

Time Travelling with fanfic writers: Understanding fan culture through repeated online interviews

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Abstract

This study surveys existing understandings of fans and fan culture, and further contributes findings that not only document, but also analyze the transformative nature of fan culture and audience participation in the era of the Internet. Through repeated online interviews with fanfic writers from the fandom of *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003; movie, 2009), and as a case study, this study explores the nature of online fan involvements, investigates the role of fanfic writers as symbiotic cultural producers and active audience, examines the impacts of the Internet on fan activities and communities, assesses the benefits of using repeated online interviews in fan studies, and offers new observations that supplement existing findings in fan culture and audience studies.

Key Words: Fan culture, audience studies, audience participation, online interview, fanfiction.

Introduction

Scholars in cultural and audience studies have long examined the interrelationships between audience participation and mass media in fan and fandom studies (Baym, 2000). Within fan studies, fanfic is seen as a fairly new form of audience participation in contemporary popular culture that allows fans to actively participate in media consumption and production (Jenkins, 2006), and has been studied for its transformative impacts on established media culture and practices (Hill, 2001; Gray, 2010).

This is a case study of online fan culture that centers on the fandom of *The Time Traveler's Wife*, the international bestseller novel by Audrey Niffenegger (2003, California, MacAdam/Cage). This study investigates the transformative dynamics between mass media and active audience, explores motivations behind fan and fanfic involvements, observes fan culture in the context of the Internet, promotes the use of online interviews for future fan studies, examines the psychological and social values of fan communities, and suggests the literary and canonical significance of fanfic that further supplements existing findings in fan and audience studies.

What is Fanfiction (Fanfic)?

Fanfic stories are, in Thomas' words, literary works that 'borrow the settings, plots, characters, and ideas from all forms of popular culture' (2006: 226) in the attempt to weave together new tales that build upon existing stories in all styles and forms. There are different types of fanfic, for example, 'crossover' is the blending of ideas and characters from different stories, and 'slash' is the homosexual bonding between fictional characters (Jenkins, 1992a). Granted, different types of fanfic or fandom attract different types of fans, and engender different kinds of fan culture and social norms. In aiming to have a substantial view of fan culture on a micro, and more in-depth level, this study focuses solely on the fandom of *The Time Traveler's Wife*.

Fanfic and Transformative Media Culture

The origin of fanfic can be 'traced back to the 1930s pup magazine *Fanzines*' (Thomas, 2006: 226); however, it wasn't until the 1960s and 70s that fanfic really flourished and turned into the form that we now know. As Pugh (2006) observes, the rise of fanfic coincided with a post-war trend in personal and educational improvements. It was a period in which people consumed much more entertainment content from the rise of mass media, and also expected more of themselves and the educational system. More than before, mass media consumers and readers became involved in the shaping and reworking of media contents that satisfy their own demands. As Henry Jenkins asserts, fanfic writing is about drawing materials from dominant media, and utilizing them in ways that serve the writers' own interests, pleasures, and imaginations (1992b: 214). Similarly, it is with this view in mind that Pugh (224) denotes fanfic as the 'triumph over market force,' as the audience is now actively manufacturing content whenever they are dissatisfied with what the mass media provide (e.g., writing alternative endings to a story). In Derecho's words, 'Fanfic is not a genre of "pure" resistance, [as] there are elements of pacification by and cooperating with the dominant culture in fandom... [Instead, it] opens up possibilities not just for oppositions to institutions and social systems, but also for a different perspective on the institutional and social' (2006: 76) by

offering new ways of thinking, and challenging popular culture's power and influence in storytelling¹.

'The Time Traveler's Wife'

The Time Traveler's Wife (2003) is a fictional love story between a man who involuntarily travels through time, and a woman who is always left behind, waiting for his eventual return to the present, and his eventual return to her. With its intricate storyline and captivating narrative style, *The Time Traveler's Wife* is widely received internationally², and also has a fandom that consists of a small but passionate number of fanfic writers who devote some of their time, energy, and creativity to the expansion, continuation, alteration, and re-imagination of *The Time Traveler's Wife*.

It is hard to define which genre *The Time Traveler's Wife* belongs to, as it is not only romance, but also science fiction and fantasy. In understanding fantasy fiction and its relation to its readers, O'Keefe asserts, 'many people consider fantasy an escape, which takes them for a while out of their dreary, frightening lives to a pleasant, impossible world like the one Mary Poppins lives in—the delight being in the unreality' (2003: 11). One aspect that distinguishes *The Time Traveler's Wife* is that it not only carries on the tradition of fantasy fiction in bringing readers into the world of limitless imagination, but also grounds itself in the reality of everyday life that captivates its readers. Like many fantasy stories (e.g., *Trek*, *LOTR*), combining the fantastic element of time traveling and realist depiction of love and separation, *The Time Traveler's Wife* is not merely a means of escape for its readers. Additionally, it is liberation into the openness and endless possibilities offered by the fictional world that allow its readers to indulge in the intricate mixture of reality and surrealism.

Aims of This Study

As discussed above, in the attempt to investigate the transformative dynamics between fan and mainstream media cultures, and through the case study of fanfic writers from the fandom of *The Time Traveler's Wife*, this study seeks to understand the rationales behind fan involvements, examine the transformative nature of fan culture and audience participation on the Internet, encourage the use of online interviews in future fan studies, and contribute new findings to supplement existing literature in fan and audience studies.

Methods

I began my study by going to www.fanfiction.net, one of the largest fanfic websites on the Internet, and locating all of the fanfic stories relating to *The Time Traveler's Wife*. All of the fanfic stories were accessed and documented in February 2008. I found fourteen stories that were written by ten fans on the website, and I contacted all of them via email, or through the website's 'message' function when the authors' email addresses were not provided in March 2008 (See Appendix A for a template of the initial contact e-mail). Of the ten authors that I contacted, five agreed to participate in my study. Two of the five interviewees consented to my using their real names in my study; however, to better protect my subjects' privacy, only their online monikers are used in this study. Repeated online interviews were conducted via emails and online instant messaging services such as AIM and MSN, and the number of interviews conducted with each fan ranged from two to seven times, with the most being four times.

Interviewed Fanfic Writers

Fanfic writers featured in this study are Bobcat Moran, Elphabathedelirious32³, Ninadow, Katta, and Brooklinegirl. All of the interviewees are female, and their average age is 24. One of the ways in which to categorize fanfic writers is by making note of the nature of fandoms that each fanfic writer participates in, as well as the kinds of texts that they tend to deal with in their fanfic stories. The five fanfic writers interviewed in this case study are not representative of *all* fanfic writers, but only those who work in comparable fandoms and write in analogous fashions (i.e., crossover or slash). Similarly, findings in this study may not be generalizable to fanfic writers at large.

Bobcat Moran has written 19 stories based on Mega Man/Rockman stories, and she is most interested in the X and Classic series. Elphaba32 has written 72 stories that center on Star Wars, Gilmore Girls, Wicked, Wizard of Oz, Grey's Anatomy, Book X-overs, NCIS, Silence of the Lambs/Hannibal, and True Blood, and Wicked is among one of her all-time favorite books. Ninadow has written 12 stories based on Naturo, Blood And Chocolate, Pirates of the Caribbean, and some other miscellaneous books and games. Lastly, Katta has written 77 stories based on a large range of books, TV shows (e.g., Buffy: The Vampire Slayer, West Wing), movies (e.g., X-Men and StarTrek), comics (e.g., Calvin & Hobbes) and novels (e.g., Sherlock Holmes and LORT). None of the interviewees is a first-time fanfic writer.

Potential Limitations

One of the potential limitations of this study is its relatively small sample size. Nonetheless, because this study is exploratory in nature, and with the aim of providing in-depth understandings of online fan culture through case study of one fandom, the lack of a large sample size is not as critical to this study in particular. In fact, in taking a qualitative approach, this study is actually more affected by the quality of the interviews rather than the quantity of the interviewees. With advantages brought forth by conducting repeated online interviews (see below), this study has generated rich qualitative data for textual analyses, and these analyses as well as new findings will be presented in the next section to supplement existing theories in the field.

Analytical Construct

In my attempt to gain firsthand experience while reconstructing my interviewees' views on fanfic, online interviews enabled me to understand fanfic writers' lived experiences through in-depth interaction with them (see Bakardijeva & Feenberg, 2001 and Akpinar, Wennerstrom, Svensson, & Osberg, 2006), and also facilitated my data-driven research approach. Particularly, in analyzing the data, I followed Emerson et al.'s approach (1995) in developing a 'thematic narrative.' Namely, I systematically investigated all interview materials by constantly going back and forth between the data and the development of narrative analysis 'though an intellectual examination of evidence to eventually reach its contributing central idea' (171). Moreover, As Emerson et al. suggest, and employing Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory⁴ (1967), I prevented myself from formulating explicit hypotheses, and relied on the interviews as the 'essential kernels of the narratives' (171) by paying attention to the ways in which the interviewees discuss and describe fanfic. Furthermore, all original interview materials, or 'naturally occurring descriptions' (Emerson et al.: 115), are presented in this study to enable the readers to make their own assessments of my interpretation of the data.

Why Online Interview?

While there are multiple ways to better understand fan cultures (i.e., face-to-face or phone interviews, surveys, and focus groups), I argue that online interview is the most ideal approach, as it is not only an excellent tool for in-depth understandings and analyses of human behaviors (Hills 2000; McBride & Bird, 2007: 181), but also a helpful aid in exploring mediated activities in ways that traditional methods are incapable of mastering (Alasuutari, 1999). As suggested by Prandstaller, 'The critical promise of [online interview] resides in its potential to make and keep our interpretations sensitive to the concrete specificities, to the unexpected, [and] to history' (Ang, 1990; Prandstaller, 2004, p.5). Some people argue that online interviews are not as efficient as face-to-face or phone interviews (Katherine Sender,

Ph.D., personal communication), since a lot of peripheral and contextualizing information are lost without direct encounter. While this school of thought does have its own merit, the purposes and benefits of conducting online interviews in online fan and fanfic studies are fourfold:

First Reason: Anonymity

Jenkins documented in 1992(a) the tendencies of the public to label fans and fanfic writers as 'outcasts and freaks' because of their perceived fanatic behaviors. As a consequence of these derogatory stereotypes, fanfic writers may be less prone to express their true thoughts and feelings as freely as they would otherwise (and this phenomenon will be discussed later in this study). For its unmediated encounter with the interviewees, traditional research methods (e.g., face-to-face interviews) take away the protective shield of anonymity that many fanfic writers find comfort in and value (Akpinar, Wennerstrom, Svensson & Ostberg, 2006: 20), and make the interviewees less willing to be interviewed, and less likely to self-disclose certain kinds of information even if they agreed to participate in the study.

In reference to their awareness of outside stereotypes against fanfic writers, Katta commented:

Katta: I think most people find fannishness a bit weird in itself- to get so caught up in fictional stories.

Katta's assertion highlights an aspect of fanfic writing that people outside of the fanfic community often question-- The 'fanatic' aspect of fanfic writing⁵. In fact, this is often the impression that outsiders have of fanfic writers: Extremists who get so caught up in fictional stories. Echoing Katta's viewpoint, Bobcat Moran illustrated:

Bobcat Moran: It's taking being a fan of the series to a level that I think a lot of people would find a bit odd. Certainly, that's the vibe I get from news reports that I read every so often about fanfiction- they have a, 'now aren't they * odd* and * different*?' feel to it, a sort of 'look at this stranger new culture we just discovered!'

As Pugh asserts, fanfic writers are often seen as 'irrational beings whom cannot tell realities apart from imaginations' (2006: 7) by people outside of the community, and, as Bobcat Moran

suggested, these stereotypes are often aggravated by the media's pigeonhole coverage of fanfic writers, and further marginalize fanfic writers in society by giving them neither the chance to explain nor show who they really are beyond conventional stereotypes and media misrepresentations. The consequence of this vicious cycle, as I have discovered, is dual: Firstly, it encourages fanfic writers to closet themselves. For example, in response to conventional stereotypes against fanfic writers, Bobcat Moran expressed in one of our interviews that she purposefully keeps her online identity separate from that of her real life because of her embarrassment by her own fanfic involvements:

Bobcat Moran: [My embarrassments mostly stem from] the stereotypes that go along with fanfic writing.

Additionally, stereotypes against fanfic writers also force fanfic writers to guard themselves against people outside of the community to avoid potential ridicules or contempt. For this reason, online interview is the optimal research method, as it allows fanfic writers to open themselves up while remaining somewhat anonymous.

Second Reason: Medium-Specific Fan Culture

The transformation of fan communities, as a result of technological advancements, makes online interviews an apt method for fan and fanfic studies. Literature in the field has established that the Internet has opened up a new world that allows fans from all over the world to congregate and form an ever-growing global community that was never before possible (Akpinar, Wennerstrom, Svensso & Ostberg, 2006: 3). Echoing this perspective, Katta commented:

Katta: Back in the days of mailing lists, people gathered together as fans of one particular thing [...] Nowadays with Livejournal and such places, it's easier to find areas to be multifannish and geek out [...] It opened up possibilities [...] Of course, it also means a lot of fans never meet in person. [...] So it has changed socially too

Katta pointed out that the Internet has brought about changes not only in how people participate in various fanfic communities (Prandstaller, 2004: 8), but also how they interact with each other in these communities. More generally, McBride & Bird (2007) denote that changes in medium often lead to changes in fan culture. For this reason, because this study

is interested in the online fan culture of *The Time Traveler's Wife*, doing repeated interviews on the Internet makes more methodological sense.

Third Reason: Practicality

Not only has the Internet made overarching changes in fan culture, but also it has fundamentally changed the demographics of fanfic writers and made traditional modes of interviews less practical (Halleskon & Busse, 2006:13). For example, not only do most of my interviewees have different kinds of jobs that result in dissimilar lifestyles, but they are also very geographically dispersed in that most of them live in different parts of the United States, if not the world. The varying jobs, locations, and time zones among my interviewees make both face-to-face interviews and phone interviews impractical. Online interviews such as email exchanges, on the other hand, are advantageously asynchronous, and consequently allow the interviewees to participate in the study whenever they can, and from wherever they are.

Fourth Reason: Nature of Online Interview

While face-to-face interviews' ability to contextualize interviewees' answers has long been recognized in qualitative studies, Mann and Stewart (2000) assert that the same level of meta-understanding and analysis is also achievable over the Internet. Specifically, Mann and Stewart assert that the same effects could be reached by observing the non-verbal and extralinguistic behaviors of interviewees via 'emoticons' that often lead to substantial understanding of the subjects' responses beyond face value.

Findings & Discussions

Why Fanfic?

To people outside of fan or fanfic communities, the attractiveness of fanfic is not always so easily comprehensible. In trying to explain their fanfic involvements, most of my interviewees discussed the motivations that inspired their fan activities, and their analyses fall under four main categories:

Motivation No. 1: Self-Enrichment

To Bobcat Moran, self-enrichment is a key feature that motivates her fanfic creations:

Bobcat Moran: Fanfiction... provides me with an excuse to write, a ready-built world to work in, and a preexisting community of people willing to leave feedback. It's a way for me to keep my foot in the door, fandom-wise, and, since I'm the sort who will over-research all sorts of little things—for instance, I learned all sorts of things about the Chicago Youth Symphony for 'La Primavera' that never show up in the story- it's a way to learn all sorts of new, often esoteric things... It sort of fulfills the desire to have more of the story.'

Bobcat Moran suggested that the process of writing fanfic stories gives her the chance to learn 'new' and 'esoteric' things that she would not have otherwise, and that she appreciates the willingness of preexisting community to offer feedback on her works. Echoing Bobcat Moran's view, Thomas (2006) also asserts that the interactivity and willingness to provide feedbacks among fanfic writers is not only prevalent but also essential to fanfic communities.

Motivation No. 2: 'To Stay A Little Longer'

Elphabathedelirious32 (Elphaba32), on the other hand, had another reason for her fanfic involvements:

Elphaba32: Writing and reading fanfiction is... a way to stay with a favorite story after it's over. Everyone knows what it's like to read a book and wish there were more of it. Fanfiction is a way to stay immersed in the story and the character. Some good fanfiction is actually like reading a continuation of the story.

To Elphaba32, fanfic's ability to let her 'stay a little longer in the story' is what attracted her the most. Echoing Helleskon & Busse's view (2006: 7), Elphaba32 saw fanfic stories as a 'work in progress' that shifts between fanfic writers and readers, and that provides new discourses and engagements to satisfy the quest of interested parties to carry on the story. In a way, Elphaba32 suggested an intimate tie between certain fanfic writers and the medium, and further exemplifies the personal connection some fanfic writers identify with the process of writing and reading fanfic, a connection that extends the relationship between the fan and the canon.

Motivation No. 3: Extension of Escape from Reality

Steering away from the psychological fulfillments that fanfic engender, Ninadow is, instead, attracted by the extension of 'otherworldliness' of fanfic:

Ninadow: I think everything, from books to games to anime, is an escape from reality, at least in some part [...] Because, while you are focused on that, you're not doing what other people around you are [...] You're not in that world; you're in the story's world [...] That's why fanfic is fun, because you get a hand in creating that world.

The 'otherworldliness' of fanfic attracts and motivates Elphaba32 and Ninadow. It is intriguing; however, that while Elphaba32 is attracted to fanfic's ability to lengthen her stay in the realm of imaginations that both mainstream media and popular culture have created for her, Ninadow is enthralled by fanfic's capability to extend her escape from reality into an imaginary world that she created for both herself and others in the community. In other words, fanfic allows her to help create an extended escape that some people seek from popular culture. Nonetheless, similarly to Elphaba32, Ninadow also commented that she appreciates the total control she has over the construction of her fanfic world.

Motivation No. 4: Celebration of Media Content

With a slightly different perspective, Katta asserted:

Katta: I think fanfiction 'can' be a way of dealing with displeasure with the original source material. I've certainly used it that way, both as a reader and a writer. For instance, when a certain character got killed off *Supernatural* a few weeks ago, I read every new fic [fiction] I could find that had him surviving. But fic used that way is a form of methadone; it doesn't fully heal the disappointment. Meanwhile, a lot of fic isn't about mending the original, just toying with it.

While fanfic does not fully heal Katta's occasional disappointment with, nor does it allow modification of, original materials from mainstream media, it at least provides her with a way to proactively deal with such displeasure at her own discretion, and this sense of empowerment is something that she values. Echoing Pugh's (2005) perspectives, as an attempted counterforce to encourage alternative takes and celebration of mainstream media content and popular culture, fanfic provides Katta with a channel to resist, extend, or alter

media content offered by established media conglomerates on a much more interactive and personalized level.

Motivation No. 5: Personalization of Media Content

To Brooklinegirl, writing fanfic is gratifying in that it allows her to explore and elaborate on things that were never included in the original text:

Brooklinegirl: It's a fascinating process- I get to take the canon and structure of a show or movie or book I really like, and expand upon it, make it something more than it was, explore hidden depths and stories that were never included in the canon.

Brooklinegirl's comment is a perfect illustration for what Biggle, Jr. termed the basic human urge: 'The urge to speculate, to invent, [and] to dream' (1985: 121). To Brooklinegirl, the charm of fanfic writing lies in the alteration, expansion, and, essentially, personalization of existing commercial contents.

Psychological, Social and Literary Values of Fanfic

Henry Jenkins asserts that fanfic stories 'are as much the artifacts of a particular cultural community as they are the expression of personal meaning and interests' (1992a: 215). Undoubtedly, the definition of fanfic varies, as it is essentially about the 'behaviors, interpretations, and interactions' between the individual writers and the text (Bradley, 2005: 8), and this is another reason why I decided to carry out an extensive study on one, as opposed to multiple, fandom. Similarly, echoing the intricacy raised by Bradley, as well as Jenkins' view, much of the existing literature in fanfic studies has focused on the psychological and social aspects of fanfic writing (e.g., Jenkins 1992a; Jenkins 1992b; Grossberg, 1992; Smith, 1999; Thomas, 2006; and Willies, 2006), and these two aspects are further affirmed and explored by the fanfic writers that I interviewed:

Elphaba32: Fanfiction is a way to get into the minds of favorite characters, and to stay in the story a little longer. It's also a way to work through issues with the ending or certain characters. Most fanfiction writers I know are also fiction writers, and as writers when we have an issue with characterization at a certain point in a story, or feel very deeply about an ending, we use fanfiction to 'fix' it or work through it. Additionally, if there are scenes or explanations 'missing' from the novel or source material, I like to explore what those could have been.

To Elphaba32, fanfic is a chance to 'fix' events that have happened in canon that she found dissatisfying, a way to prolong the pleasure granted by the original story that is dear to her heart, and a channel to express her emotion and creativity. It's psychological in the sense that Elphaba32 attempts to correct, through writing fanfic, what is wrong, painful, or missing, and to explore possibilities that were never present in the canon (Willis, 2006: 167). In other words, through her fanfic creations, Elphaba32 proactively tries to minimize psychological discomfort that comes from cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

Additionally, in elaborating on the psychological values of her fanfic involvements, Ninadow asserted:

Ninadow: To me, fanfiction is a chance to get inside a character's head a bit more than I would if I were just reading the book.

Echoing Elphaba32's perspectives, Ninadow also sees fanfic as a chance to get inside the minds of her favorite characters. Unlike Elphaba32 and Ninadow; however, Katta voiced another psychological values of fanfic:

Katta: It is a way of untangling my thoughts when I see or read something, of interacting with it, creating meaning from it, comparing it with other works... all those things done in analysis, only done in fiction instead. (Or too, because of course I analyze things.) And it's also a way to communicate with other fans, both communicating ideas about the show/book, ideas about the world, and more personal conversations about what's going on in our lives.

To Katta, fanfic is a way for her to contemplate and analyze the original text, and to exercise her literary creativities through writing. Moreover, confirming the social aspects of fan involvements that existing literature documents (e.g., Jenkins, 1992b), Katta further commented that fanfic is also about the exchange of ideas and thoughts with other fans, and the sense of community where fans become friends, form trusting bonds, and share personal stories with each other.

Confirming the social significance of fanfic, Elphaba32 asserted:

Elphaba32: [Fanfic is an] outlet for my obsessions so that my friends who don't want to hear my rantings don't have to anymore... It provides a writers' community full of people who all share at least two common interests (writing, and whatever the source material is). I met one of my closest friends through fanfiction, which is a lot safer than MySpace.

To Elphaba32, fanfic communities provide fans like herself with a venue to meet likeminded individuals who share similar interests and hobbies (Brooker, 2007), and this form of social network is facilitated by most offline fan communities' moving online.

Adding to Elphaba32, Ninadow, and Katta's viewpoints on the values of fanfic, Brooklinegirl stated:

Brooklinegirl: [Writing fanfic] is a creative outlet, a social circle, and a great support structure for writing and creativity.

Aside from seeing fanfic as a creative and social outlet, and as a new perspective that has not been accounted for in existing literature, Brooklinegirl recognized fanfic's literary significance in that fanfic writers often give and receive compositional feedbacks from each other within the community, and this is something that is valued by most community members. Arguably, giving and receiving writing feedbacks does not necessarily denote literary significance at first glance. However, the fact that such instrumental exchanges are not uncommon in fanfic communities signifies the importance of literary values to fanfic writers in developing their writing skills. Moreover, building upon Brooklinegirl's recognition of the literary importance of fanfic, Bobcat Moran stated:

Bobcat Moran: [Fanfic is] a way to explore ideas that were glossed over/ignored/left out entirely from canon. It's a writing exercise and a way to find sometimes surprisingly good, sometimes appallingly bad stories. It's a huge part of fandom and sometimes is the way I discover new books/movies/TV shows/video games when a writer whose works I like in one fandom also writes for other fandoms.

Instead of highlighting the psychological and social aspects of fanfic in fan communities, as existing literature and my other interviewees have done, Bobcat Moran focused on the literary

importance, or compositional aspects, of fanfic, in her fan involvements. This does not suggest the devaluation of either the psychological or social significance of fanfic to fans. Nonetheless, this calls to attention the need in the field to recognize the literary significance (Oppenheim & Turner, 1999: 292) of fanfic as much as it has in its acknowledgement of the psychological and social values of fanfic in fan communities.

Contrary to existing literature's systematic overlooking of the literary importance of fanfic (Coppa, 2006: 226), most fanfic writers that I interviewed not only see fanfic writing as a literary exercise that they take seriously, but also wish to relate such perspective to people outside of the community. For example, in answering my interview question, 'Is there anything else you would like to add to help me better understand fandom, fanfic, and/or *The Time Traveler's Wife*?' Elphaba32 commented:

Elphaba32: Legitimate writing can come out of what is technically fanfiction.

Elphaba32's declaration is her attempt to defy conventional stereotypes that people outside of the community often have in seeing fanfic as merely 'unoriginal stories that are based on other stories' without recognizing the efforts that fanfic writers put into maintaining the quality of their works as they attempt unceasingly to measure up to the eminence of the canon. This does not suggest that fanfic writers aim to write stories that mimic content from popular culture, but that they care about the quality of their works as not only extension or alteration to popular culture, but also respectable literary works that they can share with other community members.

In fact, in illustrating how seriously fanfic writers treat the literary aspect of fanfic writing, and how much recognition canon receives in fanfic communities, Ninadow pointed out that there are self-regulating online communities that are 'bent on ranting about bad fanfic.' According to Ninadow and Katta, bad fanfic consists of stories that contradict the original storyline, fundamentally change the personalities of existing characters, and are poorly structured or written. Moreover, in trying to rectify inaccurate stereotypes against the quality of fanfic in general, Katta noted:

Katta: [Fanfic is] sort of like Mozart's variation on Twinkle Twinkle— There's nothing wrong with the original Twinkle Twinkle, it's just fun to play with.

Katta's comment is stimulating in that it drew a distinct parallel between Mozart and Twinkle Twinkle, and canon and fanfic in the attempt to attest to the quality of works that 'derive from other works.' Fanfic is a genre that consists of stories that are based on other people's original works; nonetheless, as my interviewees have suggested, not only do some fanfic writers value and take the craftsmanship of fanfic writing seriously, but they also believe that legitimate writing can, and does, come out of fanfic.

Canon

One thing that is peculiar to fanfic writing is its emphasis on following the original 'canon.' Canon is the original characters, settings, background information, and writing styles of the original work that all fanfic writers base their stories on, and it is not only the *sine qua non* to fanfic writers in their creations, but also what fanfic writers value, and use to judge each other's works. For example, according to Katta and Ninadow, bad fanfic consists of stories that contradict the narrative styles or logics of the canon, or that induce a sense of discontinuity between the canon and its fanfic stories.

For its irreplaceable importance in fanfic culture, I was surprised to find only a handful of studies that examined the values and impacts of canon in existing fanfic literature. In summing up established views on the influence of canon in fanfic culture, Kaplan comments that canon is sometimes seen in the field as a 'restriction that limits fanfic writers' creativities' (2006: 151), as fanfic writers are bound by communal standards and norms to follow the narrative styles and events of the canon in order to create a sense of continuity between the original text and their works. While canon can indeed be interpreted as a creative confinement, most fanfic writers that I interviewed suggested otherwise:

Brooklinegirl: [Writing with canon] is fascinating... I get to take the canon and structure of a show or movie or book I really like, and expand upon it, make it something more than it was, explore hidden depths and stories that were never included in the canon.

Brooklinegirl, for example, found the ability to expand upon canon 'fascinating' because it allows her to expand upon existing events, and further explore the original canon in ways that the screenwriter or author did not account for. Instead of feeling restrained, Brooklinegirl actually saw canon as building blocks from which to develop her fanfic stories. Augmenting this perspective, Ninadow commented:

Ninadow: If you're making an original world, you have to worry about balancing the exposition out with the action [...] But with [canon], you already have an established setting and characters [...] I don't have to tell you that Clare loves Henry [from *The Time Traveler's Wife*] very much and by the way—Henry's a time traveler! [...] because you should already know them [...] I could get right into my [story] without having to explain the whole social order [...] or what their goals are, or some such info that we should already know.

To Ninadow, canon is anything but boundaries that curb her fanfic creativity. In fact, she prefers writing with canon, as it prevents her from having to dwell on generating minute details in order for her stories to make sense to her readers. According to Ninadow, writing with canon allows her to focus more of her attention on exploring alternative plots and character developments, and this is something that is only possible with the existence of a communal canon. For example, Ninadow asserted:

Ninadow: It's actually a bit hard going from fanfic writing back to regular writing [...] Since I find that I've left out key details that I know, but everyone else doesn't [...] It's darn annoying, it is.

Ninadow's sentiment towards the inconvenience of writing original stories without canon is interesting in that it fundamentally challenges the notion that sees canon as restraints rather than liberations. Echoing Ninadow's view, Kaplan (2006) asserts that fanfic writers actually find having canon empowering in that they believe canon allows them to focus more of their attention and energy on developing their stories that extend, alter, or savor the canon without worrying about contextual information (i.e., setting of the story, who the characters are, and relationships among the characters) because that is already shared knowledge between fanfic writers and their intended audience. Summarily, and as Brooklinegirl and Ninadow exemplified, canon is not only the *sine qua non* to fanfic, but also the essence that attracts fanfic writers and binds the fanfic community together.

On 'The Time Traveler's Wife'

It is true that different canons may attract different kinds of fans, and lead to the formation of different fan communities and cultures. In my attempt to survey the nature of *The Time Traveler's* fandom, the interviewees were asked whether there is anything special about this

specific canon that attracted them, and/or that set *The Time Traveler's Wife* apart from other canons. Bobcat Moran, for example, discussed what she likes about this novel, and how it makes for a good canon:

Bobcat Moran: [*The Time Traveler's Wife*] appeals to my inner romantic and my inner science fiction geek. The characters all feel very real to me, and I would've guessed that Niffenegger was from Chicago even if I hadn't read the authors' bio in the back, because there's all these little details that really make the setting feel complete. And I liked the creative way the book was set up. The jumping around in time gave a lot of tantalizing hints as to the future.

Bobcat Moran enjoyed the realistic aspect of the book. Moreover, in talking about why she thinks *The Time Traveler's Wife* is a good canon, Bobcat Moran believed that the story's jumping back and forth in time allows her the freedoms to insert additional events, and also facilitates futuristic writings that continue and/or expands the canon. As she further illustrated:

Bobcat Moran: [*The Time Traveler's Wife* makes a good fanfic topic] because there are a lot of gaps left in the story, lots of places where a missing scene could be inserted. It's a very easy fandom to write future-fic for, [and] I've noticed that a lot of people seem to write stories with an older Alba.

In fact, not only has Bobcat Moran noticed other fanfic writers' writing stories on an older Alba that the original story does not account for, but Bobcat Moran herself has also written and published a futuristic fanfic story that centers on the encounter between an older Alba and Henry. Echoing Bobcat Moran's view, Katta also appreciated the realistic approach Niffenegger takes in dealing with time traveling:

Katta: It's a very lovely book - I liked the way it was written, and the realistic description of the time traveling and what it did to [the main characters' lives]

In looking at *The Time Traveler's Wife* from another perspective, Elphaba32 offered an alternative standpoint that differs from both Bobcat Moran and Katta's viewpoints:

Elphaba32: I like and dislike emotion of *The Time Traveler's Wife*. A book that pulls one in completely emotionally is a great book, but when that emotion turns painful, as at the end of *The Time Traveler's Wife*, it is agonizingly bittersweet.

To Elphaba32, the emotional appeal of *The Time Traveler's Wife* is what makes the book remarkable. Nonetheless, as Elphaba32 mentioned, the end of *The Time Traveler's Wife* is distressing, and it is certainly something that none of the fanfic writers I interviewed enjoyed.

Elphaba32: [Writing fanfic for this book] was mainly a way to resolve my sadness over the ending of the book.

As Elphaba32 alluded to earlier in this study, she uses fanfic to 'fix' things that she doesn't like about an original story. In carrying out this tradition, Elphaba32 has written and published two fanfic stories that quintessentially override the tragic canonic ending with a happier one.

Offering yet another reason that distinguishes *The Time Traveler's Wife* from other canon, Ninadow commented:

Ninadow: I liked that [the author] treated time travel like an affliction instead of 'This is wonderful, now let's go mess up the past' [...] The writing style was also a lot easier than some of the other books I had been reading up to that point.

To Ninadow, it is the fictional characters' attempt in dealing with time travel and Niffenegger's writing style that bring out the uniqueness of this book, and encourage her fanfic creations.

Last but not least, for reasons comparable to that of Katta and Ninadow, Brooklinegirl commented:

Brooklinegirl: The book is fantastically written, and so completely new- the structure and the story and the science and the 'rules' of time-travel- as to be completely fascinating to me.

While time traveling has always been a popular theme in science fiction (O'Keefe, 2003), the way Niffenegger presents and experiments with time traveling is certainly considered, at least by most of my interviewees, novel and intriguing. To Brooklinegirl, *The Time Traveler's Wife* makes a good fanfic canon because the structure of the book contributes to this sense of endless possibilities that encouraged her to explore different viewpoints and character developments. Granted, each fanfic writer has, more or less, her own reasons for writing fanfic. Nevertheless, it appears that the way Niffenegger deals with time travel, the very nature of all the 'gaps' in the chronology of the narrative, is one central element that is appreciated and celebrated in the fandom of *The Time Traveler's Wife*— The desire, as well as ease, to 'fill in the gaps.'

Conclusion

Participatory fan activities have transformed the ways in which audience and mass media interact. From literature review to qualitative data analyses, this study has, through repeated online interviews with fanfic writers from *The Time Traveler's Wife*, explored the transformative nature of online fan culture, discussed briefly the historical developments of fanfic communities in relation to mainstream media content providers, investigated the motivations behind contemporary fan and fanfic involvements, made observations regarding online fan culture through the case study of *The Time Traveler's Wife's* fandom, promoted the use of online interview in conducting future fan studies, discussed the impacts of conventional stereotypes against fanfic writers, investigated the psychological and social values of fan communities, and offered suggestive new insights regarding literary values of fanfic that complement existing findings in fan and audience studies. Nevertheless, this is a case study of only one fandom on the Internet, and hence more research needs to be done in order to assess the generalizability of the findings presented in this study to fanfic writers at large.

In the world of media convergence, the roles of media, culture, and audience are amalgamating (Bird, 2003: 3), and their influence on each other is greater than ever before. As a counterforce to mass media, a distinct culture of its own, and a proactive audience who consumes but also produces (Jenkins, 1992b: 214), fans and fanfic writers alike should be acknowledged for their multifaceted nature, and understood beyond conventional stereotypes and media misrepresentation. Moreover, as Henry Jenkins asserts, 'We should no longer be talking about [fans] as if they were somehow marginal to the ways the culture industries operate' (2007: 362). In fact, the Internet has made various forms of fan participations and productions more visible than ever before, and fan activities are no longer as underground as it used to be. With the convergence of traditional and new media, the nature of mass media, fan culture and audience participation is evolving, and these transformative dynamics call into

question existing debates in the literature regarding fanfic and its relation to the power and influence of mass media in storytelling.

Returning to earlier arguments made by Pugh and Derecho in the introduction -- While fanfic can be seen as 'triumph over', or 'resistance to' mainstream media and popular culture, perhaps the picture is more complicated than that. Rather than aiming to 'challenge' mass media, interviewees from this case study collectively voiced more personal motivations for writing and reading fanfic stories. Particularly, most of the incentives have to do with fans' desire to obtain gratifications that mass media fail to offer, be it unsatisfied curiosity or unfinished imagination. Just as changes in medium contribute to the transformation of fan culture, changes in the uses of fanfic also further complicate the relationship between popular culture and fans by calling into question the 'supply and demand' balance between mass media and audiences. Extending Henry Jenkins' assertion, not only should consideration of fanfic's impact on audiences center on the gratifications that fans seek from fanfic, but also the power struggle between mass media and audiences should be evaluated based on the role of mass media as delegated *by* the fans. In other words, the question should no longer be 'What do mass media give the audience?' but 'What does the audience take away from mass media?'

Biographical Note

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Appendix A: The Initial Context E-Mail

Hello,

My name is Angela Lee, and I am a Ph.D. student at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. I am currently doing a study on fan culture and fanfic in the fandom of *The Time Traveler's Wife*. I came across your fanfic story on this website while doing research, and I enjoyed reading your piece. With your permission, I was hoping to interview you in whichever way you prefer (i.e. via email, instant messaging, online chat room, and/or Skype), as I believe you will enrich my study, and also add to its credibility. Please help me understand the uniqueness of fanfic and fanfic writing.

Your participation involves answering a few questions relevant to this particular study. It is entirely voluntary, moreover, if you find any question intrusive or annoying, I will naturally respect your point of view and you do not have to answer such question(s). I guarantee that all of the answers provided by you will be fully confidential, and will not be used for any other purposes.

If you have any question about this study or anything else, please don't hesitate to contact me at anytime. Below is my contact information:

Email: *****

AIM: *****

MSN: *****

Thank you for your time, and I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely yours,

Angela M. Lee

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¹ Albeit the extent to which this counterforce influences mainstream media, in addition to granting fanfic writers and readers a sense of empowerment, is contestable.

² The book is named the 2003 Amazon.com Book of the Year; winner of the 2005 Exclusive Books Boeke Prize in South Africa and 2006 British Book Award for Popular Fiction; and has sold nearly 2.5 million copies in the U.S. and U.K. as of March 2009.

³ To facilitate reading, 'Elphabathedelirious32' will be shortened to 'Elphaba32' for the rest of the paper.

⁴ Grounded theory is known for its potential in 'developing existing theory or, occasionally, new theories' (Barbour, 2007, p. 1116), and is thus a fitting approach for this exploratory case study.

⁵ Granted, the word 'fan' in fanfic did come from 'fanatics' (Bird, 2003: 52).