Fan Worlds: Expanding the Horizons of Fandoms and Fan Studies

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Abstract

The field of fan studies has gone through several transformations in semantics and dialectics since its conception in the latter half of the 20th century. However, it is overdue for a complete revolution in the way that scholars conceptualize fans and fandoms. Matt Hills (2017) introduces the theoretical concept of fan worlds to expand our thinking on what constitutes a fan or fan community. The author builds on Hills' concept of fan worlds to introduce it as a way of mapping and orienting space using the practices that form an affective bond between a fan subject and fan object. This mapping of space is visualized through social media, which renders legible the relationships that form between fans, fan objects, and media institutions. Using social media, issues of accessibility, anonymity, economy, and transcultural contact zones can be identified and mapped into the fan world. In turn, social media also forms infrastructure that connects spaces within the fan world to one another and the world as a whole to other fan worlds. Scholars of fan studies should adopt the concept of fan worlds within their own projects and continue to map out the world systems that exist around fan objects.

Abrégé

Le domaine des études de fans a connu plusieurs transformations en sémantique et dialectique depuis sa conception dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle. Cependant, il est trop tard pour une révolution complète dans la façon dont les érudits conceptualisent les fans et les fandoms. Matt Hills (2017) présente le concept théorique des mondes de fans pour élargir notre réflexion sur ce qui constitue un fan ou une communauté de fans. L'auteur s'appuie sur le concept de Hills des mondes de fans pour l'introduire comme un moyen de cartographier et d'orienter l'espace en utilisant les pratiques qui forment un lien affectif entre un sujet fan et un objet fan. Cette cartographie de l'espace est visualisée à travers les médias sociaux, ce qui rend lisibles les relations qui se forment entre les fans, les objets de fans et les institutions médiatiques. En utilisant les médias sociaux, les problèmes d'accessibilité, d'anonymat, d'économie et de zones de contact transculturelles peuvent être identifiés et cartographiés dans le monde des fans. De plus, les médias sociaux forment également une infrastructure qui relie les espaces du monde des fans les uns aux autres et le monde dans son ensemble aux autres mondes des fans. Les spécialistes des études de fans devraient adopter le concept de mondes de fans dans leurs propres projets et continuer à cartographier les systèmes mondiaux qui existent autour des objets de fans.

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Introduction

My first memories of fandom start around 2001, when I was six years old. For my birthday that year, my parents bought me the first *Harry Potter* book, titled *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in the United States. I was already a voracious reader and lover of the written word, and my parents had heard good things from their friends about this new children's book series from across the pond. I don't remember my initial reaction to *Harry Potter*, nor how long it took my mom and me to complete the first book, but I do remember talking about the book with others—my grandparents, my cousins, the boy who lived next door to my dad's parents. I remember discussing favorite characters, lending and borrowing books, theorizing about what would come next. I remember discussing the first movie before it came out and going to the theater with my family, excited to be around fellow *Harry Potter* lovers. I vividly remember arguing with my friends in sixth grade about whether Severus Snape was a death eater or a spy and emailing them triumphantly that summer after we had all finished the seventh book and I had been proven right.

Most of my memories of reading and watching *Harry Potter* are tied to interactions with other people. *Harry Potter* was the first text I considered myself a 'fan' of not because it was the first media object I had ever liked, but because it was the first one that I shared openly with other people. From the beginning, my identity as a fan was tied inextricably with forming social bonds through shared interests.

This continued throughout my adolescence and into adulthood as I sought out people both offline and online that shared my interests as well as spaces in which such interests were celebrated. In middle school, I joined a message board for the *Warriors* book series. In high school, I read and wrote fanfiction about *Pokemon*. Now, I use social media to access fan groups

for my favorite videogames, books, and television series and attend comic-con-like conventions. Being a fan is an integral part of my identity and interacting with fellow fans a part of my daily life.

Somewhere along the way, this interest in fan objects and fan cultures became academic in nature as well. During my graduate studies, I became interested in exploring fan studies and fan theory. I wanted to understand what it meant to be a fan and what defined a fan community or fandom. Specifically, I wanted to better understand the relationship between fan communities and social media, especially as I began to learn about issues of privacy, marketing, and neoliberal subjectivity on social media during my coursework. This yearning to better understand a fundamental part of my identity culminated in my thesis.

In this thesis, I investigate the relationship between online fan communities and social media in dialogue with the wider field of fan studies. I consider the theoretical direction that fan studies must take as fan culture becomes "mainstream" and fan activities more variable and widespread. In particular, I consider how social media has shifted definitions of fandom from fan communities into fan worlds, a term I borrow from Matt Hills (2017). I contend that fan studies must shift its focus away from questions of community and towards theories of worldbuilding as social media brings activities, subjects, and platforms outside of the previously accepted scope of fan practices into its orbit. More succinctly, as social media disintegrates the binary between different spaces in online and offline worlds, it facilitates in the disruption of similar boundaries between definitions of "fan" and "not-fan." It is no longer theoretically prudent to section off physical and digital locales as "fan spaces" untethered to the larger social world, nor is it logical to divide subjects into roles of fan, cultist, audience, non-fan, etc. Rather, all individual subjects, fan objects, activities, and spaces that interact with a given media audience can be considered

part of that fan object's fan world, regardless of the time and effort spent on activities related to the fan object and its fan culture(s).

Social media is perhaps the ideal platform of analysis for studying fan worlds. As discussed by Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013), the driving force of social media is the "spreadability" of content, or the ease by which users can create and share content both on the platform and between platforms. This spreadability is promoted by social media because user-created content is used to collect data and generate ads, which is the main source of social media corporate revenue. Thus, easily accessible and sharable content generates more profits for social media moguls—the more content that is shared and spread, the more data extracted, and the more profits made. Social media aims to aid this "spreadability" in its platform interface—for example, Facebook's "share" button makes it easy for posts and photos to be shared from one profile or group to another. Likewise, Facebook's "like" button makes it easy for users to express their likes and interests, and it is easy for the platform to measure what kind of content is more popular by the number of "likes" it has. The ease with which content can be created and spread on social media makes it simpler than ever before for individuals to discuss, interact with, and share content associated with a given fan object. Thus, the platform of social media makes the endless and multilinear expansion of a fan world visually apparent through the exponential spread of content and users, algorithms, and platforms interacting with that content.

I also contend that by constructing fandom as a world and social media as acting as both a space and infrastructure within that world, it is easier to trace flows of information, content, and power. For example, by including social media platforms, targeted ads, demographic analysis, and marketers as part of the fan world instead of as processes outside of it that interact with it, one can consider how these objects shape the geography and infrastructure of the fan

world. Social media is not something imposed upon fandom or simply a space upon which fandom can reside, but an inextricable part of the fan world.

But, one might ask, if anything tangentially related to a fandom can be considered part of its fan world, then what sets fandom apart from other cultural or social phenomena? Is there even a point to fan studies if everything can be subsumed within a fan world? These are additional questions that I wish to explore throughout my thesis as I consider fan worlds as a way of orienting the activities and processes that fan scholars study. My goal is not to abolish fandom studies but open it up past the boundaries that previous academics have imposed upon it through their definitions of fan, fan community, and fan activities. This does not mean that nothing can be gained from an in-depth study of the most devoted fans and their most time-consuming activities. However, such practices and people are not the only or even the primary ones that make up a fan world, and they must also be considered in relation to the rest of the world.

To consider these questions and provide specific examples for my analysis, I must first define my terms and trace the lineage of the field with which I wish to engage. As such, in the first chapter of my thesis, I consider the academic history of fan studies from its origins in the 1980s to today, using Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington (2017) to identify three past generations of scholarship. I then turn to Matt Hills (2017) to identify the concept of fan worlds and consider how this theoretical framework can be used to orient fandom.

In Chapters Two and Three, I narrow my analysis to the realm of fan worlds on social media platforms. To do so, I first use Couldry and Hepp's (2017) discussion of social worlds to define social media and discuss worlding and digital space in Chapter Two. I then turn in the same chapter to O'Reilly (2012), Apprich (2017), and Terranova (2004) to define Web 2.0 and discuss how it uses flows of content and information to generate profits, thus undermining the

initial democratic dreams of the world wide web. I will then locate social media as the driving

platform of Web 2.0 within the past decade. I will look primarily at Facebook and its profit

model as well as its dialectics of subject formation and community building. I use Facebook as

my primary platform of analysis both due to my familiarity with it, having joined and remained a

member of it since 2008, and due to the ubiquity of its influence in shaping social media

platforming and user engagement. Over one billion people have joined Facebook since it became

open to the general public in 2006, and its user-interface model has been adapted by most other

social media forms. Facebook changed the way that we access content online—through liking,

sharing, and linking separate content to one another. Facebook also emphasizes the promotion of

individual branding; Facebook encourages its users to define themselves in terms of their likes,

friends, pictures, educational background, etc. How Facebook constructs an "individual" has

carried over onto other social media forms such as Instagram and Snapchat. As such, I believe

that Facebook is the best object for my analysis in its promotion of spreadability both as an

integral part of Web 2.0 and as a constructor and connector of fan worlds.

After establishing Facebook as my object of study, I analyze how its platform illustrates

the concept of fan worlds and how such worlds operate and spread in Chapters Three and Four. I

focus my analysis on two different fan worlds—that of the web series *Critical Role* and the

videogame series *Fire Emblem. Critical Role* is a live tabletop gaming web series that broadcasts

live a Dungeons & Dragons game between eight self-professed "nerdy ass voice actors" every

Thursday night for about 3-4 hours. As described on the official website "[w]hat began in 2012

as a bunch of friends playing in each other's living rooms has evolved into a multi-platform

entertainment sensation, attracting over half million viewers each week" ("About Us"). Viewers can watch *Critical Role* live on YouTube or Twitch or catch previous episodes (of which there are more than 200) on YouTube, Twitch, or in

The cast of Critical Role dressed as their characters from the first campaign
http://criticalrolepodcast.geekandsundry.com/

podcast format on several streaming sites. Earlier this year, *Critical Role* also held one of the most successful kickstarter campaigns of all time, raising over 11 million USD from 88,000 backers in 45 days to fund a 10-episode animated series based on the show's first campaign ("Critical Role"). Personally, I have been watching *Critical Role* since 2017 and have seen almost every episode. I also met the cast of *Critical Role* this past summer (2019) at Denver Pop Culture Con. I am very engaged in the series and its fandom and am proud to call myself a huge fan.

Gameplay from Fire Emblem: Three Houses
https://www.rpgsite.net/news/8519-fire-emblem-three-houses-new-information-reveals-link-attacks-weekend-activities-and-more

Fire Emblem is a videogame SRPG (strategic roleplaying game) series hailing from Japan. Created in 1990 with the release of *Shadow Dragon and the Blade of Light*, *Fire Emblem*

is now an international, bestselling series consisting of thirteen original titles, three remakes of earlier games, and several spin-offs. The latest mainline title in the series, *Fire Emblem Three Houses*, came out on the Nintendo Switch on July 26, 2019 to critical and financial success. I have played eleven games in the franchise and poured over 150 hours into the latest release. *Fire Emblem* is one of my favorite videogame series, and I am very involved in the fandom both online and at conventions.

I chose these two fan worlds for my thesis because of my familiarity with them and the ways in which they demonstrate different dimensions of the fan world. As a web-based media object, *Critical Role* provides an excellent example of how fan worlds use and are in turn used by social media as both rely on the other to distribute flows of information, content, and data. *Critical Role* also illustrates how, using fan worlds, we can identify and orient objects and practices in relation to fandom that are not typically be associated with fans. Additionally, because the cast of *Critical Role* is so involved with its fans and explicitly invested in constructing a fan community, this fan world provides a good example of both how and why fandom can be constructed as a community as well as the limits of such a construction. The *Fire Emblem* fan world, on the other hand, can be used to demonstrate how social media changes fan worlds that originated offline and in a "non-Western" sphere. As such, to properly analyze the *Fire Emblem* fan world and its transnational dimensions, I use Morimoto and Chin (2017) to define and discuss concepts of transnationality and racial identity on the web. Additionally, in Chapter Four, I use Pratt's (1991) concept of contact zones to analyze how online fan spaces act as spaces wherein people from different backgrounds engage with one another under hierarchies of power and knowledge. *Fire Emblem* forces me to consider how fan worlds operate on a transnational level and how scholars can begin to dissociate fan worlds from Eurocentric biases

of the fields of area and media studies.

In my conclusion, I briefly consider how fan worlds engage with one another and can be oriented within an ever-expanding fan universe. I summarize what elements define the fan world and differentiate it from other theoretical concepts. I consider how the theoretical framework of fan worlds expands the field of fan studies to include non-normative ways of performing fandom and renders visible sites of difference, conflict, and convergence.

As a final note, I want to briefly touch upon the limits of my study. One danger of researching fandom, as noted by Zubernis and Larsen (2012), is the propensity for one to "[believe] that whatever slice of fandom he or she knows best is therefore representative of the whole" (36). As both fans and scholars, fan-scholars need to be careful in how they represent themselves and the limits of their knowledge to the fan and academic communities they engage in. As such, to avoid falling into the above fallacy, I wish to be open about the limits of my knowledge of fan worlds. The objects I consider myself a 'fan' of and the activities I engage in within fan worlds are both limited, as are the points of contact I use to engage in these activities. My fan activities primarily occur on Facebook, Reddit, Tumbr, Twitter, Archive of Our Own, and at the occasional convention. My analysis of specific fan worlds in this thesis are primarily taken from my own experiences and interactions with fellow fans on Facebook groups for Fire Emblem and Critical Role. My methodology consists of analyzing fans' posts and messages through the lens of my theory of fan worlds that develops in dialogue with published works in the fields of fan, media, and cultural studies. As such, my analysis should not be read as a definitive statement on what constitutes a fan or fan world for every individual subject or fan object.

Additionally, my analysis does not represent the entirety of what constitutes the fan world

for both *Critical Role* and *Fire Emblem*. My experiences are not representative of the experiences of every fan, even those with whom I share fan objects and communities. As a white woman from the United States, I can speak little about the experiences of fans of color or non-western fans, except when I reference them in their own words. My analysis of fandom relies heavily on the existence of fan spaces online, and as such is mostly limited to fan activities that can be performed by individuals who are privileged enough to have easy internet access, an issue that I touch upon in Chapter 3. Within fan studies, as scholars such as Jenkins (2014) and Morimoto and Chin (2017) have noted, more work is needed to consider fandom outside of a white, middle class, Eurocentric perspective. However, I do believe that the theories I use and build upon may be used to examine other fans, fan spaces, and fan activities. The future of fan studies lies not in a continual rehashing of the same old definitions and/or taking a stance on the inherent "goodness" or "badness" of certain fan activities or groups, but in extending our analysis from fan communities to fan worlds.

Chapter 1: Genealogy of the Fan World

A Brief History of Fan Studies

Though associations of individuals bonded by a shared interest or hobby have existed since the dawn of civilization, the terms 'fan' and 'fandom' used in reference to these individuals has a much shorter genealogy. The word 'fan' is an abbreviation of 'fanatic,' which, though originally meaning an overzealous religious devotee, came to be defined as anyone exhibiting "excessive and mistaken enthusiasm" (*Oxford Dictionary;* qtd. Jenkins 1992, 12). The abbreviated form 'fan' first appeared in the 19th century as a description for followers of professional sports teams, though it quickly became used to define "any faithful 'devotee' of sports or commercial entertainment" (12).

For much of the 20th century, fans were pathologized by mainstream media as overeager devotees whose devotion to their object of desire rendered them incapable of living as normal, productive members of society. As Jenkins (1992) writes, "news reports frequently characterized fans as psychopaths whose frustrated fantasies of intimate relationships with stars or unsatisfied desires to achieve their own stardom take violent and antisocial forms" (13). Fans were elsewhere characterized as pathetic men unable to find success in love or as eroticized women who willingly throw away their decency for their objects of desire (14-15). Annett (2014) also notes the tendency to characterize fandom, defined here as a group of fans, as either a frenzied (typically female) mob or duped audience "hypnotized into uncritical acceptance of the culture industry" (13). Fans were (and occasionally still are) thus constructed by dominant media and cultural forces as separate from normal, rational viewing audiences by the perverse intensity of their devotion. While audiences were necessary for the proliferation of 20th century mass media throughout society and the capital accumulation of the media industry and its associates, fans were, conversely, dangerous due to their lack of adherence to gendered, capitalist social norms.

They did not behave as men and women ought to, as male fans did not spend their energy and labor producing goods for capital and female fans succumbed to perverse sexual desires instead of focusing on the duties of the patriarchal home and family.

Several academics, such as John Fiske (1992) and Henry Jenkins (1992), disrupted this discourse in the late 1980s and 1990s in order to construct a new, positive view of fans and their fandoms. The first wave of fandom studies, referred to as the 'Fandom is Beautiful' phase by Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington (2017), aimed to fight back against dominant depictions of fans as pathological and dangerous (Coppa 2014, 73). According to Jenkins (1992), fans were not differentiated from viewing audiences by the perversion of their desires, but by "the intensity of their emotional and intellectual involvement" (58). This intensity leads them to find other fans and forge groups in order to share their feelings, discuss theories, and create new objects, constructing a sense of "commonality and community" (58). Through the generation of new discourse and media texts such as fanfiction, fan videos, and fan art, fans construct a larger world around the original text and become co-creators, a process that Jenkins labels 'participatory culture.' This participatory culture, also called fandom, "was portrayed as the tactic of the disempowered, an act of subversion and cultural appropriation against the power of media producers and industries" (Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington 2017, 2). As stated in Jenkins' seminal work *Textual Poachers*,

> To speak as a fan is to accept what has been labeled a subordinated position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional authorities. Yet is it also to speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic (22-23).

So, under this wave of fan studies, fans are defined as subjects who differentiate themselves from media audiences through their consumption practices as they take on the role of producer or creator in their appropriation of fan works through writing fanfiction and creating fan art; they act as both consumer and producer, thus disrupting the usual capitalist binary between the two. In turn, these fans use such fan works to create social bonds and form communities with one another, called fandoms, that form a subversive counterculture to the dominant, oppressive forces of capitalist mass media. For Jenkins, there is no fan without a fan community, no formation of the identity "fan" without an Other (in this case, mainstream audiences) to define oneself against as well as a community through which to construct the social bonds that form fandom.

On the other hand, the second wave of fan studies characterized fans primarily as consumers rather than producers and "highlighted the replication of social and cultural hierarchies within fan cultures and subcultures" (Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington 2017, 5). These theorists, such as Harris (1998) and Thomas (2002), contended that instead of inherently liberatory spaces, "fans' interpretive communities (as well as individual acts of fan consumption) are embedded in existing social and cultural conditions" (Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington 2017, 5). Fan communities contained their own "taste hierarchies" that replicated those found in society at large, privileging the desires and practices of upper- and middle-class white heterosexual men over those of marginalized populations (5). Fans can still be grouped into communities, but these communities exist not in juxtaposition to societal structural hierarchies, but in tandem with them.

The third wave of fan studies identified by Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington (2017) aimed to "broaden the scope of inquiry to a wide range of different audiences reflecting fandom's

growing cultural currency" (6). That is, this wave expanded the theoretical boundaries of what is

considered a fan or fan community, given the growing cultural importance of fandom. For

example, Sandvoss (2005) identifies the difficulty of defining "fan" either through self-

classification or a measure of emotional intensity:

> Sometimes audience groups that from the outside appear as casual viewers identify
>
> themselves as fans. On other occasions emotionally involved viewers and readers shun
>
> the label 'fan' as potentially derogative, at least as far as their own media consumption is
>
> concerned. Moreover, emotional intensity is a category which cannot be measured
>
> quantitatively (6).

Given these issues, Sandvoss turns to definitions of fan and fandom focusing on fan practices.

He defines fandom as "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular

narrative or text" (8). These texts can include sports teams, musicians, and celebrities. As

Sandvoss (2014) elucidates, these objects are texts not because they are deliberately authored as

such but because they "are read as texts on the level of the fan/reader" since "[t]hey all constitute

a set of signs and symbols that fans encounter in their frames of representation and mediation,

and from which they create meaning in the process of reading" (64). Fandom, which Sandvoss

implicitly defines as the state of being a fan, is not something that inherently exists but a type of

subject that comes into being by relating oneself to fan objects and constructing meaning from

these objects. How fans relate to their texts or perform as fans varies, but all can be defined as

"forms of consumption in which [one] build[s] and maintain[s] an affective relationship with

mediated texts" (Sandvoss 2004, 8-9). Thus, fandom is defined as a series of consumptive

practices—writing and reading fanfiction, discussing the latest episode of a television show,

performing and recording a song by one's favorite artist—that creates an affective response in

the fan and forms a relationship between them and a mediated text, defined as an object that conveys meaning and is interacted with through a technical medium such as paper, radio waves, or a computer (Thompson 1992, 35). This affective response can be either positive or negative, associated with feelings of happiness, lust, anger, sadness, or any other emotion or mood.

I find Sandvoss' definition of fan useful in its analysis of fans and their activities as a process of subject formation instead of a category of person, as well as his turn away from self-identification. Not all who fit in Sandvoss' definition would self-define as fans, myself included—for example, though I have seen almost every movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and at times look at fan art produced about it, I do not self-identify as a fan. This is because my own self-definition of fan is dependent on how invested I am in a given text and how this investment measures in comparison to how invested the people are around me. So, both because I do not experience intense emotions toward most movies in the MCU and because I know many people who are more invested in the MCU than I am who call themselves fans, I am hesitant to label myself a fan, even though I enjoy the movies and characters. For me, self-identifying as a fan means setting myself apart from viewing audiences by the intensity of my devotion, a definition more in common with Jenkins'. However, by limiting the study of fans to those who self-define, scholars run the risk of ignoring activities and social processes that shape fan worlds.

Furthermore, Sandvoss' definition of fan serves to deracialize and declass fan studies. According to Benjamin Woo (2017), commonly accepted definitions of fan and fandom in media studies tend to presume whiteness by privileging fan objects, activities, and modes of consumption largely preferred by white fans. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins "asserts that media fans are 'largely female, largely white, [and] largely middle class,'" thus forming a racialized

image of what a fan is within the foundational text of the discipline (Woo 2017: 246). Surveys

have reportedly backed this statement, with Kingston's 2015 survey finding that 90% of

convention goers identified a white, while a survey of 10,000 users on Archive of Our Own

found 77% of users were white (246). Nevertheless, as Woo asserts, "it is not as though people

of color do not develop deep, meaningful engagements with cultural goods" (247). Rather, in

selecting their fan objects and practices of study, most researches have unknowingly privileged

white tastes. By decoupling his definition of fan from specific practices or fan objects, Sandvoss

helps move fan studies away from its ideological whiteness and towards a more inclusive

definition of fandom.

Building off Sandvoss, I define a fan as a process of subject formation that individuals

engage in when they perform activities that form or strengthen an affective bond with an object.

These activities can be as simple as watching a new trailer or discussing the latest book in a

series with a friend. Though these activities may not seem as outwardly productive as those

Jenkins (1992) discusses in *Textual Poachers*, I contend that they are, in fact, productive as they

produce both feelings of affect and a stronger attachment between the fan subject and the fan

object. This attachment may not needs be positive in nature—as mentioned by Reinhard (2018),

people's strong negative reactions to objects can also form a strong negative bond between the

two and drive them to engage in activities related to that object (8). So-called "anti-fans" are just

fans whose affective bond produces negative emotions instead of positive ones. Still, how fans

self-define can certainly matter—as Jenkins (1992) noted, those who self-define as fans are more

likely to join fan groups, produce fan content, and interact daily with fellow fans and others in a

fan world. Because of this, I will at times use this self-definition in my work, but I will refer to

these individuals as self-defined fans to differentiate them from my Sandvoss-inspired scholarly

definition of fan.

Other scholarship located in the third wave likewise "explored the *intra*personal pleasures and motivations among fans, refocusing on the relationship between fans' selves and their fan objects" (Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington 2017, 6). By extending the study of fandom beyond questions of community and interpersonal relationships, third wave scholars aimed to study fans not just as fans, but as a field of inquiry that can "capture fundamental insight into modern life" due to the ubiquity of fandom in modern culture and communication (7). For them, the field of fan studies may overlap with others such as communications, psychology, and political science.

It is important to note that these "waves" of fan studies exist not as chronological eras but as differing approaches to the academic study of fandom. Each wave may have had its heyday in past decades, but their approaches to the study of fandom still influence the field. For example, Jenkins (2007) continues to focus his studies on fandom "as an imagined and imaginative community" and is concerned "that a return to individual psychology runs the risk of reintroducing all those pathological explanations that we [the first-wave scholars] sought to dismantle" (361). Likewise, Coppa (2014) decries attempts by Sandvoss (2005) and others to reduce the definition of fandom to patterns of individual consumption, instead arguing for an "understanding of fandom as something fundamentally *social*" that is capable of transforming "subculture[s] (that is, a social group based on common interests) [into]…communit[ies] (that is, based on shared geography, kinship, or history)" (76; 78). Citing Bacon-Smith (1991), Coppa seems to believe fandom can provide an "extended family structure of core fans" that can meet the social needs of participants who feel left out of other familial and societal structures (78).

In terms of scholarship, Coppa calls for "a fan studies that takes as its subject the self-

identified fans who participate in some kind of fan culture" (77). She believes these fans should be the focus of fan studies due to their capacity for fan activism, dismantling structures of power, and upending traditional relationships between media producers and consumers; her definition of "fan culture" is something that intrinsically exists in opposition to mainstream culture and hierarchies. In focusing on individual fan psychology or consumption, Coppa worries that academia will assist in the dismantling of self-formed fan communities by corporate structures. Borrowing from Stanfill's (2013) blog post on the danger of Kindle Worlds, a short-lived for-profit fanfiction scheme by Amazon, Coppa worries that the fan-as-individual-consumer turn of fan studies "is part of a broader shift to incite fans-the-individuals to ever greater investment and involvement but manage them through disarticulating them from the troublesome resistive capacity of fandom-the-community" (Stanfill 2013; qtd in Coppa 2014, 80).

I understand Coppa's concerns via the co-option of fandom by corporate structures, having seen firsthand how powerful capitalist forces can shape fandom to their benefit, often to the chagrin of self-identified fans. For example, in December 2018, the popular social media blogging site known as a haven for (particularly LGBT and female) fans, Tumblr, removed all pornography (defined as depictions of sex acts and any nudity) from the website. This purge was instigated after the site's app was pulled from the Apple App store due to child pornography. Tumblr users largely saw this move as a quick and easy way for the owners of Tumblr, mega-corporation Yahoo, to avoid losing profits by getting the app back onto the store while also avoiding responsibility for the corporation's inability to keep child porn off the site. Before the purge, Tumblr was often used as a hub for erotic fan art and fanfiction, especially for queer audiences. As such, this move by Yahoo was a clear example of the fact that when corporations control fan spaces, the places where fans inhabit and perform fan activities, they can likewise

dictate what fan activities and practices are deemed "socially acceptable," often to the detriment of marginalized groups. Despite almost unanimous user backlash, Yahoo went ahead with the purge, also demonstrating the limits of the power of collective action.

Perhaps, as Coppa seems to imply, if academics and other so-called "fan experts" were to speak out more about the benefits of fan communities and fan practices, fan voices would not be silenced as often by large corporations. However, I disagree with Coppa's complete disavowal of the work of Sandvoss and other scholars who have sought to open up definitions of fan, fandom, and fan community. By limiting the study of fans to those who create fan works in order to form kin-like social bonds, one runs the risk of ignoring multitudes of individuals who interact with fan media and content as well as a diverse set of activities associated with the creation and dissemination of this content. Coppa's (2014) loathing of "fannish participation… reduced to 'likes' and 'reblogs'" diminishes the most common activities found on social media that fans use to perform their fan identity and form bonds with both individuals and objects through disseminating content (80). Likewise, though I do agree that fandom is a fundamentally social concept as it forms affective bonds among people and between people and objects and platforms, limiting zones of social contact to closed off communities structured along the lines of anthropological organizations of kinship cuts off the majority of fans' social activities from the realm of fan studies. As such, I contend that the constructed notion of a singular, cohesive "fan community" needs to be retired as outdated within the discipline, and that we instead must turn to Hills' (2017) theoretical concept of fan worlds.

Fan Communities and Fan Worlds

In *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (2017) argue that "instead of understanding each and every fan culture necessarily as a single community, we

might do better to understand it as a complex figuration of figurations that links up different local groups in a range of interdependent activities" (171). Matt Hills (2017) expands on this, claiming that fandom should be approached "as a network of networks, or a loose affiliation of subcultures, all specializing in different modes of fan activity" (860). Ultimately, Hills "re-theorize[s] fandom not as community versus individualization, nor as an empirical scattering of fan voices and experiences to be academically taxonomized, but rather as a set of pathways or branches which can close down what it means to be a fan for any given person" (877-78). This new theory moves past the binary set up between community-centered fan studies and individual-centered fan studies in order to open up the world of fan studies to an unspecified number of persons, activities, and ways of performing fandom. Hills' vision of a world that encapsulates this series of pathways and networks borrows from Becker's (2008) analysis of art worlds, which states that

> whoever contributes in any way to that activity and its results is part of that world. The line drawn to separate the world from whatever is not part of it is an analytic convenience, not something that exists… So the world is not a closed unit (376; qtd. Hills 2017, 873).

So, in terms of fan studies, the concept of a fan world would include anyone or anything that relates to the world of fan activity. This includes individuals who do not define themselves as fans or as part of a fan community, audiences who do not create fan works, and industry professionals who interact with fans. Fan worlds allow for the mapping of these entities onto the same space as self-identified fans, thus allowing for theorists to analyze the connections and flows of content and information that exist between them.

The concept of a fan world also opens up the possibility of differing interpretations of fan

spaces, practices, and activities. As Hills elucidates, an issue with the terms "culture" or "community" is they automatically presume the existence of something outside the term, an Other whom the culture or community can be defined against. This "Other" has been identified by various theorists as either mainstream culture (with fan culture defined as an opposing subculture), "normal" or socially acceptable media consumption practices, or top-down corporate media structures. The problem with these oppositional binaries is that they typically exclude or minimize certain practices (such as Coppa's derision of likes and follows counting as fan activity) and people. They also ignore the ways in which certain fan cultures have become part of mainstream culture. The MCU, for instance, has become so ubiquitous that knowledge of it is often necessary to navigate social interactions. I spent the summer of 2018 catching up on all the MCU movies that I had previously missed not because I was enamored by those I had seen, but because I felt I needed to in order to keep up with my friends' and colleagues' conversations. Likewise, *The Big Bang Theory*, a show following the fictional lives of four geeky men who are self-identified super fans of several science fiction and fantasy media objects, is one of the most watched and best well-known television series of the past decade. In many ways, fan culture has *become* mainstream culture, and fan practices can no longer be read as inherently oppositional to either mainstream audiences or social norms.

Likewise, the rhetoric of fan communities assumes an overarching logic that governs fan social bonds and the spaces in which these bonds are formed and contested. As Hills (2017) states:

> The possibilities for ways of having done fandom do not cohere into a single community, whether interpretive or not. Neither can they resolve into any harmonious or final set at the level of academic cataloguing, and nor are they part of an overarching culture, instead

remaining fractious, fractionated and in some cases merely disconnected from one

another (875).

So, how fans interact and create content varies greatly depending on the space that they inhabit,

creating various "cultures" and "communities" with different overarching rules and logics.

Zubernis and Larsen (2012) analyze how different fan practices and modes of participation

primarily occur within different spaces depending on how private or public these spaces are. For

example, they identify consumptive activities such as information gathering that occur within

public spaces that "may have ties to corporate entities" as separate from interpretive activities

like the creation of fan works which occur in "private, fans only spaces" (18). Different

communities centered around the same fan object thus emerge with different rules, practices, and

participants in different spaces. Fans may occupy more than one community, but how they

perform as fans changes as they move between communities, lest they risk being shamed or

excluded from a given community for breaking its rules. Zubernis and Larsen illustrate this using

an example from the *Supernatural* fandom. At a convention in New Jersey in 2009, a fan crossed

the line of acceptable behavior in a convention space when she asked an actor on the show what

they thought about "wincest," the shipping[1] of the two male leads who also happen to be

brothers, much to the chagrin of most other fans at the Q&A session who booed her (Zubernis

and Larsen 2012, 145). Though shipping wincest is acceptable and even encouraged in certain

online spaces, bringing it up in a public space with an actor on the show is decidedly not.

I have similarly experienced how different online fan spaces promote and regulate

different rules and expectations, creating what Couldry and Hepp (2017) and Hills (2017) define

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[1] Shipping refers to the act of wanting two (or more) characters or people to be in a romantic or sexual relationship, or the belief that said characters of people are already in a relationship. i.e, as a kid I "shipped" Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger from the *Harry Potter* series, which means that I wanted them to end up in a romantic relationship together. A romantic pairing between these characters is called a "ship."

as different (sub)cultures. For example, I participate in fan activities related to *Fire Emblem* on several websites, including Facebook, Tumblr, and Archive of Our Own, a fanfiction website. These fan spaces attract different people and promote different activities depending on the structure of their platform—Facebook's Fire Emblem group mostly involves discussion of the games, official announcements from the game's creators, and the occasional share of fan art, while on Tumblr *Fire Emblem* fans primarily share fan art and occasionally fanfiction. On a less obvious level, these spaces promote different cultural norms and practices. For example, on Tumblr, queer ships between two male or two female characters are more acceptable than on the Facebook Fire Emblem group. This can be demonstrated by searching for "Ike/Soren," a popular pairing of two men from the series' ninth and tenth installments, content in both groups. On Tumblr, Ike/Soren proves relatively popular, with the most popular artwork depicting the two generating over 5,000 likes ("Ike/Soren"). Meanwhile, on the Fire Emblem Facebook group, as of September 19, 2019, of the top ten results that appear when one searches Ike/Soren, six of them contain a commenter who expresses dislike or disgust over the pairing, even on posts where the original poster (OP) wasn't specifically labelling their relationship romantic. Evidently, the extent to which certain types of fan practices and activities, such as supporting wlw or mlm[2] ships, are accepted is dependent on the fan space, thus demonstrating how different spaces generate separate fan cultures and supporting Hills' claim that "ways of having done fandom do not cohere into a single community" (875).

On the other hand, conceptualizing fandom as a fan world allows for spaces of convergence, divergence, and emergence among different fan spaces and cultures. Art work originally posted on Tumblr ends up reposted on Facebook and Twitter. Events that occur at a

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[2] wlw is short for "women who love women," while mlm is short for "men who love men." Both are used in this context to describe pairings between two people of the same gender.

convention are discussed on blogs and forums (such as the event described by Zubernis and Larsen earlier in this chapter). Fanfiction and fan art posted by one fan influence another fan's work. Facebook and Google track likes and shares of fan content to display targeted ads for a user across different platforms and websites. Anti-fans infiltrate a group in order to "troll" fans and cause mayhem. A fan's identity on one site is doxed and revealed on another to post her personal information in the public sphere.

Finally, one may ask, why conceptualize this phenomen as a world as opposed to say, a convergence culture or a network of networks or a supercomputer? I believe that "world" is the best term for what I perceive as a way of mapping or orienting space. Unlike Hills, I do not believe that any fan, fan practice, or fan community can remain fully disconnected from one another; at the very least, each are connected to the central fan object that makes up the gravitational core of the world. From there, they can be "mapped" onto the world in relation to both one another and the core object, with infrastructure and networks of trade and travel linking different locations, which may represent physical or digital places. Individuals can locate themselves within different places in this world, each with their own culture and set of customs. Connections between locations in this world are not permanent like in a network but based on the actions of individuals as they travel across space, thus linking places. As theorists analyze the world, they are not cataloging objects to place into a database but instead orienting subjects, object, and themselves within the world in relation to other subjects, objects, and spaces. In this, the fan world differs from other concepts such as society, culture, or the digital world because it is mapped and oriented by fan practices instead of other phenomena.

Yet this is an amorphous world, not a spherical globe like our planet Earth. Boundaries are ever-growing and contested. Ways of perceiving and making meaning of the world differ for

each of its inhabitants. The world is in a constant and infinite process of world-building and

expansion, much like our own universe. And the world is itself merely a part of a larger fan

universe made up of all the different objects for which there are fan worlds, with peoples

traveling between different worlds through shared infrastructure.

    In order to map this system of worlds, as well as discuss concepts of space and

infrastructure, I must now turn to a discussion of social media and Web 2.0 in order to illustrate

how fan worlds can be organized, perceived, and analyzed.

Chapter 2: The Structure of Social Media

Social media has increasingly become an integral location for fans and fan worlds due to its capacity to connect individuals across geographic distance and its promotion of networking via content creation and sharing. Although my initial experiences with fandom involved friends and family that lived physically nearby, by high school, most of my fan activities took place online on websites that connected me to fellow fans across the globe. Specifically, I used social media and fiction-sharing sites to meet other fans, share fan theories and fanfiction, and even make new friends who I felt understood me better than my local peers. My experience of fan worlds was inseparably intertwined with my usage of social media.

My experience is shared by many other fans. As noted by Zubernis and Larsen (2012), "fandom interaction itself has shifted in the last several decades to occur primarily online" (117). Social media websites have facilitated the expansion of fan groups and activities by allowing fans to more easily connect with one another and spread fan content. Social media websites have also encouraged the creation of fan spaces on their platforms—Facebook encourages the creation of user-headed groups and Pages, Reddit's entire interface constructs interest-based communities and cultures via subreddits, and Tumblr even goes as far as measuring weekly and annual "Fandometrics" and posting which fandoms have been the most active. As social media has expanded to fill more of our social worlds, so too has it facilitated the expansion of fan groups into ever-expanding worlds. By converging and connecting different peoples, practices, and platforms, social media dismantles previously set material and rhetorical boundaries such as those between the worlds of the social, digital, and fan. To analyze this convergence and its implications, however, first I must define the term social media along with the related term Web 2.0.

What is social media?

Although theorists, users, and corporations commonly use the term "social media" as though its meaning is obvious, an exact definition is more difficult to pin down. I borrow from Couldry and Hepp's (2017) work on the social and media in the formulation of my own definition. They define "the social" as the "spaces of interaction" in which human beings are "entangled" with one another (9). The social is "the basis of our human life-in-common in relations of interdependence" (3). To explicate, humans are independent beings who rely on one another to both physically survive and make meaning of their shared experience of being human; thus, the social world is where such interactions between human beings occur.

As stated in Chapter 1, a medium refers to the technical means through which communication occurs, such as radio waves or paper (Thompson 1992). Communications theory has defined contemporary media, like the newspaper or television, as "specific channels of centralized content" (Couldry and Hepp 2017, 2). Couldry and Hepp's thesis, however, hypothesizes that new media forms such as the internet and social media have revolutionized our understanding of media from these "specific channels of centralized content" to "platforms which, for many humans, literally *are* the space where, through communication, they *enact* the social" (2). Media and the social are inexplicably intertwined, for

> the fundamentally mediated nature of the social—our necessarily mediated
>
> interdependence as human beings—is… based not in some internal mental reality, but
>
> rather on the material processes (objects, linkages, infrastructures, platforms) through
>
> which communication, and the construction of meaning, take place (3).

Since we are autonomous beings, our social communications must always be mediated through another process or platform, whether that be spoken language, paper, or the internet. The social

world demands the existence of media, and most forms of media could be considered "social media" in their capacity to communicate information between human beings. Nowadays, however, media is increasingly shifting to meet the demands of the social, with new media platforms like the world wide web and social media networks explicitly constructed to facilitate broader and farther communication.

Additionally, the construction of the social changes as the technical means through which communication occurs become more heavily mediated (Couldry and Hepp 2017, 7). That is, the social world has become more deeply "mediatized" with "the increased reliance of *all social processes* on infrastructures of communication on scales up to the global" (37). Activities such as keeping in touch with friends and family, sending gifts for special events, purchasing and selling goods and services, and even dating are increasingly reliant upon digital media. Digital media facilitates this reliance through both

> the *connectedness* of infrastructures on which media-related practice depends—so, for example, the digital is now dependent on the development of wi-fi and other mobile services—and in the layering of connected media practices in which individuals or groups are now routinely engaged. Media environments have become increasingly characterized by 'convergence,' meaning less a merger of all media devices…and more convergence at the level of the 'data' or content which, being *digital*, becomes communicable across multiple devices… (52).

Digital media converges separate infrastructures and platforms into the same "media environment," accessible through a multitude of devices, which is becoming increasingly inseparable from the social world. The use of the word environment also connotes a sense of physical space which can be inhabited by individuals. Digital media acts not just as a mediator

between human beings but as the space on which such mediations occur; it is both the medium of communication and the space in which such communications take place.

My definition of social media includes these same aspects of digital media, but with additional details to differentiate social media from other forms of digital media. Couldry and Hepp (2017) differentiate "social media networks" from other forms of media as "a new type of website which provide… platforms for hundreds of millions of users to network with each other…within the parameters of form and content management designed by that platform's owners" (50). Social media networks help transform the internet into "a deeply commercialized, increasingly banal *space for the conduct of social life itself*" (50). Like digital media, social media acts as both a medium and a space; however, social media is unique in that its *explicitly stated* purpose is to form social bonds between users on their network. The form of these social bonds varies from platform to platform: Facebook labels them as friends, Twitter and Tumblr as followers, LinkedIn as connections, etc. What unites these sites, however, is that they explicitly label the "bond" and thus establish an identifiable relationship between disparate users.

However, it is important to note that even though social media platforms inhabit their own space, these spaces are connected to the larger digital world, often in ways that are explicit and easily accessible. For example, content and links from other websites can be shared on Facebook, while other websites, such as *BBC*, include buttons that allow viewers to share articles and content directly onto Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, or LinkedIn. Other websites and phone apps allow users to sign-in via their Facebook account instead of creating a new username and password. Social media is increasingly used to connect all aspects of a user's digital life under one username, one identity. The stakes of this in regard to fan worlds will be discussed in the next chapter.

Finally, to understand what practices the digitalization and socialization of media encourages, I must first include a discussion of the term Web 2.0 and its connection to social media.

Web 2.0

The term 'Web 2.0' first emerged at a 2004 conference of the O'Reilly Media Group to describe emerging business practices on the web following the dot-com bubble burst (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 48). Tim O'Reilly and others theorized that in the wake of the burst and the shutdown of several websites, surviving and emerging web models constructed a new way of engaging with the internet for both businesses and users, hence the moniker 'Web 2.0' (O'Reilly 2012). According to O'Reilly (2012), these practices can be largely summed up as programming that relies upon and encourages user engagement, sells websites as services instead of goods, and promotes usage across devices. Ultimately, these serve to construct the web as a "platform" through which users can access and help build a never-ending number of sites and services (O'Reilly 2012, 34). This platform's popularity and longevity is due to its reliance upon user feedback and constant updating to improve user experience and engagement. As such, users can be constructed as co-creators in this system as they leave feedback, connect separate websites to one another using links, and create personal pages on various sites such as blogs or social media networks.

Although O'Reilly and other business and teach moguls praise Web 2.0 as revolutionary and emancipatory, the situation is more complicated amongst academics. For example, Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) define Web 2.0 as "a set of corporate practices that seek to capture and exploit participatory culture" (48). Jenkins (2007) views Web 2.0 corporate practices as copying the fan practices he first identified decades earlier in their encouragement of media mixing,

content creation, and free sharing. However, while fans engaged in these practices in order to build community and engage with media producers, companies promote these practices to make a profit by gathering data from spreadable content and selling that data to marketers.

In a similar vein, Apprich (2017) defines Web 2.0 as the way in which "new online-platforms turned the idea of user participation into a profitable business model, thereby giving capitalism an answer to the challenges of the evolving digital environment, and in particular non-commercial sharing cultures" (11). Apprich views Web 2.0 as squandering earlier utopian dreams of a free, democratic web by masking market forces with user-friendly language. For example, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Amazon promote user participation under the guise of neoliberal individuality, defined as the cultivation of an individual alienated self through the purchasing of goods and services, and community formation. On these platforms, users are encouraged to purchase goods, review products, and self-brand to promote their own page or group. In addition to encouraging consumption through self-branding, platforms collect user-generated content as data that is then used to manage platforms and communities and market products. User Generated Content can thus be read as a form of free labor that is exploited by platforms and related corporations in order to manage populations and turn profits. As stated by Tiziana Terranova (2004),

> Free labor is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited (78).

The central aim of Web 2.0 is to promote user-generated content as a source of free labor through which data can be collected and profits made. The very structure of Web 2.0 platforms exists for the exploitation of this free labor hidden behind platitudes of free sharing, self-

promotion, and community building.

Facebook is an ideal example of Web 2.0 in practice through its use of dialogue that promotes individuality and community formation while belying its underlying economic strategy of collecting data to create ads and turn profits. Facebook's mission statement reads as follows:

Founded in 2004, Facebook's mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them ("FAQS").

This mission statement explicitly refers to both the construction of community and promotion of individuality, while saying nothing about the process of data collection and targeted advertisement. Additionally, the statement specifies that it is users who create content and communities—using the power granted to them by Facebook. It is telling that the verb "give" is used in relation to this power—the statement could instead claim to facilitate community building or provide a platform for communities. Instead, by positioning Facebook as the giver of power, Facebook is constructed as a benevolent master at the top of a hierarchy who "gifts" power to its users so that they may further its mission statement. Of course, Facebook maintains that its mission statement is for the good of "the world," which can be brought closer together simply through individuals "friending" one another and discussing their interests and beliefs.

What Facebook's mission statement means to refer to as "the world" is not immediately clear—it seems to involve space both physical (since it allows users to "discover what's going on" in places that they do not physically inhabit) and digital (since Facebook brings the world "closer together," and this cannot be in reference to geographic location as Facebook does not control tectonic plates). Facebook's "world" seems similar to Couldry and Hepp's (2017) social

world in that it entails communications between human beings that together construct an experience of a shared space. So, Facebook explicitly identifies itself as both a place that human beings inhabit with one another and a medium through which interactions between human beings can occur. Facebook exists simultaneously as both place and infrastructure.

Facebook as Place

According to Michel de Certeau (1984), a place is defined as "the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence" (117). A place is situated in a distinct location, which it defines, in relation to other elements that inhabit distinct places; it is "an instantaneous configuration of positions" (117). In the digital world, a place is marked not by physicality but by this distinct ordering. The term "website" implies an identifiable location within the web, as does "URL address." Much like physical locations, web locations are accessible through addresses that demarcate their place as separate from that of separate elements. As confirmed by Terranova (2004), "[t]o be locatable on the internet…a machine/host/user needs to have an address and this address needs to be unequivocally situated within a common address space" (43). The act of setting up a web address, thus demarcating a new place in relation to other places on the web, is also the act by which a new site comes into being. To exist on the web at all, one must exist as a place. In this sense, the web can be read as an organizing of places in relation to one another.

A website exists as both its own identifiable location (i.e. Facebook) as well as a collection of different addresses coalesced into the same "site." On Facebook, different addresses exist for each user's or group's personal page. This gives off the impression that each person controls their own place as well as its organization and contents. Facebook encourages users to share pictures, record their likes, and write about what's on their mind. This construction of

individual choice, however, masks the limits imposed upon users by the platform's programmed interface. A user can arrange their pictures and posts only within the boundaries set forth by Facebook's interface. Additionally, if any content posted by the user is found to have violated Facebook's "community guidelines," it will be removed, and the user's account could be suspended. No user is the "owner" of their place on Facebook; they are visitors who can drop by and add new content, but they can change neither the structure of the place nor its rules. Facebook-as-a-place is controlled from the top-down through both programmed algorithms demarcating the interface and community guidelines created and enforced by the platform's management.

Users can, however, shift how Facebook operates as a space. De Certeau (1984) defines space as "a practiced place," made so by "the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function" (117). For example,

> the street geometrically defined by urban planners is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs (117).

Beings transform a place into a space by acting on and through it, producing "vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables" (117). Facebook is transformed into a space by the actions of users—what pages they access, how much time they spend, how they move from place to place. The logic of this space is not stable or predetermined in the same way that the address/place is—how the space is used or defined varies for different users. Facebook can never be a given user's "place," but it can operate as one's own "space," as one chooses how to move through and interact with the space. By theorizing Facebook as both a place and a space, one can analyze how it operates as both a top-down demarcated order of elements and a series of user

movements and actions. This two-vectored approach will prove useful when investigating fan worlds on Facebook in the next chapter.

Facebook as Infrastructure

Infrastructure is the basic physical and organizational structure needed to operate a system, unit, or world—for example, the infrastructure of Canada includes railroads, highways, and telephone lines. The internet is also a vital infrastructure for the operation of economic, political, and social processes—it is used for trade, banking, diplomacy, interpersonal communication, dating, and other actions necessary for the maintenance of our political, economic, and social worlds. Couldry and Hepp (2017) specifically describe the internet as "an infrastructure for everyday social interaction" (69). The internet acts as both a medium for social practices and an influencer that has changed how we live our social lives and how we make meaning of our social interactions. For example, smartphones that access the internet are used "to organize family practices and interactions" as well as let family members access "reference[s] to mediated representations of themselves as family on a continuous basis" (70). That is, through posting family photos on social media, articulating events as family outings and discussing such outings with others, and remaining in contact with family members across distance, the internet constructs the family as a closed social unit and defines what elements constitute that unit as well as how it is perceived by others.

The infrastructure of the internet includes both physical/technical and organizational elements. The material elements of the internet are not readily visible, but they include the hardware components that make up computers, phones, and other devices that access the internet, the electrical grid necessary to power such devices, fiber optic cables and cable modems that transmit data, and the cable stations that serve as nodes in undersea networks (Starosielski

2015). Software that enables a user to access the internet is composed of data bytes that are programmed and organized. The same material processes that make up much of other communication technologies are found in the infrastructure of the internet. The internet is both a unit that operates through infrastructure and an infrastructure for other units.

Like the internet, Facebook can be analyzed as part of the infrastructure of social and digital worlds. Facebook is a medium through which a multitude of social interactions occur—on the user's wall, personal pages, and through Facebook messenger. Facebook is a platform that helps operate and orient the user's social world, and in turn may influence how that world is structured in terms of the user's relations to friends, family members, strangers, products, and media objects.

In terms of the digital world, Facebook introduced many elements that have allowed for the quick and easy formation of new connections between different sites. Social media championed many of the elements that keep Web 2.0 running through the creation and sharing of content, such as user-generated content and share buttons. Facebook not only connects users to one another; it connects users to content, including that from other websites. Other websites invite users to like or share content via their Facebook login. These share and like buttons make up the infrastructure that connects different locations on the internet into a world.

Facebook ads also encourage users to visit other websites through a simple click, using a product or news story that Facebook's algorithms assume the user may be interested in. These algorithms gather information from user's posts, likes, and demographics to connect ads and marketers to users. Many other social media sites have adopted a similar system, such as Tumblr and Twitter. Similar to like and share buttons, targeted ads make up part of the infrastructure that constructs the internet into a traversable world as users access new locations with a simple tap of

a keyboard, mouse, or screen.

Finally, Facebook provides infrastructure for the internet through the use of its login on other sites. Other websites, mobile apps, and even games give users the option to sign up for the site using their Facebook login in exchange for some amount of access to their Facebook account. For many users, Facebook forms a foundation of their online identity as they use it to access other sites and services. Thus, different sites and user identities converge with Facebook as the central platform, the infrastructure holding disparate online locations and user identities together.

One of these identities is that of the fan. I contend that Facebook cultivates a fan identity that users inhabit whenever they perform fan activities on the site, such as liking and sharing fan content, commenting on posts, and connecting with other people in the fandom. Because such activities are promoted as part of Web 2.0's marketing scheme, this fan identity is cultivated and encouraged by the interface of the site. In the next chapter, I will discuss how this identity is cultivated in various spaces on the site, as well as how these spaces structure the fan world.

Chapter 3: Facebook in the Fan World

Fandom and social media have shaped each other since the formation of the latter. As Jenkins (2007) notes, much of the rhetoric surrounding, and public impetus behind, the creation of social media reflects early fan theory—both have been lauded as spaces in which individuals become empowered as content creators, digital locations where people can meet across physical distance and social difference in order to build community. Social media's platform model directly borrows from fan spaces and practices that encourage user-generated content and the sharing of such content in order to build social relationships. As such, it is no surprise that fan groups quickly became enmeshed in social media as the space allowed them to grow in size and in visibility. Fan groups have been on Facebook since before the platform went public, and today fan groups generate much of the profits made by social media through content creation and sharing on and across platforms.

Facebook exists as a place, space, and infrastructure in the fan world as users and content alike inhabit and move through space, forming connections between one another and from platform to platform. In doing so, users and content shape the topography of the fan world as they move along horizontal and vertical axes. Facebook demonstrates that the fan world is not a flat surface nor a barren land, but rather a world shaped by the actions of its inhabitants.

To analyze the relationship between Facebook and the fan world in this chapter, I consider several topics. First, I analyze how fan worlds operate on Facebook on different spaces—walls, Pages, and groups—and how the structure of these spaces shape fan activities and the topography of the fan world. Then, I consider issues of accessibility of anonymity in these spaces to demonstrate that the fan world is not a democratic world without borders, but rather a world that is shaped by hierarchies of power and knowledge. Finally, I briefly discuss the

economies that structure the fan world and how fans and fan content circulate in the world through these economies.

Walls, Pages, and Groups as Fan Space

On Facebook, fan worlds operate on several different layers. Fans share images and news, post pictures, and share fan-related stories with their friends on their wall. Here, fandom becomes a practice that users perform to cultivate their social media persona. Just as the gendered subject is formed through repetitive performance (Butler 1999), other subjects, such as the fan, are likewise performative. The Facebook wall is a space where the fan subject is carefully curated and performed for an audience that includes the user's selected friends, Facebook algorithms, and marketers. Facebook promotes this subject formation by encouraging users to list their "likes" on the "About" section of their personal pages in terms of sports, movies, music, books, etc. Suggested likes then pop up as ads according to their supposed similarity to the user's other likes and likes by friends and other users of similar demographics. Facebook encourages the user to continuously perform as a fan by liking more objects, thus defining themselves on their page in terms of these likes. What a user "likes" becomes part of the identity that they share with the rest of the platform; Facebook turns the act of "liking" something from private to public, to something that we formulate as part of the identity that we share with other people. "Liking" becomes an intrinsically social activity that locates the subject within a fan world.

The Facebook wall can be read as both a location, with its own URL address, and infrastructure. The term "wall" suggests a physical infrastructure that denotes the boundaries of a given entity such as a building or a nation. Like these walls, the Facebook wall operates as both a public and a private space—users can decide whether content posted on their wall is visible to

the public, only their friends list, or only themselves. Likewise, users can set whether others can post content to their walls. Nevertheless, the contents of the wall are always visible to the platform itself—and to the algorithms that collect posted data and sell it to marketers in order to generate profits. The wall can never truly be a private place that protects the user from the outside world.

However, the Facebook wall can operate as a space that users shape according to their posts, links, and likes. In this, the wall serves less as a solid boundary and more as a series of portals to other sites and locations that the user (and those the user allows to view their wall) defines through their actions moving through space/time. Just as de Certeau (1984) remarks that a pedestrian defines the space of a city block through their movements through space and time, Facebook users define the space of the wall through scrolling, clicks, and time spent viewing content. Both acts of posting content to other URL locations and clicking on this content form spatial connections between sites. In this, the Facebook wall can also serve as infrastructure to the fan world, a form of transportation that moves inhabitants of the world from one location to another. This also demonstrates how porous boundaries are in the fan world, as new linkages are continuously forming that contest previously established boundaries.

Facebook also directs users to "like" Pages that are related to their listed likes or have been liked by their friends. Liking a Page results in the Page being listed in your likes and in the Page's posts appearing on your newsfeed. These Pages may be run either by officially recognized corporations or organizations or by private Facebook users. Facebook marks Pages that have been confirmed as "authentic…for this public figure, media company, or brand" with a "blue badge" that appears as a checkmark within a circle ("What is a verified Page or profile"). Pages run by businesses and organizations confirmed as authentic by Facebook are marked with

a similar gray badge.

In terms of the fan world, this differentiation between Pages serves to divide "official" sources of content and information from those that are unofficial or fan-run. Official Pages tend to garner more likes; for example, the official Critical Role Page has over 140,000 likes, while the most-liked fan-run Page, Critical Role Fan Club, has only 2,300 likes. This supports assertions that fan spaces have been co-opted by corporate interests and can no longer be read in opposition to mainstream media forces. In terms of the fan world, this suggests that the topography of the world is not identical or flat—hierarchies exist as places with closer "official" ties to the fan object garner more popularity and support. These places have more power within the fan world because of their ability to shape fan discourse and disseminate knowledge to a wider audience, for, as Foucault (2007) asserts, knowledge is power. Although any fan may comment on posts on these Pages, the Pages' administrators can delete any comments they feel go against the Page's rules or values. Fans who do not support corporate or celebrity interests may find themselves silenced or even banned by the Page. The ability to speak and communicate with others is thus subject to the interests of those with more money and influence; power is concentrated in the hands of those who create or disseminate the fan object.

Nevertheless, there is a category of space on Facebook where fans maintain control—groups. Like Pages, groups on Facebook have their own URL address. Anyone can create a group and decide the rules and parameters for who else may join as long as they also adhere to Facebook's community guidelines. Groups on Facebook can be set to one of two privacy settings: public (anyone can see the group and what's posted in it) and private (anyone can find the group, but only members can see posts). The Critical Role Fan Club, the largest *Critical Role* group on Facebook, is a public group, while Fire Emblem is private. Unlike Pages, there is no

differentiation between official and unofficial groups. Groups are almost always fan-run spaces. The Critical Role Fan Club group has about 54,000 members—about half of the number of likes of the official Page, but still many more than the likes of any fan-run Pages ("Critical Role Fan Club"). Because fans control who can join and what can be posted on groups, they have greater autonomy in constructing the space. That is, it is fans who largely define how one can participate in and move through the group, thus transforming it into a "fan space."

Of course, the Facebook platform still controls the overarching logic of this space, both in terms of the community guidelines posters must follow and the technical limits of the platform. The group admin cannot, for instance, impose a rule that goes against Facebook's community guidelines or program the group so that music plays whenever a user clicks on it. Still, groups are more disconnected from a fan object's corporate structure than Pages since it is fan-administrators and moderators who have the power to delete comments and ban users. Groups can also impose additional rules in tandem with Facebook's community guidelines in order to shape the culture of their group. The Critical Role Fan Club on Facebook has ten additional rules that range from crediting artists from reposted fan art to banning discussion about the contentious departure of a previous cast member from the show ("About This Group" Critical Role). Who holds power over discourse in the group, then, is based upon who first formed the group, not who has the closest ties to the creators or distributers of a fan object nor who has the most Facebook friends or followers. Nevertheless, power is not evenly distributed among fans in these groups but held by those who can enforce group rules and promote or delete content.

Groups are thus reminiscent of fan-lead online forums that dominated online fan spaces before the rise of social media. Similar to these forums, the fans who maintain or frequently post in these groups often become well-known entities within the fan world, though this familiarity is

more pronounced in some places than in others. For example, the admins who run the Fire

Emblem Facebook group are well-known to many of the group's nearly 9,000 members, though

few fans outside of the group know who they are. They are similar to Big Name Fans (BNF)—

fans who, according to Zubernis and Larsen (2012), "seek to set themselves apart in fan

communities, earning privilege and status through amassing and controlling the flow of

information"—yet different in both the degree of their popularity and how they have attained

status (30). When I asked the group "who are some of the "big name fans" in the *Fire Emblem*

community?" on a post, the only group member who was tagged in the post (twice) was a fan

artist who, in addition to posting in the group, has her own Page on Facebook and Instagram. Of

the other 22 names mentioned in the replies, 18 are youtubers famous for streaming videogames

or posting reviews, two are fan artists, one is known for leaking content about the latest game

ahead of its release, and one I could not locate online. Interestingly, of those 22 names, I only

recognized three of them, demonstrating that the reach of even BNF is limited in the

decentralized nature of fan worlds.

Conversely, when I posted the question "who do you think are the most well-known

members in this Fire Emblem group?," only one person commented the name of a BNF while

also acknowledging that he is not very active in the group (as in, he rarely posts or responds to

content). The most commented name was a person known for his "late night threads" inviting

discussion on topics not related to *Fire Emblem* such as politics, religion, and other fandoms.

Other fans were identified as well-known due to the frequency of their posts and comments or

the magnitude of discussion that their posts generated.

This discrepancy illustrates how locations within a fan world act as unique spaces while

also remaining connected to other locations within the world. The Fire Emblem fan group

contains content, individuals, and information that is not found in other places in the *Fire Emblem* fan world. People can become "group famous" without this fame extending to other locations. Likewise, groups may operate under different rules and customs than other fan spaces, as demonstrated by my example in Chapter 1 of the difference in reception of queer content between *Fire Emblem* fan spaces on Facebook and Tumblr. Nevertheless, groups also provide infrastructure through which knowledge and content from other spaces can spread to new fans. By constructing fandom as a world, one can both identify the unique nature of a given space while also analyzing the relationship between spaces as devised by flows of information, content, and people. These flows can occur along horizontal vertices, moving across digital space from one fan to the next, or along vertical vertices, being imposed by those who control the platform or the "official" circulation of the fan object and are thus located closer to the object's center of gravity.

Accessibility

Nevertheless, even among fans, hierarchies of power and knowledge still exist in relation to access to fan content. For example, to join a private group on Facebook, users must answer simple questions about the fan object, such as identifying a simple fact about it or discussing one's personal relationship to the object in a few words. This serves to also limit the groups to members who at the least have basic knowledge of and/or a positive affective relationship with the fan object. So, the fan world is not a space without borders—to enter a certain place, you must demonstrate knowledge about the fan object. Still, the ease with which fans can access these spaces—simply entering a term into Facebook's search bar and then answering a basic question—serves to make the performance of fandom readily available to anyone with internet access.

Of course, internet access is not something readily available to everyone. Only about half of the world's population is considered "connected" to the internet, which the UN agency the International Telecommunications Union defines as getting online "at least once in the past three months" (Dreyfuss). Accessing the internet once every three months is certainly not enough to become embedded in online fandom, where content and information circulates, changes location, and evolves rapidly. Additionally, even those who can access the internet relatively frequently may experience a weak connection that cannot facilitate highly active platforms. To be able to access a high-quality connection, an individual must live in a location connected to the proper infrastructure as well as have the means available to pay for Wi-Fi or mobile plans. The affordability of an internet connection is tied to how much telecommunication companies charge their clients for access. According to the Web Foundation, a survey of 60 low- and middle-income countries found that only 24 offered affordable mobile plans (defined as costing less than 2 percent of the national average monthly income) (Dreyfuss). Like most of the world's resources, access to the internet is correlated with hierarchies of class, race, and gender. Men, white people, and those with high income are more likely to have access to a fast, stable connection.

Access to social media can also be influenced by racial and sexual hierarchies. According to Danah Boyd (2012), when Facebook first emerged as a competitor to MySpace as the dominant social media platform in 2006, whether an American teenager switched from using MySpace to Facebook was dependent upon their race and class, with white, affluent teenagers choosing Facebook (204). This occurred in part because of how Facebook formed as an "elite" social networking site, with access first open only to Harvard students before expanding to all Ivy League schools, then top-tier colleges, then finally all colleges (206-7). In 2005, Facebook

slowly began accepting high school students, though the validation process was complex, which resulted in mostly teens from wealthy schools or with close friends in college managing to join (207). Even when Facebook became accessible to the general public in 2006, the image of Facebook as a privileged, elite site continued to influence the site's demographics. For example, Boyd's study found that what words people used to describe Facebook and MySpace were often based in class or race stereotypes, with Facebook labeled clean, cool, and safe while MySpace was perceived as dirty, hypersexual, dangerous, and "ghetto."

Whether or not this image of Facebook persists today is debatable. Yet, Facebook's origins still effect how the site, and especially its groups, operates. Management of Facebook groups and Pages occur on a "first-come" basis, with the administrators and moderators of a particular group typically being whoever first created the group. This means that early adopters of Facebook, who tended to be college students, middle- or upper-class people, and Caucasians and Asians from North America, are more likely to administer a group. For example, the Fire Emblem group was created on July 22, 2006, before Facebook was even opened to the general public ("About This Group" Fire Emblem). Unsurprisingly, all six admins in the group are white, and only one is not male. Three of the admins reside in the United States, two in Canada, and one in Australia. Even in the Critical Role Fan Club, which was not formed until 2016, only one of the ten admins is not white (though seven are female) ("About This Group" Critical Role). These demographics may be influenced in part by which people a certain fan object is more likely to appeal to—it may be that more fans of *Critical Role* are white or more fans of *Fire Emblem* are male. In the case of *Fire Emblem*, however, there is ample evidence that white people do not make up the majority of fans of the series—the series is significantly more popular in Japan, its country of origin, and only recently has begun to achieve popularity outside of Asia. The fact

that the most dominant *Fire Emblem* group on Facebook is an English-language group administered solely by white people implies that, on Facebook at least, fan groups are more likely to be curated and controlled by white people from "the West" regardless of the origin of the fan object or the demographics of its fans. In these situations, white people control what discourse is or is not acceptable in the group as well as how or what knowledge is disseminated, thus situating white people at the top of the fan group's hierarchy.

Other studies have likewise shown that fan spaces and discourse is often dominated by white, Eurocentric interests, and that, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, fan studies is often complicit in upholding this hierarchy. Every fan, fan practice, and fan space can be located in the fan world, but that does not mean that all inhabit a similar, equally influential position. The fan world can be mapped in ways that express this inequality of access and power. Spaces that have closer ties to the fan object, such as official Pages on Facebook, are located closer to the object's gravitational pull at the center of the world, and thus have a stronger gravitational pull of their own. As shown above, these Pages garner more traffic and have more influence in shaping the discourse of the fandom. Other spaces may be better developed as unique spaces because they attract more active visitors who, through their movements through time and space, construct a more visible and thus influential fan space. More popular spaces tend to become so by appealing to more dominant or socially acceptable tastes, or by operating in a language that more people understand. On Facebook, it is typically educated, white, Anglophone tastes that are promoted and shape the dominant discourse in fan spaces.

It is important to remember, however, that the fan world is broad enough that power may operate in different ways in different spaces, just as different spaces produce different sets of cultural norms. For example, the Japanese artist-centered platform pixiv is one of the most

popular spaces for fan art online. As of 2018, pixiv has more than 30 million registered users and 75.5 million uploaded works (Ressler). Approximately 53% of the user base is from Japan, while others come from China (18%), Taiwan (6.2%), the United States (4.9%), South Korea (4.8%), and elsewhere (Ressler). Pixiv contains 44,427 illustrations and manga tagged under "Fire Emblem" along with 13,435 novels as of November 10th, 2019. In comparison, Archive of Our Own contained 26,429 fan works in the category "Fire Emblem" on the same date, of which less than 300 are published in a language other than English, while DeviantArt listed 114,200 posts (called deviations) under the search time "Fire Emblem", most of which are fan art and cosplay photos. This comparison highlights the dominance of English fan media online, even in fandoms that originated outside of the Anglo world, while also demonstrating that non-English spaces can still attract significant traffic in the fan world. English dominance may exist, but it is not totalitarian in nature.

It is interesting to note how pixiv labels fan creations—instead of fan art and fanfiction, fan works are called illustrations and novels, which serves to upend the binary between "fan" and "official" works. There is no marked difference between fan and non-fan art illustrations and novels on the platform. This is unsurprising given Japan's more lenient culture concerning fan materials—for example, amateur manga artists and authors can publish and make money off of fan manga and fiction, known as *dōjinshi*, due to a combination of more lax copyright laws compared to the west and a reluctance to pursue legal cases against fan creators by professional artists and authors due to the popularity and acceptability of such works. Under Japanese copyright law, "a copyright holder needs to claim the infringement of his/her copyright for a court to recognize[sic] the violation in fan art," so the copyright belongs to the fan creator "until the original copyright holder claim[s] copyright infringement" (Watabe and Abe). In the manga

and light novel industry, most original creators will not pursue potential copyright violations due to the ubiquity of fan art as well as the fact that it is not uncommon for fan artists to eventually become professional mangaka and authors. Fan materials are viewed as a part of the media economy that makes the media object more accessible and visible without detracting much from the income of the original publishers. Fan spaces located in Japan or on Japanese-language platforms are influenced by this different cultural logic that is based on legal and economic factors, demonstrating how social and economic influences from countries or cultures outside of the white Anglophone sphere can shape unique fan spaces and practices.

In turn, the dissemination of fan materials from these platforms onto Anglo-dominated platforms influences the cultural logics of the Anglophone platforms and their fan spaces. Fan art from pixiv is often shared on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. Japanese fanfiction tropes, such as the hanahaki disease[3], have become popular on English-language sites—when searching the tag "hanahaki disease" on Archive of Our Own on November 14, 2019, I found 4,387 results. Japanese words and phrases such as *nakama* (close companion) and "notice me *senpai*" are commonly used in fandom discourse and have "take[n] on fresh significance almost independent of their Japanese origins" (Morimoto and Chin 2017, 178). These transcultural effects can be found in fandoms whose fan object did not originate in Japan, such as the video game *Undertale* or American cartoon *Invader Zim*.

Nonetheless, Facebook is still situated in a hierarchical position on the internet compared to other platforms through both discourse (such as that discussed by Boyd that positioned the "clean, safe" Facebook over the "ghetto" MySpace) and infrastructure, and as such, flows of power between Facebook and other platforms, while multidirectional, typically locate Facebook

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[3] Hanahaki disease is a fictional trope wherein a character coughs up flower petals because they suffer from one-sided love. The disease is either cured when the affection is reciprocated or proves fatal.

in the more dominant position. As stated in Chapter 2, users can use their Facebook account to sign up for other sites, including pixiv. One significant way in which Facebook shapes other internet platforms, and thus the internet milieu at large, is through the erasure of anonymity by connectivity.

Anonymity

Facebook, working in tandem with other social media platforms, erases much of the anonymity that existed within online fandoms when they operated largely on forums. On these forums, fans rarely had to provide any personal information except to affirm that they were over the age limit set on the site (which I can attest from personal experience is easily lied about.) Here, fans could create their own identity wholly separate from their private life if desired. As a personal example, from January 2010 to July 2012, I became involved in the Pokemon shipping community under the name EeveeTree. I gained a small following and became relatively well-known among the subset of this community active on DeviantArt. As of August 2019, I still have 112 watchers on my page, meaning 112 people will be alerted if I post another piece, and my page has been viewed about 25,300 times. As Eeveetree, I created an identity as a friendly community member with strong interests in romance, anime, YA literature, and red pandas. Yet, the only personal information found on my page is my country of origin and my birthday. I made "friends" on DeviantArt that wished me happy birthday and checked up on me when I had been absent from the website for a while that knew very little about my personal life. Despite—or perhaps because of—this anonymity, I felt closer to this community than I did to those I belonged to offline; on DeviantArt, I had the freedom to express my interests and desires while avoiding anxiety over my age, appearance, and background.

On Facebook, this anonymity is much more difficult to achieve. Facebook requires that

users "use the same name that [they] use in everyday life" and "provide accurate information about [themselves]" ("Terms of Service"). Accounts that are caught using inaccurate information are suspended. Although some personal information can be marked as private, one's name and profile picture are available to the general public. Thus, on Facebook, one's performance as a fan is inextricably tied to other identities such as one's gender, race, and religion. On the Fire Emblem community, my fellow fans know my name and appearance and can easily look up my location, relationship status, political and religious beliefs, and other interests. Likewise, friends from my offline life can easily look up what fan groups I am a member of on Facebook.

Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 2, because social media emphasizes inter-platform connectivity, it is easy for someone's account on another site to be traced back to their Facebook, even when such information is not readily publicly available. So, even if someone goes by a pseudonym on Twitter or Tumblr, it is not difficult for others to trace this pseudonym to the person's actual name and thus be able to uncover other personal details such as their workplace and home address. This has contributed to the practice of doxing, wherein internet users uncover and publish the private information of another user, typically for malicious purposes. Doxing has typically been related to political activism, with activists or trolls on the left and right respectively taking turns outing their political adversaries in order to target them for harassment and even violence. Doxing has also increasingly become a part of life in the fan world as fans dox people they view as threats to the fandom, whether these people are perceived as outsiders or fellow fans. An obvious example of this within the past few years is Gamergate. What began as a conflict over the value of the video game *Depression Quest* and the supposed romantic infidelity of its creator, Zoe Quinn, quickly became an internet-wide battle between reactionary, predominantly male fans of video games and feminist fans of all genders over the treatment of

women in gaming communities (Hathaway). Many women at the heart of the Gamergate debate
were targeted by online harassers who posted their private information including phone numbers
and home addresses, which lead to rape and death threats. Quinn describes how she was doxed
using connected social media accounts:

> I had synced my [Tumblr] blog with my Twitter account to automatically tweet a
> link anytime I posted there. That night, it worked as an open back door. A single
> insecure password on one site I barely used was all that it took to inflict maximum
> damage… Whoever had broken into my Tumblr also figured out that it had the
> same password as an eBay account that I'd used once to buy a pair of boots and
> forgotten about. The credit card tied to it was mercifully out of date, but the
> shipping address I'd given the seller wasn't. The hackers weren't just posting calls
> for me to die or talking about what a fat slut I was; they were sharing my personal
> information: my old address in Canada, cell-phone numbers from a few years
> back, my current cell-phone number and my current home address. They had
> edited the post in which I'd talked about standing my ground and not negotiating
> with online terrorists and replaced it with information showing that they knew
> where I was and where my family lived (Quinn).

Because social media encourages (and at times even requires) personal
identification as well as the syncing of accounts on different platforms, this kind of
hacking and doxing is easy. This demonstrates that fan identities can never be truly
separated from the other identities we perform in our daily lives, nor can the fan world be
separated from day-to-day concerns of economic accumulation, social bonding, or political
organizing. Rather, the fan world is deeply embedded in all aspects of daily living in society.

This can be illustrated by both the victims and instigators of doxing attacks like the ones directed at Quinn. Online video game fans felt they had the right to dox and harass Quinn and other feminist gamers because they viewed their critiques of misogyny in videogames as personal attacks on not only their objects of desire but also their very identities as gamers. As explained by Reinhard (2018), when fans choose to self-identify as fans, they "willingly become identified with the thing they love," and because of that, a critique on that thing is often interpreted as an attack on the self (82-3). When "[f]ans identify with their object of affection…evaluations of good/bad attached to the object become internalized as reflecting on the fan. Internalizing the criticism others have for the object can result in defensiveness and lashing out" (83). Furthermore, fans who are used to holding a powerful position in the fandom because of their race, gender, or class are likely to lash out when they feel that power is being contested by others. Their "fan identity becomes conflated with gendered, sexual, and racial identities, allowing for [them], who sees themselves as the true fan, to see women, people of color, and the non-heteronormative as 'fake' fans" (78). Thus, gamers who conflated their identity as fans of videogames with their identity as (typically straight and white) men lashed out when they perceived "fake" fans who did not match their gendered identity as critiquing their object of fandom and attempting to gain power to shape discourse about the object.

Because of social media, it is easy for the race, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality of fans to be identified and conflated with their fan identity, thus leading to these sites of confrontation along lines of identity politics. In fact, in making visible/legible a user's multiple identities, social media aims to deconstruct the boundaries between different identities and form an image of a cohesive single "self." For example, when I perform as a fan on Facebook by commenting in the Fire Emblem group, I am also visibly performing as a white woman due to

my profile picture. By clicking on my public profile, a fellow user can also learn my level of education, my current city of residence, and my hometown. Thus, when I post on Facebook, I am simultaneously performing each of these identities. Additionally, as Facebook collects more information about me through my posts and likes, its algorithms form a more cohesive identity of my "self" in accordance with how I perform. Facebook constructs a self that is a consummation of all my performed identities.

Economy

Along with fans' identities, Facebook also renders visible the two primary economies that structure the fan world—the gift economy and market capitalism. As discussed in Chapter 2, social media sites like Facebook generate profits using ad targeting. Fan practices are an integral part of this system as Facebook's algorithms gather information to sell to marketers based on what users like, post, and share. So, when a fan likes a Page about a given fan object and/or shares posts about that object, the algorithms take note of this and display ads on the user's page that relate to this object. For example, because I have liked several Pages about anime and occasionally post show recommendations, I receive ads on Facebook that advertise websites and products related to anime. Facebook promotes common fan practices such as liking, content creation, and content sharing and supports fan Pages and groups on its platform because such activities and spaces allow for more data collection and thus better ad targeting. Facebook uses fan practices to collect information on fans, sell that information to companies, and advertise products. In this, Facebook explicitly constructs fans as potential consumers who, through their fan practices, keep the online market economy running.

However, how fans create and circulate content with one another on social media is more reminiscent of gift economies. Most fan works such as fanfiction and art are posted online and

circulated freely among fellow fans. These authors and artists labor not to make a profit, but to build connections with one another. Fan theorists have drawn from anthropologist Marcel Mauss' work on gift giving in "archaic societies" in order to describe the socially complex forms acts of giving, receiving, and reciprocation take in this economy (Hellekson 2009). According to theorists such as Hellekson (2009), fans exchange the fruits of their labor as gifts in order to construct social relationships and symbolic value—"[t]he gifts have value within the fannish economy in that they are designed to create and cement a social structure, but they themselves are not meaningful outside their context" (115). The exchanged gifts serve to connect fans with one another through a shared "metatext" surrounding the original text that adds value to the text (115). That is, through creating and circulating fan works, fans co-construct the fan world surrounding the fan object through connecting new spaces, activities, and works to the object's metatextual world. This in turn builds social relationships between fans and other fans, fans and fan works, and fans and the original fan object through the sharing of affect. Put simply, fans create and circulate texts because they want to share their affective responses with one another, and, in doing so, they also change the feelings that fans experience towards the original fan object.

To better analyze this gift economy, I decided to ask a series of questions to fan creators from the Fire Emblem group. I posted in the group asking for volunteers to answer a few questions about their experience creating fan works. I sent the following questions to those who responded to my post:

1. Why did you decide to create and share fan works?
2. Have you developed any positive social relationships with fellow fans as a result of sharing fan works?

3. Has creating fan works changed your own relationship with *Fire Emblem*? For example, has it changed how you feel or think about something in the series?

4. Has creating fan work had an overall positive impact on your life?

I received responses to my questions from three individuals: Ronaldo[4], Andrew, and Anthony. Ronaldo has made podcasts with other fans sharing their thoughts about *Fire Emblem* games; Andrew posts let's play videos on YouTube; and Anthony has created a communal *Fire Emblem* fanfiction he calls "poll story" wherein he wrote a story based on common plot elements from *Fire Emblem* games and allowed fellow fans to vote on how the story should proceed.

In answer to the first question, both Ronaldo and Andrew expressed that creating and sharing fan works fulfilled a personal desire to express themselves and share their thoughts or talents. Ronaldo specified that he also enjoyed "hearing other people's thoughts"—for him, podcasting is a way to communicate with fellow fans, including those who may think differently. Anthony also was interested in communicating with others as well as explicitly in building community—he created poll story to draw more traffic to a new *Fire Emblem* Facebook group. However, Anthony felt that his poll story was unsuccessful overall; in response to question two, he noted that he felt his polls were largely ignored except by people he was already friends with. Ronaldo, on the other hand, did build closer friendships with the people he podcasted with, whom he had met through the *Fire Emblem* fandom. He said that podcasting helped people in the fandom understand him better. He specifically mentioned how he thinks "the internet makes social cues ambiguous," which makes it more difficult for people to understand one another; podcasting was a way to overcome this ambiguity and reach better understanding. Like Anthony, Andrew didn't feel that he made positive social relationships through his fan works, but he has through other

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[4] I asked permission of each individual to use their given name on Facebook.

people's works in the fandom—some of his closest friends are artists he met through *Fire Emblem*. However, making videos did change his relationship to *Fire Emblem*—it "reignited" his love for the series because it made him reevaluate stories and characters as he played the games for an audience and discover new things about the series. Ronaldo also says that making podcasts "forced [him] to think more critically [and] reflect about things about the series" and that the time investment he has put into the series because of his fan work has made it more special to him. Anthony expressed that making poll story likewise lead him to think more about character motivations in the series and how he could recreate similar characters in his stories. Finally, in response to the final question, all three answers with various degrees of yes, creating fan work has had a positive impact on their life. For Ronaldo, it has had a positive impact on his social life as it has allowed him to bond with more people and have a more enjoyable experience in the fandom. Andrew noticed a positive impact on his personal life, as he feels more personal confidence. He also thinks becoming more immersed in *Fire Emblem* has improved his game writing skills and given him more ideas for characters. Anthony's response was the least enthusiastic of the three—though he initially answered, "I guess it did," he added the caveat that the fact that his content was mostly met with silence put him down.

Though the experiences of these three fans differed, they all support the claim that fans create and share fan works in order to form social bonds with one another and with their fan objects. Their fan works were created and circulated as part of the gift economy, wherein the works were exchanged not for monetary gain but social and personal value. Yet, an expectation of reciprocation still exists—Anthony was clearly disappointed when he did not receive social recognition in response to his fan creation. Fans who create and share fan works do expect something in return, typically in the form of positive social relationships or personal growth.

Still, regardless of response, all three demonstrated that creating fan works changes the relationship between the fan and the fan object, typically in a way that reinforces positive affective ties. This, in turn, may shift how they experience the fan world, whether due to renewed love of the series or better communication with fellow fans. Thus, the circulation of fan content through gift economies is a vital adhesive that connects fans to one another and to the fan object and strengthens the bonds between the two.

The relationship between the two economies that structure the fan world—market and gift—is complex. The market structure of platforms such as Facebook assists in the circulation of content and the sale of fan goods from official sources. Meanwhile, the creation and sharing of fan content as gifts provides Facebook and other social media platforms with the data they need to churn a profit. In this, both economies support one another's goals. For most individual fans, their fan activities involve both economies—they create and share free content, but also purchase goods and services in order to access other content and official fan goods. I pay for a subscription to *Critical Role's* Twitch channel so that I can watch extra content and access shows after they have already aired; I also have purchased official merchandise as gifts for friends. I spend money to access conventions such as Denver Pop Culture Con so that I can then buy fan art or official autographs. It is important to note that the "unofficial" fan art produced at these conventions involves an economy that fits the definition of neither a capitalist market nor a gift; though these fans are paid for their labor, their goal in producing such works is not the accruement of financial capital. They are paid directly for goods and services that they produce with their own labor, and this money is typically used to offset the costs of travel and materials or cover the producer-fan's basic needs, not to generate further capital. Nevertheless, all these activities, whether embedded in gift or market economies or something in-between, build social

connections among members of the fandom as well as deeper affective relationships between the fan and the fan object. Thus, market and gift economies are often intertwined instead of binarily opposing structures in the fan world. While theorists such as Coppa (2014) may bemoan the exploitation of gift economies by market ones as discussed in Chapter 1, the reality is that both economies are needed to structure the fan world, and neither can be entirely separated from the other.

Yet, once again, these economies do not produce an egalitarian space free from hierarchies and inequality. Corporations gain capital and power through their activities in the fan world. Issues of accessibility and anonymity effect who can participate in what economies and how their participation affects their livelihood. People with different expectations about fan labor, value, and ethics converge in the fan world. The fan world is a space where people and content from different backgrounds meet, conflict, and sometimes combine in new ways. The fan world is, in fact, a contact zone.

Chapter 4: Fandom Worlds as Transcultural Contact Zones

The contact zone, first proposed by Mary Louise Pratt (1991), is a way of theorizing spaces where different cultures converge. Pratt defines these zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (34). Pratt contrasts contact zones to imagined communities, a concept laid out by Benedict Anderson (1983) in which "human communities exist as *imagined* entities in which people 'will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'" (Pratt 1991: 37). Imagined communities are defined by finite boundaries, sovereign (self-governed and autonomous), and fraternal because they are "always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1983: 7). Contact zones, on the other hand, necessitate antagonistic relationships, fluidity of cultural and political borders, and limits of sovereignty in a world which contains various and clashing actors, spaces, and structures of power.

Although Anderson is specifically focused on nation-states and political communities in his analysis, it has been used to conceptualize language communities (as Pratt discusses) as well as fandoms. As Morimoto and Chin (2017) discuss, "[a] central truism of English-language media fan studies is that modern fandoms are 'imagined communities' fostered by technologies that enable geographically dispersed people to overcome time and distance in forging virtual communities of affect" (174). Imagined fan communities supposedly overcome transnational differences, "increasing a sense of simultaneous, shared popular culture experience" (174). The problem with this imagining is it "lose[s] sight of the disparities and disjunctures that may characterize cultural interactions within fandoms" and ultimately causes "marginalized and peripheralized voices and perspectives [to be] effectively silenced" (174-75). I agree with this

critique of imagining fandom as a "community" as it ignores how fan spaces are shaped by hierarchies of power and knowledge, often in accordance with similar hierarchies that exist in the social world. Fandoms are not defined by finite boundaries, autonomy, or horizonal comradeship; they are fluid and capable of connecting separate locations under the same space, embedded in networks that impose their own rules and cultures, and contain their own hierarchies based on demographic factors or perceived closeness to the fan object. Fandoms are more similar to the contact zone—spaces where people from different backgrounds and cultures meet, clash, and grapple with their differing identities and experiences.

I am joined in this assertion by both Jenkins (2014) and Morimoto and Chin (2017), the latter of whom analyze how online fandoms grapple with issues of race and nationality in their essay "Reimagining the Imagined Community: Online Media Fandoms in the Age of Global Convergence." In this essay, Morimoto and Chin discuss how when people express their discomfort with how certain dominant voices and discourses marginalize their experiences within the fandom, they are often "met with variations on the familiar refrain of how 'toxic' fandom has become, and exhortations (even demands) to be 'civil,' 'moderate,' or 'nice' as part and parcel of how 'the fandom' should behave" (184). I have seen similar responses occur on Facebook during moments of conflict in fandom. These responses occur because dissent is seen as disrupting the shared experience and comradery of the fandom—like fan theorists, many fans have adopted an idealized view of fandom as a homogenous community, and when that view is challenged, they feel threatened. As such, constructing fandom as a community inherently silences marginalized voices because fan studies has defined and propagated community in terms of harmonious, family-like bonds.

Facebook, I contend, also operates as a contact zone. Facebook is typically constructed

by theorists and layfolk alike as a narrow zone wherein users interact solely with their friends and like-minded people—numerous articles exist decrying how Facebook limits our worldview by only showing us content that confirms our viewpoints and connecting us with people that we know, who more likely than not share our same nationality, race, or social class. Also, like fandom, Facebook imagines itself as an imagined community that "brings the world closer together," a line that explicitly delimits space and attempts to close the world into a defined area ("FAQS"). Facebook aims to promote feelings of fraternity by labeling connections as "friends," suggesting a close personal bond. Although Facebook acknowledges that debates and disagreements occur, the platform promotes an image of debate as a healthy, democratic process wherein the world draws closer together, thus becoming more homogenous and fraternal.

On groups and Pages, however, we interact with people who are not on our friend list and do not share our same demographic backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences. Like in other fandom spaces, the debates that emerge from these interactions are not always friendly nor do they necessarily result in agreement or understanding. However, Facebook makes the differences between fans more visible which, I argue, can lead to more acknowledgement of difference and the ability to engage in discussion about such differences. As evidence, I wish to discuss two separate encounters I have witnessed and contributed to on the Critical Role Fan Club and Fire Emblem groups on Facebook.

Critical Role

On October 3, 2019, the *Critical Role* channel on Twitch aired a special one-shot tabletop game partnering with Wendy's. Wendy's had approached the *Critical Role* team for this partnership in order to promote their new tabletop game, Feast of Legends. Feast of Legends is a

parody tabletop game heavily based off Dungeons & Dragons that has players create characters associated with Wendy's menu items (such as the Baconator and Frosty) and use these characters to defend the land of Freshtovia from their frozen enemies (Feast of Legends). The game basically works as an advertisement for Wendy's food and their supposed "freshness" over their fast food competitors; eating Wendy's food while performing attacks and other feats in the game will even give you a better chance of succeeding. The *Critical Role* Wendy's one-shot similarly worked as an advertisement for the company as the players promoted the game and ate Wendy's food on screen. Many fans, however, took issue with the partnership, especially given Wendy's refusal to join the Fair Food Program and agree

Official art from Feast of Legends
https://www.enworld.org/threads/wendy%E2%80%99s-presents-feast-of-legends-a-late-night-review.667780/

to purchase their tomatoes from farms that don't use slave labor as well as the CEO's support of Trump (Scheiber). Other fans were frustrated with the cast promoting a corporate tabletop RPG (TTRPG) after promising to promote more independent TTRPG creators. The backlash ranged from attempts to educate the cast and fellow fans through sharing information and articles to accusing the cast of being stupid, classist, and contributing directly to Donald Trump's re-election campaign[5]. Many of the fans involved in the backlash identified as queer and/or people

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[5] The entire cast has been openly (and often emotionally) opposed to Trump and his policies both on social media and occasionally on the show itself. Although relatively financially successful thanks to the show, several of the cast members have struggled economically in the past. Additionally, several cast members are members of groups

of color. In response, cast member Matthew Mercer posted an apology on Twitter the next day, the recording of the one-shot was taken down, and all the money earned from it was donated to the United Farm Workers. Most, though not all, fans were satisfied with this response and with the cast promising to vet sponsors more thoroughly in the future.

On the Critical Role Fan Club group, however, a backlash against the backlash quickly brewed. Many fans were angry at other fans for getting offended and supposedly "forcing" the cast to give up their earnings. Comments complaining about the backlash have continued to the present. For example, on a post on October 13 about a fan's character dying in their own Dungeons & Dragons campaign, an argument about the proper character level to battle a kraken turned into a commentary on fans getting too passionate, with one fan, Mitchell, stating:

> The one thing I've learnt is that critters get very passionate way too quickly and it always leaves someone upset. Like insanely passionate they start even attacking the cast themselves. Like holy shit these guys took money from Wendys and got so scared from the abuse they got that they donated the money. Critters didn't even attack Wendys they attacked internally at their own love! It's good to see that taking a step back you guys saw each others differences 👍 [sic]

Valid concerns (that occasionally delved into personal attacks on the cast) about the one-shot's support of a harmful corporation were interpreted by this fan and others (the comment received three likes, and I have seen similar comments appear in the group) as an attack and "abuse." Concerns about labor rights, homophobia, and racism are characterized here as an overabundance of passion. This demonstrates one of the dangers of the contact zone—the possibility for mistranslation as fans from different political and economic backgrounds try to

targeted by the Trump administration—Taliesin Jaffe is bisexual, Sam Riegel is Jewish, three of the regular cast are women, and many recurring guest stars and crew members are also people of color, women, and/or LGBT.

share their beliefs and concerns and are instead mistaken as overly emotional, violent, and even abusive. It also demonstrates how easily assumptions are made to support those in power—here, the commenter is assuming that it is the cast who are victims of backlash that left them afraid rather than unconscious perpetrators who, when they realized their mistake, made restitution. In this commenter's narrative, completely unbacked by any statement from the cast, the cast are victims acted upon instead of actors who made their own decisions in response to the consequences of their actions. Under this narrative, it is easy to justify getting angry at and hurling verbal abuse at fans who supported the backlash, since they are constructed as violent bullies who hurt the victimized cast members.

Fan response to the backlash also supported Morimoto and Chin's (2017) observations that marginalized and politicized fans are often told to be civil and nice, and their complaints are bemoaned as a symptom of the toxicity of the community. On November 5, when *Critical Role* announced that their Kickstarter-backed animated series had been picked up by Amazon, fans commented worrying about a backlash due to Amazon's dubious business practices. Fans who had complained about the Wendy's one-shot were called "hypocrites" and "haters" in the resulting discussion. One fan, Richard, commented that "[p]eople need to keep their issues to themselves when it comes to content creators," while another, Arturo, told fans that they need to "just [be] an adult and accept that the world is not black and white as it looks from behind a twitter account…". Martin even expressed anger at those who only sought to educate the *Critical Role* cast about Wendy's practices, commenting

> the fact that people even think they NEED to educate the cast is whats pissing me off tbh. enjoy the content or dont, but dont try to sit on a high horse and tell them what they can and cannot do [sic]

Eventually an admin shut down the conversation and deleted comments that she decided went "too far," which were almost all comments that supported fans who were upset about Wendy's. Meanwhile, the above comments remained. It is interesting to note that all the fans commenting on this thread were men, although the admin was a woman. The commenters were not uniformly white. It would seem that men, regardless of race or nationality, were more likely to express strong emotions against the Wendy's backlash.

A common thread seen in the comments opposed to the backlash is that they are defensive of the cast as well as opposed to fan criticism at large. The defensiveness makes sense both in terms of typical fan response to criticism as personal (as discussed in Chapter 3) and because of the visibility and vulnerability of the specific cast. The cast members of *Critical Role* are very supportive of fans and fan content—they show fan art on every video stream (with artist permission), arrange with fan artists to sell their work in the official merchandise store, interact with fans on social media, and frequently travel to fan conventions to sign autographs, take pictures, and hold talks. They also openly discuss their past and present struggles, relationships with one another, and hopes for the future. Basically, they seem more like a group of friends who fans have been invited to join than a group of professional actors, and as such, it is unsurprising that fans would get defensive of them. They are, put simply, fellow travelers in the fan world who likewise help shape it and engage with other members of it as they visit fan spaces and even transform corporate spaces into shared fan space. *Critical Role* would seem to upend the vertical hierarchies between corporation/fan object and fan.

However, it is clear that such actions on the part of the cast mask the hierarchies that still exist and that, in the absence of corporate policing, are instead policed heavily by fans themselves. In the aftermath of the Wendy's backlash, many fans claimed that it was wrong to

criticize, express frustration with, or even attempt to educate the cast. Meanwhile, criticism, frustration with, and attempts to educate fellow fans abounded! Policing fellow fans was seen as vital to the survival of the community, while any attempts to police the cast were shut down as wrong and emblematic of an individual's immaturity, hypocrisy, and pride. In this, fans emphatically reinstated the hierarchy between cast and fan that had been jeopardized by both the actions of the cast (promoting fan space, listening to and changing due to fan criticism) and the actions of "wayward" fans (criticizing the cast, defending those who criticized). This vertical hierarchy is clearly important to many fans, who wish to minimalize conflict in the contact zone wherein both cast members and fans interact and clash. Yet, by attempting to minimalize this conflict, fans silence dissenting voices and try to construct the inhabitants of the fan world as a homogenous community. Many fans are not ready to accept the dangers of the contact zone and the intricacies of the fan world beyond their own limited view of what fandom "should be."

Fire Emblem

However, even when conflicts occur, understanding and empathy can emerge as a result. I followed one such conflict and its aftermath from 2016-2018 on the Fire Emblem Facebook group. This conflict took place over multiple posts and involved multiple members of the group as well as issues of homophobia and racism. The conflict centered around a teenage male fan from Iraq, Aaron,[6] who openly professed hatred of the only queer male character in the game *Fire Emblem Fates*, Niles. Aaron began a discussion on the group in 2016 that asked which characters everyone had married in their playthrough(s) of *Fates.*[7] Whenever anyone commented

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[6] Names have been changed to respect the privacy of individuals involved, since the Fire Emblem group's membership list and all posts are private. I did not black out my own name (Meli Taylor), as I feel it is important for me to be honest about my own participation in the events.

[7] In the three most recent *Fire Emblem* titles, *Awakening*, *Fates*, and *Three Houses*, players design their own customizable avatar in-game who stands in as the main character. This avatar can marry other characters in the game.

that they had married Niles, Aaron responded with distaste. Finally, the following interaction

occurred:

The conversation continued to get more heated as fans accused Aaron of homophobia, which he

did not dispute. Eventually, a fan not pictured above claimed that Aaron belonged to a

"degenerate culture," and Aaron claimed that the fans on the group had made him hate gay

people. At this point, two admins for the group stepped in, told everyone to calm down, and

further warned Aaron that he would be removed from the group if he repeated some his

homophobic comments. One admin stated the following to defuse the situation:

> Whatever issue you have with gay people is your own burden to bear, but you have
>
> literally zero privilege to give people shit for it. As for everyone else, take a chill pill too,

please. I know it can be infuriating to see people who don't understand. But if you grew

up surrounded by the belief that certain things are just wrong, I don't expect people on

the internet are going to change such a deep rooted view. [sic]

These comments once again reveal how emotionally charged it can become when people

from different backgrounds and with different beliefs engage within the same space. This

interaction included both identified homophobic microaggressions as well as racist ones that

went largely unremarked upon by other fans, such as "ethnic booty" and "degenerate culture." In

fact, the only person who publicly took issue with the phrase "degenerate culture" was me; even

the admins did not take public action against the clearly racist and Islamophobic statement.

Because Aaron was a Muslim from Iraq, fellow fans assumed that his homophobia must be due

to his cultural background, despite the fact that Aaron claimed that he hadn't disliked gay people

until he began interacting with some on the Fire Emblem group. Even the admin, who made a

concerted effort to empathize with Aaron and offered to talk with him about his own views of

same-sex marriage in private on a separate message, jumped to the conclusion that Aaron's

views against LGBT people had developed because of where he grew up. The interaction ended

with fans on both sides feeling uncomfortable and unsafe as contact between individuals of

different sexual orientations, nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, and religions turned into conflict.

The conflict continued past this comment thread as a few fans took it upon themselves to

troll Aaron about his hatred of Niles whenever the character came up in conversation. This came

to a head when, on a different Fire Emblem group, a fan with the same name was harassed and

doxed and his supposed homophobic behavior online reported to his high school, which

reportedly threatened his ability to graduate. Once word of the events reached the main Fire

Emblem group, many fans were confused as to which fan had been doxed and whether the

doxing had originally meant to attack Aaron instead of the other fan with his same name. Several conversations began about Aaron's past homophobia, and one fan accused him of also hating Jews due to his nationality. Soon after, another fan posted a comment thread wanting Aaron to be kicked off the group which attracted many supporters until an admin deleted the post. Aaron became openly discouraged by these posts, while admins threatened that any member found harassing him would be in violation of the group's rules.

Despite this hostility, however, the conflict eventually died down and ended in Aaron apologizing for his past behavior both publicly and privately. In 2018, Aaron sent me a message apologizing for his comments and thanking me for helping him change. He also became friends with several LGBT members in the group who taught him empathy and understanding. Likewise, when Aaron brought up his Islamic faith in 2018 in a conversation about religion, fellow group members responded positively. In this, we see the possibilities for change that arise from the contact zone—by meeting and clashing with people from other backgrounds and cultures that share similar interests, individuals may come to abandon their old prejudices and become more empathetic. Because fan worlds act as contact zones, they are worlds in which those who may never have the chance to meet in a physical location are able to interact with one another and inhabit and shape the same spaces. Interactions between these individuals shape not only the fan space, but also each other as they challenge each other's' previously held beliefs and prejudices.

Conclusion

As Pratt (1991) asserts, contact zones are spaces of confusion and conflict wherein everyone's beliefs and senses of self are challenged and threatened. This can result in the reification of hierarchical structures and the attempted silencing of those from minority groups, as demonstrated by the aftermath of the Wendy's backlash in the Critical Role Fan Club.

However, this can also result in education about differences, overcoming of prejudices, and empathy building as people come to understand that their own views and experiences are not shared by everyone. Fan spaces allow for these positive developments when they act as contact zones wherein individuals from different backgrounds are allowed to interact and express their differences. It is important to note that in the Fire Emblem group fans were only able to change their opinions and beliefs because conflicts were allowed in the group. While the admins of the Critical Role Fan Club group deleted comments about the Wendy's backlash before fans even had the change to debate with one another, the Fire Emblem admins allowed debates to happen as long as they didn't devolve into personal attacks or hate speech. This may have caused more conflict in the short-term, but in the long-term this led to a satisfying resolution for most parties involved as they grew to appreciate each other's differences and abandon (at least some of) their homophobic and racist prejudices.

I posit that viewing fandoms as worlds that include contact zones is both more accurate and more helpful for minority fans than constructing them as communities. Fan worlds allow for spaces of conflict and communication as well as separate "safe houses," defined by Pratt (1991) as "social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogenous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression" (40). These safe houses are important locations for minority groups where they can retreat from the stress of constant conflict and oppression. Within the *Fire Emblem* fan world, I built my own "safe house" when, in 2018, two other fans and I formed a separate Facebook and Facebook messenger group for female members of the group. This group, though not free of conflict, served as a space where women in the fan group could talk about the sexism they faced in the group as well as topics deemed "too

feminine" by the fan group at large. I still communicate frequently with three members of this original group chat; they are an integral part of my experience in the *Fire Emblem* fan world. Thus, in the *Fire Emblem* fan world, I am able to move back and forth between contact zones and safe houses, to communicate and conflict with and be shaped by fans who are different from me while also inhabiting spaces wherein I do not have to worry about power differences and institutional sexism.

Fan worlds explicitly allow for the creation of these disparate spaces as well as the movement between them while still inhabiting the same world centering around the fan object. While communities are visualized as homogenous and topographically horizontal, worlds are heterogenous entities that include vertical topographies, contested borders, and heterogenous spaces and inhabitants. Fan worlds map hierarchies of power, heterogenous contact zones, and safe spaces for minority groups. By constructing fandom as a world instead of a community, we open fandom to include a variety of spaces and voices; thus, imaging fandom as a world instead of a community bridges the gaps that emerge within transcultural, virtual fandoms and invites minority groups to map their own spaces.

Conclusion

Fan worlds are a vast and complex theoretical concept. They are constructed using shifting arrangements of people, places, and contents moving in relation to one another along vertical and horizontal vertices. A fan world is, at its core, a series of relations orbiting a central fan object that are constantly moving through time and space. Because of this, it is impossible to capture the fan world in a stable image—it is always in the process of being shaped as inhabitants, both human and not, shape space through their activities and movements.

A fan world is also not an entity divorced from other worlds and structures—its dimensions are influenced by actions and actors outside of the gravitational pull of the fan object. Hierarchies of race, gender, and sexual orientation influence the fan world's space and infrastructure. Likewise, actions that occur in relation to the fan object may have repercussions outside its sphere of influence, such as the controversy surrounding Gamergate. Fan worlds exist in relation to other fan worlds, other types of worlds (such as the digital or the social world), and platforms and structures that are located on multiple worlds. These platforms often are used as

A user on the Critical Role Fan Club names his dragon-type Pokémon after dragons from *Critical Role*
https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10155738886557232&set=gm.754999161368528&type=3&theater&ifg=1

the infrastructure that carries information, content, and subjects from one part of the world to another or from one different world to the other. For example, through Facebook a fan might post, view, or share a picture that combines elements of disparate fan objects, such as a screenshot of Pokémon that are named after *Critical Role* characters. Fan contents, like fans, can exist on multiple fan

worlds at once and form connections between these worlds that allow for easier transportation between the two worlds for future subjects and contents. So, another person seeing the above picture may decide to likewise name their Pokémon in a game after *Critical Role* characters, or someone else may base a creature in a Dungeons & Dragon game after a Pokémon, thus strengthening the infrastructure that exists between the two worlds through the creation and dissemination of more fan content.

When considering fandom as a whole, it is best to theorize it as a system of interrelated worlds that each center around a given fan object. Some of these worlds are more closely related than others, and some may in fact orbit around a parent world. The fan world of *Fire Emblem Three Houses*, for instance, orbits the larger fan world for the *Fire Emblem* series as a whole. How other fan worlds interrelate to one another is complex, multi-faceted and outside the scope of this thesis. However, I hope that further research will be forthcoming on how activities, platforms, and contents connect worlds to one another and form world systems.

Perhaps fan worlds may seem too vast a theoretical subject to quantify. How can fandom be analyzed as its own subject when worlds are so immense and malleable? In this conclusion, I would like to offer a few thoughts on this question and summarize how, despite their differences, fan worlds have similar structures as demonstrated in this thesis that allow them to be analyzed as unique concepts.

First, all fan worlds must center around an object at its core. This object can be a media series, a celebrity, a type of food, a joke, or anything else that someone forms an affective relationship with while consuming the object and/or representations of it. It is through this act of consumption that something becomes an object that is defined and acted upon by the subject. To also exist as a fan object, however, this object must draw in disparate elements to its core and

connect them through a shared relationship with the fan object. So, *Fire Emblem* becomes a fan object when autonomous individuals are somehow connected through their shared interest in the series, whether that connection be through physically meeting or creating and/or sharing content. A human being using pen and paper to write fanfiction or draw fan art, even if they do not share this creation with others, still enters the fan world since separate elements—a person and a content derivative of the original object—have developed an affective relationship with the series and with one another. The fan world's gravitational pull strengthens as more subjects, contents, and places become situated in relation to one another through its influence.

Second, all fan worlds must contain infrastructure and space. Something may act as both infrastructure and space, such as Facebook. Other forms of infrastructure include mailing lists, email, and other social media platforms. Spaces are formed when individuals interact with a place and transform it through their actions and movements. These spaces can form both online and offline. Thus, fan worlds must also include people and contents that can move into and through places and transform them into spaces. These spaces form in relation to one another through the movements of inhabitants along both horizontal and vertical axes. The horizontal axis measures how the spaces exist in relation to one another, while the vertical axis measures how they exist in relation to the central fan object. Those closer to the fan object are those that are more directly influenced by the fan object, typically because they are controlled by official sources or fans with direct ties to the industry. These spaces tend to borrow from the object's gravitational pull to bring in larger quantities of visitors. As such, information and content that originates from these spaces reaches a wider audience and has more influence on the fan world as a whole. Those who disseminate this knowledge thus have more power in the world, although this power does not go uncontested. Fans may fight back against corporate control when it goes

against their wishes and form their own spaces that do not adhere to the wishes of those in positions of power.

Fan worlds also share similar concerns about accessibility and visibility. Minimal access to a fan world is easily granted—one must simply form an affective relationship with an object and be situated in relation to other peoples and contents that have affective relationships to that object. However, access to high population areas or locations that are situated close to the central fan object can be more complex and require some level of financial stability and easy access to the internet or a major city where popular fan events take place. Moving through the fan world may prove too difficult to some as they face barriers according to geographical location, income, and personal identity. Inhabitants of fan worlds must also be aware of how they perform as fan-subjects and other aspects of their identity, and how their actions may bring them unwanted attention. Many spaces in the fan world require high levels of visibility that render racial and sexual minorities open to attacks from other inhabitants who do not want to share the world. Socially negative activities such as trolling, harassment, and doxing also exist in the fan world and form connections between people, contents, and fan objects. Both positive and negative social bonds emerge in the fan world.

Because the fan world is a space where difference is rendered visible, it also acts as a contact zone. People from different national, racial, religious, and sexual backgrounds meet and clash in the fan world. The gap that exists between the idealized vision of the fan world as a homogenous space unmoored from larger social concerns and the reality that the fan world is always a space of heterogenous peoples and unequal power relations connected to those that exist in other realms can cause conflict as people try to cover up the gap and pretend that it does not exist. Fans who make legible the heterogenous, unequal nature of the world may find

themselves under attack from fellow fans who imagine the space as an "escape" from the real world or an imagined community of fraternal citizens. Tension always exists in the fan world as people with different ideas and from different backgrounds try to shape space in disparate ways.

However, contact zones are also spaces where individuals can learn empathy and come to understand other perspectives and lived experiences through interactions with people they otherwise would not meet in their day-to-day lives. Through interactions with one another in the fan world, individuals can come to better understand people from different backgrounds and how certain behaviors may be harmful or oppressive. Because fan worlds are malleable and diverse, spaces within the world can exist as safe zones where oppressed peoples control the information and content that passes through the space. Hierarchies can be challenged and even upended, and individuals with limited economic or social power can become well-known and popular through their accumulation of knowledge about the fan object or dissemination of fan content.

Finally, fan worlds are defined by the intertwined gift and capitalist market economies that structure the exchange of content, goods, and services. These economies may conflict, collaborate, or even converge in various circumstances. These economies rely on one another for the dissemination of information and content and the formation of social relationships between individual subjects. All fan worlds contain both economies, but the relations between the two differ from world to world.

The elements I have discussed that construct all fan worlds are not necessarily the only ones that exist—others may consider other structures or issues that form fan worlds. Fan worlds can be analyzed through a number of lenses such as people, platforms, contents, infrastructure, and space. What makes fan worlds important, however, is that they open up the space of fandom to include a wider array of elements and relationships. They acknowledge that the experience of

fandom cannot be contained as a singular community or subculture. Rather, the ways of performing fandom are as diverse as the number of fans. Fan worlds allow us to acknowledge this diversity and consider each activity, content, fan, and fan space in relation to one another and to the central fan object. Fan worlds are ultimately a way of making sense of fandom as the glorious, messy, oppressive, emancipatory, multivariable, multidirectional, expansive experience that it is.

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