

Digital fanfic in negotiation: LiveJournal, Archive of our Own, and the affordances of read-write platforms.

Introduction

Fanfiction is the unauthorized rewriting or adaptation of popular media narratives, utilizing corporately owned characters, settings and storylines to tell an individual writer's own story (self-ref, 2017). It is often abbreviated to fanfic or even fic, and exists in a thoroughly grey legal area between copyright infringement and fair use (Tushnet 1997, McCardle 2011). Though there were a few cases of cease-and-desist letters sent to fan writers in the twentieth century, media corporations now understand it is useless to attempt to prosecute fanfic writers – for one thing, there are simply too many of us,¹ and for another it would be terrible publicity. Though modern fanfic can be reliably dated to the 1960s (Jenkins 1992), it is now primarily an online practice, and the fastest growing form of writing in the world (self ref). This paper uses participant observation and online ethnography to explore how fanfiction archives utilize digital affordances. Following Murray, I will argue that a robust understanding of digital read-write platforms needs to account for the social and legal context of digital fiction as well as its technological affordances. Whilst the online platform LiveJournal in some ways channels user creativity towards a more self-evidentially 'digital' texts than its successor in the Archive of Our Own (A03), the Archive encourages greater reader interactivity at the level of archive and sorting. I will demonstrate that in some ways, the A03 recoups some of the cultural capital and use value of print. I argue that a true appreciation of digital fiction is less about projecting fiction as becoming more and more 'digital' along a linear trajectory, than application of a nuanced socio-technological perspective that addresses the aims, ideology and provision of particular platforms in practice.

Bell et. al define digital fiction as “fiction that is written for and read from a computer” (n.p.). According to the Digital Fiction International Network, digital fiction should be distinguished from paper texts that have been scanned online and from ebooks, which are the digitized versions of novels written for print. The Network's definition specifies that “digital fictions are “born digital” – that is, they would lose something of their aesthetic and/or structural form and meaning if they were removed from the digital medium” (ibid.). As I have written elsewhere (Fathallah, *Reading*), fanfiction written in the context of online communities of practice shares many of the qualities of this definition. Fanfic is communal, frequently hypertextual and multimodal, and metaleptic, which is to say, it vacillates self-consciously between different levels of ontological representation (Bell *passim* self-ref 2017). Whilst this broad description remains true, the present dominance of the fan-programmed site *Archive of Our Own* (hereafter A03) as a repository for digital fanfic presents some features for particular consideration. Notably, A03 offers the facility to quickly download fanfic in mobi or ebook format, at which point, arguably, the text is less self-evidently 'digital' than fanfic in

¹ I have been writing fanfic for over fifteen years, mostly under the pseudonym *reading_is_in*. My most recent works can be found at http://archiveofourown.org/users/reading_is_in/works but my now defunct LiveJournal account, <https://reading-is-in.livejournal.com/>, is much more comprehensive of my earlier writing.

some of its earlier forms like LiveJournal. Yet nor would it be accurate to say the story has been ‘de-digitalized’ by its download - if the kindle it is read on is connected to the internet, one can technically still treat the story as an html page and follow the tag or category links related fic within the archive. Still, once downloaded, the story not only resembles and reads like print, but is reinstated with a kind of permanency and stability more frequently associated with print.² Thus, building on my previous work, I want to argue that in studying digital fiction we ought not imagine some kind of teleological process of ‘less’ to ‘more’ digitalization as read-write technologies proliferate, but consider how particular sites, projects and organizations use the affordances of digitality to serve, engage with and/or exploit their users. As Tarleton Gillespie and others have observed, and the A03 makes explicitly clear, programming is never neutral - ideological values, preferences and priorities get ‘baked into systems’ (boyd 104), and this is as true for the politics of reading and writing as it is for any other function (Gillespie 2017; DeVito 2016; Jenkins, Ito and boyd 2016).

In the first half of this paper, I explore the features of A03 as opposed to its more obviously digital-fiction friendly predecessors, then go on to explore how users can modify with the software and experience the reading process in ways that may have more in common with pre-digital literacies than we imagine. In the second half, I analyse archived user reactions to the shift to A03, in order to investigate what features are considered valuable, and which disliked. It should be noted at the outset, however, that the A03 is constantly evolving project created by fans and academics, whose codes are refined and modified based on user input. It was created in order that fans have a stable repository for their works that could not be deleted at whim by the corporate owners of other servers.³ Casey Fields considers the A03 to be an illustration of feminist principles in human-computer interaction. LiveJournal, meanwhile, is a corporate platform which exists to make money for its shareholders. Thus, as I will argue, in reading digital fiction we must not imagine some kind of teleological process of ‘less’ to ‘more’ digitalization as read-write technologies proliferate, but consider how particular sites, projects and organizations use the affordances of digitality to serve, engage with and/or exploit their users. As Tarleton Gillespie and others have observed, and the A03 makes explicitly clear, software is never neutral - ideological values, preferences and priorities get ‘baked into systems’ (boyd 2016: 104). Programming is always political, even if unconsciously, as the coder decides how categories are constructed, what choices are offered to which users, which options are available and which excluded. This is as true for the politics of reading and writing as it is for any other function (Gillespie 2014; DeVito 2017; Jenkins, Ito and boyd 2016).

Aims and Contexts

The aim of this analysis is to demonstrate the interaction between technological and socio-cultural factors that influence read-write experience in the context of digital fanfic. I am

² Indeed, in the course of my research, I have come across one instance of literal de-digitalization. The author of a multimedia piece of fanfic analyzed in Fathallah 2017, eventually created a ‘hard copy’ version of her successful comic story for her mother, a teacher, to share with her young class. This is an anomaly, but demonstrates this article’s broader point against the teleological narrative of a movement from ‘less’ to ‘more’ digitalization as technological affordances proliferate.

³ see <http://archiveofourown.org/about>

particularly concerned with how A03, which operates and bills itself as a site run for and by fan-participants as an alternative to corporate-owned platforms, balances the concerns of a) different groups of fans and b) readers and writers in their respective function. The findings are primarily a result of participant observation, as I have been active in several fandoms and experienced the LJ/A03 shift first-hand, including moving my own text across them. Online ethnography, particularly the study of fan sites and forums, rounds out the analysis. Where fans' posts are currently online and not anonymous, I have sought permission from the quoted participants both to quote and link to their sources, in accordance with the arguments for a reciprocal ethics in subcultural research I put forth in previous work (self red).

In her 2015 retrospective piece, 'Charting the Digital Literature Sphere', Simone Murray reflects on the unfulfilled prophecies of technological determinists. Hypertext, once thought to signal the 'death of the book', has demonstrably not replaced print fiction (311), as print fiction is still bought and sold alongside ebooks and digital fiction. Rather, she argues, literary studies needs to take account of the impact of the digital sphere in the gatekeeping and framing of reading practices. The wealth of blogs, review sites and reader-author interactions via social media has in some sense had a democratizing or popularizing effect on what sort of texts are considered worthy or valuable, as most people can set up a blog or participate in an online review discussion. Yet even these sites tend to adhere surprisingly to traditional models. Murray writes that "the vast majority of online literary discussion concerns traditionally linear, single-author narratives published either in print form or in e-book versions that closely mimic the codex experience" (313). It seems that many people are using digital media more to discuss the printed book than reinvent it. Relatedly, a quantitative/qualitative study of short fiction readers conducted by Laura Dietz reveals that, despite sometimes claiming otherwise, readers and reviewers still consider print to signal mediation of better quality of fiction than digital platforms, even when the online content is subject to rigorous editorial processes. Amazon markets its proprietary Kindles on its similarity to the print experience, highlighting its 'touchscreen display that reads like real paper' (Amazon n.p.), omitting the screen glare of tablets and PCs and promising an immersive experience with 'no distractions' rather than the free-flowing traversal of linked surfaces enabled by the hypertextual format. It promises that the medium will seem to disappear, so that the reader encounters the text in some mystically pure state. Yet conversely, its newer models offer 'X-Ray' features that allow readers to connect 'all the passages across a book that mention relevant ideas, fictional characters, historical figures, places, or topics of interest', in addition to inbuilt dictionaries (ibid.). It functions similarly to the parallel X-Ray function on Amazon's Prime Video, which allows one to call up the biographies of the actors shown by hovering over the screen, as well as in-text references, errors in filming and other trivia. Connectivity is also stressed by the Kindle's advertising material, noting its ease of download and hyperlinks to GoodReads, which bills itself as "the world's largest site for readers and book recommendations". As Murray makes clear, the predicted forward march from print to digital fiction has not materialized, but diverged into a complex set of affordances that attempt to combine the portability, connectivity and communality of hypertext with the supposedly more immersive analogue experience of print, invoking and involving a broad set of cultural gatekeepers, from fans to professional critics. This may well reflect an attempt to annexe some of the lingering prestige attached to print, albeit in a more democratic context.

How do these developments apply to fanfiction? Murray argues that in considering digital fiction, we ought to attend to the differing context of production in addition to technological affordances:

[in order] to do justice to these developments, [we need] a sociocultural conceptualization of the digital-literature interface that is both contextual in focus (rather than belletristic or technocentric) and contemporary in outlook, so that we may gain greater insight into digital media's role in fashioning twenty-first-century authorial careers, publisher prospects, public understandings of literature, critical judgments, and reader behaviors (313).

Clearly, the context of fanfiction is quite different from professional novels (though in line with trends of convergence in culture and technology, adapting fanfic for publication is becoming more popular and visible: see Jones). Firstly, and most obviously, fanfic communities have different expectations regarding copyright and originality than professional publishing. Whether original stories based on other people's characters are legal or not is the very definition of a legal grey area (see e.g. Tushnet 1997, McCardle 2003, Johnson 2007), but as pre-Gutenberg societies expected stories that were variations on the themes of popular favourites, fanfic communities expect more stories concerning their favourite characters,⁴ whilst readers of professionally published fiction expect stories featuring original creations (except for serials, and some historical fiction). Secondly, the degree of gatekeeping in posting fanfic varies from none, to rigorous selection and moderation procedures by site owners and moderators. For example, at the A03 or Fanfiction.net, anyone may make an account and post a story immediately. Conversely, at some more specialized archives such as *The Sugar Quill Archive* for Harry Potter fanfic, uploaded stories go through a rigorous selection and moderation process, in which many are rejected, before they are posted. Thirdly, fanfic archives require particular interactions from readers to get to the stories they desire. Most lay readers are interested in stories from particular fandoms, rather than fanfic in general. So for instance, on the A03 landing page, one is initially presented with broad categories, including 'movies', 'music and bands', 'books and literature', and 'anime and manga'. From here, one can filter to a particular fandom and simply browse, or opt for a more complex interaction. For the list of works in each fandom, the sidebar offers a choice of filters and the opportunity to search by tag (see figures 2-3).

⁴ Naturally, fanfic communities have other conventions concerning style, form, tropes, posting and so on. The reader will encounter some shortly, but this is not the place for a full discussion. There is a growing literature on fanfic; the reader could start with x and y's *Fanfiction Reader*.

Sort and Filter

Sort by
Date Updated ▼

Top 10 Tags ?

- ▶ Ratings
- ▶ Warnings
- ▶ Categories
- ▶ Fandoms
- ▶ Characters
- ▶ Relationships
- ▶ Additional Tags

Other Tags ?

Search within results ?

Language

Status

Complete only

Figure 2

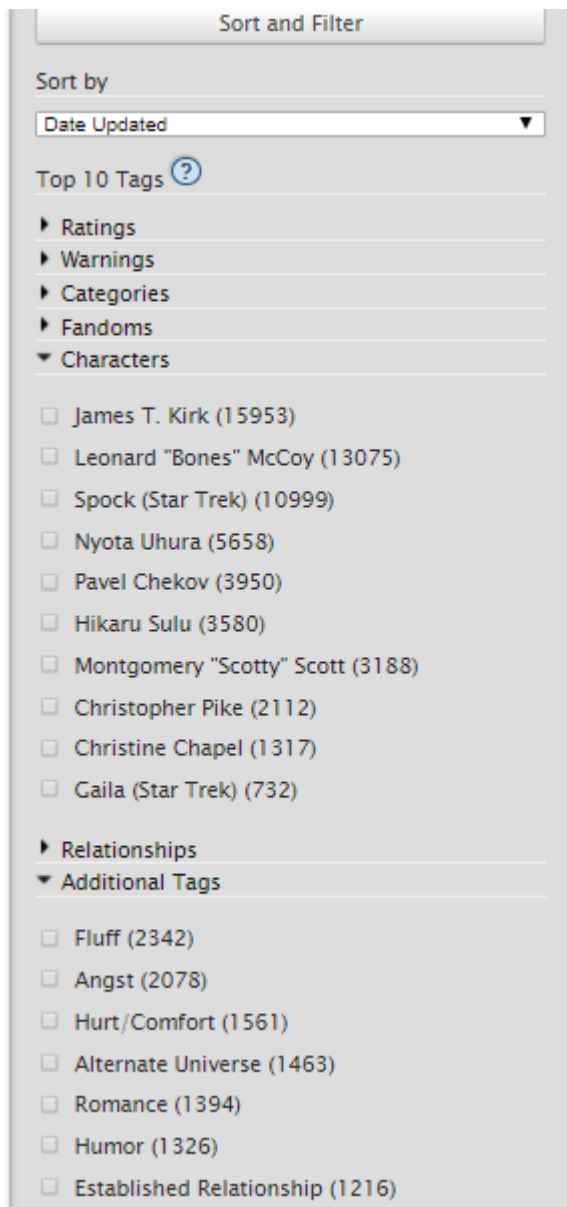


Figure 3

As we can observe, fanfic has specific sets of conventions and genres related to, but distinct from, those found in professional fiction, and the design of the site archives them accordingly. The tag ‘hurt/comfort’, for example, refers to that trope in which a character receives some physical or psychological injury but then recovers with the assistance of others. This narrative device is familiar and fundamental to all kinds of storytelling (self ref) but it is only in fanfic communities that works are organized according to this category. Likewise, fans often have a preference for particular romantic or sexual pairings - indeed the term OTP, or One True Pairing, referring to that implicit or explicit fictional relationship the reader or viewer prefers above all others, has come into general online parlance (see e.g. Urban Dictionary). Accordingly, fics can be filtered by pairing at the A03. Whilst the uploader selects the initial categories for his or her story and can tag idiosyncratically, the archive also utilizes volunteer “tag wranglers” who follow site guidelines to refine and add to the tags for consistency and thus better searchability. Thus, the process of finding a story to read can be intensely interactive, a kind of “treasure hunt” (self ref), wherein the reader must

refine her tag selection and filter order until she discovers the story she wishes to read next. As I have mentioned elsewhere (self ref) this might be an example of the reader interaction often implicated and attributed to digital fiction - but it functions here at the level of *archive* rather than *story*. The context and affordances of LiveJournal, as I will go on to demonstrate, channel users towards greater interactivity at the level of story, but given that it is a corporate-owned blogging site used for a broad variety of purposes, fans posting and reading stories are less likely to interact at the level of broader site structure.

Some of these affordances are also utilized on professional fiction sites - GoodReads, for instance, offers a search by genre function. Notably, reviews and recommendations for fanfic are beginning to appear on GoodReads, including complementary cover art. Some fanfic writers embrace this keenly, others have severe reservations about the exposure of their fanfic to the broader reading public, who may not understand neither understand its intertextual and social contexts. As Fanlore.org documents (Fanlore.org/GoodReads), there was fan authors were receiving complaints through GoodReads that their stories could not be fully understood if the reader was unfamiliar with the source material, which anyone in fandom would take as a given, and their stories were being negatively reviewed and rated as a result. This is an example of how sociocultural changes, combined with the hypertextual connectivity of digital fiction, are changing 'public understandings of literature, critical judgements, and reader behaviour' (Murray 313). Not so long ago, fanfic was generally dismissed in the popular press as derivative and low quality. Now that online technology has enabled the *spatial* converge of fanfic both with professional literature and online self-publication of other types, the divisions between categories are both deconstructed and thrown into visible relief. Further, self-publication in exchange for better royalty rates is becoming increasingly attractive to professional writers, and several successful authors including Cassandra Clare and E.L. James have launched successful writing careers by adapting their fanfiction. At present, though, it seems less likely that the trend will evolve towards into some nebulous all-encompassing category of fiction than an ever-increasing market for niche and specificity, requiring ever more specialist archivists and tag-wranglers to organize it.

In previous work (self ref), I have suggested that without collapsing the categories, certain specific hallmarks of digital fiction can be adapted as lenses through which we can better understand fanfiction in the digital age. Bell has argued that the multimodal affordances of hypertextuality allow for a particularly concrete form of metalepsis in digital fiction, which we can adapt to understand some kinds of fanfic. Metalepsis can be defined as the self-conscious movement or play between levels of representation. In its traditional form, it does not mean precisely the vacillation is between fiction and reality, though this sort of definition is sometimes given as shorthand, because the whole process takes places within a text, and the whole text is still fiction or fictionalized. Turk clarifies:

Because metaleptic transgression, so defined, is contained within the borders of the text, the boundary that is crossed is not the boundary between the actual world and a fictional world but a fictional "real world" as represented on the page or screen and another narrative level or world within that "real world" (Turk 87).

Obviously, the technique was not born digital – several of Stephen King's novels, for instant, feature writers as lead characters, and the text vacillates between their own construction of

their (fictional) world, and the fictional real world they live in. A 17th century novel, the author may begin with an a direct address to a flatteringly fictionalized or allegorical form of the author's patron before beginning the story proper. Shakespeare's characters quite often break the fourth wall to request sympathetic judgement – at the conclusion of *The Tempest*, Prospero literally requests the audience free him from performance via applause, thus shifting metaleptically from a fictional magician to an author stand-in in appealing to his audience. But digital fiction allows metalepsis to operate in more literal ways, via linked or embedded materials that span real and fictional worlds. A story set in a castle that still stands in physical space could embed real photographs, or even link to a panoramic camera view that accompanies the focalizer's textual exploration as first-person narrator or through free indirect discourse. Tisha Turk has likewise demonstrated that fanworks involve 'literal ontological metalepsis' (90), as the real-world reader/viewer imposes her real-world interpretation onto a fictional world being presented as real. In the case of Real Person Fiction, the subset of fanfic that utilizes real (living or dead) people as characters, this 'ontological' metalepsis may find its most literal expression – in related research, I have discussed a case of real-person fanfic built around real photographs shared online by the actual person behind the mediated character, then reappropriated and interpreted by the fan author (self ref). Other prominent features of digital fiction, such as hypertextuality, interactivity and multimodality, are certainly utilized in fanfic. And yet, as I am about demonstrate from auto-ethnographic research and participant observation in both sites, these affordances were arguably more prominent in *older* fanfic repositories, like LiveJournal and Dreamwidth, than they are in the currently dominant A03. The A03, I want to posit, utilizes the interactivity associated with digital fiction more at the level of archive than individual story. Each individual fanfic within the archive, I would argue, actually recuperates aspects of print culture and its associated kudos as it passes through the A03 coding for publication.

Analysis and Discussion

In illustration, we can turn to the example of Big Bang Challenges. Though most Big Bang challenges are still hosted on LiveJournal or Dreamwidth, authors in recent years have been encouraged to archive their stories retrospectively in a tagged A03 collection. This convention offers a useful basis for comparison between the sites' affordances. Most large fandoms host a yearly Big Bang event, a custom that originated on LiveJournal. A team of moderators for each participating fandom creates a community blog devoted to the challenge, and participants sign up to either write a 10,000 or 20,000 minimum word count story (depending on the requirements of the challenge), and/or create a complementary feature for a story such as artwork, a playlist of songs or a music video. Primary authors submit summaries to the moderators, who post them anonymously. Based on these, the second group of participants pick a story to create a complement for on a first-come first-serve basis. The multiple authorship model of digital fiction is already evident here, especially when we consider authorship to cover the idea of creating an environment. The principles of anonymity we see 'baked into' (boyd 104) to the challenge guides participants to collaborate based on genuine interest in the story proposed, as opposed to established relationships or subcultural status. The ss is 'cheatable' – a pair determined to collaborate could theoretically

communicate by private message and establish a code by which to recognise each other – but they might as well collaborate outside the challenge in that case. The principles ‘baked into’ the software and communal convention are useful in overcoming subconscious bias and removing barriers to approaching potential collaborators, in enactment of of fandom’s democratic, non-competitive model of creativity.

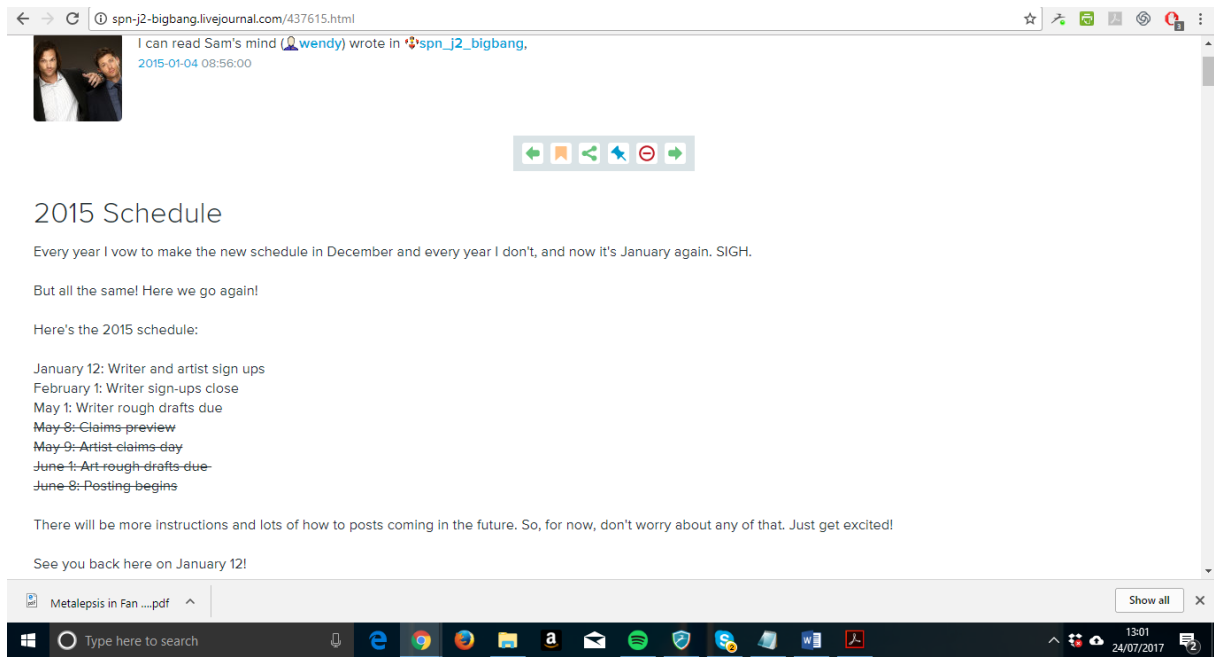


Figure 4: 2015 Schedule for the 2015 Big Bang in the Supernatural fandom, Livejournal.

A finished Big Bang story is necessarily a collaborative multimedia project published with html coding. Figure 5 presents the cover page of a story I wrote for the 2013 Big Bang in the *Supernatural* fandom, titled *Smith and Wesson Hit the Road* (reading_is_in is a screensname I often utilize).⁵ I consider this to be a piece of digital fiction according to the Digital Fiction Network’s definition, as it is a collaborative piece which fully utilizes and depends upon the html context for at least some of its meaning. The editors and the artist who made the header are credited with links to their journals, as are the moderators of the challenge for their organizational work. The post also contains a link to the artist’s masterpost, in which she presents all her artwork and describes the process of making it. The first comment on that post is from myself. Every Big Bang fic in the challenge is thus connected, and all are linked back to the masterpost that organizes the community. The product was truly collaborative, and I experienced the process as a function of community building, getting to know my artist and exchanging ideas. As figure 6 shows, I also eventually used LiveJournal’s html affordances to create a series of ‘postcards’ and ‘emails’ exchanged between the fictional characters that were utilized as an epilogue. Interestingly, I found this a useful way to master a technique recommended to writers of traditional fiction: to show, rather than tell. Metalepsis actually operates at 3 levels here, given that the fic is set in an alternative universe

⁵ *Supernatural* is a cult TV show on the CW network, combining elements of drama, horror, comedy and science fiction.

set up canonically by the television show *Supernatural*. In the show, the protagonists live completely different lives. In the show, the alternative universe turns out to be an illusion, a piece of manipulation created by one of the more sinister angel characters designed to teach the human protagonists a lesson regarding their inescapable fate. Moreover, my artist's integration of stills from the source text with real-world postcards and other images demonstrates that phenomena of literal ontological metalepsis Turk described above, self-consciously playing with the illusion of the narrative events taking place on a real roadtrip across the U.S.A.



Figure 5.

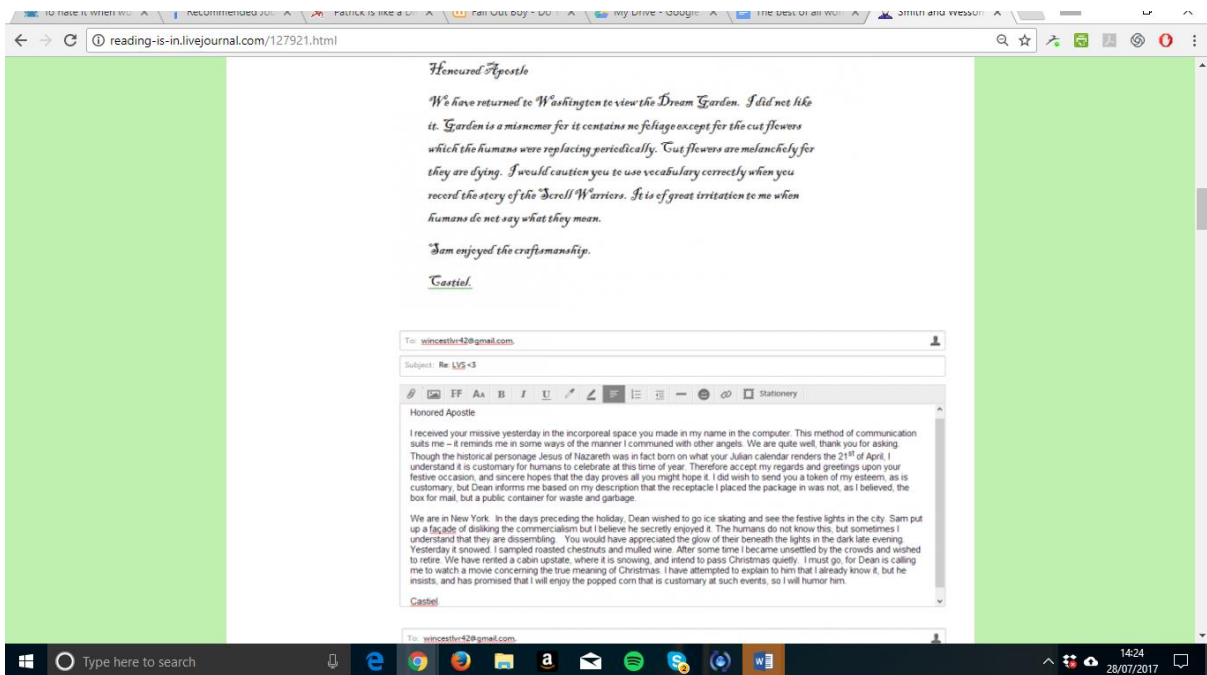


Figure 6.

A string of 36 comments follows the posts, in which I discussed the story with readers, thanked them for their compliments, and talked about my further reading and writing plans. On LiveJournal and Dreamwidth, which are built on the same template, the only way for readers to register their involvement with a story once it is posted is to leave a text comment. Because commenters are signed in to LiveJournal, clicking on their names took me to their own journals, which usually held their own fic and reading lists based on our shared interests.

The story is also archived on A03. Whilst I did link directly from the journal entry to A03 for readers wishing to download a copy, more users are more likely to find it at A03 by searching tags or exploring the *Supernatural* Big Bang collections by year. One advantage of A03, in terms of category searching, is this ability to group fics with a range of shared properties as 'collections'. However, we can immediately illustrate how whilst A03 offers high searchability and visibility, uploading the fic here actually removes some of the properties ascribed to digital fiction. For example, uploading the multimedia to my LiveJournal had been a collaborative project with my artist, but I was unable to integrate her images into the A03 file. No doubt, this was primarily due to my lack of experience with the then-new A03 format - A03 can host images, though most texts do not include them. Indeed, the process is now more obvious and intuitive than arguably it ever was on LJ. However, given that most fans migrated from LJ to A03, it is reasonable to speculate that adjustment to a new format deterred some of us from utilizing the full affordances of the site, particularly in its early years. I did manage to addend the images I'd created as postscripts, but readers told me they did not show up on their e-readers. Essentially, when they had downloaded the fic, it reverted to being a 'print-like' document, albeit one that they could trace back to my LiveJournal in order to view the accompanying illustration. Finally, because each LJ chapter takes the form of one post, each utilized one of the specially photoshopped icons my artist made for me, commenting on or illustrating some small aspect of the story.

There is a distinct gap between the digital affordances A03 offers and the frequency with which they are utilized. Of the 3210930 works archived at the A03 as of 01/08/2017, only 1036 or 0.03% are tagged 'embedded image' (which in practice includes .gifs). The average seems to be slightly higher in large fandoms and fandoms where source visual media is readily available and editable online. For instance regarding visual media, of the 56972 works posted under 'Doctor Who and Related Fandoms', there only 13 (0.02%) utilize the function. Of the 84370 posted under the Avengers franchise, there are 53 (0.05%). Of the 99838 listed under 'Sherlock (BBC)', there are 39 (0.04%, statistics correct as of 01/08/17). A03 also offers the function embed audio or video. Fans use this almost exclusively to upload and store fanvids and podfic (fanfic read aloud and recorded as mp3/mp4 files). For the purposes of this article, I am confining my definition of digital fiction to works which, in addition to fulfilling Bell's criteria above, utilize written text as their primary medium.⁶ It safe to say, then, that in general, fic posted to A03 is more traditionally 'print-like' than LiveJournal entries, and less self-evidently digital - at the level of individual story.

To be clear, I am not attempting to establish any kind of hierarchy or value judgement that would imply more digital = better, less digital = worse or vice versa. I am however observing

⁶ This does raise an issue as to where precisely we draw the boundaries between a primary and secondary medium, or indeed, between an interactive story and a game, but that is a tangential issue to the discussion

that in the movement from LJ to a new, fan-programmed central repository, what we actually see is the utilization of digital technology to create a more analogue-like reading experience. Naive futurist projections that imagine our immersion in the digital becoming more and more total neglect the importance of social norms and group aims and desires in human-computer interaction. The entire point of the A03 is that it would meet fans' needs rather than attempt to leverage them to the benefit of outsiders. It was built and is maintained entirely by a volunteer staff of fans and academics, and being technically still in beta, is updated and improved in an ongoing process with users through discussion on the site blog. Every few years, 'roadmaps' are created, integrating the changes and updates planned, and 'change logs' keep users updated on the progress.⁷ All blog entries are open to comment, and typically gather long lists of comments, suggestions (and indeed arguments) over the future of the site both in terms of programmed features and social policies such the definition of harassment, bannable offences, and anonymity. Fans have typically been considered 'early adopters' of new technology (Bury 2006; Jenkins 2007). Yet in line with Murray's observations above, we should also consider that perhaps what many fanfiction writers need and want to use that technology for is less to experiment with the multimedia affordances of digital fiction, than to overcome the social and legal restraints on fanfic that prevent us browsing, accessing and storing it as we would more traditional books.

Of course, A03 does not comprise and serve the whole of fiction-writing fandom. There are thousands (tens of thousands?) of fanfic sites online, and though A03 imports older repositories on a regular basis, it would be naive to think that such a scattered, diverse, global activity as fanfiction could ever have a truly 'central' or 'representative' archive. Outside the A03 network, it is easy to find a range of complaints and discontent at A03's program and policies, not to mention accusations of presumptuousness. On the anonymous LJ/Dreamwidth community *fail_fandomanon*, which as the name suggests is devoted to anonymous criticism of fandom trends and phenomena, posters vent their frustrations at what they feel is a lack of a writing community on A03:

On LJ the community was right there, right next to the fic, whereas with Ao3 the fic is separated out in to it's [sic] own gallery where you go and view it in your own time and don't necessarily bring that back to the community on Tumblr (anon. 1 2015)

the fic on AO3 feels very distant from the fannish community and even the writer, for me, even if there are links to someone's blog or Tumblr. And it just felt a lot easier to get a conversation going with someone in comments on their own blog, which could lead to comments on non-fic entries, getting to be friends...(anon. 2. 2015).

In addition to the fact that LJ fics are integrated by the design of the site into personal blogs, thus giving more of a sense of the person behind the story and comments, some fans connect their feeling of a loss of community this to the 'kudos' feature of A03. This function, added in 2010, operates like the Facebook 'like', allowing readers to click a button and leave a vote of approval on a story without commenting on it. In a Tumblr post titled 'The Kudos system: why I won't put my fics on A03', *thewalkingdetective* writes:

I think the kudos system they have over there is a complete and total slap in the face to authors. [...] The problem with kudos is that it discourages people from leaving reviews [...] The ability to just leave kudos

⁷ See http://archiveofourown.org/admin_posts?tag=71

removes any guilt a reader might feel about reading a fic and showing no appreciation whatsoever to the author afterwards. Thus, people don't leave as many reviews (thewalkingdetective 2013).

In 2012, several writers requested that A03 add an 'opt-out' feature to disable the kudos function on particular works. Fan writer and commentator arsenic_jade reports that the response from staff was that 'for accessibility reasons, it was decided a one-click, such as Kudos, were necessary' (arsenic_jade 2014). Precisely what accessibility reasons were not defined, but we might wager it has something to do with social and/or typing limitations. In response, fan writer embroiderama comments:

I really need the sense of connectedness and communication that I get from fandom and from interacting around my stories. It makes me feel bad and very anxious when I'm getting a whole bunch of one-sided communication which feels like a wall. It feels like being alone. It's really, really not fun, and I don't understand why my anxiety, my pain is less important than the people who are reading my stories and want to feel like they commented when they didn't (quoted in arsenic_jade 2014).

Arsenicjade's conclusion on the matter is that 'the Archive is built to privilege the consumer's experience over the writer/creator', a neat illustration of how coding encapsulates value systems. Interestingly, some fans object to the entire concept of an archive as a means of organizing fic, believing that the goal of comprehensiveness detracts from the ability of finding high quality fiction. User KYUUKETSUKIRUI states that 'trolling archives for fic is about the *last* way I want to find reading material. I'd much rather read from recs or delicious or my f[riend]list'. The choice of trolling as a verb is notable: lurking to search as opposed to actively engaging with a friendlist is connected to a pastime generally considered pernicious to online community and co-operation. Whilst no doubt readers have been taking recommendations from friends for as long as reading has been widespread, the capacity to link into a network of reviews and recommendations from readers in one's own subcultural community is a further example of how the social affordances of digital media can influence the way we read as much as the technological. If I know that I would like to read a certain type of fic involving tropes x and y, but none of z, or that focus on character a and ignore b, I can follow rec links and reviews from other fan writers and readers who demonstrate the same proclivity at quite a high degree of specificity. Of course, the more traditional custom of following recommendations from writers whose quality one admires is also current in fandom.

Conclusion

In summary, then, whilst we have established that whilst fanfic writers do develop practices and communities that depend on digital technology both for meaning and distribution, we may need to expand our thinking on what digitality looks like as it applied to textual practices. At the level of the individual story, the now-dominant A03 uses digital affordances

to create a user-experience as similar to hardcopy fiction as possible, allowing readers to download text to Kindle and read offline. Indeed, the older platform of LiveJournal tends to utilize more of the tropes critics associate with digital fiction, such as collaborative work, metalepsis, and inbuilt hypertextuality. On the other hand, as Murray has written, a properly conceived notion of digital fiction ought to account for the social norms and freedoms which new publishing contexts create - such as the ability to publish fanfic to a wide audience without fear of owner takedown, to which A03 caters specifically. Moreover, we should attend to how overall site programming allows for the organization and categorization of text, particularly in its requirements for interactivity on behalf the reader. Taking this view, we ought not to succumb to teleological predictions that imply a trajectory from a 'pure' idea of the book to a fantasy of total digital immersion. Rather, as the case of A03 illustrates, it seems likely that writers will increasingly treat digitality like a toolbox, selecting and modifying affordances according to aesthetic and social requirements. Hypothetically, this could actually create an even more stratified field of cultural production than traditional publishing, wherein technological literacy becomes the prerequisite of a speaking platform, and also grants control over the presentation and organization of text. On the other hand, if programmers are willingly engaged with users and prepared to serve their needs, the role of creative writer may become increasingly democratized as more and more people have access to the contexts suitable for their particular publications. Finally, as arsenic_jade's comments point out, we should not assume that the needs of the writer will necessarily align with those of the reader. Which position is prioritized, or if an attempt at equality of service will be made, is just one of the values programmers must consider in this era of new reading platforms.

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