

Geek hierarchies, boundary policing, and the gendering of the good fan

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Abstract:

Even though mainstream cultural constructions of geeks (and, through it, fans) have been changing recently, they remain heavily gendered. I describe how fans internalize these concepts, and how gender and gendering of fannish activities continues to affect inter- and intra-fannish policing. What underlies much of this border policing is a clear sense of protecting one's own sense of fan community and ascribing positive values to it while trying to exclude others. Fans replicate negative outsider notions of what constitutes fannishness, often using similar feminizing concepts. Accusations of being too attached, too obsessed, and too invested get thrown around readily, and all too often such affect is criticized for being too girly or like a teen. Particularly interesting here is the gender bias that not so subtly pervades much cultural conversation surrounding fan discourses and that is more often than not predicated on unruly sexualities and queer bodies, both of which get policed within and without fan spaces.

Keywords: affect, border policing, fanboy, fangirl, fan representation, geek hierarchy, gender discourse.

Twilight ruined Comic-Con. Scream if you agree!!

In her *L.A. Weekly* Comic-Con 2009 recap, Liz Ohanedian describes the apparent tension that the *New Moon* panel generated. Bringing large numbers of mostly young, mostly female *Twilight* fans to this enormous geek convention caused discontent for various reasons: the fannish object itself was dismissible, and the fans' new fan status and their modes of engagement were suspect. Responding with signs stating 'Twilight ruined Comic-Con. Scream if you agree!!' Comic-Con attendees replicated common fan stereotypes by regarding *Twilight* fans as too obsessive, too fanatic, and too invested. Moreover, they also showcased the complementary if not contradictory internal fannish dismissal: that one

could fail to be a good-enough fan as well as a good-enough representative to the outside. In fact, most internal fan hierarchies fall into one or both of these critiques.

Not being a good-enough fan usually encompasses not knowing enough facts, not owning enough fan objects, and not having been a fan long enough. In the case of *Twilight* fans, it simply meant that most of these fans would never have come to Comic-Con had it not been for *Twilight*. They were new fans and singular fans focused on *Twilight* only, and with the questionable reputation of their fan object, they weren't good-enough fans. At the same time, though, the constant emphasis on their particular modes of fan engagement, such as frenzied and hysterical squeeing, suggests that their created fan image was embarrassing to other fans. After all, the fanatic fan, the dangerous fan, and the unsuccessful fan are well enough treaded (see Jenkins 1992; Jensen 1992), and most fans instinctively try to avoid negative public representations, all things that *Twilight*'s very loud and very visible fangirls made more difficult.

What makes this case so interesting is that at every level of dismissal gender plays a central part. *Twilight* itself and its fans are ridiculed in ways fans of more male oriented series are not. Melissa Click points out how the adjectives used to describe fangirls in the popular media are not only excessive but also highly gendered. She suggests in her discussion of *Twilight* fangirls that the 'reports of girls and women seemingly out of their minds and out of control disparage female fans' pleasures and curtail serious explorations of the strong appeal of the series'. Just as popular disregard of the series suggests gendered stereotypes, so does the internal fan policing on display at Comic-Con. In fact, the *Twilight* fangirls fail to be good fans, and thus embarrass other fans, by liking the wrong things and liming them in the wrong ways. These reactions are not restricted to *Twilight* fans, but the gendered aspect of this particular scenario is indicative of the ways discourses of fandom are influenced by issues of gender not only in the way female fans are regarded but also in the way certain negatively connoted fannish activities are considered specifically female.

Underlying all these analyses is a gender binary that identifies certain behaviors as *masculine* or *feminine*, with the former usually connoting active, intellectual, aggressive, and objective, and the latter, passive, emotional, sensitive, and subjective. While recent gender theory (Butler 1992) has clearly shown these categories to be constructed, not just on the level of culture but on the level of biology, the societal associations linger and become self-reinforcing. When women act according to stereotype, their behaviors get dismissed as feminine; when they act against stereotype, their behaviors get dismissed as aberrant or get reinscribed negatively as feminine nevertheless. In the case of overt sexual expression, for example, male desire for female stars is accepted as healthy virile sexuality, whereas female desire often gets redefined as overinvested and hysterical—a term that in its etymology, of course, already shows its genderedness.

In his discussion of 'pathologizing stereotypes of fans, by fans' (Hills 2012: 121), Matt Hills focuses on inter-fandom stereotyping and dismissal not just through gendering but through what he calls, "'gender plus," that is, gender plus age or generation' (Hills 2012: 121). And yet even issues of age often are framed in terms of gender, so that girl and girly

become age and gender dismissals. Looking at music fandoms, for example, Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs's (1992) discussion of Beatlemania and Gayle Wald's (2002) analysis of boy bands address the negative feminization of not just the fans but, by extension, the male performers as well. Wald in particular shows how the intersection of gender, age, and sexuality in bands that perform 'specifically to and for girls' pleasure' [7] allows a patriarchal culture to dismiss both the bands and their fans as being 'girly', and thus lacking quality and authenticity.

If female fans are dismissed more easily, then so are their interests, their spaces, and their primary forms of engagement. Or, said differently, gender discrimination occurs on the level of the fan, the fan activity, and the fannish investment. There is a ready truism that enthusiasm for typically male fan objects, such as sports and even music, are generally accepted whereas female fan interests are much more readily mocked. Likewise, fangirls are mocked as is fan fiction, an activity more commonly ascribed to females. More than that, affect and forms of fannish investment get policed along gender lines, so that obsessively collecting comic books or speaking Klingon is more acceptable within and outside of fandom than creating fan vids or cosplaying. Even the same behavior gets read differently when women do it: sexualizing celebrities, for example, is accepted and expected among men but gets quickly read as inappropriate when done by women.

For this essay, I look at the way mainstream culture has constructed the geek (and through it, the fan) and how, even as this portrayal has been changing, it remains gendered. I begin with the general perception of audiences, popular and academic, in order to show how fan representations often sharpen the focus of already generally negative and pejorative portrayals. I then describe how these concepts have been internalized among media fans and how gender and gendering of fannish activities continues to affect inter- and intra-fannish policing. I analyze the debates and fannish repercussion when generally accepted norms are broken and where media fans consciously debate the image they do and do not want to present to the world: fans selling their fan works; fans outing other fans; and fans stalking celebrities.

When looking at a variety of examples, both shared in this essay and experienced in over 15 years as active media fandom participant, I suggest that what underlies much of this border policing is a clear sense of protecting one's own sense of fan community and ascribing positive values to it while trying to exclude others. Even without specifically incorporating my identity as a female fan, the essay is clearly shaped by my experiences and observations and is theoretically influenced by the autoethnographic movement laid out, for example, by Alexander Doty (2000) and Matt Hills (2002). I hope that the multitude of examples and the popularity of the geek hierarchy itself among geeks and fans is an indication that these tendencies indeed do exist. So while I chose a given example for its exceptional quality, I easily could have chosen a variety of alternatives to make a similar case. This self-assertion and collective identity creation is understandable behavior and altogether common in most forms of social groups, especially counter- and subcultures (see, for example, Hebdidge 1979). However, it is noteworthy how fans replicate negative

outsider notions of what constitutes fannishness, often using similar feminizing and infantilizing concepts. Accusations of being too attached, too obsessed, and too invested get thrown around readily, and all too often such affect is criticized for being too girly or too juvenile. What interests me particularly here is the gender bias that not so subtly pervades much cultural conversation surrounding fan discourses and that is more often than not predicated on unruly sexualities and queer bodies, both of which get policed within and without fan spaces.

I want to reward people for consumption

Fans have been granted a kind of model role in audience studies as the field moved from a Frankfurt School view of audiences as passive prey of the manipulative mass media to a Birmingham School construction of audiences as active interlocutors. The former is most vividly represented in Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of the culture industry, where mass media stupefy their audiences in clear contrast to high-brow art, which challenges and expands viewers' minds (1993), whereas the latter is most clearly articulate in Stuart Hall's distinction among various forms of audience responses that range from accepting to highly critical (1991). While many studies, such as those by John Fiske (1987), David Morley (1980), and Ien Ang (1985) have looked at more or less random audiences and their responses to culture, others have focused on more specific groups. Janice Radway's (1984) ethnographic study of a particular group of woman romance readers and Tania Modleski's (1982) psychoanalytic analysis of female television audiences address the gendered behavior of viewer interpellation and audience response. Henry Jenkins' (1992) literary and cultural studies analysis of fans and fan texts and Camille Bacon-Smith's (1992) ethnographic investigation of fan culture both situated their reception studies within a mostly well defined, easily accessible, and highly self-conscious example of active audiences. As a result, fan studies became all but a subset of audience studies with fans as 'canaries in the coal mines' (Jensen 1992: 24) of contemporary media culture, even as the definitions of what actually constituted fans became more complicated. In their study of *Audiences*, Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998) offered a nomenclature for subcultural audiences that distinguished fans, cultists, and enthusiasts, trying to articulate the difference between more general attention, focused interests, and active community engagement. However, in all these conversations about the gendering of audiences, especially in soap opera fandom, and the fan as representative audience member, there was little focus on the actual representation of fans and the way fans themselves responded to these representations. It is this reception I want to address, and how recent changes in fan and geek media representation have affected fan audiences.

While this essay is ultimately about fans, I begin with a discussion of geeks and their representation. Using geeks as a near synonym for fans also delineates the types of fans I focus on: it may be obvious that I do not look at either sports or music fans but, given my focus on gender, it is important to point out that I also do not look at traditional star and celebrity fan culture. Indeed, it may be the intersection of traditionally gendered modes of

fan objects and engagements that creates some of the anxieties I am discussing, where melodramatic plotlines and male sexualization may be permissible in soaps but not in comics. Given this specific focus on science fiction and media fandom, I will at times treat geek and fan as interrelated if not interchangeable terms: geeks tend to connote more interest in academic matters, especially technology and science, whereas fans are more often connected to popular culture. However, their representations often conflate the two, so that characters' geekiness is often shown through their fannish characteristics, such as collecting TV show paraphanelia, dressing as TV characters, having memorized TV trivia, or going to scifi conventions.

Thus while general geek acceptance has also brought with it wider fan acceptance, it is often the less explicitly fannish (or, one might argue, the less explicitly *female* fannish) elements that have been accepted by mainstream. Moreover, both fans and geeks tend to share complex feelings toward identifying as such: the simultaneous pride and shame is habitual for both groups and largely for similar reasons. In the examples for geek definitions I use here, the vast majority of examples and categories are in fact fan related—mostly comics, gaming, and science fiction. Even as fans and geeks are aware of external criticism, the subculture(s) also take particular pride in their otherness. At the same time, with geek chic, the general culture has embraced certain levels of geekiness just as audience engagement and convergence culture have made fans more acceptable.

The same, then, can be said of fans: Henry Jenkins, in fact, has mirrored this shift throughout his career. Where his 1992 *Textual Poachers* looks at media fans and their transformative works specifically, his 2006 *Convergence Culture* shows how these fannish behaviors have mainstreamed and how indeed media industries should study fannish activities closely. In fact, this mainstreaming of fannish behavior and increased attention to fans by media and show producers is among the most dramatic and influential change in recent fan studies. Fans are more easily found these days as fans are less stigmatized; consequently, networks and producers have begun to expect and even create fannish behavior in their audiences. This attention reveals itself in multiple ways: stronger awareness and representation of fans within popular shows; interpellation of audiences as fans with interactive social media; and direct conversation with audiences via new media outlets such as blogs and twitter.

In general, media fans have become more visible and multiple as fannish behavior has entered mainstream audiences. Fans are everywhere and at the center of attention from the academy, journalism, and industry. On the one hand, fans function as easy representatives for audience behavior: early adapters and adopters, fans are outspoken, passionate, and usually provide extensive feedback. On the other hand, networks often prefer their audiences a bit less involved and invested. At MIT's 2007 Futures of Entertainment conference, which brought together academics and studio representatives, Buzznet representative Elizabeth Osder distinguishes between 'superfans' and more mainstream 'consumers', clearly favoring the latter. Beginning with 'I want to reward people for consumption', she dismisses superfans, instead focusing on consumers who contribute

in smaller ways, trying to get them more invested and involved in the product: 'How can I reward them for their good contributions and how can I incent them to do more things'. She thus suggests that network and commercial tie-in sites prefer casual users whose individual contributions may be small but whose numbers are important and who don't have unrealistic expectations and demands.

Industry desires fans because of viewer loyalty, free advertisement, and increased purchase of connected products. Moreover, fans contribute their free labor to add value to sites. Thus, casual viewers-turned-fans are desirable to the industry because they are prone to watch their shows regularly, talk about them to others, purchase missing (or all) episodes and tie-in products, visit the network sites regularly, and add material to discussion boards; moreover, they are appealing because they aren't too fannish, too obsessive, too much. Fans who read and comment occasionally on a network site are much more malleable and less contrary than those who are hypercritical or create transformative works that might compete with studio products or ideologies. Louisa Stein, using Althusserian terminology, describes this media industry's marketing behavior of creating fans as *interpellation* in her essay 'Hailing the Millennial Fan'. Speaking of the specific program *Kyle XY* and its transmedia strategies, she describes:

In its simultaneous construction of, and address to, the Millennial audience via transmedia storytelling, ABC Family interpellates an ideal viewer who is liminal and yet poised to be mainstream, expert at media and yet potentially malleable for advertisers, willing to go the extra mile in terms of textual investment and yet happy to play within the officially demarcated lines'. (Stein 2011: 130)

In other words, the constructed fan combines all the positive fan qualities such as sustained viewer interest and commercial viability while engaging fannishly in ways preferred and controlled by the studios.

People who write erotic versions of *Star Trek* where all the characters are furries

Where industry may have its preferable low-level consumer fan, fans themselves constantly create internal hierarchies. The value of a given fannish activity may differ from fandom to fandom, but most fans seem to agree that everyone looks down upon and mocks 'People who write erotic versions of *Star Trek* where all the characters are furries'. Lore Sjöberg's 2002 popular 'Geek Hierarchy' showcases the dynamic of internal fan stereotypes as it replicates the stereotypes that popular culture points at fans: wherever one is situated in terms of mockable fannish behavior, there is clearly a fannish subgroup even more extreme than one's own, and it is that group that one can feel secure in not being a part of. And, as the title of this subsection indicates, most fans can rest secure in their knowledge that erotic

furry fan fiction remains less acceptable than their fannish hobby. The geek hierarchy thus articulates a strong need and desire within fannish circles to articulate some form of hierarchy, mostly to prove to oneself that there are more intense geeks out there. What makes the hierarchy interesting is that it understands itself as self-reported. Nowhere does the chart make declarative statements but instead the arrows are defined as 'consider themselves less geeky than', thus suggesting the hierarchy's ludicrousness at the same time as it shows that everyone on this list may indeed be considered odd by mainstream culture. In so doing, it questions the entire premise of creating internal hierarchies in the first place.

Moreover, throughout the chart there's the potential for lateral comparison, i.e., how does a 'comic book fan who only reads superhero comics' compare to an 'erotic fanfic writer'? The answer, of course, is that they're both equally geeky: they are both more geeky than science fiction writers and less geeky than furies. In fact, while the hierarchy's attempt to not privilege certain types of fan activities over others (cosplay and fanfic writing and gaming and comic books all have their own branches), the top and bottom of the hierarchy are singular: science fiction authors and furies respectively. Francesca Coppa analyzes the hierarchy in terms of performativity, though she acknowledges the way gender and professionalism are tied closely into this:

The hierarchy supports traditional values that privilege the written word over the spoken one and mind over body. The move down the hierarchy therefore represents a shift from literary values (the mind, the word, the 'original statement') to what I would claim are theatrical ones (repetition, performance, embodied action). As we descend, we move further away from 'text' and more toward 'body', and, at least on the media fandom side of the diagram, toward the female body (because fan writers are likely to be women). (2006: 231)

The geek hierarchy exemplifies the internal tensions all fannish geeks contain: play and embodiment are ridiculed even as fan activities thrive on various forms of play; professionalism is ranked higher despite the fact that fans celebrate amateur expert status; too strong an investment is threatening even as that very affect is what centrally defines fans and geeks.

Unlike Sjöberg, who creates parallel hierarchies within different fan areas, thus avoiding the comparison of quite differently gendered fan activities, ProtoClown's imockery editorial 'The Geek Hierarchy' blatantly exhibits the internal gender bias so prevalent in much of fandom. One thing clearly stands out in this personal, but nonetheless fairly representative, attempt to rank geeks: almost all categories are accompanied by images of mostly fanboys yet the lowest category is a drawing with a paper bag over its head for 'The Fanfic Writer.' Though the descriptions are gender neutral, readers probably are aware of the much higher percentage of female fan writers. The hierarchy is gendered in two ways then: not only does he all but erase female film, gaming, or comic geeks (in fact, the first

fangirls are visible in tenth place for Otaku), but he also places the female-dominated fan endeavor lowest.

Geek hierarchies in general function in a particular way: by finding someone who is more unusual, less mainstream, more out there, fans can raise their own status. I'd suggest that such a hierarchy is deeply invested in ideas of normalcy as defined by the outside, i.e., fans internalize outside definitions of normal behavior in order to define internal hierarchies. As a result, many clearly visible fan activities are judged and described as cringe-worthy. At the same time, Protoclown isn't all that concerned with representatives of fandom who might be criticized and whose negative reputation befalls him—after all, one of the scariest things about fanfic writers is that they can pass for normal: 'there is no way to actually identify them in public. Anyone you meet could be a potential fan fiction writer.' With the fear of outside embarrassment gone, it is clear that the anxieties are all toward the different fannish engagement, i.e., the potential eroticism and, I'd argue, the strong female demographic of fanfic writers. Protoclown's geek hierarchy thus expresses not only his own version of what constitutes geeks (i.e., mostly fanboy activities), but also reveals underlying anxieties about fangirls and their sexualities—especially as they may participate stealthily.

I didn't spend all those years playing Dungeons and Dragons and not learn a little something about courage

Just as fans have become more diverse and more visible, their media representation has become more complex and differentiated, yet images of the scary, obsessed, and dangerous fanatic remain. Joli Jensen in her 'Fandom as Pathology' distinguishes between two pathologizing representations, 'the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd' (1992: 9), but it is the former that tends to be more popular in mass media representations. David Chapman's 1980 murder of John Lennon may be the most famous fan-inspired murder, but news continually report threatening, stalking, and dangerous fan behavior. Likewise the threatening fan is deeply embedded in our media landscape, from Kathy Bates' kidnapping and torturing superfan in *Misery* (1990) to Eminem's imagined stalker double Stan who commits murder/suicide for and because of his obsession with Eminem's character Slim Shady in the 2000 rap song 'Stan'. Yet the dangerous fan has always been accompanied by the pitiful socially awkward fan, a stereotype probably best represented in the infamous 1986 *Saturday Night Live* skit in which William Shatner tells a group of *Star Trek* fans at a con to 'Get a Life'.

The importance of geeks in the rise of computers and the Internet began to change the general perception of geeks and, with that, of fans. Moreover, with wider acceptance and purposeful mainstreaming of fannish activities, representations of fans have moved away from excessive stereotypes to encompass not only a wider variety of fans but also generally more sympathetic ones. Not a decade after the infamous SNL line, *The X-Files* comfortably (if humorously) introduces a fanboy in 'Jose Chung's "From Outer Space"' (3x20; 1996), who utters the memorable line 'I didn't spend all those years playing Dungeons and Dragons and not learn a little something about courage'.

As fan activities continue to enter mainstream culture, fans and fan activities habitually get referenced within the shows themselves, and many shows include their own *fanservice*, the purposeful inclusion of material to please the show's fans.

At the same time, fans continue to be portrayed as obsessive compulsive with excess affect. Such representations either showcase fannish behavior of individuals as negative and harmful, show groups of fans as lacking and mockworthy, or have central characters themselves articulate their disdain. Possibly most interesting here is the *CSI: Las Vegas* episode 'A Space Oddity' (9x20; 2009), where a murder at a science fiction convention presents the audience multitude of fan stereotypes. Ironically, however, none of the fan suspects are actually responsible but instead the killer turns out to be a female media studies professor. Apparently, the only stereotypes more mockable than costumed geeks are of the even more obsessed scholars who study them. Many fan scholars, in fact, have pointed out how academia does not differ in shape or intensity from fannish behavior. Jensen (1992) discusses the different cultural value judgments attached to fan and aficionado even as their modes of engagement are quite similar, and Alan McKee, slightly tongue-in-cheek, analyzes 'fans of cultural theory' (2007).

And yet, the general tenor of fan representations has changed, and fans are allowed more varied and complex interpretations and constitute series regularly. Most recently and possibly importantly, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present) focuses on a group of self-identified geeks who very clearly embrace their fannish aspects proudly. In the tradition of sit-coms, this show normalizes the minority culture of the geek to mainstream culture through humor. However, as Heather Hendershot (2010) has convincingly argued, in the end, the show isn't certain whether it is 'laughing *with* or *at* the geeks'. More problematically even, the positive geek here is thoroughly defined as the straight male geek, with the female main character Penny serving as a stand-in for outside viewers of geek cultures, constantly surprised and bewildered by geeky references and interests. In fact, this show is bordering on the male wish-fulfilment of being smart, geeky, and yet getting the hot dumb blonde, suggesting that the mainstreaming of the geek runs apace differently for fanboys and fangirls.

Becky, can you quit touching me?

If Leonard's romance with Penny is any indication, the fan hero remains relentlessly gendered. While the fanboys are often clearly caricatured, their portrayals nevertheless tend to be more lovingly tongue-in-cheek than the respective fangirl characterizations. Fanboys are allowed more agency and can become heroes, whereas fangirls are either invisible or weak yet odd girls. The 86 minute-long *Trekkies* (1997), for example, spends mere minutes on fan fiction and fan art; even though one of the five-person *Galaxy Quest* (1999) crew is female, both fans back on earth are fanboys; and the 2008 *Fanboys* announces its gendered representation in its title. The media representation of fans and its slow redemption tends to be focused on fanboys rather than fangirls, a fact that's

supported by the fact that Webster's Dictionary entered 'fanboy' as a new word in 2008 but 'fangirl' has yet to be included.

Probably the best example of the gender bias in fan representation is *Supernatural* in which fans of both genders show up in the episode 'The Real Ghostbusters' (5x09, 2009). The protagonists Sam and Dean Winchester accidentally end up at a fan convention focused on the novel series *Supernatural*. Most of the fans are represented as male, an unusual choice given that *Supernatural* fandom is primarily female. One fangirl, Becky, had appeared in an earlier episode, writing slash and inappropriately touching Sam. In this episode she continues her affective hysterics and sexual advances, first on Sam, then on *Supernatural* author Chuck (who incidentally happens to be the male writer-as-producer-later-turned-God stand-in). In contrast, the two introduced fanboys, Demian and Barnes (incidentally the names of the moderators on the Television Without Pity's *Supernatural* forum), get turned from slightly obnoxious live-action role-playing geeks to ghost hunting heroes. As Catherine Tosenberger aptly summarizes in her introduction to a special issue on *Supernatural*, 'The message of "Ghostbusters" appears to be: fanboys, keep on keeping on—you are dorky but lovable. Female fans, you are creepy, but you might be willing to fuck us real writers, so you aren't **totally** unacceptable' (2010). Becky's most recent return to the screen moves the fangirl entirely into the 'unacceptable' category by using a love potion to force Sam to marry her, all in a desperately unethical plan to escape her—continually textually referenced—'loser' status (7x08, 2011). Given *Supernatural*'s large female fan base, this mean-spirited and hateful representation of female fans seems strange, and yet it suggests the intended viewer's subject position as clearly not that of a fangirl.

Thus, while the male fanboys have grown from pimply geeky parental basement dwellers into heroes (or, we might translate into non-fictional examples, into producers and successful academics), the fate of the fangirl is more complicated. We can list a sizeable number of famous writers and producers who are quite comfortable declaring their fanboy status. From Joss Whedon to Russell T. Davis, there's no shortage of fanboys having made it good, and both fan communities and the industry celebrate this synergy where consumer-turns-producer (Hills 2006). In fact, much of the current industrial fan model encourages fans to strive to become part of the industry. The problem with this model is that it requires certain forms of engagement with the media, mostly those we'd call *affirmational* rather than *transformational* fans. Ofan writer obsession_inc coined these terms to distinguish fans who play within the source texts' boundaries by analyzing, illustrating, collecting, cosplaying, etc. from those who use the source text to introduce their own ideas, relationships, even characters. In her post, obsessive_inc also points out that affirmational fans often congregate on official sites, since the creators are ultimately the respected authority, whereas transformational fans tend to avoid official sites in favor of their own blogs, social networking sites, or archives. What she doesn't point out, but what tends to be accepted as a truism, is that these two forms of fan interaction are also heavily gendered.

Beyond this 'men collect and women connect' fan gender stereotype, there may be deeper reasons as to why women are more eager to change the existing media narratives

we are offered. After all, most TV programs, especially science fiction and crime drama, are geared at the 18-35 white male heterosexual demographic. In response, these viewers often do not feel the need to transform the fictional worlds they are offered, since they are their prime target: the point-of-view characters are more often than not straight white males, the sexually objectified characters on average tend to be young females, and men tend to have more lines and more agency in general. One commercial fan representation that doesn't privilege fanboys is, not incidentally, written and directed by a woman: Felicia Day's *The Guild* (2007-present) is a web series, now also available on DVD, that follows a guild of MMORPG players. All of her characters are characterized incisively, and male and female fans are treated equally—women are no less geeky, awkward, antisocial, funny, or smart than the men are. And it may then be no surprise that the one positive female fangirl we now have on *Supernatural* is indeed played by Felicia Day, fighting Leviathans with her hacking skills (7x20, 2012) and getting Sam and Dean to enjoy LARPing after she has resolved the case (8x11, 2013).

That's not Being a Fan; that's having a Fetish

While we have seen hysterical overinvestment as the fan behavior most often dismissed explicitly, it may be its sexually embodied underpinnings that are particularly threatening. In a 2002 *West Wing* episode (4x10, 2002), Aaron Sorkin scripts an encounter between deputy chief Josh Lyman and *Star Trek* pin wearing temp staffer Janice. When Janice declares, 'I'm not obsessed. I'm just a fan', Josh responds at length:

I'm a fan. I'm a sports fan, I'm a music fan, and I'm a *Star Trek* fan. All of them. But here is what I don't do. Tell me if any of this sounds familiar. Let's list our ten favorite episodes. Let's list our least favorite episodes. Let's list our favorite galaxies. Let's make a chart to see how often our favorite galaxies appear in our favorite episodes. What Romulan would you most like to see coupled with a Cardassian, and why? Let's spend a weekend talking about Romulans falling in love with Cardassians, and then, let's do it again. That's not being a fan; that's having a fetish.

While this moment is clearly an instance of the mainstream policing fandom, it's interesting that it is represented as one fan criticizing another fan that she is overinvested, and doing so in terms of non-normative sexuality. In fact, Josh (and through him the text, since he is clearly the more strongly identifiable character as a series regular who not only wins this particular argument but even makes Janice smile and seemingly agree with him after his tirade) redefines fans as a positive term yet excludes anything too affective, too invested, or too communal. And while most fans would clearly deny Josh's definition of fandom, his speech is on some level representative of the way fans themselves border police definitions of fandom.

Geek hierarchies border police on two fronts, excluding both those not enough and those too much invested in the fannish object or practices. Clearly, what constitutes an acceptable level of investment and involvement varies greatly, but it tends to be a particular zone of acceptability for most fan communities and individual fans (a zone that they themselves firmly inhabit, of course). The not good-enough fans are common enough in most subcultures. Dick Hebdige's study of British working class youths established the way used style and particular objects and behaviors to define their subcultural identity, throughout articulating a 'struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life' (1979: 17). Media fans here are little different from particular youth cultures, using clothes, lingo, and particular objects to signify membership. Forms of possessions and knowledges thus can be used to establish membership; not getting insider jokes, not owning mandatory paraphernalia, or not knowing specific facts may all indicate outsider status. Googling 'You know you're a fan if' gives close to 400 million results. Drawing up lists that test and let people declare insider status is a central feature of fan communities, allowing communal identification at the exclusion of those who don't have the appropriate knowledges.

Affect and levels of commitment to a particular band, team, show, or actor will dictate what defines a not good-enough fan. Sports fan even have a term for those followers of their team who only show interest when the team is winning: fair weather fans. Their lack of dedication to the team is clearly shown in the derogatory term and the dismissal by those who consider themselves true fans. Likewise, length of fannish involvement gets often used as an indicator of fannishness: knowing a band before they were popular is a measurement of a music fan's dedication. Years in fandom generates fannish cred as they indicate time commitment and investment as well as a certain permanence of affect. Expansiveness is another form of commitment: owning rare artifacts shows both financial and time commitment, so comprehensiveness of collections—be they gaming cards, comic books, action figures or what not—shows fan cred. Even suffering for one's fannish obsession can become cred: having seen all the *Doctor Who* episodes or having seen every bad made-for-TV movie your favorite actor ever played in, or having read an author's entire oeuvre. All of these modes of involvement and investment, commitment and affect differ from fan community to fan community, but in most cases forms of these are used to distinguish 'true' fans from those with only casual interest, and it depends on the community as to how these outsiders are received.

How would you feel if a bunch of strangers in matching shirts handed you a box of porn?

If fans judge other fans by their lack of commitment and affect, they also do so when that emotional investment seems too intense. This judgment comes in either mocking or outright censure. If fannish rules and norms are broken, fans often come together to criticize the culprit. The Journalfen community FandomWank has been tracking online

fandom fights for years: many of their posts simply report fannish infighting and the overly emotional or aggressive behavior of the participants is held up for mocking, all of which has gained the community an often quite negative reputation in many corners of media fandom. At the same time, the community also reports and keeps track of what most fans would consider more serious fannish infractions. Traditionally, media fandom has tried to stay under the radar of the producers and actors and not to profit from any of their fanworks. Both rules were created to protect the uncertain legal status of fanworks and until recently were not challenged. As a result, transgressing these rules upsets large sections of that specific fan community. Selling one's fan fiction, for example, tends to result in immediate outcries and criticism as well as public mocking and shaming. Debates surrounding the selling of fan fiction occur often enough to warrant the entry 'Selling Fanfics' in the wiki maintained by fandom watch community FandomWank.

More recently, of course, the publishing phenomenon of E.L. James' erotica trilogy *Fifty Shades of Gray* (2012) has not only brought to the fore the appeal of so-called 'mommy porn', but also the commercialization of fan fiction into the mainstream. The fact that many women indeed do enjoy reading sexually explicit and arousing prose is, of course, a fact well known to most fan fiction fans, but it certainly seems newsworthy to major news outlets, such as *The New York Times*. For fans, what is far more controversial, however, is the 'filing off of serial numbers', i.e., the changing of names in a fan novel to then sell it as professional writing. While authors going professional is generally supported, fans and academics alike debate whether fan fiction should remain within a fannish gift economy (Hellekson 2009, DeKosnik 2009). Moreover, this question is heavily gendered: the overwhelming number of fan writers are women, whereas other transformative works that tend to feature more male artists, such as digital sampling or Machinima, rarely hesitate to commercialize their works (DeKosnik 2008).

Even given recent conversations, in general, selling fan fiction tends to offend the widely accepted fannish nonprofit ethos as well as the fannish norm of not needlessly exposing fandom to mainstream. The latter is even more important when it involves sharing fan fiction with actors, writers, or producers, a practice that may not be illegal but may certainly be considered in bad taste by many. Likewise, exposing actors in other ways to fan's sexual fantasies is usually frowned upon by the community. One example that outraged the fan community was the so-called smut box, a gift by fans for Michael Rosenbaum who played Lex Luthor on *Smallville* (2001-11). The box contained a 'smut box' filled with a variety of sex toys. While some fans saw it as a harmless gag gift, other responses were quite critical, in part in seeming defence of the actor but mostly in defence of fandom and its reputation:

You have to consider, how would you feel if a bunch of strangers in matching shirts handed you a box of porn? Do you think that's a normal well brought up thing to do? ... The reality is, there are LOONIES in every fandom, including

ours. And the image of fans outside fandom isn't exactly positive. (Suzycat 2006)

This fan's response here clearly invokes stereotypical fan representations as one reason why fans shouldn't embarrass the fan community—though it isn't clear whether they are embarrassing because they are unlike other fans or whether the embarrassment comes from the public exposure of fannish sexual interests.

If fan sexuality is to be hidden, then the same is true of fan bodies much of the time. The stereotype of the pimply unwashed out-of-shape fanboy and the overweight fangirl use parts of their fannish bodies metonymically to signify their fan obsession: after all, many teens have acne and many fans do not, but there's something particularly appealing in a stereotype that embodies fans as undesirable and repulsive bodies. As a result, embodiment in the form of cosplay and tattoos is often mocked by other fans. There are hundreds of sites mocking cosplayers with names like fuckyeahshitty cosplay; they often create demotivational posters proclaiming 'Just because you can doesn't mean you should'. What stands out is the amount of images mocking body shapes and gender conformity, a complaint especially curious in anime cosplay. Anime, after all, doesn't represent actual human bodies but rather drawn ones, often changing forms and genders freely. Rather than engaging playfully with these drawn characters, however, cosplayers judge themselves and others by accuracy, even when cosplaying characters clearly not human. In fact, mocking seems pretty clear: if you aren't thin and pretty enough, you shouldn't cosplay skinny female characters.

A similar focus on bodies comes into play in fan criticism of fannish tattoos. The 'Top 10 Most Obsessive Whedonverse Tattoos' presents images of tattoos with a mixture of awe and derision (Tara 2009). Likewise, almost half of those on the list of '20 Video Game Fanboys Who Take it Too Far' are included because they have tattoos. Tattoos invoke a permanence that seems to suggest a deep and abiding passion for the given subject. In so doing, they indicate extreme investment and excessive affect. But tattoos also write the fannishness on the body, making it more difficult if not impossible to hide one's fannish interests, and thereby placing fannishness at one's core identity. In so doing, this attitude of FIAWOL (Fandom-Is-A-Way-Of-Life, as opposed to Fandom-Is-Just-A-Godamn-Hobby) enforces fannishness as a core value in a way that cannot easily be hidden from or ignored by mainstream culture. Like Coppa argues in her discussion of the geek hierarchy, the embodied fan remains suspect and threatening.

Orlando Bloom Has Ruined Everything

Throughout this essay, I have argued that gender affects self and outside representation both in terms of the gender of the fan as well as the supposed fan activities ascribed to women. Humor often reveals uncomfortable truths even as it holds them up for ridicule, and I want to conclude with self-mocking geek representations, a comedy fan film and a comic strip, both of which illustrate these underlying gendered stereotypes within geek self-

representation. The most common stereotype of the male fan is the oversexed yet undersatisfied male teen (or even adult) geek who may indeed channel his desires into excessive fan obsessions. In such a scenario sexual women can only exist as fantasies and objects, not actual desiring females. In SMBC's 2009 amateur fan video 'Time Traveling Geek', five fanboys are shown playing a table top RPG in 1984. Upon rolling the nearly impossible ten 20s (from 20-sided dice), a girl from the future gets transported into the room and proceeds to tell them about the future. The skit explores the differences between these past fanboys' ideas of the future with the present reality, in turn mocking both. The stereotype of the unkempt antisocial geek gets reiterated however: when one fanboy asks 'Are there female geeks?' she immediately responds 'Yes, but we still want men who are courteous and take care of themselves'. Humorously the video presents stereotypes and complicates them, yet in the ending the geek hierarchy gets reinforced: when one of the boys mentions his 'erotic Star Wars fan fiction', the girl disappears. The video thus clearly distinguishes mockworthy yet acceptable fan activities (neither pizza dipped in soda nor 'Choose-Your-Own-Adventure novels do not organize themselves, woman' repel her sufficiently) from unacceptable ones (namely, erotic fan fiction). Ironically, of course, that is the one activity not traditionally associated with fanboys but rather with fangirls, thus suggesting that the feminized fan behavior immediately is considered more problematic, and indeed even more so, because it is a male engaging in this feminized fan activity.

When girls actually do get to become fans, their representations often bemoan that fact; 'Orlando Bloom has ruined everything' is the punchline in Bill Amend's 2003 *Foxtrot* online comic strip, later to become the title of one of his book collections. This popular online comic strip self-defines as geeky, with occasional forays into the super geeky' (Amend n.d.) and its kid characters can easily be read as geeky archetypes. When ten-year old Jason garbed in a *Lord of the Ring* hood excitedly counts down the days until 'Return of the King' and his teen sister Paige rebuts him by already having her tickets, his frustrated outburst that 'Orlando Bloom has ruined everything' exemplifies not only the frustration of thousands of Tolkien fanboys frustrated by the film's appeal to females but a larger gender disparity and the frustration about female media engagement and fan behaviors. Where Paige's fannish behavior is presented as typically female and focused on attractive actor Orlando Bloom, Jason claims a special fan status: 'The "Lord of the Rings" films are for people like me to love. We memorized the books! We made the web sites! We drew the detailed maps of Osgiliath on our binders!' (Amend 2005: 79). Not only does the comic clearly present the varying fan activities that often tend to be gendered, it also indicates how these fan activities fall on an implicitly acknowledged hierarchy.

If these were 40yr old men screaming for 17yr old girls someone would call the police

Like the *Twilight* fangirls at Comic-Con, Paige is clearly marked as a not good-enough fan, not only because she is a more recent fan but also because she is a fan for the wrong

reasons and in the wrong way: her interest is in the film actor rather than in the books; as a result, she focuses on the 'wrong' part of the movie; and, worst of all, her interest carries strong sexual overtones. This interest in Orlando Bloom is problematic not only because it is sexual affect, but also because it is sexual affect by a female. A demotivational poster that made the circles at the height of the *Twilight* craze shows a group of young and middle aged women excitedly cheering and holding up a poster reading 'Twilight moms.' The subcaption reads: 'If these were 40yr old men screaming for 17yr old girls someone would call the police' ('Double Standards' 2009). This poster quite clearly suggests myriad ways in which gender plays out in fannish expressions. The irony of the poster is quite blatant, given how much of mainstream popular culture is very much about sexualizing (often very) young women for middle aged men (from televised beauty contests to most Hollywood movies; from car and beer commercials to 'breastaurants', like Hooters). The reasons for this blatant outrage at adult women sexualizing young males must lie deeper, though. These women's fannishness is inappropriate and clearly threatening in its acknowledgment of female sexuality and desire, in its clear focus on excessive affect. The same discomfort to women's sexuality can be seen in public reactions to *Fifty Shades of Gray*, where the fact that adult women are sexual beings is heralded as a new insight, to be ridiculed and pop-psychoanalyzed in turn. Both the puzzlement and the defensiveness surrounding the book indicate that women's sexualities continue to remain enigmatic and repressed.

Paige and the twimoms represent one form of inappropriate female fan whereas the activity of transformative works such as writing fan fiction represents another. What they share (and have in common with the likewise derogatorily presented tattoos, cosplayers, and furies) is inappropriate embodiment, in particular unconventional sexualities and sexual interests. What makes this internal scorn even more problematic is that for many fans within transformational fandoms, these fandoms have become safe spaces not just for geeky behavior but also for expressing one's identities and sexualities. Whether it is gay *Star Trek* fans appreciating IDIC (Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations, see Tulloch and Jenkins 1995) or queer fan fiction writers finding their first partners through fandom (Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007); whether it's the freedom of exploring one's sexual desires at con BDSM cosplay or in fan work challenges such as Kink Bingo, all of these examples show how fandom can be an important place for fangirls and fanboys, straight and queer, cis and trans, old and young, to connect minds to bodies and fannish passions to real life interests. But until we can recognize and dissolve the various hierarchies shaping identity discourses, it would seem that gender assumptions continue to shape geek, fan, and media culture on all levels.

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