

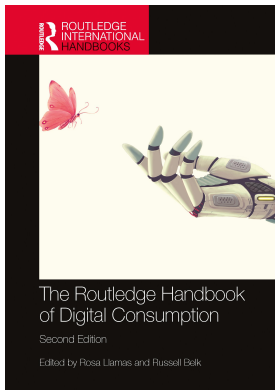
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DIGITAL FANDOM (REVISITED)

Exploring the Role of the Hypermediated Fan as Trickster

Clinton D. Lanier, Jr., C. Scott Rader and Aubrey R. Fowler III

It has been argued that fans make explicit what everyone else does implicitly (Booth 2017). That is, fans interpret the cultural world around them, produce meanings based on those parts of the world that resonate with them, and communicate these meanings with others (Fiske 1989). While all of us do these things to various degrees, fans are those individuals that do so consciously, openly, and overtly, not to mention enthusiastically (Sandvoss 2005). In the process, fans actively appropriate the objects of (popular) culture and rework them to further their interests in what has been referred to as a form of participatory culture (Jenkins 2006). That is, fans do not merely consume culture; instead, they creatively (re)produce it by simultaneously affirming and denying its various manifestations, which leads to new cultural forms (De Kosnik 2016). While fan scholars debate which of these two approaches is dominant in fan practices (i.e., affirming or denying cultural objects) (e.g., Booth 2017; Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005), we argue that the truth lies somewhere in the middle. For most, being a fan is ultimately a form of hedonic experience (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982) in which fans manipulate the opposing aspects of culture in order to play not only with a cultural text (i.e., specific sign system) but with culture itself. As a result, we contend that fans operate fundamentally as tricksters, or those crafty entities that call an established order into question by disrupting conventional behavior (Campbell 1989). Any re-writing of a cultural text, whether affirming or denying, is going to throw the text into sharp relief.

Nowhere is the affective, rebellious, and creative nature of trickster fans more prevalent than in the digital realm. Digital technology, including the internet, has not only increased the amount of information available to fans, but also the tools and spaces for fans' trickster activities. Given their creative propensities, fans were early adopters of digital technology and quick to utilize digital media to engage in their fan practices (Coppa 2006). For example, fans created Usenet newsgroups, set up Listserv forums, and established online archives of fan-based creations almost as quickly as those tools appeared. While some fans still utilize this earlier technology, most now use sophisticated blogs, wikis, and social media to engage in various fan practices and interact with other fans (Booth 2017; Thomas 2016; Wojton and Porter 2018).

One thing that makes digital fandom (i.e., fan practices regarding a cultural text within a digital space) difficult to study is that digital technology functions simultaneously as a tool (e.g., Microsoft Word), an object (e.g., Fan Fiction), and a medium (e.g., www.fanfiction.

net) (Stein 2006). Fans produce, distribute, consume, and interact all within the same digital space. In addition, while this technology provides ever-increasing access to fandom, thus making these practices more democratic and real (i.e., the cultural and economic impact of fans can no longer be ignored) (Fuschillo 2020), it has also made fans and their practices more insular and virtual (Booth 2017). Not only have fan creations been digitized and disseminated around the world, but fans themselves participate as virtual beings within hyper-mediated communities in this digital landscape (Pearson 2010). This shift, while seemingly innocuous, has led to deeper changes in the ontological and epistemological conditions of fandom. As fandoms have become more mediated (i.e., incorporated into the digital realm), both fan practices and the broader socio-cultural structures in which they operate have become more remediated (i.e., the distinctions between fandom and mainstream culture break down), which, in turn, has caused them to become and more demediated (i.e., fandom becomes the new real). As Booth (2017) points out, these different levels of mediation are based on inherent tensions between the real and unreal, presence and absence, and even production and consumption that cannot be fully reconciled. Rather than interfering with fan practices, we contend that many fans revel in these tensions as it allows them to simultaneously construct and deconstruct texts in classic trickster style.

Fans & Fandom

Before we examine digital fandom, it is important to step back and address the general nature of fans and fandom in order to provide the context for their digital manifestation. Fans are traditionally defined as individuals who display an intense interest, affection, and attachment for the objects of popular culture (Chung *et al.* 2018). Fandom is defined as fan practices regarding these particular objects in which “cultural meanings and economic values are socially negotiated, produced, and exchanged” (Fuschillo 2020: 347). (In keeping with fan lexicon, we will broadly refer to these cultural objects as texts, since they are primarily conceived as carriers of meaning.) Fans, though, are not a homogenous group but encompass various types of individuals who differ in their forms of participation and levels of engagement (Hills 2002; Jenkins 2006; Sandvoss 2005). Also, while fans are often thought of in terms of specific cultural phenomena (e.g., sports, music, or movies), researchers argue that being a fan is ultimately a process that underlies the way in which these individuals create meaning, attach value, and make sense of their lived experience (Fuschillo 2020). Consequently, it is the practices of fandom rather than the objects of fandom that define what it means to be a fan.

In spite of the broader conceptualization of fandom, “first-wave” fan scholars argue that fandom is primarily directed toward the objects of popular culture (e.g., rock music, television shows, and football) as opposed to the objects of high culture (e.g., classical music, fine art, and performing arts) (Gray *et al.* 2017). Popular culture, though, does not exist on its own accord but comes into being through the interactions of consumers (notably fans) with the products of mass culture (i.e., offerings that are mass produced for general consumption) (Storey 2021). The process of converting mass culture into popular culture involves not merely the selection and rejection of specific offerings but also the productive and meaningful use of these offerings as creative resources (Fiske 1989). While many of these early scholars associate fans with audiences (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998), others have criticized this approach because it privileges the passive consumption of a text and denies the creative nature of fandom, which actually underlies the transition of mass culture to the status of popular culture (Fiske 1989).

Given the constructed nature of popular culture, fandom must be understood not simply as passive consumption but also as active production (Fiske 1992). It must be noted that production is not necessarily the creation of an artifact but primarily encompasses the creation of value and meaning. Ultimately, fans produce extended cultural meanings by reworking and refashioning the objects of mass culture to articulate concerns and interests that usually go unvoiced in the original text (Jenkins 1992). For these first-wave scholars, the relationship between fans and original text is primarily one of resistance (Bacon-Smith 1992). Fans typically choose certain texts from mass culture because there is some degree of affinity and compatibility between the meanings of the texts and fans' lived experience (Jenkins 1992). At the same time, there is usually a certain degree of frustration and antagonism with these mass texts. As cultural commodities, there are certain forces (e.g., economic, social, and cultural) that drive these texts toward the meanings of dominant culture, while leaving out subordinate and alternative voices (Fiske 1992). As a result, fans often move beyond the original text by both poaching from and subverting aspects of the original text in order to open up spaces to explore deeper and more relevant meanings for the fan communities (Hills 2002).

The productive nature of fans, though, is not enough to define fandom since this type of behavior is also prevalent among other groups (e.g., DIY consumers) (Storey 2021). For first-wave fandom research, what makes fandom distinct is the socio-cultural nature of this production. Jenkins (1992) proposes a more specific conceptualization of fandom based on four dimensions. First, fandom is based on a distinctive mode of reception. In particular, fans refuse to maintain and openly resist any separation or critical distance between themselves and the products of popular culture. This directly challenges dominant culture, which needs to maintain the division of text and reader in order for it to possess and defend its economic and symbolic capital (Fiske 1989). Second, fandom constitutes a particular interpretive community (Jenkins 1992). While all consumers engage in semiotic production (i.e., the production of meaning), fans also engage in enunciative production (i.e., the social communication and interpretation of meaning) (Fiske 1992). That is, fans share and debate their co-created meanings with others who possess a similar interest in the particular cultural text (Bacon-Smith 1992). Third, fandom constitutes a particular art world (Jenkins 1992). Although fandom can be viewed in terms of its relation to the commodities of popular culture, it also constitutes a creative world of its own that moves beyond simply consuming pre-existing texts and engages in the production, distribution, and consumption of its own co-created texts (Fiske 1992). Fourth, fandom constitutes an alternative social community (Jenkins 1992). Having been denied access to official economic and cultural capital, fandom establishes a community that is not based on the traditional markers of status and success but on what fans directly and openly contribute to the fan community (Hellekson and Busse 2006).

In spite of the detailed explanation of fandom by these early scholars, others argue that this narrow focus on resistance, community, and textual production does not account for many individuals who also consider themselves to be fans but do not fit this model (Gray *et al.* 2017; Hills 2002; Scodari 2003). For instance, models of resistance fail to explain adequately the affective pleasure that fans find in a particular text (Chung *et al.* 2018; Sandvoss 2005). Additionally, if the ultimate goal of fandom is simply to subvert the status quo, it would make more sense for fans to attack mainstream texts rather than the esoteric ones that often attract their attention. As such, "second-wave" fandom scholars argue that the resistance model not only fails to explain a large majority of casual fans, many of whom consume cultural texts individually and produce no fannish creations (Joubert and Coffin 2020), but that it also fails to hold up under empirical scrutiny of the so-called "elite" fans, many of whom are fully committed to a particular text (Wojton and Porter 2018). Instead, these scholars argue that

fan practices are embedded in the economic, social, and cultural structures of society that often reproduce, rather than resist, these hierarchical structures within fandoms (Hills 2002).

The fact that producers of popular cultural texts still vehemently oppose certain fan practices and attempt to tame these unruly consumers is at least partial evidence that fandom is not seamlessly integrated into the broader socio-cultural order (Lothian 2009; Walliss 2010). Whereas first-wave scholars may have been overly functional (Gray *et al.* 2017), second-wave scholars seem to be overly structural. Jenkins (2006: 136) attempts to strike a balance between these two waves of fan research by suggesting that it is wrong to perceive fans “as either totally autonomous from or totally vulnerable to the culture industries ... The interactive audience is more than a marketing concept and less than a semiotic democracy.” All fans, even the more mainstream ones, actively negotiate the relationship they have with their chosen cultural texts through the constant interpretation, co-creation, and maintenance of those texts (Fiske 1989; Hills 2002; Russo 2009).

This deeper philosophical and meta-theoretical debate among fan scholars has opened the door for “third-wave” fandom research, which now focuses on a broader range of fans and cultural texts, including political, academic, and high culture fandoms (Gray *et al.* 2017). From a micro-level perspective, research has examined the intra-personal pleasures and complex motivations of fans (Derbaix and Korchia 2019) as well as issues of identity and personal performance (Seregina and Schouten 2017). From a macro-level perspective, research has examined how fans’ readings, tastes, and practices are both resistive and constitutive of the social, cultural, and economic structures in which they are practiced (Cronin and Cocker 2019; De Kosnik 2016). While some scholars argue that fandom can shed important light on the economics of modernity (Gray *et al.* 2017), a new wave of scholarship, driven especially by the examination of digital manifestations of fandom, suggests a different economic model is beginning to emerge that moves beyond designations of production and consumption and incorporates ideas from the gift economy and theories of the commons (Booth 2010; Lothian 2009; Pearson 2010).

Despite the different “waves” of fandom research and the varied depictions of fans, we contend that elements of the trickster underly much of fan creativity. While there is a certain subversive aspect of the trickster fan that aligns with the resistance stance of first-wave fandom, the inherent pleasure of playing their tricks also aligns with second-wave fandom. In addition, the trickster fan always needs someone or something (i.e., a cultural text) on which to play its tricks, suggesting that even though the trickster has the uncanny ability to transcend a text, its tricks only make sense within a given socio-culture structure. In fact, it is often the futility of the trickster to extricate itself from these structures that make the trick so amusing. Whatever the motivation or outcome of the trick, the trickster is able to draw (critical) attention to the established meanings of the text, which, in turn, often leads to new meanings and cultural forms.

Digital Fans & Fandom

Since the advent of modern fandom, fannish activities and practices have expanded greatly and have become, to a certain extent, part of mainstream culture (Coppa 2006; Gray *et al.* 2017; Jenkins 2006). Nowhere is this more prevalent than in the digital world (Negroponte 1995). The digitization of many products has affected practically all types of fandoms, from sports (e.g., fantasy football), to music (e.g., remixes), to media (e.g., fan wikis). While some analog fan practices have transferred to the digital realm relatively unchanged (e.g., fan fiction), other fan practices are clearly the result of this new digital medium (e.g., machinima)

(Jones 2006). In this section, we examine how some digital fan practices, specifically in the realm of media fandom, have fundamentally altered or extended the ways in which fandom operates. As we have mentioned, what makes this task difficult, yet also revealing, is that digital technology functions in multiple ways (e.g., tool, object, and medium) (Booth 2010; Stein 2006). Unlike in the analog realm where these functions are typically separate, the digital realm not only blurs the distinctions among these functions but also those practices that utilize this advanced technology.

What then is digital fandom? Basically, it is the use of digital technology to engage in fannish activities and practices with respect to specific cultural texts. It is important to note that digital fandom does not constitute a distinct type of fandom, but instead refers to fannish behavior as mediated through digital technology. While we agree with Booth (2010) that digital technology does not specifically determine fan practices, we argue that it has allowed fan practices to change in ways that are fundamentally different than those within the analog realm. Despite the early hype over the digital revolution and the temptation to cast it positively (Negroponte 1995), both fans and scholars view this technology somewhat ambivalently by arguing that digital fandom is both empowering and disempowering, personal and impersonal, and inclusive and exclusive (e.g., Busse and Hellekson 2006; Chung *et al.* 2018; Fuschillo 2020). For example, whereas the internet has opened up fandoms to a much broader audience and allowed for wider dissemination of fan texts, it has also distanced fans from each other by allowing them to interact anonymously, which has even led to the subversion of fan texts by other fans, non-fans, and even anti-fans (Booth 2017; Busse 2013; Click 2019). Others have argued from a decidedly negative perspective that digital technology has led to the commodification of fandom itself by various media producers and the exploitation of fan labor purely for economic gain (De Kosnik 2016; Willard 2017).

Digital fandom is thus a complex phenomenon encompassing a variety of practices, conflicting interests, and evolving socio-cultural meanings (Booth 2017). In addition, digital fandom incorporates both offline and online behavior, thus making clear distinctions between practices, participants, and perceptions difficult. As a result of this complexity, digital fandom, like fandom in general, resists a comprehensive definition and is often understood in terms of the perspectives of particular fan cultures (Gray *et al.* 2017; Hills 2002). Even so, we highlight some of the major practices of digital fandom below (see Table 30.1), especially those that lend themselves to fans' tricksterish activities.

Fan Fiction

Despite the cultural embeddedness of fans and fandoms, fannish interpretive and creative practices have always been somewhat beyond the control of media producers (Fiske 1992). One of the oldest uncontrollable fan practices is the writing of fan fiction (e.g., fan-authored stories that utilize elements of an official media text) (Busse and Hellekson 2006; Jamison 2013; Jenkins 1992). Fan fiction usually extends or even contradicts the official media text, thus offering fans a space to explore issues that are personally relevant (Lanier and Schau 2007). In addition, many fan stories disrupt and challenge conventional readings of a text (Busse 2013). Fan fiction made the transition to digital media quite early and has a prominent presence on the internet in popular archives and blog sites such as *Archive of Our Own (AO3)*; *FanFiction.Net (FFN)*, and *LiveJournal (LJ)* (Wojton and Porter 2018).

While many aspects of online fan fiction mirror those in the analog world, there are some digital practices that seem to be different in nature. One of these is the posting of fan fiction to blogs (Booth 2010; Cooper 2007; Herzog 2012). Fan authors usually post one chapter

Table 30.1 Digital Fan Practices

Practice	Explanation	Trickster activities	Resources
Fan fiction	Unauthorized fan-created narratives that are based on, but typically deviate from, aspects of a cultural text	Fan fiction provides fans the means to alter the elements, interpretations, and meanings of a cultural text in order to question dominant values and re-envision the narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jenkins (1992) Hellekson and Busse (2006) Jamison (2013) Wojton and Porter (2018)
Fan wikis	Online fan databases that are created from the extraction, categorization, and hyperlinking of the elements of a cultural text	Wikis allow fans to dissect and decenter the elements of a cultural text, which, in turn, allows for not only a multitude of readings but also a deconstruction of the cultural text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mittell (2009) Booth (2010) Thomas (2016) Lanier and Rader (2017) Jones, Nelson, and Sompel (2018)
Fan personas	Online identities, including screen name, avatar, and profile, created by fans to express their desired connection to a cultural text	Fan personas allow fans to shape-shift at will by constantly changing their demographic, psychographic, and behavioral profile in order to both disrupt and engage multiple selves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Busse (2006) Booth (2010) Osborne (2012) Hampton (2015) Moore (2020)
Machimima	Fan-generated movies that use the source code of a popular video game (e.g., Halo) in which to situate a new fan-based narrative	Machimima gives fans control over not only the narrative but also over the cultural text itself, which they can use to completely reimagine the fandom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jones (2006) Lowood and Nitsche (2011) Johnson and Pettit (2012) Harwood and Grussi (2021)
User-generated content	Fan creations that are solicited by the producers, and over which the producers assert ownership, for the promotion of a cultural text	User-generated content allows fans to freely poach elements from a cultural text, which can disrupt, though more often confirms, the media text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jenkins (2006) Pearson (2010) Chin (2014) Willard (2017)

Source: Own elaboration.

(or less) at a time, and other fans provide comments and feedback on the story. This general process is not new to fan fiction and actually represents the way that most fan fiction stories are written (Busse and Hellekson 2006). What is new in this digital realm is that the story and the criticism are no longer spatially or temporally separate but are fully integrated in the blog (Booth 2010). In this space, the roles of author and reader become intertwined as the readers author their own comments, which often influence the direction of the story, and the authors read the comments and engage the readers in a dialog on the story. As a result, blog fan fiction is a dynamic text that is not composed by a single author but is the result of everyone who writes on the blog. The resulting fan fiction becomes a multi-layered and multi-authored text that is forever open (Booth 2010; Cooper 2007; Jamison 2013).

Fan Wikis

The expansion of digital technology has led to the rise of “convergence culture,” which encompasses the flow of media content across multiple platforms (Jenkins 2006). One impact of convergence culture on fandom is that media producers are now engaging in “transmedia storytelling” where narratives unfold across different media outlets to provide more comprehensive stories. For example, fans of *Star Wars* have to cull information across a multitude of movies, an increasing number of live action television shows, several animated series, numerous books and comics, and a plethora of video games in order to make sense of the complete metatext (i.e., the entire story of *Star Wars*) (Jenkins 2006).

One way that fans respond to the narrative complexity of these transmediated texts is to develop fan-based wikis (i.e., online databases that allow for the communal creation and editing of virtually infinite content that is hyperlinked as separate web pages) (Thomas 2016). Examples of popular fan-based wikis include *A Wiki of Ice and Fire* (Game of Thrones), *Harry Potter Wiki* (Harry Potter), and *Wookieepedia* (Star Wars). On a basic level, fan-based wikis serve as a form of collective intelligence embodied in a complex archive that provides fans access to factual, cross-referenced data (Busse and Hellekson 2006). On a more complex level, these wikis move beyond mere repositories of information and challenge our deeper understanding of narrative, authorship, and readership. Whereas most fan-based narratives (e.g., fan fiction) follow traditional narrative forms (Jenkins 1992), wikis separate the narrative elements, thus dissolving the “chrono-logic” of a media text and detaching the story from its discourse (Booth 2010). Fans collectively rewrite media texts by deconstructing them into their constituent parts and then hyperlinking these parts to each other in an infinite array of spatial and temporal connections (Lanier and Rader 2017). This allows the exploration of narrative possibilities through rereading and reconstructing the story as a multi-authored fan discourse.

Fan Personas

A broader practice of digital fandom is the development of online profiles, or personas, by fans on the internet (Booth 2010; Jenkins 2006; Stein 2006). Despite the communal aspect of fandom (Jenkins 2006), most online fans choose to remain anonymous and hide their identities behind a clever screen name, provocative avatar, and fluid profile. In fact, a cardinal sin in fandom is doxing, or revealing another fan’s actual (offline) identity, often to threaten or harass them (Wojton and Porter 2018). The fact that this usually occurs within fan communities reveals both the importance of fan anonymity and the lack of constraint some fans feel in an anonymous environment, which is also exhibited in trolling, stalking, and bashing.

One thing that makes doxing so damaging is that fans use their online personas to both reveal and/or alter aspects of their actual identities (Osborne 2012). Personas are a public performance of one's identity within a community (Moore 2020). In fact, it is common for fans to refer to their personas as works-in-progress (Busse 2006), as their digital fan identities are considered unfinished, in between, and transformative (Hampton 2015). Fans use their public personas to negotiate, challenge, and disrupt culturally embedded norms and values associated with traditional identity markers (Busse 2006). Ironically, by transgressing these traditional identity markers and performing "queer" personas online, fans develop empathy for alternative identities and achieve a sense of belonging and community (Osborne 2012).

Machinima

Another digital fandom practice that has gained popularity online is fan filmmaking. While fan films have been around since the beginning of media fandom, the digital revolution has opened up greater movie-making possibilities (Jenkins 2004; Walliss 2010; Young 2008). Digital technology allows fans to create professional-looking films at a fraction of the costs of major studios. Digital software also allows for the incorporation of sophisticated special effects and simpler film editing, leading to much cleaner productions (Jenkins 2004). The high quality of fan films and the ease of distribution have caused media producers to shift their concerns from issues of copyright infringement to fears of direct competition (Walliss 2010). In a somewhat ironic twist, professional filmmakers are beginning to utilize fan filmmaking practices in the production of commercial films (Jenkins 2004).

An interesting offshoot of digital fan filmmaking is machinima (Harwood and Grussi 2021; Johnson and Pettit 2012; Jones 2006). Machinima is a form of filmmaking that utilizes video game software to produce a computer-animated movie (Harwood and Grussi 2021). Rather than arising from the desire to make films, machinima resulted from gamers' desires to modify the source code of the games to re-envision the media text. As Jones (2006: 266) writes, "The ability to freely play with the medium presents a challenge to previous notions of how audiences conventionally behave." More specifically, whereas other forms of fannish practices leave the original text intact, machinima actually alters the text itself. In the case of machinima, digital fandom moves beyond models of co-creation and allows fans to engage in pure production by utilizing the media text simply as a resource in the creative process (Lowood and Nitsche 2011). Fans do not merely pay homage to the media text in their films but now control the text itself and can determine its meanings.

User-Generated Content

In addition to engaging in transmedia storytelling, media producers are also attempting to harness the creative and interpretive power of fans by eliciting user-generated content (i.e., fan creations solicited by producers for the promotion of a media text) (Jenkins 2006; Pearson 2010; Russo 2009). Knowing that there is no way to fully contain and control fannish proclivities, producers often seek to appropriate fan creations in order to forge relationships with fans and benefit directly from fan practices (Russo 2009). For example, in 2007, the producers of the rebooted *Battlestar Galactica* (BSG) television series invited fans to be part of the BSG experience by making a short tribute film using digital clips provided by the show. The resulting films, particularly those that followed the rules, were judged for content and quality and the winner was aired on TV (Pearson 2010). Although many fans participated in

the contest with the hope of having their creations legitimized by the show, some saw this as a means of capitalizing on free fan labor while reigning in fan creativity that was at odds with the brand (Lothian 2009).

The explosive growth of digital technology and digital fandoms has not only increased the prevalence of user-generated content (UGC) but has also taught producers how to more effectively manage this process in order to assuage fans' concerns while reaping more economic benefits (Willard 2017). Although the use of contests still remains, producers now view fans as (informal) collaborators, as well as financial backers (i.e., crowdsourcing), in both the production and promotion of the media text (Booth 2017; Chin 2014). For example, the producers of MTV's *Teen Wolf* commissioned fan artists to create original artwork to promote the upcoming season of the show (Willard 2017). As with all UGC, the fan artists agreed to prescribed rules for the commissioned works and were required to relinquish their rights to the final artwork. As Willard (2017: 4.1) notes, "fans' transformative practices – adaptive and unsanctioned by definition – are reconfigured and repurposed to promote a canonical, industrially sanctioned version of the show." Ironically, in their quest for legitimation, if not monetization, fans inadvertently submit to a form of containment that undermines the source of their creativity.

The Hypermediated Fan as Trickster

While most fandom researchers decry "negative" portrayals of fans (Wojton and Porter 2018), the fact that the concept of fans is derived from "fanatics" (Jenkins 1992) and the objects of fan's intense desires are conceptualized as "cult" texts (Hills 2002) suggests something of the nature of fandom, especially in the hypermediated digital realm where "anything goes." This is not to say that fans are crazed sociopaths, but that their actions often lie outside the accepted social order. For fans, this isn't simply a position in which they find themselves, but one that they actively seek out. In this capacity, they often function much like the trickster (Campbell 1989; Pelton 1980; Radin 1956).

The trickster is an ever present, though enigmatic, figure in human history. All attempts to define this character fail due to the fact that what makes the trickster a trickster is that it transcends any definition. That is, to be a trickster is to defy any categories, even the indefinable (Pelton 1980). The trickster operates in the space between truth and falsity, fact and fiction, sacred and profane. Not confined to any category or script, the trickster embodies innovation as well as cultural change. Although the trickster defies definition, Hynes (1993a) proposes six characteristics that hint at its presence. Fans embody many of these traits in the digital realm.

First, the trickster is fundamentally an ambiguous and anomalous figure who does not fit well in any category and who always operates on the edge (Hynes 1993a). Like the trickster, fans lie somewhere between consumer and producer, audience and performer, and reader and writer (Hills 2002). Fans are not one or the other but exist in the anti-synthetic space between these positions (Lanier and Rader 2017). For example, in blog fan fiction, writer and reader intermingle on the webpage, making it hard to distinguish any clear roles as the two interact to create the story (Booth 2017). Likewise, fan fiction exists in a legal gray area between free use and copyright infringement (Pearson 2010). Producers are often careful about taking legal action because alienating their fans could hurt the brand and lead to even larger negative economic consequences. Ultimately, this ambiguous position, especially in the digital space, allows fans to transcend traditional categories and open possibilities for new interpretations and creations.

Second, the trickster is utmost a deceiver and trick-player (Hynes 1993a). While being a fan is to have a deep admiration and commitment to a cultural text, fans also refuse to maintain any critical distance between themselves and the text (Jenkins 1992). In the process, fans disrupt and disorder the objects of their fandoms through both respect and resistance. From simply rewriting a text in unexpected (and even provocative) ways to providing speculative spoilers (i.e., disclosing important information about a text such as the ending), fans play “tricks” on the conventional reading and meanings of a text. That is, fans challenge the central narrative of the text and any particular reading. For example, fan wikis disassemble metatexts (i.e., all of the texts contained in a fandom) into free-floating signifiers that can be reassembled in an infinite number of ways. As a result, the deconstructed texts become an endlessly deferred narrative (Hills 2002). Rather than restricting and undermining a text, this particular “deception” (i.e., challenging a text through seemingly innocuous categorization) allows fans to reinterpret the text in a manner that is personally relevant (Lanier and Rader 2017). Digital fan practices like fan wikis not only disassociate the narrative elements of a text but also alter the discourse around the text in often unexpected ways. The tricks and deceptions of fans have a way of highlighting what is absent in a text, which, in turn, unleashes fans’ creative potential.

Third, the actions of the trickster are often performed under disguise or through shape-shifting (Hynes 1993a). That is, the trickster often performs its tricks by altering its appearance and/or shape. Highlighting the lack of critical distance, fans have always wanted to participate more fully in their favorite texts. In analog fandom, this is usually manifested in terms of “dressing up” as your favorite character (e.g., Cosplay). Digital fandom has allowed fans to go much further in this process. Not only can fans present their desired persona through their anonymous screen names, avatars, and stated traits, but they are not constrained by demographic factors. Fans can easily change their race, gender, and even species (e.g., *Star Trek* Klingons or *Avatar* Na’vi) (Schreyer 2015). Within digital fandom, fans are not restricted to emulating their favorite character but can actually become the character and interact with others in this role (Booth 2010). In the process, fans can directly challenge embedded cultural values by embodying the “other” that lies outside of the social order. This allows fans to speak, sometimes literally, a different language (Schreyer 2015).

Fourth, the trickster is a situation inverter in that it has “the ability to overturn any person, place, or belief, no matter how prestigious” (Hynes 1993a: 37). Part of the motivation of fandom is to rewrite a text in order to explore issues not addressed in the canon (Jenkins 1992). In fan fiction, this is often done by inverting the dominant focus to emphasize the subordinate aspects of the text (Lanier and Schau 2007). For the trickster, the inversion can never go too far – in fact, the farther the better! This is evident in slash (i.e., homosexual encounters among heterosexual characters) and male pregnancy (or “mpreg”) stories that completely invert aspects of a text, particularly its characters. In blog fan fiction, not only is the text inverted (a single inversion) but so is the role of author and reader (a double inversion), which can then lead to further alterations of the story (a triple inversion), which could theoretically go on *ad infinitum*. For many scholars, the trickster represents a form of productive chaos. By both disordering and reordering reality, often in humorous and entertaining ways, the trickster not only inverts reality but also reveals the underlying creative process (Hynes 1993b).

Fifth, the trickster is regularly portrayed as the messenger of the gods (Hynes 1993a). Like the trickster, fans often serve as a mediator between consumers and producers. Fans serve as gift givers by offering new perspectives on a cultural text, often by breaking the rules (e.g., intellectual property laws) surrounding these texts. But like the trickster, fans

often operate with a certain immunity that protects them from prosecution. For example, machinima allows fans to produce unique and engaging films based on manipulating the source code of popular video games. While they have been able to evade legal issues, the wildly popular machinima YouTube channel was shut down in 2019 for purported legal issues, though no one was officially prosecuted. While the attempt to monetize these fannish creations took this work out of the legal gray area, this setback does not mean this fannish practice will end. Like the trickster, fans are crafty and resilient and will find another outlet for their gifts. By manipulating digital technology, fans reveal that the generative aspects of creativity cannot be constrained by any system and often lead to cultural transformations (Hynes 1993b).

Sixth, the trickster operates as a sacred and profane bricoleur (Hynes 1993a). According to Lévi-Strauss (1966), a bricoleur is someone who can create things based on the materials available. Fans, by utilizing various aspects of a given metatext, have a knack for creating unique objects that both challenge (i.e., profane) and extend (i.e., sacralize), often simultaneously, their respective fandoms. As Hynes (1993a: 42) writes, “Yet the bricoleur aspect of the trickster can cause any or all lewd acts or objects to be transformed into occasions of insight, vitality, and new inventive creations.” As noted above, slash and mpreg represent both novel and hugely popular genres of fan fiction. These stories undermine traditional gender roles in order to expose embedded cultural stereotypes and open up possibilities for alternative identities, especially within the digital realm (Busse 2006). Ultimately, fans’ trickster activities often reveal the sources of order and power. More importantly, these activities show that we are not confined to a system of order or even to a choice among alternative orders. We all have the ability to transcend order and construct our own universes (Hynes 1993b).

Discussion

While fans have many of the characteristics of the trickster, there can also be something decidedly un-tricksterish about them. Beyond the simple fact that some fans do not engage in tricksterish behaviors (Joubert and Coffin 2020), fandom itself can exert an enormous force in the opposite direction. That is, there are pressures within all fandoms toward order, control, and predictability. This is exacerbated by the more recent push within digital fandom for activism and advocacy (Wojton and Porter 2018), fan-based “citizenship” (Hinck 2019), and archive and repertoire (De Kosnik 2016). In this discussion, we will reveal the inherent paradox that lies at the heart of fandom, especially in the digital age.

As Jenkin (1992) notes, a defining characteristic of fandom is its focus on community. While there has been some more recent pushback on this characteristic (Derbaix and Korchia 2019; Joubert and Coffin 2020), the majority of fan scholars, especially the ardent “aca-fans” (i.e., academic fan scholars), believe you must be part of a community to be considered a fan (Busse and Hellekson 2006; Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005). That is, individuals who operate individually on the margins of fandom are not true fans or, at worse, are merely poseurs. To be considered officially among the ranks of the anointed, at least according to these scholars, you must participate in a fan community (Cronin and Crocker 2019; Plante *et al.* 2020).

The problem, though, is that community naturally engenders constraints that can blunt the creativity of the trickster. As Grayson (1999: 107) notes in his work on playful consumption, “a prerequisite for everyday social relations is a shared understanding or consensus among interactants about the rules governing the interaction.” That is, for a community to exist, there must be clearly defined boundaries, roles, and expectations (Goffman 1959). While these are structured in such a way to allow for a variety of opportunities within the

community, there are also normative limits (i.e., rules) governing such possibilities, which are usually internalized and enforced by members of the community. Transgressions of the boundaries, roles, and/or expectations could lead to public censure or expulsion from the community.

Given that the trickster is inherently a boundary breaker, role disrupter, and mischievous deceiver, community and tricksterism are seemingly at odds. The creative potential of the trickster that gives rise to a particular fandom is then tempered by the fan community (Plante *et al.* 2020). To manage this creative potential, fandoms direct their trickster antics at what lies outside the particular fandom (e.g., heteronormative values of mainstream society) (Wojton and Porter 2018). Whereas fandom is predicated on highlighting and celebrating the “other” (Busse 2013), the “other” soon becomes, in tribalistic fashion, that which is not part of the fan community (Plante *et al.* 2020). As Hynes (1993b: 214) writes, “expressions that were once fresh and lucid become outmoded, obscuring, and encrustating the intangible creative forces they once so ably communicated.” Unfortunately for fandom, slash and mpreg fan fiction have now become less queer and more cliché. Even those works that push the boundaries of fandom (e.g., Alpha/Beta/Omega fan fiction) are never totally disruptive of the fan community and are quickly subsumed into accepted fan practices (Busse 2013).

The trickster, though, hates to be contained by any system and actively seeks to subvert all constraints (even those considered subversive) in order to release its creative potential (Hynes 1993b). As the trickster makes clear, every construct is constructed, and hence can (and should) be deconstructed (Lanier and Rader 2017). It is both interesting and telling how fans who transgress the boundaries of mainstream society fiercely react when the boundaries of their own fandoms are transgressed (Cronin and Crocker 2019). Those fans and aca-fans who argue that community may not necessarily be part of the definition of fandom, or at least part of the definition of being a fan (Derbaix and Korchia 2019; Joubert and Coffin 2020), may know instinctively that community, even one that is counter-culture, naturally constrains the boundary-spanning creativity of the trickster. Although digital fandom has made it much easier for fans to connect and develop their fandoms into thriving communities driven by activism, advocacy, and citizenship (Wojton and Porter 2018), not to mention an intense focus on status, capital, and identity (Seregina and Schouten 2017), it has also developed, ironically, institutionalized structures that constrain not merely creative expression, but the irrational, nebulous, and chaotic source of creativity. Perhaps in their push to move fandom from the deviant margins of society and remove the stigmatization of fans as fanatics, both fans and aca-fans may have cut themselves off from the very source of their fannish practices. If digital fandom is going to retain its vitality, it must figure out how to transgress and subvert *itself*. What digital fandom may really need is the resurrection of the crafty, unconstrained, and irreverent trickster.

Further reading

- Click, M. (2019) *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*, New York: New York University Press. (Explores expressions of negative feelings and emotions in digital fandom and their various effects on fan behavior.)
- Hinck, A. (2019) *Politics for the Love of Fandom*, Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press. (Examines fan-based citizenship in a digital world.)
- Wojton, J. and Porter, L. (2018) *Sherlock and Digital Fandom*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland. (Provides interesting case study of the digital aspects of the *Sherlock* fandom.)

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