

Participatory toolboxes: Franchise fan wikis as tools of textual production

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Abstract:

This paper highlights the value of fans' immaterial labour, here exemplified through fan wikis, and negotiates how that labour can be – and, in some cases, already has been – used by industry producers. Given convergence culture's blurring of professional/amateur divisions, the paper assesses where notions of authorship and recognition of fans from industry are crucial, and determines how fans can ultimately be situated as participants in the creation of industry textual works.

Keywords: Wikis, produsage, participatory culture, franchising, fandom

Introduction

The digital impact of fans on contemporary media production cannot be understated. Thanks to the advents of participatory culture and the open-access nature of digital fandom, there is a greater capacity for fans to contribute to the industrial processes that create the popular culture texts they communally enjoy. Through this participatory capacity, this paper details a cornerstone of fan production – that of the fan wiki – that has become more utilised by industry in creating those texts, while also symbolising the potential to renegotiate the increasingly blurred relationship between industry practitioners and fan users. In so doing, fans now have a greater opportunity to contribute directly to industrial processes, should textual producers choose to appropriately enable them, with the potential for a mutually beneficial relationship between industry and audience.

The fan wiki has become a vital component of how audiences navigate their preferred pop culture online. These online encyclopaedias document extensive details of the narrative and production aspects of any television series, film franchise, musical project or comic book run, functioning as repositories of information for both the longevity and complexity of a pop culture franchise. Predominantly, these wikis are constructed and moderated by fans as self-appointed curators of these repositories of knowledge, rather

than the wikis being run by industrial producers; these curators, and other fan contributors, are also able to use wikis as expressions of fan identity and knowledge. Fan wikis are important as they 'service as both archives of a fictional universe's content and guides for fans who could not hope to command vast amounts of information' (Hunter 2011, p. 43). Moreover, the wiki serves as a vital fan-made paratext for the franchise it chronicles, with Pellatt defining a paratext as 'any material additional to, appended to or external to the core text which has functions of explaining, defining, instructing, or supporting, adding background information' (2013, p. 1). A fan wiki as paratext orients readers within narrative worlds by being 'a text that surrounds and supports the core text, like layers of packaging that initially protect and gradually reveal the essence of the packaged item' (Pellatt 2013, p. 1). This support mechanism of fan wikis can also potentially supplant industry-created resources for franchises, such as official websites and showrunner bibles.

The integration of fan-run wiki processes in documenting pop culture texts has become inextricable from the industrial processes behind them. In discussing the vital functions and digital expertise of fan culture in relation to television, Hills notes that '[f]andom's know-how can involve detailed awareness of production contexts as well as expansive knowledge of the narrative universe or hyperdiegesis... such fan knowledge of overarching storyworlds operates as part of the epistemological economy surrounding cult TV,' (2015, p. 361). Building upon the supportive nature of the fan wiki as paratext, the process of fan wiki curation is now almost as vital a component as the casting, filming and marketing of a text. Thus, the fans who are creating, updating and proliferating them deserve recognition by industry.

Industry Creators and Fan Curators: Professional and pro-amateur wiki usage

Fan wikis collate a range of information compiled across countless hours of labour and displayed on thousands of web pages. There is no strict correlation between the longevity of a franchise and the number of pages needed to document the information about it, allowing the contributors of these wikis breadth of scope to do so. **Figure 1**, below, is an example table of several notable film, television and video game wikis, the number of individual pages currently on each wiki, and how many years of franchise information history they contain.

After years of numerous fan communities developing wikis, such vitality of function has started to receive greater credence on an industrial level, particularly for such decades-long franchises as the ones used in Figure 1. Writers and producers are beginning to rely more on fan assets in developing new franchise texts, drawing on pools of fan knowledge to spark ideas, maintain continuity and inform backstory; in effect, another process of the industry 'harnessing the hive' of user-driven information and content, enabled thanks to the processes of technological convergence (Bruns 2008). For example, during the production of *Star Trek Beyond* (2016), writers Simon Pegg and Doug Jung not only drew on the information present in *Star Trek's* own compendious wiki, Memory Alpha, but also enlisted the aid of the wiki's moderators in devising a name and backstory for an element of the final

film. Pegg notes that he and Jung ‘had the entirety of ‘Star Trek’ history at [their] disposal’, and that the wiki became ‘[their] resource and the place that [they’d] turn to whenever [they] wanted to know’ any minute details about the narrative universe of *Star Trek*; anything they needed, ‘Memory Alpha [had] it’ (Lesnick 2016). The fan-written wiki was both an invaluable tool in producing the new industry text of the film and, per Pegg, a ‘beautiful ... support network’ (Lesnick 2016).

Franchise	Wiki	No. of pages	Years of narrative history
Sherlock Holmes	Baker Street Wiki	1,419	131
DC Comics	DC Database	105,622	80
Marvel Comics	Marvel Database	212,767	79
Doctor Who	TARDIS Data Core	67,139	55
Star Trek	Memory Alpha	45,898	52
Star Wars	Wookieepedia	145,396	41
Battlestar Galactica	Battlestar Wiki	3,534	40
The Elder Scrolls	The Elder Scrolls Wiki	61,414	24
The Buffyverse	Buffyverse Wiki	5,931	21
Works of Brandon Sanderson	The Coppermind	2,972	13

Figure 1: Major wiki contents (as of 23/10/18)

This use of wikis is a logical step in the current production climate of entertainment franchises. Western entertainment in particular currently enjoys an era where decades-old properties are finding renewed longevity with online audience engagement, transmedia practices and, in the case of long-running franchises like *Doctor Who* and *Dynasty*, revivals and reboots, able to be reliably banked upon as sources of social, cultural and economic capital for the entertainment industry (see Hutcheon 2006, Parody 2011, and Voigts & Nicklas 2013). Given this, it makes sense that industry producers and writers would be turning to such dense databases in order to fit their new narratives within the established tapestry of continuity, fostering greater connections between audiences and the new texts. Fidelity, particularly for passionate fan communities, is key. *Batgirl* comic book writer Hope Larson noted this during an interview at the Superhero Identities conference, convened by the ‘Superheroes and Me’ Australian Research Council initiative in 2016. Larson discussed how she required fan wiki knowledge to outline her storylines for the character given her lack of personal knowledge regarding *Batgirl*’s more than forty years of backstory. It’s also clear that some franchise stakeholders take this fidelity seriously, with one example of this being Lucasfilm’s Leland Chee. Tasked with managing the Holocron, Lucasfilm’s internal database of over 80,000 character, setting and narrative details from the *Star Wars*

universe, Chee's employed role – proudly listed on his LinkedIn page – is as the official Keeper of *Star Wars* knowledge, maintaining narrative cohesion amongst the franchise's plethora of transmedial projects; Chee notes that his self-styled 'dream job' requires him 'to know more about *Star Wars* than pretty much anyone else' (Harrington 2017). Chee's information also helps maintain continuity on *Star Wars*' own fan wiki, Wookieepedia.

The harnessing of fan labour raises questions regarding the role of fans – as part of a mercurial discourse between so-called amateur and professional practitioners – and how industry producers draw on the fruits of their labour. The legal dimensions alone of relations between fandom and industry are extensive and still being mapped, particularly in regards to fanfiction and infringement of copyright (see amongst others Stendell 2005, Noda 2008, Noppe 2011, Chatelain 2012, and Freund 2014). This paper acknowledges, yet sets aside the potential legal discussion surrounding how fan wikis are positioned for use by industry. In contrast to more traditional user-created derivative works like fan-fiction and fan films, wikis are sites of existing industry knowledge that have been curated and cultivated by fandom. They exist in a grey legal and sociocultural area in not being a fan website *per se*, in the mould of *Star Wars*'s own TheForce.net, yet they are not fan creations in the same manner as *Star Wars* fan films such as *Broken Allegiance* and *Star Wars Down Under*. Rather, wikis serve as paratexts for their franchises that are created and curated by fans, documenting knowledge whilst also serving as supportive orientation points for those franchises. Pellatt notes that a paratext 'primes, explains, contextualises [and] justifies' (2013, p. 3); accordingly, fan wikis are vital paratexts that position users for entry into franchise narrative worlds by elucidating narrative and production details. The creatively-indistinct quality of fan wikis, as well as the importance of their function in how audiences navigate franchises, primes discussion about how culturally and ethically these resources and, importantly, their curators fit into industry processes, opens the door to further investigation.

Unpacking the Toolbox: The fan wiki as franchise history, fan expression and showrunner bible

In order to understand the place of fan wikis in industrial production, the participatory toolbox of the wiki needs to be unpacked. Given the now-blurred nature of industry-consumer relationships when it comes to franchise production, it is therefore apropos to discuss the indistinct relations between how wikis are currently used and what they can prospectively be harnessed to do. In general, the wiki can be seen in three distinct ways: as a chronicle of franchise history, an outlet for expressions of participatory culture, and a replacement/supplement to traditional industry bibles.

Fan wikis are, first and foremost, databases of history, collecting information covering almost every facet of a franchised work. This compilation can be split into two functions – that of longevity and complexity – which can both be seen in *Doctor Who*'s TARDIS Data Core wiki. Comprising 55 years' worth of television episodes, films, books,

video games, comics and more, *Doctor Who* naturally has a lot of details needing to be catalogued, even before entering the realm of hyperdiegetic information and fan-made content. Generally, the TARDIS Data Core is a fastidiously-maintained resource, going to great lengths to document details both grand and minute within the narrative world and production paratexts. As an example, the wiki's page for the story 'Twice Upon a Time' – one of the more recent TV episodes at time of writing – contains a prelude, a 2500-word synopsis of the episode, cast list, a thorough chronicle of production credits, an extensive list of all references made in the episode to both the real world and the continuity of the series' narrative backstory, and an assortment of details pertaining to story notes, production details, ratings, incorrect viewer theories and home media releases. In addition, much of the page is hyperlinked, including several additional pages created solely out of content from the episode's micro details. For example, a character refers to a number of the Doctor's names in passing, including 'the last tree of Garsennon'. This particular name had not appeared in any other *Doctor Who* story, yet the passing reference spawned a separate wiki page about Garsennon; at time of writing, that page consists of only the one sentence of reference to the name being in 'Twice Upon a Time'. Though this particular episode's page contains more than the average amount of information given that the story marks the final appearance of the show's current Doctor, the page and its branched details are nonetheless indicative of the extreme depths fans plumb in documenting every facet of the franchise.

This single episode page demonstrates fan wiki capacity for complexity and longevity. The document, accessible for editing and lengthening by the majority of users signed up to the website, details a compilation of every known fact fans have collated regarding the episode.¹ The narrative is constructed through the wiki as its own informational database that at once illustrates the episode's place in terms of the longevity of the series – with some links on the page going as far back as the show's original 1963 incarnation – and the nexus of production, diegesis and reception elements comprising the episode. Using this episode as an example of the immaculate detail, on a macro scale, of the TARDIS Data Core, proves how it has become a compendious online tome, able to render and chronicle the length and complexity of a franchise.

The other major fan wikis noted in Figure 1 fulfil similar functions. In terms of longevity and complexity, some prioritise one over the other; Baker Street Wiki documents well over a century of Sherlock Holmes narrative history with minimal detail, whilst the more recent Coppermind wiki has a comparatively brief chronology and smaller pool of works, yet presents a far deeper level of detail for each of those works – a necessity, given the high degree of narrative interconnectedness and paratextual information present in Brandon Sanderson's works. In addition to creating hubs for narrative and paratextual information, the process of altering and updating the wikis, evidenced through changelogs and edit histories themselves facilitates a form of historical chronicling. As Booth notes, 'Wikis do not just record and present history...but are in the process of recording a narrative of history' (2009, p. 334). Whether a fan wiki performs both or one of the two functions of

longevity and complexity, it is nonetheless a malleable and accessible archive of franchise information – and, particularly for lengthier franchises like *Doctor Who*, a useful orientation point for both old and new fans.

Though online culture has not unified fan communities in quite the way it was once hoped to (Bury 2017), fan wikis still afford the ability to participate directly within the paratextual tapestry of a franchise. Users can contribute information which is then used as a reference point that often far exceeds information publicly released by franchise producers. The Memory Alpha fan wiki is a clear example, as it includes far more detail about the *Star Trek* franchise than the database of the official *Star Trek* website run by CBS Studios. This makes wikis ideal for fans who wish to orient themselves within story worlds, perhaps through their newness to the franchise, their return after a hiatus, or just to recall certain plot and character details. With these kinds of users in mind, fan wikis can be read as examples of how fans are mapping their franchises and providing access points to both old and new fans. The importance of fan-created resources in terms of narrative coherence is illustrated by Jonathan Gray, who notes that ‘viewer-created paratexts are pre-constituted audience research, providing evidence of how viewers make sense of texts’ (2010, p. 146). This notion is evident when it comes to fan wikis’ interpretive capacity of more subjective wiki entries; it’s easy enough for Wookieepedia to list the technical components of a lightsaber, but more effort is required to parse the characterisation and motivations of the *Enterprise* crew members on Memory Alpha. In the grand scheme of fan-made works, wikis occupy a unique space as being both a paratext, a supportive surrounding of the core text per Pellatt’s definition (2013), and an outlet for participating users to potentially *become* part of a paratext – a focal point of knowledge that usurps official outlets, and a place for users to contribute regardless of their level of existing creative or collaborative acumen.

Crucially, the notion of fan wikis overtaking official informational resources opens a discussion regarding an ingrained aspect of popular culture production, particularly for television: the showrunner bible. The intent of the bible is to list all narrative elements of a series in one place for easy reference of the production staff. Scholarly exploration of the showrunner bible is limited, though the work of Chow-White, Deveau and Adams (2015) does critically illustrate the function of the bible composed by Ronald D. Moore in showrunning the 2003 reimagining of *Battlestar Galactica*. Given the fast pace that high-profile franchises have their wikis augmented by fans, it’s arguable that fan resources are more adept at compiling franchise information for further instalments. Jane Espenson, writer for shows such as *Battlestar Galactica* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, claims that some showrunner bibles – many of which are constructed as initial pitch documents to sell the shows to television studios – do not get updated once their series is picked up. Espenson compares many showrunner bibles to exceptions such as the bible for *Frasier*, which she describes as a ‘wonderful and meticulous document’ (2008) that was consistently updated with micro details over the series’ eleven-year run. In comparison to such rare, methodically-catalogued bibles, Espenson offers that the general function of most showrunner bibles – particularly the sales pitch rendition – can be considered outmoded:

[The showrunner bibles] I've come across (and there have only been a couple) have generally been sales documents used to help a television network or studio understand a new show... I haven't seen this kind of bible get updated as a show continues. This means that they often contain information about the characters or their world that has been changed by subsequent scripts and is no longer valid... [S]ince shows often take off in unexpected directions, this kind of feature [used to sell the show to studios] is quickly outdated and irrelevant. It's possible that a bible may contain some firecracker of information about the way the creator envisions the eventual end of the series, but since everything is subject to change, that firecracker may be a dud. Especially if the fuse was lit many years earlier. (2008)

Though bibles are still used in some contemporary productions – at times with a good degree of depth, such as in showrunner Beau Willimon's bible for the Netflix adaptation of *House of Cards* (Anderson-Moore 2015) – fan wikis are demonstrably just as, if not more, informationally rich as their showrunner-fashioned counterparts. As Pegg and Jung used Memory Alpha in the context of writing *Star Trek Beyond*, so too might other franchises be inclined to incorporate the labours of fans as their own bible, if they are not already implicitly doing so now.

Using (or Abusing) the Fruits of Fan Labour: Renegotiating the fan/industry dynamic through wiki usage and recognition

Despite Pegg readily admitting the valued work of the Memory Alpha moderators in helping to write for *Star Trek Beyond*, there is no mention anywhere in the film's production credits attributing that work – not even a mention of the wiki or its moderators in the 'Special Thanks' section at the end. While acknowledging that the legal dimensions surrounding fan works may have played a role in this lack of attribution, this section theorises potential problems and solutions that may emerge from fan wiki prominence, arguing that some kind of official recognition of fan efforts is warranted.

Often, types of fan work can be characterised as 'precarious labour' (Deuze & Banks 2009), a process whereby 'commercial entities [explicitly seek] user involvement as content creators in pursuit of corporate goals' (Bruns 2016, p. 4). An example of this is software developer Bethesda monetising the distribution of fan-made mods for the video game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* in 2015. Two issues quickly became apparent: these kinds of mods were originally freely available to players for both this and previous *Elder Scrolls* games, and Bethesda were found to only be paying 25% of revenue to the creators of the mods they monetised. The dual issues led to the monetisation plan being scrapped shortly after introduction (Matulef 2015).

As noted previously in this paper, fan wikis occupy a nebulous middle ground as neither a fan site nor a fan creation, relying on fan contributions whilst not consisting of fan-made material in the same manner as something like fan-fiction. As a result, notions of fan wiki labour being precarious are harder to theorise. The wiki's collection of information, though relying on some degree of interpretation by fans, is largely collating what has been written and presented by industry producers, rather than a new creation. If the producers, directors and writers behind franchises other than *Star Trek* are relying on fan knowledge to create new primary industry texts, without acknowledging this work either anecdotally, as with Pegg and Jung, or directly, through attribution in the credits, one could claim a degree of exploitation of the efforts of fan wiki curators.

However, to assume exploitation of fan labours by industry is to miss a degree of nuance. Through the 'produsage' concept, whereby amateur users are now enabled and encouraged to become producers of content online, Bruns discusses the potential for industry maliciously 'harnessing' the efforts of such users through precarious labour. In particular, Bruns notes that 'the extent to which prosumption or produsage activities are exploitative of user labour is likely to depend on project-specific circumstances; neither model can or should be dismissed summarily as inherently exploitative' (2016, p. 4). Similarly, Chin proposes that *pro bono* labour contributions to industry by fans can be seen as a form of gifting, opining that 'rather than merely assuming that fans are exploited by the media industry when collaborating with media producers, it is important to acknowledge their voice in this collaboration, and that there may be other motivations at play'. Chin (2014) cites contributors to fan sites for *Battlestar Galactica* and *Sherlock* as participating in an exchange of social capital of 'status and reputation' for themselves and their fan communities through their contributions. Though Chin's examples are for fan sites, rather than fan wikis, the underpinning notion – of fans 'gifting' their efforts with no thought towards exploitation – helps present a model for how to view those who contribute to fan wikis.

Whether through gifting or financial imbursement, the crucial role that fan wikis and their moderators play requires some form of greater recognition. Nele Noppe convincingly argues that commodifying fan work is a discussion that should be taking place, potentially through a 'hybrid economy' prioritising both finance and intangible value (2011). Although Noppe's argument focuses more on derivative fan works like fanfiction and artworks, her underlying assertions could just as easily apply to a prospective solution for fan wikis and their curators. With this in mind, potential exists for methods through which fan wiki contributors and their communities can be properly recognised.

In addition to the obvious solution of financial payment – which seems unlikely, unless a contributor's role is formalised within a company as with examples like Leland Chee and Lucasfilm – the acquisition of social and symbolic capital would be the most direct means to acknowledge fan wiki contributor communities. Being officially credited as contributing to the background of a script, a book, a comic or a video game, even if the site itself is acknowledged rather than individual contributors. This recognition would place a

high social value on that site's status as an outlet recognised by industry – an aspect Chin (2014) investigates with the formation of the website 'Galactica.tv' and its earned status as a hub for *Battlestar Galactica* information, galvanised by a number of official interviews the site conducted with cast and crew of the shows. Though Memory Alpha is already regarded as a paramount source of information, having an official mention in the credits of *Star Trek Beyond* could have greatly increased the site's social value within the *Star Trek* fan community.

Further bridging the gap between fan communities and industry producers is the potential for wiki research assistants, acting in a similar capacity to the kind employed in academic work. With payment again potentially consisting of something social or symbolic apart from the financial, these 'wiki RAs' could be hired to specifically investigate the backstory of franchise history, as detailed in fan wikis, and use this information to aid in maintaining consistency with existing canon. Cultivating RAs from existing fan wiki contributor communities can only be a boon to producers, as the contributors' knowledge of both diegetic and hyperdiegetic information is already primed for use in a new text. This would also go towards 'legitimising' – in a production sense – wikis as official sources of franchise information, whose contributors work for the producers who create more texts for the franchises those contributors love.

Conclusion

Fan wikis are a flashpoint for potentially reconfiguring the relationship between fans and industry producers. Through recognising the immaterial labour undertaken freely by fans in cataloguing information for the franchises they love, textual creators have the opportunity to capitalise upon untapped resources that could significantly aid the creation of new texts, while concurrently fans can now be further enabled to participate in the production process of those texts.

Jason Mittell's exploration of the *LOST* wiki Lostpedia offers that the structure of a wiki offers a high degree of potential for divergence; Mittell notes that Lostpedia 'offers many spaces for ... creative experimentation, and the blurring of boundaries between categories ... [allowing] constant remaking of the site's parameters and policies' (2009). The same is true of fan wiki use in industry practice. The vast range of available wiki resources and the benefits of utilising them in the creation of new industry texts offer fertile ground for further discussion, even if explicit examples are minimal at time of writing.

The collective intelligence of fan wiki users offers both an advantageous resource to be used by industry practitioners – provided a mutually beneficial exchange is had between both parties – and a chance to reassess the blurred relationship that participatory culture has cultivated between the two groups. Community curators of content have demonstrated they have the desire and the capability to construct these fan repositories of knowledge, accomplished by the collaborative effort of multiple users; many of whom do so out of their passion for popular culture. To ignore their use is to deprive industry of valuable skillsets – a

collective and participatory toolbox – and to rob fans of the potential to further contribute, quite directly, to their beloved franchises.

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Note:

¹ It should be noted that, although several of the paratextual notes in the episode page are referenced with external links, there are still several that are presented without linked evidence (for example, regarding certain production details and writing intents).