have grown tired of asking, "[Why] can't we have legitimate queer couplings in canon, instead of manufacturing them for ourselves and hoping for crumbs from actors and producers?" (151). Media producers have increased queer representation, but these efforts are often criticized for making queer identity an "addition" that can be quickly removed before release in Russia, China, or other countries in which queer identity is under threat.

Another major cause for fandom's self-suppression beyond class, gender, age, and sexuality is fandom's presumed whiteness. Like the prior intersections, race can drastically alter one's experience with fandom and media. andre carrington views the problem of representation not as an underrepresentation of people of color, but as an *over*representation of white people, writing that white science fiction fans, as a result of this overexposure, "find representations of themselves in the genre to be much the same as they are elsewhere in culture: normative, benign, and frequent" (17). Attempts by people of color to enter fandom are often pre-stained by racism

and generalizations based on ethnicity, either requiring fans of color to posture as “white” or to form separate (and unequal) fandoms. Race also plays a significant role in transcultural fandom. Although Chin and Morimoto laud the benefits of transcultural fandom, fandom has largely been concentrated around media produced in the United States and the United Kingdom for an implied US and UK audience. As Rukmini Pande contends, the topic of race in fandom is only broached through standard discussions about representation via “the presence of a significant character or issue that explicitly foregrounds the operations of nonwhite racial identity” (6). As a result, the perception of whiteness as a “neutral” identity continues to be affirmed. If fans outside of the US and UK are seen at all, they are typically filtered through the ideological lens of the Global North. In Darlene Hampton’s analysis of US and UK media coverage of Chinese fans of the UK television series *Sherlock*, “the pathological identity usually mapped onto fangirls is applied to China itself—which becomes personified as a... *fangirl* of Britain, feminized through its characterization as a romantic consumer (rather than producer) of cultural goods” (234). Consequentially, non-white fans outside of the Global North struggle to “engage in online activities that do not have anything to do with their racial, cultural, and ethnic identity” as they are excluded from the bulk of fandom unless they can find a way “to negotiate with that identity in some way, whether by omission or commission” (Pande 51). Combined with the prevailing assumptions about fandom, race, gender, age, sexuality, and many other factors, the only way to safely negotiate fandom is to pass as a straight, white, cis-gendered, middle-class man.

Fandom’s swirling complexity practically requires a Ph.D. to decipher. Luckily, many academics have fought to have fandom depathologized and to better acknowledge and understand the fan, so much so that fandom studies has established itself as an academic field of some merit. During what Scott and Pande refer to as the “Fandom is Beautiful” era of fandom

studies, scholars such as Jenkins and Sandvoss argued for a reading of the fan as a subcultural rebel, attempting to salvage fandom by, per Hills, “removing the taint of consumption and consumerism” (55). Other researchers performed ethnographic studies of fan communities—ranging from Camille Bacon-Smith’s look into women in *Star Trek* fandom to Nancy Baym’s soap opera fans—and repeatedly expounded on the virtues of fandom while downplaying potential issues of sexism, sexuality, and race. This view of fandom continues to shape research today by positing the fan as an outsider to “mainstream” culture, despite the rapid normalization of (white, heterosexual, young, cis-gendered male) fans. This period of fandom studies also brought about the popularization of the term “aca-fan,” perhaps best known from Henry Jenkins’ “Confessions of an Aca-Fan” blog. Aca-fans wear their association with fandom on one sleeve and with academia on the other, attempting to bring fandom’s passion into conversation with the intellectual rigor of the university system. Yet this portmanteau does little to stunt the shame that haunts the field. Zubernis and Larsen lament that fandom studies scholars “have been accused of not engaging in ‘serious’ academic research or ‘rigorous’ methodology,” forcing the field to “theorize and politicize our pleasures in order to make them more palatable to a cultural elite that does not need any more encouragement to dismiss what we study as frivolous and meaningless” (45-46). Also, aca-fans mark themselves as *more than* fans, not unlike the VQC, by emphasizing their academic rigor and institutional authority and assuming that “illuminating theoretical eyes can perceive the cultural order which is otherwise buried in the unthought routines of everyday life,” beyond the capabilities of the average fan (Hills 124). So long as fandom is seen as Other, so will aca-fans continue to raise hyphenated barriers between their careers and their passions and highlight their rationality over their affective connections to media.

If academia is devalued through mere association to fandom, it should come as no surprise to find that the works of fandom itself are regularly lambasted as unproductive, crass, and of low class. Perhaps the most well-known practice of fandom—fanfiction—regularly finds itself within the crosshairs of critics for being too sexual, too derivative, and poorly constructed. Yet this depiction compares fanfiction to both commercially produced works and works that have been bestowed the title of “literature.” Rather, fanfiction’s value lies within the affective circuit of fandom itself. One of the first scholars to note fanfiction’s value is Bacon-Smith, who writes that fans use fanfiction to “communicate their messages about their own lives” through their chosen media object, but those messages are often illegible to outside groups because they must learn “how to read all over again” from within the fandom (150). More recently, fandom studies have sought to reconcile fandom’s creativity and value to media industries as part of a stage I call “Fandom is Profitable.” While much of the “Beautiful” era’s emphasis on fandom’s rogue elements persist, academics and aca-fans claim that fandom is full of value. Abigail De Kosnik has argued that fandom acts as an unsanctioned archival force, preserving media and creating new works based on those archives. Fanfiction, she insists, acts as a “rogue archive” of knowledge, “driven by...a longing to protect and sustain female and Queer communities and cultures,” that acts outside the bounds of White Patriarchal Capitalism (134). Though fanfiction has been lampooned for poor writing, brazen sexuality, and use of “unoriginal” source material, authors, poets, musicians, and filmmakers borrow elements from culture, history, and our lived reality all the time to produce books, poems, music, and films subsequently used to make more cultural artifacts. Fans are regularly embarrassed for writing “real-person fanfiction” featuring actors and boy bands, yet an entire genre of “legitimate” works produced under the genre of biographical fiction—featuring works like *Rodham* by Curtis Sittenfeld and *Hamilton* by Lin-

Manuel Miranda—are essentially fanfiction by another name. The success of the *Fifty Shades* franchise, itself adapted from *Twilight* fanfiction, blurs the divisions between “fan” work and profitable venture.

If nothing else, the industries that produce our media have listened to the voices that proclaimed fandom’s worth. For the past decade, fans have grown accustomed to new, more obtrusive ways of being monetized. YouTube regularly supported video uploaders via ad revenue based on views, video games began including purchasable content sometimes totaling more than the game itself, fan art collected by bots is regularly sold on t-shirts and prints with nary a cent given to the original artists, and digital files purchased via online marketplaces (e.g. iTunes, Amazon, Steam) come pre-packaged with digital rights management software or unique file extensions that prevent the buyer from ever actually *owning* the file. Services like Netflix and Google Stadia don’t even download a file, asking buyers to instead pay for the privilege of experiencing the media and cutting off users that stop paying their monthly fee. This development, combined with the virulent attacks towards marginalized fans and the media industry’s reckoning with sexual harassment and workplace racism, has led Scott to declare a new, necessary phase within fandom studies: “Fandom is Toxic.” “We are responsible for the stories we tell about fan culture, and we need to be attentive to whom we are telling them to (whether to media industries, fans, each other, or some combination thereof)” (49).

One such facet of fandom to re-tell is the “value” of fanworks such as fanfiction. Defending fanfiction’s value as “literature,” as a rogue archive of knowledge, or as an alternatively valued resource for fans may work to realign it with dominant media forms, but I would argue that fanfiction is functionally useless by traditionally capitalist measures. Worded differently, fanfiction is useless, and it is that uselessness that gives fanfiction its infamous

reputation. Fanfiction authors make little attempt to hide their emotions, desires, or fantasies, refusing to acquiesce to the prerogative to sell their works to the “right” (read: straight, white, cisgender male) audience and instead write largely for themselves first (Zubernis and Larsen 87-90). This is perhaps best represented through self-insert fanfiction, typically labeled as Mary Sue (or Gary Stu, if male). Typically disregarded as power-fantasy or sometimes selfishness on the author’s part, Kristina Busse observes that “the ultimate desire underlying all these self-insertions remains attempts to merge our own lives with that of the fictional universes, *to address our own experiences and emotions within the worlds of our favorite texts*” (168, emphasis added). Zubernis and Larsen posit a simpler reason for the existence of fanfiction: “humans are creative, and are pushed to work and rework their ‘stuff’ until they get it right. There may well be something faulty or inadequate about the socially approved texts, but the metatext isn’t always the subversion of that. The metatext is sometimes ‘I am emotional, intellectual AND sexual and that’s okay’—which may be equally subversive” (101, original emphasis). By recognizing fanfiction’s worth to its author, we escape debates over its use-value or exchange-value and instead revel in its unproductiveness. Doing otherwise, Owen Parry cautions, “we keep fanfiction subservient to hegemonic narratives of success, desire and morality as they are formed in neoliberal capitalism” (140). This is not to say that fanfiction is completely immune to external pressure—just finding the will to write fanfiction requires overcoming shame to some extent, and fans themselves argue about when fanfictions become *too* personal—but it is nevertheless important to allow space for “worthlessness.”

Fanfiction is far from the only fan work produced; one need only search Twitter for a moment to find contests for art, cosplay, video tributes, animations, and other forms of sharable

media. Media industries have long found ways to channel fandom's creativity to their own ends. Any subculture, for that matter, is under constant threat of commoditization. Hebdige notes how as soon as subcultural practices, fashion, and style are brought out of their specific contexts and mass-produced, "they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise" (89). Where subcultures have their work poached, fans typically give their labor away willingly. Part of this "free labor" comes from conditioning via Web 2.0 design, which privileges user interaction and contributions and creating an Internet that "depends on massive amounts of labor...only some of which is hypercompensated by the capricious logic of venture capitalism" (Terranova 48). Without users, most social media websites would go bankrupt, yet those that use Facebook and Twitter remain uncompensated (monetarily) for keeping the affective circuit between their services and their users alive. Some media producers have even found ways to turn fan labor into new products to sell, to widely varying responses.

Among the most controversial attempts to monetize fan labor centers around the practice of modding, or the modification of games by those who play them. Game developers have held a tenuous relationship with modders. Some mods, such as texture replacements or gameplay rebalances, are celebrated by the industry, but mods that remove digital rights management software, anti-cheat services, or otherwise threaten potential profits regularly receive cease and desist orders, lawsuits, or other threatening tactics to remove them from distribution. Bethesda Softworks, developer of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, sought to profit from the game's active modding community under the guise of philanthropy. Partnering with Valve—which runs Steam, a virtual storefront where many fans could purchase *Skyrim* and subsequently download user-created mods—Bethesda allowed users to price their mods in late April of 2015, with only a quarter of the price going to the modder. Some fans believed the change was needed, arguing

that it would lead to better mods, but many others saw Bethesda paying scraps for (almost) free development time. This accusation was nothing the games industry hadn't heard before nor was it entirely without merit. Julian Kücklich emphasized ten years prior to this debacle that the industry has been profiting from the “playbour” of fans for decades:

The precarious status of modding as a form of unpaid labour is veiled by the perception of modding as a leisure activity, or simply as an extension of play. ... And while the digital game industry increasingly acknowledges the contribution of modders, they have no incentive to contest this view: the perception of modding as play is the basis of the exploitative relationship between modders and the games industry” (para. 4, 28).

As fan outrage over the rather exploitative terms of the joint Bethesda/Valve venture, both companies shuttered the enterprise less than a week after its launch. This did not mark the end of Bethesda's attempts to monetize modding, as the 2016 “Special Edition” release of *Skyrim* received an update nearly a year after its release adding the “Creation Club,” featuring purchasable downloadable content made by modders. While it was criticized for once again charging money for mods that were normally distributed for free, the fan outcry was nowhere near as vitriolic as it did two years prior as the *Skyrim* modding community has remained largely independent of Bethesda, utilizing third-party sites like Patreon to help fund their craft.

Fandom studies must also address the toxicity that endangers women, fans of color, queer fans, transnational fans, and others who do not fit the normative mold, a division maintained by both media industries and areas of fandom itself. Vietnamese-American actress Kelly Marie Tran received mountains of hate mail and worse from fans of the *Star Wars* franchise directed at her performance of Rose Tico in 2017's installment *The Last Jedi*, and though Disney and others who worked with Tran condemned the vitriol, Tran's character was sidelined almost entirely with a little over a minute of screen time. As the Black Lives Matter movement gained attention across the world over the past summer, many game publishers such as Ubisoft published a

statement supporting the movement. Just a few months later, Ubisoft used the raised fist iconography of Black Lives Matter for the fictional terrorists of their mobile game *Tom Clancy: Elite Squad*. Gamergate has also had rippling effects outside of games media, with some speculating that the fans who participated in the attacks toward “social justice warriors” helped pave the way for conservative pundits Milo Yiannopoulos and Steve Bannon to accelerate their political careers and lead the Trump campaign against Hillary Clinton in 2016. If anything, politics has leaned heavily on fandom, with politicians using Twitch, Twitter, and merchandise sales in painfully similar ways.

Fandom studies shouldn't discard the pleasures of being a fan wholesale, but it does need to reevaluate how fandom forms and what it grows around. Although fandom still largely is built on the foundation of US and UK cultural texts, fandom has also grown around smaller creators outside the standard media industries. Fans of board gaming have heralded the 2010s as the “Board Game Renaissance,” as Kickstarter allows game makers to bypass game stores and ship their games straight to backers. Meanwhile, podcasts receive a large portion of their funding via Patreon, where fans can contribute to the podcast creators' monthly income. YouTubers who make content around fandom and media works regularly find themselves supported by other members of fandom through ad revenue, Patreon subscriptions, and merchandise sales. The rise of the “influencer” acts as a microcosm of celebrity culture, complete with stars, sponsorship deals, and daily paparazzi-esque scandals.

And yet, fans continue to receive mixed messages over what circumstances they are allowed to be fans and what practices are approved by the corporate Powers That Be. YouTubers, for instance, face copyright restrictions over the smallest breaches that could easily be argued as fair use. Unfortunately for them, YouTube's automated Content ID system does not

differentiate between “fair use” and “copyright” and consistently errs on the side of the major corporations and media producers. This has led to some YouTubers to either pivot towards creating “original” content that cannot be claimed via the system or to find ways to exploit the system. One example of the latter is what games critic Jim Sterling calls the “Copyright Deadlock.” By incorporating media from a range of production companies, studios, and corporations in somewhat equal amounts, the video will register so many content IDs that it becomes “deadlocked” whereby no one group can claim any advertising revenue (Sterling). Since Sterling’s content is funded through Patreon and other endeavors, he can afford to lose the ad revenue, but many others—especially newer or more marginalized channels with fewer subscribers—can not take the same risks. When faced with the choice to acquiesce to the media industries’ demands or practice unrestricted (but uncompensated) fandom, there will no doubt be many fans who believe the exchange is worth it.

A core question for fandom studies in the future lies somewhere in between these two ends, exploring the joys of being a fan and the hazardous relationship that has formed between fandom and the media industry. Only expounding how great fandom is hides the toxic masculinity that has entrenched itself within it, but overemphasizing the self-aggrandizing relationship between industry and (white, straight, cis-gendered, Western, young male) fans keeps the emphasis on those fans and equally sequesters fans on the margins of fandom. Fandom is still core to our modern living, so fandom studies must show just how deeply fandom is buried within our society.

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