Fandom At The Crossroads: Celebration, Shame and Fan/Producer Relationships

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By

Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen

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All celebrity interviews were personal interviews conducted between 2007 and 2011 unless otherwise noted. Fan comments included were personal interviews or online public posts collected between 2007 and 2011 unless otherwise noted.

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Photographs are by authors except as noted below. All photographs taken for this book and used with permission.

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INTRODUCTION

Halfway through a celebrity Q&A at a *Supernatural* fan convention in Los Angeles, an attending fan broke the first rule of fandom ("Tell no one about fandom!") by asking what the actors onstage thought of fanfiction. A groan rolled through the mostly female crowd, followed by an awkward moment of silence as the actors groped for an appropriately diplomatic answer. The actors (Travis Wester and A.J. Buckley) seemed more amused than traumatized by the question; not so some of the gathered fandom. The dozen or so fangirls we joined for dinner that night were still talking about "the incident" several hours later, and the debate was heated. One woman asserted that questions from fans need to be moderated, lest the fan ask something "weird," going so far as to say that "an authority figure needs to step in." Presumably the authority figures in question would be the co-owners of Creation Entertainment (the company staging the event), who are both men in their fifties. The notion that a room full of adult women couldn't be trusted to ask their own questions without being vetted by two male "authority figures" was disconcerting, but it wasn't entirely surprising. It reflects some pervasive assumptions about fans—assumptions from which fans themselves often operate.

Much has been written over the last three decades about fans, often in an attempt to rehabilitate the image of the fan, to validate fan practices, to celebrate and defend fandom, to declare certain battles won. But for all the declarations about the positive force of fandom, a pervasive sense of shame permeates both fan spaces and academic approaches to the subject. There is shame about being a fan at all, shame over the extremity of "some" fans, shame over "certain" fan practices, over having those practices revealed to the rest of the world, or to the fannish objects themselves, as the fan at the convention discovered. There is also shame about studying something as "frivolous" as fandom—or worse yet, taking frivolous pleasure ourselves, "sitting too close" instead of remaining suitably detached observers.

We should know. We've been sitting too close to our television sets once a week for the past seven years. When it comes to *Supernatural*, we're anything but detached.

Supernatural (known within the fandom as "Show" or "SPN") premiered on September 13, 2005, on what was then The WB network.

Creator Eric Kripke was inspired by Kerouac's *On The Road*, sending his heroes Sam and Dean driving across an explicitly American landscape in a big black '67 Impala to investigate the urban legends that had fascinated Kripke since childhood. The show was expected to appeal to the coveted 18-49 male demographic. However, the casting of Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles as the show's male leads made it clear that the network was hoping to attract viewers with more than gun battles and gore. A last minute decision to make Sam and Dean brothers opened up the possibility for a closer relationship than a Luke and Han style friendship would have allowed, and turned the term "bromance" literal. The obvious chemistry between the actors, widely commented on by everyone involved with the show and anyone who has ever interviewed Ackles and Padalecki in person, also contributed to the series' evolution. Initially produced as monster-of-the-week episodes crafted to scare, *Supernatural* found its stride when it combined urban legends with a powerful and nuanced relationship drama, exploring the intense, complicated, decidedly angsty bond between the brothers.

While *Supernatural* has flown under the radar until recently, the series attracted a passionate fan base from the beginning. When Henry Jenkins put out a query on his blog in 2007 asking what show his readers thought he should be watching, the vast majority recommended *Supernatural*. Jenkins easily succumbed, writing "I more or less ended up inhaling Season One, watching the episodes in sequence and thus seeing the characters' inner lives come bubbling up again and again." Jenkins described the show as acting as a "cultural attractor," tapping into the zeitgeist of the moment (2007a). In a world concerned with the largely invisible threat of terrorism, Jenkins notes, fighting unseen evil resonates with viewers, allowing *Supernatural* to draw on our current generalized anxiety while also tapping into our more primal fears about what might be lurking under our beds, in our closets—or, most frightening of all, in our own minds.

Supernatural also tells a story of familial ties, love and loyalty. The Winchesters, father John and sons Dean and Sam, are a different sort of nuclear family. Essentially homeless nomads after the death of their mother, the boys grew up in motel rooms, criss-crossing the United States with their demon hunter father. They are far from stereotypical, yet they are what we all recognize as family. They argue, they disagree, they break apart, they come back together. But most of all they love, often to the point of literal self-sacrifice. In a political climate filled with the rhetoric of family values, *Supernatural* seems to affirm what family means while confirming that families can flourish in non-traditional ways.

In order for a media text to be a successful cultural attractor, there must also be a way in for fans, with meaningful ways to participate. *Supernatural* provides a canon open enough to invite speculation, discussion, critical evaluation, and transformative works, while at the same time sustaining a remarkably consistent mythology which has now stretched over seven seasons. Episodes continue to provide glimpses of the boys' backstory, sometimes in flashbacks to Sam and Dean's childhood, sometimes through time travel, sometimes even with a glimpse of the boys' idiosyncratic versions of heaven—enough to captivate, but never to satisfy. The show provides an intense emotional pull as well with the deep, codependent, self-sacrificing, borderline pathological relationship between Sam and Dean. Since Sam and Dean are brothers, the characters are given a pass for displays of emotion outside the cultural norms for masculinity. Thus, *Supernatural* offers fans a sort of pick-your-own love relationship between the boys, allowing fans to invest in their passionate love, either platonically or otherwise. As Jenkins writes, "We want to see men emote for each other, and the family ties allow for a narrative that can play with this instead of justifying it" (2007a).

The show is also a testament to the immediacy of fandom in the age of the internet. The first Live Journal site dedicated to *Supernatural* predated the airing of the pilot by two months, after buzz from Comic Con got fans talking. The first dedicated website went up several days after. The first fanfiction community on Live Journal was created two days before the airing of the pilot, and the first fanfiction was posted within hours of the show's debut. As we'll see later, actors and producers are often there, side by side with the fans, tweeting from the set or even during the airing of particular episodes. Fan practices are incorporated into the show itself and canon and "fanon" live side by side. Indeed the fandom surrounding *Supernatural* can be seen as an excellent example of "convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (Jenkins 2006, 2).

This explains what brings fans to the show. How we came to the show, and how we've negotiated the multiple roles we've occupied both in fandom and as academics investigating fandom, is a story at once parallel to and deeply entwined with our analysis of the fandom. Both of us have long fannish histories. We met via another fandom (*Velvet Goldmine*) and have shared many of the same fannish interests ever since. We did not come naturally to *Supernatural*, however, nor did we arrive there at the same time. Rather, we were lured there by a mutual friend who thought the show would be something that would appeal to us. She gifted us with DVD

Fig. I-1. The somewhat attractive Jensen Ackles

Fig. I-2. The somewhat attractive Jared Padalecki

sets, reminded us to watch on Thursday nights, and provided well- crafted near-essays on the quality of the acting, writing and production. She played dirty by sending us photos of the show's (somewhat attractive) lead actors. After some initial hesitation and false starts, she prevailed—we were both sucked headlong into the series.

We live in different states and don't get the chance to be in the same place at the same time all that often. When we could finally arrange a "fan weekend," we mainlined the entire first season of *Supernatural* on DVD in what we'd later categorize as a "lost day". We sat down to watch early one morning, and stayed there all day and into the night, stopping periodically to ogle screencaps and close-ups and mutter appreciative curses. We slept for a few hours and then got up with the sun to start right back in. At 6 pm the next day, we stared at each other and Lynn asked blearily, "Did we ever even eat anything this weekend?" The answer—alarmingly—was no. Clearly our investment was anything but casual.

By early 2008, we were completely immersed in the *Supernatural* fandom, but still lacking a satisfactory explanation of our own experience. We were frustrated by media coverage that seemed to misrepresent and pathologize fans, and by academic theorizing which seemed to give lip service to writing as an aca-fan but to continually shy away from confessing the actual fan side of the equation. Why, we wondered, are fans—ourselves included—still so ashamed to admit it? The tenacity of this uncomfortable emotion seems particularly unexpected at a time when the economic power of fans has become an accepted (and much-courted) force. An article by Lance Neuhauser in MediaBizBloggers posed the provocative question, "Want to know the value of a 'fan'?" The answer to that, according to a study by Vitrue on the LQ Digital IQ Index, is $3.60. This value increases, however, with what Neuhauser calls the consumer's "return on interaction"—the impetus to share experiences and knowledge. Consumers have changed the way they communicate, with a study on the value of Twitter followers concluding that "social media fans are two-thirds more likely to recommend a brand they've friended to a friend, or to buy the products themselves." The economic force of fandom alone should garner it a more favorable place in the culture. And yet the image of the fan remains persistently "othered" (2010).

The growing field of fan studies, into which we plunged with as much enthusiasm and shame as we did into fandom itself, seems open to a more immersed and emotionally focused exploration. The first wave of fan studies assumed a dichotomy of power, following de Certeau's (1984) description of powerful producers on one side and disempowered consumers on the other. Second and third wave theorists moved away from an

assumed dichotomy, but continued to focus on questions of class and subversion (Fiske 1992; Thornton 1995). More recently, theorists have explored the role of fandom in constructing fans' identity, and the social and cultural significance of identity performance in distribution of power (Sandvoss 2005; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Hills 2002) and have introduced a focus on the individual and the subjective previously neglected in cultural studies, including prioritizing the emotional aspects of fanning (Lancaster 2001).

Those emotional aspects of fanning also, of course, apply to those of us who fit the definition of aca-fans. In *The Wow Climax*, Jenkins stresses the need to examine fandom from an emotional perspective, from a standpoint of immersion instead of distance:

> These aspects of popular culture are difficult to understand from a stance of contemplative distance. To understand how popular culture works on our emotions, we have to pull it close, get intimate with it, let it work its magic on us, and then write about our own engagement…capturing their own subjective responses to popular text and using them as a point of entry into understanding larger cultural processes and aesthetic issues. Unfortunately, various forms of distanciation have been built into the theoretical traditions and aesthetic categories through which we study popular culture (2007, 10).

Our decision to write from a position of immersion within *Supernatural* fandom is intended, undoubtedly with varying degrees of success, to reduce that distance. In doing so, we attempt to respond to the suggestion of Hills (2002) and others that what we write about fandom should be accessible to fans, written in a language that doesn't require an advanced degree or years of specific study to comprehend, yet without the subtle condescension that comes from underestimating fandom's collective intelligence and expertise. We also try to retain those emotional aspects of fandom that have been neglected in fan theory. After all, none of us became fans because it wasn't fun! Throughout the text, we incorporate a sampling of icons, used as both avatars for online posts in various fan spaces and as a form of creative expression. Icons are a unique language, providing everything from social criticism to biting snark to uninhibited emotional reactions, also known as "squee." Our strong investment in *Supernatural* fandom is clearly not the exception, as many SPN fan icons proclaim.

Fig. I-3

What also remains largely unexplored in the field of fan studies is the application of psychological theory which goes beyond the often pathologizing lens of psychoanalytic analysis to examine both individual and communal psychological aspects of fanning. Both Sandvoss and Hills call for such approaches to fandom, with Hills contending that it "seems impossible to take fandom seriously without taking fan psychology seriously" (Hills 2002, 22). We agree—not surprisingly, since one of us is a clinical psychologist and the other teaches from a background of literary criticism and analytical approaches to fame and celebrity. Deeply immersed in the *Supernatural* fandom ourselves, we wanted to explore fandom from the inside, looking at fannish motivation, emotion, satisfaction, and conflict. But we wanted to go further. Taking Jenkins' idea of convergence culture and the reciprocal relationship between fans and the creative side as a starting point, we wanted to cross another barrier. Having already attempted to straddle the line between academic and fan, we set out to cross an even more thickly drawn line—that between fan and creator. Juggling all three roles landed us in more uncomfortable positions than we were prepared for, but also brought to light, in an immediate and personal way, the tensions inherent in being a fan and in studying fandom.

Chapter One: Lost in Space—Participatory Fandom and the Negotiation of Fan Spaces

We begin by exploring the diverse ways in which fans participate in fandom, and the variety of fan spaces they inhabit. The most dominant constructions of fandom paint a picture of monolithic spaces in which all fans are engaging in the same behaviors. Harry Potter fans all dress up and stand in line for midnight showings, Star Wars fans all pack light sabers. In reality, the modes of fannish engagement are as diverse as the people who come to fandom. The definition of fandom has thus been hard to pin down. How can we ascribe meaning to a concept so varied and fragmented, which seems to mean something different to every individual who defines themselves as a fan? Aca-fans have categorized fans according to their degree of participation, at times leaving the less participatory fans out of the taxonomy completely. Fans differ widely in the types of participation they seek out and the fan spaces to which they are drawn.

The concept of niche-seeking is relevant to most human behavior, fandom included. We all strive to find those places—physical, psychological, social and emotional—where we feel most accepted and least different. Thus, some fans are drawn to role playing games (RPGs) and others to post fanart on Tumblr or fanvids on Youtube. Some fans feel an acute sense of being "at home" when they discover the fanfiction community for the first time on the private space of their own laptop, and others when they travel across the country to attend their first fan convention. Each fan space has its own customs, norms and expectations for participation. Different spaces meet different needs and attract different types of fans, offering validation, inclusion, artistic inspiration, escape, freedom of expression, or whatever an individual fan is (subconsciously at least) seeking. And, as we will see in later chapters, fan spaces differ widely in terms of openness, their boundaries ranging from relatively permeable to ironclad.

When a particular fan space is perceived as quite different from the non-fannish culture in which it is embedded, there is a high degree of protectiveness, with fans policing the boundaries diligently. An internalized sense of shame produced by the perception of difference is often the motivation for such protectiveness. Fans speak of finding a "safe space," but disagree on what the parameters are which would create such a place.

Chapter Two: Taking Sides—Business or Pleasure?

As we analyze fannish spaces on a continuum of open through tightly closed systems, we examine the reality of the fan closet and the forces that keep fans there. Cornel Sandvoss (2005) and others contend that fandom is now a common and ordinary aspect of everyday life in the industrialized world. Similarly, Matt Hills credits both his academic and fan lives to the "encouragement, indulgence and tacit legitimation offered by my family" (2002, 87). This comfort with fandom, however, may well be rooted in certain aspects of individual experience, including gender (male) and type of fandom (in Sandvoss's case, mostly a sports fan). Tell your colleagues that you just flew across the country to go to a *Supernatural* fan convention and you're likely to be confronted with blank stares and awkward questions. You went where? For what?

Us: "*Supernatural*."

Them: "Like the paranormal?"

Us: "Uh, no – it's a television show. On the CW."

More blank stares inevitably followed. Our responses ran the gamut from defensive intellectualizing ("The writing is great!") to denial ("It's not about the hot actors!") to saying nothing at all, which is both the easiest and most common choice. Given the cultural bias against emotion and pleasure, it is small wonder that academics should be reluctant to admit to the same behaviors they study. But as Tulloch (2000) notes, there are significant theoretical and methodological implications attached to how scholars research fandom—whether they are fans themselves, or study fandom as something that others engage in. As Hills bluntly points out, "Fans don't like academics and vice versa"(2002, 3).Thus, fans have been reluctant to allow a deep level of access to academics, limiting analysis to interviews and observations whose inherent power imbalance restricts the expression of affect in favor of the "good subject" of rational discourse. Fans' defensiveness leaves their guard up, resulting in self-censorship that compromises understanding.

Fans are not the only ones reticent to self-disclose in a public forum. Doty (2000) and Hills (2002) have questioned whether decades of hiding fan culture theorists' personal and cultural investment in their subjects have served to "squeeze much of the life out of it in many senses" (Doty 2000, 11), and call for more explicitly auto-ethnographic work. At the same time, both Hills and Doty acknowledge the danger of slipping into being "overly confessional" or appearing "embarrassingly egotistical or gee-whiz celebratory"—yet these affective states are inherent in fandom. Aca-fans attempt to occupy a space which is uncomfortably split between

fan space and the perceived legitimacy of academic space. Perhaps more jarringly, aca-fans tend to be uncomfortable on both sides of the fence. Fans eye us suspiciously, reluctant to be put under a microscope and unwilling to consider us true fans. Academics are equally suspicious, questioning the legitimacy of studying something as frivolous as popular culture. The discomfort has often made aca-fans reluctant to disclose their fannish selves when theorizing fandom, downplaying the emotional, sexual and psychological investment and emphasizing the intellectual and rational. Aca-fans are doubly ashamed—not only are we defensive about studying fandom, but now we might have to acknowledge fan pilgrimages to *Supernatural* shooting locations or camping out at 3 am for Comic Con seats?

Our own strategy (occasionally embarrassing, confessional or gee-whiz celebratory) has been to immerse ourselves head over heels into our chosen fandom. The layered and nuanced understanding of the inner workings of a particular fandom and the fandom's relationship to the societal structures that support and challenge it can only, it seems, be discovered from the inside.

Chapter Three: I'm Too Sexy For My Stereotype

The pursuit of pleasure seems inextricably intertwined with the sense of shame, whether it's the evolutionary pleasure of sex or the pleasure sought in "frivolous amusement," the definition of which shifts with cultural exigency (attendance at theatrical productions and reading novels were both formerly discouraged after all). Some would go one step further and argue that the two share a second important characteristic as well—namely that we should be ashamed of ourselves for experiencing either one.

The influence of shame in negotiating fannish identity and the selection of fan spaces, as well as its impact in constraining how aca-fans study fandom, may have been underestimated in a field which likes to proclaim this "the age of the geek, baby!" In this chapter, we examine this ubiquitous and uncomfortable emotion and its role in how fans have been portrayed by both mainstream media and academic theorists. We also look at the persistence of shame and its influence on identity and psychological health, especially for women. Fandom, for many female fans, is compelling for its invitation to self-expression, including sexual expression. At the same time, the negative connotations of "fangirl" persist, leaving fans caught between the pull of a new authorized discourse and the fear of alienating subscribers to the current one. We explore here the cultural proscriptions

on female sexuality which contribute to fan shame, from post-war wrestling fans and 1960s Beatlemania, to Radway's (1984) analysis of romance-reading fans and their grumbling husbands and sons, to Jenkins' (1992) and Bacon-Smith's (1992) *Star Trek* slash writers. We draw on our rich store of fan interviews and fanworks to examine the persistence of shame in contemporary *Supernatural* fandom, and its influence on the creation of boundaries, norms and censure. The "first rule of fandom" is, after all, "tell no one about fandom." Fans continue to debate the risks and benefits of its existence.

Chapter Four: Fandom as Change Agent—Transformative Whats?

One of the reasons for fans' protectiveness of their "safe space" is that it is just that—a space that offers the protection and privacy needed for genuine self-expression. In this chapter, we examine the therapeutic potential of fandom, comparing it to the safe space of the therapy room. Fandom has long been characterized as subversive on a societal level, challenging gender and relational norms and existing power structures. We suggest that fandom is often transformative on an individual level as well.

To explore fandom's potential for more individual transformation, however, it is necessary to narrow one's lens and explore beneath the surface of individual fans' motivations. This presents a significant challenge when viewing fandom from the outside. Fans, however, discuss those inner fantasies and desires with other fans on a regular basis, allowing this sort of analysis from within. We examine here the impact of the community on the individual fan, as well as the production of fanworks not merely as a form of self-projection and reflection, but as a type of therapeutic expression, carried out within that supportive community. Specifically, we discuss three well-researched routes to psychological change—narrative therapy, expressive writing, and group counseling—and locate similar modes of change through various types of participation in fandom. In the process, we challenge internalized shame in the same way fans are, explicating a more positive model of fandom.

Chapter Five: Only Love Can Break Your Heart—Fandom Wank and Policing the Safe Space

In this chapter, we examine the flip side of the supportive fandom community. As the field of fan studies has developed, there have been several large-scale shifts in how fandom is viewed. Early researchers

reacted to the pervasive negative view of fans by defending fan practices as transformative and culturally subversive, seeking to rehabilitate the image of the fan. That rehabilitation has not met with much success in the mainstream media or culture, but has been widespread in academic theorizing on fandom. In the early studies that shaped the field (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992), academics were reluctant to recognize hierarchies in fandom, characterizing fandom as a place where diversity of opinion was uniformly welcomed; however, "wank" is also an integral part of fandom. The popularity of online communities such as Fandom Wank and ONTD (Oh No They Didn't!), the existence of 'hate memes,' and the subtle and not-so-subtle relational bullying attest to fandom's passionate disagreements.

Recognizing fandom's potential for individual transformation, we turn in this chapter to the risks inherent in seeking and finding a safe space while still struggling with internalized shame. In their efforts to maintain the privacy necessary to a sense of safety, fans diligently police their fan spaces—and other fans. We examine the impact of anonymity in online fan spaces, the use of bullying and aggression to both jockey for position and enforce norms, and the psychological motivations behind these behaviors. The intense emotional investment and therapeutic potential of fandom also creates a strong need to maintain its integrity, and to attack threats both from the outside and from within.

Chapter Six: And The (Fourth) Walls Come Tumbling Down

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the threats to the perceived privacy and safety of fan spaces comes from the other side of the boundary—the creative side who are the objects of fannish affection. Both aca-fans and mainstream media have recognized the increasingly reciprocal relationship between fans and producers, facilitated by internet technologies and social media. The assumption is that both sides benefit. However, fans do not always welcome the breaking of the First Rule of Fandom, whether it's incursion from the creative side or fans themselves doing the rule breaking.

In this chapter, we examine the destruction of the fourth wall in *Supernatural*'s recent seasons, which has intensified the sense of fan shame by allowing those outside the safe space of fandom a glimpse inside. Early theories of fandom were predicated on the necessity of distance between fan and fannish object, with that distance allowing the continued projection of fantasy that sustained the fan's adoration. Fans

thus controlled the narrative text through incorporation of elements that fit with the individual's self-projection. The hapless fan who asked the Forbidden Question we witnessed at the convention revealed the lengths to which fans will go to preserve secrecy, in order to keep the boundaries between fan, creator and fannish object strictly delineated, something Thompson (1995) describes as "mediated quasi-interaction." The created distance facilitates an audience members' ability to shape a relationship with both the text's authors and the fannish objects themselves. While the fan interacts intensely with a particular text, the text does not talk back.

Or does it?

The relationship between fans and the creative side, as well as the human representations of the fannish objects themselves, are increasingly reciprocal. As media texts are more widely disseminated and fans' constructions become more visible, the division between the creative side and audience is changing. With face-to-face interaction at conventions, the hierarchical boundaries separating fans and fannish objects begin to break down. Even more strikingly, the advent of Twitter, Facebook, and instant feedback ensures that the relationship between fans and creators is no longer unidirectional. The fourth wall has essentially crumbled, and the reciprocal relationship that Jenkins first hypothesized more than a decade ago in *Convergence Culture* is a reality.

Supernatural has become the media poster child for fourth wall breaking over the past four years, its writers repeatedly demonstrating their knowledge of fandom and portraying the show's fans in "meta" episodes. The stars of the television series have also delighted in solidifying the reciprocal relationship with fans, utilizing Facebook and Twitter to interact with fans and to publicize their own projects. *Supernatural* is now the most popular subject of fan conventions, so fan/celebrity interaction occurs in face-to-face venues as well, further breaking the First Rule (and at times just about every rule) of fandom. In this chapter, we analyze the multiple ways in which *Supernatural* has taken the reciprocal relationship with fans to a new level—and fans' reactions.

Chapter Seven: The Reciprocal Relationship—How Much is Too Much?

One of the most common manifestations of internalized fan shame is the projection of fans' fears onto their fannish objects. Thus, fans continually worry that the actors, writers, directors and producers are mocking, criticizing, or otherwise pathologizing them. Although the

relationship between fans and the creative side is indeed increasingly reciprocal, nevertheless the lines of communication are often indirect, filtered through third parties and prone to misinterpretation. In this chapter, we explore the reality of producers' thoughts on fans by doing something that is rarely done either in fandom or in fan studies. We ask them.

Over the course of several years of research we interviewed the showrunners, writers, and actors who make the show, to hear their thoughts on fans and fan practices. We visited the set and the production offices, where almost everyone who helps bring *Supernatural* to life—the art director, Impala wrangler, locations manager, director of photography, production assistants— shared their take on fans. We asked about things not usually covered in *Entertainment Weekly*—fanfiction, vidding, conventions, cosplay, slash. And we not only asked, we answered. As curious as fans are about what their fannish objects are thinking, the creative side is equally curious about fans. Just as fans negotiate the boundaries between various fan spaces, the creative side—actors in particular—negotiate their own boundaries with fans and make careful decisions about their constructed personas. In the course of our discussions over the past four years, we inevitably broke some boundaries too.

CHAPTER ONE

LOST IN SPACE: PARTICIPATORY FANDOM AND THE NEGOTIATION OF FAN SPACES

Fans have often been categorized in terms of their modes of participation, with that participation usually defined in terms of production. Most taxonomies of fandom have not defined the consumption of a fanned object or even the gathering of information about that object as participatory. We may value (transgressive) appropriation and transformation over "mere" consumption because, among other things, it provides us with texts, thus overlooking what are perceived to be more "passive" forms of engagement. However, a significant number of fans would define their participation in terms of active consumption of information about their fanned objects and the people who contribute to its creation (musicians, actors, writers, directors, players). In reality this kind of interaction with the text involves obtaining a wide ranging knowledge of the fanned object and requires a significant amount of time and effort and a specific set of technical skills. In this chapter, we use this broader definition of "participation" and then examine the varied spaces in which these practices take place, along with the differing expectations of privacy inherent in each. These expectations of privacy in turn mirror the propensity for shame and the subsequent desire for validation.

The definition of fandom has been hard to pin down, perhaps because we tend to speak of fandom as a singular entity. A fandom surrounds *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Twilight* or the Boston Red Sox. But fandom is hardly monolithic, and the internet has only facilitated and accelerated the fragmentation of fandom into sometimes harmonious, sometimes fractious groups that engage in a wide array of fan practices. Fans actively consume information about their fannish "texts"; they construct wikis, write fan fiction and create fan videos and fan art; they participate in role playing games (RPG's); they find each other on Tumblr; they attend fan conventions; and increasingly they interact directly with actors, directors, writers and others from the industry side via Facebook, Twitter and blogs

Fans rarely engage in just one practice. Artists are also writers or readers or vidders. Writers might also participate on RPG sites, or they may provide commentary and analysis of episodes in forums such as Television Without Pity and the message boards at IMDB. Fans often migrate from one fan space to another as their participation in fandom grows or changes. *Supernatural* fan Mary Dominiak compared the various practices she engages in and the fan spaces she inhabits:

> I feel part of a couple of *Supernatural* communities. The first one was TVGuide.com, initially with people who were commenting on the same show-related blogs I visited…..I expanded to *Supernatural*.tv and Live Journal, and there was a definite thrill in seeing more and more people reading the things I write, both blogs and fanfiction. My correspondence with other fans has gone beyond the show, particularly with fans I've met in person at conventions or just by arranging real-world meetings. The (online) fannish *Supernatural* communities are similar in many ways to "face to face" communities structured around a common interest. The major difference is that the fan community is actually much more diverse than any of my face to face ones, encompassing a wide range of ages (as young as 13 and as old as 65) and a multiplicity of nationalities, literally all around the world.

Mary's description of her engagement with her fandom closely mirrors the range of skills and competencies that Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) delineated (technical, analytical and interpretive). She went from being a consumer of "show related blogs" (technical skills) to a participant in various communities, eventually beginning a blog of her own (analytical skills), to writing fanfiction (interpretive skills). Her negotiation of fan spaces is also illustrative of the ways in which these skills and practices overlap.

Because fans participate in a variety of ways, they must constantly negotiate and renegotiate boundaries, stepping back and forth between public and private spaces. Some fan practices are mainstream enough to make public spaces comfortable, while others are not.

Chart 1-1

Skill	**Fan Space**	**Fan Practices**	**Participation**
Technical (embody an appreciation of how the textual effect is created. For television this includes evaluation of acting, conveyance of feeling, production values, script, camera work)	public spaces, may have ties to corporate entities (production companies, advertisers, special interest groups, academics)	Gathering of information through reading magazines, websites,	Consumptive
Analytic (analysis of the text from within the parameters of the text itself.)	Semi-public spaces, but with the expectation that they are fans-only spaces	Fan forum discussions, blogging.	Productive (often predicated on technical)
Interpretive (Interpretation of texts from without the text by comparing them to something else.)	Private, fans only spaces	Creation of fan works (fan fiction, videos, art, music), participation in RPG's.	Productive (often predicated on either technical or analytical skills, or a combination of both)

Fan Practices, Fan Spaces and the Expectation of Privacy

Fan spaces online occupy a middle ground, commonly perceived as private and yet in reality public and generally available to anyone with a computer. Not only can they be accessed by anyone, they are often vulnerable to outside influence, making true "fans only spaces" difficult to find. Fans, as we'll explore in later chapters, search for safe spaces in which to express themselves openly, but the threat of censorship hangs over most fan spaces in one way or another – whether this be incursion from the owners of the properties, from advertisers on the site, or from special interest groups who object to content. At times this incursion even comes from the fans themselves.

Well known sites such as FanFiction.net have offered a central space for writers from multiple fandoms. Created in 1998, FF.net remains the largest archive of fanfiction on the internet. However, there were and continue to be objections to the perceived public nature of the site, a concern given the still shameful practice to which it is devoted. The site itself attempted to validate the writing of fanfiction and reduce the threat of criticism by adopting policies that function as censorship. Real Person Fiction (RPF) and NC17 ratings were banned from the site in 2002, thus curtailing the interpretive skills and self- expression of fans who wish to write in either of these genres. Such censorship works to remove one of the primary contributors to shame by simply taking out the sex.

The Organization for Transformative Works (OTW)'s Archive Of Our Own, (known within fandom as AO3), in contrast, seeks to be inclusive and non-restrictive in its policies and explicitly excludes any outside interest groups who attempt to influence content. The Archive of Our Own:

> . . . offers a noncommercial and nonprofit central hosting place for fanfiction and (long-term) other transformative fanworks: i.e. it is free to use and does not make any money. It is multifannish and built on open-source archiving software designed and built by and for fans. It is hosted on servers owned by the OTW and therefore not vulnerable to a commercial hosting company deciding they don't like our fanworks.

AO3's twin goals, freeing writers from corporate interests and the threat of imposition of social rules inconsistent with fandom, make it attractive to fans who seek a "safe" space. However, fans have been slow to accept AO3, perhaps because it has been seen as an academic space that , no matter how open their policies, automatically carries with it an "official" imprimatur that may put some fans off. As we'll see later, the

incursion of academic spaces into fan spaces is not always welcomed. AO3 put back the sex, but the perception of judgment may remain—this time the fear of being "studied."

Live Journal and Dreamwidth present alternative spaces for fans, offering more privacy and a greater sense of community. Dreamwidth in particular feels safe for fans, as it is supported only by user fees, without ad revenue. Live Journal defines itself as "a global community of friends who share your unique passions and interests," a clear invitation to fandom to come on in and make yourself at home. However, LJ has not been as safe as fans would like to believe. Supported by ad revenue, LJ is vulnerable to outside censorship. The Live Journal purge of content and journals deemed inappropriate or obscene and the resulting fan protest, known within fandom as "StrikeThrough" in 2007, and the Fanfiction.net "RedBootton kerfluffle" in 2010 are examples of such censorship.

Some fans solve the problem of community by maintaining a journal at Dreamwidth and cross posting their fanworks in Live Journal. As we'll explore in Chapter Three, online fan spaces, despite some outside interference, nevertheless offer a greater sense of safety and privacy, which encourage self-expression. But even within the most protected spaces there is the possibility of incursion, and sometimes this threat is from other fans. Despite their shared love of a particular television show, band, or team, fans do not always easily co-mingle. For instance, the first piece of *Supernatural* fanfiction posted in Live Journal appeared within twenty-four hours of the airing of the pilot. It was "Wincest", a type of fiction that posits a romantic relationship between the two main characters of the show, brothers Sam and Dean Winchester (Winchester + incest = Wincest). This immediately sparked a response from those who vehemently opposed this budding genre, and alternate communities were formed before the second episode of the show had aired, including a now-defunct "Anti-Wincest" community. Since then communities have formed for Sam girls and Dean girls, those who want to see Dean hurt or Sam limp, those who want to indulge in male pregnancy fic (MPreg), those who want to see one or both of the boys suddenly sprout wings, or tails, or have congress with angels. Alternative Universe (AU) fanfiction is popular, putting the characters or the actors who portray them into different situations that have nothing to do with either show canon or personal reality. Jared is a troubled student and Jensen his conflicted teacher, Dean is an executive at a large corporation and Sam is an unappreciated IT person (no wait – that's not fan fiction, that's an episode of *Supernatural*!). These separate communities offer discreet spaces for all of these pieces of fandom to co-exist if not co-mingle.