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Chloé Aubry, Cora Krömer, Brigitte Ouvry-Vial (dir.), *Reading & Gaming*

"Single, taken or in love with a fictional character?" How fanfiction could help us understand (digital) reading.

Katrin Tiidenberg (Tallinn University)



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Résumé

Cet article se focalise sur un phénomène où la lecture de fiction, pour le plaisir, la lecture numérique et le jeu s'entrecroisent- la fanfiction sur Internet. Je propose une analyse brève et exploratoire des expériences d'un petit groupe (7 personnes) de lecteurs adultes dévoués et expérimentés de lecture de fanfiction afin de comprendre les dynamiques affectives, cognitives et sociales de leurs pratiques de lecture. La lecture de fanfiction des participants est conceptualisée en tant que pratique ludique d'ouverture, de curiosité et d'enthousiasme pour l'expérimentation¹. Je suggère qu'en regardant la lecture numérique comme jeu, nous pouvons comprendre davantage des pratiques de lecture. C'est sans doute le côté ludique qui rend la lecture de fanfiction immersive, peut-être même addictive, même quand elle est consommée via des dispositifs d'écran et sur des sites web qui sont généralement liés à une attention distraite et à des difficultés à lire pendant des périodes plus longues de temps ininterrompu. Ainsi, la lecture de fanfiction peut être informative, pour comprendre la lecture à l'ère numérique, pour concevoir des interventions afin de motiver les gens à lire plus (de fiction) et pour comprendre et développer des littératies multiples à l'ère de la surcharge d'information et du défilement omniprésent.

Mots-clés

Fanfiction, expériences de lecture de fanfiction, lecteurs adultes de fanfiction, lecture comme jeu, lecture participative, lecture ludique, nouvelles littératies.

Abstract

This article focuses on a phenomenon where reading fiction for pleasure, digital reading and play intersect - internet fanfiction. I offer a brief and exploratory analysis of the experiences of a small group (7 people) of devoted and experienced, adult fan-fiction readers in order to understand the affective, cognitive and social dynamics of their reading practices. Participants' fanfiction reading is conceptualized as a playful practice of openness, curiosity and enthusiasm for experimentation². I suggest that by viewing digital reading as play we can understand more about reading practices. Arguably, it is this playfulness, which makes reading fanfiction immersive, perhaps even addictive, even when consumed via screened devices and on websites that are commonly linked to distracted attention and difficulties with reading for longer periods of uninterrupted time. Thus, reading fanfiction may be informative, both for understanding reading in the digital age, for planning interventions to get people to read more (fiction) and for understanding and developing multiliteracies in the era of information overload and ubiquitous scrolling.

Keywords

Fanfiction, experiences of reading fanfiction, adult fanfiction readers, reading as play, participatory reading, playful reading, new literacies

¹ PAASONEN S., "Many splendored things: Sexuality, playfulness and play", *Sexualities*, First published November 8, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460717731928>.

² *Ibid.*

Introduction³

Reading is important. Beyond the functional, practical importance of literacy for living an informed, perhaps even an empowered life, we know that fiction reading, in particular, has an abundance of psycho-social benefits. It can give us models of the social world, which in turn facilitates empathy and increases social support⁴. It can also help us instigate self-change; alter how we think⁵; and modify our self-understanding through producing new metaphors of personal identification⁶.

Yet, for decades now, scholars, teachers, parents, writers, publishers and activists have been worried about reading. Common anxieties address changes in reading habits, waning vocabularies, diminishing comprehension levels, and less time spent on reading for pleasure. When digital technologies and social media are added to the mix, discussions sour into what can be described as a moral panic. Moral panics are a sociological term for popular explanations that spread at times of change, in particular when the conventional order of things seems to be threatened. They very often accompany introduction and popularization of new technologies. In the case of the moral panic surrounding (networked and digital) reading, we see devices being juxtaposed to books. A disappointed narrative of smartphone addicted, book-ignorant "kids these days" prevails. Yet, the relationship between networked communication platforms, digital devices and reading for pleasure is not that simple. The body of literature known as "new literacy studies", points out that reading (and writing) printed texts is no longer enough to participate in the labor market, academic and leisure life of a networked society⁷. A literate person needs to have many dynamic and malleable competencies⁸. Typically these multiliteracies are described through the need to be able to create and understand a multiplicity of "texts" – printed, visual, infographical, animated, spoken, video, audio⁹. Thus, when digital literacies are discussed, we often focus on things like social media feeds, how-to guides, YouTube videos or virtual classrooms. But, what about reading fiction in a digital, networked setting?

³ A briefer version of this text has been published on my blog <<http://kkatot.tumblr.com/post/133863911327/single-taken-or-in-love-with-a-fictional>>.

⁴ MAR R. A., & OATLEY K., "The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience", *Perspectives on Psychology Science*, vol. 3, 2008, p. 173-192; MAR R. A., OATLEY K., & PETERSON J. B., "Exploring the link between reading fiction and empathy: Ruling out individual differences and examining outcomes", *Communications*, vol. 34 / 4, 2009, p. 407-428.

⁵ MAR R. A., & MULLIN J., "Emotion and narrative fiction: Interactive influences before, during, and after reading" *Cogn Emot*, vol. 25 / 5, 2011, p. 818-834.

⁶ MIALD D., KUIKEN D., "A feeling for fiction: Becoming what we behold", *Poetics*, 30, 2002, p. 221-241.

⁷ BLACK R. W., "Online Fan Fiction and Critical Media Literacy", *Journal of Computing in Teacher Education*, vol. 26, 2009, p. 75-80.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ LEVY F., MURNANE R., *The New Division of Labor: How Computers Are Creating the Next Job Market*. New York: Sage University Press, 2004.

This article focuses on reading internet fanfiction. This is where reading for pleasure intersects with reading fiction, and digital reading. The article offers a brief and exploratory analysis of the experiences of a small group¹⁰ of devoted, reflexive, and experienced fanfiction readers, and some publicly available texts (blog posts, columns, opinion pieces) that self-professed fanfiction readers have published on why they read fanfiction. I gathered these comments on people's experiences in order to gain an insight into the affective, cognitive and social dynamics of this particular reading practice. This is obviously a very limited sample of people and experiences, thus this piece has no ambitions to generalize to all fanfiction reading or all fanfiction readers. Rather, well aware of its limitations, this piece offers an initial, explorative glance at an area worthy of much further scholarly attention.

I conceptualize my informants' fanfiction reading experiences as playful. Johan Huizinga¹¹ characterizes play as a voluntary, non-utilitarian and immersive practice that enables social connections, offers exaltation, but also relaxation. While play is primarily about pleasure, this pleasure can stem both from enjoyment and from hurt, challenge, even offence¹². Therefore, in this article, I explore reading fanfiction as "a mode, capacity and orientation of sensory openness, curiosity and zest for variation that precipitates improvisation"¹³, or in other words, as a playful practice. I suggest that this playfulness is where fanfiction reading gets its immersive, perhaps even addictive qualities, and that this may be informative, if our goal is to get people to read more fiction, or read more for pleasure in the era of information overload, networked communication and ubiquitous technology use.

What is fanfiction?

In her doctoral dissertation on the topic, Juli Parrish¹⁴ defines internet fanfiction as:

- writings by amateur fans of a particular media text (television program, book, film, role-playing game, anime, cartoon, etc);
- that starts from (but is not limited to) some of the characters or premises of the source text;
- which explicitly self-identifies as fan fiction;

¹⁰ 7 people chosen from my personal and professional networks via a Facebook post, where I asked, who was a fanfiction reader, and would be willing to share their experiences with me. This was done in November 2015 in preparation for a workshop presentation.

¹¹ HUIZINGA J., *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Routledge, 1949.

¹² SICART M., *Play Matters*: Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014, p. 3.

¹³ PAASONEN S., Many splendored things, p. 1-2.

¹⁴ PARRISH J. J., *Inventing a Universe: Reading and Writing Internet Fan Fiction*. Ph.D. Diss. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 2007, p. 11.

- and is published on the internet.

Fanfiction is published in specialized online fanfiction archives like *Archive of Our Own* or *Fanfiction.net*, on fiction sites like *Wattpad*, or on blogging platforms like *Livejournal* or *tumblr*. *Archive of Our Own* is particularly interesting, because it is run by a non-profit organization called the Organization for Transformative Works, which was established in 2007 by fans themselves. It reached a million registered users in 2016¹⁵, funds itself through donations, which allows it to retain its freedom to permit explicit content, and has 653 volunteers as of February 2018.

Based on statistics from 2017¹⁶ the TV show *Supernatural* is the most popular fandom on *Archive of Our Own* (Figure 2) and is evidently steadily growing, despite the fact that the TV show has been running for 13 seasons by now. The top work in the *Supernatural* fandom has 1 004 489 hits (in March 2018). A 'hit' is registered every time a visitor navigates to a work's page¹⁷. Thus, it can be claimed that while reading and writing fanfiction may come across as a bizarre subcultural practice to those not a part of it, it is by no means an uncommon or a marginal one.

FANDOM NAME	NUMBER OF WORKS
Supernatural	152 370
Harry Potter	116 423
Sherlock Holmes	99 221
Teen Wolf	80 292

Figure 1: Top 4 of most popular fandoms on *Archive of Our Own* from February 2017

Fanfiction texts often extend the plots, timelines and relationships in the source texts¹⁸; critique elements or ideologies of canon¹⁹, and weave new tales by remixing ideas from different sources²⁰. What does that mean, exactly? Below, (Figure 2²¹) is a screen capture from *Archive of*

¹⁵ ARCHIVE OF OUR OWN., "The Archive of Our Own Reaches One Million Registered Users!" <https://archiveofourown.org/admin_posts/6037>.

¹⁶ QUNAYU, "[AO3 META STATS] What are the most popular fandoms on ao3?" *Archive Of Our Own*, 02.07.2017, <<https://archiveofourown.org/works/9539549>>, accessed 10 March 2018.

¹⁷ ARCHIVE OF OUR OWN, "What is a hit?", <https://archiveofourown.org/faq/statistics?language_id=en#hitstats>, accessed 10 March 2018.

¹⁸ BLACK R. W., "Digital design: English language learners and reader reviews in online fiction.", In M. Knobel & C. Lankshear (eds.), *A new literacies sampler*, New York: Peter Lang, 2007, p. 115-136.

¹⁹ PICH H., "Talking back: 'Fanfiction, fandom and the collapse of the fourth wall,'" *Voiceworks*, vol. 95, 2013-2014, p. 63-65.

²⁰ THOMAS A., "Blurring and Breaking through the Boundaries of Narrative, Literacy, and Identity in Adolescent Fan Fiction", In M. Knobel & C. Lankshear (Eds.), *A new literacies sampler*, New York: Peter Lang, 2007, p. 137 - 167.

²¹ I have reproduced these screenshots with permission from author. I have removed the titles of the works, the pseudonyms of the authors as well as named references to other writers.

Our Own. It is summary of a work that belongs to the fandom of a TV show called *Teen Wolf* (fourth in terms of popularity on Archive of Our Own). The two characters most often written about in that particular fandom are Stiles (a human boy, best friend of the main character) and Derek (a werewolf and initially an antagonist, then an ally of the main character). There are many fans, who, due to the two characters on-screen chemistry, want them to be romantically involved. This is called 'shipping' (from the word relationSHIP). The relationship never escalates into a romantic one in the original series. The combined name of this 'ship' is Sterek (Stiles+Derek) and out of the 96 263 *Teen Wolf* fan-works on *Archive of Our Own* in March 2018, 51 975 are Sterek.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/F
Fandom:	Teen Wolf (TV)
Relationship:	Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski
Characters:	Derek Hale, Stiles Stilinski, Scott McCall
Additional Tags:	Genderfuck, Gender or Sex Swap, Girl!Stiles, Girl!Derek, Kissing, Oral Sex, Porn
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2017-03-16 Words: 5083 Chapters: 1/1 Comments: 8 Kudos: 62 Bookmarks: 8 Hits: 2709

Summary:

Derek needs Stiles to break into the Sheriff's station. Kind of. Stiles and Derek are girls. They also get it on.
 This is a gender swapped AU, so ... er ... proceed with care? (details in the notes).

Notes:

For
 (See the end of the work for notes.)

Figure 2: Description of a 'Sterek' fanfiction on the archiveofourown platform

Beyond exploring a non-canonic relationship between two characters (a sexual relationship between Derek and Stiles), which much of Sterek fanfiction does, the work above has swapped the genders of both of the characters from male to female. This has led the author to characterize their work as AU (Alternate Universe). Proper tagging is important in the realm of fanfiction, because, as Olin-Scheller and Wikstrom²² point out - fans can be quite attached to their interpretations and perceptions of the original text and its characters. Some find particular pairings, universes and behaviors unacceptable, and will never voluntarily read them.

The convergence of reading (original text and other people's fanfiction) and writing (your own

²² OLIN-SHELLER C., & WIKSTROM P., "Literary Prosumers: Young People's Reading and Writing in a New Media Landscape", *Education Inquiry*, vol. 1 / 1, 2010, p. 41-56.

fanfiction) is perhaps one of the more often researched and theorized characteristics of fanfiction. This is why fanfiction is often used as an example of produsage and participatory culture in audience-, media-, pop-culture-, and literacy studies. Produsage is a portmanteau that combines the words "production" and "usage", and indicates "the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement"²³. Bruns²⁴ describes produsage practices as characterized by: open participation, communal evaluation; unfinished artefacts, continuing process; fluid heterarchy, ad hoc meritocracy; and communal property and individual reward, which all invite users to be more than just users. Internet fanfiction platforms like *Archive of Our Own* are characterized by all of the above. However, it is important to keep in mind, that while fanfiction, as described above, relies heavily on the internet, it is not originally a digital or a networked phenomenon. Henry Jenkins - one of the key figures in early fanfiction scholarship – has traced the origins of the genre to the 1930s Fanzines, and placed it's comeback in the late 1960s with the popularity of *Star Trek*²⁵. Thus fanfiction is not an internet phenomenon, rather it is a particular style of consuming cultural content, engaging with characters, and building relationships and communities around shared affinities towards such engagement.

Reading fanfiction

Overall, fanfiction reading seems to have deserved less scholarly attention than fanfiction writing. There is no reliable data on the proportions of fanfiction writers compared to readers, but we can extrapolate from the scholarship on produsage in analogous participatory practices²⁶. The eminent new media scholar José Van Dijck²⁷ and a Guardian report²⁸ she chose to trust, claim that only one in a hundred people are active online content producers, with 10 'interacting' by commenting, and the remaining 89 by simply viewing. Even if we think these proportions have shifted since 2006 (possible), or are somewhat different in fandom (likely), we shouldn't underestimate the volume of those not creating content, but reading, listening and looking online.

²³ BRUNS A., "From Prosumption to Produsage", In Towse R. and Handke C. (eds.), *Handbook on the Digital Creative Economy*, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2014, p. 74.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ JENKINS H., *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, New York, Routledge. 1992

²⁶ BIRD S. E., "Are We All Producers Now?", *Cultural Studies*, vol. 25, September, 2011, p. 37-41.

²⁷ VAN DIJCK J., "Users like you? Theorizing agency in user-generated content", *Media Culture Society*, vol. 31 / 1, 2009, p. 41-58.

²⁸ ARTHUR C., "What's the 1% Rule?", *The Guardian* (Technology section), 20 July, (accessed date), <<http://technology.guardian.co.uk/weekly/story/0,,1823959,00.html> 2006>.

Extant work on fanfiction reading has highlighted the importance of headers and author's notes sections for readers. These notes contain information on the fandom, genre, rating, relationships, languages used and warnings, as well as informal, emotional, non fandom-related messages for readers²⁹. These help readers manage their expectations, find reading material, and organize their reading experience. I interpret both headers and author's notes (cf Figure 2 and Figure 3) as reading guides, or authors' suggestions on the intended ways of engaging with their texts both on an affective ("this is my first fic, be gentle with me") and on a cognitive ("this fic is a gender swap, do not click on it if that squicks you out") level.

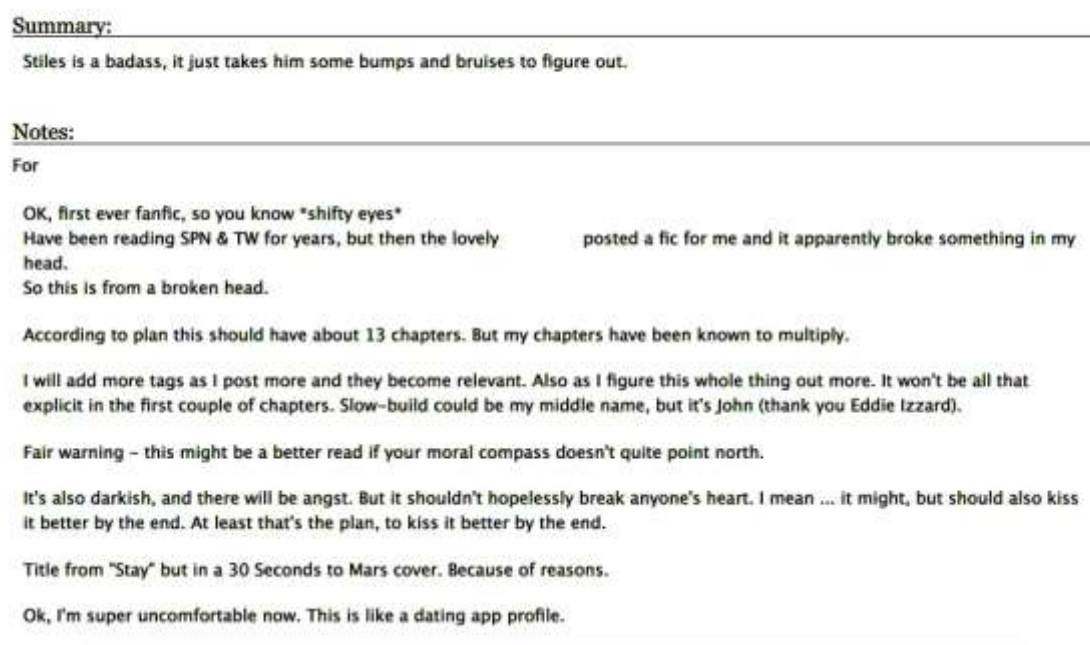


Figure 3: Screenshot of a Notes section of a fanfiction work on archiveofourown

The literacies of reading fanfiction have been found to be somewhat different from traditional print literacy. Fanfiction readers integrate their prior knowledge of the canon with the cues found in the web interface to construct meaning³⁰. To be able to enjoy fanfiction, readers have to understand the genre's hybridity and intertextuality³¹.

By and large, there seem to be two categories of readers that have captured the interest of

²⁹ BLACK R. W., Online Fan Fiction.

³⁰ CHANDLER-OLCOTT K., & MAHAR D., "Adolescents' anime - inspired "fanfictions": An exploration of Multiliteracies", *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, vol. 46, 2003, p. 556-566.

³¹ BLACK R. W., Digital design.

fanfiction scholars:

Beta readers³² are basically unpaid, voluntary editors. The main difference is that they are, similarly to the writer, fans of the original work. They read a work of fanfiction with a critical eye, in order to help improve grammar, spelling, characterization, and general style of a story prior to its release to the general public³³. Beta readers can amass quite a lot of status in the community, and are, as a norm, explicitly thanked in the header of the fiction. This means they are discursively linked with the text's authorship to a higher degree than editors in conventional publishing schemes are.

Reviewers³⁴, or **commenters** are readers also portrayed as an important resource for writers. Reviewers are a *Fanfiction.net* specific term, where readers can leave reviews. On *Archive of Our Own* readers can leave comments. There is a strong culture of reviewing / commenting on fanfiction platforms. Sometimes these reviews are just about expressing one's love (or hate) for what the author has done with beloved characters, but at other times readers challenge the writer's interpretation, or comment on the quality of the writing (composition, sentence structure etc). Reviews and comments can be incredibly constructive (in particular for those writers, who are not writing in their first language, and explicitly ask for such feedback in author's notes) as well as relatively perfunctory. In either case, comments and reviews serve an important social function of networking, communication and community building.

Experience of reading fanfiction

In public discourse (cf. the two snippets from web-columns below), reading fanfiction is often framed as a guilty pleasure, something a person thinks they should be ashamed of, but can't stop doing.

Many of us fanfiction devourers are ashamed of admitting that we enjoy this kind of story.³⁵

Embarrassing admission of the day: I read fanfiction (...) I indulge in what I admit is a

³² Cf. BLACK R. W., "Access and affiliation: The literacy and composition practices of English-language learners in an online fanfiction community", *Journal Of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 49, p. 118–128. 2005; KARPOVICH A.I., "The Audience as Editor: The Role of Beta Readers in Online Fan Fiction Communities", In Busse K., Hellekson K. (Eds), *Fan Fiction And Fan Communities In The Age Of The Internet*, 2006, p. 171-173.

³³ FANLORE

³⁴ Cf. BLACK R. W., Online Fan Fiction; BLACK R. W., Access and affiliation; CHATELAIN J., "Learning from the Review Culture of Fan Fiction.", *Journal of Digital Information*, vol. 3 / 3, 2003.

³⁵ PANGAN D. R., "5 Reasons you should read fanfiction", *BookRiot*, <<https://bookriot.com/2016/10/12/5-reasons-you-should-read-fanfiction/>>, accessed March 10th 2018.

very guilty pleasure.³⁶

You'll notice the affective language - fanfiction readers self-define as "devouring" what can be considered ridiculous content, enjoying it to an embarrassing, guilt-provoking extent. In her recent book "The Case for Fanfiction: Exploring the Pleasures of a Maligned Craft" Ashley Barner³⁷ calls this type of reading "absorbed". Readers get immersed in the world described in the work of fiction, engage with the stories and the characters passionately, and experience characters as seemingly real. She points out that absorbed reading is not a fanfiction-specific thing, but an older phenomenon with a long history of criticism that echoes social and cultural power-lines (where women and children, in particular, are criticized for, or seen as in need of saving from practices that distract their attentions from their duties or their "normal" development). This, perhaps, helps describe both fanfiction's questionable image and the prevailing discourse of "guilty pleasure".

Fanfiction scholar Flourish Klink³⁸ further encapsulates the common perceptions about fanfiction readers by pointing to three misconceptions about why they read, or what they want: "they're just interested in happily ever afters; they're just interested in gay porn; they're just interested in radical queer reinterpretation of the Western canon and won't take no for an answer". While these are inarguably part of why some fanfiction readers read some fanfiction, the experience is much richer.

In order to explore the feelings, thoughts and social dynamics of the experience of reading fanfiction, I decided to ask some of my fanfiction-reading and -researching colleagues and friends about the nuances of their personal experiences.

I started with a very broad question. "Friends," I wrote on my Facebook wall: "I'm trying to comprehend the different ways of reading fanfic, so how would you say you (or if you've talked to others about it, then other people too) read it?" To somewhat scaffold my informants experiences, I also looked at some opinion pieces, columns and blog posts by self-professed fans.

It quickly became apparent that different people approach the question of how they read in rather different ways. They focused on everything from their motivation, to how they find their

³⁶ MLAWSKI S., "Why I'm not going to read your fanfic", *Overthinking It*, September 22th 2008, <<https://www.overthinkingit.com/2008/09/22/why-im-not-going-to-read-your-fanfic/>>, accessed March 10th 2018.

³⁷ BARNER A., *The Case for Fanfiction: Exploring the Pleasures and Practices of a Maligned Craft*, McFarland, 2017.

³⁸ KLINK F., "Five tropes fanfic readers love (and one they hate)", Medium, October 27th 2016. <<https://medium.com/fansplaining/five-tropes-fanfic-readers-love-and-one-they-hate-73843372408c>>, accessed March 10th 2018.

reading material; whether the experience is perceived as soothing, or emotional; and whether they binge-read or just scroll. I will flesh these out in the following.

1. Motivation - why am I reading?

In columns, blog posts and web forums³⁹ self-identified fanfiction readers describe the general motivations for reading fanfiction as ranging from the desire to continue a favorite story when a TV show ends, or when a fan "runs out of" original content by having read all the books, or watched all the episodes available; to the need to "fix it," when the reader's favorite character dies, or is mistreated in the original text. The longing for a particular relationship; the desire to see one's favorite characters in new stories; or because the reader considers the writing to be better in fanfiction than it is in the original text are also mentioned.

My informants, however, went into further detail, and offered different motivations, uses and gratifications for different genres and styles of fanfiction they read. One of my informants offered the following, rather elaborate, taxonomy:

I read crackfic⁴⁰ for joy of silliness, you know, laughing-with, not at someone. PWP⁴¹ I read to get off. I binge or read longfic for immersion, I'm a longfic binger, so this also means that I don't really understand drabbles⁴². Fix-it fic is for anger and catharsis? Fic that my friends have written I read to strengthening social ties. Longer fic with porny bits has its own uses, maybe these are for arousal as immersion, I am not sure. When I seek out specific ships it fixes what canon is lacking, but offers catharsis as well. And I read old fandoms when I am feeling nostalgic either for the show, that time in my life, or the social experience of that fandom in its prime.

Clearly, managing one's reading expectations and experience in such detail is not an easy task. It is possible thanks to the information in fiction headers, which clearly mark the genres, tags, ships and other information that writers and readers find relevant. Tags in particular are interesting, because while authors use preexisting, widely-used and searchable tags (i.e. AU), they also create new ones to describe elements of their fiction (occasionally, because a reader will leave a comment, where they say they would have preferred for X or Y to be tagged in advance). Often these tags will inform readers on detailed elements like which character is a sexual Top, or whether some character is portrayed as particularly anxious. Fanfiction scholar

³⁹ Cf. PANGAN D.R., 5 Reasons ; QUORA, "What is the use of fanfiction? Why do people read it and why do people keep contributing to it?", accessed on March 9th 2018. <<https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-use-of-fanfiction-Why-do-people-read-it-and-why-do-people-keep-contributing-to-it>>.

⁴⁰ A purposefully funny or crazy story, gets its name from the presumption that the author has to be on crack to write such a story.

⁴¹ Porn Without Plot or Plot, What Plot? Indicates sexually explicit fiction.

⁴² Short piece of writing with no real direction.

Flourish Klink⁴³ conducted a survey of 7500 fanfiction readers and found that the most popular tropes, which "serve as shorthands for themes and plot points" and are often marked in tags were: "friends-to-lovers", "mutual pining", "bed sharing", "huddling for warmth", "fluff", "canon-divergent AUs", "hurt/comfort" and "rescue mission". While the first 5 are arguably all shipping-focused tropes intended to make two characters that are not lovers in the canon to become lovers for the purposes of the fiction, the "hurt/comfort" and "rescue mission" tropes can perhaps be explained as being plot features of widely popular fix-it fictions read for catharsis.

2. Reading intensity and commitment to reading

When commenting on how they read, my informants also differentiated between styles or types of reading on the scale of what can be called intensity or commitment. Examples of differently intense reading experiences could be binge reading through an entire tag, because one gets "sucked in", versus just scrolling through it or reading what comes up on one's social media feed. However binge reading may also be a style of commitment to the fandom and the community (cf. the following quote):

I think it can be measured by intention - you might read everything in a tag/ship/ even if it's only 4 stories that you find, but your intention was to read all the available material.

However, my informants also differentiated between how committed they are to reading a particular piece of fiction. Depending on the story, mood, need, and moment they may become fully immersed in a text. Alternatively, they can read "casually", skipping over "boring" bits. The more casual reading, according to my informants, tends to accompany reading from the place of a specific motivation – for example reading out of routine or habit (checking tags and feeds before bed), reading friends' stories to strengthen social ties, or reading to fill time (i.e. when waiting at the airport). Of course a reading experience that was embarked on out of one motivation (to fill time) and thus enacted in a casual manner, can easily tip over into engaged and immersed reading that leads to a binge (and vice versa).

3. Ways of finding fiction and curating the broader reading experience

Fanfiction readers tend to have very clear preferences for what they want to read. They have their favorite fandoms, pairings, tropes and writers. These nuanced preferences, when paired with the detailed tagging and categorization system on most fanfiction sharing sites, make

⁴³ KLINK F., "Five tropes".

finding something suitable to read quite efficient (although finding something that is simultaneously new AND suitable, becomes more and more difficult after each consecutive binge). Yet, beyond being able to filter existing fiction for something that fits one's personal preferences, the practice of finding and curating reading material can also be a interactional, communal practice (cf. following quote):

I think reading on recommendation is reading through community. It's not just about your way of finding fic, but also your experience as a reader - who shares the fic, who you send it on to, how you approach it depending on context.

The curation of the broader reading experience is also co-constitutive with the interactive, communal aspects of being a fanfiction reader. It encompasses the personal relationships that emerge out of reading other people's fiction and having a small, partial window into their lives via their author's notes. In Figures 2 and 3 there are mentions of another fanfiction writer (I have edited out their username, so it is just an empty space). In Figure 2 the fiction is gifted to another user (see the "for ..." in notes) and in Figure 3 the author references to someone having gifted them a fiction, which then triggered them to want to try writing for the first time. As one of my informants said, she will follow her friends across fandoms, to see how they write within a different universe.

This relational, interactional reading can become the defining characteristic of one's experience of belonging to a fandom. One of my informants shared with me a story of a sub-fandom (fandom of a fandom) she is a part of and has observed. Apparently a couple of hundred fans have coalesced around an incredibly long work-in-progress (WIP) work of fanfiction; set up their own Tumblr blog, Twitter handle, subreddit, hold annual contests and have done things like raise 150 USD for the author's coffee subscription. "Their experience of reading is highly communal" said my informant:

They wait for weekly updates avidly, spinning comment threads on AO3 that are almost as long as the fic itself (the author interacts generously with her readers), and making friendships that reach across every kind of social demographic.

4. Emotional investment in reading

Reading fanfiction has multiple affective aspects. Reading can be a highly emotional experience in terms of it being a certain, fine-tuned source of specific emotional satisfaction. It can also be highly emotional because it is experienced as risky; something that might upset, challenge or shake (cf. following quote):

For me the emotional stakes can be very high for fic. It can be slightly dangerous, as someone else may take a character to a place I am not sure I want to think about in relation to that fandom. Because sometimes I still feel like I have to finish the story, even if I don't really like it.

However, reading fanfiction can also be an experience of feeling safe, where instead of triggering or amplifying strong emotions, reading soothes and relaxes. This usually means that the reader has curated their reading material carefully in order to orchestrate particular emotional responses within themselves or in order to guarantee relaxation (cf. following snippet of conversation):

Fanfic is sort of low entry threshold reading for me. I do a lot of demanding reading – critical; deadline-driven; the kind where I have to look up every fifth word; needle in a haystack reading, where I have to find a specific thought fast. Fanfic is at the other end of the spectrum for me. The stakes for reading it are low. It is diverting but not demanding in the way of my other reading. And I think maybe those low threshold/ low stakes/diverting/ familiar aspects of it then lead me to binging, because it's a decent approximation of a safe bubble feeling for me.

- Katrin: But then what do you do, when you start reading and it ends up not being quite right? Someone you trust recommended it, but it doesn't work as a safe bubble?
- As a general practice, I don't read, or I stop reading things that might take me somewhere I don't want to go. I walk out of movies too. I may make myself read that sort of thing for work, but for my entertainment it is more similar to self care, and if it doesn't make me feel safe, happy, diverted from what is going on in my head, I disengage.

Thus, reading fanfiction has high affective potential that is, based on personal preferences used to either induce strong feelings of pleasure, risk the adrenaline of strong feelings of being challenged, or soothe pre-existing intense affective states (stress, anxiety, sadness, frustration).

These four aspects of how fanfiction is read configure into different reading repertoires that people seem to switch between with relative ease. The same reader can practice emotionally intense, but safe-feeling, vigorous binge reading in order to find catharsis, or they can casually graze on fiction, skipping "boring" parts, yet still experiencing it as pleasurable. Occasionally reading can even be experienced as challenging or teasing⁴⁴, although it is not uncommon for readers to avoid confrontational emotional experience when reading fiction.

Obviously people's reading practices also change in time. As one of my informants said: "I may have started in the beginning looking for specific pairings/fandoms/tags "for research", but with time and innocent infiltration (also known as making friends) I will now follow content across fandoms, read across pairings and binge"

⁴⁴ SICART M., *Play Matters*.

Playful reading

Based on people's experiences and the existing scholarship, we can think about the experience of reading fanfiction as including multiple spheres of "sensory openness and curiosity"⁴⁵ each of which offer a variety of different kinds of pleasure⁴⁶. The affective, cognitive, sensory, embodied experiences of reading a particular piece of fiction at a particular time make up the most personal, micro-sociological sphere. This is the experience of reading words, sentences, paragraphs and stories within one sitting. The readers, whose experiences were analyzed for this piece, recognize that this personal experience can serve different needs and offer different gratifications. Thus the experience of reading fanfiction can be cathartic and immersed in one situation, arousing and immersed in another, and relaxing and grazing-like in yet another.

Beyond that, in the communal and interactional sphere, we can contemplate the person's experience of reading fanfiction across their entire biography of reading in various fandoms, across various sites, over time. This has a strong social (being part of a fandom, having a variety of reading roles) and a strong practical/curatorial (managing tags, bookmarking fictions, knowing authors, preferring tags and ships) aspect.

Returning to the idea of conceptualizing reading experience as play - as a voluntary, non-utilitarian and immersive practice that enables social connections and offers both exaltation and relaxation⁴⁷ - at least three modalities of playfulness emerge.

1. Reading fanfiction as a way to play with favorite characters.

Attachment to particular characters and specific relationships between them plays a key role in becoming a fan, starting to read fanfiction, and in how a reader finds and curates what they read. How those characters are treated in the fanfiction plays a significant part in whether a reader is lured into an immersed state and a binge-read. Thus the ability to engage playfully with favorite characters is a crucial modality of fanfiction, in particular from the perspective of writers, but also from the perspective of reading. By filtering what one reads through tags of ships and tropes, readers can search out and read fiction that suits their preferences for particular characters. Like children playing with dolls or stuffed animals, fanfiction allows fans to take pre-existing characters, often wearing real actors' faces and bodies, and go: "now kiss". This gives

⁴⁵ PAASONEN S., "Many splendored things".

⁴⁶ SICART M., *Play Matters*.

⁴⁷ HUIZINGA J., *Homo Ludens*.

fanfiction some features of role-playing, which means that readers are more actively engaged in the outcomes of their actions, which some say will affect us more than we are capable of imagining now⁴⁸.

2. Reading fanfiction as a way to play with other fans

Reading fanfiction is probably the most predominant way of participating in fandoms of TV shows, movie franchises, animated series and books. Many fans do not have the resources or the commitment to go to conventions, search out fan groups or frequent internet forums, but stumbling across fanfiction and getting "sucked in" is private, discreet, time-flexible and easy to do. The communal and participatory aspects of fanfiction – mostly for writers – have been extensively addressed by researchers, who highlight that reading and writing become forms of communication, belonging and socialization⁴⁹. But as addressed above, reading fanfiction, too, is an inherently relational practice. In addition to engagement with the text and the characters, it encompasses recommendations, feedback, comments, suggestions, sharing, reviewing, subscribing, bookmarking, leaving "kudos" etc.

3. Finally, through the two previously mentioned forms of playfulness, reading fanfiction can also be a way to play with one's sense of self, with the politics of representation, with gender or sexuality.

As "alternate universe" fictions and shipping (very often through a subgenre called "slash", which means stories based on relationships between two characters of the same sex, usually two men) are so popular among fanfiction readers (in particular among adult readers and *Archive of Our Own* users, who all of my informants were), a certain "queering" of texts, characters, situations, and descriptions of what is "normal" in those worlds seems almost inevitable. This can invite readers to contemplate their own identity and the subjectivity they are being offered by dominant norms in their everyday lives. It can also offer a way to be seen and recognized, where majority of popular content still underrepresents non-gender binary main characters and non-heterosexual pairings between them. Fanfiction impacts the identity-work in its readers, as it offers an escape from having no one to identify with, or having to identify with boring, two-dimensional and stereotypical characters just because they are of the same gender as you⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ CHAPLIN H. "Video game tests the limits. The limits win », *NY Times*, 2007, January 28th ; ALBERTI J. « The Game of Reading and Writing: How Video Games Reframe Our Understanding of Literacy », *Computers and Composition*, vol. 25, 2008, p. 258- 269.

⁴⁹ GEE J.P., *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

⁵⁰ OLIN-SCHELLER C. & WIKSTROM P., "Literary Prosumers".

Concluding questions

So what can be taken away from this brief, limited, exploratory analysis of people's experiences of reading fanfiction?

First of all, the affordances for managing reader's expectations, uses and gratifications that the headers, tagging and author's notes add to the experience of reading have to be addressed. The fine-grained nuance of available filtering options offer readers of fanfiction great control over their reading experience. One can, if they are so inclined, curate their reading space with laser-like precision. They can choose the authors, hashtags, pairings, genres and trigger warnings to create different reading experiences that generate a variety affective responses. A reader can fine-tune what they want the reading to make them feel. Consider the 'control to effort' ratio this has compared to reading jacket blurbs in a bookstore, or reviews online. Is this what reading is moving towards? Would more people read original fiction if this level and ease of control would be possible? How is this connected to the availability of a loved and pre-existing universe created by the authors of the canon? Does this indicate a potential "echo chamber" of tropes, representations and storylines?

Secondly, I suggest we need to pay close attention to the inherent multimodality and hybridity of fanfiction texts. Sometimes they come with fan-art, sometimes they come with playlist suggestions, sometimes, someone has recorded an audio version of the fiction (podfic). They might be translated into multiple languages. They might be multiauthored. Someone has probably made gifs from TV show screen-captures pairing them with text from a fic, making the fix-it interpretations of canon so much more persuasive. Affectively, fanfiction can thus cover much more ground than the original creative canons can. And again, it offers more control over our reading experience, over the storyline, over the characters. By reading multimodally, we can pull the strings of our favorite fictional characters and make them behave in ways that soothes our weird little hurts and desires. What does this mean for how we teach multiliteracies at school? How can this be employed in the interest of greater literacies? Can this be used for increased critical literacy or social empathy?

Thirdly, because the original texts are often initially consumed alone, reading fanfiction allows people to get validation for their embarrassing, too-strong, fannish reactions to the canon. Even without writing, commenting, or going to conventions, reading fanfiction offers proof that it's

not “weird” to find such great pleasure from something seemingly so trivial. Reading fanfiction allows us validation for some aspects of our desires and identities. What can we learn from these affordances that reading fanfiction has for being, becoming and belonging? Can this participatory culture be leveraged in the interest of a more empathic, more critically self-aware, more reflexive, more literate world?

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