Digital Fandom

New Media Studies

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Introduction

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This is a book about fans, fan fiction (of a sort), and the fan communities that center on that fiction. But it is more than that, too: It's also a book about digital media and necessary changes in our contemporary study of media. Fans are a microcosm of this change, and the study of fans can become emblematic of studies in contemporary media.

I do not take this grandiose claim lightly, for I believe that the second decade of the 21st century brings with it new forms of media beyond traditional models of broadcasting, beyond mass media, and beyond convergence. I believe that the contemporary media environment is more than the sum of its parts. This book is also about these changes to the media environment. And I believe that the best way of examining this sum is with the new tools and methodologies that take into account these changes.

There has been a paradigm shift in our media, a shift that I believe can best be seen and analyzed through studies of Alternate Reality Games (ARGs). The ARG represents one type of integration of converged media, one possible future of entertainment. In this book, I will demonstrate, through an examination of fandom, how the characteristics of the ARG become allegorical for characteristics of New Media. In other words, studying fans tells us something about studying ARGs; and studying ARGs tells us something about New Media. This book, therefore, is also about the future of media as it is lived, experienced and loved.

What is it about media fans that continues to fascinate media scholars? For over twenty years, fan studies have been a way to explore audience participation with a media text. From the pioneering studies of John Fiske, through the germinal ethnographic research of Henry Jenkins, to more recent explorations of fans and technology by Matt Hills, Karen Hellekson, Jona-

than Gray, and Cornel Sandvoss (among others), the productive work of media consumers has been at the forefront of audience analysis. The evolution of fan studies, however, has reached a critical moment: Traditional studies of media fandom in the digital age seem inadequately equipped to describe and analyze what I call the "philosophy of playfulness" we can observe in fans' use of today's digital technology.

What is a "philosophy of playfulness"? The contemporary media scene is complex, and rapidly becoming dependent on a culture of ludism: today's media field is fun, playful, and exuberant. More so than at any other time, the media we use in our everyday lives has been personalized, individualized, and made pleasurable to use. The field of media studies needs to take into account this philosophy of playfulness in order to represent the media texts created by fans not just as fan fiction, fan videos, fan songs, or fan research, but rather as pieces of what fans use as a larger media "game," one allegorized by the Alternate Reality Game.

An ARG is a game played in the physical world that utilizes digital technology to help players solve and decipher clues and puzzles. Although much of the game takes place online, some real world excursions blur contemporary distinctions of media and technology. Why do I link fans to ARGs in this manner? I do not mean to suggest that only "fans" participate in ARGs, nor do I intend to imply that ARGs are created solely for fans' uses. However, I believe there is an important linkage between the two on the theoretical level. Fans are actively engaged in their media texts, participating in some way with the creation of meanings from extant media events. Players of ARGs, similarly, participate in the active reconstruction of the game environment, and create new meanings from the intersection and convergence of media texts. Further, active fans who create fan fiction regularly transgress the boundaries of the original text, by adding new material, creating new readings, or providing alternate takes of the plot of the original. Similarly, ARGs utilize ubiquitous web and digital technology to help players participate in a game that is both constructed through and effaced by mediation, transgressing and destabilizing traditional media theories. In short, the types of participation in which fans engage mirrors the type of participation in which players of ARGs engage; and this type of participation is reflected by many contemporary media audiences in general.

But is it not enough just to declare that the ARG is a metaphor for the future state of mediation. What the ARG also offers us is a glimpse into a

new realm of media scholarship. By representing these changes, ARGs demonstrate what I'm calling in this book "New Media Studies." New Media Studies is not a new type of scholarship, but rather a new way of looking at the practice of contemporary media studies that takes into account, and uses, the technologies that audiences are using to engage with media. In an age where digital media is becoming convergent and ubiquitous, it becomes important to analyze not just that media, but also the very discipline of media studies. This book is, therefore, a response to William Merrin, who writes, "ongoing changes in digital media needed to be placed at the core of the discipline; backward-looking perspectives needed to be left behind; and the historical basis of the discipline needed to be opened up to critical scrutiny."[1] The language we speak and the terminology with which we define our tech-nology, will always delimit and define the ways in which we can understand our theoretical conceptions.[2] ARGs offer a chance not only to explore the destabilization of concepts in mediation, but also to emphasize and paradoxi-cally underplay New Media mediation at the same time.

But what do I mean by "New Media?" Quite plainly, I define New Media as those media forms that are digital, interactive, updatable, and ubiquitous: in this book represented by blogs, wikis, and Social Network Sites.[3] Digital media are, at their most basic, media defined by their constituent parts: the 1's and 0's of binary code. This has the effect of making all New Media texts boundless—or, rather, bound in the same infinite mediation as all other New Media texts. Whereas once the technological device determined which media entertainment one might experience (TV programs were on TV, newspapers were in print, films were in the cinema), now the digitization of media means that the mediated entertainment does not depend on the technology of its viewership. Interactive media means not only that the media product can influence its viewership's identities, but also that viewers themselves can influence their interpretation of the media product.[4] The wiki I edit today, for example, may not be the wiki you view tomorrow, thanks to the interactive actions of a multitude of amateur editors. Specific online interactive New Media "texts" include blogs, wikis, online comments, Social Network Sites, and all interactions between them.

New Media, additionally, are updatable, which follows naturally from the interactivity of the mediation. Users of New Media can easily update the media "texts" as they use them. New Media are not static products, but instead are akin to what Raymond Williams describes as cultural processes.[5]

A scholar cannot cite a wiki, for example, without acknowledging the date she downloaded that wiki, because the wiki exists just as much in time as it does in space. Indeed, looked at differently, wiki texts are ultimately timeless because they are also, ultimately, formless. Finally, New Media are ubiquitous, meaning not only that New Media surround us and greet us on a daily basis, but also that they do it without our even noticing. The iPod revolution reveals a great reliance on our New Media as technological showcases: I have an iPod not only to listen to music/watch videos/check my email but also so that others will see me with an iPod.

New Media and fandom are closely tied academic subjects; and indeed, it is important to look at fans in New Media because of the close ties between fandom and extant media objects.[6] The show *Babylon 5* is a good example of this, as creator J. Michael Straczynski made major changes to the show after fan's offered input online about the pilot episode.[7] Deery has demonstrated how producers of the *X-Files*

> did read fan sites and did take on some suggestions occasionally. Writers used online fan names for bit parts and even dedicated one episode to a prominent online fan who had recently died. Viewer feedback also determined the prominence of character roles. The character of Skinner, for instance, was apparently expanded due to positive viewer reactions.[8]

Although, as Deery suggests, this interactivity between fans and producers is still nascent, it does exist. More recently, producers of the show *Battlestar Galactica* announced a new show to feature a Second-Life-like virtual environment "tied directly to [the] TV show, letting fans influence [and] affect the broadcast storyline and vice versa."[9] The virtual world would be populated by fans, who would meet there to write new content, read the show, and participate in the production of the television program. Footage of the virtual world will, according to the Sci-Fi network, be featured on a television show, and the fan-presence itself will be a factor in the show's television text. Other fan-created content has made it into shows, albeit usually through officially sponsored channels. For example, the cult show *Heroes* featured a "Create Your Own Hero" fan-based promotion in which fans could go online and vote on various characteristics for two new heroes. The results of the voting determined the personality, appearance and abilities of the heroes, among other attributes. After producers tallied the votes, the new heroes premiered in an online series.[10] Although the producers of *He-*

roes maintained rights over the fan-created content, the fact they sought out and utilized this content speaks to the ubiquity of fan culture in television production.

By enacting these changes, fans perform New Media Studies; academics, therefore, need to keep pace in order to keep current. In this book, I refer to this type of scholarship into fan performance specifically as Digital Fandom, a way of searching for new paradigms and new ways of seeing the media technology we use on a daily basis. Fans are one way of looking at New Media, and fans' use of online, interactive technologies demonstrates an important step to an augmentation of scholarship in media studies. It is "digital" fandom not because it assumes that there is some inherent deterministic difference in the way digital technology affects fans, but rather because many creative fan practices rely on the characteristics of the digital. By integrating digital scholarship into fan studies, I hope to provide a text that offers a unique view of contemporary audiences.

The trajectory of *Digital Fandom* thus follows two parallel paths. First, I augment traditional studies of media fandom with descriptions of the contemporary fan in an online media environment. Second, I use this analysis of digital fandom to discuss media studies as a contemporary field of study. I undertake both a critical and a historical analysis of contemporary media by looking at contemporary uses of New Media. Importantly, I should note here that to make large generalizations of New Media based on a relatively small sample of texts, as I do, can be problematic: one is faced with offering the work of a few to represent larger trends. However, I use this form of textual analysis for a specific effect: namely, I show under-examined and under-theorized aspects of New Media through an analysis of specific ways audiences are using New Media. I do not mean to indicate that this is the only way fans use New Media, nor do I argue that the fan texts at which I look in this book are universal. I simply highlight particular uses of New Media to indicate changes in our scholarly perception of this new, exciting, digital environment. The very fact they are happening is indicative of larger shifts in our use of media in general.

SUMMARY

In this book I use an escalating analysis—by which I mean I examine individual online texts in order to analyze some of the ways people communicate

online. These individual texts lead me to ideas about ARGs, and the way they function in a super-mediated environment. The ideas about ARGs then point the way to a better understanding of our contemporary media environment. Indeed, the way contemporary fans interact complicates traditional media theory; however, I intend this book not to replace but to augment traditional media theories. To misquote Shakespeare, I come to praise traditional media studies, not to bury it. In order to examine this new toolbox and the contents within, I undertake a form of cultural criticism of fan-created, online interactive media texts. In this book I deal specifically with fans of cult television programs, because the interaction with this serial, on-going, extant media object offers unique insights into the fan community and its use of online media. Cult texts have "vast, elaborate and densely populated fictional world[s] that [are] constructed episode-by-episode, extended and embellished by official secondary-level texts (episode guides, novelizations, comics, magazines) and fan-produced tertiary texts (fan fiction, cultural criticism essays, art, scratch videos)."[11] Fans "fill in the gaps" between episodic narratives: for example, a cult text asks the audience to answer questions like, will the survivors get off the island in *Lost*? Who is *Doctor Who*? In what ways will the future be different in *Star Trek*? Who are the hidden Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica*? Cult television's meaning exists not in any one place, but rather in the ethereal location in-between answer and question, in-between desire and the fulfillment of desire.[12] Jason Mittell argues that this form of "narrative complexity" complicates the cult world so much that we watch in order to "crack each program's central enigmas."[13]

As I demonstrate, part of "cracking" these "enigmas" involves much the same process as players and participants of Alternate Reality Games enact to solve the puzzles of those games. This applicability to contemporary media is what makes the ARG such a useful guide for New Media Studies, as I demonstrate in the first chapter. My exploration of the ARG as a metaphor for Digital Fandom and New Media Studies begins in Chapters Two and Three, with an examination of the blog as an intra-textual document. In Chapter Two I show that Roland Barthes's conceptualization of intertextuality is no longer adequate to describe works or texts of New Media. The blog represents a new form neither wholly intertextual nor individual. Specifically, a blog is made up of both the posting and the comments about that posting, and the "author" of a blog fan fiction is not a fan, per se, but rather a fandom. Chapter Three uses Bakhtinian theories of the carnivalesque to begin an intra-textual discussion of blogs. In contrast to intertextuality, which sees the ways texts work together and where meaning is uncovered between texts, intra-textuality examines the meaning that occurs inside the document text

itself. Through an examination of blog fan fiction written about the television show *Battlestar Galactica* (2003), I posit six factors that construct and determine intra-textuality.

The next two chapters reveal the interactive potential of wikis as archives of narrative information by looking at the wikis for the cult TV shows *Lost* (2004) and *Heroes* (2006). In Chapter Four, I examine the implications of this narrative reconceptualization as an interactive narrative database. The narrative database forces a reappraisal of traditional narrative form, where narrative is split between what is told (the "story") and the telling of that tale (the "discourse"). Chapter Five explores the interactive narrative construction of narractivity, the process by which communal interactive action constructs and develops a narrative structure. Through an analysis of spoilers on these wikis, I describe three different ways fans can construe the story.

In the next two chapters, I show the blurring of boundaries between the real and the virtual in Social Network Sites. In Chapter Six I detail how fans create a new form of textual "space" on MySpace which is open to user interpretation and play, and normalizes the virtual and the real-world identities of their users. Taking off from the work of de Certeau, I reconceptualize the role of strategies and tactics in reading a cult television text, and demonstrate that MySpace offers an interreality, a third space of fan creation. Chapter Seven describes three ways this identity roleplay allows fans to rewrite a media text's characters on MySpace. Specifically, I show how other fans reread this roleplay as a narrativized sense of identity in online character personas, and then reproduce their fan community in this interreal space. For users of MySpace, creating a profile of a character is more than fan fiction, and more than textual poaching: it is a space where identities mingle.

In the conclusion I interrogate the very methodology I have used in the book, by re-examining the concept of the Alternate Reality Game refracted through the lens of New Media Studies. I show that the ARG is the result of the outcome of the heavy mediation in a contemporary mediated society. Through an articulation of concepts described in Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *Remediation*, I show how ARGs actually *demediate* real life by reversing and surpassing the polarity of hypermediacy and immediacy.[14] Hypermediacy represents the way media are made obvious: When we admire the special effects in a film, we are in awe of its obviousness. Immediacy, alternately, is the way a media can seem to disappear, and we can seem to forget that we are using or experiencing it. When we emerge bleary-eyed

from a film, forgetting that we were even watching, we have been experiencing immediacy. I argue that ARGs represent a future of media entertainment that reverses these two conceptions through a demediated, playful hyper-immersion, and assert that just as useful a metaphor as the ARG makes, so too must it fall under the very re-examination it portends.

I conclude the book by showing the connection between fans' use of online, interactive technologies and New Media in general. I discuss the ways that Digital Fandom provides a lens through which we can focus on changes in our contemporary media landscape. We must examine the unquestioned assumptions that gird contemporary analysis of media. For example, as Benkler indicates, the traditional theories of media and cultural studies cannot account for the potential and the actualization of online practices.[15] We must rethink traditional ways of dealing with issues such as ownership, originality, authorship, commercialization, and copyright in the online world.

This book is about media. It is media. It relies on and examines media. But more so, it offers a glimpse of a mediated future as seen through contemporary media practices. It should not be the end of the conversation, though; this should not the last Tweet in our dialogue. Media, like fans, are continually evolving, and it is only through a constant and vigilant observation of these changes that scholars, students, and practitioners of media can hope to stay current. If anything, therefore, this book is about a particular time and a particular mediated state. It is about making claims about the future, only a few of which may actually come to truth.

This book is an attempt, therefore, to describe fandom in a digital culture, and to introduce, problematize, and explain new conceptions in media studies as demonstrated by fans. It is my hope that readers will come away not only with some new ideas about the contemporary media landscape, but also with new questions to ask, and new avenues of research to explore. To that end, I do not intend this book to be a conclusion; rather, it is what I hope to be the first line of dialogue in a conversation—the first IM, perhaps—about media, about fandom, and about the place of both in contemporary scholarship.

NOTES

[1]   William Merrin, "Media Studies 2.0: Upgrading and Open-Sourcing the Discipline," *Interactions: Studies in Communication and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2009): 19.

[2]   See, David Gunkel, *Hacking Cyberspace* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 1.

3   I do not mean to imply that these are the only types of New Media out there, but for the sake of brevity it is on these three I focus.

4   See, Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), 101.

5   Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 1980), 48.

6   I use the term "extant media object" in this book as a shorthand of the text for which a fan shows appreciation, or the object of the fan's attention.

7   "What Effect Have Fans Had?" *The Lurkers Guide to Babylon 5,* 19 Mar 2006, http://www.midwinter.com/lurk/resources/fans.html#effect (accessed 10 Mar 2009).

8   June Deery, "TV.com: Participatory Viewing on the Web," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 37, no. 2 (2003): 177.

9   "Sci Fi Channel Partners with Trion for Interwoven TV Show and Virtual World," *Virtual Worlds News,* 02 June 2008, http://www.virtualworldsnews.com/2008/06/sci-fi-channel.html (accessed 10 Mar 2009), ¶1.

10   "Create Your Own Hero" (See, Appendix B).

11   Sara Gwenllian-Jones, "Virtual Reality and Cult Television," in *Cult Television*, ed. Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 84.

12   Matt Hills, "Defining Cult TV: Texts, Inter-texts, and Fan Audiences," in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill (London: Routledge, 2004), 509–10: Hills shows how the definition of "cult" relies on the intersection of production, intertextuality and fan appreciation; see also, Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 131–5.

13   Jason Mittell, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (2006): 38.

14   Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999).

15   Yochai Benkler, "Coase's Penguin, or, Linux and the Nature of the Firm," in *CODE: Collaborative Ownership and the Digital Economy*, ed. Rishab Aiyer Ghosh (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 169.