'Fanfic is Good for Two Things - Greasing Engines and Killing Brain Cells' (smartania.com)

Introduction

As a type of fan activity that relies on and derives meaning from other fan activities, specifically that of fan writing, 'hack fiction' represents a new complexity in the field of fan creativity. Rather than employing the television show as its primary material, hackers isolate the secondary text, the fan fiction, and invert the more common trend of fan activity by prioritising and situating this as the primary text through which all meaning within the community is produced. Henry Jenkins has referred to fan creativity as a form of 'poaching' in which the fan attempts to gain authorship over the text by 'continuously re-evaluating his or her relationship to the fiction and reconstructing its meanings according to more immediate interests' (Jenkins, 1992: 35).

Instead of poaching the television show, appropriating and extracting various meanings, whether implicit or explicit, from its structure, hackers essentially poach the poachers, stalking members of the fan fiction community across cyberspace and penetrating their works by literally imposing their voices upon the text. Hackers are not merely critics of fan fiction; they go one step further. To criticise is to maintain a distance from and a respect of the boundary of the writer's universe; hacking allows them the opportunity to actively and directly disrupt that world. Hackers seek out 'bad' fan fiction, fan writings which, for the hacker, do not meet a satisfactory standard of writing and 'hack' the stories, inserting their own mocking comments into the body of the original text. Labelling such stories as 'suckfic', they parody the writings of a number of (usually unwitting) fan writers and it is this ethic of parody which forms the basis of the hacking community. While fan fiction depends upon an intensive knowledge of the show in order to competently communicate meaning, hack fiction relies not only upon a knowledge of the show, but also upon an almost theoretical, scholarly awareness of the codes and conventions operating within fan fiction itself. This knowledge becomes the unifying factor within the hacker community, allowing the group to develop a sort of anti fan-fic meta-text.[1] The hacker creates a social atmosphere based on a potent dislike of 'suckfic' writing, and this environment becomes the foundation for every type of active exchange within the community. Competence of expression is of vital importance within the community, building upon a pre-accepted notion of its members as inhabiting a somewhat elevated position within fandom discourse in general.

Fan fiction writing operates as a means of fan activity which allows the individual to explore his or her own interpretations of the object of that activity, in this case the television series, and also other narrative forms such as films or comic books, or on public personalities of whom the individual is a follower. Television fan fiction usually involves some of the characters of a television series, but frequently rejects the plots that have already been developed within the diegesis of that series, replacing them with alternative creations which correspond with the fans' desired outcomes or preferred readings of the texts. In this essay I explore a subset of the fan fiction internet community, 'hackers', who pride themselves on violating fan fiction writings. I specifically concentrate on those who are active at www.smartania.com within the 'Mystery Suckfic Theatre 3000', a hacking base which concentrates largely on fan fictions from *The X-Files* and Japanese Anime fandoms and one in which I, after some difficulty and several 'flames'[2], established myself on the boards under a pseudonym and managed to conduct some virtual ethnographic research in order to acquire an understanding of the underlying motivations behind what hackers do, why they derive pleasure from their activities and to place them within the wider context of fan activity. I will examine the notion of 'distinction' within fan communities, demonstrating that hacking functions to distinguish between 'legitimate' fan writers and 'illegitimate' fan writers and acts to establish hierarchies within fan communities. I discuss 'hacking' as a weapon against other fans' incompetence as writers, serving as a means of regulating and manipulating fan writing activity on the net, and actively marginalizing certain fan writings which, according to them, do not have the right to claim authorial ownership over the text. I draw on concepts of distinction, cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), poaching (Jenkins, 1992) and bricolage to analyse the complex relationship between hackers and other fan fiction writers. And I explore the contradictory nature of the hacking community as one which both exploits and undermines certain fan activities while also inherently relying upon them for the production and persistence of meaning within the community.

How to 'write' correctly

Hack fiction is a culmination of two processes: the process of writing fan fiction; and the process of deconstructing that fan fiction in such a way that the voice of that author is suppressed and marginalized in fan writing subculture. Hackers punish the incompetence of other fans because they pose a threat to what it means to be intelligent 'readers' of a text. The ability to poach the television show, to extract meaning from its farthest expanses, to essentially 'read between the lines' becomes the empowering mechanism for the reader of any text, and particularly that of the televisual text because, as Michel de Certeau asserts, "the television viewer cannot write anything on the screen of his set…he has been dislodged from the product…he becomes the pure receiver" (2003: 109). It is this resistance to becoming the 'pure receiver', to being rendered silent by the production process, a muted observer who automatically accepts and assimilates all proposed meanings within the text, that mobilises the fan to poach. As Jenkins notes:

Fans recognise that their relationship to the text remains a tentative one, that their pleasures often exist on the margins of the original text and in the face of the producer's

own efforts to regulate its meanings (Jenkins: 1992: 24).

In the view of the hacker, however, bad fan writing reflects badly upon fan culture at large by disrupting the potential of the fan to become the author of the product. It functions only to serve the insecurities of the fan-consumer by exemplifying the frustrations of fan culture: the inability of the fan writer to properly exercise their authorial control over the show and to unjustly represent the wider, more competent fan writing community. One hackfic writer told me:

> <<It's also a lot harder to find decent stuff (fan fiction) these days due to the sheer mass of it about. Most of it (is) written by people who aren't really that interested in gaining any skills as writers (I so hate calling them that.). It all comes down to the writer at the end of the day. I remember reading fics that made me feel sad, made me laugh, and left me in awe of the writers talent … Now? After wading through 30 matrix fics about Neo boning Agent Smith or Morpheus all I feel is the burn of bile at the back of my throat.>> (5.1.03)

For hackfiction writers, knowing how to read a show 'correctly' functions as a prerequisite to knowing how to write the show 'correctly', and acts as a biased predetermination of one's competence of expression and communication in their membership of the community. As Jenkins notes, 'an individual's socialisation into fandom often requires learning "the right way" to read as a fan' (Jenkins, 1992: 89). It also works to reinforce exactly what 'good' writing should inspire in the reader of fan fiction. As one hackfic writer said:

<< I'm sat here hacking a Blairfic when I have work by friends who are genuine writers sat here on my computer waiting to be read. Work filled with real emotions, real angst and fear and love and wrongness, and most importantly its really well written and genuinely entertaining and moving. I could be reading that instead of this lifeless, meaningless dreck, but no. Bleh. >> (PKTechboy)

To be able to produce a legitimate reading or interpretation of the text parallels the right of the member to make claims about textual meaning in the show and, by extension, in the writings of other fans, and also inherently disallows certain readings of the show. The meanings produced within the community then act as a lens through which initiated members may judge subsequent readings of the texts, framing the ways in which they interpret other fan activity. As Jenkins notes:

> Fans … are responsive to the somewhat more subtle demands placed upon them as members of fandom-expectations about what narrative are 'appropriate' for fannish interest, what interpretations are 'legitimate' and so forth. Fan-produced works respond to the perceived tastes of their desired audience and reflect the community's generic traditions… (Jenkins, 1992: 88).

Creating Distinctions and Hierarchies

A particularly popular approach within the hacking community is to attack the fan fiction writer's failings in making sense of the television show of which they are a fan. This functions to disempower that writer's claims to being a fan of the show, whilst simultaneously elevating the hacker's ability to make claims about their own fan status. It also serves to explicitly disrupt the flow of the voice of author, separating it from the

universe they have created and framing it as a degenerate and flawed work. In one hackfic, the hacker notes,

> < It would be nice if you would at least (have) followed the plot of the f**king show when doing a post episode story.> (Nerbie)

While in another the writer plays the role of the fan fiction author:

"Dear Fox, guess what? In eight months, you are going to be a father. I am pregnant!! {{HAHA You're screwed up the ass for palimony, you little b**ch!}} Love, Dana." She saved the document as babymulder.doc…and printed it out. She smiled at the note.{{It was a bemused smile. She wondered how she, such a bright, smart woman, known for the almost baroque style of writing in her field journals could have written such a bland and yet gloating POS}} ('Discovery Of Love' by Erin M. Blair. Hacked by PKTechboy)

The use of a tactic such as this to criticise the fanfic writer operates on two levels: that of play and humour[3], unintended by the original author and discontinuous with their work; but also, and more importantly, that of distinction. It works to promote the hacker as a better writer of the show and also as a better reader, and thus fan, of the show. Devotion to and an intensive knowledge of the show are important prerequisites for determining the nature of the true fan. If these are not demonstrated, then the fan's right to claim such an identity is stripped of them. Hackers deploy a kind of postmodern ideal of knowledge as purely functional, using their knowledge in favour of and against others. As in the above example, lax characterisation and inconsistency of expression become a measure of the incompetence of the writer as fan. They expose the individual for what they are, a deviant, in the eyes of the hacker. By imposing themselves onto and disrupting the work of the fan, hackers actively enforce their jurisdiction over the planes of certain fan activities. Hackers re-map the boundaries of fan creativity, incorporating certain 'legitimate' materials into an idea of 'normative' fan writing culture, while excluding and alienating others. They essentially lay claim to certain notions of 'authentic' fan territories, while simultaneously disowning others.

What hackers do through poaching other fan writings, then, is similar to Bourdieu's idea of taste in class distinctions, that is, the 'propensity and capacity to appropriate…a given class of objects or practices (which) is the generative formula of lifestyle, a unitary set of distinctive preferences (Bourdieu, 1984: 173). Bourdieu noted that taste is never 'pure'; rather it is always embedded in social meaning. He argues that tastes are

> the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes…The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated (1984: 56-57)

The hacker subscribes to the existence of certain implicit means, a set of appropriate criteria, through which 'tasteful' negotiations of the individual's relationship with the product, the televisual text, may be made. They believe that hackers, as a community, are the possessors of a legitimate culture of fan writing, and that this bestows upon them the right to de-legitimise writing that does not conform to their particular standards of taste, rendering it 'distasteful'. The hacker demarcates certain efforts by the fan

community to make meaning from the text as authentic and legitimate, in turn seeking to naturalise and normalise these textual deconstructions, while actively marginalizing other 'tasteless' readings. Essentially hackers are a community of presumably well-educated fans with greater intellectual and creative cultural capital (Bourdieu: 1984) or, to be more specific, greater 'subcultural capital'[4] (Thornton: 1995). Thornton argues that subcultural capital operates both on the level of distinction and of cultural capital, noting that it 'is embodied in the form of being "in the know", using (but not over-using) current slang and (putting) a premium on the 'second nature' of their knowledge' (1995: 11-12). Hackers bestow such a privileged *a priori* status upon themselves through the 'insider' knowledge they mobilise against other fan writers in order to justify the 'suckfic' writer's deficiencies as both fans and writers, and simultaneously to elevate the hacker's role within the sphere of fan activity. In their use of exclusive, 'hip' humour and slang as both a weapon against other fans and as maintainers of their own identity, hackers reinforce their superiority and legitimacy as fans vis-à-vis explicit displays of (sub)cultural capital through knowledge and promote distinctions between fan subcultures based upon cultural capital.

This relegation of the fan fiction writer's status to that of 'suckfic' author also serves the purpose of imposing a hierarchical structure on the conduct of fan writing at large based on notions of distinction. Hackers distinguish between fan subcultures according to, as Macdonald notes, levels and hierarchies of knowledge and access to 'inside' information (1998: 136). Hackers construct a hierarchy based on competencies of creative expression within fan literature and, through this, lay claim to knowledge and abilities which justify their prestigious status within fan communities. The social role of the hacker is not only to 'violate' the work of other authors, it is also to establish and normalise a certain code of conduct for fan writers. By explicitly commenting upon other writers' taste and fan knowledge, hackers impose a certain mastery over both the original text (the television series) and other fan's interpretations of that text, thereby enforcing a code of hierarchy based on the fan's (sub)cultural capital. Hills notes that fans can be seen to construct hierarchies by "competing over fan knowledge (and) access to the object of fandom" (2002: 46). Hackers determine their privileged position within this hierarchy by establishing an elitist environment based on direct violation of the most fundamental signifier of the fan's status: their knowledge and interpretation of the object of that fandom. Hacking grants a privileged status within the hierarchy to those 'authentic' writers who can demonstrate their legitimacy as fans of the show.

Playing the Bricoleur

This is not to imply, however, that hackers insist on a singular way of writing fan fiction. The fact that they believe that there is a 'correct' way to read and 'write' the show does not mean that there is no original way to write fan fiction. Rather, they insist on the ability to emphasise the author's voice in the writings in order to fully communicate the meaning which they have drawn from the text of the television show to other readers and writers of fan fiction. This is subsumed into the wider ideology of the hacking community as a

means of maintaining the constancy of the bricolage effect of fan writings.[5] If fan writers can continue to 'poach' the text so that they gain a certain 'authorial' status over the text and essentially make the text submissive to the re-workings of their discretion and the imposition of their meanings, then the activity of fan writing assumes a bricolage effect, a challenge to the dominant culture, perceived and embodied within the original text of the show. Fan writers engage in a game of appropriation and re-appropriation of the text, forming their own style which, though not entirely subversive of the original text, does empower and prioritise the fan-author voice rather than that of the original 'author' of the show. Fan writing activities become the fan's symbolic "gestures and signs of refusal" (Muggleton: 2003: 200) to the mainstream culture of the commodified show in which the fan's role is to 'read' but not to 'write'. For the hacker, however, the bricolage effect of fan writings can only be maintained through the production and perpetuation of new and original styles of writing and ways of interpreting the original text as a means of empowering the otherwise 'silent' voice of the fan. For the hacker, the existence of 'bad' fan writing, that which does not provide insight or inspiration and which does not prioritise the position of the fan writer as 'author' counteracts the purpose of fan writing. Hackers then uphold the 'virtues' of the fan fiction community by literally filtering the 'bad' from the 'good', the 'legitimate' from the 'illegitimate', through 'hacking' and negating the voice of the fan that fails to achieve these objectives.

Hackers also claim that they are making 'bad' fan fiction more accessible to the fan fiction audience through the imposition of their voices over that of the original writer. Smartania.com defines hackfic as follows:

> <<When a member of Smartania takes the above (fan or 'suck' fic) and gives it the Mystery Science Theatre 3000 treatment, thus making it a little more tolerable.>>

While they are violating fan fiction that deviates from the wider fannish ideologies of conducting 'proper' readings of the text, they are also simultaneously acting as subconscious monitors of this deviance, enforcing a code of resistance to the possibility of fan fiction failing to achieve its fan-empowerment objectives. This operates as an attempt to de-popularise and discourage similar appropriations of the text. Yet for hackers the 'correct way' to read the show does not constrain the fan fiction writing community at all; fan fiction for them is justifiable as long as it competently represents the author's voice and adds a new textual meaning to the show itself. Hackers do not hate fan fiction; they merely oppose sub-standard representations of it. Many of them have written fiction themselves. Asked this question of whether they like fan fiction, one hacker told me,

> <<I've come across some really well-written fanfic. And hell, I've written the odd fanfic myself and it gave me the practice and got me back into writing my own original stuff after I hadn't done it for years. So I can't really knock it at all.　But there is SO MUCH CRAP out there that it's become near-impossible to wade through it to find any good stuff.>> (EPK75)

It would therefore be incorrect to assume that the majority of hackers reject the idea of fan fiction itself; if anything they support it. In fact the hacker serves to rejuvenate fan fiction writing as a subcultural movement by constantly re-fetishising the original text of

the television show, ensuring that it always remains a mystical, meaning-laden object for competent writers of the fan fiction community. They promote the notion that the fan writer's voice should be empowered within their writing and, by extension, within the commodified object, the television show, itself. The text can be 'rewritten' in multiple, novel ways as long as the voice of the fan acts as a foundation for its writing. The fan writer must find original ways of performing within the constraints of fan fiction writing. In his discussion of 'ways of operating' and 'instructions for use', de Certeau says that the person must:

> create for himself a space in which he can find ways of using the constraining order of the place or of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity (de Certeau, 2003: 108).

Fan fiction, for the hacker, is concerned with exactly this: with ways of establishing a 'degree of plurality and creativity' within an environment which impresses certain rules and regulations upon the writer. For the hacker, the 'legitimate' fan writer finds multiple ways of rewriting and re-privileging the text. 'Problematic' fan writing, then, is that which does not establish the necessary degree of creativity and plurality required for the fiction to be viewed, by the hacker, as a 'legitimate' rewriting of the show.

Celebrating 'Trash'

However, it is not enough to say that hackers merely act as monitors of the activities of other fan authors, omniscient protectors of the virtues and meanings with which authors instil their works. The hackers' position is an altogether more complex and contradictory one than this. One hacker offered the following reasons for their work:

> <<Hacking fan fiction is like therapy. It lets you get all the bad feelings that you are left with after a horrible fic that violates one of your favorite TV shows or books out of your system. It's also the chance to be a big meany and be accused of being "just jealous" by the "Sunshine up your ass happy moron brigade"(c)>>Nerys. (Nerbie)

This notion of hacking as therapy is an important one in developing an understanding of the reasons behind the hackers' motivations for hacking, why they are driven to hack fan fiction that they believe violates a show rather than maintaining an observational distance from and distaste of the work. By 'violating' fan fiction writings, hacking not only allows them the opportunity to impose a voice upon another, deriving their own meaning from it and simultaneously exaggerating and stifling the voice of the fan fiction author, but also becomes a means of indirectly negotiating their own positions in relation to the text of the television show. It improves their own potential for deriving meaning from the show while also providing a relatively safe framework through which they may 'test the water' as such. Using as a medium and a stimulus the writings of other fans, hackers are free to play with their own notions of what it means to be a fan, exploring their understandings of both the text and of fan culture itself. Hack fiction allows them the freedom to assert themselves, to 'be a big meany' and to develop their own original and critical style and to test the constraints of fan fiction. As such, they negotiate the boundaries of the fan fiction universe, allowing themselves the flexibility to cross these boundaries, while

simultaneously reinforcing them for other writers. This gives them the opportunity to act as commentators on the very process of fan fiction writing itself.

Furthermore, hackers themselves act as bricoleurs upon the fan texts, viewing them as matter for public consumption and moulding and re-shaping them to suit their own tastes and desires. Fan fiction thus acts as the stimulus for the production of meaning within the community by which this new style is formulated and explored. The author becomes the unknowing victim of the hacker, subject to the imposition of the hacker's meanings and the marginalisation of his own voice within the text. The hacking community is evidence that the pattern of bricolage within fandom is not merely a visible component of fan activity but also persists and reproduces internally, within and across fan activity, the bricoleur acting upon the bricoleur. This act of deconstructing the deconstruction, of recontextualising an already recontextualised meaning, forces the hacker into a complex position. While hackers boast about their 'violations' of other fans' works, they must also realise that it is this work that drives them, that essentially inspires and motivates the entire community. It is for exactly this reason that the meanings for the hacking community remain such implicit, unspoken ones. While they may be enforcing their own form of punishment upon other writers, they are also being mobilised to write by these writers. For the hacker, then, the writings of 'bad' fan fiction authors do, in fact, possess those meanings which they so fervently deny in their hacks. They continuously brand the works that they hack as 'meaningless dreck', telling the authors that they 'suck', but before they hack they must somehow acknowledge, even unconsciously, that the works are endlessly meaningful and, above all, that they derive a strange and inexplicable pleasure from its reading. They unwittingly celebrate what Jeffrey Sconce has termed 'trash' culture with reference to fans of 'paracinema', establishing and reinforcing 'a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility' (1995: 372) in which meaning is produced through an intertextual dependency on other fans and other fandoms, in this case, 'suckfic' writers. For the paracinema fan, the emphasis is upon the extremities of 'badness' necessary, as Hills notes, to 'revalue "bad film"' (2002: 60). For hackers, the 'trashy' nature of the text produced by the 'suckfic' writer becomes the focal point for 'celebration', offering the hacker the excesses of 'bad' writing necessary to 'revalue', to give new meaning to the 'suckfic' text. The process of hacking would not exist were it not for other fans' readings of the show, and hackers are wholly dependent upon the meaning these fans produce; they must exploit and exaggerate it in order to hack. The 'bad' or 'trash' fan fiction, then, is the meaning-laden object of the hacker's bricolage activity upon the text, becoming, as Hebdige notes, that familiar object that warrants analysis as a sign of collected meaning, an object that must be 'worn' in such a way as to violate that collected meaning (Hebdige, 1979). The collected meaning is that which underlies fan fiction, that claim by the writer to authorial status of the text; the 'sign' that must be violated becomes, for the hacker, the 'bad' author, the one who does not deserve this right, yet whose claim persists. The hacker's gesture of refusal towards the collected meaning, then, becomes the process he engages in, a literal attempt to negate all 'illegitimate' claims to authorial status. In this way, hackers not only use other fans as a referent, they also use themselves as such. It is impossible for

hackers to understand their culture without firstly understanding fan fiction culture; it is impossible for them to hack fan fiction without firstly, and crucially, examining their own position within that culture. They represent their concerns and doubts with regard to their positions in relation to the wider expanses of fan culture, a postmodernist condition of uncertain, fragmented identity. They violate and re-invent the texts of fans to reflect these concerns, juxtaposing a celebration of the objectives of fan writing with deep contempt for those same objectives. As one hacker noted:

<<…there were a lot of fanfic writers who became "elite", had a lot of fans, and let this go to their heads. I just wanted to shake these people and say "you write... fanfic.">> (EPK75)

Conclusion

In these ways, and indeed in many more ways which are beyond the scope of this paper, the hacking community inhabits a complex space within fan territory. Concerned with the writings of fans and the production of meaning, they seek to safeguard and protect the fans' relationship with the text, giving the voice of the 'authentic' and 'legitimate' fan writer precedence over his authorial claim to the text. They simultaneously work to marginalize the works of certain authors, denying them their voices within fan culture and their meanings in relation to the primary text of the television show, whilst creating and reinforcing distinctions and hierarchies within and between fan communities. However, they are also essentially bound to the texts that they hack, forcing them to at least unconsciously accept and acknowledge the meanings produced by these 'deviant' fan writers. In the process of denying them these meanings and performing the rituals of hacking practice upon them, they are coerced into a mutually complex relationship with them, one which constantly reinforces their dependence upon 'suckfic' writers for the production and maintenance of meaning within the hacking community and intrinsically causing them to continuously question, negotiate and re-examine their own positions within the broader expanses of fan culture.

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[1] Baym cites Jenkins' definition of the meta-text as a collaborative method of interpretation and discussion through which meaning is produced and enforced within the community. Baym, 2000: 17.

[2] 'Flaming' is a term used in online lingo to denote a deliberate attack on others in conversation.

[3] Indeed humour plays a very important role in the maintenance of the hackfiction community. Specific jokes and colloquialisms reproduce themselves in many of the hacks and on the message boards, acting to establish a sense of online 'togetherness' and exclusivity. An analysis of humour and of *how* members communicate online deserves special attention but is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper.

[4] Thornton coins the term 'subcultural capital' to denote a subspecies of cultural capital which can be seen to operate outside the domains of class and economy, with which Bourdieu is largely concerned.

[5] Muggleton defines bricolage as "an act of transformation by which a new and original style is formed through plunder and recontextualisation as a challenge to the hegemony of dominant culture." Brooker and Jermyn, 2003: 200.

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