An extended Foreword: From fan doxa to toxic fan practices?

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What have relatively recently become known as 'toxic' online practices – especially in the wake of 2014 press coverage of Gamergate (Nieborg and Foxman 2018; Consalvo 2012; Vickery 2018) – have also now been discussed in relation to performances of fannish identity. I say 'fannish' as the boundaries and borders of 'fandom' become potentially problematic here. It is frequently unclear whether trolls engaged in putatively 'toxic' activities are long-term fans, newbies entering fan spaces purely for the purposes of provoking, or, indeed, whether these might not be fans at all, but social actors attempting to *instrumentally use fandom* to publicize their own agendas. Indeterminacy thus haunts any discussion of toxic fan practices: where are the lines to be drawn around 'fandom', and equally where should we locate conceptual boundaries around the 'toxic'? The essays collected together in this themed section edited by William Proctor and Bridget Kies propose a series of potential answers to these admittedly difficult questions.

In this (extended) Foreword, however, I want to propose that *toxicity is, perhaps, necessarily articulated with the matter of fan boundaries and borders* – that is, it is inevitably linked to issues of (fan) authenticity as much as indeterminacy. To give one example, Suzanne Scott argues in her article in this themed section that 'producorial trolling' occurs when media producers troll fans by queerbaiting, issuing misleading publicity/paratextual information, and/or including subtextual representations that are read by fans as being inauthentic. However, these producer practices can alternatively be understood, in production terms, as constrained fan service rather than 'plastic' (false) representation, needing to address 'mainstream' as well as fan audiences; as brand discourses of narrative secrecy rather than outright attempts to be disrespectful to fandom; as (failed) efforts at dialogue with fandom, and constructions of brand distinction, rather than as intentional 'baiting'. Even where a strong discourse of producer trolling exists in fan communities then we might wonder whether, like subcultural capital, trolling exists in the eyes of relevant beholders, and whether there is an indeterminacy introduced by the fact that production and fan discourses can be wildly divergent on the issue of this specific type

of trolling. Drawing a conceptual boundary around the toxicity of producorial trolling would therefore seem to be difficult, given that its very status *as trolling* can be called into question.

As regards authenticity more broadly, fandom has been much analysed as a matter of identity policing and boundary-demarcating (from Jenkins 1992 through to, for example, Busse 2013 and Zubernis and Larsen 2012), with hierarchies of 'fan cultural capital' (Hills 2002) corresponding to versions of 'good' or 'true' fandom. But notions of authentic fandom depend on what is at stake in this struggle to be a 'good' fan, whether status is based around forms of knowledge (Booth 2015; Linden and Linden 2017: 27; Young 2017: 45 and 49) or expressions of skilled creativity. And as Milly Williamson (2005: 117) has argued, this means that struggles over fan status typically occur within a 'field' as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (see also Williams 2010). A Bourdieusian field is a (relatively) autonomous, bounded social space within which 'players' compete over specific forms of status, or 'capital', whilst sharing an embodied and preconscious, habituated 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1990: 66). As Rohit Chopra summarises this: 'Players within each field and across fields, engaged in the struggle over different types of capital, 'recognize' the terms of each game' (2003: 430). But fields are not wholly autonomous, and thus they can be impacted upon by external powers, e.g. the state (Chopra 2003) or, more often in the case of fandom, the media (Couldry 2012: 140–141). Given that fields are structured by this competitive struggle over forms of capital, they are also articulated with a 'doxa', or an unquestioned sense of how capital can be amassed, or lost:

> Absorbing the doxa of a field, and a sense of one's place in the distribution of capitals, overlays the perception of all things, stations, spaces, people, actions and timings with a particular meaning and pertinence… Two individuals physically co-present in the same 'situation' but not in the same field will, therefore, perceive one item, event, symbol, sign or person (including each other) presented to consciousness in two totally different ways and respond to them accordingly. A television interview is one thing to the journalist in the media field and quite another to the interviewed academic in the intellectual field, for example (Atkinson 2016: 28).

Fields are thus carried in people's dispositions rather than merely being distinct physical (or online) spaces. Doxa is important here because, when it is properly operative, it constitutes what is taken for granted as self-evident in any specific field. Bourdieu argues that:

> The sociologist is opposed to the doxosopher… in that she questions the things that are self-evident… This… shocks the doxosopher, who sees a political bias in the refusal to grant the profoundly political submission implied in the unconscious acceptance of commonplaces… -- notions or theses *with* which people argue, but *over* which they do not argue (Bourdieu 2004: 8).

Doxa can be rendered into consciousness, and particular doxic 'notions' argued with, but its essential parameters are not argued over: these remain accepted as 'the way things are'. If this were the end of Bourdieu's theorization, however, then fields would remain fixed in doxa over time, and there would never be any meaningful possibility of critical thought or social change. Fields can shift and change, though – most especially in moments of 'crisis': 'Crisis is a necessary condition for a questioning of doxa', Bourdieu observes, arguing that

> the drawing of the line between the field of opinion, of that which is explicitly questioned, and the field of *doxa,* of that which is beyond question and which each agent tacitly accords by the mere fact of acting in accord with social convention, is itself a fundamental objective at stake in that form of class struggle which is the struggle for the imposition of the dominant systems of classification. The dominated classes have an interest in pushing back the limits of *doxa* and exposing the arbitrariness of the taken for granted; the dominant classes have an interest in defending the integrity of doxa or… establishing in its place the necessarily imperfect substitute, *orthodoxy.* (Bourdieu 1977: 169).

Where doxa can be pushed into orthodoxy then it starts to become a matter of debate rather than an accepted common-place. Beyond this, 'heterodox' views can begin to emerge, attempting to actively rework and transform doxa, as Will Atkinson notes in his revisionist applications of Bourdieu:

> the advance of feminism and the gay movement… have been instrumental in turning the previously rigid set of gender categories from unquestioned doxa into an *orthodoxy* counterposed to a *heterodoxy* proclaiming alternative visions of capacities and meanings, opening gender out into the variety of expressions and categories…, though some underpinning assumptions around gender and sex doubtless remain doxic nonetheless. (Atkinson 2016: 112; see also Bourdieu 2001: 88–89).

Following this concept of doxa, and how it can be contested in fields that are under significant social/cultural pressures of various kinds, I want to argue that what has been journalistically and academically identifed as 'toxic' online behaviour emerges precisely when a field's previously stable doxa has been disrupted and called into question by heterodox forces, *or* when a field's doxa (expressed in orthodoxy) possesses a significant continuity with beliefs and values which can be articulated in toxic ways, e.g. an established geek doxa permeated by sexism may tip over into toxic behaviours; or a gamer doxa which has historically marginalised female gamers might shade all-too-easily into related toxicity. In short, I will argue here that toxic fan practices can be read in two key Bourdieusian ways: firstly, as the outcome of disrupted, destabilised doxa, where dominant groups reactively fight to maintain their now-questioned dominance in a dramatically reconfigured field

(whilst previously dominated groups are given a greater voice in just such a field), and secondly, as a resonance with, and extension of, doxa's implicit 'feel for the game'. I am thereby not positioning toxicity as a matter of individualised psychology or pathology. Such psychologisation, whether it is based on theories of 'deindividuation' (Poland 2016: 124–125; Chen 2017: 11) or 'disinhibition' (Suler 2004), fails to adequately relate toxic practices to field instabilities and to reactive disruptions (or resonant extensions) of doxa, instead reinforcing a currently powerful neo-liberal doxa of individualisation and self-responsibility (Chopra 2003; Bourdieu 2004: 30–31) in relation to what may be more accurately assessed as social forces.

I will refer to the articles contained in this outstanding themed section as I progress, and where they are especially relevant. I'll begin by addressing the emergence of toxic fan practices in relation to what I'm framing as doxic disruptions in the field(s) of media fandom. I will then move on to consider how 'good' and 'bad' (progressive/reactionary) toxicities have been compared, arguing that they cannot be viewed as mirrors of one another, despite sharing in compartmentalisations of practice and problematic discourses of 'culture war'.

At Stake in Fields of Media Fandom: Toxic Reaction and Resonance

Though 'toxic geek masculinity' has begun to dominate analyses of toxic fan practices (see Salter and Blodgett 2017, Blodgett and Salter 2018, and Woo 2018: 175–177) – partly as a result of pervasively mediated case studies such as those regarding the 2016 *Ghostbusters* remake (Proctor 2017) and *The Last Jedi* – so-called 'toxicity' can evidently occur in a range of cultural sites and through, and in relation to, an array of different cultural identities. However, if we start from the issue of borders and boundaries – how is 'toxicity' bound up with notions of 'authentic' (or not) fandom? – then a Bourdieusian approach to toxic fandom is very much called for.

Indeed, Pierre Bourdieu has been repeatedly cited in work in this area (Massanari 2017: 331; Woo 2018: 81; Condis 2018: 77), although usually without a rigorously Bourdieusian approach being adopted. It would be useful to examine what forms of capital are performed, opposed, or even unrecognised in 'toxic' fan exchanges, whether these are with producers, critics, or other fans. This would mean addressing how a 'toxic' lack of respect directed at various Others, and a consciously exclusionary set of fan practices, can piggyback on implicitly exclusionary forms of fan distinction. If fandom can be defined as significantly exclusionary in a whole series of ways, in line with constructions and circulations of subcultural capital (Thornton 1995: 11; Nagle 2017: 107), fan cultural capital (Hills 2002: 57) and/or 'gaming capital' (Consalvo 2007: 4), then it becomes rather awkward to assert that spectacularly and offensively 'toxic' fandom is clearly separable from more ordinary performances of fan identity. Rather, toxic fandom might instead render explicit, visible and conscious, logics of disparagement and (de-)legitimation that are structured into the very relationality of fan identities. I find it surprising that analyses of Gamergate, for example, have not made a thoroughgoing use of Mia Consalvo's concept of gaming capital. Consalvo considers how gaming capital – posited by the games industry as well as

differentially by high-level gamers (2007: 184–185) – has been complicit with an industrial address to male gamers:

> game magazines overall perform important functions for the larger game industry. For instance, most game magazines have [had] an overwhelmingly male readership, usually in the 90 to 95 percent range… That readership is also considered the central core of game purchasers… Magazine publishers know that, and play to that demographic above all else… *What results is a product that excludes almost as much as it includes*… That naming of a group also helps define gaming capital – and who is likely to want or possess it. Those excluded by magazines' address are also more likely to be excluded from wanting or possessing gaming capital. It's … a by-product of the system (Consalvo 2007: 36, my italics).

If gaming capital has thus, historically at least, been gendered in some of its (major) manifestations, then the anxieties expressed by some (and by no means all) Gamergate participants – to the effect that the rise of female gamers could represent a loss of male power and hence should be opposed by male gamers on that basis – cannot be entirely dismissed as the product of entitlement, or the result of a lack of cultural/educational capital. Typical arguments surrounding Gamergate have posited toxic geek masculinity as a type of liminally non-hegemonic masculinity (Braithwaite 2016: 2; Massanari 2017: 332; Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016: 172) displaying marked insecurity about its situated masculine power (and for a similar argument in relation to male fans, see Nisbett 2018: 182–183). But rather than *a priori* reading geek masculinity in this way (almost always without evidence, and seemingly on the common-sense basis that 'we all know what geeks are like'), the anxieties of geek masculinity in the domain of gaming could, in fact, be linked to a recognition of changes in the gaming field, and thus in the logics of gaming capital. By contrast, the psychologising of pathological 'aggrieved entitlement' (Kimmel 2017: 58; Condis 2018: 98; Woo 2018: 179) suggests that toxicity is aligned with men having misread and fundamentally misunderstood their actual sociological situation (Kimmel 2017: x and 276). At the same time, 'entitlement' also runs together and homogenises disparate fan-cultural experiences (Faraci 2016), constructing what Elizabeth Minkel (2016) has dubbed 'the myth of the entitled fan'. In a Bourdieusian interpretation, by contrast, toxic Gamergate practices could be seen to emerge, at least in part, *from an accurate sense of inclusivity developments in gaming capital*. Such developments would not represent a zero-sum game of cultural power, to be sure, but they would nevertheless proffer a reconfiguration of 'gaming capital', threatening to shift the unquestioned, industrially-supported and naturalised doxa of masculinised gaming capital into a position of 'orthodoxy', open to heterodox challenge and reworking (Bourdieu 1977: 164).

Related Bourdieusian scenarios are recounted in several of the essays collected in this section of *Participations.* Analysing the situation of the Rabid Puppies in relation to

attempts to game the Hugo awards in 2014 and beyond, J. Richard Stevens and Rachel Lara van der Merwe argue that 'Toxic controversies may mask… structural concerns', with right-wing proponents of "popular" SF, e.g. self-published military science fiction, behaving in such a way that 'structural change [in the field of science fiction publishing was] … subsumed into frames of "culture war" rhetoric.' Stevens and van der Merwe suggest that the field of SF fiction had been altered in a variety of ways, most crucially by the empowerment of kinds of SF storytelling that previously had not been legitimated by gatekeeping publishers but which had found a market via ebooks and self-publishing. Posited by defenders of this 'new SF' as 'blue collar' writing, and seen as popular in sales terms, the emergence of such a wave of 'heteronomous' commercial publishing opposed to (sub)cultural capital realised at the 'autonomous', SF-as-literary-art pole of the field (Williamson 2005: 109) represents another field reconfiguration. The Puppies' right-wing challenge to the prestige of the Hugos – and the progressive/feminist politics aligned with them – thus pushes at a fan doxa that had previously gone unremarked and largely naturalised. 'Culture war' discourses may be thoroughly unhelpful as an epiphenomenon of toxic conflict, but according to Stevens and van der Merwe, underlying logics of practice are articulated with a shift in the field, and with changes in the associated doxa and capital of literary SF fandom. Although the Puppies sometimes argued that they were in favour of an apolitical strain of SF 'entertainment' (versus what they positioned as politicised and 'Social Justice Warrior' liberal/feminist science fiction), this logic of intervening on behalf of the 'apolitical' – common to forms of gendered and misogynistic toxic practice (Condis 2018: 105; Blodgett and Salter 2018: 137) – is readable as a flawed attempt to reinstate doxa, given that doxic forms of dominant ideology have typically presented themselves as universalising rather than as specific to the political interests of dominant fractions of society. But attempts at installing a new doxa where the field has, due to conflicts over capital and the very structure of the field itself, been pushed into orthodoxy debates and heterodox viewpoints, can only risk seeming absurdist. Such is the status of decaying ideology or de-doxified culture (and for a discussion of de-doxification in relation to parody and memetic participatory culture, see Lamerichs et al, also in this section).

A further example of the struggle over field-based logics of practice is highlighted in Kelsey Cameron's essay dealing with the 'Bury Your Gays' trope. Here, the history concerned is not one of a literary field marginalising its heteronomous (commercial, blue collar and masculinist) fiction, but instead involves television's marginalisation of queer representations. Cameron argues that toxic reactions from queer fans to showrunners killing off lesbian characters are not simply a matter of individualized fan agency, or the psychologized behavior of 'bad' individuals. Addressing the case of Jason Rothenberg, showrunner on *The 100*, who was responsible for the death of a popular character, Commander Lexa (Alycia Debnam-Carey) – depicted in a lesbian relationship with series' lead Clarke Griffiths (Eliza Taylor) – Cameron suggests that toxic *ad hominem* reactions to Rothenberg, including death threats and abuse, were produced as a response to the systemic and historically ingrained marginalization of lesbian characters in US TV drama. As

Cameron tellingly states, 'toxic reactions directed at Rothenberg were about him, but they also point to the way *The 100*'s *fan-producer antagonisms take shape in relation to larger industry trends. Fan anger is both personal and systemic, about the structural conditions of televisual representation* and about the way Rothenberg as an individual creator navigated them' (this section of *Participations*, my emphasis). Yet the visibility of these trends, and the way in which they have been challenged by fan activists (see also the essay by Mar Guerrero-Pico, María-José Establés, and Rafael Ventura preceding Cameron's), means that such ingrained representational practices can no longer function as an unchallengeable doxa. Fandom – along with gay rights activism – has thus succeeded in making contestable that which, representing the prior doxa of a field of popular media representation (supported by a voluntary US Code of Practices from 1951–1982), had previously been naturalised as a form of exclusionary practice.

In each of these otherwise diverse cases – Gamergate and toxic geek masculinity, Puppiegate and the Hugos, and #BuryYourGays – a form of consciously and spectacularly abusive, disrespectful behaviour is directed as specific Others such as feminist/female gamers, feminist/left-leaning SF fans, and TV producers. And in each case, this toxicity is not readable merely as a matter of psychologised or failed understanding (in effect, a counter-Othering of those deemed 'toxic' and lacking in cultural/educational capital by scholars with pronounced levels of cultural capital). Instead of displaying psychologised toxicity, these differently positioned expressions of toxic conflict all accompany the collapse of a field's doxa, or 'feel for the game', and an associated threat to forms of subcultural (including TV production) or fan-cultural capital.

As Sarah Schaefer Walton wryly notes in her discussion of Harry Potter fandom, MuggleNet and the Leaky Cauldron in this section: 'to condemn canon-enforcement and fanon construction as intrinsically toxic would be to condemn fandom itself', given that these forms of (doxic) naturalisation can be profoundly exclusionary. To be clear, of course I am not implying that fandom is intrinsically toxic, but I am suggesting that it is always *doxic* in specific ways that tend to exclude certain kinds of fan. Thus there is a logic, a continuity, linking these exclusions with the reactive force of toxic fan practices which emerge when such (fan) doxas are destabilised due to significant changes in fields of media fandom. Derek Johnson's (2018) analysis of media franchising in relation to toxic fan/geek practices makes a related point, again reminding us of the extent to which media industries, and their reinforcing of specific forms of fan cultural capital, are implicated in the emergence of toxic fan practices. Johnson, traversing similar terrain to Stevens and van der Merwe here, examines toxic geek masculinity via the web portal Return of Kings, a Pick Up Artists' (PUA) site loosely affiliated with Men's Rights Activists (MRAs). Johnson goes on to address how this alt-right participatory culture engages with a range of media franchises, and their reinvention of characters and properties in line with changes in superhero/science fiction audiences, audiences that are frequently now recognised as being significantly composed of female fans. Rather than dismissing the alt-right as 'eccentrics outside the cultural mainstream', Johnson focuses on how

Efforts to resist the media industries' supposed feminist agenda emerge not
solely from individuals but from extremist communities that imagine
opposition to media entertainment as part of reactionary but activist political
projects. … [S]uch media activism figures superhero franchises and other legacy
entertainment as a significant site of intervention… *The work of 'men's rights
activism' and other movements aimed at re-securing white, male,
heteronormative authority depends upon struggles over legacy and ownership
of the franchised characters, symbols, and entertainment narratives through
which media industries reproduce culture* (D Johnson 2018: 86, my emphasis).

Media franchises such as *Ghostbusters* and *Star Wars* are hence not contingent flashpoints
for alt-right and MRA activism so much as part of a conscious, explicit struggle against
changes in the pop-cultural field by such activists, given how these dynamics are mediated
via the repetition and difference of shifting franchises (Condis 2018: 73). As such, the 'de-
feminized edit' of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* discussed by Suzanne Scott in this issue can
certainly be interpreted as an instance of toxic geek masculinity aimed at provoking ire,
dismay and disgust in media coverage and among feminist fans/scholars. The audacity and
absurdity of such an appropriation of well-known fan edits (such as one for *The Phantom
Menace* which edited out Jar Jar Binks) is further indicated by the uploader's description
accompanying the edit. This makes basic errors that one would not expect to see in fan
commentary, incorrectly spelling both Admiral Holdo's name and General Leia Organa's:
'NO HALDO! She simply doesn't exist. Her whole subplot doesn't exist. The Kamikaze is
carried out by Poe. (= Poe dies.) - Leia never scolds, questions nor demotes Poe. - Lea dies.
Kylo kills her. - Kylo is more badass'. Such mistakes seem to troll *Star Wars* fans, just as the
edit itself arguably trolls a projected opposition of 'SJWs', implying that this edit (again with
some degree of indeterminacy) can be interpreted as a game that uses fandom as an object
or a mask to garner publicity for MRAs.

     Toxic fan and trolling practices tend to emerge in relation to singular media, given
that fields of pop-culture fandom have frequently been structured around leading media
objects, whether in the case of film franchise fandoms, TV fans, gamers-as-fans, or literary
SF fandom, which only belatedly incorporated 'media' SF. As a consequence of these media-
based fields, I would suggest that transmedia-oriented fan toxicity has perhaps been less
evident to date, although it hasn't been entirely absent. As I argued in an earlier article in
Participations myself (Hills 2012), *Torchwood* fans used the release of tie-in audios following
on from the death of a popular bisexual character, Ianto Jones (Gareth David Lloyd), who
had been depicted in a gay relationship with lead character Captain Jack Harkness (John
Barrowman), to strongly criticise the series' creator Russell T Davies. Here, though,
transmedia continuations of what had initially been a spin-off TV series merely permitted
the continuation of toxic fan disgruntlement in response to the destruction of a favoured
''ship', or character relationship. Transmedia-oriented toxicity also flared up around the
publication of Mark Frost's continuation of the *Twin Peaks*' narrative in *The Secret History of*

Twin Peaks (2016) when fans discerned what appeared to be major continuity errors, and some threatened to cancel their pre-orders. Regardless of how *ad hominem* they may have become, these toxic fan incidents remained predominantly subcultural or fan-cultural, however.

In a sense, proliferating media coverage – though it treats MRA/alt-right toxicity as a problem and an outrage – also acts as a kind of prize for such activism, given that it moves its politicised stance out of restricted subcultural/fan-cultural circulation and into the domain of mainstream debate by piggybacking on the 'media meta-capital' of blockbuster franchises (Couldry 2012: 140). Such performances of toxicity have thus tended to emerge through threatened (and gendered) subcultural capital or marginalised fan cultural capital whilst dynamically bidding for status in the cultural mainstream outside of fan culture, gamer culture or platform-based 'toxic technocultures' (Massanari 2017: 330). Indeed, Nieborg and Foxman, in their analysis of US journalistic coverage of Gamergate, suggest that 'toxicity' was an index of the story's mainstreaming and its acquisition of what I would term media meta-capital (Couldry 2012: 140), enabling journalists to move away from subcultural accounts (Nieborg and Foxman 2018: 124) towards more general debates around online misogyny:

> The shift… to using Gamergate as shorthand… allowed… the movement… [to] be explicitly understood as a mainstream, no longer solely a niche or 'gamer,' issue. It also gave journalists a lens through which to speak about a wider culture of online misogyny in recognizable terms. Furthermore, for the victims of Gamergate, it situated misogyny as something commonplace – moving it from a singular set of events to the… recognition of a mundane, yet reprehensible aspect of online culture (Nieborg and Foxman 2018: 123).

By invoking toxicity, journalists could create a mainstream and highly legible narrative: 'No longer a subcultural phenomenon … the story of Gamergate was able to carry more mainstream appeal to readers who were not necessarily interested in games; the subject of online harassment involved a broad range of fields and industries' (Nieborg and Foxman 2018: 124). Hence Gamergate's narration was also able to cross into a range of different fields via the potency of media meta-capital, garnering a degree of publicity which led Gamergaters to describe the game designer Zoe Quinn, their initial target of online attack, as a 'professional victim' who was happy to benefit from the 'fame' they had brought her (see Quinn 2017: 231 for a counter argument). Given Nieborg and Foxman's (2018) argument that the identification and highlighting of 'toxicity' was linked to Gamergate's mainstreaming as a news story, it may not be surprising that this journalistic strategy has provided the template for other related coverage, e.g. that of the #blackstormtrooper hashtag examined in this section by William Proctor. Focusing on – or even assuming – toxicity allows journalists to disembed fan tensions/conflicts from fan communities, reframing 'fractured' communication (Reinhard 2018) as a matter of 'universal' psychology

(and field-traversing media meta-capital) rather than remaining caught up in fandom's performative specificities. Hence from the perspective of journalism treated as its own Bourdieusian field (Benson and Neveu 2005), we might rewrite 'if it bleeds, it leads' as 'if it's blatantly toxic, it's currently doxic.' That is, emphasising narratives of fan toxicity resonates with a post-Gamergate journalistic framing of (especially masculine) fan/geek identity as being inherently immature, reactionary, and objectionably – if not violently – troll-esque.

And yet, traversing fields beyond those which have occasioned the emergence of toxic practices can represent a prize for alt-right activists because they do not view their toxic practices as 'bad', but rather as a legitimate means to an end, and one consonant with garnering mainstream press, however critical, for their cause. Presence in the mainstream media can potentially also confer forms of symbolic capital. Lincoln Geraghty's essay in this themed line-up makes an important point about how toxicity can act as a moral shifter. Geraghty considers the case of a Chicago Cubs fan, Steve Bartman, who unwittingly interfered with a crucial World Series game in 2003, and was then symbolically attacked by other Cubs fans:

> we should understand toxic fan practices in the case of Bartman as an outcome of the tension between him being seen as a 'bad' fan (or the physical embodiment of the [historical] 'curse' [that the Cubs would never win the World Series]) and those who participated in his abuse being 'good' fans (or protecting the team and communal space from a threat).

Geraghty's example may not be as outrageous as Gamergate and misogynistic online harassment, but he nonetheless makes the point that toxic fan practices can be seen as 'good' by those carrying them out. The same is surely true for queer fan activists pushing back against the erasure of gay characters (see Guerrero-Pico, Establés and Ventura here). Thus recuperating cases of 'good' toxicity within scholarship – or toxicity that verges on 'good' activism – merely replays the 'moral collapse' of alt-right trolling, where bad, toxic activities are narrated as 'good' engagements with an 'enemy' force and a changing culture (i.e. exposed doxa and its shifting field of subcultural/fan-cultural capital). Might this imply that there is a straightforward mirroring between reactionary and progressive toxic fan practices? I want to consider this next, addressing how toxic practices have been compared, and how 'good' and 'bad' toxicities have been problematically framed by discourses of 'culture war' linked to compartmentalisations of practice.

At Stake in Discourses of 'Culture War': Toxic Comparison and Compartmentalising

It is perhaps tempting to surmise that toxic fan practices can occur on either side of what has been dubbed the 'culture war' between the alt-right and its discursively manufactured opponent, i.e. the emotionalized, monstrous-feminine figure of the 'SJW' (Massanari and

Chess 2018: 5–6). Hence the Editorial Introduction from Proctor and Kies ponders whether and how 'progressive toxicity' can be theorised, though there may be a danger here of falling unwittingly into line with Donald Trump's diversionary tactics: when asked to condemn the toxicity of alt-right activists, Trump instead argued that bad behaviour was a general problem, just as much about the 'alt-left' (J Johnson 2018: 107) as the alt-right. However, it is not only figures such as 'God Emperor Trump' – present in the memes studied by Lamerichs et al in this section – who have lamented toxic practices among the left's social media brigades. The left-wing critic and scholar Mark Fisher mounted a detailed critique in the UK context:

> It is … necessary to identify the features of the discourses and the desires which have led us to this grim and demoralising pass, where class has disappeared, but moralism is everywhere, where solidarity is impossible, but guilt and fear are omnipresent – and not because we are terrorised by the right, but because we have allowed bourgeois modes of subjectivity to contaminate our movement. I think there are… libidinal-discursive configurations which have brought this situation about (Fisher 2013; see also Phillips and Milner 2017: 170, and Grossberg 2018: 95–97 & 100 for a related argument in the contemporary US context).

Here, Fisher is criticising toxic social media attacks which had been directed, from left-wing Twitterati, at the British journalist and campaigner Owen Jones, along with the comedian and activist Russell Brand. For Fisher, these toxic practices of *ad hominem* symbolic assault may be self-justified via their performative politics – 'good' toxicity justified by political progressivism – but the result is not a convincing left-wing movement. Instead, Fisher (2013) argues that Twitter mobs represent an individualised moralism eating away at class-based collectivism, being

> driven by a *priest's desire* to excommunicate and condemn, an *academic-pedant's desire* to be the first to be seen to spot a mistake, and a *hipster's desire* to be one of the in-crowd… best understood as a bourgeois-liberal perversion and appropriation of the energy of these movements.

Fisher's argument is a complex one, arguing that moralism has displaced class-based politics, whilst structural critique has been surrendered in favour of the social media pleasures of 'calling out' individuals. He goes on to suggest that the toxicity of left-wing attacks is one where 'the enemy is always to be essentialized. Since the desires [involved]… are in large part priests' desires to excommunicate and condemn, there has to be a strong distinction between Good and Evil' (2013). But Fisher's attempt at avoiding such essentialism, and mounting a subtle critique of social media moralism, has been collapsed into a banal equation of right-wing and left-wing toxicity, where all sides are just as bad as

one another and no political self-justification can survive toxic mirroring. This is the position that Angela Nagle recruits Fisher's argument to in *Kill All Normies*, suggesting that

> The main preoccupation of this new culture (the right named them SJWs and snowflakes, let's call it Tumblr-liberalism) was gender fluidity and providing a safe space to explore other concerns like mental ill-health, physical disability, race, cultural identity and 'intersectionality'… While the roots of this whole political sensibility may be found in academia and activist culture, its emergence into the mainstream… was the culmination of years of online development on Tumblr, in fan cultures, on previous platforms like LiveJournal (Nagle 2017: 69).

And for Nagle, Tumblr-liberalism with its roots partly in 'fan culture' (albeit not the 'toxic geek masculinity' version of fandom) is positioned as 'very much the reverse mirror image of rightist 4chan' (2017: 69), amounting to what is pondered in this themed section as 'forms of toxicity performed by fangirls' (in the article from Guerrero-Pico, Establés, and Ventura). Toxic geek masculinity, meet toxic geek femininity.

But I want to avoid any move to mirroring/equating these cultures – note that, at the same time, Nagle calls into question 'intersectionality' via quote marks, as if it is something improper, fictional, or misguided rather than itself emerging through significant intersections between scholarship and activism, and raising important issues (Romero 2018: 173; Fowler 2003; Hackworth 2018). The 'plague on both their houses' discursive move lends far too much credence to 'culture war', implying that both sides in such a 'war' must be equally morally suspect. It also fails to consider who is engaging in potentially toxic (fan) practices, and whether this involves 'punching up' at those who are more culturally powerful or 'punching down' at oppressed and marginalized social groups – a consideration which can be situationally complex (Mortensen 2016: 12–13), and which can also be open to moments of 'bizarre reversal' where privileged groups 'in terms of race, class, and gender' position themselves discursively as an oppressed faction, something explored in this themed section by Andrew Zolides in his Bourdieusian-indebted analysis of 'kynical' Wrestling fans dubbed 'smart marks' or 'smarks'. Using the 'culture war' trope, as Nagle does, to equalise 'alt-left' and 'alt-right' thus depends, in part, on an evacuation of questions of cultural power, oppression, and privilege – something which has resulted in Marxist-indebted critics dismissing *Kill All Normies* as an 'appalling' work (Sandifer 2017: 2).

Indeed, 'culture war' is a vastly problematic framing of toxic practices. As Stevens and van der Merwe note here, it tends to disrupt any possibility of meaningful dialogue across 'combatants', as well as masking actual shifts in fields, related capital and doxa. But 'culture war' discourse has a number of other (unwitting) outcomes. For one thing, it makes it difficult for scholars and critics not to have to take sides. If 'good' and 'evil' are essentialized and moralized within a powerful cultural narrative, circulating within scholarship and outside it, then the possibility of a 'suspensionist' argument appears to be

drastically foreclosed. 'Suspensionism' was a position that I set out in *Fan Cultures* (2002: xxii–xxiii) as a way of challenging the 'moral dualisms' of fandom characterized as 'good' or 'bad'; it was a way of calling for more complex, nuanced, and ambivalent theorizations that didn't rush to champion fandom nor race to condemn its practices.

Of course, the 'moral dualisms' linked to what Mark Fisher analyses as individualized leftwing moralism, or alternatively those linked to Gamergate's alt-right coalition of MRAs, PUAs and toxic gamer-geeks, are seemingly far more pressing than moral dualisms of good/bad fandom. Where the latter is perhaps a theoretical question, the former concerns people being attacked online, doxed (Buozis 2017: 12–13), bullied (Moody 2017: 10–11) and undermined. Except … the moral dualisms of good/bad fandom can lead to equally real people being pathologised and stigmatized by those outside fandom, or to people being marginalized and attacked within their fan culture. The boundaries of who is or should be a 'gamer' (a passionate fan of this media form), along with associated gaming capital and its fan-cultural authentication, formed a component of the 'culture war' that Gamergate fed into. In short, moral dualisms of fandom and those of online cultural-political toxicity cannot be convincingly or entirely disentangled. And if that is so, then can a 'suspensionist' position have value once again here, or does it amount to an irresponsible refusal to take sides or, worse, a tacit support for the 'enemy' by refusing to condemn them?

In an article tackling toxic fan responses to the feminized (2016) *Ghostbusters* remake, William Proctor – co-editor of this section – argues that male *GB* '16 fans who complained about how their 'childhood had been ruined' should be listened to, rather than dismissed or pathologised as trolls. Proctor aims to take

> the claims of childhood ruination seriously as a way into theorizing … 'totemic nostalgia,' which is non-toxic, and the way in which this might extend into malicious 'toxic fan practice.' *GB* '16 provides an apposite case study to critically examine the formation of nostalgic narratives centred on a totemic object (2017: 1113).

Proctor very carefully and precisely states that he is not defending or excusing 'toxic' practices, but is trying to understand fans' logics of practice instead of positioning all *Ghostbusters* fans who attacked the remake as the 'enemy', and as *a priori* bearers of toxic geek masculinity. To this end, then, Proctor utilises *Fan Culture*'s (2002) call for suspensionism:

> Following Hills' suggestion…, I refuse to construct 'decisionist' narratives 'which attack or defend sections of fandom' and usually 'hinge on making political decisions as to the 'goodness' or 'badness' of fan cultures' (Hills, 2002, p. xii). Instead, I adopt a suspensionist position, which refuses to split fandom into the 'good' and 'bad' and which embraces inescapable contradiction (the ugly?). This means approaching the contradictions of fan cultures [...] as essential

cultural negotiations that can only be closed down at the cost of ignoring fandom's cultural dynamics (Proctor 2017: 1113)

Again, suspensionism doesn't mean excusing inexcusable practices. It does, though, open up the possibility of theorizing and analysing continuities between ordinary doxic fan practices (here, idealizing a fan object within childhood nostalgia as a part of self-narrative) and toxic fan practices that rely on, or resonate with, such fan doxa, as well as potentially being produced through the problematizing of previously unchallengeable doxa. What such suspensionism hence doesn't do is 'essentialize' the enemy (Fisher 2013), refusing to demarcate these *Ghostbusters* fans as soldiers in the culture war.

In addition, 'culture war' discourse comes close to glorifying toxic conflict on the terrain of popular culture; it lends a sense of discursive weight and gravity to the interventions and toxicity of the alt-right, bolstering their sense of being 'good' even whilst they posit and narrate working-class/blue-collar and middle-class male victimisation at the hands of allegedly powerful/elite women (Condis 2018: 98; Salter and Blodgett 2017: 194–195; Braithwaite 2016: 6). And 'culture war' embraces the ambiguity at the heart of the 'SJW' moniker – that for some, this can importantly indicate a 'warrior' identity, and participation in an unavoidable, necessary fight against misogyny, misogynoir, and right-wing ideology (Massanari and Chess 2018: 2).

More than this, however, 'culture war' arguably captures an experiential logic to the likes of Gamergate *and* the identity-constructions of geek fan culture – i.e. that both hinge on the constitution of a 'magic circle' felt to be immersive and detached from 'ordinary' or everyday life. Activist trolls, gamers and fans, that is, share a powerful compartmentalisation of their lives and selves: there is a part of life that can be set aside for the enacting (or even glorification) of toxic practices. 'Culture war' memetically reframes this gamified logic of identity in a more archetypally 'serious' and moralising manner, justifying toxicity by reference to the 'greater good' that war is supposedly always waged for. Whitney Phillips' study of trolling makes the point that trolls possess a talent for 'emotional firewalling… matched only by their ability to recognize and exploit their target's attachments' (2015: 35). Trolling thus calls for a depersonalization of the target, such that they are not viewed as a fellow subject, and detachment from the troll's sense of self outside the trolling frame, so that they are not rendered vulnerable: 'the vast majority of trolling is explicitly dissociative … [as] the mask of trolling safeguards trolls' personal attachments… To a person who deliberately severs emotion from behaviour … the demarcation between 'real' disrespect and trollish taunting is perfectly sensible' (Phillips 2015: 36). As a result of this demarcation, trolling can be appreciated – and performed – by trolls as a skilful game rather than being viewed as a matter of 'real' disrespect.

However, entirely de-subjectifying a 'target' could also be read, and theorized, as rendering the troll as unworthy of respect in return. In a chapter conceptualising dignity in *Why Things Matter to People*, Andrew Sayer argues that 'the identity of white supremacists is based on hatred and stigmatizing of their others, and is therefore unworthy of

recognition. In refusing unconditional respect or dignity to others, they lose their claim to conditional respect for themselves' (2011: 196n9). There is a sense of vengeful, war-like relationality here, perhaps, where toxic practices are justified purely by virtue of others' toxicity – just as those on the extreme end of spoilering's 'spectrum of toxicity' in Melina Meimaridis and Thaiane Oliveira's article position this as a kind of vengeance against people who have 'spoiled' them in the past. Following Sayer's relational logic, but shifting his argument from white supremacism to trolling *per se*, trolls would deserve to be righteously counter-trolled in a circuit of toxic practice.

But if trolls gamify their toxic activities by splitting them off from their 'real' selves, then so too can 'the gamification of gender' (Condis 2018: 1) sustain misogynistic, toxic geek masculinities. As Megan Condis has pointed out, 'the rhetoric of the #Gamergate protest explicitly revolved around gaming tropes like 'leveling up', 'grinding' and 'defeating the final boss'' (2018: 97), positioning its proponents not as doing real harm to female gamers and 'targets' but rather as playing a game insulated from real-world consequences. Simultaneously, Gamergaters also self-conceptualised as soldier-gamers, envisioning

> #Gamergate as a battle between forces of darkness and light, in which Gamergaters fight to preserve the purity and goodness of games… This fervor recurs across social media networks. For example, a resource thread for Gamergaters on 4chan's /v/ (video games) board is titled 'World War /v/ Part 10'… 8chan posters draw upon this same imagery in a thread about Sarkeesian's… appearance on *The Colbert Report*. Speaking as one soldier to many more, one commenter posts, 'The war is still there for you in the mornin' soldier. Rest when you can, fight when you must, but always, always keep your head in the game' (Braithwaite 2016: 4).

As Andrea Braithwaite observes, this 'reminder to 'keep your head in the game' anchors Gamergaters' dominance in video games [and gaming capital – MH]. Gamergaters see themselves at a distinct advantage, their victory guaranteed by their gaming expertise' (2016: 4; see Quinn 2017: 7 for a riposte based on the same logic). This gamification isn't only linked to trolling or actual gaming, however (Condis 2018: 76–77). Benjamin Woo's ethnographic study *Getting a Life: The Social Worlds of Geek Culture* relatedly analyses how Toronto-based geeks responded to direct questioning about the demographics of their culture:

> Questions about race and ethnicity turned out to be a dead end; interviewees repeatedly asserted that geek culture was representative of the city's population as a whole, though I remain somewhat sceptical of these claims based on my own observations. By contrast, people had a story to tell about gender, one that, at the time, looked like it might have a happy ending. … When I asked people to talk about women in geek culture, most said that the

number of women participating actively in their fan communities was on the rise (Woo 2018: 184).

Woo found these to be some 'of the most uncomfortable situations during my research … I never got very satisfying or candid answers' (ibid). Instead it seemed as if his geek respondents were afraid of saying the wrong thing, or were conscious of wanting to represent geek culture in a positive light. Contrary to the feminist, inclusive narratives that he typically encountered, Woo chanced upon a number of men who were comic shop regulars joking around with one of his interviewees, the male owner of the store, about how their 'wives and girlfriends' got in the way of their fandoms, often spoiling their geeky pursuits. Woo describes the kind of sexist banter involved as something that 'would have been tired in 1950s sitcoms', yet such jokes remained 'current features of conversations in comic shops and at game days while I was conducting field research' (2018: 185). There was hence a marked dissonance between how the geeks talked explicitly about gender and fan/geek identity, where retailers 'in particular, were usually careful to emphasize that geek culture was for everyone' (2018: 188), and how in a

> joking 'play frame' – the joke as a language-game unfolding within magical, ironizing quotation marks… – they took up a normatively male avatar and were willing to express sentiments that seem… quite sexist. … Adopting a play frame is a way of displacing the rules of everyday life, which offer certain, circumscribed possibilities for agency, with another set, which offer different possibilities (Woo 2018: 188).

These geeks were thus constructing a kind of 'magic circle' akin to those of the trolls studied by Whitney Phillips and the gamers studied by Megan Condis. Within this compartmentalised domain separated from 'outside' life, they felt free to be notably sexist, politically 'incorrect' or right-wing/reactionary, and profoundly othering of women. In her article in this themed section, Bethan Jones astutely argues that there are 'multiple levels of toxic fan practices at work in fan/producer, producer/fan, and fan/fan interactions': her focus is on how a 'fanboy entrepreneur' encourages other fans to behave in specific ways on social media, as well as directly calling out some fans for their behaviour. However, Woo's ethnographic analysis suggests that embodied fandom can give rise to even further levels or spectrums of toxicity (again, see Meimaridis and Oliveira's article) whereby geeks can self-present as progressive in one context ('officially', when they are being interviewed as representatives of geek culture) yet can be reactionary, sexist, and dismissive of their female partners when they feel free to 'joke' around.

 I would argue that this illustrates the flexibility of fan doxa. Geek 'doxosophers' (Bourdieu 2004: 8) can be aware of orthodox critique in gendered terms – masculinist fan doxa having been destabilised and called into question – yet they can still retreat into this very doxa, one which has naturalised their fan/geek identities in the past, when they do not

feel called upon to challenge the gendered 'participation gap' (Jenkins 2006: 23; Condis 2018: 72–73) that has otherwise marked geek culture. Of course, it could be suggested that Woo's male fans are not displaying strongly or spectacularly 'toxic' practices; on the contrary, they are joking and poking fun. But to fence these categories and practices off from one another is to accept the logic of compartmentalisation that sustains forms of toxicity, as well as failing to emphasise continuities between doxic (or orthodox) fandom and toxic fan practices.

There is a major difference between the way in which trolls/Gamergaters and fan-geeks use 'magic circles', or compartmentalised, ritualised spaces separated from ordinary life, however. In the troll's case, a 'real' self is kept outside of the contained, dissociated space of trolling. The 'soldier' in a self-justifying 'culture war' similarly brackets off aspects of their identity from their mission-oriented 'game'. By contrast, the geeks in Woo's analysis seemed to experience their 'true' selves *within* the play frame, whilst their rehearsed interview answers felt more akin to assumed, compliant roles. Regardless of how identity is split, though, toxicity is commonly linked with such self-divisions; compartmentalising, as a logic of practice, allows orthodox opinion to be imaginatively restored as doxa in Bourdieu's terms.

And yet, we would do well not to let 'toxic' and 'geek' become overly aligned. Some writers have argued that what contemporary society actually needs is more geeks (Fuller 2017), on the basis that a more widely disseminated techno-literacy would permit greater public critique of forms of power linked to platform capitalism. And Michael Ward (2014), writing in *Gender and Education*, argues that for working-class lads, geek identity can be a way of struggling over class and gender mobility, with academic aspiration offering positive pathways out of post-industrial deprivation. Both arguments chime with Woo's ethnographic emphasis on the importance of a 'scholastic disposition' in relation to geek identity (2018: 81). Given this, it is surprising that work on toxic geek masculinity has been so unsure of the hegemonic status of knowledge and technological know-how, with fan-geeks being described as attaining or being subsumed into hegemonic masculinity (Salter and Blodgett 2017: 68; Massanari 2015: 130), or being positioned as liminally/insecurely hegemonic (Woo 2018: 179; Nisbett 2018: 182; Massanari 2017: 332; Braithwaite 2016: 2). That such diverse possibilities are present in the literature indicates that assumptions are being made about what geek masculinity means, or is, rather than detailed empirical study actually exploring these questions, as in Ward (2014) and Woo (2018).

Additional assumptions have perhaps framed the equation of 'toxic' with 'geek masculinity'. In her recent discussion of feminist fan studies, Suzanne Scott appears to equate post-feminist work with the 'threat' of a turn to examining 'male-dominated' and 'masculine' fan practices rather than maintaining a 'continued focus on transformative female fan practices and communities' (2018: 74). If geek masculinity threatens to be 'inherently more conservative' (ibid), then it would seem that feminist fan studies may only recognise geek/fan masculinity as a worthwhile research focus when it is construed as a problem – i.e. as performing a toxicity to be fought. For, as Scott goes on to argue, concerns

surrounding the diversification of fan studies 'are unquestionably fed by the ways in which gendered subcultural gatekeeping practices dovetail with broader political movements, from men's rights activism to the alt-right' (ibid). But given the haziness with which geek masculinity's hegemonic status has been assumed or asserted, it seems to me that there is a good case to be made precisely *for more feminist study of geek/fan masculinity in all its guises*. Framing developments in fan studies as a binary where toxic geek masculinity (rightly) represents a feminist concern whilst geek masculinity only constitutes a post-feminist turn seemingly means obscuring the possibilities for important feminist work on non-toxic geek masculinity.

In this extended Foreword to the impressive, diverse and timely articles that follow, I have argued for a rigorously Bourdieusian approach to fields of media fandom, and their associated (albeit destabilised or sometimes extended) doxa. Readers will find that Bourdieu's work is threaded through this themed section, occurring in multiple articles. I've also suggested that, *contra* psychologisations of 'toxic' practices, we need a greater focus on how toxicity emerges in reaction to reconfigured fields, and in resonance with aspects of doxic or 'orthodox' fandom. Furthermore, I have focused on the issue of moralising 'good' and 'bad' toxic practices, considering how right-wing and left-wing toxicity have been compared. Again, this is a theme that runs through a number of the following articles, where 'progressive toxicity' is productively engaged with. Lastly, I have sought not to equate different kinds of toxic (fan) practice, whilst nevertheless observing a common logic of fan/troll compartmentalisation.

'Toxic' practices may not be something entirely new, but the discursive intensification of 'toxic' fan activities, I have argued, is articulated with fan boundaries and authenticities, as these are challenged by technological and inclusivity developments in fields of fandom. Calling established fan doxa into question means that toxic fan practices can also always be linked – via field struggles over forms of capital – to indeterminacies (where does 'toxicity' begin? Can specific practices be framed as 'trolling'?) as much as to challenged fan authenticities surrounding who gets to claim 'a good' or 'true' fan identity, or who 'needs' to be policed by varied authorities, including intra-fandom disciplining.

The closing Roundtable discussion captures the complexities of this debate incredibly well, especially when it begins to problematize a host of issues, focusing on how *situated and intersectional* toxic fan practices, the discourse of toxicity, *and* the academic study of toxicity can all be. And however fuzzy 'toxic' may remain as a term – I suspect it is such a mobile discourse that any analytical definition will capture only elements of how it plays out in context – the fact that it has risen to prominence inside (and outside) fan studies should alert us to the need to continue engaging with it (Reinhard 2018). Critically examining 'toxicity' in relation to the analysis of complex power structures, whilst try to avoid equating 'good' and 'bad' toxicity via a 'plague on both your houses' argument, also means paying closer attention to how toxic discourses are deployed by multiple social actors: how do differently-positioned fans, journalists, bloggers, media producers and paratextual

producers make claims over toxic practices, as well as very differently-positioned academics?

'Culture war' closes down these kinds of nuanced questions that scholarship should be exploring, collapsing into a moral demand for the-taking-of-sides in place of rigorous cultural critique. By contrast, a thoroughgoing Bourdieusianism which examines *all kinds of capital and exclusion* rather than prioritising class – thereby becoming profoundly intersectional itself (Daniels 2013; Fowler 2003; Noble and Tynes 2016: 4) – can offer one way into thinking about how toxic (fan) practices operate in relation both to unsettled privilege and struggles for cultural recognition. As previously unchallengeable fan doxa has been destabilised – via cultural-political transformative work on the left *and* the right – resulting tensions between orthodox and heterodox viewpoints have socially, structurally, and sociologically given rise to 'toxic' phenomena. And as Cameron and Stevens and van der Merwe effectively argue in different ways in their articles here, fan studies must hold on to the agentive and the structural when tackling fan doxa and toxic fan practices.

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