

RESEARCH

'Art Happens not in Isolation, But in Community': The Collective Literacies of Media Fandom

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When the Archive of Our Own (AO3) received a prestigious Hugo Award from the World Science Fiction Convention in Dublin the summer of 2019, this moment represented a recognition by the literary science fiction community of an alternative model of authorship – one which operates outside the publishing world or academia, one where authorship is collective rather than individual, and one where artworks are appropriative and transformative rather than “original.” Using this occasion as my starting point, I will discuss here the ways that the literacies associated with fandom may be understood as illustrative of the new forms of expression that have taken shape in a networked era.

Keywords: fandom; literacy; mentorship; science fiction

All fanwork, from fanfic to vids to fanart to podfic, centers the idea that art happens not in isolation, but in community...all of our hard work and contributions would mean nothing without the work of the fan creators who share their work freely with other fans, and the fans who read their stories and view their art and comment and share bookmarks and give kudos to encourage them and nourish the community in their turn. – Naomi Novik on behalf of the Archive of Our Own at the Hugo Awards, Aug. 18 2019

When the Archive of Our Own (AO3) received a prestigious Hugo Award from the World Science Fiction Convention in Dublin in the Summer of 2019, this moment represented a recognition by the literary science fiction community of an alternative model of authorship – one which operates outside the publishing world or academia, one where authorship is collective rather than individual, and one where artworks are appropriative and transformative rather than “original.” Using this occasion as my starting point, I will discuss here the ways that the literacies associated with fandom may be understood as illustrative of the new forms of expression that have taken shape in a networked era.

What, you ask, is the Archive of Our Own? Launched in 2009, AO3 is an online platform for fan works – creative work based on existing media including novels, films, television series, comics, and video games (Romano, 2019). To date, AO3 has hosted more than 5 million fan works representing almost 2 million registered users who have written about more than 30,000 fandoms. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has alone inspired more than 340,000 amateur stories and novels. Entirely fan owned and operated, AO3 has become the major hub for fan fiction. Now one of the top 200 most visited websites globally, AO3, alongside Wikipedia, represents one of the great landmark accomplishments of participatory culture in a networked society.

Across this essay, I address what fandom and fandom studies can teach us about what it means to think of literacy as a social skill and cultural competency rather than as an individualized accomplishment. I want to trace academic responses, particularly from the learning sciences, to the alternative models of mentorship through which fandom in general and fan fiction archives in particular have supported diverse forms of learning – from technical skills to critical reading, from the writing craft to vernacular theory, from sub-cultural capital to the civic imagination. And I will close with some reflections about how the MacArthur Foundation has drawn on insights from fandom and other sites of participatory culture to inform the

redesign of schools, libraries, after school programs, and other institutions in order to support connected learning and open literacy.

Fan Publishing: A Quick and Dirty History

To understand the importance of the Hugo Award recognition, I need to quickly trace through some of the history of science fiction fandom. Hugo Gernsback, widely considered the father of modern science fiction, was a Belgian born inventor who is best known for creating the Walkie Talkie and who was a major advocate of amateur radio as a participatory medium. He saw science fiction as a means for popular science education at a time of rapid technological change and scientific discovery. He began adding science fiction stories to his popular science magazines and eventually broke off *Amazing Stories* as a home for a genre he was in the process of identifying and defining. His columns for this pulp magazine outlined a vision for science fiction as a place where new ideas could be explored, pushed to their breaking point, and debated from diverse perspectives. He felt it was through the debates amongst fans that the public might come to better understand the implications of what was happening in what we would today call STEM research.

Many young writers, often students from top technological institutions, began writing within this genre, attracting an army of teenage fans across America, who wrote into the letter columns to Gernsback's magazines. And when he started to publish their addresses, they reached out to each other and started to organize a network of fan-publications, building on the infrastructure of the Amateur Press Association, which traced its own roots back to the mid-19th century, as young men and women began creating and trading publications using toy printing presses (Petrik, 1992).

The fan-run Worldcon (or more formally, the World Science Fiction Convention) was first held in 1939. Alexandra Edwards (2018) stresses that Gernsback was not the only magazine of the period to foster large fan communities through letter columns or to inspire organized fandoms, but my claim does not rest there. From the first, Gernsback saw science fiction fandom as a pedagogical space, not simply a consumer base for his pulp magazines. Among other things, this conception encouraged (mostly) young men to write, inspiring a network of amateur zines, published mostly via mimeograph, which circulated across the United States and elsewhere. Much (see, for example, Carrington, 2016) has now been written about the intense debates (and the identity play) which took place within this social network, as participants wrote both lengthy essays and (mostly) original fiction or parodies of pre-existing works. Michael Saler (2012) has coined the evocative term "Public Spheres of the Imagination" to describe the ways groups of people became intellectually invested in imaginary worlds as a platform to debate alternative visions for their own societies, seeing these fan practices as an extension of the kinds of literary publics which Michael Warner (2002) has identified around other periodicals. Science fiction fandom also became a training and recruiting ground for future professionals, with most of the major science fiction writers, artists, agents, and publishers first getting their experience working on these zines. And there was considerable blurring of the boundaries between fandom and the professional realm.

In 1953, the attendees of Worldcon began voting for the Hugo Awards, named after Gernsback, and given in recognition of outstanding contributions to the speculative genres (science fiction, fantasy, horror, and comics), including from the first, awards given for fanzines and their editors. By 2019, the WorldCon, held in Dublin, drew 8748 attendees representing 64 countries, a merger of science fiction fans and professionals. By this point, the Hugo Award has become the most prestigious award given for speculative fiction, with this year's winners including *The Calculating Stars*, *Spiderman: Into the Spiderverse*, "Janet" (*The Good Place*), and the Archive of Our Own.

Some women participated in science fiction fandom from the first and gained some begrudging respect and acceptance, including gaining some opportunities for professional publication (Merrick, 2009). The big expansion of female participation came with the 1960s and 1970s. Women faced several obstacles: on the one hand, there are vivid accounts of the sexual harassment they faced from the old boys' club associated with science fiction fandom, and on the other hand, there are accounts of the ways that the pipeline which helped young men gain professional opportunities did not function in the same way for these women.

When *Star Trek* came along, many women broke with science fiction fandom and began to publish their own zines, which mostly focused on the crew of the U.S. S. Enterprise and its five year mission "to go where no man has gone before." *Spockanalia*, credited as the first *Star Trek* zine, was published in 1967 when the program was still on the air (Verba, 1996) but this grassroots movement expanded in the 1970s when the series went into syndicated reruns across America. Blocked from access to the ranks of media professionals, most of these women saw their zines as serving a subcultural audience, one which actively supported their efforts to reimagine and remix the series' gender politics. The male science fiction community dismissed

these women as “Trekkies,” that is, “groupies” obsessed with *Star Trek*'s male performers, whereas the women tended to describe themselves as “Trekks,” active participants in the world of *Star Trek*.

Over time, this female-dominated zine community expanded outward to encompass more and more different media properties as *Trek* fandom evolved into “media fandom.” The male science fiction world prided itself on creating “original stories,” though often building on broadly shared genre conventions and sometimes the works of beloved writers (Isaac Asimov, for example, largely defined the ways several generations of writers thought about the laws of robotics.) The female science fiction writers largely focused their energies on creating “more of” and “more from” specific media franchises (Pugh, 2005), actively bending the fictional universes towards their own politics and pleasures. By the early 1990s, fandom began to attract the interests of academics, myself among them, who, in many cases, were deeply embedded within these creative communities.

Around that same moment, fans began moving from print-based publications – by this point, mostly photocopied works – and towards digital circulation. At a time when there was concern that the internet, having started on military bases and in research institutions, was itself a mostly male technoculture, these fan women were helping each other learn how to access and tap the power of the online world, often passing along their old computers to other fans whose work they wanted to help transition to the web. Many of these works were aggressively policed by media companies who saw these texts as infringing upon their intellectual property rights and many leading science fiction authors were outspoken in condemning fans who built on their stories as “infringers” who lacked “originality.” Women who did make it from the world of fan fiction into media and literary professionals were urged to destroy all traces of their earlier fan identities, often resulting in even more hard feelings between media fans and the professional community.

As we entered the era of Web 2.0, so-called user-generated content was seen as producing value for those platforms which could capture and commodify the output of grassroots communities. Several startups, including Fandom Inc. and FanLib, saw fan fiction writing as a space ripe for corporatization, while fans decried the lack of female representation in their leadership, the limits they placed on grassroots expressions, the heightened visibility they would bring to fan fiction writers still skittish about copyright enforcement risks, and more generally, the ways these companies aligned themselves with mass media companies (Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2013). Many fans recognized that the moment for creating their own grassroots platform for publishing fan fiction was now or never, and so they circled the wagons in order to develop the strongest possible protection from the dangers they saw in the way Web 2.0 was operating (Romano. 2019).

The Organization for Transformative Works was formed in 2007. The OTW's peer-reviewed journal launched that same year and remains the most important journal in the expanding field of fandom studies. Transformative Works is a concept in American Intellectual Property Law that describes works that build on pre-existing texts but “add something new” – an original interpretation, for example. Fans argue that fanworks might gain greater protection if the legal community more fully embraced the concept of “transformative works.” The OTW sought to organize fandom so that fan lawyers would defend fan fiction writers, academics would research the community and its practices to foster greater public understanding and fan coders would develop an autonomous platform where fans could publish their works without falling under the constraints imposed by Web 2.0 platforms. Fan communities that organized around a range of other social media platforms – from LiveJournal to Tumblr – have been censored, uprooted, and displaced. Archives of fan works disappeared from the web without warning because hosting companies went under during the dotcom bust. So, above all, they wanted an Archive of Their Own, where they could come together to share and debate stories that spoke to their own interests in popular media. The platform would expand as new fandoms and fan objects emerged and its capacity to embrace new users has been tested over the past decade plus of its existence. The platform's continued existence depended on fandom's collective energies, but not on commercial motives. During this same era, the fandom network has expanded transnationally, with fans around the world discovering fan fiction, writing stories in their own languages but also primarily in English, and sharing them both within other local platforms as well as through the AO3.

In the meantime, corporate interests in fan fiction only increased with the success of *Fifty Shades of Gray*, which had originated as fan fiction based on the popular *Twilight* franchise but became a huge best-seller and a blockbuster film series; the characters were revised (slightly) so that the novel could be published as an original work. When its author E.L. James “came out” about its origins within fandom, other fan-women-turned-professional followed her example. And publishers began to seek out fan fiction as a source for new writers, finally starting to build the pipeline from fan to professional that male participants had enjoyed for decades. But they also began to create sites like Kindle Worlds, which many fans felt was bringing fan fiction more deeply under commercial content regulation while also creating ways that amateur writers could receive modest compensation for their works (Stanfil, 2018).

Francesca Coppa, One of OTW's founders, reported, "In the past few years, the nature of the arguments I have been having as a fandom advocate has changed: in the past, I found myself arguing for the legitimacy of our works; now, I find myself arguing against their exploitation" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2014). OTW became the most important advocate in this struggle, with its lawyers helping to, for example, achieve an exemption from federal copyright restrictions in order to protect the production and circulation of fan videos as transformative works.

To sum up what I've said so far, female media fan fiction writers follow a different set of norms and values than those associated with science fiction fandom (which historically was overwhelmingly male but has itself become increasingly diverse, if not without some intense internal struggles). The female fan fiction community stresses the value of creating within a subculture rather than using fanworks as a stepping stone into professionalization. They have, in fact, been major critics of both copyright law and the corporate policies that impact social media companies seeking to profit from their works. More closely aligned with the professional realm, male fan culture has long made fun of this alternative model claiming that fan fiction is unoriginal and without literary value as well as overly sentimental or eroticized. So, the Archive of Our Own receiving an award from the World Science Fiction Society represents a significant thaw within this history of hostility and contempt. And a meaningful moment came when the people accepting the award on behalf of AO3 asked those in the audience who had published fan fiction on their site to stand up, with some professionals coming out as fan fiction writers for the first time. On Twitter, fans began describing the stories which won "them" a Hugo Award, since the OTW's leadership has encouraged participants to read the award as a collective recognition for fan fiction writing as a whole.

Fandom's Multiple Literacies

What does this event mean for those of us who are interested in "open literacy"? The Archive of Our Own and fan fiction writing communities more generally represent a distinctive space which fosters a broad range of contemporary forms of literacy. Indeed, as this broad strokes history already suggests, science fiction fandom was from the first intended to foster popular science literacy and knowledge, and it became a training ground and recruitment hub as a significant number of writers and artists were fostered and supported on their path to professionalism. But the female fan fiction writers who contribute to AO3 have a more expansive notion of literacy. In their book, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (2006) write that all fan fiction might be understood as "works in progress," emphasizing the process of fan fiction over the products:

The appeal of works in progress lies in part in the ways fans engage with an open text; it invites responses, permits shared authorship, and enjoins a sense of community... When the story is finally complete and published, likely online but perhaps in print, the work in progress among the creators shifts to the work in progress among the readers. In most cases, the resulting story is part collaboration and part response to not only the source text but also the cultural context within and outside the fannish community in which it is produced. (p. 6)

Thinking of fan fiction as "work in progress" stresses the collaborative nature of the writing process (See also Busse, 2017). When E. L. James revealed the fan fiction origins of her novel, many professional writers were concerned about the ethics of building on another author's work, while the fan community were bothered by the ethics of not acknowledging the help and support James had received from fan mentors along the way. Fan fiction is dialogic at its core, encouraging others to write responses and keep the process of remixing and retelling going; many of the stories took shape in social settings where multiple would-be writers sit around, "talking story" and bouncing ideas off each other (Jenkins, 1992). One fan fiction writer explained her pleasure in this process:

What I love about fandom is the freedom we have allowed ourselves to create and recreate our characters over and over again. Fanfic rarely sits still. It's like a living, evolving thing, taking on its own life, one story building on another, each writer's reality bouncing off against another's and maybe even melding together to form a whole new creation... We have given ourselves license to do whatever we want and it's very liberating. (Jenkins, Green, Jenkins, 2006, 35)

It's striking that this quote begins and ends with a statement of self determination – "we have allowed ourselves... We have given ourselves license," reflecting a more open attitude towards culture as a shared

community resource, rather than private property. And it is also important that the passage uses the collective pronoun “we” to discuss the ways that fan fiction can be understood as collective cultural production rather than simply the self expression encouraged by commercial platforms in the individualistic world of neoliberalism. Fans are willing to fight to protect their rights – both individually and collectively – to build their own story from raw materials appropriated from the culture around them. And, as we will see, fandom builds into its practices mentorship and scaffolding so that newcomers feel some degree of support as they produce and share their first works. There is an ethos of self-care and community building that makes fandom a unique space for thinking about the pedagogies required to enable open literacy and connected learning within a participatory culture.

My appreciation of fandom’s support structures informed my 2009 white paper, *Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture*, which I wrote to accompany the launch of the MacArthur Foundation’s Digital Media and Learning initiative, a decade-long commitment by a major American foundation to research informal learning (including in games and fandom) and reshape those institutions – schools, libraries, museums, youth programs – that most directly touched the lives of American youth. I described the forms of literacy I associated with the emerging participatory cultures on the web:

We must push further by talking about how meaning emerges collectively and collaboratively in the new media environment and how creativity operates differently in an open-source culture based on sampling, appropriation, transformation, and repurposing. The social production of meaning is more than individual interpretation multiplied; it represents a qualitative difference in the ways we make sense of cultural experience, and in that sense, it represents a profound change in how we understand literacy. In such a world, youth need skills for working within social networks, for pooling knowledge within a collective intelligence, for negotiating across cultural differences that shape the governing assumptions in different communities, and for reconciling conflicting bits of data to form a coherent picture of the world around them (Jenkins, Purushatma et al., 2009, 32).

A decade plus later, it is even clearer now that a site like the Archive of Our Own facilitates both collective meaning-making and socially-based literacies, or what this conference is calling open-literacy. In *Writers in the Secret Garden: Fanfiction, Youth, and New Forms of Mentoring*, Cecilia Aragon and Katie Davis (2019) describe the informal mechanisms that fan fiction sites – in this case, FanFiction.net – have deployed to encourage and sustain participation (and learning):

We discovered a new kind of mentoring, which we call distributed mentoring, that is uniquely suited to networked communities, where people of all ages and experience levels engage with and support one another through a complex, interwoven tapestry of cumulatively sophisticated advice and informal instruction (2).

They are referring, in large part, to what fans call the Beta-Reading Process, where more experienced (not necessarily older) fans volunteer to work with newer writers to help them to improve the stories they post (Karpovich, 2006; Jenkins, 2006).

Across the book, Aragon and Davis identify seven traits of the distributed mentorship that emerges in fan networks. First, distributed mentorship is characterized by **abundance**, allowing authors unlimited space to share their work, and equally unlimited opportunities to find exemplars from which to draw inspiration. They work through **aggregation**, with the whole greater than the sum of the parts: any individual story might, to use a technical term, suck, but that allows fans some sense that they can always do better than the worst story out there. The value of the network grows through **accretion** so that each new story adds value to the system as a whole, and each new voice can bring fresh perspectives to bear on the source material. The amount of feedback received and the diversity of perspectives tends to **accelerate** the learning process. Much of the feedback is publicly **available**, making it possible for people to go back and review it later but also for community members to learn from each other’s process. Communication between mentor and mentee is **asynchronous**: they do not have to co-exist in the same time and place to learn from each other. And perhaps most powerfully, the distributed mentorship of beta-reading is fueled by **affect**, shared passion: members care about each other and about the work that is being generated and that motivates them to put in the hard labor of giving and receiving feedback. Reviewing more than 177 million reviews on Fanfiction.net, Aragon and Davis found that they were overwhelmingly positive and supportive rather than negative, standing in sharp contrast with the notoriously harsh comments posted in reaction to

videos shared on YouTube. Here, the ethics of the fan community, which are acknowledged and reinforced throughout the mentoring process, encourage a constructive engagement – not every time, but most of the time.

Face-to-face contacts through the history of fanzines enabled informal mentorship arrangements of all kinds, but with the dramatic expansion of online publishing, there were major challenges in scaling up beta-reading, bridging between strangers who might be far apart in age and geographic location. Rebecca Black (2008), for example, studied the forms of mentorship and cultural literacy that emerged in fan fiction writing communities around anime and manga, as western fans learned the nuances of Japanese culture and Japanese fans were able to practice their English skills in a context where both parties were passionately committed to the exchange. In *Convergence Culture* (Jenkins, 2006), I described how Harry Potter fans might receive feedback from several hundred fellow fans when they posted their stories online, compared to the lackluster and indifference responses they might receive from their teachers and classmates in a more formal educational setting. I shared the story of Flourish, then a high school student, who began publishing her first Harry Potter fan fiction (and advising others) in her early teens. Today, Flourish Klink hosts the *Fansplaining* Podcast and her job at the transmedia company Chaotic Good involves helping major media producers to understand and respond constructively to their fan bases.

The Beta-reading process operates on multiple levels. First, of course, it provides a mechanism to improve participants' writing skills: fan fiction writers learn both by receiving and giving feedback. Second, these fans are learning to engage closely with the source materials, since fans look for textual evidence as a means of authenticating and justifying their interpretation and expansion of these shared resources (Bacon-Smith, 1991). And third, these fans are inculcating the shared values, norms, and practices of the fan community itself, a process that once felt threatened by the rapid expansion of fandom during the early days of the digital era.

In the MacArthur white paper (Jenkins, Purushatma et al., 2009), and later in our book, *Reading in Participatory Culture* (Jenkins, Kelley et al., 2013), we made the case for understanding appropriation (and remix) as foundational literacy skills in this age of new media literacies. Now, given current debates about the concept of "cultural appropriation," let me be clear in my use of the term. I take as given Mikhail Bakhtin's claim that authors do not take pristine words, images, stories out of the dictionary but rather that they take them from other people's mouths, still dripping with the saliva of their previous use. Culture builds on the raw materials left behind by other expressive practices, and the best way to understand and appreciate those earlier works is to muck around inside them and extract elements that speak powerfully to your own needs and desires, that express your own identities and seem valuable in your own communities.

That said, we need to spend more time reflecting on the ethics of appropriation – the power dynamics that determine who borrows from whom and under what circumstances. George Lipsitz (1997) has made strong cases for the value of cross-cultural exchange which takes place through this borrowing, but we should be concerned about what happens when a more powerful group exploits and profits from the expressive labor of more subordinate and marginalized groups, taking credit as if they had originated everything they put into circulation. I want to teach the controversy, to bring remix practices into the educational arena, to build up a deeper appreciation of the learning that can occur when we build on the culture around us, but also encouraging a questioning of the power relations which can result in more harmful forms of appropriation. This approach to media literacy education was inspired by the life and work of Ricardo Pitts-Wiley, a black actor, playwright, and educator, who went into prisons in Rhode Island and built a reading group where young prisoners, who on average read well below their grade level, read and discussed the long and challenging *Moby-Dick* (Jenkins, Kelley et al., 2013). He motivated them by asking them to rewrite Herman Melville's classic as a means of telling their own stories of the gang life and the drug trade, just as fan fiction sites encourage young fans to explore their own political agency through Katniss Everdeen.

We should not forget what originally drew feminist writers like Constance Penley (1991) and Joanna Russ (1985) to these fan fiction writers – the idea that they offered an alternative space where vernacular theories of gender and sexuality emerged through the writing, reading, and critical discussion of these stories. I witnessed how the fan community absorbed the queer activism of the 1980s and 1990s, rethinking its own genre traditions, as more and more fan writers came out as LGBTQ+, helping their friends to better understand their own sexual experiences and identities. For many queer teens, fan fiction reading and writing allowed them a space to discover, experiment with, and express their own emerging sexualities, trying on different fantasies and identities, to see which worked for them. And here, the adult mentorship extends to providing a sounding board and an emotional support system for these fans as they undergo such awakenings.

We might think of these fan fiction sites as an innovation commons. Just as a previous generation of fan writers helped to model alternative constructions of male friendship, romance, and sexual relations, some of which have since been simplified and adopted by the industry as “bromance,” the potential exists – at a time when Hollywood is struggling to become more diverse and inclusive with varying degrees of success – for fan writers to reimagine how racial, ethnic, and national identities are constructed within popular narratives. The media is preoccupied with white fanboy backlash against black stormtroopers and female ghostbusters, while many fans are pushing to “racebend” fictional characters and lobbying for more inclusive casting (Jenkins 2017). Their stories experiment with new genre conventions that could help popular fiction to escape the legacy of colonialism and white supremacy which were encoded into the pulp genres that trace their roots back to the 19th century. Rukmini Pande (2018) has called attention to the racial biases at play within fandom itself, sparking important debates both within fandom and fandom studies. These debates may ultimately have a similar impact on the lives of these participants as the debates about gender and sexuality that fandom scholars documented in the 1990s.

The New Media Consortium defined 21st century literacies as:

the set of abilities and skills where aural, visual, and digital literacy overlap. These include the ability to understand the power of images and sounds, to recognize and use that power, to manipulate and transform digital media, to distribute them pervasively, and to easily adapt them to new forms (2005: 8).

Others, such as Gunther Kress (Bezemer and Kress, 2015), cite multimodal literacy. Here, again, fandom offers a rich model, since fan works almost always involve the translation of characters, worlds and stories from one medium to another. As Camile Bacon-Smith noted as early as 1992, fans, watching television together, started to share semiotic practices, recognizing certain gestures or looks as communicating more about the emotional and erotic lives of characters than might be said overtly on the screen. Francesca Coppa (2006) extends this idea, applying performance theory to fan fiction, suggesting that words on the page seek to evoke those impressions and shared interpretations in the heads of their readers, offering interpretations of the characters that build on the original performances. These acts of translation take on new significance in a transmedia era as the fans may be acquiring cues and clues across works that tap the affordances of different forms of media representation. And in turn, fanworks may require collaborations between fan writers and fan artists, who work to illustrate their stories or express their own autonomous interpretations of these stories. Vidding may re-edit the original footage and set it to music to make these shared fan interpretations visible and tangible. Cosplay (Lamerichs, 2018) returns these interpretive practices to the realm of physical performances as fans interpret and perform the characters, still on their own terms. Early cosplayers valued the authenticity of trying to perfectly reproduce the original character as seen on screen, while more recently, fans have adopted a more expansive conception of these characters through practices like gender-bending and race-bending, which allows fans to reimagine the originals to better reflect their own lived experiences as women or people of color. Here, again, fandom represents a public sphere of the imagination, as racial issues are more overtly surfaced and negotiated, sometimes heatedly contested, within the shared space of these fan networks.

My own recent work (Jenkins, Shresthova et al., 2016; Jenkins, Shresthova et al., 2020) has stressed the civic literacies that also emerge within these fan communities. My co-authors and I speak of the Civic Imagination, which refers to the ways that civic beings use their imaginations to propose alternatives to current political realities, to recognize themselves as agents capable of making change and as members of communities that may work together to pursue shared interests, to develop new strategies for changing the current structures of their society, to foster solidarity and empathy for others whose experiences and perspectives differ from their own, and to anticipate what freedom, democracy, respect, and equality might feel like before the most marginalized and oppressed experience them directly. These skills are fundamental to any democratic culture. Around the world, young activists are developing new political vernaculars, new modes of protest, new ways of imagining the future, as young people who grew up as participants in fandom and other participatory culture communities find their civic voices. Here, fans have always rallied to save an endangered series or to defend themselves against attack from copyright holders which has allowed them to rehearse skills they now are deploying to challenge right wing governments around the world. They are tapping into the shared images offered by popular culture texts, ranging from *Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter* to *Handmaid's Tale* and *Game of Thrones*, as a shared mythology allowing them to form collaborations and partnerships between diverse populations working for social justice.

Abigail DeKosnik (2016) has documented the work of what she calls “rogue archives,” recounting the ways that fans teach each other how to code in order to build up the infrastructure required to support all of this fan production. This transfer of technical skills between women commands attention and respect at a time when women are still greatly outnumbered in the STEM fields and professional organizations are seeking ways to turn this situation around. The shared concerns of this female-centered community have resulted in significant innovations around the tagging and filtering of content (Fiesler 2016), as fan writers voluntarily place content warnings (for example, signaling stories which may deal with rape, incest, or sexual violence) and genre markers (indicating the specific themes and conventions deployed) so that fans can find works that satisfy them and avoid works that might trigger painful reactions. Other online networks are now studying how this system works so that they, too, can help negotiate diverse content and readership within the online space (McCulloch, 2019).

Put this all together and the Archive of Our Own and other fan fiction sites offer an impressive model for informal learning, one which taps the affordances and opportunities of a more participatory culture in order to foster a broad range of contemporary literacies. This model of open literacy with its strong focus on appropriation and collaboration, on building on and providing feedback for each other's work, contrasts sharply with the competitive and individualistic models of authorship which shape commercial publishing and media production, including those traditionally rewarded by the Hugo Award. As this discussion has suggested, these practices have been closely monitored by educational researchers over the past several decades along many different axes in hopes of identifying features or practices that might be exported to other learning and creative communities.

Implications

The MacArthur Foundation made a multi-million dollar gamble that insights from participatory cultures could inform more formal pedagogies, drawing insights from work on fandom and gaming communities to inspire the reinvention of public institutions. These intellectual partnerships sometimes produced spectacular results, such as the YouMedia Center at the Chicago Public Library, which was inspired by Mimi Ito and the Digital Youth Project's large-scale ethnographic investigation of young people “hanging out, messing around, and geeking out” within local and networked communities (Ito, Horst et al., 2013). The YouMedia model, which has since been replicated at libraries across the United States, provided opportunities for young people to socialize, experiment with new tools and programs, and receive expert mentorship as they launched their own creative projects, all within the informal learning context represented by the public library. The results of these MacArthur Foundation-funded experiments have led Ito and her collaborators (Ito, Gutierrez et al., 2013) to investigate more fully the concept of connected learning, exploring the ways that learning outside the classroom – in peer groups and families, in after school programs – connects with, reinforces, and re-energizes the formal learning that takes place in schools. As Ito and company (2019) explain:

As a model for design and social change, connected learning focuses on connecting young people's interests and peer culture to opportunity and recognition in academic, civic and career-relevant settings. Connected learning strives for equity by embracing the cultural identities of diverse young people, meeting them where they are in their communities of interest, and building points of connection and translation to opportunity in schools, employment and civic and political institutions (3).

As this work has progressed, there has been a number of important cautions about whether these kinds of affinity-based informal-learning communities can be easily replicated in the schools. In my MacArthur White Paper (Jenkins, Purushatma et al., 2009), I raised the question of how many of these practices and logics might be absorbed into formal educational institutions. I warned:

While formal education is often conservative, the informal learning within popular culture is often experimental. While formal education is static, the informal learning within popular culture is innovative. The structures that sustain informal learning are more provisional, those supporting formal education are more institutional. Informal learning communities can evolve to respond to short-term needs and temporary interests, whereas the institutions supporting public education have remained little changed despite decades of school reform. Informal learning communities are ad hoc and localized; formal educational communities are bureaucratic and increasingly national in scope. We can move in and out of informal learning communities if they fail to meet our needs; we enjoy no such mobility in our relations to formal education (11).

Above all, the processes of distributed mentorship discussed here work because they are unregulated – by educational institutions, by governments, by corporate rights holders, all of whom have largely stepped back and allowed these informal learning communities to do their work.

Craig Watkins and his collaborators (Watkins, Cho et al., 2018) has stressed the often subtle barriers to entry that persist even within seemingly more open forms of participatory culture. Others (Gee, 2018; Jenkins 2018), discuss the ways that the regimented curriculum of schools and formal learning institutions may squash what makes spaces like AO3 work in the first place. James Paul Gee describes the exchange of resources within what he calls affinity spaces, exchanges that do not necessarily require a strong sense of community. For me, the core is a sense of affiliation with affect-driven communities and the social norms that ensure supportive and collaborative engagement. Fans are willing to give each other intensive feedback because they see themselves as fans and that's why it matters that open literacy is a social skill and not simply a means to personal self-expression, which is more often the way voice is understood within the schoolhouse gates.

The Archive of Our Own is only one of a broad range of thriving participatory communities/affinity spaces operating within today's networked culture. These sites allow peer-to-peer support for the learning of a broad array of literacies. We certainly know more today than we did in the past about the constraints and inequalities within such spaces, so we should not idealize them, and they exist in a context where social media can become a toxic environment, especially when it has intensified the century old rivalries between male and female fans. But we also should be studying what works in such spaces when they do work, as AO3 clearly does, and how we might abstract from these spaces a participatory ethics that might allow us to build better learning environments elsewhere.

All of this might bring us back to the quote with which I began this essay, a quote I hope you will now read with deeper understanding, as we pay tribute to what the Archive of Our Own has accomplished and its role in fostering the multiple literacies of fandom.

All fanwork, from fanfic to vids to fanart to podfic, centers the idea that art happens not in isolation, but in community...all of our hard work and contributions would mean nothing without the work of the fan creators who share their work freely with other fans, and the fans who read their stories and view their art and comment and share bookmarks and give kudos to encourage them and nourish the community in their turn. – Naomi Novik on behalf of the Archive of Our Own at the Hugo Awards, Aug. 18 2019

Competing Interests

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