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Fandom in the Digital Era

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This essay traces the profound impact of the digital revolution upon fandom, looking particularly at debates within the fan and acafan communities. It argues that fans have always been at the forefront of media industry transformations, summarizes some of the common themes emerging in the debate, and considers the wider implications for the reconfigured relationships between producer and consumer in the digital economy.

The digital revolution has had a profound impact upon fandom, empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production. Some fans revel in the new opportunities presented by digital technologies, while others lament the digitally enabled encroachment of corporate power into every space of fandom. Fans and acafans have for some time been debating the effect of these new dynamics upon fan practices and fan communities within blogs and online journals such as *Flow* and *The Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures*. Although there has been some movement into the academic mainstream via the recent *Cinema Journal* “In Focus: Fandom and Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Fan Production,” the debate deserves wider consideration. The issues raised by fans and acafans have consequences not only for fandom but also for all fields of digital production and consumption. This article highlights some of the common themes emerging in the debate and considers the implications for the reconfigured relationships between producer and consumer in the digital economy. But let us first examine these reconfigured relationships through the lens of *Battlestar Galactica*, the science-fiction epic that chronicled humanity’s search for its lost planet of origin, Earth.

On October 14, 2004, the UK channel Sky One (part of News Corps’ BSkyB satellite service) showed *BSG*’s premiere episode, “33,” several weeks ahead of its scheduled US debut on January 14. British fans quickly uploaded the episode to the peer-to-peer file server BitTorrent and would-be US fans just as quickly downloaded it. Did this heinous violation of the producers’ intellectual property rights decrease their revenue streams? Media analyst Mark Pesce (2005) argues that this collective piracy actually had the reverse effect:

The series is so good that the few tens of thousands of people who watched downloaded versions told their friends to tune in on January 14 and see for themselves. From its premiere, *Battlestar Galactica* has been the most popular program ever to air on the SciFi Channel, and its audiences have only grown throughout the first series. Piracy made it possible for “word-of-mouth” to spread about *Battlestar Galactica*.

The music industry has vigorously prosecuted peer-to-peer sites such as Napster, arguing that the online duplication and distribution of music files decreases CD sales. Empirical evidence of the decline in CD sales supports the industry’s case. Nor has the music industry yet found a successful business model for monetizing peer-to-peer file sharing. Unlike the music industry, which has a first-order commodity relationship with its consumers, selling a product directly to them, advertising-supported television has a second-order commodity relationship with its consumers, indirectly selling the sponsors’ products rather than directly selling the text itself. Piracy has different implications for first- and second-order commodity producers; the former will always suffer from piracy but the latter may sometimes benefit. While no producer has as yet actively encouraged piracy, many producers now actively seek ways to benefit from fan producers by indirectly monetizing user-generated content for the purposes of promotion.¹

In 2007, the *BSG* producers attempted to do precisely this, enlisting fans to produce ancillary content for their promotional activities. The *BSG* site invited fans to “be a part of *Battlestar Galactica*” by making a four-minute tribute film, the best of which would be aired on television. The site offered a menu of downloadable audio and video clips that would “help give your videos the *Battlestar* look and sound”; any additional material had to be originally produced (*Battlestar Galactica*). Acafan Julie Russo (2009) argues that this producer solicitation of user-generated content differs markedly from fan practices. She asserts that vidders (fans who produce mashups of popular songs and television footage) participate in egalitarian and nonhierarchical communities, an example of what Russo terms “horizontal creativity.” By contrast, producer solicitations of fan-generated materials “typically feature a top-down arrangement that attempts, through its interface and conditions, to contain excessive fan productivity within proprietary commercial spaces” (2009, p. 127). Russo’s criticisms may stem from a rather romantic and utopian conception of fannish communities; fans enthusiastically engaging in the *BSG* and similar initiatives might not share this conception. Some fans might have no interest either in producing their own content or in engaging with fan-produced content.

Even some fans who limit their creative activities to the interpretive sometimes find annoying the vast amount of ancillary content that now regularly accompanies most television shows. Ron Moore, *BSG*’s showrunner, recorded detailed and lengthy podcasts to accompany each episode. While some fans rejoiced in the insider perspective, others saw Moore’s interpretations as an authorial assertion that blocked off the traditional avenues for narrative speculation. Says acafan Kristina Busse, “Moore’s podcasts do collapse multiple meanings or rather, they open up meanings (Moore’s especially bad on that, suggesting all the varied ways it could have gone) only to then tell us the ‘true’ occurrences and what they mean!” (2009). Or as acafan Jonathan Gray

¹When the WB delayed the airing of the final episode of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*’s third season due to sensitivities concerning the recent Columbine school shootings, Joss Whedon encouraged Canadian fans to send bootleg copies to US fans, saying “bootleg the puppy.” But Whedon was reacting against censorship, not encouraging a new economic model (*Entertainment Weekly*, 1999).

emailed me, “There is a risk in writing or saying too much. It would be as if E. M. Forster followed up *A Passage to India* with a podcast that tells us what really happened in the cave, or as if Shakespeare left a 20-page document explaining exactly why Hamlet acts the way he does” (2009). The speculative leaps engendered by uncertainty can be a pleasurable part of the viewing process; digitally enabled and enhanced authorial interpretation not only risks decreasing this pleasure but also tilting interpretive power more strongly toward the producer, some fans assert. Of course, some hardcore fans, eager to permanently inhabit their virtual worlds of choice, revel in producer-supplied ancillary content, be it podcasts, webisodes, or alternate reality games. For these fans, too much is never enough.

As I argue in my essay “Cult Television as Digital Television’s Cutting Edge,” fans have always been at the forefront of historical transformations of the American television industry (Pearson, in press). However, while scholars routinely point to fan support of the original *Star Trek* as an early example of the active audience, other early cult shows also engendered strong viewer engagement. For example, *The Twilight Zone* received 500 letters a week and had fan clubs in 31 states (Zicree, 1989, p. 134). Producer Rod Serling claimed to have received “several thousand letters of protest” when CBS cancelled the show in 1962 (Adams, 1962). In 1967, heavy mail protest against ABC’s cancellation of *The Avengers* (1961–1969, ABC Weekend Television) brought the show back (Humphrey, 1967). Evidence of such intense viewer loyalty may well have influenced 1990s producers who specifically designed shows for the cult niche (e.g., *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files*), knowing that these avid viewers would not only watch every week but also purchase ancillary products. By the early 21st century, as Henry Jenkins suggests, fan practices have come to have an even wider impact: “Convergence Culture describes a moment when fans are central to how culture operates. The concept of the active audience, so controversial two decades ago, is now taken for granted by everyone involved in and around the media industry” (2006, p. 1). In *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* Jenkins says that he rejects conceiving of

[. . .] media consumers as either totally autonomous from or totally vulnerable to the culture industries. It would be naïve to assume that powerful conglomerates will not protect their own interests as they enter this new media marketplace, but at the same time, audiences are gaining greater power and autonomy as they enter into the new knowledge culture. The interactive audience is more than a marketing concept and less than semiotic democracy. (2006, p. 136)

It is the power balance between conglomerates and audiences, the space between marketing concept and semiotic democracy, that the fans and acafans have been exploring and which I wish to explore in this article.

Fan studies began as an act of reclamation and celebration; reclamation from the geeky image constructed by the media, most famously seen in the *Saturday Night Live* sketch in which William Shatner urged fans to “get a life,” and celebration of fannish resistance to capitalist incorporation. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington said in their introduction to *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* that “for the first wave of scholars [. . .] the consumption of popular mass media was a site of power struggles and fandom the guerilla-style tactics of those with lesser resources to win this battle” (2007, pp. 1–2). A younger generation of scholars pointed to the inherent imbrication of fannish consumption of media texts and their ancillary products within the logic of capitalism. Sandvoss, for example, argues that all fannish consumption and production could be characterized as “inherently tied to the spectacular

nature of industrial capitalism” (2005, p. 52). Sandvoss draws upon Guy Debord’s theory of the society of the spectacle, which he glosses as follows:

The world is increasingly seen and performed as commodities, forming economies of signs and symbols and, consequently, a society of spectacle [. . .] In this understanding of spectacle, fan performances are in fact performances of symbols and images representing texts and commodities tied to the economic and symbolic power of the media industry. (2005, p. 51)

Now some scholars, drawing upon Lewis Hyde’s anthropological study *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (1983), argue precisely the opposite, claiming that fandom constitutes an alternative regime to capitalism, a gift economy (Scott, 2009). While profit drives capitalism, they say, community-building drives the gift economy. It is fans giving, receiving, and reciprocating which results in the creation of fan social networks. Says Karen Hellekson, “Fan communities as they are currently comprised, require exchanges of gifts: you do not pay to read fan fiction or watch a fan-made music vid. They are offered for free [. . .] yet within a web of context that specifies an appropriate method of ‘payment’” (2009, p. 114). As Suzanne Scott (2009) explains, a gift economy ideally suits fandom’s requirements. The free exchange of gifts simultaneously (supposedly) evades copyright restrictions and builds a closed social network; whether this social network constitutes a community is an issue acafans have not addressed. In the analog age, the free exchange of gifts happened in person, through snail mail and at conventions, but the advent of the internet has greatly facilitated both the production of gifts and the exchange mechanisms among fan communities. Worrying to some is the fact that the internet has greatly facilitated the capacity for commercial exploitation. Might the legitimacy bestowed by showcasing their wares on a recognized media outlet lure fans out of previously closed networks into the arms of the powerful corporations? For example, referring to *BSG*’s call for user-generated content, Russo fears that “recognition by and on television is incentive enough to channel this artistic labor out of the Internet at large and into SciFi’s walled garden” (2009, p. 128).

The symbiotic relationship between fans and producers predates the digital age. Fan activities have many times at least indirectly benefited the powerful corporations Jenkins refers to (which, of course, is why so many of them are now intent on directly benefiting). We are all familiar with the myth of *Star Trek* fandom: how Trekkies first saved the show from cancellation and then kept it alive during the wilderness decade between the demise of the original series in 1969 and the release of the first feature film in 1979. As with many myths, there is some truth at its heart, as contemporary newspaper accounts attest. *The Los Angeles Times*, covering fan protests against NBC in 1968, reported:

When news of the rumored cancellation of NBC’s *Star Trek* reached the hinterlands, it started the biggest rumble since Tony Galento fought Max Baer. On the surface it appears that the series has more fans than Lawrence Welk. Even a large contingent of Caltech students will protest with a torchlight parade over the weekend. (Page, 1968, p. C14)

The paper subsequently reported that 300 students marched to NBC’s Burbank studios (Ruhlow, 1968, p. 3). On March 1, 1968, over the end credits of the episode “Omega Glory,” NBC officially announced that the program had been renewed for a third season. *The Los Angeles Times* ran a follow-up article in July which spoke of a “rare showing of candor” from NBC which “admitted that [the fan protests] had an ‘influence’ on saving the series. The turn of events was

so startling that it began to sound like a far-fetched science fiction story” (*Los Angeles Times*, 1968, p. A31D).

Star Trek once again entered the wilderness after the cancellation of the fifth series, *Enterprise*, in 2005, which, following upon the disappointing box office and critical performance of the tenth feature film, *Star Trek: Nemesis*, seemed to signal the final death of a franchise which had enjoyed ill health for quite some time. Again, fans came to the rescue, the full armature of digital production at their disposal giving rise to podcasts, radio broadcasts, music and rap videos, and films (Kozinets, 2007, p. 198). This cottage industry produced the high profile Webisodes *Star Trek: New Voyages*, described on the home page of the website:

Star Trek New Voyages: Phase II is an award winning independent Web series that produces new episodes of Classic *Star Trek*. Continuing the fourth and fifth seasons of the original series, we film the untold stories of the USS Enterprise, Captain Kirk and his crew, with the intention of filling in the missing years of the original five year mission, and bridging the gap to *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. We are a group of fans who have come together with a common love for the classic era *Star Trek* for the purpose of having fun while making new episodes. It is the goal of *Star Trek New Voyages: Phase II* to support and promote the CBS/Paramount *Star Trek* franchise by giving fans an active way to continue their interest in Classic *Star Trek*. (*Star Trek: New Voyages*)

The fact that *Enterprise* garnered an average audience of three million in its final year, while the *New Voyages* have been downloaded 30 million times, would seem to indicate a great deal of support and promotion. Of course, this claim of fealty to the powerful corporation might be another way of saying, “Please don’t sue us,” but Robert Kozinets argues that *The New Voyages* and all the other fan-produced material serve CBS/Paramount’s best interests: “By letting the series go feral [. . .] it will be invigorated by the energies of the fan community; they will make it their own, and recharge it with the evaporated meanings that the old series gained in syndication that the new series lacks” (2007, p. 207).

The *New Voyages* are as faithful as possible to the old voyages, even to the extent of enlisting the talents of classic *Trek* alumni such as writer D.C. Fontana and actors George Takei (Sulu) and Walter Koenig (Chekov). Were the Webisodes more transformative, CBS/Paramount might be less tolerant; certainly the powerful corporation might object were there a hint of the homosexual relationship between Kirk and Spock celebrated in slash fiction, especially after the critical and box office success of *Star Trek XI*.² If fans want to play in CBS/Paramount’s walled garden, they have to observe the ground rules, and those rules have not changed since the analog age. Paramount in the past actively solicited fan-authored stories for the long-running anthology *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*, issued by its publishing subsidiary Simon and Schuster. Fans were told that “certain types of stories will be disqualified from consideration”:

- a. Any story focusing on explicit sexual activity or graphic depictions of violence or sadism.
- b. Any story that focuses on characters that are not past or present *Star Trek* regulars or familiar *Star Trek* guest characters.

²Many critic and fans thought the Spock/Uhura relationship one of the few false notes sounded by the *Trek* reboot. I usually resist conspiratorial explanations but can’t help wondering whether the provision of a female lover for the repressed Vulcan might have been a deliberate attempt to defuse K/S fanfic.

- c. Stories that deal with the previously unestablished death of a Star Trek character or that establish major facts about or make major changes in the life of a major character, for instance, a story that establishes a long-lost sibling or reveals the hidden passion two characters feel for each other.
- d. Stories that are based around common clichés, such as “hurt/comfort” where a character is injured and lovingly cared for, or “Mary Sue” stories where a new character comes on the ship and outdoes the crew. (Strange New Worlds Contest Rules)

Hurt/comfort and Mary Sue stories are established genres in fan fiction, which also revels in depicting explicit sexual activity or graphic violence and sadism, introducing new characters, killing off established characters, and revealing hidden passions. Fanfic writers may derive their pleasure from these transgressive transformations of the story world, but publication in *Strange New Worlds* required abandoning the familiar discourses of fan communities and conforming to the strange new rules of publication for profit.

Dr. Who provides another example of predigital efforts to monetize and control fan activities. The Doctor Who Fan Club of America’s (DWFCA) formal relationship with the BBC proved attractive to many local fan clubs who, as a condition of membership, complied with the requirement to participate in fundraisers to help keep the show on their local PBS affiliate. In the early 1980s, however, many clubs ceased their affiliation with DWFCA rather than submit to the demand to abandon their interests in other cult shows. As a result, the DWFCA became “best known as a source for BBC merchandise” (Bacon-Smith, 2002, pp. 8–9). When inviting fans to “be a part of *Battlestar Galactica*,” the *BSG* producers followed in the footsteps of their analog predecessors in requiring fans to conform to corporate rather than fan conventions. Says Russo, the selection of “fewer than 40 short CGI-based establishment and action sequences” constrained fan activity by “excluding the character-based dramatic scenes that make up the majority of the show” (2009, p. 127) and from which many fans derived their primary pleasure.

The ground rules may remain the same from analog to digital, but the latter offers many more opportunities to enter the corporate walled garden, as producers seek to profit from the mass of user-generated content the new technologies engender. Fans, like uber acafan Kristina Busse, wonder whether the price of entry is too high: “The fannish community [. . .] might have to disavow those parts that do not please the owners of the media product. Certain groups of fans can become legit if and only if they follow certain ideas, don’t become too rebellious, too pornographic, don’t read the text too much against the grain. That seems a price too high to pay” (2007). In one notorious instance, that of the website FanLib, the price was set so high that it drove fans away. FanLib, Inc., a private, venture-funded company founded by industry insiders Jon Landau (producer), Jon Moonves (entertainment lawyer), and Anil Singh (former Yahoo CEO) and working in association with partners HarperCollins, Penguin Books, Showtime Networks, Simon & Schuster, and Starz Entertainment, announced in 2007 the establishment of a new website dedicated to fan fiction that would fuse “the power of the Web with the passion of the most avid entertainment fans. FanLib.com provides fans with a new home to write, showcase, discover, rant, and rave about their favorite movies, TV shows, and books.” FanLib claimed that it was “launching a new era” by “packaging [fan fiction] for mainstream audiences,” complete with features including collaborative, online storytelling events produced in cooperation with HarperCollins, Showtime Networks, and MSN, and sharing and content syndication that would permit fans to “extend the audience for their fanfics by embedding customized

promos in personal Web pages, blogs, and e-mails” (Fanlib). Profit, not personal pleasure or interpersonal relationships drove the private, venture-funded company, which intended to make money from the advertising on its website. The fannish outrage provoked by this perceived cynical and flagrant violation of the ethos of fannish giving has echoed through the blogosphere and surfaced in both acafan and more conventional academic publications. Said Cathy Cupitt in *The Journal of Transformative Work and Culture*, “FanLib’s business plan was to use the archived fan works to create eyeballs it could sell to advertisers” whereas traditional fan archives are either ad-free or not-for-profit. To make matters worse, FanLib brought fan content into the corporate fold but “offered no legal protection to the fan writers and artists, who would be left carrying the can if there was a lawsuit” (2008). In July 2008 the website shut down. According to Karen Hellekson, the failure resulted from a fundamental misunderstanding of fandom’s gift economy: “FanLib broke the rules of the community’s engagement by misreading ‘community’ as ‘commodity,’ and the site failed thanks to intense backlash, an expression of fannish defense of their field of value” (2009, p. 118).

The “fannish defense” of values against those of the powerful corporate interests backing FanLib may invoke nostalgia for the first wave of fan studies, the celebration of guerrilla-style resistance. For example, in a post on the *Flow* website responding to two essays on the topic of taste and fandom, Julie Russo spoke in terms of “capitalist reincorporation vs. resistance,” contrasting:

[. . .] essentially compliant consumption of prefabricated content across a broader and more permeable spectrum of media channels (e.g., watching TV shows online, following official metatexts and various corporate Web tie-ins with no or only circumscribed interactive elements) at one end [. . .] and fan-driven community building based on creative production and reinterpretation on the other. (2006)

However, Russo’s proposed spectrum fails to account for the complexity of the contemporary symbiotic relationship between fans and producers. As Scott points out, it is a mistake to conceive of “gift economies and commodity culture as disparate systems. Media fandom is rapidly being constructed as a fertile battleground where the territory between online gift economies and commodity culture will be negotiated” (2009). It is not resistance, it is negotiation, with much of this negotiation taking place in the legal minefield of copyright law. Cupitt criticized FanLib for not offering participants legal protection, but despite the convictions of many of its practitioners, fan fiction may not require legal protection. Legal scholar Rebecca Tushnet argues that the added value contributed by fan labor should protect fans from prosecution. Comparing music downloaders to fan producers, Tushnet says, “few downloaders would claim to have invested labor in any relevant sense when they search for and select music to copy. Fan authors and artists, by contrast, seek recognition from their peers for adding new perspectives and twists to the official texts” (2007, p. 64).

The fan-founded and managed Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) lobbies for this flexible interpretation of copyright laws:

Copyright is intended to protect the creator’s right to profit from her work for a period of time to encourage creative endeavor and the widespread sharing of knowledge. But this does not preclude the right of others to respond to the original work, either with critical commentary, parody, or, we believe, transformative works. (Organization for Transformative Works, Frequently Asked Questions)

But what constitutes a transformative work and what degree of transformation must occur to deter prosecution? According to the OTW:

Transformative works are creative works about characters or settings created by fans of the original work, rather than by the original creators. A transformative use is one that, in the words of the U.S. Supreme Court, “adds something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the [source] with new expression, meaning, or message.” A story from Voldemort’s perspective is transformative, so is a story about a pop star that illustrates something about current attitudes toward celebrity or sexuality. (Organization for Transformative Works, Glossary)

Corporations such as Paramount and Fox have in the past sent cease and desist letters to owners of fan websites that included (nontransformed) sounds, images, and clips, but transformative fan works have so far slipped under the courts’ radar. According to Abigail De Kosnik, many transformative works circulate widely without copyright restraints; hip-hop sampling, the Japanese *doujinshi*, or fan-created comics, games modders and professionally published sequels such as Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone* (2001) which retold *Gone With the Wind* from an African-American perspective (de Kosnik, 2009). For the moment fan fiction and other fan produced texts such as *Star Trek: New Voyages* exist in a legal limbo, but fan negotiations with the powerful corporations that hold the copyrights might well establish precedents for other prosumers operating within the new digital economy. Fan practices may provide the model for the reconfigured industry-consumer relationships of the digital era as a negotiated sharing of productive power. While this might sound overly optimistic, *Digital Britain*, a review of current digital provision and future possibilities compiled by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, calls for “an equitable framework to bring content creators, rights-holders, aggregators, distributors, and consumers together to create workable and effective online download markets of scale.” This framework depends upon “a series of commercial agreements and business models that give the consumer or the fan highly affordable and convenient content” (Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009, p. 110). *Digital Britain* may not envision a prosumer utopia; indeed, it makes fierce noises about punishing those who consistently violate copyright. Nonetheless, the very mention of fans in an official publication shows that fandom has now become central not only to corporate but to government forward planning.

This is the sanguine view; others see digital technologies as further enabling corporate control not only over textual production but over textual interpretation. The Ron Moore *BSG* podcasts mentioned at the start of this essay were but one element in an array of digital ancillary content that now routinely accompanies most television dramas — webisodes, flash games, alternate reality games, uploaded user-generated content, message boards, wikis, and so forth. Those fans who objected to Moore’s podcasts believed that fan interpretation might be similarly incorporated, with the authorial authority of the showrunner inevitably trumping that of the fans. Suzanne Scott told me in an e-mail communication that she worries that “emerging transmedia storytelling systems and ‘authorized’ ancillary content harbor the potential to reinforce the textual authority of a limited few even as the text itself expands” (2008a). She expanded on this point in her essay “Is Fan Production Frakked,” arguing that the seemingly infinite array of ancillary content, much of which mimics fan practices, might have the effect of deterring fans from producing their own interpretations in the form of fanfic or other texts:

BSG encourages fans to consume authorial/authorized content that frequently performs the textual “work” we associate with fan narratives: exploring alternate narrative trajectories, extrapolating minor character’s backstories, and so on. These authorized supplements come at the expense of letting fans explore those narrative gaps and fissures through their own textual production. (2008b, p. 169)

The authorized supplements might constrain even the textual work of narrative speculation, preemptively filling the narrative gaps and ellipses that open space for divergent interpretations. As acafan Bob Rehak observed about Moore’s podcasts:

[. . .] he insists on answering questions to which I kind of want to know the answers but really, on another level that likes to imagine possibilities freely, don’t [. . .] RDM collapses the functions of author and interpreter into a single beast, and in so doing gets the final word on what a character was “really” thinking, or what “really” happened after that cutaway. (Rehak & Scott, 2007)

Rehak implies that the podcasts curtail rather than enhance his fannish pleasure. As the influence of the resistance model of the first wave of fan studies waned, pleasure and affect became more central to scholarly understanding of fandom. As Sandvoss said, seeing fans either as semiotic guerillas or as capitalist dupes cannot “fully account for the pleasures and enjoyment of fans without which their regular and dedicated consumption of their given object of fandom cannot be explained” (2005, p. 159). If the overflowing cornucopia of ancillary content increases authorial agency, might it simultaneously decrease the sense of personal agency upon which fannish pleasures and enjoyments depend? Or might the supposedly interactive nature of many authorized websites (the message boards, the opportunity to post user-generated content) provide a “false” sense of personal agency, permitting fans to make their own meanings but only within the tightly constrained limits offered up by the producers? Answering this question requires a fuller definition of the concepts of agency, immersion, and interactivity. For example, Janet Murray suggests that what she terms the “participatory environment” of virtual realities becomes more immersive by permitting interaction. Murray implies that beaming away a heavy pipe that has trapped a crewwoman in the game *Star Trek: Final Unity* provides more pleasure than simply wandering around an impressively detailed representation of the USS Enterprise on a CD-rom (1997, pp. 111–112). Pleasure derives from a sense of agency: “When the things we do bring tangible results, we experience the [. . .] delight of electronic environments – the sense of agency. Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (Murray, 1997, p. 126). This article does not afford the space to fully explore these difficult concepts; however, the fan debates about the relationship between pleasure and agency raise more general questions that pertain to digital production and consumption.

Just as corporate content may create a “false” sense of personal agency, it may also create a “false” sense of community. FanLib failed, according to its fan critics, because its founders fundamentally misunderstood the community-based nature of fan activities and the gift economy. According to the fans and acafans, many corporate producers similarly fail to understand how fandom operates. While ancillary content may mimic fan practices and fan interaction may occur on corporate message boards, real fan communities can only grow from the grassroots. As Louisa Stein (2010) argues in her analysis of the ABC Family Channel’s show *Kyle XY*, aimed at the “millennial” demographic of teens and young adults, media corporations promote “inauthentic” modes of engagement to tame media fans and boost corporate profits. Looking at the show’s website and its ancillary content, Stein concludes that ABC offers a “corporate-sponsored, -promoted,

and -guided version of fannishness, packaged as contemporary youth identity” and uses this fannishness “to bolster viewer brand loyalty and, in turn, advertiser faith in ABC Family as a viable venue with a compelling demographic reach.” For example, the ABC Family home page urges viewers to upload their videos and share their stories about friends and family, delimiting fan activities to those which resonate with the corporate brand (Stein, in press).

Like the BSG producers and their authorized videos, and like Paramount and its authorized fan fiction, ABC incorporates fans into its corporate community. Is this “real” fandom or “real” community? How important is community to fandom, and how should that community be defined? Kristina Busse and Cornel Sandvoss exchanged views on this issue in the debate on fan girls versus fan boys that took place on Henry Jenkins’ blog during summer 2007. To Busse, fandom is coterminous with community: “Fandom [. . .] requires a community and participation in that community — and possibly self identification with that community.” Even “the lonely fan reading/watching/enjoying their text” participates in an imagined community of other fans. Sandvoss replied that he thought “there is a certain logic in accepting to recognise those people who call themselves fans — whether they meaningfully participate in interpretive communities or not — as fans” (Busse & Sandvoss, 2007). For Busse and the other acafans who value grass-roots fan communities, the top-down corporate communities offered by FanLib and ABC Family are inauthentic because they cannot provide the “community sense and the permanence and the self identity” (Busse & Sandvoss, 2007) that stem from fan-created virtual communities.

Is the fannish discourse concerning egalitarian, quasi-utopian online communities an accurate representation of the social relationships in fandom? While empirical evidence suggests that virtual relationships can to some extent fulfill the function of face-to-face interpersonal relationships, there is also evidence that undermines the representation of online fan networks as egalitarian, bottom-up communities. In her pioneering study of female media fans, Camille Bacon-Smith delineated the rituals of initiation by which a new fan gained access to the charmed inner circle (1992). Both face-to-face and digital fandoms are as ridden with hierarchies, cliques, and conflict as all social organizations; the existence of the uber-fan or the BNF (big name fan) attests to this. More important, does virtual fandom actually constitute a community? Answering this question would necessarily entail drawing on perspectives from sociology and anthropology. For example, some in those fields might question the equation between a gift economy and the construction of community, since the exchange of gifts can function to maintain hierarchical social relationships just as easily as it can function to construct egalitarian relationships. Clearly the issue of community in all its ramifications (definition, the nature of fan networks, the relationship of fans to corporate structures that mimic fan networks and practices) constitutes a key and unresolved tension in fandom as well as in the digital economy as a whole.

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