

## **From post-object to “Zombie” fandoms: The “deaths” of online fan communities and what they say about us**

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### **Abstract:**

Drawing on Williams’ (2011) conceptualisation of post-object fandom this paper examines the “deaths” of two online fan communities: City of Angel and the Sugar Quill. Questioning the nature of these endings, as well as the role of the authors as witnesses to these events, the paper explores the analytical productivity of attending to ruptures/endings for the study of fan communities and subjectivities. The paper also considers the implications of the study of endings for the field of fan studies research at this moment in time.

**Key words:** endings, fandom, community, subjectivity, fan studies, Internet research, Harry Potter, Angel

### **Introduction**

This is a paper about endings, deaths, and the act of witnessing the closure/aftermath of online fan communities. In the paper we look at what we are calling “zombie” fan communities — online fan cultures that have entered into a state of atrophy, decline or impending demise. Our interest is in how these decaying communities die or are killed off, and what fans’ responses to these deaths can tell us about the formation of fan subjectivity online.

The paper is based on our experience of witnessing the end of two online fan communities during our separate studies of fandoms devoted to *Angel/Silent Hill* (Whiteman), and *Harry Potter* (Metivier). We are interested in exploring the nature of the endings we observed during these studies; the abrupt closure of the forums at City of Angel

and the lingering end of the Sugar Quill. In examining these two incidents, we also seek to question our position as witnesses to these events. Although bad news (perhaps) for the communities, these events provided us with bountiful opportunities to explore the way disruption focuses attention on notions of subjectivity and community. How should we feel about this tension and the way that we might be seen to be engaged in scavenging off the flesh of these communities? More broadly, what might this say about the ways in which the field of fan studies is fuelled by the energy, productivity, and sometimes misfortune of fan cultures?

Our broader argument relates to the analytical productivity of attending to ruptures/endings. With the discipline of fan studies facing questions of its own vivacity and status, now is perhaps a particularly fitting moment to be thinking about endings (see, for example, Harrington et al. (2011) on the need to bring fan studies 'into conversation' with other fields in order to ensure its continued significance (584)). At the same time, we also point to the dangers of mythologizing, or treating as self-evident, certain types of grand, or big endings. These dangers are discussed in the context of the difficulty of locating endings, the concurrent need to recognize that the endings we examine are always a product of our analysis, and in relation to the multiplicity of micro-level deaths/endings (both substantive and imagined) that are experienced from day-to-day in online fan communities.

Our reference to the zombie in this paper is intended to signal a particular state of uneasy existence and liminality. The zombie — the 'lower-class citizen [...] of the monster world' (Romero, cited in Brottman 1998: 139) — is a complex signifier with a 'flexible metaphoricality' (Boluk and Lenz 2011: 11) and rich history (Boon, 2011: 5). The meaning and significance of the zombie has shifted over time, and in relation to different frames of reference, implying variously: '[...] the living dead, the reanimated corpse, the brain-dead and the brain-seeking; the psychotic and unresponsive body detached from the rational and reasoned thought; the automaton and the slave' (Fhlainn 2011: 139). The cinematic zombie has metamorphosed, for example, from being 'a suggestible creature, to a contagious one' (Mahoney 2011: 114; see also McIntosh 2008). For this reason, although in broad terms it implies something monstrous and inhuman, there is a need to avoid 'zombie essentialism' (Boluk and Lenz 2011: 12) and to be specific about what ideas are being drawn from this category.

The use of the term zombie to describe the status of online fan communities bears the risk of attributing negative connotations to the participants of these settings. This is not our intention. We do not wish to imply that the members of City of Angel and the Sugar Quill constitute a mindless enslaved mass or an abomination. Our interest is instead in the seemingly endless productivity of the zombie as a signifier, and how, in drawing attention to questions around the line between life and death as an aspect of what it means to be human, the zombie holds potential for exploring new ways of thinking about the "disembodied" information/texts we constitute as research data.

In the diversity of its incarnations, scholars have identified a number of defining characteristics of the zombie which are of interest to our argument. First is the sense of loss

which pervades any move from a living to a “post” condition. For the zombie, this is experienced as the loss of ‘something essential that prior to zombification defined it as human,’ whether this be the ‘the soul, the mind, the will, or, in some cases, the personality’ (Boon 2011: 7). Each of the sites we are looking at experienced a loss that threatened their security and existence, with past traditions and future outcomes, once taken for granted, becoming unsettled. The second characteristic is a particular sense of “zombie time”: the idea that the zombie is ‘[...] neither living nor dead, but somehow in between both orders’ (Harpold cited in Boluk and Lenz, 2011: 12). As Boluk and Lenz suggest: ‘The zombie narrative situates itself in that deferred space between catastrophe and posthistory where the march of time begins to shamble and, as Harpold suggests, “the end begins”’ (12). Finally, even with this loss and death, the zombie displays a continuing sense of animation; driven by ‘compulsive repetition’ existing in a ‘condition of permanent inertia, a perpetual motion of (animated) inanimate matter’ (Boluk and Lenz 2011: 3), going through the motions, so to speak. We will return to these ideas of loss, death and animation at the end of the paper.

Before that, however, we begin our paper by presenting the empirical basis of our interest in endings, and the details of our studies, considering how the methodological features of our projects dis/enabled our understanding of these events in different ways. We then shift our attention to the literature on endings and explore the way that such events have been approached by fan studies scholars. This is followed by the presentation of two case studies: our accounts of the endings of the Sugar Quill and City of Angel forums. The paper closes with a comparative analysis of these events, in which we recruit the zombie metaphor to illuminate different aspects of these endings whilst also reflecting on our positions as researchers (parasites?) within these settings. In this, we provide a critique of conceptualisations of the figure of the fan-scholar that assume that with care/reflexivity we can constitute ourselves as a ‘natural’ part of the ecology of our research settings.

## **Two Studies**

Our exploration of endings in this paper is based on two longitudinal observational studies of online fan cultures. These shared similar interests in the formation of subjectivity and authorship in fan communities but used different methodologies.

Whiteman’s (2007) sociological study of online fan communities used non-participant observation to examine the activities of fans of the television series *Angel* and fans of the series of survival horror videogames *Silent Hill*. The study examined two sites Silent Hill Heaven (SHH) and City of Angel (COA) over a two and a half year period, seeking to examine the strategies by which social and pedagogic relationships were established, maintained and destabilised on the public forums of these settings, and to explore the construction of identity at different levels of analysis (the identities of individual posters, of the sites, and of the fan objects). In adopting a non-participant approach, Whiteman had minimal direct contact with the sites she observed. This was limited to some email correspondence with one of the owners of SHH, and some posting on the forums of SHH

following the completion of her study (Whiteman 2010, 2012). She had no direct contact with the COA owners/members. Her analysis was therefore based solely on her observation of textual posting activity on these two sites, which she gathered and archived during the study.

Metivier was participant/observer on the Sugar Quill (SQ) during her study of *Harry Potter* fan fiction writers. Over the period of participant observation she engaged in the routine practices of the site, committing herself to getting close to the activities and everyday experiences of other people in the community (Emerson et al. 1995). From November 2005 to April 2008 she posted to the SQ forums most days. She also wrote and published fan fiction, posting stories to the archive while being mentored by an assigned SQ beta reader. For six months towards the end of SQ she served as a member of the site's staff. During this period her position was similar to other fan scholars who also assisted in the day to day running of the community they were researching and experienced tensions of negotiating ethical dilemmas raised by occupying a liminal position in the field (Bennett 2012). Like Bennett, during her brief tenure as a beta reader and moderator on SQ, Metivier was expected to 'continuously participate in, and express a commitment towards, the encouragement of normative behaviour in the community' (3). Following this period of participation observation, her analysis of observation and interview data explored the negotiation of social relationships and emergence of subjectivity on SQ.

The narratives that we present in this paper are shaped by the nature of our research designs. The methodological decisions we made have clear implications, not only for what we can say about these endings but how we say it. The presentation of the comparative case studies in this paper to some extent inevitably foregrounds similarities and represses differences. These differences are worth elaborating here. As described above, Whiteman adopted a non-participatory, observational position, focusing on the patterning of posting activity and not seeking to go beyond this. For this reason she knows very little of the individuals involved in the setting (other than what members said about themselves on the forums) and is unable to answer certain questions about "the end" of the site (regarding the motivations of members/owners of the sites, for instance). As a participant Metivier is able to draw from a broader range of data, including LiveJournal posts, emails/chat, and offline conversations with site members. This, in some ways, gives her a fuller picture of the culture and individuals involved. Nevertheless, like Whiteman, she has only the sum of her data on which to draw (and cannot go beyond this to infer the "true" motivations of members). Whilst recognising the limitations of Whiteman's knowledge of the circumstances of the ending she observed, we are equally aware of the risk of mythologizing the extent to which researchers are able to know what is "really going on" in a setting through the use of different methods. In each case our accounts of these settings' finales are limited and partial, rather than complete or definitive. The differences between our studies also raise interesting ethical questions about the nature of participation in fan studies research, which we are exploring elsewhere (Metivier and Whiteman, in preparation).

In presenting extracts of the activity from COA and SQ in this paper we have disguised posters, with the exception of key representatives who were involved in announcing the closure of the sites. As we will describe, the sites we are exploring are quite different: COA closely tied to the consumption of the fan object via discussion and the exchange of information etc.; SQ more explicitly focused on apprenticeship into the activity of fan fiction writing and the production of texts by fans/authors. In both cases the deaths of the fan sites can be seen to be connected to the end of the fan object, with the sites demonstrating the taking of different positions in relation to these objects. Before presenting our accounts of these endings, we first want to turn to the literature, to frame our consideration of the end of these communities within the theoretical field.

### **Death/Endings: Approaches in the Literature**

Different bodies of scholarship have examined issues of dis/continuity and change relating to death/endings (Crow 2005), from work on family relations and divorce (Gannon 2002; Kellas et al 2008), to sociological studies of the decline and dissolution of communities (e.g. Porteus 1989; Fleming 2000). For those interested in the production of subjectivity, a key point of interest in this literature is the idea that deaths/endings can be productive in placing attention onto the nature/meaning of life, and — in certain cases — in initiating action. In a study of rituals of mourning and ‘death socializations’, Kearl (1989) argues that death serves as ‘an indicator of life’, revealing ‘the most central social processes and cultural values’ (7). In the funeral, for example; ‘as is the case in eulogies, the most central beliefs of a people are verbalized and reaffirmed.’ Kearl goes beyond this, noting that as well as ‘revealing’ life, ‘death invigorates social systems and challenges their values.’ Sometimes, as he describes, death also plays a role in ‘mobilizing a collectivity toward united action, such as the sinkings of the *Lusitania* and the *Arizona* which led the United States into two world wars’ (6).

The significance of endings can also be seen in other areas of theory that emphasise the productivity of destabilising ruptures in different contexts. In narrative theory, for example, we find an understanding of disequilibrating influences, in which initiating events or complicating actions are vital in generating forward momentum, marking a break with the initial state of affairs and provoking a narrative drive (Branigan 1992: 18). In education, disequilibrium is considered productive for learning (Piaget 1977). In psychoanalysis, Freudian and Kleinian conceptualisations of melancholia suggest ways in which loss initiates a new subjectivity, or a potentially productive and reparative holding on to the lost object (Lapping 2011). And in the context of research, the significance of destabilising events is acknowledged as revealing of the basis of ethical decision-making in research and the related production of researcher identities (Whiteman 2012). In these works — whether the outcomes are developments in narrative, learning, subjectivity or ethics — endings can be seen to serve as catalysing events.

Alongside writing on virtual community ‘failure’ (Kolko and Reid 1998), academic work on death and endings in the context of the Internet has examined the phenomena of

online memorials (e.g. Roberts 2004; Veale 2004; Hess 2007; Hume and Bressers 2009), experiences by communities of the real death of individual members (Saarinen 2002), the virtual death of members who have been misrepresenting their offline identities, and the resultant end of trust to which this can lead (Jordan 2012). Some studies of online environments have examined the implications of the closure of online forms of sociality. These include studies of how established social formations move on from one environment to another (such as Pearce and Artemesia's (2009) study of a diaspora of gamers following the closure of the online game *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*) and work on the dissolution of what can sometimes prove more temporary forms of social allegiance (such as the disintegration of online guilds (Ducheneaut et al 2007)).

Within the field of fan studies research, the collapse/closure of fan communities remains a relatively under-examined topic. Greater attention has been paid to the emergence and maintenance of community relations within fan cultures: the establishing of group norms and codes of practice (Baym 2000), or the emergence of certain formations of relationship (as seen in studies of the production of hierarchies within fan cultures (Macdonald 1998; Chin 2002; Williams 2004)). Work has also explored the destabilisation of community relations, by examining how online fan communities respond to, and deal with disruptive elements such as flaming (Nash 1999) and conflict. Fan scholars have also examined resistance to threatened/actual endings in accounts of save our show campaigns (Byers 2007; Whiteman 2009; Morey 2010), fan activism (Jenkins 1992; Scardaville 2005; Cochrane 2012), and responses to the screening of final episodes of popular series (Todd 2011; Harrington 2012).

This is not to say that the deaths of online fan communities have been completely ignored. Kibby (2000), for example, describes events that led to the emergence and then closure of a chat page run for fans on an official web site for the music artist John Prine. Kibby links this closure to a period of flaming and off-topic activity, tensions between established/newbie members, and the dearth of new material required to sustain identification with the setting. As she describes, a cancelled tour and limited new releases meant that: 'By the time the 'regulars' had a well-established social relationship [they] had almost exhausted their exchanges of Prine contacts, media sightings and trivia questions' (96). This study presents a picture of a fan site exhausting its options and dissolving through social antagonisms it could not contain. There is a sense of loss here; although Kibby notes that the social links established by fans on the site survived the closure, she suggests that the relationship to the fan object was negatively affected ('the aura of a concrete link to John Prine is more difficult to sustain in the absence of a meeting place that is Prine's own' (100)). Zweerink and Gatson's (2004) ethnographic study of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* posting board The Bronze also examines the implications of the closure of the site for fans' sense of community, describing the distribution of members after the closure and how they maintained contact (moving from The Bronze to Livejournal, for example). This study is perhaps more optimistic in focusing attention on how members went on to sustain 'Bronzer-identified space' in other arenas both online and offline (242). Such studies have

demonstrated the ways that the ends of fan communities are experienced by their members, whilst also documenting survival strategies as fans move beyond the closure of their environments to maintain relationships in other domains.

### **Post-Object Fandom and Subjectivity**

One study that is distinctive in having focused analytical attention onto endings in the context of online fan communities is Rebecca Williams' (2011) work on post-object fandom. Rather than an interest in the end of online cultures, the end is here defined in relation to the cancellation/closure of a primary text — the TV series *The West Wing* — with Williams' conceptualisation of post-object fandom involving an examination of 'responses to the specific moment when a fan object moves from being an ongoing text into a dormant one which yields no new instalments' (266). This definition suggests that individuals embarking on fannish interest in a serial text after it has ceased production enter fandom during a stage in which the object is now "post" — an idea to which we will return towards the end of the paper.

Drawing from the social theorist Anthony Giddens' (1990) notion of ontological security, Williams explores responses to the cancellation of *The West Wing* as a rupturing, destabilising threat to the self-identity of fans of the series. Her analysis productively focuses attention on 'reiteration discourse' that emerged during the period directly after the cancellation (Williams 2011: 266). Like the literature on endings/death described above, Williams' work emphasises the way that endings provoke efforts to stabilise, to reassess and to reaffirm the significance of that which has gone before. Looking at examples of goodbyes to the show, for instance, Williams argues that such discourse serves to:

[...] intertwine fans' identity with the show but also ward off potential anxiety about the end of the fan object. By relaying their self-narratives, these fans rearticulate their identities and form their experiences with the show into a coherent story. (Williams 2011: 273)

Whereas Williams' emphasis is on continuity within a period of post-object fandom and the sustenance/maintenance of fannish involvement, our interest in this paper relates to the exhaustion/rupturing of this involvement. In both cases, endings can be seen to stimulate reflections onto the past as well as efforts to assert and re-establish a sense of self — whether in relation to the nature of fans' involvement with a text/site, or the nature of the text/site itself.

In drawing from Giddens' language, Williams' description of her participants as engaging in reflexive narrative self-projects, or transitioning between previous/new identities, suggests rational or conscious effort as involved in this action. Distinct from sociological theories that understand subjectivity as something an (autonomous) individual "has", in approaching the ends of COA and SQ we draw from work that emphasises practices and processes in order to shift the focus off the individual/singular subject

(Pelletier and Whiteman 2012). Our approach therefore focuses on the patterning of positioning moves in response to stabilising/destabilising events. In this, we do not seek to evacuate embodiment and personhood but, rather, to avoid speaking for the other and colonising the affects and desires of fleshy, ethnographic subjects for research purposes.

In this, we are recruiting different theoretical resources, including Dowling's Social Activity Method, which understands social activity as constituted by the ongoing formation, maintenance and destabilisation of alliances and oppositions (Dowling 2009). We also draw from work investigating Giddens' claim that there is a shift towards "new" forms of self-identity in late modernity. Skeggs and Wood's work on reality TV audiences, for example, questions the so-called 'freeing up' of subjectivity (Wood and Skeggs 2004: no page numbers) implied in notions of the reflexive, biographical self, arguing that this problematically draws attention 'towards the individual as an insular and singular unit rather than the social as a process in formation' (Skeggs and Wood 2012: 4).

Our theoretical position, therefore, constitutes an attempt to theorize endings in relation to a notion of subjectivity that does not unintentionally inscribe a notion of the subject as autonomous and self-managing but, rather, 'engages with the complex ways in which we are all entangled in the relation between culture and subjectivity' (Gill 2008: 443). If we think of the production of subjectivity as constantly ongoing activity/emergent practice, identities cannot be bound or transitions "between" identities marked out. The challenge of endings can instead be regarded as serving to prompt attempts to re-establish the always incomplete production of identity. In a similar way, our use of the term community in this paper draws from Dowling and Brown's (2009) de-essentialised notion of communities as sites defined by specific forms of social relations that are 'produced and reproduced in cultural practices' (154). Rather than suggesting that the communities we examine here are stable things, instead our analysis focuses on the formation of relationships marked out in the move towards the end and draws attention to moments and events that provide insight into how fan subjectivities are produced and maintained relationally. It is to these endings that we now turn our attention.

## **Two Tales of Death**

### ***The End of the City of Angel Forums***

*From all of us to all of you: Thank You! It's been a hell of a ride  
~ the CoA staff. [COA website, December 2012]*

In 2012, the doors closed for the final time on COA — a fan site that had been one of the most visible online supporters of the television series *Angel*. COA opened in 1999, the year that the spin-off from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was first launched, and established a reputation as a key location for fans of *Angel*, a reputation underlined by the support the site had apparently received from the producers of the series, and the presence of COA



“staff members” at *Buffy/Angel* conventions. Run by the “COA Council” — a management staff including the owner of the site “Dawn’s Kiss,” and a UK and USA “Production Staff” — the site contained various forms of content for *Angel* enthusiasts. This included news pages providing information about conventions and press releases; areas focused on specific characters; episode guides, a gallery of images, and a shopping area supported by external vendors offering *Angel*-related merchandise. From 1999-2005 the site also hosted lively forums devoted to discussion of the series and other Whedon-centric texts. By the time these forums closed in December 2005, they had 1,450 registered users and contained 495 threads and 19,183 posts.

### ***COA After the End of the Fan Object***

The uncertain fate of the COA forums was signalled in February 2004 when *Angel* was cancelled. During that time, when the focus had been on the fate of the fan object, a number of members voiced concerns about the longevity of the setting. These fears were not alleviated by the COA staff when they confirmed that the site would continue for ‘at least’ another year. In April 2004, in response to a question relating to the site’s future, one of the COA Council, SueAngel, noted that the future was ‘still a little undecided,’ that the site would run ‘on a much smaller scale after the last episode has aired,’ and would offer fewer features than it had in the past. SueAngel finished the post by noting ‘I love this site as much as most everyone here and I don’t want it to close any more than you so here’s hoping.’

In the months that followed, the nature of posting activity on the forums appeared to decline, with the disappearance of some members, and a number of threads marked by arguments with antagonistic posters/spammers. These posters were shunned and disciplined by forum participants who used different strategies to close down inappropriate interpretations and exclude disruptive members (see Whiteman 2007). Post-cancellation activity also involved attempts to re-energise forum discussion. One example of this was a thread titled *A way to revitalise this site* in November of 2004, which suggested that, as many of the site’s members had not been around since the beginning (and that many of the “Ancients” who had, were no longer around), members should start watching *Buffy* (and then *Angel*) together from the beginning. Whilst some supported this proposal, the idea to re-structure activity through weekly group discussion was rejected by a newbie who was concerned that ‘making this forum into a “book club” type will kill the site.’ The initiative began, but then lost its drive, proving an ultimately futile attempt to reintroduce an energising trajectory in the face of the absence of new primary textual material relating to *Angel* or *Buffy*.

The forum’s shaky future had also been suggested by structural changes that the environment underwent during 2004-2005, changes that were provoked in part by the actions of the disruptive spammers referred to above. When Whiteman had started her study in 2003, the COA forums had been arranged into three main boards: the *Insane Asylum*, a forum for general discussion; the *Angel Forum*, for discussion of the series; and

the *Help Desk*, a space for discussion of issues relating to COA and its forums. After the cancellation of the series these three forums were integrated into a single list of threaded conversations. Use of the forum now involved scrolling down a list of conversation topics, with new threads entering at the top of the forum. The forums were again re-structured in early 2005, at which point the new *Hyperion* forums emerged. The forums were now organised within a bulletin board system, subdivided into seven forums, and organised by topic of discussion. The inclusion of forums for discussion of a range of Whedonverse texts including *BtVS*, *Firefly* and *Serenity* reflected a formalising of the expansion of topics of discussion on the site in this era of post-object fandom to expand the focus of the setting to structurally incorporate different Whedon texts. (Later, after the closure, these same structural changes were criticised/challenged by members who asserted affiliation to previous incarnations of the site, signalling the loss of these as the point at which the forums had gone downhill).

### ***The Closure of the COA Forums***

On 13<sup>th</sup> December 2005 it was announced that the COA forums were to close. The following message — in a new thread titled *Forums Closure* — was posted by *SueAngel* on each of the Hyperion forums:

It is with great regret that I make the announcement that as of Friday the 16<sup>th</sup> December, the gates to the forums of CityofAngel.com will be closing forever.

The main site will continue to be available as a source of reference for fans and news updates with regards to those involved in the show will continue to appear in our News section.

The Senior Partners and CoA Council would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed to the CityofAngel.com community over the past few years and for helping to make our site the definitive site for all things Angel, by providing humor, interesting and in depth debate about the show and yes at times a little bit of controversy. The forums would not have been the same without your enthusiasm and participation and we wish you all well and a very Happy Christmas and prosperous New Year.

Now let's get to work.

*(Forums Closure, 13 Dec 2005, 9:59am)*

Only three days' notice was provided; the boards would close on the 16<sup>th</sup> December. Having faced and dealt with the loss of *Angel*, members of COA now had to deal with the loss of their forums.

In responding to this news, members of the site cast their gazes in different directions. Reaction to this new loss saw many posters reflecting upon COA's past. A flurry of threads devoted to the end of the forums appeared in the three days following the announcement. These demonstrated a nostalgic focus on sharing recollections of what had gone before, but also notable returns from members of the site who had not been around for a while as news of the closure spread to other *Angel/Buffy* related fan sites (such as the *Slayers Realm*). In this way, the announcement of the site's closure was to momentarily reinvigorate the site at the point of its termination, with members gathering to post their final goodbyes (in threads with titles like *One Last Time; My Very Last Thread on COA; My Goodbye Post*), sharing reminiscences, and voicing disappointment. Members also looked to the future and attempted to ensure the conservation of relationships that had been established within the forums. Creating a thread titled *Life after CoA*, SueAngel encouraged members to network and share contact details via the Personal Messaging function on the site (which was made available to all members in this three-day period, having previously only been available to members with particular status). The websites most frequently referenced in these posts shared an interest in *Angel and Buffy*; locations such as Buffy-Boards.com and immortalrealm.net providing potential settings for continued interaction. The provision of names and contact details in relation to different (external) sites of fan activity demonstrated attempts to enable members to locate, identify and contact each other on other sites, and via other mediums.

Responses to SueAngel's announcement in the forum *Caritas* provide a good indication of the wider activity on the site during the three-day period before the forum's closure. Like the forums, the thread was to lose momentum during its three day existence, drawing off into sporadic chat about where members lived. Before this, however, discussion suggested the ways that the site's members rationalised the end they now faced and reflected on the nature, status, and significance of the COA forums (and their own status as fans).

Initial responses to SueAngel's post emphasised sadness ('Truly, I am devastated. I sat here for at least 5 minutes, staring at the screen, disbelieving. '), and thanks to the "powers that be" for their effort in maintaining the site during its history ('Thanks to SueAngel, Vamp Girl, Bluebear and all the other coa staff for their hard work and determination in policing this site, you are all stars!'). A number of posters responded in stronger terms to the abrupt nature of the ending and the brief notice period that members had been given before the plug was to be pulled. A couple made reference to the site being 'switched off and murdered', with another making reference to the end, when the owners would 'heartlessly break our hearts and murder our memories!'

In an explanation of why the forums were closing, SueAngel linked the fate of the forums to the end of the series:

Once Angel was cancelled, we always knew the site would be on wind down. The forums are being closed to enable the main body of the site to continue just a little

longer. It was the Citizens continued enthusiasm that kept the forums going perhaps longer than they should but now is just the time for it to end as sad is [sic] it may seem. (Tue Dec 13, 2005, 1.04pm)

This notion that there had been some forewarning around the cancellation of *Angel* seemed to lead to a general acceptance of the site's closure within the posting activity. Alongside expressions of disappointment and sadness, many posters adopted positions rooted in a sense of inevitability and acceptance:

Anyway, I knew this was coming sooner or later, so I'm not very surprised. This wont be a closing of a forum to me, it will be the end of an era. The CoA forums introduced me to the internet, and to some of the most wonderful and loving people that I will not forget for the rest of my life. Deep friendships, deep romances and deep memories, they come to an end now, which is fitting, since all of those people have moved on with their lives and have forgotten about our wonderful City I had not, so I'm glad that the gates will close and preserve those wonderful conversations and feeling forever. (Tue Dec 13, 2005, 8.00pm)

Yet there were some dissenting voices. A number of posts/threads provided evidence of resistance, with posters offering to help run the site themselves ('if there is a possibility even a slight one of continuing the forum independently in any way you can count on my help'), or to petition the owners to keep it open. Two posters expressed the pro-resistance position by initiating and participating in threads devoted to the idea that COA might/perhaps should be, spared (*Save COA!* and *Should COA be saved?*). Here too, the loss of the site was consistently linked to the loss of the fan object: 'Surely the owners were crushed to lose Angel the tv show, so will cave in to our emotional blackmail about our beloved Angel site?' This resistance failed to gain momentum.

In the thread *Should COA be saved?* a poster responded to these suggestions by reinforcing the sense of inevitability, and arguing that the time had come for the site to close:

I know this will be unpopular thing to say but it's time to end. All forums dedicated to popular shows end sometime. How many Xena or X-Files forums are still going? Most Buffy forums have died or morphed into something else with a small inclusion of a Buffy or Angel section. The legacy of this great site should not be tarnished. Since the end of the series it has been plagued by \*Jasmine Fans\* and most of the good posters left to make their own forums. It's unfortunate for the few who came along after the glory days that are cool and will lose their home but hey Ive had two of my own forums lost for reasons not of my own choice, things change and we just have to go with them. Remember COA for the great site it was and join with your best friends at whatever forum you choose there are many free

hosting sites like probboards or invisionfree for the hardcore people who want to talk about Angel for years to come and let this place live forever in your memories.  
(Tue Dec 15, 2005, 5.03pm)

This response to the end was intertwined with a concern to protect the memory of the site; a sense that the memories of what had passed should not be allowed to be corrupted (had the forums perhaps gone on for longer than was good for them?). In such posts we find the idea that the COA forums as they were — as they had been — no longer existed, that the golden age of the site was past, and that the end had already been experienced (even if it had not been formally marked by a closure, or by those in authority at the time).

There was then, general acceptance that the time had come for the forums to close (an acceptance infused by sadness and in some cases disappointment/anger). But what was being lost? Two strong drives can be identified in the threads, with posts gathering around two anchoring points that served to fix a sense of what the site had been. The first is a strong sense of object-specificity; an idea of the site's identity as configured in relation to other Whedon-centric sites (such as websites which focused on discussion of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). In this context, COA's significance came from its unique status as the only/main *Angel* focused forums:

I know the board hasn't been that active the last couple of weeks, yet I can't think of NOT coming here every day, since this is the only true Angel board, most others are more biased towards Buffy. (Tue Dec 13, 2005, 11:43pm)

Aww that's a total shame, in fact quite depressing. [...] an Angel dedicated site is non-existent anywhere else, and more often than not (there have been occasions when its different) this site is far more mature in its approach to a subject than the Buffy sites..... (Tue Dec 13, 2005, 12:52pm)

[...] The only other site I chat on is buffytalk but they are so biased towards buffy its unreal! Where can I go to that's a true angel forum! \*Sigh\* I am gutted! (Wed Dec 14, 2005, 3:51pm)

The second was an emphasis on the site as a social, rather than object-oriented, space that had generated specific relationships which might now be lost. Here nostalgia for the past, an original home, became tied into the highlighting of the significance of the friendships that had been established through participation in the site, but also — as the following two posts suggest — a sense of culpability in the fate of the site evident in the expression of apologies from members who had not been around for a while:

Sorry I haven't been around much of late, but you know CoA was our first home. Thanks to the site we made some cool friends. I am really sorry it is closing, kinda the end of an era. (Wed Dec 14 2005, 10:01am)

Wow!..... that's..... wow. Okay I'll admit I haven't been around as often as most...okay, barely around at all recently, But CoA was like some of us here, our first home, I basically got up some days and wondered who was about or what happened when I was away, call it sad but hey, i'm a sad guy. [...] (Wed Dec 14, 10:57am)

On *Forums Closure*, as on other boards on the site, COA citizens engaged in shout-outs to significant others:

Wow, what a shocker!!! I've made some really great friends here, who I never would have met without this site. Al, SVA, JC, Seppe, Wes and everyone else, we had a blast, huh? For those of you on the other board, I'll see ya soon. and the rest of you, it was nice taling [sic] to you and hopefully we'll all meet up again sometime. We had a blast, huh? What are we gonna do now? (Wed Dec 14, 2005, 8:53pm)

These shout outs became tied into recollections of other moments from the site on other threaded discussions such as the thread *Favourite Moments of COA*, which saw the five years of COA configured via individual recollections of COA moments, the presentation of defining moments of the site's history from the viewpoints of different members:

I remember my pink tutu + Spike conversation the first time I came here. I remember fighting in the CoA codex. I rememeber my awful spelling mistakes (I still can't spell, but I'm better at it!) I remember flirting. I remember that I had fun talking to aradhus, berto, JMF, Hadeeth and some other people. ahhh good times. [.....] (Wed Dec 14, 2005, 4:21pm)

Such recollections and shout outs served to establish distinctions between established and more recent members of the site at its point of closure. In this way they can be understood as affiliation and community strategies (Dowling and Brown 2009). Appeals to sub-groupings of members in shout-outs worked to establish alliances within the population. The history of the sites as imagined within the posting activity also proved to inspire a wealth of community referents. The nostalgic focus on the past on COA (and in particular the discussion of the site's lost golden age) was perhaps unsurprising as the forums were about to close. By placing themselves "at the scene" during events from the past, members aligned themselves with the site and each other. In doing so, the closure became a final opportunity to (re)affirm their status as experienced old timers, and mark themselves as

different from newer members, including those who had been disruptive as the site had declined.

When the end finally came on 16<sup>th</sup> December, the forums of COA disappeared from view. Some conversations were in mid flow. Others had already been abandoned.

### ***The Lingering Death of the Sugar Quill***

87 sighting. The amount of times my heart broke with nostalgia while I reread this thread. (*The Sq87 Chugs Into Home Port*, Apr 28 2011, 05:15)

Random try... hello?! Miss and :wub: my SQ gang and the good old days ☺ (*The New Official Appreciation Thread*, May 9 2012, 14:28)

This is the end...Never will there be a place like the Quill again...Why do I get a lump in my throat every time I come here?...I guess you really can't go home again. It's never the same. (*I Open at the Close*, Sep 27 2011, 20:36)

The Sugar Quill operated as a fan site for the Harry Potter (HP) series of children's books, launching in January 2001, six months after the publication of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (the fourth book in the series). For a number of years the community thrived. By the end of its life the site contained a huge variety of content for HP fans, including forum areas focused on specific characters and relationships (such as W.A.I.L: the Weasley Adoration and Idolatry League), chapter by chapter discussion of the HP books, "off topic" areas for general socialising, forum help areas ("The Room of Requirement") and areas for discussion of J K Rowling's website and interview statements.

The site's key mission, however, was fan fiction. SQ 'selectively' accepted stories deemed to be 'well-written', 'creative', and that fitted 'within the universe of Harry Potter canon.' The "three year summer" prior to the release of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* in 2003 was a particularly fertile period for fan fiction and the site quickly established a reputation as a safe space for new fan fiction writers testing the waters of online fandom (see Jenkins 2006). For this reason the beating heart of the site was considered to be the fan fiction archive and the forums focused on writing. In addition to the main writing discussion forum ("The Pensieve") these included an area for regular writing challenges aimed at new writers ("87 Rolls of Parchment") and an "SQ Book Club."

Like COA, SQ was run by a management staff. In charge of the day-to-day running of the archive and forums was Zsenya, one of the site owners. Other founding members and newer staff assisted with day to day site admin. Moderators (or "Forum Ghosts") policed the canon discussion forums, while "Official SQ Beta Readers" were responsible for the writing forums. Aspiring writers could apply for a beta reader when submission days for new authors were announced. If a beta reader took on a new writer, this involved a commitment to mentoring them, potentially over a period of years. This institutionalised provision of on-

going opportunities for intensive feedback proved appealing to HP fans with writing aspirations. Fan fiction production expanded rapidly following the publication of each new instalment in the series. After the last book, *Harry Potter and Deathly Hallows*, was published in July 2007, SQ members were broadly optimistic that the vitality of the SQ archive would ensure the longevity of the site.

In June 2008, however, SQ stopped registering new users, and in November 2008 the site ceased accepting fan fiction submissions. At this point, the site had 9,328 forum members, 4,858 threads and 411,453 posts and the archive held 2600 stories under 960 author names.

### ***The SQ Forums after the End of the Fan Object***

The possibility that the SQ forums, if not the fan fiction archive, might come to an end was first mooted in September 2007, two months after the publication of *Deathly Hallows*. There had been a huge surge in site traffic in the days following the release of the final book as new and returning members posted their immediate responses. A few weeks after the end of the fan object, forum activity on the site peaked. To all appearances the site was engaged in “business as usual.”

In line with the site’s core purpose, the majority of discussion about the fan object on SQ was linked to the practices of reading and writing fan fiction. Many threads on the site were slow-moving and contained relatively short posts. The expectation was that now that the conclusion of the series was known, discussion of events in the books would wane, and that discussion of writing/fan fiction would continue as the site’s main focus. However, it was at this point that pre-existing tensions between the site and a subset of its members (temporarily submerged in the anticipation of fresh canon) re-emerged. These tensions related to the sorts of things that could be said about the fan object; specifically what was seen as the excessively serious and/or negative tone of discussion on some threads. As a small number of active posters continued to engage in debating aspects of the now-complete fan text, general forum activity declined. In private correspondence with Metivier, members identified the unpleasant atmosphere and intensity of discussion on the “canon” forums as reasons for not wishing to venture onto the site.

Threads/posts deemed antithetical to SQ’s light-hearted and positive approach to the fan object were moderated. In addition, staff would sometimes initiate site-wide reprisals when discussions were deemed to be heading in a “moralising” direction. Moderating strategies included the automatic filtering of “hot button” words and making threads disappear and reappear at random. While the actions of moderators provided entertainment for members sympathetic to the site position, they had little impact on threads marked by long-running debates between a few members, which continued unabated.

Discussion among the staff focused on the worrying tone of some discussion and the future direction of the site. As an initial response Zsenya created a new thread. Her first post acknowledged that the identity of the site was changing:



At some point over the years, the Sugar Quill gained a reputation for being a place where people could engage intelligent and serious discussion of the Harry Potter books. I think that's wonderful. That may have been what attracted many of our current members to the site. However, our hope has always been that the discussion would also be somewhat lighthearted and that it would attract people who loved the books and characters as much as we did...Yeah, I know, freedom of speech, blah blah blah. The Sugar Quill, however, is not a free country. It is, in fact, a private island supported entirely by private donations, Zsenya's own support fund, and the blood, sweat, and tears of our dedicated beta-readers and forum ghosts... (*SQetiquette*, Sep 27 2007, 06:30)

The post also contained a note of warning:

It was my secret hope that after *Deathly Hallows* was released there would be no need for further discussion on the Harry Potter series and that I could have a dramatic closing of the Sugar Quill, a la the *Little House on the Prairie* series finale...

The post ended with a re-affirmation of the site's approach to the fan object, including a request to re-read the site's posting guidelines and find ways to post in an 'encouraging manner.'

As an attempt to contain the energies of members and steer them in an appropriate direction, the *SQetiquette* post was partially successful. The post stimulated a wide range of responses. Some posters picked up on the hint of a possible imminent site closure, expressing hope that SQ would 'never end.' Others aligned themselves with the site, thanking staff for their efforts and celebrating SQ by sharing memories of important moments in its history. The post also provoked dissent. After an initial series of highly positive posts, one member enquired if 'mild criticism' of the fan object would be allowed within the terms of *SQetiquette*. Zsenya responded with a clarification and the thread continued in a reflective vein. A few posters confessed to being guilty of bad behaviour on the forums, expressing remorse and committing themselves to reform. In an attempt to turn the tide of self-absorption, Zsenya suggested that people who found themselves spending more than an hour a day on SQ should 'step away' from the computer, 'go for a walk' and perhaps even 'think about picking up another hobby.' This elicited further self-justifying posts. At this point, another senior admin joined the discussion, counselling members to 'chill' and providing suggestions for 'SQ downtime,' such as investigating new fan objects. The continued existence of the site was beginning to look increasingly uncertain.

### ***Fan Fiction after the End of the Fan Object***

This somewhat melancholy discussion was interrupted by news on October 20<sup>th</sup> of JK

Rowling's announcement at a publicity event that one of the main characters in the HP books, Professor Dumbledore, was gay. As the latest in a series of extratextual comments aimed at fans, the announcement prompted new discussion on the forums about the implications of the end of the fan object for fan fiction and what this meant for the future of the site and its members.

In the aftermath of the end of the series the relationship between SQ and the fan object began to change. Until this point the site's identity had been constructed through a specific approach to interpretation of the *Harry Potter* text and a (playful) passionate deference and loyalty to its author. While the fan object remained open, extra-textual information provided by the author (e.g. items posted on J K Rowling's official web site) enjoyed the status of "canon." Information that was judged to be "not canon" (e.g. details from the movie adaptations not in the books) was excluded. In the long gaps between books, this agreed-upon SQ fan text was available to be tinkered with and speculated upon within the safe haven of the site.

After the closure of the fan object, however, Rowling's new statements provoked consternation on SQ among some of its members. Fan fiction writers who had invested months or years participating in Rowling's detailed fictional world and creating their own were left reeling at the abrupt closing down of speculation. In the writing forum, a few days after the Dumbledore announcement, Zsenya started a new thread to discuss the status of details provided by the author that were not "on the page." The post began by referencing the site's official orientation to the fan object:

I know I made a big point of stating in the SQetiquette post that JK Rowling wrote the Harry Potter books and if you think you can do better, you should go fly a broom. But it was a little tongue-in-cheek... (*How Much is Too Much*, Oct 23 2007, 04.40)

The post went on to invite discussion about the changing status and role of fan fiction on the site. This opening up of discussion to criticism of the fan object was a departure from site norms and re-energised the writing forums for a short period. Members responded by airing their anxieties about and, in some cases, irritation with Rowling's "off the cuff" statements. The thread moved swiftly, running to seventy-two posts within three days.

One poster noted that Rowling's 'generosity' to sections of her fans left readers and writers of fan fiction with 'very mixed feelings.' The post went on to say that fan fiction writers participate in fandom because they are 'fiction junkies' and that such fans need information in 'story form' rather than 'just one sentence' from the author in order to 'adjust' their thoughts. For SQ members identifying as fiction junkies, ontological security was not so much related to a 'pure relationship' with the single fan object (Williams, 2011: 269), but, rather, to a broader pattern of identification with the pleasures of narrative. A popular view was that Rowling was now making things up 'on the spot' and that these details should be ignored. Others proposed strategies for distinguishing between

statements that could be given the status of canon for the purposes of fan fiction and less authoritative statements. After the third day of heated debate Zsenya summarised the discussion, acknowledging SQ members' 'geeky' over-investment in the HP books (including her own). She announced that she was in the process of changing SQ's story submission guidelines to account for the range of views expressed on the forum and her own fresh insight into the reasons behind 'all the non-canon discussions' in wider fandom.

As well as being a response to the expected and prepared for ending of the fan object, the arguments and rationalisations about Rowling's post-object actions constituted a profound disruption to community norms and procedures. Throughout its existence, the site had closed down criticism of JK Rowling through its selection of authors, institutionalization of the beta reading system and establishment of a 'highly biased and selective fan fiction archive.' It was yet to be determined whether a more critical ambivalence towards the fan object would invigorate the site and continue to energise fan fiction production.

Before this could be ascertained, it became apparent that SQ would need a radical overhaul if it were to survive in any form. From September 2007 sporadic but increasing connectivity and database issues further undermined the health of the site. Concerns about the site being on "life support" were beginning to emerge, particularly in the staff forum.

### ***The Closure of the SQ Forums***

At the end of November, as intermittent, unscheduled periods of site down time increased in frequency, Zsenya reported in the staff forum that she had recently learned SQ's current web hosting company would be stopping their services. Noting that the site was receiving less and less traffic she went on to say that she was considering reducing the size of the archive and forums. The following day she confirmed that, while the fan fiction archive would be preserved, SQ would no longer accept new authors and story updates would eventually cease. The transition was planned for Christmas as this would allow her to spend the holiday working on the changes. This would be a 'poetic' end to SQ in its current incarnation given that seven years earlier she had used her winter break to set up the site.

The news provoked an intensive reassessment of the purpose of the SQ among staff. As on COA, members posted expressions of sadness, while others appeared resigned to the inevitability of the end. Posts pleading for a stay of execution were mixed with those calling for calm. Staff members who supported the change noted that as the forums were 'already dying,' the news represented the 'end of an era.' Such posts emphasised the importance of a "good death" for the Quill and the continually unfolding nature of the "circle of life." A series of posts affirmed the necessity of 'reducing' and 'compressing' the site. There were suggestions that the story archive should be 'purged' of old, badly written stories in order to make room for an influx of fresher, higher quality fan fiction about to be written in the wake of the end of the fan object. As some members called for stability, emphasising the continuing 'legacy' of SQ, others remained reluctant to accept the prospect of the death of the site. A few posts petitioned the admins to reverse their decision and volunteered to take over the day-to-day running of the site. Offers of technical assistance, however, were not

forthcoming.

Warning that the hosting situation was now critical, Zsenya informed staff she would be posting an announcement for the wider membership before the holidays. Though the announcement stated the site was only in the process of being ‘downsized,’ it appeared to herald the definitive “ending” of the site:

I wanted to give everyone time to plan ahead, to migrate to other parts of the Internet and to explore other options for the Harry Potter discussions...The Internet has grown tremendously since 2001. We hope that people will continue the Sugar Quill tradition in other communities across cyberspace. (Sugar Quill website, December 2007)

The weeks following the official announcement and throughout the early months of 2008 were marked by intermittent, increasingly lengthy periods of downtime. Site traffic ground to an almost complete halt. A small group of staff hung on, carrying on with their duties as though nothing had changed in the hope that the transition period would lead to a renewal rather than a complete cessation of activity on the site. By the time the forums went down in August 2008, apparently for good, there were only five authors still posting stories. The last update to the fan fiction archive was on November 26, 2008.

Between August 2008 and March 2009 the site could not be accessed. At this point in Metivier’s research she had moved on to the interview stage of her data collection. To her surprise, in August 2009, a further announcement appeared on the front page of SQ. This stated that the site had been inactive for the past year due to ‘database-related’ problems and ‘life commitments.’ This appeared to draw a clear line under the ending of the site.

This was not, however, the full picture.

### ***After the End: the SQ Forums Today***

Although the site had appeared truly dead for several months, the appearance of the announcement was a sign of continued life. The ‘downsizing’ finally complete, the site would continue to be hosted and all ‘previous threads and stories’ would be made available in “read only” mode.’ Visitors would be able to ‘read past discussions but not actively post new messages.’ In November 2009, however, an SQ member discovered that it *was* in fact possible to post to the writing discussion forum and to a few other threads. Between 2009 and 2012 other members stumbled upon the still-active forums. To date 23 posts in total have been made.

In a severely attenuated state the site lives on. It remains a place for new visitors to enjoy the pleasures of reading fan fiction written during a bountiful period of fan fiction production. It also endures (from time to time) as a space for former SQ members to come together to celebrate the site/each other, congregate around new fandom events such as the release of the final *Harry Potter* movie, and mark significant anniversaries in the history of the community. One of the most recent posts, for example, commemorates the site’s role

as a gathering place for members during the September 11 attacks on New York.

At the time of writing (March 2013) the SQ forums are offline.

### **Exploring Endings**

In the accounts given above, we have explored how two fan sites reached a state of exhaustion and/or degeneration. The family resemblance between our studies provides interesting points of continuity and contrast. Whiteman's account examines responses to a termination that was very clearly announced as such; one with an explicit cut-off point (16<sup>th</sup> December 2005) at which point the forums disappeared. Her focus is therefore on how the announced closure of a fan setting was received and digested by its members. In contrast, Metivier's account can be seen to trace tensions that emerged both within SQ and in the SQ's relationship with the creator of the fan object as it moved into a period of post-object fandom and towards an ending that was both subtle and incomplete. Without the sustaining "lifeblood" of a flourishing story archive to feed new discussion on SQ, the site now exists in a state of half-life, neither properly alive nor truly dead. Our accounts also suggest that the closure of COA was a "cleaner cut" compared to that experienced by SQ. SQ was plagued by worsening technical issues over a long period, but there was a strong investment in and commitment to preserving the "legacy" of the site in the archive of textual material it contained.

These two tales of death also provide insight into the nature of online communities, and the production of subjectivity within these environments. The abrupt closure of COA was similar to that described by Pearce and Artemesia (2000), where five days warning was given to gamers that the game world they inhabited was to close (88). This demonstrates the ephemeral nature of online spaces. However sturdy these may sometimes appear, the plug can always be pulled, whether quickly, as on COA, or with more forewarning, as on SQ. Second, the endings of COA and SQ reveal differences in the nature of the responses and distinctive relationships to the fan object through the patterning of posts on each site. Positions asserted on the forums of these sites, for instance, suggest different levels of anxiety about control over the fan object and its reception during the periods we are examining. There is perhaps a sense on COA that the object had been "completed" and lines of inquiry had been exhausted. While this is also, to some extent, the case on SQ, here there is more concern with the preservation of life and health of the fan object and its meaning as something that can still be corrupted.

Alongside these differences, these two case studies also suggest more general contributions regarding the nature of endings and how we, as fans and as researchers, understand/use such events.

### **Recognising Endings**

The endings we have presented not only tell us something about what sustained life in these settings, but also provoke reflection on where we place the distinction between life and death. To some posters, the end of COA arrived after the site had already died and on

SQ (as on COA) the golden age was clearly positioned in the past. This ‘sense of an ending’ (Kermode 2000) that the end was nigh (or had already occurred) signals endings as subjectively asserted as well as empirical closures. The acceptance that the site was over on COA and that the canon forums on SQ were “dying” suggests the need for care in how we constitute endings in our analyses of fan cultures. On both COA and SQ the issue of the *relevance* of the sites/fan objects was of concern, given the patterns of behaviour that we have explored. On COA the absence of established members and new textual material appeared to lead to a general acceptance that the site was less relevant than it had been in the past, while on SQ the relevance of the site was a topic of discussion as tensions between fan site and author unsettled the existing mode of engagement with the fan object.

This resonates with the distinction made by Gallop (2011) in her work *The Deaths of the Author*. Gallop’s project puts forward a nuanced theorisation of death for thinking through shifts in relations between authorial subjects over time. Gallop makes a distinction between the literal, biological state of non-existence once the body has given up, and a sense of death that is perhaps of more concern to the author: the loss of relevance and relegation to the past. This is ‘not a literally dead author, but something possibly even worse, an author who while still alive is already a ghost — outmoded, obsolete, not present but stuck in the past’ (Gallop 2011: 143). Returning to the idea of zombie time, we find that here too, the sense of death as the presence or absence of energy/vitality does not always, by definition, coincide with the end of biological existence. Whilst zombie time is established in relation to an apocalyptic sense of “the end,” the relationship between the zombie and death is complex. The zombie survives in a ‘post-human’ state, but this transition does not necessarily involve a return from the dead (Boon, 2011: 7). Fhlainn (2011), too, notes that the line between human and zombie is not crossed through death as psychological transformation pre-death occurs in some zombie texts. These different points of reference also remind us of the way that, as Levine and Parks (2007) point out, the ‘potentially interminable afterlife’ of modern media objects commences sometimes even before official cancellation (4). For this reason, ‘the notion of a “final episode”, or instalment of a series, or ending of a fan community, is ultimately somewhat misleading.

These ideas — and the nature of the relationships with the fan objects and with other authors on COA and SQ — suggest that we should reflect on how we impose endings in our analysis. The analysis of these two sites serves as a reminder that constituting an ending in a particular way says some things and not others, and that focusing on “objective” endings as significant, inevitably cuts out other potentially productive lines of enquiry.

Another aspect of recognising the constructed nature of the endings we impose as analysts, involves acknowledging the frequency of endings within fan cultures in order to move towards an understanding of endings as plural/multiple. Such a focus can illuminate how endings function as an important part of how groups are constituted and identities configured. In the above accounts, we have focused on “big endings” of the fan communities and how these were linked to the endings of the fan objects. However, myriad smaller endings in the context of fandom — of instalments/episodes, series, fan fictions,

“meetups” — demonstrate the continuity of loss in fan cultures. These different types of endings and ruptures are significant in the ongoing production of subjectivity within fandoms. They get celebrated, provoking re-assessments and reminiscence, and all are involved in the discursive articulation and negotiation of the fandoms’ history and sense of itself. Within this, different endings emerge as more or less important to different groups. For some, the end of a ship may be significant, for others the death of a character. This experience of loss is everyday and ongoing. The loss of loved objects, however small or mundane, is a routine element of the emergent production of self/of object, leading to a constant process of stabilising and destabilising. This also suggests the need for care when imposing meta-endings onto sites/phenomena. The “post-ness” we attach to particular objects defines endings in terms that are important to us as researchers and to others within the same field. Official endings, such as final broadcast date, are also significant to fandom, but may not be experienced by all communities in the same way.

### **Endings as Productive**

Whilst being careful in how we recognise deaths/endings, it is also important to recognise the productivity of exploring endings. This productivity is suggested by Williams (2011) in her discussion of fans’ responses to endings as involving ‘reiteration discourse’ (267): efforts to establish a secure identity in the face of disruption. In a similar way, our accounts also suggest the way that endings can be invigorating as well as destabilising, thereby energising the production of subjectivity. In the case of both COA and SQ, it was the announcement of the end that provoked reflections on what the site had been (and whether “it” had already been lost). In this way, confronting the ends of things can be seen to be productive in provoking responses, whether those be individual reflections on the past, or social efforts to stabilise in response.

Shifting settings, it may not be going too far to recognise the same drive to resolve/reassess in literature exploring the status of fan studies as a distinctive field. Jenkins’ *Afterword: the future of fandom* (2007) argues that it may no longer be appropriate to talk about fans as either a distinctive group or as individual subjects. Given the radical expansion of what is meant by fan culture, where fannish practices are now a central part of people’s everyday lives, he notes the importance of thinking about the social dimensions of fandom as ‘everywhere and all the time’ (361). When fandom becomes such an ‘elastic category’ (364), it becomes increasingly difficult to locate the dividing line between ‘grassroots’ and ‘commercial’ culture, and between authors and their audiences. Jenkins expresses concern that the term “fan” is already in the process of being erased in media coverage and asks, is there any longer a ‘centralized, dominant culture’ against which fans define themselves? Can the ‘cultural otherness’ of the fan still be located?

As fandom becomes part of the normal way that the creative industries operate, then fandom may cease to function as a meaningful category of

cultural analysis. Maybe, in that sense, fandom has *no* future (Jenkins 2007: 364).

Is the fan becoming a zombie category — one that is ‘dead’ and yet ‘still alive’ (Beck 2001, 203)? Jenkins suggests a possible end for fan studies as it blurs into other disciplines, arguing that a greater crossover between fan scholars and scholars in other fields with similar interests in notions of emotional investment, appropriation, participation, and community would be beneficial in reinvigorating the field. Here, as on the sites we have looked at, a threatened ending is provoking a re-assessment of subjectivity (in this case, of the academic community of fan scholars, and subjectivity of fan scholarship).

### **Conclusion: Witnessing Endings**

In focusing on two specific tales of death, we have argued that our aim is not so much on marking out specific periods of time when we can examine how individual fans cope with change (Williams 2011: 274). Instead, we have argued for an understanding of ruptures/endings as ongoing, constant and generative of subjectivity. We want to close by thinking about the basis of our argument, in respect of our role as witnesses to these events, and reporters on these events in this paper.

Whiteman’s selection of COA as an empirical setting had partly been informed by rumours of the impending cancellation of *Angel* during 2003, and an interest in how the site would respond to this event. This was a strategic decision — informed by a broader theoretical interest in the nature of destabilising events — that might perhaps be defined as cynical. Her first response to the announcement of the closure was selfish; *relief* that she had not missed the end, something that would have been easy to do given the three day deadline. The next, was pragmatic, in ensuring that she had archived as much forum material as possible, before the site disappeared (the description presented in this paper is based on the archive of threads from the COA forums that she gathered somewhat frantically during these three days). Her overwhelming feeling, however, in observing the final posting activity on the forums, was one of sadness, and the moving nature of the final moments of the forum’s life, which included plaintive posts asking whether anyone was ‘still there?’ Despite her non-participant observational position — which meant that her experience of the life of the community had been from a distance — visiting COA had become part of her daily life. In the aftermath of the forum closure, with the forums now closed, the impetus to follow ongoing activity was removed. The archive now became her sole focus. Whilst this served to “bind” COA as a text, with this came a sense of loss, suggesting the identification that “even” the observer can develop with the observed activity.

During her immersion in the SQ fan fiction community, at times Metivier experienced her emergent, hybrid subjectivity as a fan scholar as isolating. During this period, the activities of reading and posting on the SQ forums and archiving posting activity pulled her in different directions. The ambivalence/anxiety she felt was eased to some



extent by social interaction with other fan fiction authors away from SQ, on LiveJournal and offline. Her experience of tension between her different “roles” on the site increased when she became a beta reader and forum moderator on SQ, a period that coincided with the end of the fan object. Participant observation on SQ came to an end when the forums went down in April 2008. At the time, as with other recent periods of downtime, there was no way of knowing if this would be a permanent state of affairs. As the site came back online intermittently over the next few months, she stopped posting and drew on her knowledge of the site to generate a fresher, “tidier” archive of key forum threads to supplement her existing “messy” archive of material. For this reason, the end of the fan object and the site’s eventual closure emerged as critical events: not only for providing insight into the nature of the site and helping Metivier to refine her research questions, but as an event closely intertwined with the ongoing production/emergence of a researcher subjectivity. The end of SQ provided respite from being “always on” and facilitated the process of gaining the necessary distance from the fan object to be able to produce the analysis. Four years on, she experiences a renewed sense of excitement and pleasure when she logs in to SQ to find another new post — as well as discomfort about “eavesdropping” on these poignant moments.

Both of us, then, made use of the endings of our sites in our studies of fan subjectivity/authorship. We have argued that this was productive theoretically, but it could be argued, perhaps, that there is something indecent in our exploitation of final moments that were (it can be assumed) experienced as deeply personal to at least some of the participants. The concomitant danger here is to imagine the loss and misfortune to be greater than was actually experienced. Whiteman experienced the ending of COA as sad for its members and then had to come to terms with the fact that their misfortune (as she perceived it) was beneficial to her research. When SQ ended, Metivier drew on her insider position as a staff member to imagine that the ending was experienced as a “good death” for the site, only to be confronted four years later with the knowledge that some members still mourned its loss.

In this article, we have constituted the sites themselves as zombies. This is perhaps not a good analogy if we think of zombies as aggressive monsters. In the sense that the sites were fading away, ghosts may be a more appropriate metaphor. Still, in popular culture zombies are also portrayed as weak/ailing and easy to kill — or as puppets. In this light, the zombie metaphor can also be seen as reflective of our anxieties about our interference in the settings and how we understand ourselves as witnesses to the events discussed. Our analysis of the sites, and use of members’ utterances, might be regarded as a parasitical animation of the sites by writing about them. In imposing our own meta-ending, like zombies, we aggressively colonize the endings of the sites, possessing the narrative and foreclosing other possibilities. Exploring our experiences as witnesses to these events suggests how theoretical constructions that are constitutive of our subjectivities as researchers might be understood to operate as a kind of parasitic virus hosted by the sites and communities that are our objects of study. In research, this may often be the case.

Nevertheless, in fan studies research where our activity is fuelled by the energy and enthusiasm of fans (ourselves as well as others), this awareness provokes particular discomforts and anxieties about the nature of our own subjectivity, as well as productive insights.

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