EDTC 816 Assignment 1: Exploring Online Communities

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In the Digital Era, the line between consumer and producer has become blurred. The expansive resources and interactivity of the Internet along with the burgeoning capacities of computer technology have helped to create a new cultural norm of participation. Participatory culture, as described by Jenkins, et al (2009), is democratic and welcoming with “low barrier(s) to artistic creation and … strong support for creating and sharing one’s creation” (p.xi). Fan fiction is an exemplar of participatory culture. This medium, which is most frequently shared online, includes prose, stories, and poetry created with repurposed or remixed characters, settings, and storylines taken from mass media (Jenkins, 2006).

Fanfiction.net is an online community whose purpose it is to support the work of fan- fiction writers above the age of 13. The community serves as a forum for the production and publication of written works in a wide variety of genres and languages. It offers legitimacy and encouragement to fanfiction writers. For those who take leadership roles in the community, it is also an opportunity to engage in a demanding, albeit fun hobby.

Burns and Webber (2009) suggest that people are drawn to fan fiction “because they want more, more, more” (p.27). It is an avenue for those who hate to see a good book end, so they continue to write the story.

Fanfiction.net is primarily a dynamic publication venue. While critics of this genre contend that it is a “parasitic art form”, unable to stand without the work of legitimate authors (Flegel & Roth, 2014, p.), proponents of fan fiction prefer to think of it as “archontic, ...build(ing) on existing text…adding to its archive and expanding it” (Derecho, 2006, p. 64). Fanfiction.net provides a welcoming community for writers and readers of fan fiction. A 2010 survey of fanfiction.com participants showed that with more than 2 million user accounts, over 12% of members had posted at least one story on the site (Fanfiction.net, 2010, para. 11). The size of this community alone (millions of members) can serve as validation for anyone considering writing fan fiction. The presence of stories in 78 languages attests to its global reach.

As with many other online affinity communities, fanfiction.net places “a high value on

cataloging content and documenting practices” (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013, p. 678). Fanfiction.net can be navigated through a communities (genres) tab: anime, books, comics, cartoons, etc. Each category then links the reader to another page, offering hundreds of links to the site’s writing archives. Each story listing provides both the title and description, along with the rating, language, length, and date of publication. Reviews for the story can also be accessed through a link in the story heading and readers are invited to add their own comments.

Open source or freely distributed services are another phenomenon of the digital era. Flegel and Roth (2014) explain that those who participate in the “gift culture” of writing and sharing without the expectation of financial gain do so because they relate so strongly to the characters and worlds of the source text. They added, “media fans who embrace such a stance reflect the culture in which many of their fandoms developed” (p. 1101). In the same way that the world of gamers has its dedicated hackers, the world of literature has its devoted fan fiction writers.

Curwood, Magnifico, and Lammer (2013) identify “self-directed, multifaceted, and dynamic” participation as a hallmarks of online affinity spaces (p.678). Not surprisingly, therefore, there are a number of ways to engage in the Fanfiction.net community. One may participate as a writer, a beta reader, a reviewer, a forum participant, or as an observer.

Writers are invited publish stories to the site and manage their contributions to the archive. Verified membership and agreement with the Fanfiction.net rules and regulations are prerequisites of publication. All content must be rated in accordance with the content rating system used by FictionRatings.com, with options ranging from K for all audiences and MA for mature audiences only. Entries may be listed only once and must conform to specific formatting requirements, for example, one-liners, bloopers, and dialogue scripts are not allowed.

Jenkins, et al (2009) identifies informal mentorship as another identifying feature of participatory culture. In the Fanfiction.net community, the beta reader functions as a volunteer mentor for novice writers. Beta readers are experienced writers who edit “with a critical eye, with the aim of improving grammar, spelling, characterization, and general style of a story prior to its release to the general public” (Fanfiction.net, 2016). In order to qualify as a beta reader, one must have previously published at least five stories or at least 6000 words. Beta readers post a profile and list of literary preferences, which are then used by writers to vet and select the beta reader of their choice.

Story reviewers provide a second, more distributed form of mentoring and feedback for the writers. Any reader can offer a review. Writers have the option to moderate their guest reviews and even block unfriendly reviewers. If, as Burns and Webber (2009) suggest, “the source material on which fan fiction is based” can be called a “canon,” then reviewers often play the role of protectors of the canon. They not only encourage writers’ creativity and effective writing, they also zealously guard the authenticity of characters and settings. The readers/reviewers also wield two other tools for community approbation: “favorite” and “followers”. Favorite is a designation of approval for the story and followers are people who are interested in reading anything the author generates. Both designations appear in the story heading and, as is true in other online social communities, these numbers represent success.

Another expression of fandom (a passionate, shared interest in a particular form of media) is the discussion forums. Volunteer leaders, who recruit their own “staff” members, initiate and maintain these discussion boards. In 2010, FFN Research reported that there were 5259 fandoms on fanfiction.net and that approximately 50 people were involved in each in some capacity (Fanfiction.net, 2010, para. 11). Private messaging for members is an additional feature that supports all aspects of Fanfiction.net community life.

Where there are leaders, there are also followers. Fanfiction.net offers the general public the opportunity to connect via Facebook, Twitter, and blog posts. The material on the website is viewable as a non-participant, as well. Fanfiction.net is a community that encourages all levels of participation from active involvement to what Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) defines as the legitimate peripheral participation of the lurker.

A strong ethos is the unifying thread for members navigating from the core to the periphery and everywhere in between. It can found in the guidelines and explicit requirements for participants. Quality, respect, and protection of its most vulnerable members are three of its most evident points.

While Fanfiction.net is reflective of the type of “informal, bottom-up (participatory) culture that exists and has developed independently” of schools and publishing companies, all writers are expected to present their work in a professional format (Balling & Kann-Christensen, 2013, p. 69). Additionally, there is the expectation that writers, editors, and reviewers will practice self-efficacy and self-regulation. Members are expected to respect and support one another. Writers are instructed to respect the effort and contribution of the reviewers; even if the review is critical. They are encouraged to “take it as a compliment that the reviewer has opted to spend his/her valuable time to help improve your writing” (Fanfiction.net Community Etiquette, 2016, para. 2). Respect also extends beyond the community. Fanfiction.net expressly asks its members to respect the wishes of a dozen popular writers (as listed on the story guidelines page) who have asked that their work not be used for fanfiction.

Strict compliance with the content ratings system and adherence to the rule that all publicly viewable material must be rated K – for all audiences - are evidence that the community recognizes the presence of younger teens in their midst and is committed to maintaining an appropriate environment for them. In fact, a 2010 analysis of membership showed that 80% of Fanfiction.net members were between the ages of 13 and 17 (FFN Research, 2011, para. 29). Given the 21st Century teen’s well-documented propensity for online activity and the types of juvenile –friendly media favored in Fanfiction.net, it is not surprising that Fanfiction.net is largely a community of teens.

The observable activity within the website is posting, editing, critiquing, and archiving written works, as well as participating in discussion forums. Research, in the form of consuming various forms of popular culture, and writing are off-line activities. The relationship between the online and offline activity is symbiotic – both are essential.

For Fanfiction.net writers, technology mediates a connection with “a passionate, public (and global) audience”(Curwood, Magnifico, and Lammers, 2013, p. 678). It helps to take a lone enterprise and convert it to a tool for social connection, with the added benefits of free editing and mentoring. Finally, it provides visibility, which over time may assist the amateur “to turn professional by using their fan writings as evidence of commercial potential” (Lee, 2013, p. 192). Such is the power of participation in cultural production using technology.

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