

# The Archive of Our Own and the Stakes of Publishing Fanfiction

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# Abstract

The Archive of Our Own (AO3) is the dominant platform for publishing fanfiction in the Western world. Launched in 2009, as of 2020 it has a registered userbase of just over three million and hosts almost seven million works. Built by and for fans, AO3 is non-profit and non-commercial, with a core of ideological values that add to its excellent reputation among fans. It has been successful in building its brand, attracting devoted users and winning recognition outwith fandom, most notably in 2019 when it won the Hugo Award for ‘Best Related Work.’

Utilising an observation-based, digital ethnographic approach combined with a Bourdieusian framework, this thesis aims to establish how AO3 has succeeded in and surpassed its initial goal to become a community-controlled haven for fans and their works, developing into a celebrated, influential repository for fanfic. It examines the impact AO3 has had on the stakes of publishing fanfic, placing the site and its users at the centre of debates over issues such as free digital labour, the blurring of boundaries between audiences and media creators, and the politics of free speech online. The thesis argues that while AO3 is popularly seen as an indisputable good for the fanfiction community, its particular set of values has shaped the priorities of that community in ways that are not always beneficial, often as a result of a refusal or inability to adapt to changing needs amongst its users. The thesis gives insight into the culture and community surrounding AO3 and seeks to establish what sets it apart from other fanfiction platforms. In doing so, it demonstrates that the act of publishing fanfiction is not simply a pleasant pastime shared by a community of friends but also represents a struggle for economic, cultural and social capital.

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# Introduction

On the morning of New Year's Day 2016, I finished watching the final episode of a favourite television show. By the time the evening came around, I had been thinking about the story's ending on-and-off all day and found myself idly googling for information about what might have happened to the characters afterwards. Many of the results directed me to a website called the Archive of Our Own (colloquially known, I later discovered, as AO3), which houses a large collection of fanfiction (stories based on pre-existing literary and media properties, and/or on well-known figures such as actors, musicians and politicians). Having not been directly involved with fanfiction since the late 1990s (as I discuss in the Methodology), I clicked on one of these results with some trepidation, unsure if I would find something to scratch the itch for more of the storyworld I loved. Several hours of immersive reading later, I had not only happily consumed a large number of 'fics' (short for fanfiction) but had also discovered a reading and writing community that would become central to my life, providing a seemingly-endless well of reading material and reigniting my own interest in writing fiction.

I had also, as it turned out, discovered a fascinating platform for online fiction publishing, AO3 not merely some faceless virtual space but one with its own culture, conventions and ideals. Not only that, but a platform that appeared to be very highly regarded within the community I was re-entering. My stumbling onto AO3 in search of narrative satisfaction had in fact provided an object of interest to me as a publishing studies researcher and ultimately proved so interesting as to become the focus of this thesis.

Utilising the results of an extended digital ethnographic study of both AO3 and fan-popular social media site Tumblr, this thesis considers what factors have allowed AO3 to rise to its current dominance as a platform for publishing fanfiction. It then examines how AO3's status and influence have affected the stakes of publishing fic, focusing on the centrality of three forms of capital in the fanfic community: economic, cultural and social. In the section below I provide a history of AO3, the circumstances of its conception and its rise to become the main platform for publishing fic.

## A History of AO3

Since its public launch in 2009, AO3 has grown steadily into a dominant force in the fanfiction community, with 2019 containing some of the most significant developments in

its existence. In July the Archive reached the milestones of two million registered users and five million posted fanworks<sup>1</sup> (since surpassed with six million works in May 2020<sup>2</sup> and three million users in November 2020<sup>3</sup>), while in August it won the Hugo Award for Best Related Work,<sup>4</sup> the first time any project of the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW, parent body of AO3) has been awarded or nominated for a Hugo, AO3 having missed out on a nomination in the previous year by a single vote.<sup>5</sup> Combined with a spate of positive attention in the mainstream media – including one high-profile article from June 2019 in *WIRED* magazine hailing the Archive’s information system (the organisation of its metadata) as better than that of tech companies or professional libraries<sup>6</sup> – AO3’s reputation, both within and outwith fandom, has never been higher. Moreover, in the wake of the Archive’s Hugo win, numerous writers have suggested this may represent a turning point, not just in the site’s status but that of fanfic as a marginal and maligned form of writing.<sup>7</sup>

The current high point of AO3’s status is in stark contrast to the environment that prompted its creation. In the mid-2000s, the fanfiction community weathered some difficult events, as external forces threatened to restrict or destroy its practices. Arguably the most notorious of these was the launch of FanLib, a pan-fandom (i.e. accepting material from all fandoms) fic archive that attempted to monetise the user-generated content (UGC) submitted to it by fan writers by partnering with intellectual property (IP) owners (including publisher Simon & Schuster and television network Showtime<sup>8</sup>) for promotional purposes. Operating between 2007-8, along with its fanfic archive FanLib hosted a fan forum and ran contests sponsored by media properties, including *Star Trek*, *Battlestar Galactica* and then-popular shows *Weeds* and *Dexter*. In the year it was active, it had some success in procuring members – by August 2008, the time of the announcement

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<sup>1</sup> ‘AO3 Reaches 5 Million Fanworks!’

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Archive of Our Own Hits Six Million Posted Works!’

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Archive of Our Own Reaches Three Million Registered Users!’

<sup>4</sup> ‘AO3 Wins 2019 Hugo Award for Best Related Work’.

<sup>5</sup> nwhyte, ‘The 2018 Hugo Awards in Detail’.

<sup>6</sup> McCulloch, ‘Fans Are Better Than Tech At Organizing Information Online’.

<sup>7</sup> Chamberlain, ‘Fan Fiction Was Just as Sexual in the 1700s as It Is Today’; Jenkins, ‘“Art Happens Not in Isolation, But in Community”: The Collective Literacies of Media Fandom’; Rowland, ‘Fanfiction: The Infinite Free Buffet’; Bambury, ‘Why a Hugo Nomination for Fan Fiction Website AO3 Is a Win for Nerds of All Stripes’; Hale-Stern, ‘Everyone Who Contributed to Fanfiction Site “Archive of Our Own” Is Now a Hugo Award Winner’; Romano, ‘The Archive of Our Own Just Won a Hugo. That’s Huge for Fanfiction’; Fiesler, ‘Why Archive of Our Own’s Surprise Hugo Nomination Is Such a Big Deal’; Puc, ‘Why Archive Of Our Own’s Hugo Win Is so Important for Fandom’.

<sup>8</sup> Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*, 117.

it was to close, it had 25,000 of them<sup>9</sup> – but it also experienced a major backlash from much of the fan community.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than a supportive, safe environment for fan writers, FanLib was seen by many as the creation of a group of opportunistic businessmen who aimed to take advantage of the fanfic community. Fans felt they were at risk of being exploited by commercially-focused interlopers, particularly given that submitting fics to FanLib's contests required writers to relinquish their rights to the work, which could then be used for commercial purposes.<sup>11</sup> This feeling was only exacerbated by the division along gender lines between FanLib and fandom – while FanLib was run by men, transformative fandom (the subgroup of fandom which produces creative works based on originary texts) has long conceptualised itself as broadly driven and populated by women.<sup>12</sup> As academic and self-proclaimed fan Henry Jenkins put it: 'Fans were going to take all of the risks; the company was going to make all of the profits, all for the gift of providing a central portal where fans could go to read the "best" fan fiction as evaluated by a board of male corporate executives.'<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Jenkins points out the invasive nature of the company, which set itself up as the arbiter of what constituted quality in fanfiction, without any regard for the history and established standards of its culture.

Ultimately, FanLib was bought out and immediately shut down by Disney in August 2008, just over a year after its launch, its new owners only interested in acquiring the site's proprietary software<sup>14</sup> (later building Take180, a website featuring 'shows made with audience participation'<sup>15</sup> using the bones of FanLib's platform<sup>16</sup>) and not in the fanfic archive that was attached. Many of its users were upset by the site's closure,<sup>17</sup> not least because the short time between the closure announcement and the actual deactivation of the site meant that much content was lost<sup>18</sup> (and unrecoverable as the site was not being

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<sup>9</sup> 'Fanlib'.

<sup>10</sup> Hellekson, 'A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture'; De Kosnik, 'Should Fan Fiction Be Free?'; Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*, 117–18.

<sup>11</sup> 'Fanlib'.

<sup>12</sup> Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, 22; Russ, 'Pornography by Women for Women, with Love'; Flegel and Roth, 'Legitimacy, Validity, and Writing for Free: Fan Fiction, Gender, and the Limits of (Unpaid) Creative Labor', 1100–1103; Busse, 'Geek Hierarchies, Boundary Policing, and the Gendering of the Good Fan'; Later, 'The Monstrous Narratives of Transformative Fandom', 330–31.

<sup>13</sup> Jenkins, 'Transforming Fan Culture into User-Generated Content: The Case of FanLib'.

<sup>14</sup> Stewardess, 'What Disney Bought From FanLib'.

<sup>15</sup> 'Take180.Com Marks Official Launch with Three New Original Short-Form Series'.

<sup>16</sup> Stewardess, 'FanLib Founders Dance on Its Zombified Grave: FanLib Became Disney's Take180.'

<sup>17</sup> Whigham, 'Goodbye, Fanlib... we Barely Knew You'; 'Cafe - General Chatter - FanLiB Refugees Forum';

Tagular, 'FANLIB, CLOSED!!!!!!?????'; Tikatu, 'Welcome!'

<sup>18</sup> 'Fanlib'.

archived by any organisations, including the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine,<sup>19</sup> from which it was apparently blocked by FanLib itself<sup>20</sup>). However, others amongst the fan community expressed relief and triumph that the perceived attempt to take advantage of fan writers’ labour had proved unsuccessful.<sup>21</sup> For example, speaking of FanLib in comparison to AO3, Twitter user thisismewhatevs summed up the company’s legacy as follows:

Remember when a bunch of men tried to monetize fanfiction but the majority female writing community said “fuck that” and created a free, open source, incredibly well catalogued database of creative works. Ugh we do not deserve Ao3 but we are GRATEFUL.<sup>22</sup>

The other major area of conflict within mid-2000s fandom concerned LiveJournal, a journaling and social networking site which was a core site of fan activity throughout the 2000s. In 2007, LiveJournal suspended and deleted numerous journals without notice. This was apparently a response to complaints from conservative Christian activist groups – notably one called Warriors for Innocence, which claimed its purpose as ‘hunting monsters on the web’ and ‘hunting pedophiles where they fester’<sup>23</sup> – the suspensions based on their objections to material included in these journals’ interest lists, including pornography, incest, paedophilia and rape.<sup>24</sup> Amongst those suspended were groups whose intentions were far from the glorification or endorsement of these subjects, including book discussion groups, rape survivor groups and adult fanfic groups. The event – known as ‘Strikethrough’ – drew negative reactions from users, enraged not only at LiveJournal’s high-handed tactics, but at the perceived attack on free speech and fandom as a safe space. Typical of the responses at the time was the following blog post by LiveJournal user katiefoolery, published the day after the suspensions took place:

I have always felt safe here... right up until some no-name, non-government-supported, vigilante group tried to make it even “safer”. I don’t feel that sense of safety and homeliness any more. Now I feel as though I should watch what I say; that I should be looking over my shoulder nervously every time I write a

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Wayback Machine’.

<sup>20</sup> Stewardess, ‘Restoring FanLib’s Deleted History’.

<sup>21</sup> Princessofgeeks, ‘Fan.Lib Is Shutting Down’.

<sup>22</sup> @thisismewhatevs, ‘Remember When a Bunch of Men’.

<sup>23</sup> Sues, ‘LiveJournal and Six Apart: It’s Time to Do the Right Thing’.

<sup>24</sup> Jardin, ‘LJ Purges Incest, Slash Fic under Pressure from Self-Appointed “Warriors”’; McCullagh, ‘Mass Deletion Sparks LiveJournal Revolt’.

post or a comment. I've even removed some of my interests out of paranoia.\*

Oh, I added one, too: free speech. [...]

\* And who wouldn't be paranoid when there are rumours abounding that simply listing an interest in certain mangas is enough to get your journal deleted?<sup>25</sup>

The sense of not just personal but also ideological betrayal in this post is characteristic of LiveJournal users' responses to Strikethrough, with the site no longer representing a safe space in which users could freely express and exchange interests and opinions. Specifically, for many fannish users, this heavy-handed gatekeeping represented a fundamental misalignment between LiveJournal's operational principles and ideals such as free speech and opposition to censorship (discussed in more detail in Chapter Four), making it unfit as a hub for fan activity. This impression was strengthened a few months later when, in August 2007, a second round of suspensions – known as 'Boldthrough' – occurred, further diminishing user trust in the platform and contributing to the growing feeling amongst fans<sup>26</sup> that having to rely on commercial corporations for their sites of activity would only continue to result in unacceptable ideological compromise.

The idea for AO3 grew out of and was developed during this period of conflict, with fan creators and particularly writers realising there was a need for a non-commercial space in which their works would be protected from external influences and threats. Indeed, AO3 was launched as a direct response to FanLib (and not to Strikethrough, as some fans believe,<sup>27</sup> though both it and Boldthrough increased the sense of urgency for the establishment of such a site and influenced the development and design of the Archive), the backlash to which led to the proposal that a true fandom archive would need to be built by those involved with fannish activities at the ground level. This can be seen in the following excerpt from the original LiveJournal post proposing the initiative by prominent fan author astolat:

we are sitting quietly by the fireside, creating piles and piles of content around us, and other people are going to look at that and see an opportunity. And they are going to end up creating the

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<sup>25</sup> katiefoolery, 'Correspondence'.

<sup>26</sup> Romano, 'The Demise of a Social Media Platform: Tracking LiveJournal's Decline'; 'Strikethrough and Boldthrough'; Freund, "'Becoming a Part of the Storytelling': Fan Vidding Practices and Histories', 218.

<sup>27</sup> systlin, 'Shit like the Great Purges'; nevermindirah, 'Shout-out to My Fellow Fandom Olds'; wrangletangle, 'A Few Corrections'.

front doors that new fanfic writers walk through, unless we stand up and build our OWN front door.<sup>28</sup>

With the rallying cry of ‘Own the Servers!’<sup>29</sup> AO3’s founders drew on the existing skills to be found within the fan community itself, inviting those with experience in coding, designing and project management to contribute to the construction of the archive.

The result was a stable and increasingly well-regarded site, specifically designed to be aligned with fannish beliefs and practices. Moreover, from its inception, the OTW was designed to defend fan creators against attacks from those outside fandom and to advocate for the legitimacy and legality of fan works and culture. Meanwhile, AO3 was set up as a safe space for authors to host their works, with the goal to ‘provide a noncommercial and nonprofit central hosting place for fanfic and other transformative fanworks [creative works based on source texts, that add something new via imaginative and creative effort], where these can be sheltered by the advocacy of the OTW and take advantage of the OTW’s work in articulating the case for the legality and social value of these works.’<sup>30</sup> In combining an insider position with a protective outlook and non-commercial policies, AO3 has steadily grown its status within the fanfic community, building up a significant amount of capital in a variety of forms, and a reputation approaching unimpeachability (though, as discussed throughout this thesis, this reputation disguises a number of serious issues with AO3’s policies and governance, as for instance in Chapter Four’s discussion of how the site handles sensitive and offensive content).

Arguably the incompatibility between fanfiction and corporate culture has been borne out by the success of AO3’s non-commercial stance versus the failure of Amazon’s attempt at monetising fanfiction, Kindle Worlds, which sought to facilitate legal commercial fanfic via a licensing scheme. Launched in 2013 with licenses available for several high-profile and fan-friendly properties including *The Vampire Diaries* and *Veronica Mars*, it quickly became clear that the limits of Amazon’s scheme were far from conducive to successfully recruiting fan authors. The site was criticised by many commentators for being an attempt to exploit fan writers,<sup>31</sup> especially for its severe copyright policy, which, like FanLib, required the scheme’s writers to surrender their rights

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<sup>28</sup> astolat, ‘An Archive Of One’s Own’.

<sup>29</sup> Lothian, ‘Archival Anarchies: Online Fandom, Subcultural Conservation, and the Transformative Work of Digital Ephemerata’, 547.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Frequently Asked Questions’, Section: Archive of Our Own.

<sup>31</sup> Robertson, ‘How Amazon’s Commercial Fan Fiction Misses the Point’; Stanfill, ‘Kindle Worlds, Part 1: The Economic Raw Deal’; liviapenn, ‘Two Really Good Reasons Why Kindle Worlds Is Bullshit’; Baker, ‘The Fifty Shades Factor: Amazon Gives Fanfic Authors A Shot At A Publishing Payday With Kindle Worlds’.

to any original elements within the stories submitted – a policy which author and then-president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America John Scalzi branded as Amazon ‘actively exploiting [fannish] love for their corporate gain and throwing [fan writers] a few coins for your trouble.’<sup>32</sup> Moreover, its limitations on content – both pornography and crossovers between storyworlds were banned – set restrictions on some of the most characteristic elements of fanfic, as well as positioning it as the ideological opposite of fanfic’s ‘anything goes’ emphasis on creative and expressive freedom. Combined with the site’s inability to offer anything like the breadth of fandoms fans were used to finding and creating content for – Kindle World’s range of licenses remained under a hundred at the time of its closure, compared to the 40,000-plus fandoms indexed by AO3 as of December 2020 – this led to the low-key shuttering of the scheme in May 2018.<sup>33</sup> The failure of Amazon’s project emphasises how vital it is for there to be at least some compatibility between fannish ideals and those of the platforms used for fan activity, and suggests that AO3’s position as coming from within fandom is key to its ongoing success.

The aim of this thesis is to establish how AO3 has succeeded and surpassed its initial goal to become a community-controlled haven for fans and their works, developing into a celebrated, influential repository for fanfic where the approach taken by such a powerful force as Amazon failed. It examines the impact AO3’s ascension to dominant fanfiction platform during the 2010s has had on the stakes of publishing fanfic, placing the site and its users at the centre of debates over issues such as free digital labour, the blurring of boundaries between audiences and media creators, and the politics of free speech online. Utilising an observation-based, digital ethnographic approach as described in the Methodology, combined with a Bourdieusian framework established in the Literature Review, the study gives insight into the culture and community surrounding AO3 and seeks to establish what sets it apart from other fanfiction platforms.

The remainder of this introduction details the research questions that have guided this thesis and gives an outline of each of its chapters.

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<sup>32</sup> Scalzi, ‘Amazon’s Kindle Worlds: Instant Thoughts’.

<sup>33</sup> Hoffelder, ‘Amazon to Shut Down Kindle Worlds’.

## Research Questions and Thesis Structure

In his book on the rise of the awards industry in literature and the arts, *The Economy of Prestige*, English remarks that, ‘certain developments in the *institutional* framework of literature and culture, in particular those relating to prizes and awards, have shaped the *specific* forms and valences of cultural competition over the past century.’<sup>34</sup> The aim of this thesis is to argue a similar point for the rise of AO3 in fanfiction culture, proposing that this site has had a significant effect on the ‘forms and valences’ of publishing fanfic. In order to do so, the study focuses on AO3 as the dominant publishing platform for the contemporary online fanfiction community, as well as a central hub of fan activity both practically and ideologically. The main aim of the work is therefore to understand how AO3 has developed its position and reputation within the fan community and how its rise to dominance has affected the stakes (i.e. the most-pursued forms of capital) involved in publishing fanfiction.

In order to meet this aim, I have developed a number of research questions that have guided the shape and progression of this study and which are answered in the body of the thesis. The primary research question, which overarches the entire thesis, is:

- RQ 1: How has AO3’s high status as a fanfiction platform, in combination with its positioning as a mouthpiece for the fan community, affected the stakes of publishing fanfic both for AO3’s users and for the site itself?

In addition, in order to break this question into manageable parts and to drill down into its particulars, the thesis also addresses the following smaller questions within its individual chapters:

- RQ 2: How has AO3 built its status and prestige (respectively defined here as one’s relative position and reputation in the social hierarchy of a field, and respect and admiration based on one’s achievements as perceived by other actors within a field<sup>35</sup>) within the fanfiction community?
  - RQ 2a – Sub-question: What does AO3 offer to its users that makes it more attractive than other similar platforms?

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<sup>34</sup> English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, 249–50. Emphasis in original.

<sup>35</sup> Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 7–8.

- RQ 3: What effect does AO3's promotion of gift economy ideals have on the economic stakes of publishing fanfiction?
- RQ 4: Is AO3's aim to legitimise fanfiction, both legally and culturally, a boon or a threat to the fanfiction community?
  - RQ 4a – Sub-question: What does the fanfiction community stand to gain and/or lose by becoming more visible to mainstream culture?
- RQ 5 – As a community-focused project, how is social capital distributed amongst the AO3 community and what impact does this have on AO3's symbolic capital?

This thesis is divided into four main chapters, preceded by a literature review and methodology, and ending with a conclusion which discusses its findings and contribution to knowledge and suggests possible directions for future research. The following section gives an overview of the central structure of the thesis and the four chapters that form its core, in relation to the research questions set out above.

## Chapter One: AO3's Forms of Capital

This chapter focuses on my second set of research questions, examining how AO3 has come to achieve its dominant position in the fanfiction community. Influenced by Bourdieu's theory of capital I consider the assets AO3 has to offer its users and document how the close relationship between the site's various forms of capital and AO3/the OTW's stated core values is key to its reputation, each form also contributing to AO3's prestige and reputation i.e. its cache of symbolic capital. Setting out five forms of capital as central to AO3 – economic, human, legal, creative and social – I demonstrate how AO3's stockpile of each form has been built in ways that adhere to and promote its core values, thereby also contributing to its symbolic capital as perceived by its users. Finally, I examine an instance of this symbolic capital in action – AO3's emergence as a hub for the fanfic community during the Tumblr purges of 2018 – in order to demonstrate the status and influence AO3 has come to wield and that has allowed it to influence the stakes of publishing fanfiction.

## Chapter Two: Economic Stakes

Following on from Chapter One's discussion of AO3's economic capital, this chapter turns to my third set of research questions, focusing on alternative economies within the fanfiction community and the role of feedback therein. Beginning with the traditional concept of fanfiction as a gift economy, I argue that while this idea works in theory, in practice there is far more emphasis on reward in return for labour in the AO3 community than is compliant with a gifting model. Instead, I propose that fanfiction may be better understood as a combination of affective and attention economies, with a specific focus on positive feedback as the stake at stake amongst AO3's community. In addition, the chapter examines how the incompatibility between a gift economy and a feedback-based economy leads to problems within the reader/writer relationship, suggesting a generational divide, underlined by the influence of older fans within AO3/the OTW's governing structure and the rise of platforms such as Patreon which facilitate monetisation of fanfic, may be to blame for this growing issue.

## Chapter Three: Cultural Stakes

Returning to AO3 and the OTW's work in advocating for the legality of non-commercial fanfiction, this chapter examines how their emphasis on the creative value of transformative works sets the groundwork for a viable cultural role for fanfic. Beginning by exploring why the fanfic community has lagged behind other fan groups in gaining cultural capital, I then demonstrate how the OTW's advocacy for the legality of transformative works has allowed fic writers and readers to become more confident in insisting their work has cultural value. I also explore how this shift in attitudes can be seen on the industry side of the fan/producer relationship, producers and creators becoming more aware of the value of transformative fans. Focusing particularly on the portrayal of fans and authorship in the television show *Supernatural*, the chapter considers how the perception of fic writers has begun to change (albeit slowly), from an image of oversexed, obsessive fangirls, to a recognition of the craft and effort involved in creating transformative works. However, I also demonstrate the fragility of fanfic's cultural capital, focusing on AO3's groundbreaking win at the 2019 Hugo Awards and the resulting debate regarding the OTW's mission to legitimise fanfiction and how that goal might clash with both the literary establishment and the fan community. Bringing in my fourth set of research questions, I consider the future for both AO3 and the fanfic community through the lens of continued

movement towards mainstream acceptance and how that might affect the relationship between AO3 and its users, the site's role as advocate and mouthpiece for the fan community, and fanfic as a publishing field.

## Chapter Four: Social Stakes

The final chapter examines AO3 as a social space in which fanfic writers and readers meet and interact, and how the subtle existence of social hierarchies in both its community and governance provokes debates on free speech, censorship, and inclusivity. In this chapter I examine the idea of AO3 as a safe space in relation to two of its core values – maximum free speech and maximum inclusiveness – suggesting it may not be possible to deliver both on the same platform and that, more importantly, AO3 may be causing harm by suggesting that it can. In order to illustrate this issue, I examine how AO3's highly permissive content policy reflects and emphasises the low social capital afforded to people of colour within fandom and fan studies, making already-marginalised users feel disenfranchised within the AO3 community. I then discuss how AO3's vagueness regarding its commitment to free speech versus inclusivity leaves it and its users vulnerable to attacks by culture warriors who object to the idea of a supposedly safe space hosting taboo content, further harming AO3's social and symbolic capital and disrupting good-faith discussions regarding content moderation. In doing so I ask how social capital dictates who is included in the 'Our' of Archive of Our Own, if AO3's maximum free speech policy obstructs its ability to be truly inclusive, and if its prevarication in dealing with these issues threatens its symbolic capital within the fic community.

# Literature Review

## Introduction

Having established the focus of this thesis in the Introduction, this chapter presents and reviews a number of key theoretical concepts the main body of the thesis draws on, outlining its interdisciplinary location between Publishing Studies (PS) and Fan Studies (FS). Beginning by establishing a multifaceted definition of fanfiction (containing within it a definition of publishing as it applies to this research), I then proceed to draw out the parallels between PS and FS, focusing on the common ground between the two disciplines and the research in both fields the thesis draws on. This includes Bourdieu's theory of fields, a strong influence on both PS and FS, and the chapter concludes with an outline of the Bourdieusian framework that underpins the thesis and draws its two disciplines together.

## Defining Fanfiction

In 2017, fannish podcast *Fansplaining* (hosted by fandom journalist Elizabeth Minkel and industry-fandom consultant Flourish Klink) ran a survey amongst the fan community in order to 'help us come to a collective definition of what "fanfiction" means.'<sup>36</sup> While, as predicted by Minkel and Klink themselves, the survey did not result in a single, distinct definition of fanfic, the two features respondents most often singled out as inherent to the form were that fic is derivative of another work and is written by and for fans.<sup>37</sup>

These two elements also recur throughout academic and media definitions of fanfiction, which, while multitudinous,<sup>38</sup> do not necessarily vary all that much. Fan studies scholar Rukmini Pande, for example, provides the following elegant definition which includes both points and adds a third, that fanfic is non-commercial: 'Fanworks, including fanfiction and fanart, are created by fans who are invested in the source material. They seek to expand the narrative universe and share their personal creations with other fans for free.'<sup>39</sup> My own definition, as used throughout the thesis, similarly draws on these elements:

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<sup>36</sup> Klink, 'Towards a Definition of "Fanfiction"'

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Pimenova, 'Fan Fiction: Between Text, Conversation, and Game'; Thomas, 'What Is Fanfiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things About It?'; Minkel, 'What Is Fanfiction, Anyway?'; Milli and Bamman, 'Beyond Canonical Texts: A Computational Analysis of Fanfiction'.

<sup>39</sup> Pande, 'Explainer: What Is Fanfiction?'

fanfiction is primarily text-based storytelling that transforms an existing work or works, which is created within a fan community and published non-commercially. Each of the elements of this definition provides a focus for Chapters Two-Four of this thesis: Chapter Two deals with fanfic's non-commercial traditions; Chapter Three examines how fic's transformative nature gives it a valuable cultural function; and Chapter Four focuses on AO3 as a social space. In the following sections I work through the individual elements of this definition, beginning with the idea of fanfiction as being non-commercially published.

## Fanfic and Non-Commerciality

Francesca Coppa, one of the founding members of AO3 and the OTW, claims that being 'created outside of the literary marketplace'<sup>40</sup> is one of the defining characteristics of fanfiction, which 'reminds us that storytelling isn't a professional activity, but a human one in which originality and publishability is rarely the point.'<sup>41</sup> Given her involvement with AO3 and the OTW, it is perhaps unsurprising that Coppa uses her definition to separate fanfic from economic capital. However, it also serves to place fanfic in a specific cultural and social space as well: culturally, as an outsider form of writing, fanfic can afford to do things that commercially-published fiction cannot, 'routinely defying commercial norms in terms of theme, length, genre, and style'<sup>42</sup>; socially, meanwhile, the fanfic writer is always an amateur, creating fanfic 'for fun (and for free)'<sup>43</sup> even when they get paid for other forms of writing. Fundamentally, then, Coppa distinguishes fanfic as being 'outside the literary marketplace' because of its prioritisation of self-expression over payment: 'most fanfiction writers write for love rather than for money, and to their own specifications rather than the market's.'<sup>44</sup> The implications of this distinction for AO3 and its users, as it becomes ever more visible as the public face of fanfiction, are discussed throughout this thesis, particularly in Chapters Two and Three.

In her 2014 article focusing on *Harry Potter* fanfiction – which Coppa draws on in her definition<sup>45</sup> – Tosenberger suggests fanfiction is essentially 'unpublishable'<sup>46</sup> in its true form. Using her concept of fanfic as 'recursive' literature, defined as 'any text that partakes

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<sup>40</sup> Coppa, *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>46</sup> Tosenberger, 'Mature Poets Steal: Children's Literature and the Unpublishability of Fanfiction', 4.

explicitly and extensively of a specific, identifiable, preexisting story,<sup>47</sup> Tosenberger argues that fanfic requires such a depth of knowledge and engagement with both the source material and the fandom community surrounding it that to remove it from that context would be at very least to diminish it, if not to render it utterly nonsensical. Moreover, in order for fanfic to be published in a traditional manner – i.e. by going through a publishing house with the end result of a professionally edited, produced and marketed book being sold to the public – she argues it must go through such extensive alterations as to render it no longer fanfiction at all. Citing the example of 2011 novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (FSoG), which began as fanfic of the *Twilight* series and crossed over to traditional publishing to become a bestseller and cultural talking point, Tosenberger points out that everything identifying FSoG as fanfiction had to be scrubbed from it before it could be published (a process known in fandom circles as ‘filing off the serial numbers’). She therefore defines fanfiction specifically as, ‘recursive literature that, whether out of preference or necessity, circulates outside of the “official” institutional setting of commercial publishing.’<sup>48</sup>

While Tosenberger’s argument is compelling, particularly in its enthusiasm for the strange and outré aspects of fanfic, this thesis nevertheless proposes that while fanfiction may not be publishable via traditional means, it is still viable and valuable to examine it – and the platforms through which it is disseminated – through a publishing studies lens. Take, for example, the most ‘liked’ fic on AO3, a 1,308 word story<sup>49</sup> composed entirely – title included – of the three words ‘I am Groot,’ in reference to the only words spoken by Marvel Comics character Groot from *Guardians of the Galaxy*.<sup>50</sup> Possessed of more than half as many likes again as the next most-popular fic (88,326 compared to 55,528, as of 21/12/20), this text is as meticulously constructed as any other work of fanfiction might be, complete with summary, author’s note, and properly constructed sentences and paragraphs. The author also goes out of their way to use numerous forms of textual formatting, including strikethrough, blockquote, a numbered list and even a horizontal line to suggest a scene-change midway through the story. This implies a level of thought and effort beyond the simple impulse to elicit a cheap laugh or to troll readers fooled by the provocative summary, which bills it as an ‘EXTREMELY NSFW [Not Safe For Work] fic told from the perspective of Groot,’ an entirely typical-sounding premise for a work of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 14. Emphasis in original.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 16. Emphasis removed.

<sup>49</sup> sherlocksmyth, ‘I Am Groot’.

<sup>50</sup> Not entirely accurate, as Groot is also capable of the phrase, ‘We are Groot’ and both his earliest and most recent comic book incarnations are capable of a full range of speech (see: Raymond, ‘Groot Gets a Major Change From Marvel Comics’).

fanfic. Clearly intended as a work of comedy (in addition to the summary, the author's note is a tongue-in-cheek confession that the writer 'Had to take a break halfway through writing this fic because the raw emotion overpowered me'<sup>51</sup>), this fic is essentially a thousand-word in-joke, playing on its intended audience's knowledge of fanfic and AO3's formatting conventions, and that the words 'I am Groot' can mean almost anything.

In many ways 'I Am Groot' perfectly illustrates Tosenberger's argument – it only functions properly within a community that understands both what a fanfic usually looks like (specifically what a fic on AO3 looks like), including its paratextual trappings<sup>52</sup> (the framing material surrounding a text), and a specific character trait within the Marvel universe. Arguably it could not even be altered in the way FSoG was, to produce a text suitable for traditional publication, since to remove it from its context would be to destroy the point of its existence. And yet, within that context, 'I Am Groot' has an audience, a sizeable one, which reads its text and provides its approval (or censure, an issue discussed in detail in Chapter Two). It can be downloaded in a variety of forms, to be read on a variety of devices in the same way as any other ebook might be. It is a textual object, presented to an audience via a platform chosen to amplify<sup>53</sup> its visibility to a large audience, and it represents a contribution not just to the relatively niche culture of fanfiction but (as I argue in more detail in Chapter Three) to the intertextual web surrounding Marvel and its Cinematic Universe. It therefore shares many of the features which mark out a work as having been 'published,' challenging Publishing Studies' traditional definition of the term.

Within PS, definitions of the term 'publishing' vary in expansiveness: Greco, Milliot and Wharton, for example, take an industry-focused view, stating that 'publishing has been, is, and is likely to remain a business, albeit a business that supplies readers with printed or electronic books that educate, inform, and entertain.'<sup>54</sup> Baker, Brien and Webb, meanwhile, propose a much broader framing of publishing 'as a communicative art that connects readers with writers [and] as a series of social and cultural practices.'<sup>55</sup> Bhaskar and Phillips' definition aims at a middle ground between these, which echoes 'the colloquial use and understanding of the term'<sup>56</sup> as referring specifically to the book publishing industry. This, they continue, leads them to a definition of publishing, as seen from an academic point of

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<sup>51</sup> sherlocksmyth, 'I Am Groot'.

<sup>52</sup> Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*.

<sup>53</sup> Bhaskar, *The Content Machine: Towards a Theory of Publishing from the Printing Press to the Digital Network*, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Greco, Milliot, and Wharton, *The Book Publishing Industry*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> Baker, Brien, and Webb, 'Publishing and Culture: An Introduction', 6.

<sup>56</sup> Phillips and Bhaskar, *The Oxford Handbook of Publishing*, 3.

view, as ‘making books, and making them public, amplifying them, finding and building audiences for them, with everything that entails.’<sup>57</sup> This would seem, on the surface, to disqualify fanfiction as a publishing process, as it does not necessarily entail the making of books in the traditional sense. However, as with the above example of ‘I Am Groot’, I argue that fanfiction can and should be seen as a form of publishing – albeit one that operates outside the processes and networks of traditional commercial publishing. I argue this in part because, as mentioned above, a visit to AO3 can result, via a minor amount of navigation, in the download of a fully-functional ebook (in a variety of formats including EPUB and MOBI) to the user’s device. While not every user of the site may use this method of reading, many preferring to read direct from the site itself (as demonstrated by the prevalence of posts referring to having numerous browser tabs containing AO3 fics open simultaneously<sup>58</sup>), the existence of this facility makes it undeniable that AO3 is in the business of creating and distributing (e)books. In addition, I draw on Bhaskar’s work on self-publication (which the publishing of fanfic arguably constitutes). Bhaskar defines the line between the act of creating and the act of publication thus: ‘Creation is writing, publication is amplifying the writing; that is, it is the process of ensuring people aside from the creator read it.’<sup>59</sup> By providing a platform and the means by which to navigate it in order to find a desired text, AO3’s functioning as publisher in this definition is clear – simply put, AO3 exists to ‘ensure people aside from the creator read it.’ It is to this broader definition of publishing I therefore refer throughout the thesis, viewing a publisher as an entity which actively acts to disseminate works of writing in order to ensure a broader audience reach than the author could manage on their own. As such, while I agree with Coppa and Tosenberger’s definition of fanfiction as works which are published outwith traditional, commercial publishing, I maintain that fanfiction can be and is publishable on platforms such as AO3, which cater for its specific characteristics.

## Fanfic and Intertextuality

The second element of fanfiction I wish to explore throughout the thesis is the treatment of fic as fundamentally intertextual and archival by nature. This is particularly relevant to Chapter Three, which examines fanfic’s role as both response and contribution to the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>58</sup> justmickeyfornow, ‘Fun Fact’; pinkvinyl, ‘Let’s Play a Game’; vociferrari, ‘My Last Braincell’; personintheplace, ‘I Used to Wish’.

<sup>59</sup> Bhaskar, *The Content Machine: Towards a Theory of Publishing from the Printing Press to the Digital Network*, 184.

intertextual web surrounding originary texts, but also relates to the study as a whole which, as stated above, takes a view of fanfic as writing that is published in some form. The following section, therefore, gives an overview of the key material on this theoretical line.

In *Enterprising Women*, anthropologist Bacon-Smith specifically places fanfiction in opposition to the literary canon, comparing the Western literary establishment's prioritisation of originality and uniqueness as the core of literary value with fic writers' recognition that their work 'fits into a structure that includes both the source products and all the fiction that has grown up around them.'<sup>60</sup> While the establishment of the literary canon is skewed to favour works that distinguish and elevate themselves from the general flow of contemporaneous literature, fanfic writers make no effort to separate themselves from the works that surround, influence and inspire them. Rather than uniqueness and originality, relativity and reflexivity are the source of fanfic's literary value, with the author as lone creative voice being overlooked in favour of the community built around the collected texts.

Here, Bacon-Smith seems to be gesturing towards fanfic as a form of intertextuality (and, indeed, specifically invokes the term to explain how fans see units of fiction as 'universes' to be split up, diverged from, or intermingled<sup>61</sup>). The idea of fanfic as a form of intertextuality (the theory that all texts are interconnected and interrelated<sup>62</sup>) is a thread that has appeared repeatedly in academic accounts. For example, Samutina, writing on the subject of alternative universes (AUs) and crossovers (both core features of the fanfic genre), describes fic writers' ability to carry common characteristics and personal interpretations of characters across storyworlds as resulting in 'an intensive and intertextually saturated fictional frame in the equally intensive and saturated space of contemporary culture.'<sup>63</sup> Jenkins, in addition to his 'poacher' metaphor, likens fans to 'cultural nomads'<sup>64</sup> (a term that might best be dropped, given fan studies' issues with structural racism, as discussed in Chapter Four), able to move amongst and between intertextual networks in order to make new narrative interpretations. Stasi and Murdock, meanwhile, both refer to fanfic as palimpsestual,<sup>65</sup> emphasising fanfic's non-hierarchical layering of source text and transformative reworking. And Barenblat compares fanfic to

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<sup>60</sup> Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, 56.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 57–62.

<sup>62</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel'.

<sup>63</sup> Samutina, 'Fan Fiction as World-Building: Transformative Reception in Crossover Writing', 446.

<sup>64</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture (Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition)*, 36–44.

<sup>65</sup> Stasi, 'The Toy Soldiers from Leeds: The Slash Palimpsest'; Murdock, 'Making Fanfic: The (Academic) Tensions of Fan Fiction as Self-Publication', 51.

the Jewish tradition of midrash, ‘exegetical stories that seek to explore and explain idiosyncrasies in our holy texts,’<sup>66</sup> specifically subverting Jenkins’ image of poachers with one that sees fans as ‘respected interpreters.’<sup>67</sup> Just as midrash writers seek to better understand their texts by considering ways to fill gaps (lacunae), resolve contradictions, or draw out subtleties and nuances, so do fic writers seek to make meaning by considering and codifying openings in theirs. Moreover, each tradition creates and maintains a community surrounding it, one built on a cycle of interpretative discussion and writing driven by creativity and communal feedback.

The sheer number of fanfic definitions that invoke its overtly intertextual nature suggests that this is a fundamental part of what distinguishes fanfic from other forms of derivative writing. For the purposes of this thesis, though, there are two intertextuality-influenced theories of fanfiction that I particularly draw on. The first of these is Derecho’s work on archontic literature, which represents one of the most influential examples of this line of thinking. Derived from Derrida’s *Archive Fever*,<sup>68</sup> in which he claims that no archive is ever complete and closed but that all remain permanently open to expansion, and indeed driven by an impulse to continue enlarging itself, Derecho defines archontic writing as sharing that same archival motivation, ‘that tendency toward enlargement and accretion that all archives possess.’<sup>69</sup> In doing so, Derecho situates fanfic as part of a wider, older genre of literature generally referred to as ‘derivative’ or ‘appropriative’ but proposes archontic as her preferred term to describe texts like fanfiction, as they represent not a transgression or a lesser form of writing but a contribution to the originary text’s archive. Moreover, fic is distinguished from other forms of intertextuality by the conscious and overt way in which it is tied to its inspiring text, via paratextual signalling that makes clear what fandom and which characters each individual text is utilising, as for example the fandom tag required when posting works to AO3. For Derecho, then, the value of fanfic is to be found in its teasing out and realisation of the narrative possibilities inherent in any text, its constant pursual of ‘what ifs’ keeping the text and its archive active and vital in ways not open to canon producers.

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<sup>66</sup> Barenblat, ‘Fan Fiction and Midrash: Making Meaning’.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*.

<sup>69</sup> Derecho, ‘Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction’, 147.

Secondly, I draw on the concept of fanfiction as ‘transformative,’<sup>70</sup> the definition preferred by the OTW, which states that fanfic comes under the umbrella of ‘transformative works,’ in that it ‘takes something extant and turns it into something with a new purpose, sensibility, or mode of expression.’<sup>71</sup> Given the OTW’s very deliberate positioning of their fanfic platform as an archive, it is perhaps surprising that this definition focuses more on the idea of fic as creating a new entity from its source materials rather than as an intertextual contribution in the vein of Derecho’s theory. However, considered in the light of the OTW’s mission to advocate for transformative works as legal, it becomes easier to see why this is its preferred definition. As discussed further in Chapters One and Three, the OTW’s emphasis on fanfic as a creative process involving imaginative effort and resulting in a piece of work distinct from the original source is crucial to their point that fanfiction should be allowed under US Fair Use law. By foregrounding the term transformative – a term directly drawn from a US Supreme Court case which ruled in favour of a transformative work as fair use<sup>72</sup> – rather than an academic term, the OTW frames fanfic as an active creative process, focusing on what fic *does* rather than what it is based on. This emphasis on fanfic as an active creative and cultural process, a feature of both its archontic and transformative natures, is a vital element of my definition, particularly in Chapter Three as I examine how AO3 and the OTW have begun to lay the groundwork for fanfic to be reassessed as having a valuable cultural role.

## Fanfic and Community

That fanfic is intertextual might be taken as self-evident. That it is fundamentally community-centred is perhaps less obvious but many would argue<sup>73</sup> just as vital to an understanding of modern fanfiction and not simply as a useful means of delineating between, for example, *The Inferno* and a work of modern media fanfic (the former presumably not written with the aim of entertaining the Virgil fandom, nor produced with

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<sup>70</sup> Schwabach, ‘Fan Works and the Law’; Lewis, Black, and Tomlinson, ‘Let Everyone Play: An Educational Perspective on Why Fan Fiction Is, or Should Be, Legal’; Rosenblatt and Tushnet, ‘Transformative Works: Young Women’s Voices on Fandom and Fair Use’.

<sup>71</sup> ‘Frequently Asked Questions’, sec. Organization for Transformative Works: What do you mean by a transformative work?

<sup>72</sup> ‘Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc., 510 U.S. 569’, 579.

<sup>73</sup> Coppa, *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age*; Busse, ‘My Life Is a WIP on My LJ: Slashing the Slasher and the Reality of Celebrity and Internet Performances’; Busse, ‘Intimate Intertextuality and Performative Fragments in Media Fanfiction’; Stanfill, ‘Fandom, Public, Commons’; Moraine, ‘Fifty Shades of Grey and the Ethics of Fannish Prosumption’; Pimenova, ‘Fan Fiction: Between Text, Conversation, and Game’; Thomas, ‘What Is Fanfiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things About It?’

its enthusiastic encouragement accompanying each new chapter). Busse, for example, cites fanfic as ‘a form of exemplary embedded community writing that may be more (or only) comprehensible when understood in its particular context’<sup>74</sup> and suggests that its ‘raison d’être should be understood on its own terms as a series of personal, if not intimate, textual engagements.’<sup>75</sup> Echoing Tosenberger’s above point that to remove fic from its context risks diminishing or even destroying its meaning, Busse suggests not only that fanfic is inextricably linked to the community it emerges from but that the bonds forged through the connected acts of writing, publishing and reading are a fundamental motivation for and shaping factor in the creation of fic.

Other scholars focus on fanfic as a communal expression of emotion, created out of love (or occasionally hate<sup>76</sup>) for a particular text and sustaining the fic community by sharing that emotion. For example, in discussing the relationship between fan and fanfic, Wilson emphasises the role of pleasure, stating that it is essential to acknowledge the role of ‘the loving reader to whom fan fiction seeks to give pleasure.’<sup>77</sup> She singles out emotional stimulation as one of the major pleasures fanfiction can provide, defining it as an example of ‘affective reception,’<sup>78</sup> a mode of reading focused on the emotional response a text provokes in its readers and the resulting connection between reader and character. Moreover, she makes note of the ‘shared affective community’<sup>79</sup> (also termed ‘feels culture’<sup>80</sup> by Stein) such reading produces, foregrounding the sharing and exploration of emotion both as a means of understanding the text and an important way of bonding readers together. Stein points out how fandom encourages the public celebration of traditionally private emotion, building ‘a sense of an intimate collective, one that is bound together precisely by the processes of shared emotional authorship.’<sup>81</sup> As such, fanfic acts as a space not just for continued emotional connection with ones’ favourite characters but also as a safe space in which to take pleasure in expressing those emotions out loud.

In addition to this affective sharing, community also has a practical role to play in the creation of fanfic. Fanfic is collaborative and heteroglossic by nature – as discussed in Chapter Three, it is constantly in conversation with other stories, creative forms and

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<sup>74</sup> Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*, 141.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>76</sup> Johnson, ‘Fan-Tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom’; Stein, ‘Dissatisfaction and *Glee*: On Emotional Range in Fandom and Feels Culture’, 90–94; Goodman, ‘Disappointing Fans: Fandom, Fictional Theory, and the Death of the Author’.

<sup>77</sup> Wilson, ‘The Role of Affect in Fan Fiction’, para. 1.2.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 1.3.

<sup>80</sup> Stein, *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age*.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

creators – and its community is a key part of this. Just as fic writers themselves are a form of active, participatory audience,<sup>82</sup> so too are fic readers, who contribute to and have direct influence on fics as they are being written and published. For example, Coppa points out that ‘fanfiction is shaped to the literary conventions, expectations, and desires of that community, and is written in genres developed by and in community [... which] are as familiar to fans as the bildungsroman, lyric, tragedy, elegy, and epic are to literary scholars.’<sup>83</sup> The narrative underpinnings specific to fanfiction are developed out of the shared knowledge and preferences of the fic community, making them opaque to outsiders and therefore, as Stein and Busse point out, contributing to the community’s sense of cohesiveness by demarcating the intended readers as those with internal knowledge and understanding.<sup>84</sup> That said, such insiderism can also have a negative effect, making it difficult for newcomers to understand and acclimate to the norms of the fanfic community, potentially undermining the inclusiveness which actors in the fanfiction field – AO3 included<sup>85</sup> – claim as an important community value. As discussed in detail in Chapter Two, AO3’s blurring of the lines between social media affordances and its mission as a publisher and archive of fanfiction can cause particular confusion in this respect, leading to tensions with regards to the expectations of writers and readers using the site and a potential undermining of the sense of community AO3 promotes.

Community also influences the creation of fic on an individual level, with collective authorship common, if not the norm.<sup>86</sup> In particular, since fics are often published as works in progress (WIPs), with chapters being posted individually (whether on a regular schedule or sporadically, depending on the author), authors receive ongoing feedback in the form of comments from readers. As a result, readers can have direct influence on a fic as it is being created, with the result that, according to Thomas, ‘As authorship and reviewing overlap, authorship is (re)constructed to incorporate the activity of responding to comments and advice, while readers are (re)constructed as active participants in the creative process.’<sup>87</sup> This creates a new, shared pattern of authorship as the work is posted and passes from author to reader (as well as placing fanfic within a wider tradition of

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<sup>82</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*; Thomas, ‘What Is Fanfiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things About It?’

<sup>83</sup> Coppa, *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age*, 32–33.

<sup>84</sup> Stein and Busse, ‘Limit Play: Fan Authorship between Source Text, Intertext, and Context’, 189.

<sup>85</sup> ‘You Are Welcome at the Archive of Our Own’; ‘About the OTW’.

<sup>86</sup> Busse and Hellekson, ‘Introduction: Work in Progress’, 13; Kelley, ‘Chocolate Frogs for My Betas!: Practicing Literacy at One Online Fanfiction Website’, 53; Reißmann et al., ‘Fan (Fiction) Acting on Media and the Politics of Appropriation’, 20–21.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas, ‘“Update Soon!”: Harry Potter Fanfiction and Narrative as a Participatory Process’, 211.

shared authorship<sup>88</sup>) and, as Hellekson and Busse put it, ‘a whole new level of discourse begins that provides engagement and both positive and negative feedback (comments, critiques, and letters of comment).’<sup>89</sup>

Such creative contributions can also be viewed as part of the fannish sharing/gift economy (which is discussed at length in Chapters One and Two), readers giving their time and effort for free in the service of improving the quality of works shared with their community. This is particularly visible in the role of beta readers,<sup>90</sup> fans who volunteer to perform editorial or proofreading tasks for fic writers, but all fans are afforded the chance to contribute meaningful feedback in the comments section (provided they follow certain communal rules, which are discussed in Chapter Two). Indeed, it is this kind of networked skill-sharing that AO3 was built from and continues to depend on, not only in terms of the content posted to it but also the all-volunteer staff who run the site (as discussed in Chapter One). Community, therefore, is not only a defining element of fanfic but also of AO3 and consequently a significant focus of this thesis.

While this thesis is focused on fanfiction and therefore draws strongly on previous scholarship in Fan Studies, it also specifically examines fanfic as a publishing field and incorporates Publishing Studies scholarship. The following section outlines how these two disciplines interact within the thesis and reviews some of the key literature that is drawn upon.

## Publishing Studies and Fan Studies

Despite only occasionally overlapping in terms of research,<sup>91</sup> Publishing Studies and Fan Studies share a significant amount of common ground. Both are relatively young disciplines, having emerged in the late twentieth century from a variety of disciplines – PS having roots in, amongst others, book history and literature studies,<sup>92</sup> while FS largely grew

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<sup>88</sup> Gray, ‘When Is the Author?’; Gordon, ‘Comics, Creators and Copyright: On the Ownership of Serial Narratives by Multiple Authors’; Johnson, ‘Participation Is Magic: Collaboration, Authorial Legitimacy, and the Audience Function’; Murray, ‘Authorship’; York, ‘Crowding the Garret: Women’s Collaborative Writing and the Problematics of Space’; Skains, *Digital Authorship: Publishing in the Attention Economy*.

<sup>89</sup> Busse and Hellekson, ‘Introduction: Work in Progress’, 15.

<sup>90</sup> Karpovich, ‘The Audience as Editor: The Role of Beta Readers in Online Fan Fiction Communities’.

<sup>91</sup> Skains, *Digital Authorship: Publishing in the Attention Economy*, 61–82; Toszenberger, ‘Mature Poets Steal: Children’s Literature and the Unpublishability of Fanfiction’; Pecoskie and Hill, ‘Beyond Traditional Publishing Models: An Examination of the Relationships between Authors, Readers, and Publishers’; Coker and Benefiel, ‘Authorizing Authorship: Fan Writers and Resistance to Public Reading’.

<sup>92</sup> Murray, ‘Publishing Studies: Critically Mapping Research in Search of a Discipline’, 3; Mannion and Weber, ‘Discipline and Publish: Disciplinary Boundaries in Publishing Studies’, 183–84; Marsden and Noorda, ‘Twenty-First Century Book Studies: The State of the Discipline’.

out of media and cultural studies.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, this multidisciplinary history has strongly influenced both PS and FS, which have developed into fundamentally interdisciplinary fields which make use of their fuzzy boundaries to add breadth and depth to the types of research carried out under their aegis<sup>94</sup> (although both have also been criticised, for lacking the firm boundaries necessary to guide and support research<sup>95</sup> or for not doing enough to meld disparate disciplines in a meaningful way<sup>96</sup>).

In addition to their similar developmental histories, PS and FS share a number of common research interests – perhaps not surprisingly given their focus on modes of cultural production. In this thesis I aim to draw on these shared interests, particularly with regards to both disciplines’ focus on the production and dissemination of textual products and the communities and cultures that surround them. As such, I focus on three main threads which link PS and FS together: the digital turn in both disciplines, their focus on writing and reading communities, and their perspectives on culture as an industry.

With regard to the first thread, despite their relative youth as disciplines, both PS and FS have witnessed a paradigm-shifting digital turn in the cultures they focus on – for PS the rise of digital publishing<sup>97</sup> and for FS fandom’s move from physical meetups and print zines to online spaces and digital fanworks.<sup>98</sup> PS in particular has focused to a great extent on the effects of digital technology, in response to concerns in the traditional publishing industry over how it might be changed or threatened by developments like ebooks and online self-publishing. Indeed, in 2015 Murray noted that academic work on the predicted ‘death of the book’ had become ‘a passé, almost embarrassingly naïve, inquiry’<sup>99</sup> giving ‘a weary sense that, as a discipline, we have been around this block before.’<sup>100</sup> However, as fears regarding the survival of the publishing industry have receded, so too has PS begun to embrace a more positive, productive line of research concerning digital technology. Such

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<sup>93</sup> Ford, ‘Fan Studies: Grappling with an “Undisciplined” Discipline’.

<sup>94</sup> Mannion and Weber, ‘Discipline and Publish: Disciplinary Boundaries in Publishing Studies’, 195; Baverstock, ‘What Significance Does Publishing Studies Have Right Now?’, 2; Hellekson and Busse, ‘Introduction: Why a Fan Fiction Studies Reader Now?’, 1–2; Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*, 9–10.

<sup>95</sup> Murray, ‘Publishing Studies: Critically Mapping Research in Search of a Discipline’, 4; Evans and Stasi, ‘Desperately Seeking Methods: New Directions in Fan Studies Research’.

<sup>96</sup> Turk, ‘Interdisciplinarity in Fan Studies’.

<sup>97</sup> Phillips, *Turning the Page: The Evolution of the Book*; Bhaskar, *The Content Machine: Towards a Theory of Publishing from the Printing Press to the Digital Network*; Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*; Skains, *Digital Authorship: Publishing in the Attention Economy*; Murray and Squires, ‘The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit’.

<sup>98</sup> Pearson, ‘Fandom in the Digital Era’; Bury, ‘Technology, Fandom and Community in the Second Media Age’.

<sup>99</sup> Murray, ‘Charting the Digital Literary Sphere’, 312.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

works include: Thomas' *Literature and Social Media*, which examines such phenomena as 'Twitterfiction'<sup>101</sup> (literary forms that emerged from Twitter), 'Instapoetry'<sup>102</sup> (short-form poetry published on Instagram) and, indeed, fanfiction,<sup>103</sup> arguing that social media is having a profound impact on the shape of literature, the ways it is created and consumed, and the cultural industry surrounding it; Murray's own *The Digital Literary Sphere*,<sup>104</sup> which explores how the contemporary book world is being shaped by the intersections between print and digital, as well as the internet's fostering of bookish communities, and Skains' *Digital Authorship*,<sup>105</sup> which contends that digital and networked media has minimised the role of the publisher in favour of a more direct relationship between writers and readers.

In this thesis I aim to contribute to this more nuanced and optimistic treatment of the intersection between publishing and digital technology, bringing attention to fanfiction as an understudied form of digital publishing. For example, in *The Digital Literary Sphere*, Murray examines how digital paratexts such as book trailers and online literary festivals function as part of contemporary bookish culture, acting to 'crucially mediate the author-reader encounter' and therefore deserving the same scrutiny as Genette<sup>106</sup> brought to his original study of paratexts.<sup>107</sup> Yet, later in the same volume, Murray suggests that 'digital paratexts are yet to register at the heart of what book historians do,'<sup>108</sup> and that to allow this to continue would be to cede an object worthy of research by book historians/publishing scholars to other 'longer-established and [...] more institutionally secure new humanities disciplines.'<sup>109</sup> This thesis represents a Publishing Studies-orientated project which both examines digital paratexts at length and in detail, and utilises them as a significant research method (as described in the Methodology). Through such approaches I aim to use fanfiction as a canvas on which to examine how digital publishing processes map onto a distinct, non-traditional, online publishing field.

The second thread I draw on is PS and FS's focus on reading and writing communities. As discussed above, this thesis views community as a defining part of modern fanfiction; PS has also focused on such creative communities and how they

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<sup>101</sup> Thomas, *Literature and Social Media*, 49–64.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 87–91.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–33.

<sup>104</sup> Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era*.

<sup>105</sup> Skains, *Digital Authorship: Publishing in the Attention Economy*.

<sup>106</sup> Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*.

<sup>107</sup> Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era*, 21.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

intersect with the publishing ecosystem, with a particular emphasis on how the internet has lowered the barriers to interaction between readers and writers. Murray, for example, introduces the concept of the ‘imagined literary community’<sup>110</sup> – drawing on Anderson’s concept of the ‘imagined community,’<sup>111</sup> also an influential theory within fan studies<sup>112</sup> – to describe how the internet has strengthened social connections between writers and readers, bringing interactions formerly limited to physical meet-ups ‘into the author’s place of creation.’<sup>113</sup> Bold, meanwhile, in her study of the online social writing platform Wattpad (which is discussed in Chapter Two), examines how online communication has facilitated a closer relationship between authors and their readers but often at the expense of publishers, who have struggled to create their own platforms for writing/reading communities,<sup>114</sup> a point echoed by Skains in her concept of the ‘demotic author,’<sup>115</sup> who utilises online platforms to bypass publishers and strengthen their own direct connections to readers, both current and potential.

Laing’s study of how authors use social media brings up the interesting possibility that while authors see the benefits of constructing communities with their readers, these are often characterised by performative, illusory connections rather than true social ties.<sup>116</sup> Instead, it appears that the genuine community arising from authors’ use of social media is one formed of fellow writers<sup>117</sup> who find both emotional and practical support in this serendipitous online community.<sup>118</sup> As Laing puts it, ‘Previous research has found that social networking reduces the distance between performer and audience. The current research however finds that social media reduces the distance between the “performers”’.<sup>119</sup>

In contrast, as discussed in the previous section, fanfiction works as an example of a combined writer/reader community, with AO3 playing host to a significant section of it. Thomas points out that spaces like AO3 provide ‘unprecedented access to the creative process and its reception [through which] we can follow a piece of writing through from

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>111</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities (Revised Edition)*.

<sup>112</sup> Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*; Morimoto and Chin, ‘Reimagining the Imagined Community: Online Media Fandoms in the Age of Global Convergence’.

<sup>113</sup> Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era*, 36.

<sup>114</sup> Ramdarshan Bold, ‘The Return of the Social Author: Negotiating Authority and Influence on Wattpad’, 118.

<sup>115</sup> Skains, *Digital Authorship: Publishing in the Attention Economy*, 2.

<sup>116</sup> Laing, ‘Authors Using Social Media: Layers of Identity and the Online Author Community’, 264. See also: Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era*, 35–51.

<sup>117</sup> Laing, ‘Authors Using Social Media: Layers of Identity and the Online Author Community’, 263.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 263, 265.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 265.

inception to publication and revision, and learn about the strategies writers use to publicise and market their work and to build dedicated readerships.<sup>120</sup> It is my aim to utilise AO3 to demonstrate how a publishing platform can knit a writer/reader community together – in AO3’s case via the strategic promotion of certain ideological values, as discussed in Chapter One – but also how it depends on great delicacy with regards to the distribution of capital throughout that community.

The third connection between PS and FS I draw on is their interest in cultural industries and how publishing and fanfiction straddle the line between creativity and industry. Publishing’s so-called ‘cultural mission’<sup>121</sup> (i.e. the belief that books are special and sacred cultural objects and that the publishing industry has a vital responsibility to ensure their dissemination and preservation) has been much remarked upon.<sup>122</sup> Yet, as Marsden points out, there is a ‘disconnect’<sup>123</sup> between Cultural Industries and PS research, despite the publishing industry’s clear role in the cultural economy.

With this thesis I aim to provide a connection between these two areas, utilising fanfic as a publishing field with strong and complex connections to the culture industry. Influenced by, as discussed below, the Bourdieusian approach of Thompson’s *Merchants of Culture*<sup>124</sup> and English’s *The Economy of Prestige*,<sup>125</sup> the thesis plays on the concept of fanfic as its own, self-contained cultural industry, producing and disseminating creative works to a niche, yet growing and global, audience. As such, it examines not only the cultural stakes of publishing fic (in Chapter Three) but also the economic and social stakes (in Chapters Two and Four respectively), as well as how AO3 operates as a (self-) publishing platform and part of a corporation under the OTW (Chapter One). Moreover, it looks to how fanfic connects to the broader culture industry, investigating how fanfic – as represented by AO3 and its users – has become more mainstream, more market-like, and more widely impactful on society. In particular, Chapter Three examines how the barriers between the fanfic community and the media and cultural industries have begun to shift.

For example, in the intervening years since his foundational 1992 work on fan studies, *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins’ stance has shifted from framing fandom as a resistant

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<sup>120</sup> Thomas, *Literature and Social Media*, 110.

<sup>121</sup> Greco, Milliot, and Wharton, *The Book Publishing Industry*, 1–2.

<sup>122</sup> Oakes, ‘Publishing and Culture: The Alchemy of Ideas’, 99–100; Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 7–8; Bhaskar, *The Content Machine: Towards a Theory of Publishing from the Printing Press to the Digital Network*, 15–16.

<sup>123</sup> Marsden, ‘Positioning Publishing Studies in the Cultural Economy’.

<sup>124</sup> Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*.

<sup>125</sup> English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*.

group aiming to reclaim control from producers and corporations, to a view of fandom as part of a broader participatory culture which is in constant negotiation with ‘The Powers That Be’ (TPTB, a fannish term for any individual with creative or producerial authority over a text<sup>126</sup>) over degrees of power and influence.<sup>127</sup> In *Textual Poachers*’ twentieth-anniversary edition, Jenkins states his belief that a shift from a resistant to a participatory view allows for different and more nuanced questions about the relationship between producers and fans: ‘We are resistant *towards* something and we participate *in* something. So, the first asks us what we are fighting *against*. The second asks us what we are fighting *for* and thus asks us to develop a more nuanced description of the social, legal, and economic relationships within which media consumption now occurs.’<sup>128</sup> Rather than setting up a combative binary between industry and fans, as his early research into fandom did, Jenkins now advocates for seeing fandom as part of a larger media ecosystem, in which fans negotiate for an active and acknowledged role (the shape of which is one of the overarching concerns of this thesis).

Andrejevic goes further, specifically building on Jenkins’ early formulations of fandom as a site of resistant activism by arguing that ‘the binary opposition between complicit passivity and subversive participation needs to be revisited and revised.’<sup>129</sup> He identifies a burgeoning elision between fan activity and industry objectives, the former presenting an opportunity to benefit the latter. Rejecting Jenkins’ metaphor of fans as poachers, Andrejevic instead paints them as fertilisers of the media ecosystem, their freely-given (and freely-taken) labour adding value and encouraging fans to return to and reinvest in the source text.<sup>130</sup> In this way, industry absorbs the potentially-resistant practices of fans and instead redirects them into value-making assets.

Writing a decade later, Stanfill identifies how the shift in industry attitudes Andrejevic describes above has continued as fan culture has become increasingly visible to the mainstream. ‘Fan management,’ according to Stanfill, is now a major part of industrial engagement with audiences, as corporations seek ever more effective ways to harness fans’ passion for their products and convert that interest into profit.<sup>131</sup> Yet, fandom has a history

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<sup>126</sup> ‘The Powers That Be’.

<sup>127</sup> Scott, ‘Textual Poachers, Twenty Years Later: A Conversation between Henry Jenkins and Suzanne Scott’, xxii.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii–xxiii.

<sup>129</sup> Andrejevic, ‘Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans’, 43.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>131</sup> Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*.

of resistance to such management,<sup>132</sup> particularly to restrictions on its creative freedoms, which continues to raise its head despite the OTW's pursuit of mainstream validation for fanfic as a creative pursuit (as demonstrated in Chapter Three's discussion of AO3's Hugo Award win). By examining this tension between fanfic's increasing proximity to mainstream industry and culture, I aim to contribute to the discussion of publishing as part of the culture industry and its role in defining the line between art and commerce.

In addition to these conceptual areas, the other link between PS and FS I draw on in this thesis is the influence of sociologist Bourdieu on both disciplines. The final section of this review sets out the Bourdieusian concepts I draw on and how these are utilised as the theoretical framework for the thesis.

## Bourdieu's Field Theory and the Publishing of Fanfiction

To construct the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis, I draw on the work of sociologist Bourdieu, whose extensive and influential work on the structure of the social world and the power dynamics active within it has provided a useful set of tools for organising this research. The reasoning behind my decision to utilise Bourdieusian concepts such as fields, capital and stakes is twofold. Firstly, such concepts are helpful in attempting to cast fanfiction as a publishing culture and AO3 as a publishing platform, allowing me to conceive of fanfiction as an distinct field and AO3 as a specific element within that field. Secondly, as mentioned above, Bourdieu's theories have a marked presence within both publishing<sup>133</sup> and fan studies,<sup>134</sup> allowing for a common language between the two fields.

In this thesis I draw primarily on three of Bourdieu's sociological concepts: fields, capital and stakes. In the following sections I define each of these concepts and explain how together they are utilised as a framework for the thesis.

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<sup>132</sup> Martens, *The Forever Fandom of Harry Potter*, 46–48, 68–87; Martens, *Publishers, Readers, and Digital Engagement*, 117–22.

<sup>133</sup> English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*; Ramdarshan Bold, 'The Return of the Social Author: Negotiating Authority and Influence on Wattpad'; Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*; Murray, *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation*; Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era*.

<sup>134</sup> Fiske, 'The Cultural Economy of Fandom'; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*; Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*; Williams, 'Good Neighbours? Fan/Producer Relationships and the Broadcasting Field'; Chin, 'It's About Who You Know: Social Capital, Hierarchies and Fandom?'

## Fields

Bourdieu developed his theory of fields in order to understand the structure of social spaces in a fundamentally relational way. Drawing on the scientific notion of fields, in which a field is defined (in its broadest sense) as the delimited vector through which elements interact with each other and are thus changed,<sup>135</sup> Bourdieu sees the social world as being constructed of similar autonomous (or relatively so, at least) areas of human activity, containing their own rules and conventions and held together by shared interests and power relations, which dictate how their participants (both individuals and organisations) behave and interrelate.

Bourdieu frequently uses the metaphor of a game<sup>136</sup> to introduce his concept of fields (albeit with the qualifier that, unlike a game, a field is not deliberately created, nor does it have explicitly codified rules and regulations<sup>137</sup>). In this comparison, the field is the playing field (or pitch, or board) on which the game is played, the players entering this space on the (either explicit or implicit) agreement to play by the rules.<sup>138</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, the playing field of fanfiction publishing constitutes any of the virtual spaces onto which fanfic is posted for the attention of a potential audience, including platforms like Fanfiction.net (FFN), Wattpad, Tumblr and AO3.

As well as the concept of the field, Bourdieu employs the associated ideas of the *habitus*, the *doxa*, and the *illusio*. As Bourdieu utilises it, *habitus* is the term for a person's ingrained, habitual behaviours within a field – their feel for the game – both those they bring with them as a result of previous experiences and those they learn as part of the process of becoming a member of the field.<sup>139</sup> Such behaviours are shaped by the rules and conventions of the particular field being entered into and are not instinctive but must be learned by new entrants. True belonging within a field is marked by the ability to understand and function in sync with the habitus without apparent conscious effort. Moreover, the field cannot function unless its participants are willing to play by its rules,

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<sup>135</sup> Martin and Gregg, 'Was Bourdieu a Field Theorist?', 39–41.

<sup>136</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, 148–50; Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, 10–13; Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 11; Bourdieu, 'The Market of Symbolic Goods', 30; Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 58.

<sup>137</sup> Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 98.

<sup>138</sup> Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 67.

<sup>139</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*; Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*; Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*.

equipped with both a knowledge of the rules of the game being played (the *doxa*<sup>140</sup>) and an investment in the value of playing it (the *illusio*<sup>141</sup>).

As mentioned above, academic accounts have frequently used Bourdieu's theory to construct fandom as a social space. This thesis continues that tradition, specifically conceptualising fanfiction as a publishing field, inspired by *Merchants of Culture*, Thompson's study of the contemporary book publishing industry. Thompson's definition of a field is, 'a structured space of social positions which can be occupied by agents and organizations, and in which the position of any agent or organization depends on the type and quantity of resources or "capital" they have at their disposal.'<sup>142</sup> In this work he proposes that the publishing industry is not one singular field but, in fact, a 'plurality' of them, encompassing such distinct fields as trade publishing, higher education publishing, illustrated art book publishing and so on.<sup>143</sup>

As discussed above, this thesis considers fanfiction to be a publishing field, one that operates outwith the traditional publishing industry but utilises recognisable publishing processes, specifically examining AO3 as the site which best illustrates this. As such, in Chapter One I use Thompson's framework of publishing-specific capital to examine the Archive's role as a fanfiction publisher, demonstrating that the site possesses a similar array of capital as a traditional publisher, albeit in slightly altered forms and configuration. Below I explain how the thesis defines and utilises the concept of capital.

## Capital

According to Bourdieu, capital is a 'set of actually usable resources and powers,'<sup>144</sup> the distribution of which determines one's social class and power within a given field. Wacquant clarifies this definition, stating that 'For Bourdieu, a capital is any resource effective in a given social arena that enables one to appropriate the specific profits arising out of participation and contest in it.'<sup>145</sup> Similarly, in Thompson's definition capital is any asset possessed by or resource available to individuals or organisations, and is what determines power within a field or, in other words, what allows participants in a field to

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<sup>140</sup> Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 68–69; Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 164; Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 73–74.

<sup>141</sup> Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*; Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*; Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*.

<sup>142</sup> Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 3.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>144</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 114.

<sup>145</sup> Wacquant, 'Pierre Bourdieu', 268.

successfully carry out and fulfil their objectives.<sup>146</sup> It also defines the resources a participant can offer potential clients, users, or audiences, whether that be a platform on which to carry out their own operations, or a supply of consumable content. While mindful of these definitions, in this thesis I follow English's treatment of capital in *The Economy of Prestige*, using capital to refer to 'anything that registers as an asset, and can be put profitably to work, in one or another domain of human endeavor.'<sup>147</sup> As such, throughout the thesis I refer to an array of forms of capital, especially in Chapter One, in order to delineate and examine the assets AO3 possesses that make it particularly appealing and successful as a publishing platform for fanfiction. In this I draw on Thompson's identification of five forms of capital that are of particular importance in publishing fields: economic, human, social, intellectual, and symbolic.<sup>148</sup> He proposes that a publishing house requires stores of each of these five types of capital in order to operate successfully, but singles out economic and symbolic capital as being of particular importance in shaping the structure of the publishing industry. This he attributes to the industry's balance of financial and cultural aims, the value of each individual book being measured by a combination of its sales potential and its quality, including its potential for critical and cultural success.

Bourdieu himself conceives of three principle forms of capital: economic, cultural and social, which three forms provide the primary themes for Chapters Two, Three and Four respectively and which I briefly define below.

## Economic Capital

In Bourdieu's work, economic capital is the most materialised of the three forms as it can be understood as the currency of the field in question, able to be converted 'immediately and directly'<sup>149</sup> into money (assuming the field has a money-based economy). However, it can also be understood as a non-material (symbolic) good in systems where no material currency is in play (as with those discussed in the section below on alternative economies). In this thesis I therefore use economic capital both in its traditional sense to refer to financial assets and as a term for any good which is used as remuneration for commodities or services, specifically focusing in Chapter Two on how reader feedback functions as currency in AO3's economy.

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<sup>146</sup> Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 4.

<sup>147</sup> English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, 9.

<sup>148</sup> Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 4–10.

<sup>149</sup> Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', 16.

In Chapter Two I examine the economy that AO3 operates on, arguing that while it is dedicatedly (and necessarily) a non-profit concern, there is nonetheless an exchange economy underpinning the site's activities, in which fanfic is traded for feedback from readers. My argument refers to a number of alternative, money-free economical models – gift economy, attention economy, and affective economy – each of which I briefly introduce below.

### Gift Economy

The first of these models is the gift economy, a concept long associated with fanfiction<sup>150</sup> and one specifically invoked as central to AO3's principles, as discussed further in Chapter One. As described by Mauss, a gift economy is one in which 'contracts are filled and exchanges of goods are made by means of gifts,'<sup>151</sup> which, in theory, are given and reciprocated voluntarily rather than under obligation but are actually governed by complex social rules of reciprocity. Two elements of the gift economy are of particular relevance in this thesis: the social bonds created by gifting; and the tension between voluntary and obligatory reciprocation.

As discussed above, community is a vital and fundamental part of fanfiction and the gift economy model plays a significant role in enforcing social bonds between participants. Hyde describes how gifts form connections both between individuals and within communities:

If we take the synthetic power of gifts, which establish and maintain the bonds of affection between friends, lovers, and comrades, and if we add to these a circulation wider than a binary give-and-take, we shall soon derive society, or at least those societies – family, guild, fraternity, sorority, band, community – that cohere through faithfulness and gratitude.<sup>152</sup>

Thus gift-giving works on a social spectrum, the active formation of bonds at the individual level building stability within communities.

However, such bonds are also dependent on reciprocation, often a fraught subject within concepts of gifting, with varying levels of openness and clarity about what kind of

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<sup>150</sup> De Kosnik, 'Should Fan Fiction Be Free?'; Turk, 'Fan Work: Labor, Worth, and Participation in Fandom's Gift Economy'; Hellekson, 'A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture'; Riley, *Archive of Our Own and the Gift Culture of Fanfiction*.

<sup>151</sup> Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, 1.

<sup>152</sup> Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*, 76.

reciprocation is expected and, indeed, if it should be expected at all as gift economies are framed as functioning outside of exchange models. As Yan points out, the gift economy has at its core an ‘essential ambiguity; that is, gifts are at once free and constraining, self-interested and disinterested, and are motivated by both generosity and calculation or expectation of return.’<sup>153</sup> A gift may be given with no *requirement* for reciprocation but with the desire for or even expectation of it, at the very least in the form of an expression of gratitude, and if no reciprocation is forthcoming this can lead to the breakdown of the social bond the gift is intended to create or maintain.

This is particularly true of gifts which come under the definition of inalienable possessions<sup>154</sup> – goods from which the gifter retains some value even after they have been gifted. Fanfiction as a gift is arguably inalienable from the writer because of the social and symbolic capital gained via an audience’s consumption of and response to the fic. This becomes particularly fraught when the common method of reciprocation is, as with feedback on AO3, not only a signifier of communal acceptance but also fundamentally evaluative, passing judgement on the quality of the writer’s work.

In Chapter Two I examine how AO3’s promotion of gift-economy values and its use of quantifiable forms of feedback causes conflict between writers who increasingly expect and demand reward for their labour in the form of positive feedback, and readers who feel that the voluntary process of reciprocation is increasingly becoming an obligation and a payment for services that are ostensibly offered freely.

### Attention Economy

The second economic model I draw on is that of the attention economy. In 1997, Goldhaber suggested that the economy of the internet would be based not on money but on attention. Reasoning that ‘economies are governed by what is scarce,’<sup>155</sup> he pointed out that the internet’s constant production of a glut of information is driven by competition for the finite resource of human attention, thus creating what he termed the ‘attention economy.’ While Goldhaber’s prediction that this new economy would bring about the fall of large corporations – and ultimately of money itself – has as yet failed to come true, many of his points about the importance of attention in a world influenced by and heavily reliant on the internet have proved to be prescient.

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<sup>153</sup> Yan, ‘The Gift and Gift Economy’, 257–58.

<sup>154</sup> Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions*.

<sup>155</sup> Goldhaber, ‘The Attention Economy and the Net’.

Arguably fanfiction in its contemporary form is a direct (if far smaller and very niche) competitor for the same attention that book publishers seek out, both groups bidding for the attention of readers (with the hope that this attention will result in payment, whether in the form of money or audience feedback, depending on the economic norms of the field, as discussed in Chapter Two). However, as yet, there has been little research done on how fanfiction functions as an attention economy. Skains provides one of the few examples, suggesting that fanfic attracts highly attentive readers who not only confer cultural capital on the writers of the source text but also ‘collective attention capital for the fanfic writers responding creatively to the source text.’<sup>156</sup> However, Skains focuses largely on fanfic’s attention capital as rendering it attractive to the media and publishing industries – using, for example, crossover texts such as FSoG and *After* as examples of how fics with large amounts of attention capital can convert this to a traditional publishing deal<sup>157</sup> – rather than how fanfic functions as part of its own attention economy. Within the fanfic community, Skains attends to attention mainly as a part of the creative process in writing fics<sup>158</sup> – i.e. creating a work of fanfic fundamentally includes paying deep attention to the source text – and does not focus on how fic writers compete for attentive capital from their own readers. In contrast, in Chapter Two I examine how fic writers strive for reader feedback as a marker of attention paid and how this has resulted in an exchange mindset in some members of the fanfic community.

### Affective Economy

In a 2004 article, Ahmed introduced the concept of the ‘affective economy,’ positing that emotions can function as economic capital, circulating and being distributed within a social field. In her words, Ahmed is offering ‘a theory of passion not as the drive to accumulate (whether it be value, power, or meaning), but as that which is accumulated over time.’<sup>159</sup> Emotions, therefore, are not stored in an individual subject or object but are symbolic goods which can be exchanged between individuals. Ahmed uses hate as an example, demonstrating that rather than residing within a given subject or object, hate is distributed amongst various figures, circulating throughout a society/field to band certain figures together and create distinctions between them,<sup>160</sup> much as Bourdieu’s economic capital

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<sup>156</sup> Skains, *Digital Authorship: Publishing in the Attention Economy*, 62. Emphasis in original.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 68–69.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 78–81.

<sup>159</sup> Ahmed, ‘Affective Economies’, 120.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 118–19.

works to define social class. It is this circulation of emotions combined with their ability to affect an actor's status and power within a field that, Ahmed proposes, renders them as economic capital. Drawing on this idea, in Chapter Two I argue that while AO3 positions itself explicitly as part of fanfiction's gift economy, its emphasis of the link between publishing fic and receiving feedback in fact reveals it to be operating on a hybrid of attention and affective economic models. Like Ahmed's example of hate as an economic good, I posit that the fan community, in conjunction with AO3's feedback system, has turned love – in the form of positive feedback – into a currency, a potentially fraught development of its gift economy traditions clashing with its emphasis on feedback as reward for writers' labour.

Considerations of affective economies within fandom have often focused on the relationship between fans and producers/corporations (a dynamic to which I return in detail in Chapter 3). Hills, for example, examines the ways in which Rob Thomas, creator of the television show *Veronica Mars*, leveraged fans' affection for the show in order to successfully crowdfund the budget for a movie continuation, demonstrating the power available to be tapped through a good relationship between a creator and their fandom.<sup>161</sup> Stanfill, meanwhile, suggests 'lovebor' (a portmanteau of 'love' and 'labour') as an alternative term for affective labour, defining it as 'the work of loving the object of fandom and showing that love.'<sup>162</sup>

However, less attention has been paid to the affective economy between fanfic writers and their audience. As Morimoto points out,<sup>163</sup> this relationship is based on shared love of a particular media property, both creator and consumer motivated to seek out ways of engaging with their preferred source beyond canon. However, there is also a direct affective exchange to be found between writers and readers, in that writers provide the result of 'lovebor' in their fics and hope to receive in return some indication of love for their work (both labour and text) from their readers. For example, Kelley, in her examination of a *Harry Potter* fanfic community, sees fanfiction's affective economy – defined as the exchange of fics for friendship and authority – as a subsection of its gift economy.<sup>164</sup> However, in Chapter Two, I argue that AO3's subtle enforcement of feedback

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<sup>161</sup> Hills, 'Veronica Mars, Fandom, and the "Affective Economics" of Crowdfunding Poachers'.

<sup>162</sup> Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*.

<sup>163</sup> Morimoto, "'First Principles': Hannibal, Affective Economy, and Oppositionality in Fan Studies (Paper Presented at Fan Studies Network Conference 2017, University of Huddersfield, UK, June 24-25, 2017)'.

<sup>164</sup> Kelley, 'Chocolate Frogs for My Betas!: Practicing Literacy at One Online Fanfiction Website'.

as a reward, and its focus on the quantification of feedback, may render love into a currency to be paid for the privilege of reading fics, rather than a gift given in appreciation.

## Cultural Capital

Unlike economic capital, cultural capital (along with social capital as discussed below) is a symbolic form without any specific material manifestation. It therefore only has value as far as the field in which it exists bestows it or, in other words, as far as the field's participants invest in its *illusio*. Cultural capital relates to a participant's ability to understand, appreciate and contribute to the cultural relations and products of a field. According to Bourdieu, it can appear in three possible states: 'embodied' (or 'incorporated'), 'objectified', or 'institutionalised.'<sup>165</sup>

Embodied cultural capital refers to a participant's ability to understand and interpret the cultural rules and conventions of a particular field, developed as a result of one's education by both school and family. The objectified state, meanwhile, entails material carriers such as paintings, books, songs, films and so on, which function simultaneously as economic goods and – with the application of sufficient cultural capital to enable understanding and appreciation – symbolic goods. Finally, institutionalised cultural capital refers to official educational qualifications such as degrees, diplomas and titles, which represent institutional recognition of a standard of skill and knowledge in a specified subject. When referring to cultural capital in this thesis, I am primarily dealing with the embodied state, with reference to fans' ability to interact with and contribute to the field of creative culture. Specifically, in Chapter Three I examine the extent to which AO3's attempts to link fanfic's creative value with its potential to fulfil a mainstream cultural role have succeeded both within the fanfic community and in the broader cultural spheres of the media and literary industries.

## Social Capital

Finally, social capital specifically refers to the assets one possesses as a result of the network of relationships they have cultivated, including familial connections, friendships and work relationships. The wider the number of connections an actor has at their disposal, the greater their potential to accrue additional forms of capital via exchanges with the members of their network. A social network is only created and maintained via the

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<sup>165</sup> Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', 17.

continuing efforts of its members to convert casual relations into those which involve obligations to one another.<sup>166</sup> This comes into play in Chapter Two, in which I discuss the gift economy as driven by social obligations and how confusion between social and economic capital has led to confusion in the AO3 community. Meanwhile, in Chapter Four I examine AO3 as a social space and how its commitment to maximum inclusivity clashes with its policy of maximum free speech, leading to conflict over which groups' rights are (allegedly) prioritised over others.

## Stakes

In his 1976 lecture 'Some Properties of Fields,' Bourdieu places the concept of stakes at the heart of any and every field, stating that, 'A field – even the scientific field – defines itself by (among other things) defining specific stakes and interests, which are irreducible to the stakes and interests specific to other fields (you can't make a philosopher compete for the prizes that interest a geographer) and which are not perceived by someone who has not been shaped to enter that field.'<sup>167</sup> For Bourdieu, the behaviour of participants within a specific field is fundamentally driven by their desire to win the game and receive its prizes, whether material or symbolic. Drawing on this, one of the overarching themes of this thesis is the question of what fanfic participants get out of publishing fic, what are the stakes that they compete over in playing the fanfic publishing game?

The stakes of a field can be seen as a hierarchy of capital – the more valuable a form of capital to its participants, the higher a stake it represents. The primary stakes of a field, therefore, are those that its participants pursue with the greatest passion, struggling over possession of them with their fellow game players. As Bourdieu puts it in *The Rules of Art*, the stakes are an essential part of the *illusio* of a field, 'which makes the game worth the trouble of playing it [...] the root of the competition which pits [participants] against each other and which makes the game itself.'<sup>168</sup> The stakes are the reward – whether material or symbolic – for participating in the field and playing the game well i.e. the high-value capital accumulated as a result of understanding the habitus and its doxa, and successfully engaging in its processes.

Wacquant points out that 'Bourdieu's vision of society is fundamentally *agonistic*. For him, the social universe is the site of endless and pitiless competition, in and through

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<sup>166</sup> Segre, *Contemporary Sociological Thinkers and Theories*, 23.

<sup>167</sup> Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 72.

<sup>168</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, 228.

which arise the differences that are the stuff and stake of social existence. Contention, not stasis, is the ubiquitous feature of collective life that his varied inquiries aim at making at once visible and intelligible. Struggle, not ‘reproduction’, is the master metaphor at the core of his thought.<sup>169</sup> In utilising Bourdieu’s concept of stakes and examining how the fanfic community surrounding AO3 struggles over particular forms of capital, I aim to break away from the utopic, ‘fandom is beautiful’<sup>170</sup> approach that characterises much of early fan studies work. Instead, I intend to demonstrate that the act of publishing fanfiction is not simply a pleasant pastime shared by a community of friends but also represents a struggle for economic, cultural and social capital as they manifest within the fanfiction field.

Moreover, by examining AO3 through the lens of publishing studies I aim to move away from studies of fanfiction which seek to locate its value in literary merit. While there exist numerous compelling defences of fanfiction that take this stance,<sup>171</sup> often such arguments are too invested in the idea of locating the value of writing and/or reading in literariness, the definition of which is both problematically vague and subjective, and overly rooted in academically-approved judgements of what is worthy to enter ‘the canon’ and what is not. Instead of falling into this pattern, I aim to discuss the economic, social and cultural capital associated with publishing fanfic and how these function both within the fanfiction community itself and increasingly, as AO3 continues to rise in status, in mainstream culture. In the chapter that follows, I outline the methodological approach I use in conjunction with the theoretical framework described above to achieve this goal.

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<sup>169</sup> Wacquant, ‘Pierre Bourdieu’, 264.

<sup>170</sup> Coppa, ‘Fuck Yeah, Fandom Is Beautiful’; Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, ‘Introduction: Why Study Fans?’; Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington, ‘Introduction: Why Still Study Fans?’

<sup>171</sup> Pugh, *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context*; Coppa, *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age*; Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*.

# Methodology

## Introduction

Having established the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis in the previous chapter, I now proceed to explain the process of designing and implementing the primary digital ethnographic research the thesis is based on. In this chapter I first discuss my own position as scholar-fan and how this has influenced and contributed to the design of my research, before considering the ethical considerations necessary when working as an observer and the decisions I have made regarding my practices in the field and in writing up my research. I then move on to a discussion of the specific research methods I have employed during this study, including digital ethnography and close reading. Finally, I introduce the field sites I investigated for the thesis, explaining the design of my research and the details of navigating the sites.

## Positioning

As I outlined in the Introduction, a significant element of this thesis, both in terms of my inciting interest as a researcher and the methods I chose to employ, is my own involvement within the fanfiction community. As observer and ethnographer, I used my status as part of this community to inform and facilitate my research; it is therefore important to expand on my description of my experience and position as a fan and how I have utilised this as a vital part of creating this thesis. In this section I give an account of my history as a fan, my current involvement in the fanfic community, and how I have developed my identity as a scholar-fan.

I was first involved in the fanfiction community during the late 1990s, primarily as a reader on a variety of fandom-specific sites hosted by services such as Geocities or Angelfire, but eventually drifted away from it when other interests took its place. While I remained a fan of many media properties, I tended to engage with them on a less participatory level and did not actively engage with the transformative fan community for the next two decades. As I mentioned in the Introduction, it was not until 2016, a few months before beginning my tenure as a PhD researcher, that I returned to the fanfic community, serendipitously finding AO3 while searching Google. I quickly became intensely involved in the community, first by reading and commenting on fic and then, in

short order, offering to beta read (the fanfic equivalent of critical reading, copy editing and/or proofreading) for others and beginning to write my own works. I also began to develop a social network of fellow fans – often, interestingly given the focus of Chapter Two, via comments left on others’ works or on my own – which has grown substantially since those early days. I would now consider myself to be a highly active and well-connected fan, with a strong and deep personal knowledge of contemporary fan practices and behaviours.

However, while I have some minor and distant familiarity with how fandom operated during the mid-to-late 1990s, I missed out entirely on the LiveJournal period which had its peak in the early 2010s.<sup>172</sup> My main familiarity with fandom and fanfiction is, therefore, drawn from the contemporary AO3/Tumblr era, both of which sites I have spent considerable time on as a consumer and an active generator of content. This was a major influence on my decision to focus on these sites for my online fieldwork, as I already had a significant level of familiarity and comfort with their interfaces and a good understanding of how they might be adapted for research purposes.

My development as a fan and an academic are closely intertwined: I was in the late stages of the application process for my PhD when I began reading fic again and by the time I began the course I was deeply ensconced within the fan community, with the effect that my thesis progressed from a proposed focus on digital fiction to fanfiction. As a result of this trajectory, I feel confident in applying the term ‘scholar-fan’ to myself, following Morimoto’s preference of the term<sup>173</sup> over the somewhat controversial<sup>174</sup> analogue ‘aca-fan,’ which has been criticised as asserting a privileged position in both academia and fandom,<sup>175</sup> and as encouraging indulgence both on the part of the researcher and towards the fan communities being researched.<sup>176</sup> ‘Scholar-fan,’ on the other hand, has less of this baggage while retaining the vital reflexivity that ‘aca-fan’ indicates. In Morimoto’s clear and straightforward definition, a scholar-fan is ‘an academic who also and simultaneously claims the identity of a fan, merging the two in scholarship that recognizes and acknowledges a personal investment in their object(s) of research.’<sup>177</sup> Claiming the identity of scholar-fan, then, involves voluntarily relinquishing some (though not all) of the

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<sup>172</sup> Schwedel, ‘Why Did Fans Flee LiveJournal, and Where Will They Go After Tumblr?’

<sup>173</sup> Minkel and Klink, ‘Episode 71: Lori Morimoto’.

<sup>174</sup> Stein, ‘On (Not) Hosting the Session That Killed the Term “Acafan”’.

<sup>175</sup> Jonathan Gray, in: Stein, ‘SCMS 2011 Workshop: Acafandom and the Future of Fan Studies’, sec. I really don’t care much for the term acafan.

<sup>176</sup> Bogost, ‘Against Aca-Fandom’.

<sup>177</sup> Morimoto, *An Introduction to Media Fan Studies*.

objective distance that traditionally tends to be valued within academic research and instead acknowledging the influence of one's personal tastes and interests on the research in question.

As I discuss in the following section on ethics, labelling oneself a scholar-fan – especially when engaging in covert observation as I have in this project – prompts some tricky dilemmas. However, I feel that my interests are evenly balanced between being a fan and being a scholar and I have tried to reflect this in my approach to this research. Of particular importance to me is the opportunity to showcase fan voices, to demonstrate the complexity, intelligence and passion they<sup>178</sup> display on the subject of their interests, the creative work produced by their community, and their status within the wider cultural world. In the section below on Ethical Considerations, I discuss how this aim intersects with ethical concerns regarding studying fans and the reasons for my ethical decisions in designing this research. However, before doing so, the next section discusses the potential for bias in this research, both from an institutional point of view and in terms of positioning on the spectrum of insider/outsider research.

## Bias

Given that I am both a user and supporter of AO3 (including having donated to the site on a number of occasions), it is important to make clear that I have reduced the possibility for any conflict of interest in this research. While I make use of the facilities provided by AO3 to publish and read fanfic, I have no administrative powers, nor access to any features or affordances beyond those available to standard users. I have also had no contact with the site's staff or board members in relation to this research.

I have also never volunteered in any direct capacity for AO3 itself, however, between March 2017 and November 2018 I served as a volunteer reviewer for articles submitted to the 'Symposium' section of the OTW's academic journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* (TWC). My responsibility was to read submissions to determine whether or not they were of a standard fit to be published to the journal, approve those that were suitable and provide feedback for those that required revisions. During that time I exchanged a number of straightforward emails with the editor of the Symposium section regarding my acceptance of the role and my responsibilities, and received one email from the TWC

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<sup>178</sup> I would also restate that, while I refer to fans as 'they' here, I recognise and acknowledge the presence of my own fannish voice throughout this thesis.

editor acknowledging receipt of a review after problems with the online system (this message did not require a reply and no correspondence was entered into). At no time did I inform any member of TWC or the OTW that I was undertaking research into AO3, nor did I discuss this thesis or the research associated with it with anyone affiliated with the OTW. I was also never granted any privileged access to any of AO3's operations or infrastructure, nor did I request any such access. As such, I do not believe there is any institutional bias or conflict of interest affecting this research.

That said, while there is no conscious bias underlying this research, as a user and supporter of AO3, it is important for me to maintain a clear perspective on the position from which I conducted my observation and data gathering, in order to ensure the research is not skewed by unconscious bias. While not an institutional insider, as I am neither a member of the OTW's administration nor do I have any established career track within it, I am part of the fanfiction community, and I do have an interest in AO3's continued operation which must be considered with respect to this research. AO3 is the primary site where I publish and read fanfiction, as well as a space in which I continue to make social and creative connections – for it to cease operations would certainly have a negative effect on me. As Zubernis and Davis point out, this is a common consequence of scholar-fans' research into fandom, which comes with an inherent risk of bias stemming from the researcher's familiarity with and investment in the research subject and therefore requires a high level of reflexivity and self-awareness in order to avoid – or at least mitigate – such pitfalls as confirmation bias or a conflict of conscience.<sup>179</sup> Relatedly, Fine takes the stance that the ethnographer's position as an 'interested party'<sup>180</sup> is a natural part of this kind of research and rather than attempting to disguise this element of ethnographic research, one should instead acknowledge the paradox of being at once an honest, objective researcher and a partial, subjective one. It is this consciously contradictory position I have attempted to utilise throughout this research, striving to be open about my personal interest in AO3 while maintaining a researcher's critical and analytical mindset, and to reap the benefits of both.

As mentioned below in the section on ethics, part of my approach to this research has been to attempt to reflect the idea that observational research takes place on a continuum between covert and overt modes. A similar perspective has evolved on positionality in observational research, which has shifted from conceptualising insider

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<sup>179</sup> Zubernis and Davis, 'Growing Pains: The Changing Ethical Landscape of Fan Studies', 303.

<sup>180</sup> Fine, 'TEN LIES OF ETHNOGRAPHY: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research', 286.

research as separate and distinct from outsider research, to a more flexible view of these two positions as points on a spectrum.<sup>181</sup> Dwyer and Buckle, for example, utilise the concept of ‘The Space Between’ to outline a dialectical approach in which insider and outsider research are not seen as dichotomous but can be bridged in a way that encourages ‘an appreciation for the fluidity and multilayered complexity of human experience.’<sup>182</sup> This approach acknowledges and embraces both the costs and benefits of positioning oneself on this spectrum, allowing the researcher to carve out a space for themselves which is at once involved with and removed from their subjects but requiring an awareness of how the researcher affects their analysis and is in turn affected by their experiences.<sup>183</sup>

As Merton points out, the researcher’s position varies depending on context, as ‘different situations activate different statuses which then and there dominate over the rival claims of other statuses.’<sup>184</sup> This can apply even within a single community or institution, in which a researcher may have varying degrees of access and understanding depending on how they are embedded within a field site.<sup>185</sup> With regards to this project, in terms of insider/outsider positioning, my status as a user of AO3 (and therefore an insider to its processes and community) but one without any privileged access or authority (and therefore an outsider in terms of AO3’s management) allowed me to utilise the benefits of both viewpoints. In particular, it was my aim to use my familiarity with the social norms of the AO3 and wider fanfic community – including the specific language in which it expresses itself<sup>186</sup> – to ensure a level of understanding not available to a complete outsider, while maintaining an objective attitude towards the site’s governance and behind-the-scenes operations.

It was necessary, therefore, for me to maintain a clear perspective throughout my research on my personal attitude towards AO3 and how this influenced my interpretation of my data. Indeed, one of the consequences of undertaking this research into AO3 has been a significant change in my personal attitude towards the site and its administration. I entered into this project with a highly positive perspective on AO3, a result of my largely

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<sup>181</sup> Mercer, ‘The Challenges of Insider Research in Educational Institutions: Wielding a Double-edged Sword and Resolving Delicate Dilemmas’, 3–4.

<sup>182</sup> Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, ‘The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research’, 60.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>184</sup> Merton, ‘Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge’, 25.

<sup>185</sup> Labaree, ‘The Risk of “Going Observationalist”: Negotiating the Hidden Dilemmas of Being an Insider Participant Observer’, 101; Mercer, ‘The Challenges of Insider Research in Educational Institutions: Wielding a Double-edged Sword and Resolving Delicate Dilemmas’, 4–5.

<sup>186</sup> Winterwood, ‘Discourse Is the New Wank: A Reflection on Linguistic Change in Fandom’; Minkel, ‘You Did the Thing: A Conversation with Gretchen McCulloch about the Language of Fandom’.

problem-free, privileged and enjoyable experience of using the site. I anticipated that this thesis would be a means of showcasing the achievements and effectiveness of this fan-led platform to those outside the fan community. However, in the process of observing and analysing others' experiences with AO3 and the OTW, including many far less positive than my own, and looking further into the background processes of the site, I began to develop a more critical perspective, particularly on AO3's handling of issues of inclusivity and free speech as discussed in Chapter Four. This reflexive questioning of my stance on AO3 and the development of a more critical perspective on it and the OTW demonstrates how an awareness of my position and the influence of my personal support for AO3 helped to minimise bias while researching and writing up this dissertation.

In the following section I discuss the ethical considerations bound up in the observational study of online spaces, particularly ones which the researcher is already a member of.

## Ethical Considerations

The decision to draw and directly quote data for this study from fannish spaces resulted in ethical concerns in addition to the practical ones discussed below. In this section I first consider the issues relating to covert observation within a community I am personally involved in, before turning to a discussion of citation practices regarding fanworks in academic publications.

While the design of the research for this study was strongly influenced by my status as a participant in the fanfiction community, it would not be wholly correct to describe my approach as purely participant observation. Instead, as discussed below, I have used both participant and covert forms of observation, drawing on my experience as a fan but gathering data in as unobtrusive a way as possible, with the intention of observing the fanfiction community without influencing or biasing the behaviour being observed. Of particular interest in this regard is the broader debate over whether the benefits of being able to observe a community as it 'normally' behaves outweigh those of being a fully embedded member whose status as researcher is known to the community. Kozinets suggests that an overt, active approach is an essential part of performing digital ethnography, and that to remove the participatory aspect from it is to lose much of the method's value, leading the researcher either to engage in guesswork about cultural meanings rather than turn to a community member for confirmation or further discussion,

or simply to gloss over those meanings altogether and default to ‘superficial, purely descriptive analysis that codes and classifies the words and other content she finds online.’<sup>187</sup>

However, others, including Spicker, Homan, Sanders, and Scott and Usher,<sup>188</sup> argue that if the point of ethnography is to observe a community as it naturally functions, then a removed stance which minimises the influence and effect of the researcher on the community being observed is more desirable. Indeed, as O’Reilly points out, even overt ethnographers may desire that their participants forget they are being observed and return to acting ‘naturally.’<sup>189</sup> Elsewhere, O’Reilly has argued that both covert and overt research, and participation and observation take place on a continuum, shifting depending on the details and practicalities of fieldwork.<sup>190</sup> This recognition of the necessary flexibility of observational research, particularly in online spaces, is echoed by other scholars who suggest that there can be no definitive rules or guidelines regarding covert versus overt research and that each study must be considered on its own merits.<sup>191</sup>

In my research (particularly with regards to Tumblr, as discussed below), I have attempted to reflect the continuum O’Reilly describes by hybridising covert and participatory approaches, keeping my personal and academic involvement in fandom separate, but using both to feed into my study. While my own perception is necessarily coloured by my status as a fan, I have taken steps to create fieldwork sites which I can choose to observe from a purely academic standpoint and which I do not influence or affect in my research role. My methods for doing so, as well as how data from these sites was gathered and analysed, are outlined in more detail in the section on Research Sites below.

In the covert aspects of my observation, I took on the role of the ‘lurker’: someone who enters online spaces but does not actively participate and remains (for the most part) silent, watching the activities and interactions that occur within a community and consuming its products without producing anything in return or drawing attention to themselves. Despite their silence and lack of output, lurkers are a well-established and vital

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<sup>187</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*.

<sup>188</sup> Spicker, ‘Ethical Covert Research’, 120; Homan, ‘The Ethics of Covert Methods’, 52–55; Sanders, ‘Researching the Online Sex Work Community’, 71–72; Scott and Usher, *Researching Education: Data, Methods and Theory in Educational Enquiry*, 101–2.

<sup>189</sup> O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 64.

<sup>190</sup> O’Reilly, *Key Concepts in Ethnography*.

<sup>191</sup> Roulet et al., ‘Reconsidering the Value of Covert Research’; Whiteman, ‘The Establishment, Maintenance and Destabilisation of Fandom: A Study of Two Online Communities and an Exploration of Issues Pertaining to Internet Research’, 76–82; Calvey, *Covert Research: The Art, Politics and Ethics of Undercover Fieldwork*, 173–74.

part of online spaces,<sup>192</sup> though often underappreciated within fandom as a result of the community's glorification of productivity, as discussed in Chapter Two. As de Kosnik puts it: 'Lurkers and authors may not have the same social status in an online community, but they may have the same cultural status, in that they are both fully invested members of that community's culture, insofar as they are both deeply familiar with the community's archives of cultural production.'<sup>193</sup> For the researcher wishing to observe fan communities without causing unnecessary disturbance while still participating in fannish practices, a 'lurker' role offers an effective and culturally-established position from which to observe without disruptive engagement.

That said, even given the pre-existence of a covert role within fandom, undertaking covert observation entails a number of ethical dilemmas, so much so that it is often a controversial approach to take, sometimes even compared to espionage by its harshest critics, such as Bakardjieva and Feenberg.<sup>194</sup> This is a particularly significant debate within fan studies, many fan scholars choosing to disclose their status as researchers to the groups being observed and urging others to do likewise.<sup>195</sup>

Busse has addressed the way in which fans – and those who publish writing online in general – may perceive their posting as being, at least, semi-private. Her argument is that, as a result of the relatively tiny amount of attention available to any individual's postings, it is logical to assume a degree of privacy restricted to a small group of regular viewers, simply by dint of the low chances of anyone else having any attention to spend on it.<sup>196</sup> This awareness of the perceived naivety of fans is one that influences a great deal of ethical thinking around fandom. However, little evidence is produced to suggest that fans are any less capable of understanding the implications of posting material on a publicly-accessible, search-engine-indexed site. Indeed, Allington points out that to assume so may cause bad feeling on a similar scale to that suggested by pro-consent fan scholars:

it is well known among fans that statements they make in contexts such as this are liable to being quoted without their permission and with no concessions to anonymity on various blogs [...]. It would,

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<sup>192</sup> Turk, 'Fan Work: Labor, Worth, and Participation in Fandom's Gift Economy', para. 4.3; Lee, Chen, and Jiang, 'Lurking as Participation: A Community Perspective on Lurkers' Identity and Negotiability'; Edelmann, 'Reviewing the Definitions of "Lurkers" and Some Implications for Online Research?.'

<sup>193</sup> De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*, 98.

<sup>194</sup> Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 'Involving the Virtual Subject', 234.

<sup>195</sup> Raw, 'Rhetorical Moves in Disclosing Fan Identity in Fandom Scholarship'; Kelley, 'Toward a Goodwill Ethics of Online Research Methods?.'

<sup>196</sup> Busse, 'Attention Economy, Layered Publics, and Research Ethics?.'

then, be extremely condescending to suppose those using this forum to believe it somehow “private.”<sup>197</sup>

To process this disparity in how online spaces are perceived, Busse refers to the idea of ‘layered publics,’<sup>198</sup> drawing on boyd’s work on user awareness in the blogosphere, which sees online spaces as constructed of a continuum of public and private, rather than a simple binary.<sup>199</sup> Busse utilises the idea of the attention economy to argue that those posting in online spaces may simultaneously be aware of the possibility that their words are available to the public at large and have a reasonable expectation that their *actual* audience is narrow and limited, that ‘information overload will hide them in semi-anonymity.’<sup>200</sup>

Whiteman challenges this view, suggesting that for an online poster to assume that they can determine the size of their audience is misguided: ‘The final destination of an utterance posted in such contexts cannot be constrained, and neither can its audience.’<sup>201</sup> Or, as Klink puts it with reference to fanfiction, ‘you published your fanfic on the internet. Security through obscurity is not totally a thing.’<sup>202</sup> While an ethical approach means that not all material should be subject to such arguments – for example, I have taken care to avoid the quoting of any material that I judge to be personal or sensitive – Klink’s point, though blunt, speaks to an important aspect of the types of online space quoted from in this thesis: all are specifically designed to reach an audience, the size of which cannot and should not be pre-conceived<sup>203</sup> (as, for example, the large number of kudos given by unregistered users of AO3 should attest). This is in contrast to messaging/group chat platforms such as Discord,<sup>204</sup> which has become increasingly popular with fans following Tumblr’s 2018 content purge<sup>205</sup> and allows users to create private, invite-only groups which cannot be accessed without a registered account (public Discord groups do exist but must be specifically set up as such by their administrators). More importantly, all the spaces quoted from provide affordances for making an account or specific content private, allowing users to *directly* control the size of their audience and to limit what is publicly visible. This thesis respects those choices and does not quote or cite any material which

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<sup>197</sup> Allington, ‘“How Come Most People Don’t See It?”: Slashing the Lord of the Rings’, 50.

<sup>198</sup> Busse, ‘Attention Economy, Layered Publics, and Research Ethics’.

<sup>199</sup> Boyd, ‘Blogging Outloud: Shifts in Public Voice (LITA Conference)’.

<sup>200</sup> Busse, ‘Attention Economy, Layered Publics, and Research Ethics’. See also: Franzke et al., ‘Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0’, 69–70.

<sup>201</sup> Whiteman, *Undoing Ethics: Rethinking Practice in Online Research*, 77.

<sup>202</sup> Minkel and Klink, ‘Episode 121: The Money Question 2: The Appening’.

<sup>203</sup> Whiteman, ‘The Establishment, Maintenance and Destabilisation of Fandom: A Study of Two Online Communities and an Exploration of Issues Pertaining to Internet Research’, 93.

<sup>204</sup> ‘Discord’.

<sup>205</sup> Hale-Stern, ‘Why So Many in Fandom Have Taken to Discord’.

was locked to public view at the time of collection, thereby respecting both the idea of a layered public and posters' awareness of and active choices regarding the level of privacy they choose for themselves.

In addition to the issues surrounding covert observation and the public/private nature of online sites, the other major ethical issue relating to this thesis is the citation of fanworks and discourse within academic publications. The issue is twofold: first, whether it is necessary to obtain permission from the fan creator prior to citing their work; and second, whether it is necessary to anonymise the fan creator and/or omit any direct link to their work within research publications.

With regards to the first point, in their role as editors of the fan-studies-focused journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* (TWC), an OTW project alongside AO3, Busse and Hellekson take the view that the researcher's priority should be to protect fans from unwanted, unsolicited scrutiny. They recommend that efforts should be made to contact fan creators in order to seek permission to cite their works, and that such citations should not contain direct links to those works.<sup>206</sup> These recommendations also appear in the author guidelines for the journal itself,<sup>207</sup> though they are restricted to the status of 'strong' recommendations rather than requirements for publication. This protective, 'fans-first' approach has been adopted widely throughout fan studies, with many scholars arguing that the ethical approach of projects dealing with fans should be grounded in the ethical expectations held by fans.<sup>208</sup>

It is notable that, in justifying their stance, Hellekson and Busse state that they view themselves as 'fans first [rather than] academic interlopers who think it's neat to add to the Lord of the Rings debate by looking at those crazy women slashing the hobbits.'<sup>209</sup> This rather disapproving view of how academics treat fandom is strangely at odds with the prevailing impression that the majority of scholars-fans are insiders who choose their field as a result of their love for and investment in the fan community, rather than the belief that fans are an oddity to be scrutinised.<sup>210</sup> Yet Hellekson and Busse seem to distinguish between the scholar-fan and the academic who happens to study fandom, stating that their priority is to ensure that, as fandom becomes increasingly visible to the mainstream, the

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<sup>206</sup> Hellekson and Busse, 'Fan Privacy and TWC's Editorial Philosophy'.

<sup>207</sup> 'Submissions Preparation Checklist'.

<sup>208</sup> Kelley, 'Toward a Goodwill Ethics of Online Research Methods'; Dym and Fiesler, 'Ethical and Privacy Considerations for Research Using Online Fandom Data'; Fathallah, 'Transparency and Reciprocity: Respecting Fannish Spaces in Scholarly Research'.

<sup>209</sup> Hellekson and Busse, 'Fan Privacy and TWC's Editorial Philosophy'.

<sup>210</sup> Cristofari and Guitton, 'Aca-Fans and Fan Communities: An Operative Framework', 719.

study of fandom is conducted by those familiar with its nuances. They prefer that fandom is studied and written about by insiders rather than outsiders, thereby ensuring that fans can ‘control and possibly direct this mainstreaming, as well as the messages that circulate about us.’<sup>211</sup> There is a distinct positioning in such statements of the ‘fans first’ approach as the ‘correct’ way to do fandom research and the idea that fans are a special group, in need of special protections.

However, others<sup>212</sup> have challenged this stance, including Whiteman, who suggests that the ‘fans first’ position is phrased – and has taken root within fan studies – as an injunction rather than a consideration, and one that is strongly critical of any other approaches to the extent of framing all other alternatives as ethically wrong.<sup>213</sup> She instead calls for a ‘localised’ approach (i.e. one developed in response to the specific context of each individual research project) to the ethics of studying fans, rather than the adoption of a single, inflexible guideline as the ‘fans first’ position threatens to become.

Indeed, even Hellekson and Busse have reaffirmed that the guidelines set out by TWC are not prescriptive, stating in their editorial introduction to TWC’s tenth anniversary special issue that, ‘as fannish platforms and expectations of privacy have changed, as fandoms age and their members withdraw or disappear, and as fan studies has finally begun to confront its less pleasant aspects, [...] there are more reasons than ever to not always demand permission from researchers.’<sup>214</sup>

In this spirit, I have also chosen to take a different stance than that recommended by TWC. As stated above, the aim of this research has been to observe how fanfiction is published and how fans discuss that process, in as unobtrusive a manner as possible. As such, I wished to minimise the possibility of influencing or biasing the behaviours and discourse being observed by either scaring off participants<sup>215</sup> or privileging certain voices over others in the process of seeking permission to cite their words.<sup>216</sup> Busse herself points out elsewhere that to privilege the voices of those community members explicitly seeking attention over those who are more reticent may create a hierarchy in which ‘certain texts

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<sup>211</sup> Hellekson and Busse, ‘Fan Privacy and TWC’s Editorial Philosophy’.

<sup>212</sup> Musiani, ‘Editorial Policies, “Public Domain,” and Acafandom’; Bingham, ‘Queer Fan Practices Online: Digital Fan Production as a Negotiation of LGBT Representation in *Pretty Little Liars*’, 65–66; Jones, ‘“I Hate Beyoncé and I Don’t Care Who Knows It”: Towards an Ethics of Studying Anti-Fandom’, 290; Larsen and Zubernis, *Fangasm: Supernatural Fangirls*.

<sup>213</sup> Whiteman, ‘Unsettling Relations: Disrupting the Ethical Subject in Fan Studies Research’, 311–12.

<sup>214</sup> Busse and Hellekson, ‘TWC, Past and Future’, para. 2.2. See also: Busse, ‘The Ethics of Studying Online Fandom’.

<sup>215</sup> Jones, ‘“I Hate Beyoncé and I Don’t Care Who Knows It”: Towards an Ethics of Studying Anti-Fandom’, 290.

<sup>216</sup> Popova, ‘Fan Studies, Citation Practices, and Fannish Knowledge Production’, para. 2.

are given author-worthy status whereas others are read as mere detached utterances.<sup>217</sup> The result of this is potentially to elevate the louder voices of the community over the quieter ones, or, as Busse puts it, ‘if we only cite from those blogs that understand themselves to be clearly in public space, we may ignore both the possibly less guarded (and thus more unmediated?) voices as well as those who do not have the comfort or privilege to push themselves into the public light of the attention economy.’<sup>218</sup> In order to avoid this potential biasing of the information included in the thesis, I have chosen not to seek permission to quote from their authors, instead using my own discretion and my experience and knowledge of fan spaces to determine whether or not it is appropriate to quote specific material.

In terms of anonymisation, fanfiction has a strong tradition of giving explicit credit to authors and original sources, despite its undeniably derivative processes (which Jamison notes as making any fan objections to being cited in academic research ‘ironic, given what they’re doing with other writers’ work in many cases!’<sup>219</sup>). As discussed throughout the thesis, AO3 upholds this tradition, not only requiring writers to indicate which fandom(s) – and therefore source material – their work is based on within its paratext but also providing affordances to credit other AO3 works and their authors as inspiring a specific fic. Given AO3’s combined emphasis on crediting sources and its facilitation of the use of pseudonyms, I therefore decided to prioritise the assigning of credit over the anonymisation of my sources. I also apply this to the other online spaces quoted from in the thesis, all of which allow for the use of pseudonyms, which I have used when creating citations. My personal stance is that public discourse should be available for the purposes of research,<sup>220</sup> including the reproduction of quotes (particularly in work such as this thesis which performs analysis on quoted material<sup>221</sup>), and that it is important to provide proper credit for material used in this way. As Popova points out, fan studies scholars ‘often shy away from acknowledging the contribution that fannish documentation of fannish history has made to our own work.’<sup>222</sup> It is my aim to avoid this tendency by providing full credit using the identity the poster has chosen for themselves. Just as fic writers use source material (including other fics) for their own purposes but would regard the lack of explicit

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<sup>217</sup> Busse, ‘Attention Economy, Layered Publics, and Research Ethics’.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Eagan, ‘Interview with Anne Jamison, Author of *Fic*’, sec. Did you feel at times that your book is rather more related to sociology than literary studies?

<sup>220</sup> Priego, ‘Publicly Available Data from Twitter Is Public Evidence and Does Not Necessarily Constitute an “Ethical Dilemma”’.

<sup>221</sup> Franzke et al., ‘Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0’, 11 n. 11.

<sup>222</sup> Popova, ‘Fan Studies, Citation Practices, and Fannish Knowledge Production’, para. 2.

source credit as inappropriate, I prefer to ensure proper credit is in place. In addition, I have also chosen to render any quotes used with errors in spelling, grammar etc. intact, in order to avoid interfering with the text as it was published.

My overall approach, therefore, which has been approved by the University of Stirling's General University Ethics Panel,<sup>223</sup> is to conduct my research without informing those being observed, as the fieldwork sites used are publicly accessible without the requirement of registration or a password. In doing so, I call back to astolat's statement in her original proposal for AO3 that the Archive should be a place that 'would NOT hide from google or any public mention,'<sup>224</sup> but instead would be open and accessible to anyone as a signal of the legitimacy of fanfiction culture. In the thesis itself I refrain from quoting any explicitly personal material, instead following McCulloch's approach in her book *Because Internet*, and restricting myself to material that contains relevant discursive content.<sup>225</sup> Moreover, given that the thesis quotes from paratextual and meta-discursive material, rather than from any creative works themselves, I apply Jones' advice that 'statements professing *straightforward* declarations of textual fandom, in which fans talk about a text and their love of it, in ways that demonstrate their knowledge of the text and its paratexts'<sup>226</sup> do not require consent in order to be included in research. I acknowledge that at times the material regarding anti-shippers in Chapter Four may strain this guideline, as some of the comments quoted contain unpleasant and offensive language and concepts. For this material I have adapted Jones' idea of a 'sliding scale,'<sup>227</sup> which suggests that permission should be sought before including material containing hateful or offensive language in research. I maintain my assertion that the sites I have drawn material from are public spaces and therefore eligible for inclusion within research without permission and therefore have chosen to compromise by anonymising and removing any direct link to any quoted material that includes hate speech or offensive language directed at a person or group.

Finally, any material resulting from the study that is cited within the thesis is credited with the poster's onscreen name and no attempt has been made to connect this to their offline identity. In addition, in a slight adaptation of Busse and Hellekson's

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<sup>223</sup> Approval Number: GUEP492

<sup>224</sup> astolat, 'An Archive Of One's Own'.

<sup>225</sup> McCulloch, *Because Internet: Understanding How Language Is Changing*, 22.

<sup>226</sup> Jones, "'I Hate Beyoncé and I Don't Care Who Knows It': Towards an Ethics of Studying Anti-Fandom", 290.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 292–93.

recommendation,<sup>228</sup> no direct link is provided to any posts quoted verbatim within the thesis, in order to maintain a reasonable barrier of effort between readers of this work and its subjects. It is my hope that, with this approach, I can showcase the voices of fans in this thesis while also respecting their right to maintain a safe space in which to pursue their interests.

One issue that should be noted in particular with regards to the ethical approach used for this research is the possibility that some of the material quoted was posted by minors or members of other vulnerable groups. As I performed no checks on the identity of those being quoted – with the aforementioned aim of not disrupting the community being observed or privileging any type of user over others – I have no way of confirming whether or not any of the material quoted originated from members of vulnerable groups, nor is there anything knowingly included in the thesis which might identify any subjects as such.

Specifically with regards to minors, the thesis includes quoted material from six websites (AO3, Tumblr, Twitter, LiveJournal, Dreamwidth and File770 (which is hosted on Wordpress)), all of which allow users to register from the age of thirteen (at the time of writing). Moreover, with the exception of Tumblr and Twitter, users are not required to register in order to leave comments and therefore these could be posted by minors. The use of such material in academic research has been the subject of much discussion,<sup>229</sup> though often with reference to active research using subject-facing methods such as interviews, rather than the passive, non-interactive methods employed in this study.

As discussed above, I and other researchers contend that the sites from which quoted material was collected are public and therefore appropriate for researchers to cite and quote from, with the application of consideration and sensitivity to the inclusion of any potentially harmful material. I have taken steps in the use of quoted material to reduce the possibility of harm or identification by restricting any use of personal information, using only the pseudonyms provided by those being quoted, and not providing any direct URLs to original sources. With these caveats in place, I believe that utilising material already posted to public sites in accordance with those sites' terms of service does not

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<sup>228</sup> Hellekson and Busse, 'Fan Privacy and TWC's Editorial Philosophy'.

<sup>229</sup> Markham and Buchanan, 'Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0)', 11; Spriggs, 'Understanding Consent in Research Involving Children: The Ethical Issues: A Handbook for Human Research Ethics Committees and Researchers'; Facca et al., 'Exploring the Ethical Issues in Research Using Digital Data Collection Strategies with Minors: A Scoping Review'.

constitute any increase in the potential for harm to those subjects being quoted, including those who may be minors or members of other vulnerable groups.

With regards to utilising the material quoted in this thesis in any other publications, which might provoke further ethical questions in terms of broadening the potential audience for this material, I would not include any of this material without permission. While it is possible to use the ‘reasonable expectation of a limited audience’ argument with regards to a thesis, this would not apply to any articles in journals or other publications. Therefore, were I to attempt to publish such a work, I would endeavour to secure permission from those individuals quoted prior to publication and would exclude any material for which I could not obtain permission.

Having discussed my positioning as a researcher and my ethical approach to this study, I now move on to discuss the research itself more directly, beginning with a discussion of the research philosophy guiding this project.

## Research Methods

### Research Philosophy

My aim with this research is to understand how AO3 has not only succeeded in its mission to provide a fan-owned, fan-run platform for publishing fanfic but also to understand, from the viewpoint of the community served by the site, the effect AO3 has had on the field in which they participate, in terms of behaviours, values and priorities. The decision to utilise an ethnographic approach developed from this objective and, in turn, shaped the research philosophy that underpins it, as I outline below.

As a member of the fan community, I was already aware of the rich, reflexive and insightful discussions that form an essential part of how this community operates and understands itself. Put simply, fans love to talk about the nature of fandom, and meta-discussion (or ‘wank’, to use an older fandom term<sup>230</sup>), both positive and negative, is a core fan activity. It was the prevalence and perceptiveness of such discussion that first drew me to the idea of studying how fanfic is published and the varied and vibrant opinions regarding AO3 that shaped my focus both on that site in particular and on its impact on

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<sup>230</sup> Winterwood, ‘Discourse Is the New Wank: A Reflection on Linguistic Change in Fandom’.

fanfic participants. It was for this reason that I chose to make fannish discussion (in the form of posts, comments and paratexts, as discussed below) the source of my primary data.

This focus on observing the artefacts of fans' experiences in relation to AO3 places this study within a subjective, interpretative, inductive research framework. From an ontological perspective, it is deliberately and consciously subjective,<sup>231</sup> based on multiple records of fannish experiences and filtered through my own understanding of the AO3 and wider fan communities. Meanwhile, in epistemological terms, the study is interpretative, based on observations of a variety of different subjects, and with the aim of understanding how AO3's establishment and success have affected them. The research does not assume that there is a single, observable reality but that there are multiple interpretations of reality, which researchers can observe, analyse and use to construct a narrative of the phenomenon being researched.<sup>232</sup> Or, as Kivunja and Kuyini put it, an interpretivist approach allows the researcher to 'get into the head of the subjects being studied,'<sup>233</sup> which was the originating and overarching aim of this research, to understand why and how AO3 has come to have such influence over the fanfic community. Finally, this research is primarily inductive,<sup>234</sup> in that it is rooted in the collection of data in order to explore its subject matter, with a theoretical framework applied only after the data collection and analysis was completed. In the following section I describe how this philosophy was put into practice through my chosen research methods.

## Virtual and Digital Methods

In order to gain a comprehensive view of the behaviours and opinions of fans across their fragmented online presence, this study utilises a combination of virtual and digital methods. Virtual methods, as defined by Hine,<sup>235</sup> refers to offline research methods such as surveys and interviews, adapted for use in online environments. Digital ethnography, discussed in more detail below, is one such method, the repurposing of ethnographic fieldwork for online sites.

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<sup>231</sup> Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students*, 137; O'Gorman and MacIntosh, 'Mapping Research Methods', 57.

<sup>232</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 9; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students*, 141, 148–49; O'Gorman and MacIntosh, 'Mapping Research Methods', 65; Budak, 'Creative Freedom in the Digital Age', 44–45; Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 28–30; O'Reilly, 'Interpretivism'.

<sup>233</sup> Kivunja and Kuyini, 'Understanding and Applying Research Paradigms in Educational Contexts', 33.

<sup>234</sup> Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students*, 153.

<sup>235</sup> Hine, *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*.

Digital methods, meanwhile, utilise a digital-native approach, considering the toolset provided by each individual fieldwork site as a means not only of navigating the online environment but as cultural material open to analysis. Richard Rogers, founder of the Digital Methods Initiative, claims that this represents ‘a major shift in the purpose of Internet research, in the sense that one is not so much researching the Internet, and its users, as studying culture and society with the Internet.’<sup>236</sup> In this study, digital methods not only provide the practical means for conducting digital ethnography, but are also considered as worthy of analysis in their own right, particularly with reference to the folksonomies (user-generated taxonomy of online content via the use of metadata<sup>237</sup>) employed by both AO3 and Tumblr in their tagging systems, which are discussed below in more detail.

## Digital Ethnography

Hine argues that the internet can be understood as ‘a culture in its own right, and as a cultural artefact,’<sup>238</sup> in that it is a space in which meaningful social interactions occur and a human-created system which functions as a record (albeit an ephemeral one) of those interactions. This study was designed with this dual nature in mind, aiming to study the online communities<sup>239</sup> of AO3 users and fanfic participants by observing, recording and analysing the artefacts these communities create and publish online.

As such, in designing this research, I considered a number of methods that might make use of the internet as both a cultural space and a source of recordable data, including social network analysis (SNA), corpus analysis (of AO3 comments), surveys and interviews. Despite potentially providing interesting routes of research, I rejected SNA and corpus analysis relatively early in the research process as being, in part because of their quantitative nature, too distant from the communities that I was interested in to provide the kind of rich, close-up data that my research questions required. The possibility of using surveys and/or interviews was given more consideration, since these methods would likely have offered useful insights into the communities being studied and would have generated elicited data to balance out the non-elicited information collected during my observational work. However, I ultimately also rejected these methods for two main reasons: first, the

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<sup>236</sup> Rogers, *Digital Methods*, 38.

<sup>237</sup> Vander Wal, ‘Folksonomy’.

<sup>238</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*, 14.

<sup>239</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, 63.

amount of time required to collect, code and analyse the data being gathered through observation was already significant and attempting to design, carry out and analyse survey or interview data in addition was deemed to be too ambitious for the scope of this single-researcher project (as Burrell points out, ‘there are limits to what can reasonably be accomplished in a contemporary, boundless ethnography’<sup>240</sup>). Second, given the large userbases of both AO3 and Tumblr, I was concerned that to single out specific fan voices would interfere with the naturalistic, unobtrusive approach I wanted to maintain during the data gathering phase of my research (as Fine puts it, ‘Something must give. If subjects know the research goals, their responses are likely to be skewed,’<sup>241</sup> an effect I was keen to avoid). I therefore decided to rule out these methods and to focus on observation via ‘pure’<sup>242</sup> digital ethnography (i.e. using only online field sites) as my means of collecting primary data.

Digital ethnography is specifically designed as a means of researching online social and cultural activity, a naturalistic, unobtrusive and observation-based approach which adapts ethnography for online settings.<sup>243</sup> Like traditional ethnography, it involves the researcher embedding themselves within a community in order to observe, record and analyse its practices and behaviours, and may utilise a range of methods in order to do so, including interviewing, participant observation, discourse analysis and visual analysis.<sup>244</sup> However, while it shares this basic approach with ethnography, digital ethnography (also known as virtual ethnography, netnography and a variety of other terms) differs in a number of significant ways as a result of the nature of the internet, and requires an adapted process for carrying out research.

For example, while traditional ethnography directly observes and analyses people, digital ethnography focuses on conversational acts<sup>245</sup> as its evidence of behaviour. It therefore relies on the ethnographer’s ability to record these conversational artefacts (usually aided by some form of computational process) and skill in analysing material in a variety of possible forms, from textual to visual to multimedia.<sup>246</sup> Kozinets divides digital ethnographic data into three main forms: archival data, co-created data, and fieldnote data.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Burrell, ‘The Field Site as a Network: A Strategy for Locating Ethnographic Research’, 187.

<sup>241</sup> Fine, ‘TEN LIES OF ETHNOGRAPHY: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research’, 274.

<sup>242</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, 65.

<sup>243</sup> Kozinets, ‘The Field behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities’, 62.

<sup>244</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, 58–60.

<sup>245</sup> Kozinets, ‘The Field behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities’, 64; Kozinets, ‘Netnography for Management and Business Research’, 392.

<sup>246</sup> Hine, ‘Virtual Ethnography: Modes, Varieties, Affordances’, 263.

<sup>247</sup> Kozinets, ‘Netnography for Management and Business Research’, 390.

Archival data refers to pre-existing, non-elicited material that the researcher captures and saves during their observation of online field sites and may include such content as social media posts, user comments and forum discussions. Co-created data consists of material elicited via interaction between the researcher and actors within the field being researched, such as data collected via interviews or conversations. Finally, fieldnote data refers to notes taken by the researcher during their fieldwork, including first-hand observations and reflections on the research in progress. Given my aim to collect data unobtrusively, this study focuses on archival data and fieldnote data (including the coding system described in the section on Coding and Analysis below). As described in more detail in the Research Sites section below, my archival data took a variety of forms including social media posts, comments on fanfics, and paratextual material drawn from my two field sites, AO3 and Tumblr. All of this data falls under the category of textual data and therefore required organisational and analytical methods suited to dealing with digital-born text, which are discussed more fully in the sections on Coding and Analysis below.

In order to gather data, this research utilises a combination of participant observation – taking advantage of my status as a member of the fanfic community and a user of AO3 – and covert observation in order to gather its data. As defined by Bryman, participant observation refers to ‘Research in which the researcher immerses him- or herself in a social setting for an extended period of time, observing behaviour, listening to what is said in conversations both between others and with the fieldworker, and asking questions.’<sup>248</sup> Covert observation, meanwhile, refers to observation ‘which is not disclosed to the public – where the researcher does not reveal that research is taking place.’<sup>249</sup> Importantly, while covert research is often seen as deceptive, Spicker distinguishes between covert and deceptive work, defining the latter as occurring ‘where the nature of a researcher's action is misrepresented to the research subject.’<sup>250</sup> As discussed in the section on Ethical Considerations above, this is a distinction which I have upheld in my own research, making no efforts to misinform or mislead its subjects.

In practice, undertaking this research meant embedding myself in online sites in which I was already active as a fan and designing practices by which I could observe and record the behaviour and interactions occurring within them (the specifics of this process are discussed in detail in the section below on Research Sites). In this position, I was able to gain a nuanced and organic understanding of the fanfiction community’s behaviour and attitudes.

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<sup>248</sup> Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 714.

<sup>249</sup> Spicker, ‘Ethical Covert Research’, 119.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

Close and regular observation from an embedded position gave me access to the dynamics and mechanics of this culture from an insider point of view, allowing me to perform a detailed analysis of aspects of this community with an understanding that an outsider would not possess while, as discussed above, maintaining a covert presence meant that I could view the community without disrupting its practices and behaviours.

In addition, the choice of digital ethnography provided a number of other benefits that distinguish it from other methods. From a practical point of view, digital ethnography is less time-consuming and elaborate than traditional ethnography, utilising existing technologies<sup>251</sup> (as with the use of AO3's and Tumblr's affordances as discussed below) and not requiring the researcher to travel or to organise venues for face-to-face meetings, for example.<sup>252</sup> This was important in this study because the main subject and research questions took more time than expected to finalise and therefore an efficient and time-friendly method of data collection was required. In addition, there are also philosophical benefits to digital ethnography – for example, such research is based in grounded knowledge drawn from close observation, allowing for analysis at the human level. The result of this is, as Hine points out, to uncover and illuminate the 'taken-for-granted and often tacit ways in which people make sense of their lives.'<sup>253</sup> Digital ethnography can shed light on the mundane, commonplace aspects of online communities which other methods may overlook, generating embedded descriptions from prolonged observation of everyday contexts rather than, for example, the snapshots offered by user surveys or interviews.<sup>254</sup> This allows for a deep and grounded understanding of the 'cultural foundations of the group'<sup>255</sup> i.e. their motivations and priorities and the ways in which these drive community behaviours.<sup>256</sup>

However, while digital ethnography does provide many benefits for research into online communities, there are also limitations to the use of this method that should be noted. Perhaps most obvious is the challenge of data abundance<sup>257</sup> – digital field sites may contain vast amounts of recordable data and require the research to be rigorous and methodical in designing and implementing ways of dealing with this. Even the most well-organised researcher, however, will not be able to observe the full scope of any decently-sized online community, despite the digital ethnographer's ability to perform asynchronous

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<sup>251</sup> Kozinets, 'Netnography for Management and Business Research', 386.

<sup>252</sup> Kozinets, 'The Field behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities', 62.

<sup>253</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*, 5.

<sup>254</sup> Pink et al., *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*, 46.

<sup>255</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*, 22.

<sup>256</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, 55.

<sup>257</sup> Kozinets, 'Netnography for Management and Business Research', 386.

observation and to follow perfectly-preserved records of conversations back in time. Fine points out that the verisimilitude associated with ethnography is an illusion, albeit one grounded in genuine experience, as no field notes can ever capture with flawless accuracy all aspects of a lived experience, nor can any ethnographer expect to observe ever detail occurring in a field site.<sup>258</sup> Digital ethnography, with its focus on digital materials which are often recorded and re-accessible in their original format, mitigates this issue somewhat, but Fine's point remains relevant because of the limits of the human researcher. It is therefore important to make clear that digital ethnography is always rooted in an incomplete overview of the field site, filtered through the researcher's perspective, and that this study is not intended and should not be taken as a definitive statement on its subject.

This relates to another limit of digital ethnography – the difficulty in generalising the findings resulting from it. As Kozinets<sup>259</sup> and Hine point out, 'identity play'<sup>260</sup> is a widespread online phenomenon, with users adopting personae and behaviours that may not reflect their 'real life' identities (though the distinction between online and real life identities is certainly a fluid one). The lack of informant identifiers associated with online data not only makes it difficult to verify who a subject is<sup>261</sup> but also limits how much the data can be generalised outside the specific online community from which it has been gathered.<sup>262</sup> In the case of this research, its focus on AO3 relieves the necessity to generalise but it is important to note that the methodological choice to use non-elicited, unverified data relies on my experience and understanding of the AO3 and fan communities and my skill as an interpreter of data in order to ensure authenticity, rather than any formal process of verification.

Another notable characteristic of digital ethnography is that analysis of data does not take place following the recording process but alongside it,<sup>263</sup> the researcher examining and categorising data as it is collected and engaged in a continuous process of re-examination and re-contextualisation in light of new information as it comes in. The following section describes how this process functioned in this study and gives details on the specific methods of coding and analysis used.

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<sup>258</sup> Fine, 'TEN LIES OF ETHNOGRAPHY: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research', 277–78, 279–80.

<sup>259</sup> Kozinets, 'The Field behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities', 62.

<sup>260</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*, 22.

<sup>261</sup> Xun and Reynolds, 'Applying Netnography to Market Research: The Case of the Online Forum', 19.

<sup>262</sup> Kozinets, 'The Field behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities', 62.

<sup>263</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, 95–96.

## Coding and Analysis

My aim in gathering primary data from fannish spaces was both to discover, on a macro level, the themes and issues that the AO3 and broader fan communities care about and to ‘zoom in’<sup>264</sup> on specific examples from the dataset to illustrate and elucidate these issues. As such, I chose to take a ‘top-down’<sup>265</sup> approach to coding and analysis, moving from the more removed techniques of thematic analysis and coding to close reading in order to analyse specific examples from the dataset. The advantage of this approach is to provide an organised, navigable overview of the dataset and the themes that can be derived from it via careful reading and analysis of each individual piece of data, while also allowing the researcher to locate and drill down into specifics and perform further analysis to provide illuminating examples.

The specifics of performing this coding and analysis are strongly linked to the affordances provided by the two fieldwork sites – AO3 and Tumblr – used in this research and are therefore discussed more fully in the section on Research Sites below. Here, meanwhile, I provide an overview of the methods utilised before moving on to this more specific discussion.

The use of coding – ‘classifying or categorizing individual pieces of data [...] coupled with some kind of retrieval system’<sup>266</sup> – to discover and catalogue themes emerging from my observational fieldwork was initially inspired by an interest in topic modelling as a potential method for this study. Topic modelling is a form of textual analysis which uses an automated, algorithmic procedure to code a textual corpus into a set of meaningful categories known as ‘topics,’ with a minimum of human intervention.<sup>267</sup> According to Ignatow and Mihalcea, ‘a topic can be thought of as the cluster of words that tend to come up in a discussion and therefore to co-occur more frequently than they otherwise would, whenever the topic is being discussed.’<sup>268</sup> Identification of topics allows the researcher to pick out issues that are of particular importance within a corpus, allowing them to identify

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<sup>264</sup> Jänicke et al., ‘On Close and Distant Reading in Digital Humanities: A Survey and Future Challenges’, 10.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 400.

<sup>267</sup> Mohr and Bogdanov, ‘Introduction—Topic Models: What They Are and Why They Matter’, 546; DiMaggio, Nag, and Blei, ‘Exploiting Affinities between Topic Modeling and the Sociological Perspective on Culture: Application to Newspaper Coverage of U.S. Government Arts Funding’, 577; Blei, ‘Topic Modeling and Digital Humanities’; Brett, ‘Topic Modeling: A Basic Introduction’.

<sup>268</sup> Ignatow and Mihalcea, ‘Topic Models’, 157.

and categorise its ‘aboutness’<sup>269</sup> in a way that emerges from the data itself, rather than being hypothesised and predetermined.

However, topic modelling is a quantitative, computational method that relies on software to process and render results, which went against my intentions to retain a subjective, interpretative, qualitative approach to this research. Therefore, while retaining the idea of drawing out themes from my dataset by analysing and coding it, I chose to individually read and hand code my data, with the result that my approach is better defined as thematic analysis than topic modelling.

Thematic analysis is another form of textual analysis which, like topic modelling, searches for patterns within a given dataset and uses the themes that emerge as categories for analysis. However, unlike the automated processes used by topic modelling, thematic analysis relies on a human-led, iterative process of reading and reviewing the data in order to uncover the themes that will inform the research. Coding is the basic technique used in thematic analysis, consisting of ‘a process of closely inspecting text to look for recurrent themes, topics, or relationships, and marking similar passages with a code or label to categorize them for later retrieval and theory-building.’<sup>270</sup> Coding can be done in either an inductive or deductive manner, depending, respectively, on whether the researcher decides to build their codes directly from the data or to use codes that fit an existing framework.<sup>271</sup> In conjunction with the philosophical foundations of this study discussed above, I chose to take an inductive approach, building up my set of codes by tagging the notable features of each post with a suitable tag (a list of the full set of tags are included in Appendices Two and Three), adding a new code to the list when necessary (this process is discussed further in the section on Research Sites below). This allowed me to simultaneously build up an observation-based impression of the values and behaviours of the fanfic community as it operates on AO3 and Tumblr and to record these impressions in a systematic and retrievable manner. Thus, for example, the presence of numerous posts and comments regarding the social, economic and cultural capital of fanfic (some of them using precisely that terminology) in the posts I was recording from AO3 and Tumblr contributed directly to my decision to use Thompson’s Bourdieusian framework to organise the thesis as discussed in the Literature Review.

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<sup>269</sup> Murakami et al., “‘What Is This Corpus about?’: Using Topic Modelling to Explore a Specialised Corpus”, 244.

<sup>270</sup> Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe, ‘Thematic Analysis’, 926.

<sup>271</sup> Hawkins, ‘Thematic Analysis’, 1758.

Following the above process of analysis and coding, I also chose to utilise close reading as a means of analysing individual posts, zooming in on parts of my dataset in conjunction with my aim of using verbatim quotations as a means of illustrating fannish views and behaviour. Castilla defines close reading as investigating ‘the relationship between the internal workings of discourse in order to discover what makes a particular text function persuasively’<sup>272</sup> and a means of uncovering ‘hidden themes’<sup>273</sup> that may have been overlooked. This concept of close reading as drawing out and examining layers of meaning within a text recurs throughout definitions of the technique<sup>274</sup> and it was this ability to get in close to specific illustrations of fan activity that drew me to the method.

In practice, when I wanted to find an illustrative example from my dataset, I began by checking the relevant tag(s), selecting a text that exemplified the subject I wished to illustrate. I then put the text through multiple close readings, taking notes during each reading in order to draw out the meanings – both shallow and deep – contained within. This iterative and reflexive note-taking then formed the basis of a written analysis of the example text which was included, when relevant, in the dissertation itself. I have applied the above methods to two main fieldwork sites, the process of which is described in the sections below.

## Research Sites

Despite featuring material drawn from numerous sites of fannish activity, including Twitter and LiveJournal, this study focuses on two online fieldwork sites: AO3 and Tumblr. AO3, as stated in the introduction, is the main focus of the thesis as a whole, its status as the most prominent fanfiction platform over the last decade making it a site of social and cultural interest. However, while AO3 provides a comments section in which fan writers and readers may speak to each other (which is discussed in detail in Chapter Two), it is not a social media site and lacks the kind of deep and wide conversation (often referred to as ‘discourse’ within fan parlance) that characterises fannish interaction. Such conversations represent a vital part of the fan experience and are where fan opinion and beliefs are most often expressed, providing an essential forum for insight into how fans see themselves and their behaviours.

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<sup>272</sup> De Castilla, ‘Close Reading’, 136.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Burke, ‘A Close Look at Close Reading: Scaffolding Students with Complex Texts’, 2; Bardzell, ‘Discourse Analysis vs. Close Reading’; Nicholson, ‘Close Reading’, 184; Boyles, ‘Closing in on Close Reading’.

Moreover, the nature of fandom is both fragmentary<sup>275</sup> and migratory<sup>276</sup> i.e. it is (and was even prior to the internet<sup>277</sup>) multi-sited, taking place in myriad spaces with varying strengths of connection to each other, and prone to switching to new platforms with reasonable regularity (as with the migration from LiveJournal to Tumblr discussed in the Introduction). This is an acknowledged social norm within fandom,<sup>278</sup> with connections expected to spread over multiple platforms (and potentially into physical meet-ups, for example at fandom conventions) and through community migrations. Choosing to employ a dual-sited ethnography<sup>279</sup> using demonstrably connected sites as discussed below for this research was, therefore, an attempt to reflect fandom's natural tendency to spread across platforms, with an effective view of fandom requiring observation of more than one fannish space. It would, admittedly, have been more effective to include more than two sites within the study – indeed, the thesis does include material from other fannish sites including Twitter and LiveJournal – to create a 'networked' field site in the spirit of Burrell's approach to locating ethnographic research.<sup>280</sup> However, due to the single-researcher nature of the project and the time-consuming nature of gathering and hand-coding the data, I chose to limit the ethnography to AO3 as the primary field site and Tumblr as the secondary, for reasons discussed further below.

Specifically, in order to observe fans actively discussing the influence AO3 has had on the stakes of publishing fanfic, I decided it was necessary to go outwith AO3 itself and supplement my research with a second field site as a source of discourse, in the spirit of Flegel and Roth's concept of 'fan clearinghouses' that provide access to fannish debates.<sup>281</sup> Though several sites might have acted as this second field site, I ultimately selected Tumblr, a social media and 'microblogging' site (microblogging 'refers to posting that takes

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<sup>275</sup> Popova, 'Follow the Trope: A Digital (Auto)Ethnography for Fan Studies'; Busse and Hellekson, 'Introduction: Work in Progress', 18–19; Coppa, 'Pop Culture, Fans, and Social Media', 79–85; Baym, 'The New Shape of Online Community: The Example of Swedish Independent Music Fandom'.

<sup>276</sup> Fiesler and Dym, 'Moving Across Lands: Fandom and Online Community Migration'; Dym and Fiesler, 'Generations, Migrations, and the Future of Fandom's Private Spaces'; Stein, 'Tumblr Fan Aesthetics'.

<sup>277</sup> Coppa, 'An Archive of Our Own: Fanfiction Writers Unite!', 303; Coppa, 'Pop Culture, Fans, and Social Media', 78–79.

<sup>278</sup> Fiesler and Bruckman, 'Creativity, Copyright, and Close-Knit Communities'.

<sup>279</sup> Boyd, 'Making Sense of Teen Life: Strategies for Capturing Ethnographic Data in a Networked Era'; Kozinets, Dolbec, and Earley, 'Netnographic Analysis: Understanding Culture Through Social Media Data'; Burrell, 'The Field Site as a Network: A Strategy for Locating Ethnographic Research'; O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 176.

<sup>280</sup> Burrell, 'The Field Site as a Network: A Strategy for Locating Ethnographic Research'.

<sup>281</sup> Flegel and Roth, 'Writing a New Text: The Role of Cyberculture in Fanfiction Writers' Transition to "Legitimate" Publishing', 254.

place on specific platforms whose design either encourages or enforces brief communication<sup>282</sup>) as my source of fan discourse.

There were a number of reasons for this decision. Firstly, the decision to focus on AO3 and Tumblr in particular was a reflection of the preferences of the fanfiction (and fandom in general) community at large, at the time of designing the research. While fanfiction was posted to other sites (FFN and Wattpad, for example) and fans socialised on numerous other social networking sites and message boards, the AO3/Tumblr combination was the most visible and widespread one in use by the fanfic community in the late 2010s.<sup>283</sup> This can be seen in the then-common practice of writers explicitly linking their accounts for each platform, as illustrated by the 19% of fics in my sample of AO3 (discussed below) that included a reference or direct link to the author's Tumblr account in their paratexts. During the course of data gathering, the AO3/Tumblr axis began to break down, in the wake of Tumblr's ban on adult content (which took effect in December 2018 and is discussed in Chapter One) and the subsequent decision of many fans to slow or stop their use of the site. However, as the majority of my data was collected before or during the so-called 'Tumblr purge,' I contend that during the collection period Tumblr was still a major site for fannish interaction and expression and that my research suffered no ill-effects as a result of the change in dynamic (and indeed, the purge provided useful material for the thesis in general).

Secondly, Tumblr is also a platform on which fic writers post and promote their works – many of which contain links to a cross-posted version on AO3. For example, a common technique used by fic writers to encourage readers is to post a preview of a new work or chapter on Tumblr, with a link directing readers to visit AO3 to read the rest. AO3's tagging system reveals that (as of 15/07/21), 6,085 works are tagged as 'Cross-Posted to Tumblr,' 12, 818 are tagged as 'Originally Posted on Tumblr' and 63, 989 are more broadly tagged as 'Tumblr,' which might suggest cross-posting or some other connection such as the work being based on a prompt that originated on Tumblr. Therefore, while there is no guarantee that every Tumblr post that discusses fanfic has a direct link to AO3, there is an observable and demonstrable link between the two sites that places them in the same fannish ecosystem.

Thirdly, my own experience as a fan influenced my choice of field sites. Prior to re-joining fandom I had not used Tumblr and only signed up to it as a result of seeing

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<sup>282</sup> Croxall, 'Twitter, Tumblr, and Microblogging', 492.

<sup>283</sup> Fiesler, 'Survey Results: Fan Platform Use over Time'.

numerous references to the site while using AO3. Following that, AO3 and Tumblr became my most-used fannish sites (reflecting the preferences of fandom at the time referred to above) and the ones I felt most familiarity and competence with. Therefore it seemed sensible to focus on these as my two fieldwork sites, particularly since I intended to integrate the sites' affordances into my data collection and storage.

Despite certain similarities between AO3 and Tumblr (their use of folksonomy-based social tagging, as discussed in the site-specific sections below, being the most obvious, and a focus of observation for this study), each requires its own approach. The following sections outline my specific approach to each site.

## AO3

The main challenge in researching AO3 is the sheer size of the archive, which passed the milestone of six million works in May 2020<sup>284</sup> and has been growing at the rate of around one million works a year since 2014.<sup>285</sup> In order to create a manageable data set from this large archive, I therefore chose to create a sample of works to examine, using AO3's search system in order to populate it and its bookmarking facility to store and code the results. It should be noted that AO3's employment of a tag system based on user-entered, site-moderated folksonomy (i.e. users are free to enter any tags they wish in addition to the Archive's standard tags for warnings, ratings, categories etc.) means that its tags have two functions. They are used both as standard metadata to tag for such information as genres and tropes (assisted by the site's auto-fill feature that suggests 'canonical' tags i.e. those that already exist within the Archive) and as a commentary system, where authors might manage readers' expectations, warn them of potentially triggering content not covered by the Archive's standard warnings, or comment on some element of the fic or writing process. The result is that tags can be used as a source for both sides of this research – as navigational metadata and as a form of communication open to close analysis.

Initially I set up a small pilot study in order to gain a better understanding of how AO3's search system works and to discover any problems or limitations with this method. In order to attempt to filter out non-fic fanworks such as fan art, podfics (the fanfic equivalent of an audiobook) or fanvids (video edits created by fans) I set my search to filter out works tagged with the following terms: fanart, podfic, fan art, original work, vid, fanvid, fan vid. I also searched only for works with a word count of over 99 words and

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<sup>284</sup> 'The Archive of Our Own Hits Six Million Posted Works!'

<sup>285</sup> 'AO3 Reaches 5 Million Fanworks!'

with more than five comments, hoping that this would both filter out some non-fic works and return works with some reader engagement in the form of comments (as this was an important aspect of my research). Finally, I specified that fics had to be written in English, this being a practical decision as I do not have sufficient proficiency in other languages to permit proper analysis. In addition, I determined that I would manually filter any works that were locked to non-registered viewers (indicated by a blue lock icon next to the work's title), respecting the authors' decision to block these works from public access. From the results generated, I then planned to use a random number generator<sup>286</sup> to choose a page number and then a fic from AO3's standard display of twenty works per page.

After performing my first search with these filters in place, it immediately became clear that there was an issue with AO3's display of the results. Of the five million-plus works then in the Archive, the site's search engine only displayed a maximum of 100,000 entries meaning that, even with the filters I had in place, it would be impossible to build a list of all the fics from which I wished to draw the sample using this method. However, this was a relatively simple problem to solve as I had already chosen to limit my main sample to recently posted fics – specifically those posted or updated during a year-long period between July 2018 and June 2019 (these dates were chosen in order to sync up with my fieldwork on Tumblr, discussed below). While searching over a full year still returned more than the 100,000 results AO3 would display, I further split my searches into individual months which allowed me to see all of the relevant fics posted during that period and to take a twelfth of my sample (100 fics) from each one. The one exception to this was December 2018, during the busy Christmas period, in which 108,706 results were returned. I chose, therefore, to split December into two individual searches, for fics posted between 1<sup>st</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> December, taking fifty fics from each one.

The other problem I encountered during my pilot study was that the filters I had implemented in order to refine my results did not work to remove all instances of works irrelevant to the study. Flagging up some of the limitations of AO3's semi-moderated tagging system, the filters failed to catch numerous untagged or mis-tagged works which required to be manually filtered when selecting fics for my data set, including many tagged as English but written in a different language, rendering them unusable to me. Therefore, given that it would be necessary to manually filter results in any case, I chose to remove all filters except date range and language in the searches for my primary study, thereby providing more comprehensive results to choose from.

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<sup>286</sup> Haahr, 'Random.Org: True Random Number Service'.

Having identified the problems involved with using AO3's search system to generate suitable works and devised workarounds for these, I then proceeded to begin primary data gathering from the site. Following the basic design of my pilot study, I searched for all works in English posted or updated during a single month, then used a random number generator,<sup>287</sup> first to pick a page of results and then again to pick a work to add to my data set from the standard display of twenty. I repeated this procedure in order to gather 100 works per month, resulting in a set of 1,200 fics to be analysed.

As I am investigating AO3 as a publishing platform, rather than focusing on the content of the stories themselves, my data is drawn from the paratextual material surrounding individual fics. Paratexts, as defined by Genette, are those elements which accompany a published text as part of its presentation, for example the author's name, the work's title, a preface, or any illustrations.<sup>288</sup> These elements constitute a liminal space between 'text and off-text'<sup>289</sup> which may convey authorial (or author-approved) commentary to their readers as a means of influencing how they approach the text itself. The Archive features numerous different types of paratext, including author's notes (both pre- and post-fic), summaries, tags, and comments, all of which represent the varying ways in which authors can communicate with their readers and, in the case of comments, in which readers can interact with authors. Statistical information is also available within each fic's paratext, including the number of kudos, comments, hits and bookmarks each story has received (in previous versions of the site authors could choose to make hit counts invisible to readers and to themselves, however this option was removed in an update during April 2020<sup>290</sup>). While this statistical information is automatically stored with each bookmark, in order to observe and mark other paratextual features it was necessary to read through each individual fic, building a list of tags as I went (these can be found in Appendix Two). To store and tag these fics I utilised AO3's bookmarking facility, which allows users to build a database of works, accessed through their registered account (I had previously set up an AO3 account specifically for this purpose). It also allows users to add searchable tags to each of these works, which I chose to use as my method of coding my data set as I analysed it. This process allowed me to perform thematic analysis to reveal patterns and common features in how fics are published and consumed on the site, which

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, 1.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>290</sup> 'Guest Hit Count Is Coming Back'.

influenced the structure of the thesis, while also providing me with a collection of material to illustrate my argument.

## Tumblr

Tumblr's content is far more fluid and variable than AO3's, requiring a somewhat more flexible research approach. The main mode of interaction with the site's content is via each user's 'dashboard' (also known as the 'dash'), an aggregate feed of user-generated content (in various forms including text, images and audio) which is recycled through the site by means of 'reblogging' i.e. by posting that content to one's own in-site microblog. Users curate what they see by following other users (whose content, including reblogs, will appear on their dash), tags and search terms, while Tumblr augments this by recommending posts and users one may be interested in. Posts, therefore, do not circulate in isolation but are spread by other users, who may also add responses, termed by Tumblr as 'notes.' There are three ways in which Tumblr users can add content to a post:

1. By reblogging with the addition of content to the original post – this can be in the form of text, images, video etc.
2. By reblogging with the addition of tags
3. By replying to the post – this does not require the user to reblog but instead is added to a pop-up window embedded within the post

This system creates ever-developing exchanges and discussions which provide insight into the communities that make up the Tumblr userbase. Sustained observation and analysis of such discussions within Tumblr's fan communities form the basis of my fieldwork within the site. Before discussing the specific approach to the site, I first explain the particularities of Tumblr's tagging system since, as with my work on AO3, it is both an important object of research and a key part of my methodology.

## Tagging

Tumblr's tagging system is a particularly interesting area of observation as something of a wild folksonomy, compared to AO3's semi-regulated hybrid of folksonomy and taxonomy. Tumblr has no tag wranglers and no pre-set tags, instead allowing its users to tag with whatever words and symbols (including emojis) they wish. Moreover, unlike AO3 where

tags are restricted to work creators only, Tumblr's reblog system means that each user can add their own tags to their individual sharing of a post, meaning that each post can build up a huge number of tags over time. Attempting to individually view all the tags that become attached to a post over its lifetime would be a prohibitively time-consuming task for a lone researcher, requiring visits to each unique reblog (some of which run into the tens or hundreds of thousands). Fortunately, Tumblr's 'Labs' scheme, which allows users to test out experimental features developed by the site's engineers, includes a 'Tag Crawler'<sup>291</sup> which displays all the tags added to an original post in a pop-up window. This dramatically cuts the amount of time required to view tags and also allows for quick access to any reblogs with particularly interesting commentary.

This is important in terms of this study since, as with AO3's author tags, Tumblr's tags have evolved to have a dual function, both as a categorisation system for users (many of whom have developed complex organisational systems) and as a space to add commentary. Bourlai defines these, respectively, as 'keyword' tags – likened to a combination of metadata and organisational system – and 'comment' tags, which constitute a form of content, delineated from the original content to place it in the tag section, thereby indicating 'a logical or structural division in the post.'<sup>292</sup>

Bourlai further divides the functions of Tumblr's comment tags into three categories:

- Opinions: 'comment tags that express a user's views, thoughts, remarks, or observations on the content of a post or something directly related to the content of the post.'<sup>293</sup>
- Reactions: 'comment tags that express a user's reaction to the content of the post or something directly related to the content of the post.'<sup>294</sup>
- Asides: 'comment tags that include statements indirectly related or not related to the content of the post.'<sup>295</sup>

There are a number of difficulties related to navigating Tumblr's tagging system, which must be considered while researching this aspect of the site. Most obviously, its use of an unmoderated, wholly freeform folksonomy means that even popular tags can be

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<sup>291</sup> idiot, 'You Ever Wanna Look at Tags?' This feature seems to have been discontinued at some point in 2020, after Tumblr changed the way it identifies individual posts (engineering, 'New, Bigger Post IDs').

<sup>292</sup> Bourlai, "'Comments in Tags, Please!': Tagging Practices on Tumblr", 47.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 49.

subject to variations on spelling and format, which, in addition to the wide range of possible tags for any one subject can make finding relevant information challenging. Moreover, popular tags can also be utilised as a method of increasing a post's visibility, muddying the tag's waters with irrelevant content.

In addition, there are known systematic issues with how Tumblr's tags function. For example, while there is no limit to the number of tags per post, only the first twenty entered will appear in search results and only the first five will appear in tag search results (i.e. searching for '#fanfic' as opposed to 'fanfic').<sup>296</sup> This limits the usefulness of tracked tags and searches, with many examples of relevant tags being missed by Tumblr's navigational tools. Users have noted that even when searching their own blogs using tags, the results do not provide every instance of posts using the specific tag being searched for. As a result, many users have taken it upon themselves to publicise a workaround for this issue, explaining that using the template URL 'http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/specific\_tag\_string', or 'http://[blog name].tumblr.com/tagged/specific\_tag\_string' for individual blogs, yields far better results than Tumblr's inbuilt search system.

### Reblogging as Research Method

Following Bourdaa's methodology<sup>297</sup> and in the interests of adhering as closely to the fan experience as possible, I utilised Tumblr as both, to use Bourdaa's terms, an archive (a record of posts being created and shared during my research period) and a database (a searchable set of data), employing the site's built-in tools in order to do so. In order to create a space in which to store data from the site in Tumblr's native format and follow any subsequent additions to each post stored, I created a blog for use specifically in this project. In designing the blog I chose to make it as unobtrusive as possible, sticking to Tumblr's default template and refraining from including any information about the blog's purpose (beyond its deliberately vague title of 'fanstudying') or my own identity. I also chose to refrain from adding any commentary to the posts being saved, using the blog purely as a tool for reblogging rather than a way to insert myself into the discussions being posted. On only one occasion did I find it necessary to enter into a conversation with another user, after they contacted me to request that I remove a reblog of their post as they

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<sup>296</sup> 'Appearing in Search Results'.

<sup>297</sup> Bourdaa, 'Tumblr as a Methodological Tool for Data Archiving: The Case of a Calzona Tumblr'.

felt uncomfortable with some of the other content I had posted to the blog.<sup>298</sup> Following this request I immediately removed the post and added a line to the blog’s header stating, ‘Please note: reblogs do not imply endorsement of any views,’ in hopes of making clear its purpose as an archive of fannish discourse rather than any sort of commentary.

While designing the blog, it became clear that my attempt to be covert in my research would be complicated somewhat by Tumblr’s use of a hierarchy for users with multiple blogs. Upon registering an email address with Tumblr for the first time, users are provided with the opportunity to create a ‘primary blog,’ an individual microblog within the site, with its own unique URL. Creation of this blog allows the user to access the full complement of Tumblr’s social features, including the ability to create and reblog posts. Prior to the commencement of this project, I was already an active user of Tumblr, with a primary blog focused on my own fandom activities and interests. When setting up a second blog became a necessary part of my research, I was presented with a choice as to whether to create this as an entirely separate primary blog, or to create a secondary blog (also known as a side-blog) linked to my existing personal account. The differences between a primary and secondary blog are fairly minimal, as set out in this table (Fig. 1) available on Tumblr’s help pages:

	Primary Blog	Secondary Blog
Reblog	✓	✓
Password Protection		✓
Multiple Users		✓
Initiate Social Features (Follow other blogs, like posts, send asks and messages, and submit posts)	✓	
Receive Social Features (Be followed, get asks and messages, and accept submissions)	✓	✓

Figure 1: Table detailing the differences between primary and secondary Tumblr blogs.<sup>299</sup>

However, the most significant difference – that one cannot follow or communicate with other blogs via a secondary account – had to be taken into account when making this decision, as by following other blogs (necessary as one of the primary means of observation) I would be explicitly linking my research and personal blogs.

<sup>298</sup> This user felt that a post I had reblogged (which discussed the idea that rape fantasies may constitute a normal and healthy part of a person's sexual fantasies) constituted the fetishization of rape and did not want their post to be associated with it in any way.

<sup>299</sup> Screenshot author’s own. ‘Primary vs. Secondary Blogs’.

Ultimately, I made the decision to create a new primary blog in order to maintain separation between my fannish and academic identities. However, I have also actively used my personal blog as a resource for observation by creating a linked side-blog, to which any relevant posts I came across were reblogged and later picked up and shared to my primary research blog. While this may seem an unnecessarily circuitous route, it was the method that offered the best combination of my roles as covert and participant observer. The main motivation behind this approach reflected the decision to use an ethnographic approach in the first place – in order to make full use of my position as an embedded member of the community, with connections and understanding that a ‘complete observer’<sup>300</sup> (i.e. a researcher who has no interaction with the community being observed) might not possess. The ability to move fluidly between my overlapping roles as participant and observer while conducting fieldwork, and to create an information feed that presented both sides of my role as scholar-fan simultaneously seemed to be an excellent opportunity to create a practical manifestation of the theory behind my approach.

After creating my new primary blog, I began the process of research by following a number of other blogs in order to populate my dashboard with content. Using a combination of my own knowledge of prominent fandom blogs on Tumblr and the results of a search for relevant tags (e.g. fanfic, fan discourse, ao3), I built up a collection of blogs to follow that regularly posted on subjects relevant to my research. In addition, I utilised Tumblr’s ‘followed searches’ feature, which allows users to specify a search term which Tumblr will periodically send the ‘best new posts’ from to one’s dash.<sup>301</sup> I followed a number of search terms I felt would provide content relevant to my research, a list of which can be found in Appendix One (I also followed these terms on my personal blog, in order to try to catch as much relevant content as possible). This allowed me to begin my observation with an actively updating stream of content provided by a network of Tumblr users interested in fandom and fanfic, as well as relevant material provided by the Tumblr algorithm (guided by my chosen search terms). My method in this sense is both subjective, relying on my personal participant knowledge of the site, and influenced by the particularities of Tumblr’s algorithm and it should be acknowledged that it cannot, nor is intended to be, seen as either objective or comprehensive.

Having populated my field site, I then began my fieldwork proper, making sure to spend at least half an hour each weekday browsing the dashboard for both my personal

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<sup>300</sup> Gold, ‘Roles in Sociological Field Observations’, 221–22.

<sup>301</sup> ‘Followed Searches’.

and research blogs and reblogging any relevant posts. Those shared to my personal blog were subsequently reblogged to my research blog, as described above, building into an archive of material to be analysed. Each post, including its tags, was then close-read and tagged using Tumblr's folksonomy-based system, creating a searchable database. This also, as with AO3 above, allowed for thematic analysis which revealed patterns and common features in how posters talk about fandom and fanfiction, and which topics gain the most attention. I continued this observation for the span of a year, from July 2018 to June 2019, giving me a total of 1,886 posts in my archive/database once reading and coding was completed in November 2019. Once the intended year-long observation period was complete, however, I decided to continue the observation and reblogging process in order to keep in touch with any relevant developments and the fan community's responses to them, which proved a useful decision in the wake of AO3's win at the Hugo Awards in August 2019, which became a significant focal point of the thesis. As a result, at the time of writing (29/12/20), my archive/database stands at just over 4,000 posts.

In terms of backing up my data, the panicked response to Tumblr's 2018 purge proved to be a boon, as it resulted in a number of users publicising ways to back up one's blog, which Tumblr itself provides no facility for. I tested a variety of options and ultimately found a means of backing up an entire blog, including tags and images, using a Python script developed by software engineer bbolli.<sup>302</sup> This allowed me to download a copy of each post added to both my primary research blog and my personal side-blog in HTML format, which allowed me to access the content of all the posts (albeit a stripped-down version without access to any notes attached). I regularly performed this backup procedure in order to ensure that I would have access to my archive in the event that the site went down or my blog was affected by Tumblr's content purge, maintaining copies on my laptop, a cloud storage account and an external hard drive.

This chapter and the Literature Review have set out the concepts and methods that have allowed me to investigate and answer my research questions. I now proceed to demonstrate and discuss the findings of my research, beginning with a discussion of how AO3 has built its reputation and prestige in the fan community via the judicious and principled acquisition of capital.

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<sup>302</sup> bbolli, 'Tumblr Backup 101'.

# Chapter One: AO3's Forms of Capital

## Introduction

In this chapter I argue that symbolic capital (defined as ‘the accumulated prestige, recognition and respect<sup>303</sup> held by an actor within a field) is the most important of AO3’s assets, to which all its other forms of capital contribute, and that this is what has allowed AO3 to build its status within the fanfic community. Beginning by establishing AO3’s stated ideological principles, I then go on to examine how AO3 has stuck firmly to these principles in the course of building its stockpile of capital. Finally, I proceed to illustrate how this ideological approach has gained AO3 a reputation amongst its supporters as a beacon of freedom of speech and expression and principles such as feminism and inclusivity compared to other fannish platforms, thereby boosting its stock of symbolic capital.

In doing so, I also explore to what extent AO3 has succeeded in its original aim to create a platform which aligns with and promotes ideals such as freedom of expression and feminism. I argue that establishing and maintaining a strong ideological core, one which aligns with ideals popular in the fanfic community, is a key part of what makes AO3 better suited to acting as a publishing platform for fanfiction than commercial efforts, such as FanLib or Amazon’s Kindle Worlds, both of which failed at least in some part because their limitations directly contradicted numerous fundamental principles of the fanfiction publishing process.

## AO3's Values

In astolat’s original proposal that fans unhappy with FanLib’s monetised approach to fanfiction should build a ‘central archive of our own,<sup>304</sup> she included a number of necessary principles that the design and operation of the site should abide by, including the foundational stipulation that such an archive should be ‘run BY fanfic readers FOR fanfic readers.’<sup>305</sup> Amongst these suggestions can also be seen the beginnings of the ideological tenets that would become central to AO3 and the OTW’s mission statement. For example, astolat emphasises that the proposed archive should be public-facing, and should ‘NOT

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<sup>303</sup> Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 7.

<sup>304</sup> astolat, ‘An Archive Of One’s Own’.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

hide from google or any public mention,<sup>306</sup> in service of re-positioning the perception of fanfic from something to be kept hidden and secret to a legitimate and legal creative pursuit. She also states that the site should be supported only by donations and not feature any ads, that it should maintain a strongly permissive stance towards content, and that it should be gender inclusive (as opposed to FanLib's failure to include a single woman on their board).

Following consultations with the fanfic community<sup>307</sup> as it became clear that the Archive of Our Own project was to go ahead, these initial thoughts surrounding what the project might stand for were eventually refined into the OTW's mission statement. Posted in 2007 (at which point the AO3 site was not yet publicly available), the statement included a list of five core values to be upheld by the OTW's various projects, which were set out as follows:

1. We value transformative fanworks and the innovative communities from which they have arisen, including media, real person fiction, anime, comics, music, and vidding.
2. We value our identity as a predominantly female community with a rich history of creativity and commentary.
3. We value our volunteer-based infrastructure and the fannish gift economy that recognizes and celebrates worth in myriad and diverse activities.
4. We value making fannish activities as accessible as possible to all those who wish to participate.
5. We value infinite diversity in infinite combinations. We value all fans engaged in transformative work: fans of any race, gender, culture, sexual identity, or ability. We value the unhindered cross-pollination and exchange of fannish ideas and cultures while seeking to avoid the homogenization or centralization of fandom.<sup>308</sup>

To summarise, the five guiding principles of the OTW and its projects are: that transformative works and their communities have value; that fanfiction is a 'female' community; that AO3 is part of a gift economy and does not find the value of

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> femmequixotic, 'Website and Mission Updates'; femmequixotic, 'Terms of Service Draft Part One'; femmequixotic, 'Terms of Service Draft Part Two'; femmequixotic, 'TOS/TOU Focus Group'.

<sup>308</sup> 'What We Believe'.

transformative works in their financial worth; that fannish activities should be accessible to all; and that transformative fandom should embrace and encourage diversity. These five central principles have not changed as of 2020, having remained the core of the OTW's operations throughout the thirteen years since they were conceived.

AO3 shares these key principles, which are included in a rephrased form in its Terms of Service (ToS).<sup>309</sup> In addition, traversing the site reveals other principles espoused by AO3 which, while not enshrined in its mission statement, can be taken as additional principles important to its operations. For example, astolat's original articulation of the need for a fan-run, fan-owned platform is restated at the head of AO3's homepage and repeated in many of its various information pages,<sup>310</sup> as is the statement that AO3 is non-profit and non-commercial.<sup>311</sup> AO3's ToS, meanwhile, establishes its commitment to free speech and refusal to censor content based on personal preferences (the details and consequences of which are discussed at length in Chapter Four), which might be implicitly included under the principle of diversity but is stated explicitly here.<sup>312</sup>

In the following section I demonstrate how AO3 has adhered to these central principles during its trajectory towards prominence with the fanfiction community, building its assets as a publishing platform via means that align with its particular set of ideals.

## AO3's Forms of Capital

While AO3 shares a number of forms of capital with those attributed to the traditional publishing industry by Thompson,<sup>313</sup> as discussed in the Literature Review, his framework requires some adaptation in order to be applied to the fanfiction field. Most obviously, his use of the term 'intellectual capital' to refer to the IPs owned by publishers is awkward to transfer to fanfiction, as neither AO3 nor the writers who publish on it can claim ownership of the IPs their works are based on (though AO3 confirms in its ToS that users retain copyright of their own content<sup>314</sup>). I have therefore conceived of two forms of capital as alternatives to Thompson's 'intellectual' form: 'legal' and 'creative.'

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<sup>309</sup> 'Terms of Service'.

<sup>310</sup> 'About the OTW'; 'You Are Welcome at the Archive of Our Own'; 'Terms of Service', sec. B.1.

<sup>311</sup> 'About the OTW'; 'Terms of Service FAQ', sec. IV: Spam and Commercial Promotion.

<sup>312</sup> 'Terms of Service', sec. 1.E.3.

<sup>313</sup> Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 4–8.

<sup>314</sup> 'Terms of Service', sec. I.G.

Along with these adjusted terms, the following are the forms of capital I propose as defining what AO3 offers to the fanfiction publishing field and which the rest of this chapter explores in detail:

- Economic – the financial resources available to AO3
- Human – the volunteers and users who populate AO3 and particularly the human element within the site’s technological infrastructure
- Legal – AO3’s ability to advocate for the legality of fanworks and resources to protect any users who run into legal difficulties
- Creative – AO3’s active collection of fanworks, including its archive of imported works from other sites
- Social – the networks of connections and contacts established and maintained by AO3
- Symbolic – the reputation and prestige associated with AO3

In the following sections I examine the first five of these forms of capital, demonstrating how each one is aligned with AO3’s values and thus ultimately contributes to its symbolic capital. In this way, I evoke Bourdieu’s statement that ‘symbolic capital is nothing more than economic or cultural capital which is acknowledged and recognized,’<sup>315</sup> illustrating how AO3’s decade-long accumulation of capital in ways which do not break with but actively promote its central values has simultaneously brought it a valuable reputation as an institution with integrity.

## Economic Capital

As seen in the responses to FanLib and Kindle Worlds discussed in the Introduction, there is a strong anti-commercial thread that runs throughout fan culture – perhaps especially through the fanfiction community, which seems far warier of monetisation and professionalisation than fan artists, whose work can easily be found for sale in the form of prints or merchandise on sites like RedBubble, Society6 and Etsy. The idea of making money from work based on unlicensed copyrighted material sits uncomfortably with many fans, not only because of the potential legal ramifications, but also from an ideological point of view. Many of those in the fanfiction community see the freedom afforded by the

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<sup>315</sup> Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, 135.

non-commercial nature of fanfic as necessary to its nature, and worry that to monetise fic would damage both the form and the community surrounding it, as articulated in the following post by Tumblr user and AO3 author salt-of-the-ao3, in response to a question regarding fan authors receiving donations:

for me fandom is a space where people can do things out of sheer fun, without ulterior motives. Where everyone is equal in sharing their love of the fandom, and there's no hierarchy between content producers. Wether you write a self-insert<sup>316</sup> drabble<sup>317</sup> collection or a magnificent 200k epos,<sup>318</sup> you're equally valid, equally fans. No one can expect anything from you, you don't owe anyone anything, it's all entirely free and voluntary work, a work of love, for love. And I feel that money endangers that. Feels that it risks creating hierarchies, pressure, expectations.<sup>319</sup>

For this writer, money represents the threat of the fanfiction community becoming defined by hierarchies of popularity and obligation, irrevocably damaging its prioritisation of freedom and equality amongst its creators. Despite admitting in the next line of their post that this vision is 'utopic,' they maintain that they feel unable to shake off this feeling regardless of its potential naivety. This stance is representative of that section of fandom that seeks to preserve the amateur status of fanfic, recognising the practical benefits of being able to profit from their work but remaining reluctant to accept the inevitable compromises such a development would entail.

This wariness of money can also be seen as a significant influence on the way AO3 was conceived and designed. As mentioned above, even within astolat's original proposal, the stipulation that the site should be run 'with no ads and solely donation-supported'<sup>320</sup> was the second 'necessary feature' to be suggested. This rejection of commercial motives has remained a central tenet of the site throughout its development and operation, shaping the form of both AO3 and the OTW: from its outset AO3 has operated as a non-commercial, non-profit concern, registered as part of the OTW as a 501(c)(3) organisation within the United States. In practice, this means that the OTW and, crucially, the US-based

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<sup>316</sup> A 'self-insert' fic is one in which the author uses a simulacrum of themselves as a key character within the narrative.

<sup>317</sup> A 'drabble' is a short-form fic, traditionally composed of exactly 100 words (though it is often used as a catch-all term for any shorter fics).

<sup>318</sup> An alternative word for 'epic.'

<sup>319</sup> salt-of-the-ao3, 'Can I Ask Your Thoughts'.

<sup>320</sup> astolat, 'An Archive Of One's Own'.

donations it receives are tax-exempt but it also means that none of its earnings may be transferred to any individual and its assets must be directed back into its charitable cause.<sup>321</sup>

This policy necessarily extends to its users, who are forbidden from promotion of commercial products or activities under the Archive's ToS,<sup>322</sup> which it further clarifies in its FAQs, stating that:

We want the Archive to remain a non-commercial space. That means that it isn't the right place for offering merchandise, even fan-related merchandise. Linking to your personal page (not, for example, an Amazon author page) is fine, even if the personal page includes some items for sale, but the Archive is not advertising space.<sup>323</sup>

The phrasing of this statement makes clear that AO3's stance against monetisation is not simply a result of its legal responsibilities – it is significant that the words 'We want,' rather than 'We need' are used in the opening sentence, signifying an ideological stance rather than simply a legal one. Combined with the OTW's core value that its projects are part of the fannish gift economy, this reinforces the idea that AO3 is non-commercial not simply out of necessity but as part of its commitment to keeping monetisation and profit-seeking off its platform.

AO3 is rigorous in enforcing this rule: in practice, even mentioning the existence of a commercial account within a fic's paratext (e.g. stating that a fic is based on a prompt from a Patreon subscriber) has led to warnings and suspensions of user accounts.<sup>324</sup> For the most part, AO3's users seem to accept this as simply part of the deal of using the site and indeed do their part to police any breaches of the ToS: within my sample of AO3 works I came across a handful of authors<sup>325</sup> whose fics included mentions of commercial or crowdfunding accounts that seemed to have slipped through the system. Three of these had received comments warning about the possibility of suspension from AO3 as a result and later revisiting of these fics revealed that all three of the authors had removed the offending mentions.

The result is that the creation of profit, either for itself or for its users, cannot form any part of AO3's economic capital. Yet, despite this anti-profit ideology and the

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<sup>321</sup> 'Exemption Requirements - 501(c)(3) Organizations'.

<sup>322</sup> 'Terms of Service'.

<sup>323</sup> 'Terms of Service FAQ'.

<sup>324</sup> 'PSA: Don't Mention Commissions/Patreon on AO3'.

<sup>325</sup> Nine fics out of 1,200, or 0.75% of the sample, had some mention of a commercial account for their work.

longstanding concept of fandom as a gift economy (as discussed in the Methodology and Chapter Two), the necessity of some economic capital for AO3 to function is inescapable, particularly in the significant cost of server space and maintenance. According to the OTW's 2019 budget update, 74.2% of its yearly expenses go towards maintaining AO3, projected to result in a total expenditure of US\$334,351.23 for 2019.<sup>326</sup> Previous years saw similar ratios, of 73.9% in 2018<sup>327</sup> and 72% in 2017,<sup>328</sup> affirming that the Archive is both the OTW's central project and its most expensive, requiring running costs far beyond the means of the average fan. The bulk of these expenses are represented by server costs, necessary in order to host the site's large repository of fanworks – placed at 693GB in size in April 2019<sup>329</sup> – including necessary maintenance and upgrades as the US\$177,000 spent on a major overhaul and expansion of AO3's servers in 2019 demonstrates.<sup>330</sup> Simply put, AO3 allows its users access to a technological infrastructure that hosts a huge amount of content – almost seven million works as of December 2020, putting it at around the same size as the English-language edition of Wikipedia<sup>331</sup> – without requiring any type of payment or hosting any adverts, and with the promise not to sell any of their users' content or data to outside parties or use it in order to market third party products or services via the Archive.<sup>332</sup>

More than that, though, AO3's insistence that it is a 'fan-created, fan-run' project lends further significance to its provision of independently-owned servers. The necessity of creating a fan-operated platform that owned its own servers – and therefore could not be subject to the whims of outsider corporations such as LiveJournal or FanLib – was a major driver behind AO3 and the OTW's inception. Cesperenza, a prominent fic writer and contributor to the discussion that led to AO3, expressed the importance of this aim in a 2008 post supporting the newly-established OTW:

I want us to own the goddamned servers, ok? Because I want a place where we can't be TOSed<sup>333</sup> and where no one can turn the lights off or try to dictate to us what kind of stories we can tell each other. [...]

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<sup>326</sup> 'OTW Finance: 2019 Budget Update'.

<sup>327</sup> 'OTW Finance: 2018 Budget Update'.

<sup>328</sup> 'OTW Finance: 2017 Budget Update'.

<sup>329</sup> AO3 Status (@AO3\_Status), 'Today We Come to You with Fun Facts'.

<sup>330</sup> 'OTW Finance: 2019 Budget Update'.

<sup>331</sup> 'Wikipedia:Size of Wikipedia'.

<sup>332</sup> 'Terms of Service: III. Archive Privacy Policy', sec. F: What we will not do.

<sup>333</sup> According to the OTW's fannish wiki, Fanlore: 'To be TOSsed, or TOSed, is to have one's service agreement terminated due to a Terms Of Service violation. Generally, this is used when a person is suddenly ejected from a social networking site or web hosting service, rather than when someone has their phone cut off.' See: 'TOSsed'.

I want us to own the goddamned servers. I want us to make our own infrastructure, host our own party, set our own terms of service and play by our own rules.<sup>334</sup>

As mentioned in the Introduction, the phrase ‘Own the servers’ became something of a rallying cry for the fledgling OTW and its supporters,<sup>335</sup> who saw that only by owning the servers could AO3 hold up and sustain such ideologies as free speech, free expression and inclusivity without being subject to sudden changes in content policy (as with Strikethrough) or attempts at profiteering by fandom outsiders (as with FanLib). In 2009 AO3 achieved this aim, completing the purchase of two servers,<sup>336</sup> which allowed the site to enter open beta status<sup>337</sup> (i.e. to begin allowing the public to use the site). Since then, as AO3 has grown in popularity, so its number of servers has increased, to thirty-two in 2020,<sup>338</sup> which are housed in their own rack (storage structure) in a colocation facility (a data centre housing technological equipment and providing resources and maintenance), having transferred from a shared rack in 2015.<sup>339</sup> In practice, this means that AO3 is entirely hosted on servers owned by the OTW, allowing AO3 to achieve its goals of writing its own ToS and creating a space for fanfic which does not rely on for-profit companies, nor is subject to their potential censorship.<sup>340</sup>

In order to make possible the goal of owning the servers, the OTW needed to come up with a means of creating economic capital without resorting to practices that would go against their ideological stance, such as membership fees, advertising, or selling user data to third parties. As a result, AO3 is entirely funded by donations. Some of these are the result of employer matching programs (i.e. an agreement in which an employer matches their employee’s contribution to a non-profit entity), or affiliate schemes such as Amazon Smile or Humble Bundle. However, the bulk of AO3 and the OTW’s funding comes via donations from its userbase, mainly generated by biannual fundraising drives, described as ‘public radio-style pledge drives’<sup>341</sup> in the Organization’s FAQ. In practice, there is very little direct fundraising activity on the AO3 site, appeals for donations usually limited to a

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<sup>334</sup> Cesperanza, ‘Why I Support The OTW, by Speranza, Aged Mumble-Mumble’.

<sup>335</sup> See: Fiesler, ‘Owning the Servers: A Design Fiction Exploring the Transformation of Fandom into “Our Own”’; Lothian, ‘Archival Anarchies: Online Fandom, Subcultural Conservation, and the Transformative Work of Digital Ephemera’.

<sup>336</sup> samvara, ‘Servers Have Landed :)’.

<sup>337</sup> ‘A Look at the Archive Servers, Then and Now’.

<sup>338</sup> ‘AO3 Statistics 2020: A Look Behind the Scenes’.

<sup>339</sup> ‘A Look at the Archive Servers, Then and Now’.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> ‘Frequently Asked Questions’, sec. Archive of Our Own.

banner at the top of each page detailing the current total by way of a progress bar (see Figs. 2 and 3).

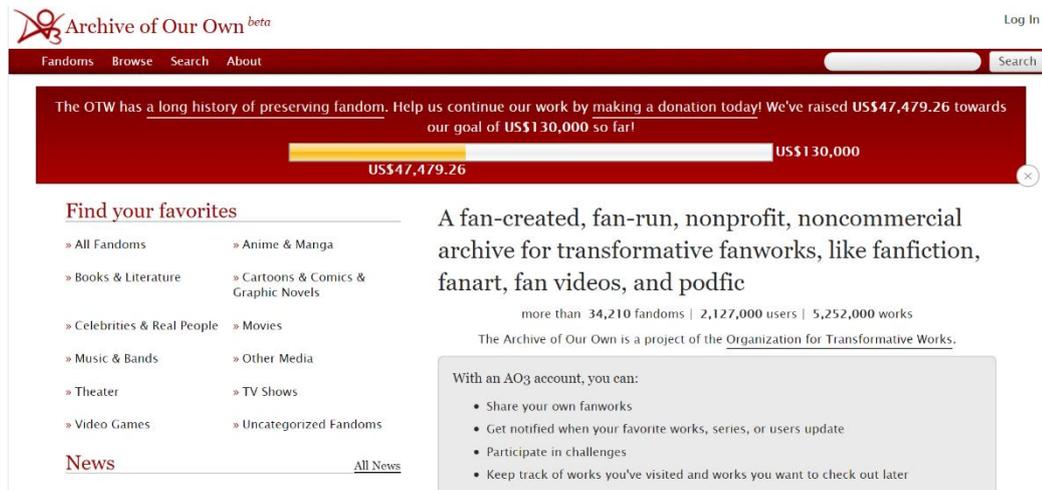


Figure 2: AO3's home page during the October 2019 fundraising drive, displaying an orange progress bar to signal that their fundraising goal has not yet been met.<sup>342</sup>



Figure 3: AO3's homepage during the October 2019 fundraising drive, displaying a green progress bar to signal that their fundraising goal has been reached.<sup>343</sup>

These drives have frequently resulted in the Archive raising more than its initial goal. For example, both of its 2019 fundraisers saw totals that almost doubled their US\$130,000 goal – raising US\$245,655 in April<sup>344</sup> and US\$247,098.69 in October<sup>345</sup> – with the October drive surpassing its initial goal with a day of launching. In April 2020 it exceeded even this success, making double its US\$130,000 goal within twenty-four hours and ultimately raising US\$458,501, just over three-and-a-half times its goal.<sup>346</sup> As a result, the OTW not only covers the costs of running AO3 and its other projects, but has been able to hold a significant amount of cash in reserve as a ‘rainy day fund’<sup>347</sup> (including an addition of

<sup>342</sup> Screenshot author's own. <http://www.archiveofourown.org>

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> ‘Thanks for Your Support’.

<sup>345</sup> ‘Thank You for Your Support’.

<sup>346</sup> ‘April 2020 Drive: Thanks for Your Support’.

<sup>347</sup> ‘OTW Finance: 2019 Budget Update’.

US\$150,000 in 2020), which it plans to use to set up a ‘low-risk, conservative investment portfolio by the end of 2021<sup>348</sup> in order to supplement its users’ donations.

Despite this success – or, perhaps more accurately, because of it – there are those in the fan community who object to AO3’s fundraising efforts, their protests inevitably gaining most intensity whenever a fundraising drive takes place. While many anti-AO3 arguments relate to the site’s highly permissive stance on content (discussed in detail in Chapter Four), others accuse AO3 of misappropriating or misusing its users’ donations, as in the following posts:

**Post One:**

it still...astounds me how like...ao3 doesn't even have that many functions and it still hasn't left beta and you can only join after getting an invite like what...are they DOING with all those “rainy day funds” like apart from server upkeep which is like fine whatever but apart from that. what on earth else are they spending the fucking money on. they don't even moderate the content that gets there so like. what the hell.<sup>349</sup>

**Post Two:**

when the people who work on ao3 are able to have money to fuck around with coding or get new, bigger, better servers... those people are going to take those skills and find a bombass job in web development or start a whole new site with these skills they learned because people donated to pay for whatever upgrades they want.<sup>350</sup>

The tone of suspicion and mistrust in these posts is clear, both writers convinced that AO3’s staff of volunteers must be secretly benefiting from the influx of donations, at the expense of the site’s userbase (an accusation that continually resurfaces despite the OTW’s legal status as a registered non-profit and their public posting of their financial reports<sup>351</sup> and budgets,<sup>352</sup> which lay out in detail how the OTW’s money is spent). Contrary to AO3’s emphasis of its status as ‘fan-run,’ there is a strong sense of an ‘us-and-them’ relationship between these posters and the AO3 staff, with a perception that the staff have a hidden agenda that takes advantage of their userbase. Moreover, there is an aggressive, antagonistic tone to the language used by these posters that, as demonstrated later in

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<sup>348</sup> H, ‘2020 Budget Update Post’.

<sup>349</sup> mccree, ‘It Still....Astounds Me How’.

<sup>350</sup> razzzybean, ‘Rather than Reblog That Long AO3 Thing’.

<sup>351</sup> See: ‘Finance Committee’.

<sup>352</sup> ‘OTW Finance: 2018 Budget’; ‘OTW Finance: 2018 Budget Update’; ‘OTW Finance: 2019 Budget’; ‘OTW Finance: 2019 Budget Update’; H, ‘OTW Finance: 2020 Budget’; H, ‘2020 Budget Update Post’.

Chapter Four, is typical of groups wishing to cause disruption and discord within fan communities.

Interestingly, though perhaps unsurprisingly, the response from pro-AO3 posters to this type of accusatory rhetoric tends to be an instant and widespread defence of the site's economic practices, reframing them within historical context to make clear the ideological positioning behind the OTW's choices. Threads rehashing the history of fandom and the events that led to the formation of AO3 and the OTW are routinely created, shared and expanded on in response to anti-AO3 posts,<sup>353</sup> in the hopes of educating newer fans and thereby pushing against the suspicion and resentment apparent in posts like those above. In particular, the OTW's aforementioned status as a registered non-profit is frequently used as proof of both its good standing and integrity and the apparent impossibility of its profiting from or otherwise misusing its users' donations.<sup>354</sup>

Perhaps even more tellingly representative of the symbolic value of AO3's stance, there is also a tendency towards triumphalism and pettiness amongst AO3's supporters, particularly in the wake of a successful fundraising drive. The two examples below give an impression of the tone of such statements:

**Post One:**

Not a question, just some positivity because HEY HEY HEY DID YOU SEE AO3 WAY EXCEEDED THEIR DONATION GOAL DESPITE THE JERKS OUT THERE WHO TRIED TO DERAILED IT AND I JUST THINK THAT'S FREAKING AWESOME, FANFIC SOLIDARITY YO!!!!!!!!!!!!<sup>355</sup>

**Post Two:**

\*quietly savors the taste of anti[-AO3] tears as ao3 surpasses their fundraising goal yet again\*<sup>356</sup>

One could argue that such belligerence is an inevitable response given the vitriol of the kind of anti-AO3 rhetoric exemplified above, reshaping the 'us-and-them' stance of AO3's detractors into a 'pro-AO3 vs anti-AO3' conflict in which the Archive's userbase closes in to protect the site. As a result, the anti-AO3 arguments end up reinforcing its good reputation, whilst providing an opportunity to educate (or possibly indoctrinate)

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<sup>353</sup> mittensmorgul, 'Anonymous Asked: When Ao3 Receives More Money than Their Goal'; fnlo, fnpoe, and grumpy-old-fandom-mom, 'These Fandom Moms Giving Money to Ao3'; queerindeed, 'Reminder That Ao3'; ifishouldvanish, 'Why Are Pillowfort/Ao3 Asking for Money??'

<sup>354</sup> porcupine-girl, 'For Someone Who Claims to Be a Fandom Elder'; changingthingslikeleaves, 'Do People Remember What AO3 Stands For?'

<sup>355</sup> Anonymous, 'Not a Question, Just Some Positivity?'

<sup>356</sup> Anonymous, '\*Quietly Savors the Taste of Anti Tears\*'

newer users on the origins of the Archive and the values that underpin it. However, it seems that there is also something else bleeding through the supporters' own statements. The site's success in raising economic capital via the 'moral' method of fundraising is held up as proof of AO3's integrity and trustworthiness, and therefore as a symbol of fandom's own ideological purity. Such an attitude seems to return the fanfic community to that utopic view expressed earlier by salt-of-the-ao3, that while money is a necessary evil, fandom can and should be a means of escaping the strictures and hierarchies of commercialism and monetisation, with AO3 acting as a trusted mediator between fans and money. Essentially, AO3 removes the need for fans to dirty their hands with money, allowing them to buy into the fantasy of an entirely free-to-access, non-transactional platform while benefitting from the resources only money can buy. When the site's users are requested to provide economic capital, it is styled as the noble gesture of a donation, rather than the transactional act of purchasing.

This could, perhaps, be seen as somewhat hypocritical on the part of transformative fandom, which uses a wide variety of highly commercial texts as the basis for its creative works. The question might be asked, how can fans desire, and in some cases insist on, a non-commercial space like AO3 while not only consuming commercial products and spending vast amounts of money on them, but also willingly conducting fannish activity on commercial platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Wattpad (the last of which is discussed in Chapter Two)? However, I suggest that this perception of fandom makes two potentially incorrect assumptions about fans and their control and awareness of the media ecosystem they engage with.

First, this question assumes that fans have much of a choice in the source of the media they consume, ignoring the fact that the vast majority of media content is produced and distributed by commercial bodies.<sup>357</sup> As a result, it would be difficult – though admittedly not impossible – to be a fan at all without drawing on some commercial sources. More importantly, though, such avoidance would arguably limit and chill the transformative creativity that fandom thrives on,<sup>358</sup> resulting in more of a capitulation than an act of resistance. As discussed further in Chapter Three, part of the drive to create fanfiction is to add to the cultural archive surrounding media texts and for fans to restrict themselves from engagement with commercial media would be to further limit their ability

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<sup>357</sup> Aguilar, 'Chart: Everything That Disney Owns'; WebFX Team, 'The 6 Companies That Own (Almost) All Media [Infographic]'; Louise, 'These 6 Corporations Control 90% of the Media Outlets in America. The Illusion of Choice and Objectivity'.

<sup>358</sup> Scott, 'Repackaging Fan Culture: The Regifting Economy of Ancillary Content Models', para. 1.4; Jenkins, 'Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture', 21–22.

to make such contributions (which is already constrained by the legal complications discussed in Chapters One and Three). Such a move would be self-defeating and reductive, only acting to further push fic writers' craft further into the margins.

Second, the question frames fans as being either oblivious or uncaring about the seeming contradiction in their attitudes. However, I propose that – in the case of AO3, at least – fans' desire to maintain a non-commercial space is not the result of hypocrisy or a lack of awareness but in fact comes from fans' acute consciousness that they are part of the media ecosystem and increasingly shifting towards the centre from the periphery.<sup>359</sup> Having experienced the likes of FanLib and Kindle Worlds, as well as the media industry's eagerness to use fan labour for its own ends (with varying degrees of consent), fans' preference for preserving and protecting a non-commercial space like AO3 is arguably born of pragmatism rather than hypocrisy. Indeed, as discussed in the Introduction, AO3 was founded in the spirit of such pragmatism, not as a means of separating fanfic from commercial media but as a way of ringfencing a particular online space in which fans would be protected from commercialism encroaching on and, more importantly, changing its practices. After all, whenever attempts have been made to commercialise fanfic, they have always resulted in restrictions on creativity in order to appeal to a wider audience or to pacify stakeholders. AO3, however, as journalist Katherine Trendacosta points out, 'has no advertisers to make happy, no corporate masters concerned with whether a gay character can sell tickets, and no interest in either censorship or deleting works it doesn't like.'<sup>360</sup> It is therefore able to provide protection from creative restrictions and censorship in a way that appeals to many fan writers and readers (as discussed further in Chapter Four).

While individual fans may vary greatly in their enthusiasm or reluctance to accept this symbiotic existence with commercial media, the AO3 community seems to have reached a balance between accepting that commercial media texts are a major foundation of fan activity while wanting to keep the specific space of AO3 as protected from commercialism as possible. This balance may be perceived as hypocritical by some, but I maintain that it is the pragmatic, realistic choice of a community that has always lived on the cusp of love for and subversion of the media products it draws on.

This helps to explain why perhaps the greatest form of economic capital AO3 can possess is the ability to accrue enough money to keep its platform not only functioning but

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<sup>359</sup> Chaney, 'What It Feels Like for a Fangirl in the Age of Late Capitalism'.

<sup>360</sup> Trendacosta, 'The Decade Fandom Went Corporate'.

thriving, while remaining, on the face of it, ideologically consistent with its stated non-commercial, gift-economy-based beliefs (although Chapter Two discusses problems arising from enforcing these beliefs). As the following sections on AO3's other forms of capital – human, legal, creative and social – demonstrate, this balancing act between practicality and idealism is one that shapes all areas of AO3, as well as its beloved status amongst the fan community.

## Human Capital

From its outset, the close relationship between AO3's human capital and its technological infrastructure has been crucial to the design and operation of the site. This is in no small part due to the site's reliance on voluntary labour from those fans with relevant skills, as expressed in astolat's original proposal:

I know we have project managers in our community -- and coders and designers -- can't we do this? Seriously -- we can come up with a site that would be miles better and more attractive to fanfic writers/readers than anything else out there, guys, because we actually USE the stuff.<sup>361</sup>

The rationale behind this thinking was that active fans – intrinsically more in tune with the processes, needs and beliefs of fandom – would be best placed to implement and maintain a fannish platform. Better a willing insider than a skilled outsider, as the issues with FanLib discussed in the Introduction had demonstrated. This idea of utilising the existing talent pool within the fan community led to one of the guiding principles that emerged from setting up the project: the intention for the OTW to 'grow our own',<sup>362</sup> to train coders internally in order to ensure there was a team of people qualified and experienced enough to maintain the platform once it had been constructed. In doing so, AO3 would ensure that its volunteers get something back from the donation of their time and effort, in the form of skills and experience that could be transferred into roles and projects beyond the Archive. Moreover, since the project has deliberately low barriers to entry, requiring no specific qualifications or geographical location in order to participate, it promotes the OTW's core principle of diversity, providing opportunities for those who might otherwise struggle to gain experience.

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<sup>361</sup> astolat, 'An Archive Of One's Own'.

<sup>362</sup> Fiesler et al., 'Growing Their Own: Legitimate Peripheral Participation for Computational Learning in an Online Fandom Community', 1375.

This is in line with fandom's encouragement of learning and mentoring. For example, numerous studies have examined the link between fanfiction, literacy, and the development of writing skills, both for young writers and for those learning English as a foreign language.<sup>363</sup> Meanwhile fan studies scholars have developed the concept of 'distributed mentoring,' in which online fanfic communities act as networks of support and feedback to help fan authors develop their skills.<sup>364</sup> Such findings indicate that while participating in fanfic is certainly a leisure pursuit, it can also be a means of self-improvement by learning new skills or providing mentorship for new entrants to the community. AO3's commitment to 'growing their own' situates it as belonging to fandom's didactic traditions, creating a space which facilitates the development of technical skills in addition to the writing skills the above studies deal with.

As a result, many of the decisions on how to design AO3 were rooted not only in how best to serve its prospective users but how to present an environment that facilitated effective learning for those who were interested. For example, the decision to construct the website in Ruby on Rails (a web-application framework) was made after a public discussion in the form of a 'Deathmatch' between coding languages Ruby and Python in order to determine which would be the easiest language for new and inexperienced programmers to learn.<sup>365</sup> The site's software is also open-source<sup>366</sup> and freely available for use 'by anyone to create their own archives, including archives limited to particular topics, fandoms, or ratings,'<sup>367</sup> in conjunction with the Archive's stated goal of maximum inclusiveness. Indeed, according to Coppa, as of 2014 the Archive was the largest women-dominated open-source coding project on the web.<sup>368</sup>

That AO3 represents a major women-led technological project indicates one of the most important ways its technology is filtered through a human lens. Fandom, and perhaps especially the fanfiction community, tends to conceptualise itself as a women-dominated

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<sup>363</sup> Black, 'Fanfiction Writing and the Construction of Space'; Black, 'English-Language Learners, Fan Communities, and 21st-Century Skills'; Korobkova and Black, 'Contrasting Visions: Identity, Literacy, and Boundary Work in a Fan Community'; Kelley, 'Chocolate Frogs for My Betas!: Practicing Literacy at One Online Fanfiction Website'; Lewis, Black, and Tomlinson, 'Let Everyone Play: An Educational Perspective on Why Fan Fiction Is, or Should Be, Legal'; Jenkins, "'Art Happens Not in Isolation, But in Community": The Collective Literacies of Media Fandom'.

<sup>364</sup> Campbell et al., 'Thousands of Positive Reviews: Distributed Mentoring in Online Fan Communities'; Evans et al., 'More Than Peer Production: Fanfiction Communities as Sites of Distributed Mentoring'; Frens et al., 'Reviews Matter: How Distributed Mentoring Predicts Lexical Diversity on Fanfiction.Net'; Zhang et al., 'Visualization of Fanfiction.Net: An Exploration of Amateur Writers'.

<sup>365</sup> otw\_recruit, 'Python vs Ruby Deathmatch!'

<sup>366</sup> 'The Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) - Archive Of Our Own (AO3) Project'.

<sup>367</sup> 'Terms of Service FAQ'.

<sup>368</sup> Coppa, 'Pop Culture, Fans, and Social Media'.

community<sup>369</sup> and AO3/the OTW specifically enforces this notion in the core values stated above, stating within its mission statement that it ‘represents a practice of transformative fanwork historically rooted in a primarily female culture’ and sees the preservation of that history as part of its purpose.<sup>370</sup> This extends to the site’s infrastructure, which has been suggested by Fiesler et al. as an example of feminist Human-Computer Interaction (HCI). Reduced to its simplest definition, HCI refers to the interaction between humans and computers (and the study thereof), while a feminist HCI, as defined by Bardzell, refers to ‘interactive systems that are imbued with sensitivity to the central commitments of feminism—agency, fulfilment, identity and the self, equity, empowerment, diversity, and social justice.’<sup>371</sup> Fiesler et al.’s study suggests that, as a result of the motivations behind AO3’s inception – to better serve the needs of women-led fandom by creating a platform designed and built by women fans – the site has feminist values ‘baked in’ (a phrase used by Naomi Novik, one of the study’s participants and a founder of AO3<sup>372</sup>) as a fundamental part of its infrastructure. Utilising Bardzell’s outline of feminist values within human-computer interaction,<sup>373</sup> the study focuses on examples of participation, pluralism and advocacy within AO3’s design as evidence of its feminist values. Thus, AO3’s active involvement of fans in the design and maintenance of the site is seen as encouraging participation, its insistence on making the site accessible and inclusive to all types of fans as encouraging pluralism, and AO3’s role as the public manifestation of the OTW’s support for the legitimacy of fanfiction as encouraging advocacy.<sup>374</sup>

Interestingly, Fiesler et. al. note in their conclusion that none of the site’s creators were familiar with the formal concept of a feminist HCI when the Archive’s infrastructure was being designed and constructed. Despite this, they nonetheless managed to create a ‘concrete and detailed example of what it means to enact feminist HCI in the design of a social computing system.’<sup>375</sup> Simply by listening to and involving its women users, AO3 stands as an active and still-evolving example of feminist innovation. This is particularly significant given the typical gender gap in computing, which has shown a decline in

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<sup>369</sup> so-caffeinated, ‘Why Are People Ashamed of Writing Fanfic?’; dsudis, ‘Let Us Not Desert One Another’; pan-princess-levy and thecaffeinebookwarrior, ‘I’ve Been Following You Closely’.

<sup>370</sup> ‘What We Believe’.

<sup>371</sup> Bardzell, ‘Feminist HCI: Taking Stock and Outlining an Agenda for Design’, 1301.

<sup>372</sup> Fiesler, Morrison, and Bruckman, ‘An Archive of Their Own: A Case Study of Feminist HCI and Values in Design’.

<sup>373</sup> Bardzell, ‘Feminist HCI: Taking Stock and Outlining an Agenda for Design’.

<sup>374</sup> Fiesler, Morrison, and Bruckman, ‘An Archive of Their Own: A Case Study of Feminist HCI and Values in Design’.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

professional women in the US since the 1990s, falling from 35% to 26% in 2013<sup>376</sup>. The existence of a space like AO3, where women are encouraged and supported in gaining computing skills by taking part in a successful women-led computing project based around a (perceived-to-be) women-dominated pastime, marks the Archive as providing a significant contribution to online culture and to twenty-first century media literacy, as well as building its technological capital in ways that uphold its values of feminism and mentoring.

Outwith its feminist leanings, AO3 also imbues its technology with human capital in ways that benefit the full range of its userbase, emphasising its commitment to remaining a ‘fan-run’ platform and a light touch when it comes to moderation. Perhaps most notable amongst these is the site’s tagging system, which has drawn positive attention both from information studies scholars<sup>377</sup> and mainstream media.<sup>378</sup> As described in the Methodology chapter, AO3’s tagging system is a hybrid of folksonomy and centrally-moderated taxonomy, with users able to enter any tags they wish (the only limitation being that individual tags must use no more than 100 characters and contain no commas), which are then sorted by a team of tag wranglers according to the site’s guidelines. No tags are deleted from individual works, thereby retaining the author’s preferred metadata but are merged under any relevant meta-tags, thus making it easier for users to find the content they are interested in.

The involvement of wranglers within the tagging system emphasises the importance of human involvement in order to make this piece of technological capital function. Internet linguist McCulloch argues that it is this decision to ‘[involve] humans by design’<sup>379</sup> that makes AO3’s tagging so effective, combining the best of rigid and ‘laissez-faire’ systems. Moreover, she suggests that the site’s awareness of the human element within its infrastructure is its greatest strength, representing a pragmatism about human nature that other platforms may lack:

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<sup>376</sup> Corbett and Hill, ‘Solving the Equation: The Variables for Women’s Success in Engineering and Computing’, 9.

<sup>377</sup> Price, ‘Fandom, Folksonomies & Creativity: The Case of the Archive of Our Own’; Price and Robinson, ‘“Being in a Knowledge Space”: Information Behaviour of Cult Media Fan Communities’; Lindgren Leavenworth, ‘The Paratext of Fan Fiction’; Dalton, ‘Searching the Archive of Our Own: The Usefulness of the Tagging Structure’.

<sup>378</sup> McCulloch, ‘Fans Are Better Than Tech At Organizing Information Online’; Busch, ‘An Archive Of Our Own: How AO3 Built a Nonprofit Fanfiction Empire and Safe Haven’; Bram, ‘How Desire Built One of the Best Information Archives Online’.

<sup>379</sup> McCulloch, ‘Fans Are Better Than Tech At Organizing Information Online’.

AO3's beliefs about human nature are more pragmatic, like an architect designing pathways where pedestrians have begun wearing down the grass, recognizing how variation and standardization can fit together. The wrangler system is one where ordinary user behavior can be successful, a system which accepts that users periodically need help from someone with a bird's-eye view of the larger picture.<sup>380</sup>

McCulloch's point is that AO3's tagging system tries to – and largely succeeds in – having its technological cake and eating it too. It allows its users the same freedom of expression that it advocates in its stance on content but also recognises the need for a reasonably delicate, non-intrusive moderation system in order to maintain order and usability, using a human-led system to nudge its users' behaviour into a manageable, navigable form.

## Legal Capital

If AO3's economic and human capital are most significant for the everyday running of the site and its steady presence in the fandom community (something highly valued by its userbase as the melancholy responses to any downtime demonstrate<sup>381</sup>), its legal capital is arguably most significant for the contemporary fanfic community's continued operation. From their beginnings as transformative fans of 1960s television shows such as the original *Star Trek*, modern fanfiction authors have been aware of the legal precariousness of their pastime, conscious that fanfic exists in a kind of limbo wherein it may or may not be a breach of copyright law. Having rarely been the focus of legal action, there exists no bright-line judgement on whether publishing fanfic is legal or not, causing fan writers to opt to fly under the legal radar rather than risk attracting attention from copyright holders who might force the issue in ways individual fans would struggle to defend against.<sup>382</sup>

In the past, this impression of fanfic as a potentially illegal activity was exacerbated by the wariness of fic-hosting platforms, many of which capitulated to demands by copyright holders to take down any fics based on their works. Among the most notorious of these is author Anne Rice's 2001 dispute with FFN, when Rice's lawyers requested that the site's owners remove and ban any works based on her storyworlds. Their argument was

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid.

<sup>381</sup> sacheland, 'When Ao3 Is down for Maintenance'; iamnmbr3, 'AO3-Me'.

<sup>382</sup> Tushnet, 'Legal Fictions: Copyright, Fan Fiction, and a New Common Law'; Lipton, 'Copyright and the Commercialization of Fanfiction'; Lantagne, 'Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Lucrative Fandom: Recognizing the Economic Power of Fanworks and Reimagining Fair Use in Copyright'.

that, even when done on a non-profit, amateur basis, the publishing of fanfiction based on Rice's work constituted copyright infringement and continuing to allow it would result in her lawyers contacting FFN's internet service provider and requesting that they take appropriate action.<sup>383</sup> FFN immediately complied with the demand by removing the category 'Anne Rice: Vampire Chronicles' from its site<sup>384</sup> and later added Rice to the list of authors it would not archive (on which she is still included as of December 2020<sup>385</sup>). As a result of her behaviour – which also allegedly included the harassment of individual fan writers<sup>386</sup> – Rice remains a figure of loathing in the fanfic community and a cautionary tale for fans who take for granted fandom's currently more relaxed attitude towards the possibility of legal action.<sup>387</sup>

That newer fans require to be educated on previous generations' fear of the cease-and-desist letter is often taken as a sign that a shift in fandom's confidence in the legality of fanfic has taken place. Certainly, some of the anxiety associated with publishing fic has waned in recent years, most visibly in the decline of the once-widespread practice of including disclaimers with each fic (which generally stated that the writer held no ownership over the characters or world their work was based on and that they would not profit from the fic, often along with a plea not to sue<sup>388</sup>). For example, in my sample of AO3 fics, only 5% (61 out of 1200) had a disclaimer attached, ten of which were tagged as belonging to the *Harry Potter* fandom, an older group perhaps retaining its legal wariness as a result of its combative history with movie producers *Warner Bros.*<sup>389</sup>

AO3 and the OTW have had a significant influence on this increased confidence amongst fan creators. As seen above, one of the OTW's core principles is the belief that transformative works have value in themselves, which the OTW puts into action by acting as a legal advocate for fanworks, offering education, protection and advice for fans, and actively campaigning for 'laws and policies that promote balance and protect fanworks and fandom.'<sup>390</sup> The OTW has been proactive in their advocacy role, with particularly notable

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<sup>383</sup> 'Anne Rice'.

<sup>384</sup> 'News (Archived Version)'.

<sup>385</sup> As of December 2020 this list comprises twelve authors and publishers, including Archie Comics, Raymond Feist and Robin Hobb. See: 'Guidelines'.

<sup>386</sup> 'Where Has Anne Rice Fanfiction Gone?'; rsasai, 'Do NOT Trust Anne Rice'; teabq, 'Oh Hey, Even More Blasts from the Past'.

<sup>387</sup> thebibliosphere, 'Ah, the Anne Rice Purges'; thechekhov, 'To Be Fair'; demonicae, 'One of the Reasons I Fell out of Love'.

<sup>388</sup> 'Disclaimer'.

<sup>389</sup> Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*; Tandy, 'How Harry Potter Fanfic Changed the World (or at Least the Internet)'; Murray, "'Celebrating the Story the Way It Is'": Cultural Studies, Corporate Media and the Contested Utility of Fandom'; Martens, *The Forever Fandom of Harry Potter*.

<sup>390</sup> 'Legal Advocacy'.

work in the realm of video remixes (vids), which it has successfully lobbied to have recognised as a creative endeavour which should be exempted from DCMA takedowns several times since its first petition in 2008-9.<sup>391</sup> <sup>392</sup> Merely the fact that an organisation exists which actively, visibly and successfully fights for fans' legal interests has created a rise in confidence in fanfic participants, as suggested by the following posts:

**Post One:**

I've been here for a while now- still not long, though. And I've literally never seen or heard of any of this stuff [fandom's history of fear regarding copyright]. It's insane to me to have to worry about being sued over fandom - which proves that OTW is working and is good at their job.<sup>393</sup>

**Post Two:**

I think I finally wrote my first fic on any website WITHOUT the disclaimer literally two months ago, on ao3. (Which I continue to donate to during their crazy regular donation calls because I never want to go back to shifty archive sites and the idea of there not being a transformative works defense fund.)<sup>394</sup>

Both of these posts emphasise not only the sense of safety that AO3 and the OTW provide but the profound change this represents compared to the previous culture of fear and anxiety that characterised the act of publishing fanfic. Both posts identify the OTW's legal advocacy specifically as the element that marks a shift from an era in which fic writers had to live with the worry of being sued for publishing their works to one in which such anxieties are distant memories and, for those such as the first poster, nigh on unimaginable. Even despite the OTW's arguments not yet having been tested with regards to fanfic, such posts make clear that they have instilled a previously unthought-of level of confidence in those who post their works to AO3.

Moreover, the OTW provides a clear argument for the legality of fanfic itself – one which is, crucially, rooted in the creative value of such works. Central to the OTW's advocacy is its stance that all non-commercial fanworks are legal, covered by the fair use doctrine in US copyright law.<sup>395</sup> This doctrine acts as a balancing influence on copyright

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid.; Freund, “‘Fair Use Is Legal Use’: Copyright Negotiations and Strategies in the Fan-Vidding Community”; Tushnet, “‘I’m a Lawyer, Not an Ethnographer, Jim’: Textual Poachers and Fair Use”.

<sup>392</sup> It should be noted at this point that this discussion is largely focused on US law, as AO3 states that since its servers are based in the US, ‘we believe that US law applies to content in the Archive of Our Own.’ See: ‘Frequently Asked Questions’, sec. ‘Legal’.

<sup>393</sup> book-of-charlie, ‘I’ve Been Here for a While Now’.

<sup>394</sup> themooglexorcist, ‘I Feel so Old Right Now’.

<sup>395</sup> ‘Copyright Law of the United States and Related Laws Contained in Title 17 of the United States Code’.

law, allowing for limited use of copyrighted material without requiring the permission of the copyright holder. It exists as an acknowledgement that the purpose of copyright law is to encourage society's progress by striking a balance between incentivising the work of creators and promoting a participatory culture – which must, by definition, allow for engagement with existing cultural materials. In other words, a creator should be allowed to profit from their own work without being usurped by another, but neither should that work's potential to inspire and influence be unduly limited.

Specifically, the OTW argues that non-commercial fanfic qualifies as fair use due to its transformative nature. As discussed in the Literature Review, the OTW's definition of a transformative work is one which 'takes something extant and turns it into something with a new purpose, sensibility, or mode of expression.'<sup>396</sup> Therefore, in order for a work to qualify as transformative, there must be evidence that the creator has put clear and substantial imaginative effort into creating a new work that is distinguishable from the original. It is worth noting that this effort does not, as Schwabach states, have 'anything to do with the work's literary merit. A lot of fanfic is, sadly, not very good; this does not mean that it is not transformative.'<sup>397</sup> Instead, as put in *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music*,<sup>398</sup> a work is judged to be transformative if it 'adds something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the first [work] with new expression, meaning, or message.'<sup>399</sup>

This kind of effort is fundamental to fanfiction, which is at its root the codification of the 'what if'<sup>400</sup> response to consuming media, with viewers inevitably asking questions involving characters and situations outwith canon. Fanfic writers take those 'what if' scenarios and expend time and effort on constructing texts in which they happen, a pursuit which might involve the smallest of nudges to the source material (perhaps providing a happy ending in place of an unhappy canonical one) or extensive and complex alterations resulting in an entirely different world and plot for the characters. As Tushnet points out, this often involves taking the story in a direction unlikely to be realised in canon,<sup>401</sup> as for example with the high level of queer love stories in fanfic compared with the mainstream, or fanfic's penchant for crossovers (in which two or more fandoms are combined in some way), which Samutina suggests 'epitomizes the transformative nature of fandom reception

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<sup>396</sup> 'Frequently Asked Questions', Section: Organization for Transformative Works.

<sup>397</sup> Schwabach, *Fan Fiction and Copyright: Outsider Works and Intellectual Property Protection*, 68.

<sup>398</sup> A US Supreme Court case in 1994, which established that a commercial parody can qualify as fair use.

<sup>399</sup> 'Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc., 510 U.S. 569', 579.

<sup>400</sup> Stasi, 'The Toy Soldiers from Leeds: The Slash Palimpsest', 286–88; Coppa, 'Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance', 229–32.

<sup>401</sup> Tushnet, 'Legal Fictions: Copyright, Fan Fiction, and a New Common Law', 670–71.

and provides a perfect example of fans' imaginary world-building (including everything that goes with world-building as a creative operation, i.e. creative inventiveness, fantasy, logic and the need to avoid contradictions, etc.).<sup>402</sup> Fans, too, are aware of this imaginative and creative effort as a key element of what defines fanfic as a form, as the following posts illustrate:

**Post One:**

What I find in canon does not measure up to the richness, the abundance, the diversity, the playful abandon, the range of emotion, or the sheer creativity of the fandom and fan fiction.

Canon gives birth to fan fiction, it's true. But where canon is bound and constrained by self imposed limits and narrowness of vision, fan fiction is free.<sup>403</sup>

**Post Two:**

i really hate how fanfic is viewed as less valuable than other writings because people assume it's easy to write when you're using the basis of another work... honestly, writing within the frame of someone else's creation can be even more challenging than writing something original and even plotless smut takes a lot of effort and practice to get right !!<sup>404</sup>

Both of these comments, despite their differences in language and tone, firmly reject the idea that the process of creating fanfiction lacks effort or skill simply because it is derivative. While not ignoring the fact that fanfic is built upon an existing text, each poster is at pains to point out that the act of transformation requires creative and imaginative labour and, echoing Stein and Busse,<sup>405</sup> may in some ways require more effort as a result of the restrictions emerging from building on canon rather than creating something wholly original.

That the creation of fanfic requires such effort is relevant to fair use as it indicates that the purpose of non-commercial fanfic is not to copy or supplant the source material but to interact with it in an imaginative, analytical manner, examining gaps and potentialities found in canon. Indeed, it has been suggested by some that fanfic may act as a means of extending the appeal of the original work, thereby increasing the range and

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<sup>402</sup> Samutina, 'Fan Fiction as World-Building: Transformative Reception in Crossover Writing', 436.

<sup>403</sup> arielsojourner, 'A Confession'.

<sup>404</sup> gilthoniels-blog1, 'I Really Hate How Fanfic Is Viewed'.

<sup>405</sup> Stein and Busse, 'Limit Play: Fan Authorship between Source Text, Intertext, and Context'.

longevity of its market viability.<sup>406</sup> As Lothian points out,<sup>407</sup> even the OTW has used this argument, arguing that since ‘fans are loyal customers’<sup>408</sup> they should not be seen as a threat to copyright holders’ interests but as a profitable asset.

The OTW’s argument about why fanfic is not illegal is so rooted in the fan community’s sense of what makes fanfiction valuable, it amounts to a reciprocal relationship in which the Legal Advocacy team draws on the philosophy fans use to validate their works to themselves, to validate fanfic to the outside world. This intertwining of the creative value of transformative works and their legality works to reinforce the OTW’s stated belief in the value of fanworks as social and cultural goods, their argument inherently drawing on an understanding and appreciation for the work and skill of fan creators and underlining AO3’s goal to be a community archive of creative works first and foremost. Building on this, the next section on AO3’s creative capital examines more closely how the Archive has made itself attractive to writers looking for a reliable repository for their works and how it has aligned itself with community values in its archiving practices.

## Creative Capital

If the legal protection of the works that comprise its archive constitutes a form of capital for AO3, it follows that those works themselves represent another. Indeed, the works users publish on the site are, in terms of its continued operation, the most important form of capital AO3 possesses – without a steady stream of fic authors choosing to publish their works on AO3, the site would face a struggle to justify its continued existence in its current form. This seems to place AO3 in the realm of UGC platforms, which depend on their userbase to create works with which to populate their site, rather than utilising an internal workforce to do so.

However, AO3 deliberately frames itself as something other than a content aggregator, instead choosing to position the site as an archive (indeed, it is often referred to simply as ‘the Archive’). The term ‘archive’ implies a service being provided, rather than a commodification of content, both to content creators, who may deposit their work in AO3 and then depend on it being preserved and protected, and to the fanfic community, who

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<sup>406</sup> Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*; Lipton, ‘Copyright and the Commercialization of Fanfiction’.

<sup>407</sup> Lothian, ‘An Archive of One’s Own: Subcultural Creativity and the Politics of Conservation’, para. 2.2.

<sup>408</sup> Tischer, ‘Does the OTW Represent All of Fandom?’

have a stable site on which to access both past and present works. Not only does this positioning back up the OTW's drive to legitimise and amplify fanfiction's cultural standing, as well as the labour and output of its users, it also allows the site to connect itself to fandom history, making a case for itself as the central hub of fanfiction's history as well as its future.

As discussed in the Literature Review, one of the defining characteristics often attributed to fanfiction is its fundamental intertextuality, which Derecho specifically links to the process of archiving in her definition of fanfic as 'archontic literature'.<sup>409</sup> As discussed in detail in Chapter Three, AO3 is arguably the virtual manifestation of Derecho's theory, a digital space in which individual transformations of myriad canons may be grouped together in a variety of sub-archives under the aegis of AO3's meta-archive, a web of interlinked works that also reach out to and draw from their originary texts. AO3's decision to use the term archive to describe itself is indicative, then, of that same understanding of the workings and value of transformative works that characterises the OTW's legal arguments – AO3 is aware and appreciative of the nature of the works it houses and its framing as an archive reflects that.

A similar sensitivity can be seen in the way that AO3 combines elements of community and institutional archives. In its self-proclaimed role as 'fandom's deposit library'<sup>410</sup> AO3 acts as an archival contact zone in which the fanfic community (that part of it which wishes to publish on AO3) can come together to construct its own records via the tagging and paratextual systems discussed above and in the Methodology. It also, however, imposes a degree of institutional control by, for example, enforcing its own mandatory warnings (the impact of which is discussed in Chapter Four), yoking its folksonomy to an overarching metadata system, and styling all deposited content with its own livery and page design (albeit this last is somewhat mitigated by the allowance of user skins,<sup>411</sup> a means of customising the appearance of webpages). Essentially, AO3 aims to provide the balance of protection and accessibility found in institutional archives whilst still emulating the collaborative nature and individualism of a community archive.

This attempt to balance community and institutional styles of archiving is perhaps most obvious with regards to AO3's involvement in the OTW's 'Open Doors' project. This venture aims to preserve fanworks for the future, both working with physical archives

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<sup>409</sup> Derecho, 'Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction'.

<sup>410</sup> 'Frequently Asked Questions', sec. Archive of Our Own.

<sup>411</sup> 'Archive FAQ > Skins and Archive Interface'.

(notably the Special Collections department at the University of Iowa Libraries<sup>412</sup>) and using its own digital resources to provide space for fannish artefacts which might otherwise be lost or rendered inaccessible. AO3 has a central role in this project, providing server space to host at-risk fic archives and, importantly, providing the option for these archives to remain active, continuing to accept new entries into their collections. This includes a number of archives with particular historical significance for fandom, for example the fannish content found on discussion forum provider Yahoo Groups, which was announced as closing down in December 2019 with very little prior warning,<sup>413</sup> or the *Harry Potter* archive ‘FictionAlley’ (FA), which merged with AO3 in August 2018 after seventeen years of independent operation.<sup>414</sup>

By acquisitioning archives into its own platform, AO3 very clearly plays the role of institution, subsuming and recontextualising individual archives like FA into its monolithic, multi-fandom space. However, it also takes steps to mitigate the effects of assimilation, working closely with archive moderators and community members in order to establish, understand and respect their conventions, and ensuring that all creators receive proper credit and can remove their works from AO3 or orphan them (i.e. remove the creator’s identifying data from the work and its metadata). In addition, the imported archive is set up as its own collection (AO3’s term for a group of works collected together under one heading) and can add a banner to its collection pages as a mark of personification (see Fig. 4). While this does not negate the effects of recontextualising FA as part of AO3 rather than an independent archive, it does at least provide a measure of delineation for collections which originated from elsewhere, indicating AO3’s intentions to preserve rather than erase their history.



Figure 4: FictionAlley's welcome page on AO3.<sup>415</sup>

<sup>412</sup> ‘Guide to the Organization for Transformative Works Fanzine and Fan Fiction Collection’.

<sup>413</sup> ‘Yahoo Groups Closure – What You Can Do – Part 2’.

<sup>414</sup> ‘FictionAlley Is Moving to the AO3’.

<sup>415</sup> Screenshot author’s own. <https://archiveofourown.org/collections/fictionalley>.

In taking such measures, the Open Doors project follows the principles that Battley suggests institutions importing community archives should abide by, ensuring to ‘accept the validity of the community’s model of recordkeeping, put effort into developing an understanding of the existing recordkeeping structures and processes, nurture ongoing relationships and build in community-appropriate elements that enable ongoing effective interaction between the systems of the community and the archivists.’<sup>416</sup> By taking such a ‘partnership approach,’<sup>417</sup> AO3 has been able to set itself up as an archival authority, taking a leading role in guiding and shaping how fanfiction history is preserved, while also maintaining its community-friendly demeanour.

The import of FA is also a useful example of how the Open Doors project helps AO3 to function as a preserver of fannish history and to position itself as part of that history. The *Potter*-based archive has something of a storied history within fandom, with two particular events giving it an important place in fannish memory. Firstly, FA entered into affiliate programmes with Warner Bros (producers of the Harry Potter movies) and Amazon in order to fund its continued existence,<sup>418</sup> a particularly notable development given Warner Bros’ combative history with the Harry Potter fandom.<sup>419</sup> Secondly, and most notoriously, prior to her move to professional authorship, well-known YA author Cassandra Clare (then Claire) was a popular writer on FA who was accused of going beyond fanfic’s essentially derivative nature into plagiarism,<sup>420</sup> including in her stories entire passages from then out-of-print novel *The Hidden Land* by Pamela Dean. This controversy followed Clare into her professional writing career, many believing as a result of her alleged history of plagiarism that her bestselling series *The Mortal Instruments* was a version of her fanfiction with the serial numbers filed off, in the manner of FSoG, rather than a work of original fiction.<sup>421</sup> The import of FA into AO3 (in conjunction with FA’s entry on Fanlore,<sup>422</sup> the OTW’s wiki site, which covers both these events) ensures that its presence within the fanfic community and the link to fanfic’s history it represents is not lost.

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<sup>416</sup> Battley, ‘Authenticity in Places of Belonging: Community Collective Memory as a Complex, Adaptive Recordkeeping System’, 74.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>418</sup> Tandy, ‘How Harry Potter Fanfic Changed the World (or at Least the Internet)’.

<sup>419</sup> Martens, *The Forever Fandom of Harry Potter*.

<sup>420</sup> Avocado, ‘The Cassandra Claire Plagiarism Debacle’; ‘Cassandra Claire’; Jamison, *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World*, 233–39.

<sup>421</sup> Baker-Whitelaw, ‘A Beginner’s Guide to Cassandra Clare and Her “Mortal Instruments”’.

<sup>422</sup> ‘FictionAlley’.

Moreover, the announcement of FA's import onto AO3 served for some as a reminder of its existence<sup>423</sup> or as an introduction to it,<sup>424</sup> rejuvenating the site's presence within the fandom community, as evidenced by the reactions to the news on both AO3 and social media, examples of which are below:

**Post One:**

I...had completely forgotten that FictionAlley existed.  
Or...well...I guess I just supposed that it no longer existed.  
I may need to see if my account is still active.  
Wow. Their forums were the start of...SO MUCH in my life.<sup>425</sup>

**Post Two:**

Oh my gosh. I totally remember FictionAlley <3 Can't wait to find some old faves and maybe some new ones!<sup>426</sup>

By providing a home for fannish spaces like FictionAlley, AO3 not only conserves the creative content of the site that might otherwise be lost – or at least made more difficult to discover and navigate – but also preserves the fandom history associated with the site. In this sense, AO3's archiving is more than the populating of its site with content, it is an ideological process, corresponding with the OTW's values of preservation and accessibility. The value of AO3's creative capital, therefore, is rooted not in its perceived literary quality but in its function as the artefacts of a creative community, carefully preserved and widely accessible.

## Social Capital

Community is also at the core of AO3's social capital, both in its role as a community resource and in how it facilitates interaction between writers and readers. Before addressing AO3's social capital, though, it is worth making clear that despite providing some features familiar from social media sites (such as threaded comments and a 'like' system resembling those used by Facebook and Twitter, the ramifications of which are discussed in Chapter Two), AO3 does not consider itself a social platform but rather, as explored above, an archive. Indeed, the OTW has consistently resisted calls for it to create its own social media platform, for instance in the wake of Tumblr's 2018 purge. Following

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<sup>423</sup> Hazelaar, 'Comment on FictionAlley Is Moving to the AO3'.

<sup>424</sup> AdaptiveMyth, 'Comment on FictionAlley Is Moving to the AO3'.

<sup>425</sup> unanon, 'FictionAlley Is Moving to AO3'.

<sup>426</sup> @elleminnowpee, 'Oh My Gosh'.

this development, the OTW was flooded with so many requests for it to provide a fan-friendly replacement that it eventually stated that it had no plans to create a social media site, citing a lack of the resources necessary to implement such a project.<sup>427</sup>

Tumblr user *bramblepatch* articulates the significance of AO3's rejection of being classified as social media in the following post (as well as incidentally reinforcing the importance of AO3's positioning as an archive and a non-commercial site):

but, uh, AO3 isn't a social media site? It's an archive. It's a community resource in that it's a well-organized place to host our content but it's not meant to function as the primary location Where Community Happens. [...] it's highly efficient archival software rather than a social network that's trying very hard to predict what, statistically, is likely to keep you engaged. they don't have any reason to artificially inflate the amount of time you spend on things you aren't looking for, because they're not selling your time and attention to advertisers.<sup>428</sup>

This post posits that social interaction is not a key driver for AO3, as its motivations lie in the preservation and facilitation of access to fanworks, and that the hub of fandom's social side is to be found elsewhere. Indeed, as described in the Methodology, this thesis was designed with this distinction in mind, fieldwork in AO3 being supplemented by parallel work with Tumblr, one of those spaces where fandom community 'happens' as the above post puts it. Yet that emphasis on AO3 as a community resource indicates that, while AO3 may not be primarily concerned with user interaction in the way that social media sites are, it certainly possesses significant social capital in other ways.

This is perhaps most obvious in that, as a project belonging to the OTW, AO3 is part of a network which brings together a number of different fannish interests, thereby interconnecting a wider network of fans than AO3 might on its own. Arguably most significant to this is the three-way axis of AO3, Fanlore, and TWC, the peer-reviewed academic journal which was the OTW's first major project to launch, in September 2008.<sup>429</sup> Each of these projects represents a particular type of fannish activity, sometimes also distinguished as types of fan:

- AO3 – transformative fandom
- Fanlore – affirmational/curatorial fandom

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<sup>427</sup> *transformativeworks*, 'Seeing as Tumblr Seems'.

<sup>428</sup> *bramblepatch*, 'You Know, It Kind of Feels to Me'.

<sup>429</sup> 'Transformative Works and Cultures'.

- TWC – academic fandom (scholar-fans)

Transformative fandom is characterised, as discussed in the section on legal capital above, by a desire to engage with the object of interest by changing it in some way, moulding the source into a new shape via imaginative and creative effort. This tends to result in artistic output such as fanfiction or fan art, which is shared in non-official fan communities. Affirmational fandom, on the other hand, tends to focus on the details and facts of canon, characterised by behaviours such as collecting and curating. Affirmational fans are more likely to congregate in officially-sanctioned spaces and to subscribe to the ‘Word of God’ (epitextual statements made by any person considered to have authority over canon e.g. the author, director or showrunner<sup>430</sup>).

These two approaches to fandom are often pitted against each other, perhaps as a result of the original post in which the terms were proposed,<sup>431</sup> which not only specifically styled the two terms versus each other but also assigned a gender to each, framing affirmational fandom as ‘male’ and transformative fandom as ‘female’ (a distinction generally, though not entirely,<sup>432</sup> agreed upon by both fans and scholar-fans<sup>433</sup>). Academic fandom, meanwhile, tends to be seen as somewhat removed from both these forms of fandom. Arguably this is a result of the delicate position in which scholar-fans often find themselves, as discussed in the Methodology, of trying to maintain their professional distance and objectivity whilst leveraging their interest in and experience of fandom as a key part of their research. TWC, however, actively attempts to mitigate against this, providing a space for fans outside of academia to submit work to the journal, its ‘Symposium’ section dedicated to non-peer-reviewed essays, with the aim to ‘help fans who happen to be interested in engaging in fandom in a more theoretical and academic way to share their scholarship more widely, improving communication between fans and academia, as well as provide a theoretical background for OTW’s mission of explaining and preserving fandom and transformative fanworks.’<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> ‘Word of God’.

<sup>431</sup> *obsession\_inc*, ‘Affirmational Fandom vs. Transformational Fandom’.

<sup>432</sup> Walls-Thumma, ‘Affirmational and Transformational Values and Practices in the Tolkien Fanfiction Community’; Wang et al., ‘Beyond the Multidisciplinary in Fan Studies: Learning How to Talk among Disciplines’.

<sup>433</sup> Ford, ‘Fan Studies: Grappling with an “Undisciplined” Discipline’, 56; Conroy, ‘Gender Dynamics in Fandom: The Gender Theory Behind Curative and Creative Fandoms’; Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*, 188–89; Jenkins, ‘Aca-Fandom and Beyond: John Edward Campbell, Lee Harrington, and Catherine Tossenberger (Part Two)’.

<sup>434</sup> ‘Frequently Asked Questions’, sec. Transformative Works and Cultures: What’s the purpose behind Transformative Works and Cultures?

By providing spaces for each of these distinct forms of fannish output, the OTW functions as its own creativity-based social network, not privileging any one type of productivity over the other but bringing them all together under the umbrella of fanworks and encouraging cross-pollination between each of its nodes. AO3 has a crucial role in this – for example, its archiving of fanworks discussed above works in conjunction with Fanlore’s practice of documenting important events and persons involved in fandom, the two sites working in tandem to provide both a transformative and affirmative account of fanfic history. Moreover, AO3’s allowance of fan meta (non-fiction writing that addresses some aspect of fandom, from source material to fan behaviours) within its archive also acts to bring down barriers between transformative and academic fans. Thus, an essay on the finer points of *Star Wars* (SW) lore would hypothetically be allowed to co-exist in the same space as a set of data on the most popular SW ships and a fic depicting Princess Leia’s offscreen pregnancy with the future Kylo Ren. This upholds the OTW’s aforementioned values of maximum inclusivity and diversity, AO3 functioning as one part of an online space which welcomes many different types of fan and fanwork, creating an interconnected archive of transformative, affirmative, and academic fan output (though the effectiveness of this aim at being inclusive and diverse is problematised and discussed further in Chapter Four).

The other major area from which AO3 derives its social capital is the community found in its commenting system. While it holds true that AO3 is not social media, it does facilitate communication between writers and readers who wish to leave feedback on fics. As discussed in the Literature Review, community is often seen as an essential part of the creative process of producing fanfic, with readers variously providing story prompts, helping writers choose what to write next and, most importantly, providing feedback on WIPs and thereby helping to shape the ongoing story. For an idea of how important this communal contribution is, one need only look at the bad feeling amongst many fans after the publication of FSoG. For much of the fanfic community, and particularly those who had provided feedback and encouragement while *Master of the Universe* – the fanfic that would eventually become FSoG – was being posted as a WIP, author E.L. James’ removal of its original fanfic form from the internet and attempts to minimise the contribution of fan readers to its development and success were seen as a betrayal and a failure to give credit to her community collaborators.<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>435</sup> Jones, ‘Fifty Shades of Exploitation: Fan Labor and Fifty Shades of Grey’, sec. 3; Moraine, ‘Fifty Shades of Grey and the Ethics of Fannish Prosumption’; Brennan and Large, ‘“Let’s Get a Bit of Context”: Fifty Shades and the Phenomenon of “Pulling to Publish” in Twilight Fan Fiction’.

AO3's structure, by comparison, invites the foregrounding of such social connections, not only in comment spaces or author's notes but in specific affordances designed to emphasise links between users. These include: the ability for writers to indicate when a work has been inspired by another, including an automated credit and link to the inspirational work in the paratext of their work and – for works which are on AO3, and subject to the original writer's agreement – a reciprocal link in the original work's paratext to the new work; and the ability to 'gift' fics to other users (i.e. to specifically mark a fic as being a gift for another user or users),<sup>436</sup> with the name of the recipient appearing in the paratext preceding a fic and the number of gifts a user has received appearing in their profile page, a high number of gifts indicating a user with a significant amount of personal social capital.

Moreover, the public nature of AO3's comments system makes visible the interactions between writer and reader, which might take several forms, including emotional exchanges, personal interactions and – most importantly, as discussed in Chapter Two – feedback on the work itself. It is an area of great potential social value for both writers and readers, not simply because of the possibility of creating friendship bonds in the process of commenting, but also in terms of the communal creative process fanfic represents. The comment space provides social capital for both groups, giving writers an active audience who provide actionable feedback, in response to which they may adjust elements of their work to be more effective, while readers are elevated from observers to collaborators, given an active role in the creative process.

Admittedly, the exact influence readers may have had on a fic as it ultimately appears is not necessarily obvious, the writer not revealing if or how they have been affected by their readers' response. However, it is also not unusual to find paratextual reference being made to a narrative or editorial change as a result of reader feedback. Some authors even formalise their readers' influence on the story, creating polls to decide a particular plot point, or soliciting requests or prompts for future content. Such directly collaborative interactions illustrate how AO3 functions as a writer/reader community, its social value not based in status updates but in responses to and discussions of the process of creating fic.

To sum up, then, each of AO3's forms of capital aligns with one or more of its core values. Its economic capital is gained through donations rather than advertising revenue or the selling of user data, echoing its commitment to gift economy principles and anti-

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<sup>436</sup> 'Archive FAQ > Tutorial: Posting a Work on AO3', sec. Gift this work to.

commercial stance. Its focus on the human capital in its technology promotes feminism, education and mentoring, and its status as a fan-run platform, giving users a significant amount of control over their experience of the site. Its legal capital is rooted in an understanding and appreciation of the creative value of fanworks, drawing on the imaginary effort and creative skill inherent in creating transformative works to argue for their legality under fair use. Its creative capital promotes the values of accessibility and preservation via AO3's positioning as an archive, while also promoting the value of fanworks as fundamentally intertextual and archontic. Finally, its social capital embraces diversity – as defined by AO3 as the coming together of 'people of all opinions and persuasions,'<sup>437</sup> 'No matter your appearance, circumstances, configuration or take on the world'<sup>438</sup> – as part of the OTW's network of different fandom forms, while also emphasising the creative, writer/reader community that is vital to the production and publication of fanfic. As a whole, AO3 (aided often by the OTW) represents a remarkably successful instance of a platform building its assets on a set of ideological principles and its ability to abide by them, rather than a commercial model of how much profit it can generate.

The result of this, I propose, is that as well as acting as assets within their own right, each of AO3's forms of capital also contribute to the site's symbolic capital, its commitment to its ideological principles helping to build up its reputation and prestige within the fanfic community. This commitment to its stated principles emphasises that while traditional publishers' symbolic value is largely rooted in their cultural impact, built from a track record of publishing high-quality and/or popular books and authors, AO3's symbolic value is more closely connected to its role as an ideological mouthpiece in fandom. Individual writers come and go from AO3 for myriad reasons, and individual works are regularly orphaned or deleted, yet, as long as AO3's overall cache of content continues to grow, the effect of such changes on the site's reputation is negligible. Instead, AO3 derives its symbolic value from aligning itself with the ideological beliefs held by the fanfic community, as well as, increasingly, from the status and reputation it continues to build outwith the fandom ecosystem. In the remainder of the chapter I discuss the Archive's internal and external symbolic capital, how it builds the site's reputation and how the two may create conflict as well as prestige for the site.

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<sup>437</sup> 'You Are Welcome at the Archive of Our Own'.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

## A Saviour of Our Own: AO3 and the Value of Symbolic Capital

Over the years since it was proposed, AO3 has carefully built a narrative around itself of a stable, user-friendly platform which espouses and operates on such ideologies as freedom of speech and expression, equality and safety for minorities (especially women and queer people), and a rejection of commercial business models. Moreover, it has established a reputation for itself as a central hub and mouthpiece for fandom, both as the preserver of fan history and the most reliable, trustworthy keeper of its present and future. It has been remarkably successful in this self-mythologization, as I have already touched on in the triumphalist response by fans to its fundraising efforts (and, as discussed in Chapter Four, the anger at any questioning of its conduct or leadership).

Another particularly vivid example of the fervour with which the Archive's supporters value its ideological stance can be seen in the controversy surrounding Tumblr's changes to their content policy in the late 2010s. Prior to late 2018, one of Tumblr's major selling points to its users had been its perceived positivity towards adult content – a previous official statement on the posting of NSFW content on the site asserted that, 'We have no problem with that kind of stuff. Go nuts. Show nuts. Whatever,'<sup>439</sup> demonstrating the laissez-faire attitude Tumblr cultivated at the time. In contrast to an increasingly puritanical and censorial internet,<sup>440</sup> Tumblr was seen as a sex-positive space which allowed not only for titillation but education and sensitive discussion as well. This reputation took something of a hit in 2013, when Tumblr temporarily excluded NSFW and 'adult' blogs from major search engines and its own search tool. However, an apology and a removal of this heavy-handed filtering system seemed to restore faith in the platform for the time being.<sup>441</sup> Then, in November 2018, in the midst of my own fieldwork on the site, users noticed that Tumblr's app had disappeared from Apple's app store, with the site eventually admitting that this was due to issues with child pornography appearing on the platform<sup>442</sup> (one of many issues that Tumblr's users had protested against to little avail). A few days following this, users began reporting incidents of entire blogs being deleted, with those featuring NSFW content apparently being particularly affected. This led to weeks of

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<sup>439</sup> 'Tumblr NSFW Content Purge'.

<sup>440</sup> Blue, 'How Sex Censorship Killed the Internet We Love'; Tamara, 'Online Censorship Gains Momentum With Instagram's New Policy'; Gillespie, 'How Social Networks Set the Limits of What We Can Say Online'.

<sup>441</sup> Gillespie, *Custodians Of The Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media*, 174–75.

<sup>442</sup> 'November 16, 2018: Issues with the IOS App'.

speculation and worry over the future of the site, during which period user trust in the platform began to be seriously eroded, the hashtag #tumblrpurge appearing across social media as users tracked and protested against the apparent deletions.<sup>443</sup> Finally, in December 2018 the social media platform announced that it would no longer allow users to post ‘adult content, including explicit sexual content and nudity (with some exceptions).’<sup>444</sup> The confirmation of Tumblr’s policy change only exacerbated the feelings of betrayal and disappointment that had been building amongst Tumblr’s userbase, leading to angry and emotional responses including the following:

**Post One:**

So since Tumblr essentially fucked up [referring to the site’s failure to remove porn bots and hate groups], they’re now deleting blogs right and left that are NSFW (and a few that are SFW) even though those blogs did nothing wrong. Now those innocent, rule following, bloggers are angry, scared and panicked that they’re being targeted for the actions of someone else.<sup>445</sup>

**Post Two:**

Like Tumblr explain I’m in confusion, what do you mean this is still Tumblr. This is not our Tumblr. This is a purge. They’re taking down everyone slowly. Give us our Tumblr back. I’m not trying to be more obvious but they are taking the free creativity and freedom to post whatever. They taking our save space.<sup>446</sup>

**Post Three:**

Dear Tumblr,

I do hope you understand that if you change your stance and purge all NSFW content and make people unable to search for it you’re openly spitting in the face of your userbase. And no, it’s not just for people who “enjoy” the explicit art. It’s for the fact that the openness with which people have been able to share their NSFW content has generated a wide-reaching sex-positive culture that has honestly helped me and many others explore and understand our sexuality better—because of the people who post and share genuinely helpful advice and content.<sup>447</sup>

As suggested by the above posts, as well as my own observations, the overall feeling amongst Tumblr’s userbase was one of betrayal and alienation, with some users deciding to mothball or delete their blogs in protest at the changes. The impression was that Tumblr

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<sup>443</sup> ‘Tumblr NSFW Content Purge’.

<sup>444</sup> D’Onofrio, ‘A Better, More Positive Tumblr’.

<sup>445</sup> yourhalfassedmessiah, ‘How’s It Feel to Be Scapegoated...’

<sup>446</sup> maysons-world, ‘What the Fuck Is up Tumblr’.

<sup>447</sup> quintessencemeister, ‘Dear Tumblr’.

had chosen its corporate interests over the needs of its userbase – in other words, that it had sacrificed specifically the symbolic capital users found in its lack of censorship in favour of economic capital. Admittedly, from an outsider perspective this may appear to be rather a naïve or short-sighted view, given the increasing external pressures on online platforms to moderate their content in order to remain operational (as discussed in Chapter Four) but given the clumsily-handled launch of these new policies (Tumblr’s ban on ‘female-presenting nipples’ being a particular subject of outrage and bemusement<sup>448</sup>) as well as fandom’s history of leaving platforms that restrict adult content, it is perhaps an unsurprising one.

In any case, though the ban did not specifically threaten writers as text-based erotica was still permitted on the site, many writers – fanfic authors amongst them – chose to protest the changes and the unwelcoming atmosphere they had created, either out of solidarity for their fellow creators or in the belief that visual art would be only the first of a series of casualties in which writing would inevitably be included. References to similar crises from fandom history were repeatedly invoked, particularly to Strikethrough which, as described in the Introduction, led to fandom’s migration away from LiveJournal, with fans beginning to seek out alternative spaces that could be trusted not to ‘TOS’ them, as the following posts illustrate:

**Post One:**

Strikethrough [...] left scars on fandom, scars that Tumblr’s purge will also leave. Whole communities will be lost and scattered to the winds. Friendships will change, and the online nature of fandom will be irrevocably shaped by the fall of yet another community. However, just as this is not the first time, this is also not the last time. As long as commercialization of fandom exists, we will continually be chased from our homes on the internet and need to find new homes. But we have persisted in the past and we will persist again.<sup>449</sup>

**Post Two:**

This is LJ [LiveJournal] Strikethrough all over again. That shook our community up but we rallied. We made an archive of our own to keep ourselves safe. Now we need more. We need a social space. We need a place to share art, ourselves, and our daily lives.<sup>450</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> Rosenberg, ‘The Ever-Mutating Life of Tumblr Dot Com’; Fiesler and Dym, ‘Fandom’s Fate Is Not Tied to Tumblr’s’; Hoins, ‘The “Flaming Dumpster Fire” of the Internet: How Tumblr’s Porn Ban Is Still Impacting Users’.

<sup>449</sup> ao3datafan, ‘Breathe, We’ve Been Here Before (An Open Letter to Fandom)’.

<sup>450</sup> michellecosine, ‘We Need to Rally’.

Such posts demonstrate that while fans are used to having to leave platforms when their policies no longer align with fannish needs, access to spaces or ‘homes’ in which to share creative and social practices is a constant requirement for fandom. Yet the need to look to corporations like LiveJournal and Tumblr for such spaces is a wearying one for fans, who face losses on both an individual and community level each time a new migration becomes necessary.

It is telling, then, that when speaking of safe spaces for fan activity in the wake of Tumblr’s change in policy, AO3 was, as in Post Two above, repeatedly mentioned as an example to follow, a kind of ideal model for fannish platforms. In stark contrast to the dwindling levels of trust in Tumblr, it quickly became clear that one of the more notable effects of the Tumblr purges was confirmation of the OTW and AO3 as the true central hub for fandom, and the fanfiction community in particular. AO3’s supporters took this opportunity to speak in favour of the site’s commitment to protecting fannish interests and content, using both text and images to position AO3 as the anti-Tumblr, as the following posts illustrate:

**Post One:**

Fandom exists because people bother to build it, but periodically websites and fandom spaces get bulldozed and tons upon tons of stuff is lost. Every contribution is valuable, because if it weren’t for those contributions, fans would only have whatever canon had to offer. AO3 is currently the closest thing fandom’s got to stable ground, so copy and pasting old stuff onto there is a worthwhile thing to do.<sup>451</sup>

**Post Two:**

Ao3 you are like our last place that is sacred PLEASE never change<sup>452</sup>

**Post Three:**

AO3 is a blessing to all fandoms that find a home within its confines. It gives fandoms not only a home, but a safe place to dwell as fans rejoice in the creativity of other fans; stories, vids, pod fics and all manner of other creations. It’s all there for us to be amazed and amused by. Long live AO3. Long live fandom. Long life to fans everywhere<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> icouldwritebooks, ‘I Can Remember First Discovering’.

<sup>452</sup> barley-and-rye, ‘AO3 You Are like Our Last Place’.

<sup>453</sup> macgyvershe, ‘AO3 Is a Blessing’.

Posts like these illustrate AO3's rise to something akin to deification, or certainly emblematisation, the use of terms like 'sacred' and 'blessing' emphasising the worshipful tone some factions of the Archive's supporters take. There has been some pushback against this, with some commentators concerned at the creeping attitude that AO3 is or should be beyond critique or questioning (a discussion to which I return in greater detail in Chapter Four). However, for the purposes of this chapter, it is enough to point out that such responses make clear the importance of AO3's ideology-based symbolic capital to its continued popularity amongst the fan community, and that its stock in this area seems only to be growing in an increasingly conservative internet.

## Conclusion

In *Merchants of Culture*, Thompson states that 'Power is not a magical property that some individual or organization possesses: it is a capacity to act and get things done that is always rooted in and dependent on the kinds and quantities of resources that the agent or organization has at its disposal.'<sup>454</sup> AO3's ability to build itself into not just a well-functioning repository for fanfiction but a hub and mouthpiece for the fanfic community has certainly depended on its building of a variety of resources – *capital* – in order that it might offer the most stable and effective platform possible to its users and thereby attain a position of power and authority. Of equal importance, however, is the manner in which it has built its capital, particularly in terms of maintaining its core ideological values. AO3's origins as a response to the perceived encroachment of corporate operations on its culture means that it is essential that it retains its integrity or risk jeopardising the symbolic capital bound up in its reputation as a principled organisation.

Thus far, AO3 has been remarkably successful in doing this, building a narrative around itself as reliable and ethical, with its legal capital in particular indicating that it is on the side of fans. As a result, its supporters are active and passionate, arguing against any criticisms of AO3 or the OTW while raising the Archive to the level of emblem for everything good about the fanfiction community and its culture. Moreover, in contrast to other platforms from which fans have a history of fleeing due to ideological conflict, AO3's userbase only continues to grow, its expansion seemingly only limited by its own invitation system. How this success has influenced the field of fanfic publishing – and whether AO3's self-mythologising is sustainable – is the focus of the rest of this thesis, in

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<sup>454</sup> Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 4–5.

which I examine how AO3's status and influence as the dominant publishing platform in the fanfic community has affected the stakes involved in publishing fic or, in other words, what forms of capital those who publish on AO3 compete for. The following chapters examine three individual forms of capital – economic, cultural and social – and their importance to the fanfic community and AO3 in detail, beginning with an assessment of the effects arising from AO3's core gift-economy values and its feedback-based economy.

# Chapter Two: Economic Stakes

## Introduction

The previous chapter established that fanfiction writers who publish on AO3 receive no financial compensation for their labour, the site being both ideologically opposed to the idea of monetising fic and legally constrained from allowing such a development in any case. The question that arises from this stance is: what reward *do* AO3's writers receive for the time and effort, not to mention the personal and legal risk, involved in creating and publishing their work? Or, to put it another way, what are the economic stakes at stake for those publishing their work on AO3?

In this chapter I examine in more detail the fanfiction community's traditional positioning as a gift economy and how this ties in with another fanfic tradition, that of reader feedback as the most common reciprocation for the gift of fan writers' labour. I look specifically at AO3's system of feedback and the problems that some of AO3's users have with it, proposing that, despite modelling itself a gift economy, AO3 has built a community based on feedback as a quantifiable reward for publishing, essentially creating a hybrid attention/affective economy. This, I propose, has had a hand in a shift in some fic writers' perception of feedback, away from seeing it as a reciprocal gift and towards thinking of it as payment for services rendered, leading to confusion and resentment on both sides of the writer/reader relationship. Finally, I propose that this may be down to a generational divide between those fans who remember the context of AO3's conception and newer ones who are used to the idea of fic as a commodity thanks to sites like Patreon and Wattpad and that, if this divide grows, it may threaten the symbolic cultural bound up in AO3's non-profit values.

## Fanfic and the Gift Economy

The fanfic community's money-free approach to publishing has long been conceptualised as an example of a gift economy, both by fans themselves<sup>455</sup> and academic accounts of

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<sup>455</sup> 'Gift Economy'.

their community.<sup>456</sup> As discussed in the Literature Review, a gift economy is one in which goods are not sold for financial remuneration but voluntarily presented as gifts which may – but are not required to – be reciprocated (though some expression of gratitude is often seen as socially appropriate). The previous chapter demonstrated that the OTW (and therefore AO3) enshrines a belief in the fannish gift economy as part of their core values<sup>457</sup> and indeed are required to maintain a non-commercial approach as a result of their status as a registered non-profit organisation and their legal defence of transformative works only covering those works published non-commercially. In the following sections I examine how this promotion of fanfiction as a gift economy relates to AO3's function as a publishing platform and the influence it has had on the economic stakes of posting one's work on it.

Interestingly, the definition of a gift economy provided by Fanlore focuses on the lack of obligation to reciprocate, stating that a gift economy refers to 'the process of fans making fanworks available openly and freely without any formalized requirement that anything be given in return.'<sup>458</sup> According to this definition, then, fan writers should post their work solely in order to contribute to the fan(fiction) community, without asking for anything in return, even any expression of gratitude. On the surface, AO3 abides by this definition: for example, upon examining the process of visiting AO3 for the first time, it is immediately made clear that the site operates specific ToS that users are expected to abide by. When first visiting the Archive, users are confronted with an overlay screen detailing the main activities users can engage in while visiting the site, as well as a warning that any information or content will be available to the public by default (see Fig. 5). In order to proceed to browse the site, users must agree/consent to the terms presented on this screen.

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<sup>456</sup> Hellekson, 'A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture'; De Kosnik, 'Should Fan Fiction Be Free?'; Hellekson, 'Making Use Of: The Gift, Commerce, and Fans'; Sabotini, 'The Fannish Potlatch: Creation of Status Within the Fan Community'; Chin, 'It's About Who You Know: Social Capital, Hierarchies and Fandom'; Kelley, 'Chocolate Frogs for My Betas!: Practicing Literacy at One Online Fanfiction Website'.

<sup>457</sup> 'What We Believe'.

<sup>458</sup> 'Gift Economy'.

## Archive of Our Own

On Archive of Our Own (AO3), users can make profiles, create works and other Content, post comments, give Kudos, create Collections and Bookmarks, participate in Challenges, import works, and more. Any information you publish in a comment, profile, work, or Content that you post or import onto AO3 including in summaries, notes and tags, will be accessible by the public (unless you limit access to a work only to those with AO3 Accounts), and it will be available to AO3 personnel. Be mindful when sharing personal information, including your religious or political views, health, racial background, country of origin, sexual identity and/or personal relationships. To learn more, check out our [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

I have read & understood the new Terms of Service and Privacy Policy

I agree/consent to its terms

Figure 5: AO3's consent screen.<sup>459</sup>

At no point does this screen include a statement that users are obligated or even expected to provide any kind of material or symbolic payment for their use of the site, either to AO3 itself or to the writers publishing on it, nor is any such requirement mentioned in its ToS. In fact, the only place AO3 directly encourages even an expression of gratitude is within fics downloaded from the site, which feature the following short message on their last page: 'Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work.' This message contains a hyperlink to a comment form for the fic, in order to make it as simple as possible for the reader to move from reading to commenting, which certainly constitutes AO3 making use of technological architecture to encourage feedback. However, neither here nor anywhere else does the Archive actively require it or restrict or pressure those readers who choose not to leave any response.

That said, while AO3 may not *require* readers to compensate writers for their labour, it does not follow that writers do not *expect* some form of it. Indeed, as Mauss points out, while reciprocation might be disregarded as a requirement of a gift economy, the absence of it can lead to problems within a community – particularly for the person who accepts a gift with no intention of reciprocation and is bound to 'lose face' as a result.<sup>460</sup> Echoing this, Stanfill views reciprocation as a fandom social norm, with those who do not provide it (or, as discussed later in this chapter, provide the 'wrong' type of reciprocation) vulnerable to criticisms of ingratitude or 'freeloading.'<sup>461</sup> The fanfic community, therefore, has developed a range of ways to reciprocate for the gift of published fics. Coppa, for example,

<sup>459</sup> Screenshot author's own. <https://archiveofourown.org>.

<sup>460</sup> Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, 40–41.

<sup>461</sup> Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*.

describes how the cycle of gifting creates social obligations within the fanfic community, citing the frequency of readers becoming first-time writers as a result of a desire to give thanks for the stories they have read previously by contributing to the community in kind.<sup>462</sup> Other, more direct obligations can also be seen – the recipient of a fic as a gift may feel it necessary to return the favour (especially if the fic is to mark some personal event like a birthday), or stories may be gifted in return for a favour or contribution to the writing process, as a show of appreciation for one’s beta reader, for example. However, given that publishing a fic onto a space such as AO3 involves essentially gifting that story to an entire fandom (or fandoms), the most prevalent form of reciprocation in the fanfic community is reader feedback.

In the following section I establish the long-running relationship between fanfiction and feedback and how AO3’s own feedback system draws on and upholds this relationship.

## Fanfic and Feedback

Modern media fanfic and feedback have been linked since fan stories began appearing in science-fiction zines in the 1960s. Borrowing those zines’ tradition of ‘Letters of Comment’<sup>463</sup> (LOCs) – originally letters written by readers and published in a dedicated letters column – fans took to writing similar letters to fan creators featured in zines, in order to comment on their work. When fandom moved online, spreading over time across a variety of platforms including Usenet and journaling sites like LiveJournal, feedback came with it,<sup>464</sup> adapting to become the below-the-line comments familiar from a variety of websites today (including AO3 and FFN).<sup>465</sup> Fan writers, therefore, have long been used to receiving readers’ comments on their work and this has become a form of reward system, with writers awaiting (often desperately) a response to any new story or chapter, as humorously depicted in the following Tumblr post:

\*posts/updates a story on ao3 at 3:00 in the morning\*

Me: haha, now that I’ve posted it it’s time to let my sleep deprived brain get some rest

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<sup>462</sup> Coppa, *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age*, 34.

<sup>463</sup> ‘Letter of Comment’.

<sup>464</sup> Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*, 136–38.

<sup>465</sup> ‘Feedback’.

Also me: \*keeps checking phone every 10 minutes for comments  
and kudos\*<sup>466</sup>

AO3 upholds this tradition with its own specific feedback systems which, while not making feedback obligatory, certainly maintain a link between publishing fanfic and receiving a response to it, contributing to fic writers' expectations of being rewarded with feedback. Moreover, AO3's use of feedback systems similar to those used by social media platforms, including a 'like' system operated via a one-click button, further enforces the transactional, economic connotations of feedback as a reward,<sup>467</sup> rather than a gift.

Each online platform has its own set of social norms which develop and shift over time as their users interpret, reinterpret, complicate and problematise the affordances through which they communicate with each other. Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen and Carter developed the term 'platform vernacular'<sup>468</sup> to describe this phenomenon, encompassing both the forms of communication built into social media platforms by their developers and the ways in which the communal understanding of these systems changes as a result of users' interactions with them. Twitter's platform vernacular, therefore, includes its hashtag system, which became an official part of the site's architecture as a result of its users' widespread adoption of hashtags as a means of deepening the communicative power of Twitter's limited-by-design posts.<sup>469</sup> Interestingly, the mutable nature of the affordances making up each individual platform's vernacular also leaves room for negative interpretations, as the positive intent behind a particular means of communication may develop ironic or negative connotations as users interact with it,<sup>470</sup> as is discussed below with regards to AO3's 'kudos' system.

Gibbs et al. point out that while each platform's vernacular is specific to itself, 'The affordances and performances that constitute a vernacular are not necessarily specific to a platform, as can be clearly seen through the use of hashtags across a wide variety of online platforms.'<sup>471</sup> Thus, for example, 'like' systems and below-the-line comments are near-ubiquitous in social media platforms and acclimatising to how these affordances are used on each individual site is part of joining that particular community of users (and the sub-

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<sup>466</sup> Wangji-xiong, 'Posts/Updates a Story on AO3 at 3:00 in the Morning'.

<sup>467</sup> Sherman et al., 'What the Brain "Likes": Neural Correlates of Providing Feedback on Social Media'.

<sup>468</sup> Gibbs et al., '#Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media, and Platform Vernacular'.

<sup>469</sup> Bruns and Burgess, 'The Use of Twitter Hashtags in the Formation of Ad Hoc Publics', 2–3.

<sup>470</sup> Hayes, Carr, and Wohn, 'One Click, Many Meanings: Interpreting Paralinguistic Digital Affordances in Social Media'; Lee, Hansen, and Lee, 'What Makes Us Click "like" on Facebook? Examining Psychological, Technological, and Motivational Factors on Virtual Endorsement'; Bucher and Helmond, 'The Affordances of Social Media Platforms'.

<sup>471</sup> Gibbs et al., '#Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media, and Platform Vernacular', 258.

communities therein). The ability to understand what meaning a mode of communication might convey other than its officially-mandated one is therefore a sign of belonging to a site's community and being fluent in its social norms. However, this can also cause feelings of confusion and ostracization for newcomers, as well as among general users when conflicting messages arise regarding the interpretation of communicative affordances.

Despite its self-positioning as a publishing platform and archive for fanfic, rather than a social media site, AO3 nevertheless utilises social media-like affordances in its feedback systems, forming a significant part of its platform vernacular. In the following sections I describe the particulars of these systems and how they mirror the mutability of social media vernacular, including its potential for misinterpretation and confusion. In particular, I discuss how AO3's use of social media-referencing systems, which are fundamentally transactional,<sup>472</sup> blur the lines between its gift economy values and the growing sense of fanfic feedback as payment.

## AO3's Feedback System

AO3 uses a multi-layered system of feedback involving three individual forms: comments, kudos and bookmarks. Here I focus on comments and kudos as AO3's most-visible and most-discussed forms of feedback (bookmarks share many of the features of kudos and comments but have less overall impact, not to mention that they are intended as a tool for readers rather than specifically as feedback for writers).

### Comments

Immediately below each fic posted to AO3 (and each chapter therein) is a space for users (both registered and unregistered, unless the author has chosen to lock the work to guests) to leave comments. These are usually text-based, though images, including gifs, can be added via HTML coding and a 2018 update<sup>473</sup> allowed the use of emojis (which was welcomed as an asset for those who find commenting with text difficult). Comments are publicly visible, though the fic author can delete them and AO3 also provides the option for each author to moderate incoming comments before they are published. Additionally, in August 2020 AO3 added the ability to disable comments completely for the first time, in response to repeated user requests for better protections against harassment from readers

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<sup>472</sup> Sherman et al., 'What the Brain "Likes": Neural Correlates of Providing Feedback on Social Media'.

<sup>473</sup> 'The Archive Now Supports a Whole Lot More Characters!'

(and also apparently as part of AO3/the OTW's response to accusations of structural racism within its organisation,<sup>474</sup> as discussed in detail in Chapter Four).<sup>475</sup> Users can also see the number of comments a fic has received and the site allows for sorting by comments so that readers can easily see which fics have received the highest number of them.

Perhaps the most important aspect to note about AO3's comments system, though, is in fact not rooted in the system itself but in the culture surrounding it. There is an unofficial rule within the Archive's community (and throughout much of the fanfic community in general) that only positive comments are acceptable.<sup>476</sup> Critical comments, whether constructive or not, are generally seen as being intrusive and inappropriate unless specifically requested by the author. Despite the existence of a vocal contingent who argue that providing constructive criticism ('concrit') represents their own contribution to the fanfic community by helping writers to learn and improve, the prevalent attitude amongst the AO3 community is 'if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all' (or, as has become something of a fandom catchphrase, 'don't like, don't read'<sup>477</sup>). As Sabotini points out, 'criticism of a work is often thought to imply criticism of an author, their status, and/or membership in the community,'<sup>478</sup> with the result that those who deviate from this unwritten rule may find themselves being firmly, if not rudely, taken to task by other community members for their perceived faux pas.<sup>479</sup> Instead, concrit is generally seen as the preserve of private communication between the writer and a trusted group of advisors, whether beta readers or fellow writers, while outright negativity is viewed as unacceptable in any context.

Positive comments, on the other hand, are highly desired, especially those that contain particularly detailed, analytical comments or highly emotional reactions. These represent significant validation and recognition for the author, as well as indicating a high level of interest, attention and engagement on the reader's part – in order to create such a comment, a reader must necessarily have engaged to at least some degree with the work.

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<sup>474</sup> 'Statement from the OTW Board of Directors, Chairs, & Leads'.

<sup>475</sup> 'Turning off Comments on Your Works'.

<sup>476</sup> flippyspoon, 'PSA: Don't Write Negative Things'; tsstrace and ao3commentoftheday, 'I Know AO3 Is Notoriously Anti-Concrit'; Anonymous and copperbadge, 'Question as an Oldster'; littlethingwithfeathers, 'Commenting on Fanfic: A How-to Guide for Not Being an Asshole. Even Unintentionally'.

<sup>477</sup> 3,667 fics on AO3 are tagged with some variation of 'Don't Like Don't Read' as of 24/12/20.

<sup>478</sup> Sabotini, 'The Fannish Potlatch: Creation of Status Within the Fan Community'.

<sup>479</sup> esqkat, 555Dragon\_Q, and BookeatingOctopus, 'Comment on Snapes throughout Time'; Lang, asiacheetah, and saralinda, 'Comment on Blueskin'; Ficreads, Angel5, and EmeraldTrident, 'Comment on You Should See Me In A Crown'; dreaner95, Phillipe363, and Aragorn\_II\_Elessar, 'Comment on Check of Reality for Captain Sara Lance'.

Whereas it would be entirely possible to skim the work and leave kudos, or even a generic comment, a detailed or emotional comment that shows a specific response to the work in question requires that the reader must have fully and consciously consumed the text. Positive comments, therefore, constitute a combination of affective and attentive capital, as defined in the Literature Review, functioning both as an expression of love for a specific work and as tangible proof that the reader has paid attention to that work.

This is particularly important in the community-based field of fanfic. Echoing Mauss,<sup>480</sup> both Turk<sup>481</sup> and Hellekson<sup>482</sup> point out that the third axis of gifting, along with giving and reciprocating, is receiving. Gifts must be accepted in order to fulfil their social function of creating and strengthening ties between community members and, as Turk points out, ‘Use is [...] the clearest sign of a gift accepted.’<sup>483</sup> This need to see evidence of a gift being used goes some way towards explaining the close relationship between fanfic and comments (and feedback in general, which can act as attention capital and/or social support<sup>484</sup>). When commenting on the subject of their desire for feedback, writers who receive little to no response to their work often refer to the sense of writing into a void,<sup>485</sup> without any idea of how their work is being received or if it has been acknowledged at all (page hits being an unreliable guide as to whether someone has actually read a fic or only clicked on it<sup>486</sup>). Publishing one’s fic on AO3 may make it part of fandom’s most prominent archive and part of fanfic culture on a technical level but it does not provide any sense that the community is even aware of its existence. Feedback, especially in the form of comments, mitigates the anxiety of not knowing whether one’s contribution has been worth the effort, acting as proof that a work has been seen and consumed, and therefore accepted into the community. This also explains the focus on positive feedback, as negative or critical comments in a public forum would function as a rejection of the writer’s work, rather than the community acceptance they seek in publishing it, and therefore do not count as reciprocation or receipt.

More specifically, positive comments play an important role in keeping AO3 an active platform. In his study of the role of feedback in fanfiction writing groups, Littleton

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<sup>480</sup> Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, 37–41.

<sup>481</sup> Turk, ‘Fan Work: Labor, Worth, and Participation in Fandom’s Gift Economy’.

<sup>482</sup> Hellekson, ‘A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture’.

<sup>483</sup> Turk, ‘Fan Work: Labor, Worth, and Participation in Fandom’s Gift Economy’, para. 4.1.

<sup>484</sup> Wohn, Carr, and Hayes, ‘How Affective Is a “Like”? The Effect of Paralinguistic Digital Affordances on Perceived Social Support’; Hayes, Carr, and Wohn, ‘One Click, Many Meanings: Interpreting Paralinguistic Digital Affordances in Social Media’.

<sup>485</sup> Anonymous, ‘I Write in a Big Fandom for 3 Years Now’; shmisolo, ‘Some Recommendations for Showing Your Appreciation for Fic’.

<sup>486</sup> ‘Archive of Our Own and Hits’.

contends that the community in which fic is published has a moulding effect on the type of feedback generated. In communities where the onus is on keeping members active and productive, positive feedback tends to be the norm as it provides positive reinforcement for the writers and therefore motivates them to continue writing and posting.<sup>487</sup> Meanwhile, in groups where the primary purpose is to help their members become better writers, *concrit* is far more common as it entails, in the words of one of Littleton's participants, "being supportive, and giving true and honest constructive criticism without being mean about it."<sup>488</sup> If Littleton's premise is correct, and it is assumed that the professional development of fic writers is, at most, a minor concern for the non-commercial AO3 and its community, then the hostility towards *concrit* makes some sense, the encouragement of writers to keep producing being of benefit both for AO3 and its users. A community of demotivated, unproductive writers, after all, would be counter to the desires of both platform and userbase (and would threaten AO3's continued existence).

However, AO3's positioning as a publishing platform and creative environment complicates this straightforward framing of only positive feedback as helpful and motivating for writers. As established in the Literature Review and Chapter One, fic readers do play an important role in the development of WIPs, supplying not just encouragement but influence on writers (one of the reasons a reader may receive a fic as a gift). Indeed, collective authorship is arguably the norm in the fanfic community,<sup>489</sup> and AO3's comment system facilitates this aspect of the writer/reader relationship, complicating its community's insistence on positive comments only. Restricting *concrit* – arguably an integral part of a writer's development – and making it into a social taboo, runs the risk of limiting the usefulness of this reciprocal dynamic, with readers dissuaded from providing anything other than unqualified encouragement and validation. Admittedly, a common suggestion to mitigate this is that writers who do desire *concrit* should indicate so in an author's note or other paratext (indeed, almost 5% of authors in my sample of AO3 did so). However, the culture of 'positive feedback only' surrounding AO3 still runs the risk of reducing its comments space into an echo-chamber of 'coercive positivity'<sup>490</sup> (an attitude already commonly demanded of fans by industry workers, according to Stanfill), rather than one of collective authorship and meaningful feedback. As such, AO3's

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<sup>487</sup> Littleton, 'The Role of Feedback in Two Fanfiction Writing Groups', 88–89.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>489</sup> Busse and Hellekson, 'Introduction: Work in Progress', 13–18; Jenkins, "Art Happens Not in Isolation, But in Community": The Collective Literacies of Media Fandom'; Kelley, 'Chocolate Frogs for My Betas! Practicing Literacy at One Online Fanfiction Website'.

<sup>490</sup> Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*, 155.

emphasis on positive comments can be seen as a marker of how feedback carries unspoken expectations and implications with it (an issue seen with many online feedback systems, particularly those employed by social media sites, as discussed further below), potentially removing the reader from their vital position as collaborative member of a creative community and into that of a mere customer, as discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

## Kudos

AO3's second main form of feedback is known as 'kudos.' The kudos system functions in a similar way to the 'like' models on social media sites including Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter, denoted by a button marked with the word 'Kudos' and a love heart (see Fig. 6). Pressing this button signifies that the reader wishes to record a positive response to the fic and, as with comments, the total number of kudos the fic has received is displayed amongst each fic's statistics and visible to all users.



Figure 6: Screenshot of AO3's kudos button.<sup>491</sup>

Unlike comments, AO3's kudos system did not feature in the initial version of the site but was introduced in December 2010,<sup>492</sup> just over a year after its public launch. According to AO3, kudos was introduced in response to user requests for 'a quick way to leave love or appreciation on a work,'<sup>493</sup> and was specifically intended to allow readers to leave feedback during busy periods like Christmas, when they may lack the time to leave a comment.

At its core, the kudos button is a condensed form of the combined attentive and affective capital comments provide, ostensibly without the possibility of negative feedback that comments include. The fact that a reader clicks on the button indicates that they have given the fic attention by visiting its page and, more importantly, have presumably

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<sup>491</sup> Screenshot author's own.

<sup>492</sup> 'Release Notes for Release 0.8.3'.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid.

consumed enough of the story to conclude that it is worthy of feedback. Meanwhile, the choice of a love heart symbol, which creates a referentiality<sup>494</sup> to other feedback buttons such as Twitter and Tumblr's heart-shaped icons, makes the affective implications of leaving kudos clear – by doing so, the reader is explicitly 'showing love' to the fic and, by extension, the writer. It also, therefore, acts as a similar marker of community acceptance, albeit a weaker one than comments represent, letting the writer know that someone has acknowledged and appreciated their contribution.

Many of AO3's users are appreciative of the kudos system, particularly as a result of the daily emails generated to notify writers of any new kudos recorded on their stories, which are often referred to as providing fresh motivation for writers to continue with their WIPs.<sup>495</sup> However, the system is not without its critics – one common but generally light-hearted complaint, for instance, is that readers can only leave one kudos per fic, regardless of how many chapters it has, with the Archive's automated message, 'You have already left kudos here. :)' a particular target of playful frustration amongst the site's users, even becoming something of a meme.<sup>496</sup> Meanwhile, some writers find that kudos is a source of anxiety, as a result of the blunt, one-sided nature of this form of feedback (as Gerlitz and Hammond point out in their examination of Facebook's 'like' system, such buttons collapse a range of possible affective responses into a single, homogeneous click<sup>497</sup>), which can invite different interpretations – including negative ones – than those intended by developers.<sup>498</sup> Rather than kudos being unmistakably positive, as suggested above, these users see it as lacking value, requiring nothing more than a perfunctory button press and not representing a satisfactory reward for the writer's effort. Some even invert its intended purpose of showing that a reader has enjoyed their work, believing that leaving kudos implies that the work was not worth the effort of commenting, as in this anonymous post:

Do you know if there's ever going to be a way to turn off kudos?  
Every time I get one I'm so discouraged because I just feel like I've  
failed somehow. Like, my story was almost good enough to evoke  
a response, but just missed the mark and whoever read it was

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<sup>494</sup> Proferes and Morrissey, 'Lost in the "Dash": How Tumblr Fosters Virtuous Cycles of Content and Community', 33.

<sup>495</sup> Iodessa, 'To Those Who Leave Kudos'; glynnisi, 'In Defense of Kudos'; ifshehadwings, 'LISTEN Pretentious Author up There'.

<sup>496</sup> perseannabeth, 'Me @ Ao3'; supercacti, 'No Title'; halftheday, 'YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE LOVE I HAVE FOR FANFICTION WRITERS'.

<sup>497</sup> Gerlitz and Helmond, 'The like Economy: Social Buttons and the Data-Intensive Web', 1358.

<sup>498</sup> Wohn, Carr, and Hayes, 'How Affective Is a "Like"?: The Effect of Paralinguistic Digital Affordances on Perceived Social Support'.

underwhelmed to the point that all they felt it earned was a generic ‘meh,it was okay’.<sup>499</sup>

Moreover, some see the system as discouraging comments, letting readers off the hook by allowing them to provide feedback without putting any thought or effort into it. In a 2013 Tumblr post, fic writer *thewalkingdetective* identified these as the reasons for their refusal to publish their work on AO3, likening the kudos system to ‘a complete and total slap in the face to authors,’<sup>500</sup> stating that the institution of such a system is destructive in a community which is somewhat sparing with its feedback in any case (referencing the widely-held fandom belief that no more than ten percent of readers are likely to leave comments or kudos<sup>501</sup>). Meanwhile, fanfic writer Ellen sees the kudos button as part of AO3’s overall discouragement of reader engagement, suggesting that the site’s function as a centralised archive without dedicated social affordances has created an environment focused on consumption rather than engagement, with the one-click feedback option of kudos exacerbating readers’ tendency to ‘cheapen’ the labour required to create the content being consumed.<sup>502</sup> As with AO3’s comment system, then, the relationship between writers, readers and kudos is far more nuanced than its simple appearance might imply, containing the potential for confusion and anxiety in how the giving and receiving of kudos might be interpreted. In particular, as the following section further examines, AO3’s feedback system’s focus on quantifiable feedback blurs the lines between feedback as a reciprocal gift and a form of payment in potentially troublesome ways.

## Quantifying Feedback

One of the key common features between AO3’s comments and kudos systems is that they are quantifiable forms of feedback. Both kudos and comments are countable (as are hits, bookmarks, and fic and user subscriptions) and displayed not only on each user’s private statistics page but to the public as well. Competition for and fixation on feedback by volume, rather than quality, is therefore, for some writers, an inevitable result. For others, readers’ ability to sort by kudos or comments can lead to anxiety, writers worrying that if their fic does not receive a sufficient number of both, its prospects of gaining

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<sup>499</sup> Anonymous, ‘Do You Know If There’s Ever Going to Be a Way to Turn off Kudos?’

<sup>500</sup> *thewalkingdetective*, ‘The Kudos System: Why I Won’t Put My Fics On AO3’.

<sup>501</sup> ‘Archive of Our Own and Hits’.

<sup>502</sup> Ellen, ‘What’s Wrong with the Kudos Button on Ao3 and What to Do About It’.

attention (and therefore feedback) in the future will be damaged. This anxiety is exacerbated by the fact that users of AO3, particularly those exploring a fandom for the first time, may see kudos as a rating system and therefore an indicator of a fic's quality, assuming that the more kudos a fic has accumulated, the better it is likely to be. It can also lead to concerns over so-called 'comment padding,'<sup>503</sup> authors worried that replying to comments may lead to accusations of artificially inflating their comment count in order to gain a higher ranking but that not replying can cause bad feeling among readers who feel unacknowledged by the authors they leave comments for, potentially making them less likely to leave feedback on the author's subsequent works.

What all this seems to suggest is that underlying (or perhaps superseding) the fannish gift economy as promoted by AO3 is a combined attention/affective economy, in which writers trade the fruits of their creative labour specifically for their readers' time and praise. AO3's users, therefore, are not necessarily motivated simply by the desire to contribute to their community or to archive their works to preserve their accessibility, but by the desire to be compensated for their labour via the collection of symbols of love and attention (kudos and comments), which are convertible into acknowledgement and acceptance by the community, as well as social and cultural status. This I term a 'praise economy,' in which fic writers compete for the (perceived to be) scarce resources of attention and praise (in the combined form of positive feedback) and do not regard their work as worth the effort unless they receive their personal quota of it. Under the praise economy, the stakes of publishing fanfic do not centre on contributions to and acceptance by the community, but on the accumulation of economic capital in the form of positive feedback, something familiar from social media platforms, which encourage a fixation on feedback numbers as proof of, for example, popularity, social support, influence etc.<sup>504</sup>

It is important to note that quantifiable feedback is not a feature exclusive to AO3, either online in general, as with the social media 'like' systems noted above, or on fanfic websites. FFN, for example, also provides statistics for users' works, including numbers of views and visitors, and how many readers have 'favorited' (FFN's version of a 'like') a fic or an author. Some of these stats, including number of 'favorites' and comments are also visible to users and it is possible to sort by these statistics as well, in the same way as AO3 allows. However, unlike AO3, FFN does not set itself up as part of the fannish gift

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<sup>503</sup> olderthannetic, 'AO3 Comments, Feedback Wank'; Anonymous and a03commentoftheday, 'Questions on Comment Replies'; Anonymous and a03commentoftheday, 'I Reply to Every Person'.

<sup>504</sup> Scissors, Burke, and Wengrovitz, 'What's in a Like? Attitudes and Behaviors around Receiving Likes on Facebook'; Ellison and Vitak, 'Social Network Site Affordances and Their Relationship to Social Capital Processes'; van Dijck and Poell, 'Understanding Social Media Logic', 6–8.

economy, nor does it espouse anti-commercial values – indeed, the site is supported by advertising – and therefore its encouragement of the traditional relationship between fic and feedback and its quantifiable systems do not suffer from the contradiction that some users see in AO3.

AO3's feedback system, then, reveals numerous problems underlying the way the fanfic economy functions, with bad feeling on the part of both writers and readers, as well as a pervasive confusion over what, if anything, writers are owed for their work, arguably in part as a result of AO3 importing social media affordances and their economic trappings into a creative/archival ecosystem. In the rest of this chapter I examine these problems in a wider fandom context, aiming to demonstrate how AO3 has influenced the economic stakes of publishing fanfiction, its use of a quantifiable, exchange-style element undermining the gifting model it promotes within its own rhetoric.

## Writers in the Praise Economy

To return to Fanlore's definition of a gift economy – which I will take as AO3's own definition in light of its connection to Fanlore via the OTW – it is interesting that the site specifies that the gifting process operates 'without any *formalized* requirement that anything be given in return.'<sup>505</sup> I demonstrated above that while AO3's ToS do not contain any statement regarding a requirement to provide feedback as reciprocation for the gift of published fanfiction, it does provide distinct systems for doing so, thus emphasising and upholding fanfic's established convention of feedback as a reward for publishing fic. Moreover, its use of quantifiable feedback encourages users to see comments and kudos as means of measuring the popularity and/or quality of a work, enforcing the idea of feedback as a desirable return on publishing fic.

While not exactly conforming to Fanlore's definition of a gift economy, this model still seems relatively well suited for the fanfic community, particularly if seen through the concept of 'circular giving,'<sup>506</sup> as described by Hyde. Under this model, gifts move cyclically and all community members are ultimately rewarded for their participation, without the necessity of direct reciprocation, an arrangement Stanfill refers to as a 'fuzzy exchange where authors are understood to deserve feedback from the community but not from

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<sup>505</sup> 'Gift Economy'. Emphasis mine.

<sup>506</sup> Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*, 11–21.

every single member.<sup>507</sup> In this way, the burden of provision is spread throughout the entire community, functioning on a many-to-many rather than a one-to-one basis.

However, this is not necessarily a satisfactory arrangement for all participants, leaving some writers struggling with anxiety over potentially unfulfilled expectations. As Turk points out, ‘This [the circular giving of feedback] may or may not be a consolation when, say, the vid into which you put so much effort gets fewer than ten responses.’<sup>508</sup> A similar conclusion might be drawn for the 27% of works on AO3 which have received no comments, or the 3% which have received no kudos.<sup>509</sup> While a circular giving approach might remove the burden of responsibility for providing feedback, it does little to mitigate the issue of those individual creators who feel overlooked and demotivated if they do not receive a personally satisfying number of responses. In other words, while conceptualising fanfic as a gift economy may work on a theoretical, macro level, it fails on an individual, micro level, resulting in a clash between the idealism of the gift economy and the reality of writers who desire and expect a return on their labour.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that there is some dispute amongst the fanfiction community over what are acceptable motivations for fan writers to write and publish: for themselves (requiring no external feedback); as a gift to their community (not requiring feedback but desiring it as proof of community membership); or purely for a response (specifically a positive response, critical feedback being generally regarded as undesirable, as discussed above) from their readers (requiring feedback and thereby contravening the gifting model). Interestingly, for example, despite the longstanding reciprocal relationship between fanfic and feedback, a notable feature of fandom rhetoric in the late 2010s/early 2020s is the insistence that fic authors’ motivation should be to write for themselves, rather than for feedback.<sup>510</sup> Often this is done in the name of encouragement, attempting to alleviate the anxiety many readers feel over feedback (or the absence thereof) by promoting the ideal that writers should find fulfilment in the act of creation rather than the accumulation of praise. However, those who hold this position seem to have in mind a kind of idealistically selfless version of the gift economy, in which writers are satisfied solely to contribute to their community without the need for any external validation or signalling of their membership of that community.

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<sup>507</sup> Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*.

<sup>508</sup> Turk, ‘Fan Work: Labor, Worth, and Participation in Fandom’s Gift Economy’, para. 3.5 and note 4.

<sup>509</sup> Searches conducted on 22/12/20.

<sup>510</sup> Anonymous and ao3commentoftheday, ‘I Wanna Post My Fics’; sinedra, ‘Advice for Fanfiction Writers’; tigereyesf, ‘My Take On Writing Dilemmas’; larielromeni, ‘Above All, WRITE FOR YOURSELF’; Anonymous, ‘Hey! This Is Not a Question’; memorizingthedigitsofpi, ‘When It Comes to Fic’.

Unsurprisingly, this argument has numerous critics, who tend to espouse two common and linked responses to it, which I discuss in the following section: first, to emphasise the amount of labour involved in creating fic and to argue that feedback is a fair reward for it; and second, to buy into a more exchange-based mindset in which fic is written solely for the purpose of receiving feedback, viewing their work as a marketable good for which payment is owed.

## Labour and Reward

Unlike many other online cultures, particularly those surrounding such groups as YouTube performers and Instagram influencers,<sup>511</sup> fanfic writers are often very open about the amount of time and effort involved in writing and publishing their work.<sup>512</sup> Such openness may occur as part of the strategic intimacy many fic writers establish with their readers, by sharing behind-the-scenes information about their lives or writing process, providing an opportunity to promote awareness of the labour involved in producing fics and thereby garnering sympathy and support from the community. For example, the following post by fic writer and Tumblr user marypsue achieves this effect in a deceptively complex manner, utilising humour, emotion and parasocial intimacy in order to encourage sympathy for the fanfic writer's plight (albeit in an explicitly tongue-in-cheek manner):

**me, facedown on the floor:** make me write  
**you, unimpressed:** literally nothing is stopping you, inspiration is a fickle bitch and should not be relied upon, and if you don't structure your time, self-motivate, avoid distractions, and do the work anyway, no external force can compel you  
**me, still facedown on the floor, now on tumblr:** ...make me write<sup>513</sup>

A significant part of the humour present in this post is the writer's decision to frame themselves as the comic target, overdramatic and lacking in discipline, in comparison to their conversational partner – an undefined 'you' who fills the role of the writer's support network and is therefore readable as a reader surrogate – who is sensible and matter-of-fact, unmoved by the writer's outburst. This positioning allows the poster to achieve two

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<sup>511</sup> Duffy and Wissinger, 'Mythologies of Creative Work in the Social Media Age: Fun, Free, and "Just Being Me"'.  
<sup>512</sup> EdenDaphne (edelet) and midnightstarlightwrites, 'Author's Note on When Duty and Desire Meet (Chapter 7)'; EllieCarina, 'Author's Note on Across the Universe (Chapter 1)'; yumenouveau, 'Please Don't Point Out Spelling Errors in Fics'; royallyanxious, 'This Is for All My Fellow Writers and Beta-Readers'.

<sup>513</sup> marypsue, 'Me, Facedown on the Floor'. Emphasis in original.

effects: the first is to show humour and self-awareness in making the writer character childish and melodramatic, implying the poster's awareness that their complaints are somewhat trivial and silly despite being heartfelt (and also subtly tying the reader to them by specifying their choice of distraction as Tumblr, the platform the reader is also – presumably – using to read the post, perhaps even as their own means of procrastination from work). The second is to have the markedly more rational support character acknowledge the discipline and effort required to write, dismissing the writer's emotional recalcitrance as problematic whilst also recognising that the underlying substance of their complaint is valid. By inhabiting both sides of the argument – a potent and relevant position to take, given that many writers of fanfic are readers of it too – the poster can mitigate any accusations of entitlement by owning up to their over-dramatic behaviour while placing the reader-avatar in a position of balance, able to see past the writer's behaviour to the substance of their complaint. As a result, the post reinforces the author's central point that writing is indeed a difficult and laborious process, while avoiding the risk of alienating their readers' sympathies.

Demonstrating how effectively fic writers such as the above have been able to embed their message about the amount of labour involved in producing fic, fanfic audience members regularly utilise social media to extol the hard work and dedication of fan authors.<sup>514</sup> In one such post, for example, hyperbolically entitled 'Fanfic Writers are the Unsung Heroes of the Internet',<sup>515</sup> Tumblr user sprixy paints fic writers as selfless labourers, remarkable for donating their time and effort to their community in exchange for nothing but the uncertain hope of feedback. There are also numerous campaigns encouraging readers to leave feedback in order to show appreciation for fic writers, especially by commenting on any fics they read and enjoy (as alluded to above, the advice regarding fics one does not enjoy is to say nothing and 'make use of the back button'). These include such projects as the Zero Comment Challenge,<sup>516</sup> which invites readers to leave comments on fics which have yet to receive any, and the LLF (Long Live Feedback) Comment Project,<sup>517</sup> a long-running Tumblr-based scheme which aims to provide guidelines for both readers and writers on how to create, request and respond to comments. Another such scheme, the unofficial 'Fanfic Writers Appreciation Day' (held

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<sup>514</sup> kedreeva, 'When I Say "Fanfiction Is Free"'; lovingnikiforov, 'Happy Fic Writer Appreciation Day'; slaveofimagination, '2019 AO3 and the "Kudos Only" Culture Will Destroy Lots of Authors'.

<sup>515</sup> sprixy, 'Fanfic Writers Are the Unsung Heroes of the Internet'.

<sup>516</sup> ao3commentoftheday, 'The Zero Comment Challenge'.

<sup>517</sup> longlivefeedback, 'LLF Comment Project'.

annually on August 21<sup>st</sup>), specifically frames feedback as a reward for the labour of writing fic, bemoaning the lack of comments and kudos forthcoming from readers:

It takes us days, weeks, sometimes months to write a story for you. We write for ourselves yes, but we also write to share. We write to offer you content about your favourite characters. We write to bring our and your ships to life. *It takes you a fraction of second to leave a Kudos, ten seconds to one, two or a few minutes to leave a comment.*

And here lies our problem: there's no proper sharing if there's no proper feedback. An author not getting comments is generally a sad author. If I didn't get feedback I'd wonder what's the point in keeping on writing. A comment makes a writer's day, most of the time even motivates them to write more.<sup>518</sup>

This post shows signs of the more serious issues with how some fic writers talk about feedback. Rather than thinking of feedback in terms of a reciprocal gift and a marker of communal acceptance, here it is a quantifiable reward and the driving purpose of publishing fic. Moreover, the responsibility for motivating writers is laid directly at their readers' feet, with the creation of feedback assumed to be a straightforward, simple process. Such attitudes have the potential to damage the vital writer/reader relationship, undermining the pleasure of participating in fandom by attempting to create a sense of guilt in readers who fail to leave feedback. For example, in their widely-shared post<sup>519</sup> on the importance of feedback, Tumblr user *creativereadingfanfiction* likens the fic publishing experience to that of a worker who brings home-baked cookies to their workplace once a week, leaving them for their co-workers to take and asking only for a note containing feedback in exchange.<sup>520</sup> As the weeks go on, the baker is disappointed by how many of their colleagues take a cookie but fail to leave any response, eventually deciding to stop providing any more cookies. The baker is temporarily persuaded back by a number of notes stating how much their efforts are missed but ultimately quits for good after the feedback disappears once more. Not only has the supply of (baked) goods been cut off but the desired reciprocal relationship between the baker and their co-workers has completely broken down, without ever having reached a satisfactory level in the first place.

In crafting this analogy, the poster takes pains to point out the handmade nature of the worker's offering, and that it is an attempt to share their love of their hobby with those

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<sup>518</sup> *breathingbarduil*, 'August 21st: Fanfiction Writers Appreciation Day'. Emphasis in original.

<sup>519</sup> The post had received 62,283 notes as of 22/12/20.

<sup>520</sup> *creativereadingfanfiction*, 'Fan Fiction Reviews'.

around them. The worker is characterised as a selfless victim of unthinking, ungrateful customers who take advantage of their generous gift without providing even the minimum of reciprocation. Importantly, it is also made clear that even a small amount of feedback – the number of workers who leave notes never rises above 10%, not coincidentally also the amount commonly regarded as a good hits-to-kudos ratio for fics on AO3, as mentioned above – can yield significant results, whether in the form of the worker staying up late to bake more cookies or the fanfic writer providing a new chapter. The implication is clear: fanfic may be provided for free in monetary terms but payment is still required in the form of feedback and if it is not provided the writer will withdraw access to their work. Feedback has been turned from a reciprocal act into an individual obligation.

Evidence of this shift in attitude can be seen in action throughout both AO3<sup>521</sup> and Tumblr, with many writers focusing on feedback as the deciding factor between continuing to publish their work, and simply giving up in the face of a lack of response, as seen in the following two anonymous Tumblr posts:

**Post One:**

I know people frown upon authors deleting [fanfics], but I really want to wipe mine out. They get hits, but only a few kudos, which provide little encouragement, and maybe a comment, and watching that is just tiring. Deleting might not change anything, but at least I won't be able to quantify the failure, and then maybe I can put writing behind me. I just want to move on, but not upset anyone, and I feel like these things are mutually exclusive.<sup>522</sup>

**Post Two:**

I've decided to take a step back from fic writing and fandom in general. I've gotten so fed up of the lack of attention my work has received. I worked hard to update my fics during the holidays... and yet, not a peep from any readers. See I don't want to be in that mind set for writing. I've made a general hiatus post about needing time to study but I hope people get the underlying message that if they don't appreciate my writing, I'm not going to sacrifice what time I have writing fics.<sup>523</sup>

Both these posts demonstrate the effect unfulfilled expectations for feedback can have, each writer reacting by withdrawing their participation and even potentially, in the case of the first writer, their existing work. Post One reveals its writer's fixation on

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<sup>521</sup> paws\_bells, 'Author's Note on Serendipity (Chapter 11)'; humongousblazestranger and starsandamorphinetoast, 'Comment on Syncopate'; Grimmseye, 'Author's Note on Fall from My Head'.

<sup>522</sup> Anonymous, 'I Know People Frown upon Authors Deleting FF'.

<sup>523</sup> Anonymous, 'I've Decided to Take a Step Back from Fic Writing', 9 January 2019.

feedback as the main reason for publishing their work, focusing particularly on the ratio of hits to feedback as an indicator of success (mirroring the baker's response in creativereadingfanfiction's post above). This writer specifically thinks of feedback in terms of numbers, implying some internal quota of feedback that must be reached in order for their work to be worth the effort. Interestingly, though, they also appear to be aware of the potential for such an attitude to damage their standing within the community, performing facework (the actions a person takes to maintain the social image they wish to project<sup>524</sup>) in order to avoid looking entitled or demanding. Their concerns are socially as well as economically motivated: the writer finds themselves in a quandary, not wishing to be confronted by their perceived failure to build economic capital but unwilling to jeopardise what social capital they do have by removing the source of their distress. As such, they represent those writers who are torn between the desire for feedback as payment and the social requirement to participate in the gifting process.

Post Two, on the other hand, is a particularly egregious example of writer entitlement, the poster emphasising the effort that has gone into creating their fics, along with the sacrifice of time, in order to support their belief that they are owed feedback as payment for their work. Their words make clear that they see their audience as subject to a hierarchy of obligation: having put time and effort into providing for their audience, the writer can and should expect recompense and if they do not receive it they will cease production. There is little consideration on their part for the priorities or availability of their readers, something pointed out by Tumblr user ao3commentoftheday, who advises the poster not to penalize their readers for having other priorities than providing them with feedback.<sup>525</sup> This observation highlights the lack of reciprocal feeling in the original post, the writer showing no interest in providing their readers with the kind of attention they themselves demand. As such, the writer displays a clear shift from a gift economy mindset to a praise economy one, in which writers trade the results of their time and effort (their fics) for the attentive and affective capital inherent in positive feedback and feel robbed or taken advantage of if they do not receive a satisfactory amount.

Inevitably, in a community that sees itself as a gift economy, like that surrounding AO3, the growing adoption of a praise economy mindset causes difficulties in the reader/writer relationship. This section has discussed the impact of a praise economy on

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<sup>524</sup> Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior*, 12. See also: West and Trester, 'Facework on Facebook: Conversations on Social Media'.

<sup>525</sup> Anonymous, 'I've Decided to Take a Step Back from Fic Writing', 9 January 2019; ao3commentoftheday, 'I've Decided to Take a Step Back from Fic Writing'.

the way writers perceive feedback as a reward; the following section examines its effect on fanfic readers.

## Readers in the Praise Economy

The difficulty with adopting a praise economy mindset when publishing to AO3 is that readers are not necessarily aware that they may be entering into an exchange system when they open up a fic. As discussed above, nothing on the AO3 site indicates a requirement to provide feedback and, given the contradictory attitudes towards feedback as a reward/payment within the wider fan community, it may be difficult for newcomers learning the conventions of fandom to understand what is expected of them. This is an issue many platforms must deal with – as mentioned above, the mutability of ‘like’ buttons, for example, is a known phenomenon across social media platforms.<sup>526</sup> However, AO3 adds its own complication by labelling its feedback button as ‘Kudos,’ which comes with definitional connotations of praise and prestige received for an achievement. In combination with AO3’s positioning of itself as a creative hub and archive, rather than a social media platform,<sup>527</sup> use of kudos as a term adds an extra layer of creative assessment and judgement to the already-diverse and shifting meanings attached to such feedback systems, potentially increasing the difficulty for newcomers to understand how their seemingly ‘lightweight’<sup>528</sup> one-click feedback may be interpreted in unexpected and even negative ways, as discussed above.

Comments may be an even trickier aspect of AO3’s feedback system for newcomers to navigate as, while below-the-line comments are a familiar online feature, there is nothing in AO3’s interface to indicate its community’s preference for comments over kudos, nor its social norm of valuing positive feedback only. Admittedly, some writers do signal their expectations by explicitly requesting feedback in the paratext of their fics (20% of my sample – 255 fics – include direct requests for feedback) but not all and, in the absence of enforcement by AO3, it is hard to argue that fic readers should be criticised for choosing not to leave ‘payment’ for the work they have consumed on a conspicuously non-

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<sup>526</sup> Jungselius, “‘She Liked the Picture so i Think She Liked It’”. Unpacking the Social Practice of Liking’; Scissors, Burke, and Wengrovitz, ‘What’s in a Like? Attitudes and Behaviors around Receiving Likes on Facebook’; Hayes, Carr, and Wohn, ‘One Click, Many Meanings: Interpreting Paralinguistic Digital Affordances in Social Media’; Bucher and Helmond, ‘The Affordances of Social Media Platforms’.

<sup>527</sup> transformativeworks, ‘Seeing as Tumblr Seems’.

<sup>528</sup> Jungselius, “‘She Liked the Picture so i Think She Liked It’”. Unpacking the Social Practice of Liking’, para. 3; Scissors, Burke, and Wengrovitz, ‘What’s in a Like? Attitudes and Behaviors around Receiving Likes on Facebook’, 1501.

commercial site that explicitly supports gift-economy ideals. Unfortunately, despite this, the clash of attitudes between gift economy- and praise economy-minded fans has the potential to lead to a culture of shame and disenfranchisement, as illustrated by the following anonymous Tumblr post:

Sometimes, I hate those posts about how I \*have\* to comment on fics. Commenting is hard for me and if I force myself, I usually end up wasting valuable time staring at my screen instead of just kudos and bookmark and move onto the next fic. But lately it feels like kudos aren't treated like the "I like this" I always thought it was intended to be, and I don't know what to do anymore. I feel awful and useless, especially as I don't really do anything else in fandom besides read fic and reblog art<sup>529</sup>

Such feelings of being undervalued are not uncommon within both the fanfic community and the wider fan community. For one thing, productivity is fetishized, with prolific fan artists and writers celebrated while those who produce less, or not at all, are overlooked. Lurkers, for example, as discussed in the Methodology, are a familiar part of online communities but possess little social capital as a result of their role as consumers only. Moreover, as demonstrated by the hostility towards critical feedback, it is only productivity of the 'correct' sort that is valued – as Sabotini points out, 'critics are constantly challenged on their "right" to criticize work, and critique is relegated to the lowest rungs of the gift-status ladder.'<sup>530</sup>

In fact, this lowering of the value of feedback sometimes also applies to even positive feedback, with some fandom members downplaying the reciprocal labour involved in supplying a response to fic writers. While many authors make a point of thanking their readers for their feedback and support in author's notes or replies to comments, there is no shortage of supposedly encouraging posts suggesting that it takes little to no effort to leave feedback, particularly in comparison to the – admittedly larger – effort expended on creating fic. For example, a post by user dreamersshouldknowbetter, detailing a list of (ostensibly fair and valid) reasons why they might not leave a comment on a fic (including anxiety and lack of energy) concludes with the following statement:

Comments, from the smallest of keyboard smashes and heart eye emojis to the largest of analyses, mean the world to a writer. A

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<sup>529</sup> Anonymous, 'Sometimes I Hate Those Posts'.

<sup>530</sup> Sabotini, 'The Fannish Potlatch: Creation of Status Within the Fan Community'.

comment can be the difference between an abandonment and another update, the divide between a story of requirement and a story of passion. Comments truly are everything to a writer, and they require so little from each one of us.

**So please, I beg of you: swallow your excuses, realize that leaving feedback has an impact that extends beyond you, and LEAVE THAT COMMENT.**<sup>531</sup>

This poster, having deliberately set themselves up as an understanding and relatable fellow fan reader, then emphatically dismisses all reasons for not commenting as ‘excuses’ and characterises those who do not comment as lazy and selfish. According to such arguments there is no such thing as a valid reason for failing to comment because all possible reasons are secondary to the duty to keep fan writers motivated to produce quality work – the responsibility for which is assigned to readers rather than the writers themselves. Despite having never explicitly agreed to do so, through the lens of posts like these readers are expected not only to do the emotional labour of supporting and validating authors, but also to filter their opinions in order to protect writers from any comments they might find upsetting or demotivating. This in addition to the time and effort involved in creating feedback and in reading fics in the first place, reading often overlooked as an activity requiring effort.

In their typology of unpaid media work, Fast, Örnebring and Karlsson categorise this as work done by ‘The Carer’: ‘the laborer who is not paid because the work performed is considered to be outside the monetary economy and instead part of an emotional/private sphere of caring and community maintenance.’ A praise economy mindset places the audience in this role by expecting them to, as discussed above in the sections on comments and kudos on AO3, provide specifically positive feedback (signalling an attentive engagement and a perceptible expression of esteem). It then further argues that any reader who does not fulfil this expectation does not deserve to have consumed that piece of writing. It is as if feedback is a type of tax on the reader, which must be paid in order to keep the community running smoothly (i.e. producing fic), implying that any readers who do not pay their comment tax or attempt to pay it in an unaccepted form (i.e. with comments that are not explicitly positive) are essentially stealing from the good, honest members of the community.

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<sup>531</sup> dreamersshouldknowbetter, ‘I’m Sure You’ve Heard a Million Times’. Emphasis in original.

Arguably this constitutes a direct contradiction of the fannish gift economy's central principle, that gifts are not given as part of a *quid pro quo* exchange but are offered up without expectation of reciprocation or reward, fandom seemingly going against its own ideals by promoting the sense of feedback as something owed rather than as the reciprocation of a gift. And, perhaps more damagingly, it undermines that sense of community and shared pleasure that the modern fandom experience is built upon. Instead, it divides the fanfiction community into 'us' (writers) and 'them' (readers), a strange development in a group whose very existence is located on the blurry line between consumer and creator.

Scott points out that a major reason for the failing of a number of attempts by corporate bodies to initiate the commercialisation (or in Scott's words, 'exploitation'<sup>532</sup>) of fanfiction is their misunderstanding 'that it is the reciprocity and free circulation of fan works within female fan communities that identifies them as communities.'<sup>533</sup> By replacing the gifting model with monetisation and the more restrictive environments such a change inevitable brings with it, organisations such as FanLib<sup>534</sup> and Amazon<sup>535</sup> removed an essential cog in fanfiction's underlying structure, trading free exchange and circulation for obligation and restriction. The commodification of feedback already shows signs of presenting a similar problem, only this time as a result of internal tensions rather than external influences, with resentment creeping into exchanges about obligation and entitlement. By making praise into an obligation, fanfic writers risk undermining the pleasure they provide, thereby reducing the appeal of their product and making the smooth functioning of the pleasure/praise exchange less likely. Moreover, this risk seems to be exacerbated by AO3 itself, which appears to support, or at least facilitate, two contradictory economic models. On the surface, it promotes gift economy ideals, yet its linking of fanfic and feedback in a way that encourages competition for higher amounts of comments and kudos (via systems that echo the fundamentally transactional nature of social media feedback) encourages its users to think of feedback as a currency owed to fic writers for their labour. The conflict and confusion arising from this contradiction can be seen in the increasing entitlement and resentment between fic writers and readers described in the above sections, undermining the symbolic capital that arises from AO3's gift economy values.

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<sup>532</sup> Scott, 'Repackaging Fan Culture: The Regifting Economy of Ancillary Content Models'.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid.

<sup>534</sup> 'Fanlib'.

<sup>535</sup> 'Kindle Worlds'.

In the following section I address some of the underlying reasons for the economic shift in fandom's understanding of feedback, and for AO3's unwitting contribution to it, suggesting that the problem may ultimately lie in a clash of generational understandings about the fanfic economy, between longer-standing fans such as those who set up AO3, and newer fans who carry less baggage regarding the monetisation of fic.

## Fanfic's Changing Economy

That there is an underlying problem regarding how some fic writers and readers think of and use feedback is clear from the material quoted above. There are a number of possible reasons for this conflict – for example, Busse suggests that feedback is part of a wider power struggle between writers and readers for control over reading practices. She cites a number of strategies fic writers may deploy in an attempt to maintain control of their work, from restricting access (e.g. by making their AO3 fics visible only to registered members), to refusing to post new writing, including updates to WIPs, until they receive a specific amount of feedback.<sup>536</sup> In turn, readers have the option to withhold their attention or their feedback, either by choosing not to read at all or by refraining from leaving a response. On the face of it this appears to be a fairly balanced, if somewhat toxic, system but Busse calls attention to the inequality inherent in it by pointing out that the biggest risk is always on the writer's side:

Even though readers may be seen as subject to the writer's whims, on another level, they have ultimate control: the stories can be saved, printed out, edited, passed on, sold, or plagiarized, and nothing but community conventions protect the writer. A writer always exposes herself to some degree when writing and posting, whereas a reader may lurk for years without ever engaging in any dialogue.<sup>537</sup>

In this framing of the fanfic community, it is the reader who ultimately holds power over writers by dint of their ability to refuse the author's demands – it is always the writer who courts their audience's attention and the reader who has the power to withhold it. The insistence on feedback as fair payment – and readers who do not pay it as offenders against the fanfic economy – may therefore be seen as a redressing of this balance, a new addition to Busse's list of control strategies that may be implemented by fic writers.

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<sup>536</sup> Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*, 117–18.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

More generally, the fanfiction community seems increasingly to be struggling with concepts of free labour and fair payment, with fic authors' openness about the effort they put into their work serving to intensify the sense of resentment and unfairness amongst both readers and writers. The growing trend for fans to talk about feedback in economic terms is arguably a response to this, as Tumblr user and fic writer sunalsolove suggests in the following post:

I just think that both these statements [about fanfic being produced for free and feedback as payment] need to be looked at outside of the idea of actually being linked to economics and be viewed as authors struggling to find words for difficult concepts about how validation exists outside of being monetarily recompensated and the fact that fic still has intrinsic value even though it is not part of an economic system.

There's not a lot of language available for either of those things.<sup>538</sup>

As discussed in the Literature Review, some scholars propose that one of fanfiction's defining characteristics is that it is published non-commercially, a distinction that the above post echoes, suggesting that fanfic cannot be understood in the same economic terms as published literature as it is subject to different conventions and expectations. Yet, as demonstrated above, market economy ideas of payment in exchange for labour *have* infiltrated the fanfic community, with the result that many fic writers struggle to discuss their desire for recompense in a culture which emphasises gifting and freedom from obligatory reciprocation – and, as mentioned above, has a tendency to shame writers who are open about their desire to be rewarded for their work. Such writers may therefore end up reaching for financial terms with which to tackle the complex nature of a culture built on free labour and driven by feedback (especially feedback that references the transactional nature of social media systems). Meanwhile, others are disturbed by this development, both from a legal standpoint and as a betrayal of their belief that fanfic should be given freely for the purposes of communal pleasure, without obligation adhering to anyone. Compare, for example, the following posts by Tumblr users nimmieamee and probablyintraffic:

**Post One:**

Do I like receiving comments? Yes. God yes. Love it. [...] But it is not *owed* to me. Not the way my job owes me payment for my labor. Not the way I earn currency. I'm not contracting with fanfic

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<sup>538</sup> sunalsolove, 'Using Economic Terms'.

readers for comments. I'm posting something and letting the internet have at it, which is a different thing entirely.<sup>539</sup>

**Post Two:**

Should there not be a place on the Internet where capitalism cannot touch? Look, there is no place that capitalism does not touch. To pretend that fandom is this beautiful walled garden is to lie to ourselves. Capitalism and politics shape so much of what we do in fandom, from what properties we fixate on, to what we are allowed to ask in return for our works, to when a crisis might arrive and we lose all our archives, that it is *prima facie* absurd to insist that they have no place in fandom. They are already here. [...]

I have come, like everyone else, for the free stuff. I have, like everyone else, written fanfic for free. I am complicit in this continued state of fandom, but I support writers and artists who are trying to get paid. Because art is always a gift, and art should be part of everyday life, but we cannot allow ourselves in our warm and fuzzy feelings about art and fandom to forget about the people creating it.<sup>540</sup>

The first poster takes the old-school fandom approach to feedback and to fanfic as a form of gifting. They recognise that the craving for feedback is a natural and perhaps inevitable result of publishing one's work but argue that writers have a responsibility to move past the urge to demand that feedback, as no contract exists between them and their readers agreeing that the reading of a fic obliges the reader to comment. For them, to publish a fic is not to exchange a service for payment but to place one's work in the public domain and accept whatever response may come (which incidentally raises questions about the AO3 community's attitude against *concrit*) and attempting to conflate the two is to skew the relationship between writers and readers in potentially damaging ways.

The second poster, however, argues that insisting on a strict adherence to the gifting model is itself both overly idealistic and potentially damaging. Instead, they believe that capitalism and its exchange models are an inevitable part of any online society and that it would be naïve and unfair to ask every creator to sacrifice the possibility of gaining some remuneration for their work. Instead of forcing a gift economy on all fan creators without exception, this poster argues, the fan community should adopt a more flexible attitude, supporting those who take opportunities to get paid (or at least not openly criticising them).

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<sup>539</sup> nimmieamee, 'My Dash Has in the Past Two Years Become'.

<sup>540</sup> probablyintraffic, 'On Fandom's so-Called "Gift Economy"'.

In light of such conflicting views, it is perhaps unsurprising that the debate over monetising fic – not by any means a new discussion<sup>541</sup> – has sprung up again. It is clear that there is a desire amongst some fic writers to be recompensed for their labour and that AO3 subtly encourages this exchange-based mindset via its own currency of positive feedback. Yet it cannot enforce any payment system as it would contradict its gift-economy stance (and jeopardise the symbolic capital tied up in it outlined in Chapter One) and certainly cannot introduce monetisation due to its status as part of the non-profit OTW. Moreover, its framing of the gift economy model as an ideological value rather than a strategic position contributes to the continued belief that asking for payment (of any kind) for fic is a dubious act.

Seemingly exacerbating this problem is a generational division between older fans who entered the fanfiction community when the idea of getting compensated for writing fanfic was dangerous, and newer fans who have benefited from AO3's legal advocacy and are therefore less guarded about the possibility of asking for payment for their labour. This clash is articulated by Tumblr user fairestcat (a supporter of the original AO3 proposal<sup>542</sup> and former President of the OTW's Board of Directors<sup>543</sup>) in the following post:

I will never stop being fascinated by the generational shift that happened in the last decade from “fandom is a gift economy” to “[AO3] deny the creator the ability to earn money.”

And the thing is, the OTW, by advocating so strongly for the legality of fanworks helped spur that shift. Newer, younger writers are coming into fandom and saying, “well, if fanfic is legal, why *can't* I make money off of it?”<sup>544</sup>

This generational difference is exacerbated by the fact that there are now a number of platforms that allow fanfic writers to ask for money in exchange for their work or offer monetisation in other ways. Online tip jars such as Ko-fi, for example, provide small bursts of income, while crowdfunding sites such as Kickstarter have been used to successfully fund one-off fandom projects for fandoms such as Marvel,<sup>545</sup> *Transformers*,<sup>546</sup> and

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<sup>541</sup> cupidssbow, ‘How Fanfiction Makes Us Poor’; Noppe, ‘Why We Should Talk about Commodifying Fan Work’; De Kosnik, ‘Should Fan Fiction Be Free?’; Hellekson, ‘Making Use Of: The Gift, Commerce, and Fans’.

<sup>542</sup> Fairestcat, May 17 2007 6.45pm, ‘Comment on,’ astolat, ‘An Archive Of One’s Own’.

<sup>543</sup> ‘Cat Meier’.

<sup>544</sup> fairestcat, ‘I Will Never Stop Being Fascinated’.

<sup>545</sup> Daybreak Press, ‘NOT WITHOUT YOU ★ A Stucky Anthology’.

<sup>546</sup> Taiyari, ‘Equinox — A Megatron + Optimus Prime Fan Anthology’.

*Hannibal*.<sup>547</sup> Meanwhile, subscription sites like Patreon offer a more direct link between creator and consumer, allowing users to subscribe to creators' accounts, with a variety of monthly subscription tiers available in return for different levels of access to their work. This allows writers to work around copyright law as, technically, their subscribers are paying for access to *the writer* rather than for their work.

Perhaps most threatening for AO3's gift-economy ideals, though, is Wattpad, a dedicated commercial writing/reading platform which features several million works of fanfic.<sup>548</sup> Within these works, Wattpad has a headline example of monetised fanfic in Anna Todd's series *After*,<sup>549</sup> which features the members of British boy band One Direction. Todd's series first appeared on Wattpad, gaining over a billion views, and was subsequently published by Gallery Books, an imprint of Simon & Schuster.<sup>550</sup> Admittedly the stories had their serial numbers filed off in the same way as FSoG but *After*'s history as fanfiction was openly referred to within promotional interviews with Todd, making explicit its status as monetised fanfic, and the original fics remain on Wattpad, unlike the pulled-to-publish FSoG.

Along with the possibility of crossing over to traditional publishing (including Wattpad's own publishing imprint<sup>551</sup>), throughout its existence Wattpad has run numerous schemes allowing writers the chance to monetise their writing, including the possibility of including brand placement in their stories. In addition, Wattpad runs the invitation-only 'Paid Stories,' a Patreon-like system in which selected writers can put their work behind a paywall accessed by purchasing Wattpad's proprietary currency, 'Coins.' This scheme, according to Wattpad, was 'born out of our readers' desire to give back to their favorite writers. Just as Wattpadders love being the first to discover new talent, now they can be the first to support writers taking the next step.'<sup>552</sup> The existence of such schemes acts to normalise the idea of work posted freely to online publishing platforms being eligible for monetisation, linking the effort of writing and publishing with a quantifiable reward. And while fanfic cannot be monetised directly via Wattpad itself, due to the same copyright restrictions that prevent monetisation of fic in general, the fact that fanfiction is, according

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<sup>547</sup> Bad Influence Press, 'RAW: A Hannibal/Will Fanthology'.

<sup>548</sup> Around four million works as of 22/12/20. This figure was found by searching the site for 'fanfiction,' however, as demonstrated by fan statistician toaststats, the figure may well be much higher due to inconsistencies in how Wattpad authors label their fics. See: toaststats (destinationtoast), '[Fandom Stats] How Many Fanworks Are There on Wattpad?'

<sup>549</sup> Ramdarshan Bold, 'The Return of the Social Author: Negotiating Authority and Influence on Wattpad', 128–30.

<sup>550</sup> Reid, 'S&S Acquires Anna Todd's "After" Series from Wattpad'.

<sup>551</sup> 'Wattpad Books'.

<sup>552</sup> 'Wattpad Paid Stories'.

to Wattpad Studios' head of partnerships, Ashleigh Gardner, 'treated like any other genre, living alongside other forms of fiction,'<sup>553</sup> removes fanfiction from the gift-economy environs of AO3 and instead places it in a commercial context,<sup>554</sup> thereby strengthening the connection between publishing and economic rewards. Moreover, Wattpad changes the stakes by offering an alternative to AO3's money-free philosophy and not attempting to convince its fic writers that to ask for recompense for their labour is immoral or criminal – instead, it suggests that there may be viable routes towards earning money through writing fanfic and that it is acceptable to see fic as potentially commodifiable.

The emergence of platforms which do not promote a gift economy model as the only 'correct' one for fanfiction only contributes to the confusion over what reward, if any, fanfic writers are entitled to for publishing their work. For AO3 this is particularly significant, not only because of its (legally necessary) promotion of gift economy values and the symbolic capital bound up in them, but because its own feedback system provokes confusion over whether fic is a gift or a commodity to be paid for with praise.

## Conclusion

Fanfiction's longstanding feedback systems are undeniably a vital part of the fanfic community, providing a creative space for writers and readers to interact, converse and collaborate. Without such systems, the fic community would lose a crucial part of its creative process as well as a significant motivator for writers to publish in the first place. AO3, in its mission to serve the needs of the fanfic community, includes obvious affordances for leaving feedback on every fic posted to its site, its architecture clearly linking the end of a period of reading (either the end of a fic or an individual chapter) with the leaving of feedback, whether via the kudos button or a comment. Yet, in its emphasis on this connection and its use of social-media-referencing feedback types which can be quantified and employed as a rating system, I argue that AO3 undermines its commitment to gift economy values – which contributes to its cache of symbolic capital – by facilitating a shadow economy in which fics are exchanged for positive feedback and writers feel increasingly entitled to this form of payment.

These conflicting models have caused confusion in the fic community for both writers and readers, resulting in an increasingly toxic environment in which writers who do

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<sup>553</sup> Quoted in: Anderson, 'YA Reading and Writing Trends from Wattpad's 60 Million Users'.

<sup>554</sup> Thomas, *Literature and Social Media*, 109–10.

not receive their expected payment feel used and demotivated, while readers complain of being made to feel guilty for failing to conform to an economic system they did not agree to participate in. Yet, despite its prominent position as a mouthpiece for the fanfic community and its influence over publishing norms within it, AO3 seems only to contribute to this clash between readers and writers, promoting the gift economy as a virtue of fanfic culture while driving its writers' desire for higher levels of quantifiable praise. As a result, AO3's users increasingly find themselves struggling over the economic stakes of free labour and fair payment, and how to balance a system in which work is offered for free yet also operates an exchange economy based on the scarce resource of positive feedback. Meanwhile, in an online environment which continues to provide platforms which normalise the idea of fic as an exchangeable commodity AO3 faces the possibility of a shift in the economic stakes it faces, alternative models threatening to weaken the symbolic capital bound up in its official position as part of the fannish gift economy.

In this chapter I have challenged the traditional view of fanfiction as a gift economy, suggesting instead that it is driven by a hybrid attention/affective economy to which AO3's design and culture contribute. Moreover, I have argued that AO3's commitment to its core gift economy values – established as key to its symbolic capital in the previous chapter – causes confusion and resentment in fanfic writers and readers who are struggling with concepts of fair reward for labour and have no framework for how to resolve this. In the following chapter I examine another polarising stake in the fanfiction publishing field, that of cultural capital, which AO3 has helped raise for fanfic but, as a result, finds itself torn between its preferred role of cultural underdog and the effects of becoming part of the establishment.

# Chapter Three: Cultural Stakes

## Introduction

In the previous chapter I suggested that AO3 has had something of a contentious (even negative) effect on the economic stakes of publishing fanfic. In this chapter, I turn to an ostensibly more positive result of AO3's influence: building on Chapter One's description of AO3's legal capital and its roots in the creative value of transformative works, I examine how this has helped to raise fanfic's cultural capital in a similar way to that of fandom in general, transforming its reputation from something shameful and criminal by outlining a valid cultural role for transformative works. In particular, I propose that AO3's legitimising role as an archive has paved the way for the legitimacy of transformative storytelling to be reassessed, not only within the fanfic community but in the broader spheres of the media industry and literary establishment. Moving through these cultural circles, I demonstrate how fanfic participants' increased confidence in the legitimacy of their activities is reflected in their image within the media industry, illustrated by fan-favourite television show *Supernatural's* shifting portrayal of transformative fans, and how AO3 has begun to bridge the gap between fanfic and literary culture via its 2019 Hugo Award. However, in examining the fallout from AO3's Hugo win, I also suggest that the AO3 community's desire for acceptance by the literary establishment may irrevocably conflict with its preference for freedom from cultural restrictions, threatening the potential for fanfic to fit into the cultural role AO3 envisions for it. I use this example to argue that while the stakes of publishing fanfiction were once simply to get away with the legally-grey act of seeking an audience for one's transformative works, following AO3 and OTW's intervention they are now increasingly to claim a valid space for fic as a form of cultural production without compromising on its foundational characteristics.

## Mainstreaming Fandom

Over the past decade, fandom has gained increased power and influence over the types of texts being created by media producers as they have realised that fans represent a lucrative audience who will not only buy repeat tickets and streaming subscriptions but also other money-making products like toys, clothing and merchandise (which, as mentioned in Chapter One, could be seen as hypocritical given fans' support of AO3's non-commercial,

non-profit status, though it could also be framed as a pragmatic compromise in an inescapably commercial media ecosystem). This can be seen in a number of developments, perhaps most obviously in how fan-friendly content has gradually come to dominate narrative media – one need only look at the top ten film releases during the 2010s, all of which are franchise instalments, sequels or remakes, and all from fan-beloved series such as *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)<sup>555</sup> to see how fannish tastes are being specifically catered to as a result of their efficacy in generating profit for Hollywood.

Fan power can also be seen in the numerous properties that have been rescued from cancellation or resurrected following it as a result of enduring fan interest or direct campaigning. Whereas the campaign to rescue the original *Star Trek*, which was cancelled in 1969 after three seasons, was a rare success at the time the show was resurrected as a series of movies in 1979 (and more the result of the show's high viewing figures in syndication), fans now regularly lobby for their favourite properties to return and have a reasonable chance of success,<sup>556</sup> with examples including television shows *Lucifer*,<sup>557</sup> *One Day at a Time*,<sup>558</sup> and *The Expanse*.<sup>559</sup> In addition, Hills and Stanfill have explored how the producers of mid-2000s television show *Veronica Mars*, which was cancelled in 2007, harnessed the power of its fanbase to successfully crowdfund the budget for a movie continuation released in 2014 (subsequently leading to a new series of the show).<sup>560</sup>

The figure of the fan has also become a subject within media storytelling, notably in the popular 2007-2019 sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, which featured a cast of explicitly (albeit caricatured) fannish characters in its lead roles but also in such properties as movies *Galaxy Quest* (1999) and *Fanboys* (2008), and, as discussed at length below, television show *Supernatural* (2005-20). Moreover, though the image of the socially awkward and immature fan still lingers in many of these portrayals, they nevertheless represent,

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<sup>555</sup> '2010s in Film'.

<sup>556</sup> Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*.

<sup>557</sup> Andreeva, "'Lucifer' Saved: Netflix Picks Up Series For Season 4 After Fox Cancellation"; Braxton, 'How "Lucifer," Banished from Fox, Found Sympathy for the Devil from Netflix'; Freeth, 'Lucifer Cast Thank Fans for Saving the Show as They Return to Film Season Four with Netflix'.

<sup>558</sup> Acevedo and Variety, "'One Day At A Time' Has Been Saved, after Immense #SaveODAAT Campaign"; Linnell, 'How Queer Fandom Saved One Day at a Time'; Darcy, 'How Fans' Passion Brought Shows Like "One Day at a Time" Back From Being Canceled'.

<sup>559</sup> TEL Crew, 'How the Power of Fans Saved The Expanse: A Retrospective Look into the Historic Campaign'; 'Saving The Expanse Is One of Fandom's Great Triumphs'; Hipes and N'Duka, "'The Expanse' Team Thanks Out-Of-This-World Fans For Saving Show – Comic-Con'.

<sup>560</sup> Hills, 'Veronica Mars, Fandom, and the "Affective Economics" of Crowdfunding Poachers'; Stanfill, 'The Veronica Mars Kickstarter, Fan-Ancing and Austerity Logics'.

according to Busse, a move ‘away from excessive stereotypes to encompass not only a wider variety of fans but also generally more sympathetic ones.’<sup>561</sup>

In addition to these fictional representations, real-life fans have also become a visible and influential part of the cultural conversation surrounding media properties. Journalist Alexis Nedd, in an article outlining the influence of fandom on popular culture throughout the 2000s and 2010s, points out that fans’ reactions to new content or plot developments have become part of the news itself, ranging from ‘actual reaction videos to longtime fans watching the first trailer of some long-awaited adaptation to entire articles written about what “Twitter” thinks of a movie or new season of television.’<sup>562</sup> The result of this, Nedd suggests, is not just that fans have become Hollywood’s ‘most desired demographic’ but also that fandom has been elevated to the level of specific influence on the types of properties mainstream media produces and even the details of them – as, for example, when the director of the 2020 *Sonic the Hedgehog* movie tweeted<sup>563</sup> that Sonic’s design would be changed following widespread negative fan reactions to the film’s trailer (the film indeed was eventually released with a heavily redesigned Sonic). Indeed, some commentators have suggested that fans have begun to develop a sense of entitlement, their expectation that their preferences ought to be indulged resulting in toxic behaviour.<sup>564</sup>

For example, the previous chapter discussed how market-economy logic has become increasingly visible in how feedback functions within the fanfiction community, encouraging entitlement and obligation as feedback has been reframed as payment for the labour of fan writers. In a 2019 article provocatively titled ‘Fans Are Ruining *Game of Thrones* – And Everything Else,’<sup>565</sup> Greenaway argues that a similar pattern can be seen in how modern media fandom interacts with creators and producers. He suggests that fandom has become aggressively entitled, leading to fans insisting that professional creators should listen to and fulfil their expectations and reacting disproportionately, specifically referring to the petition set up following *Game of Thrones*’ final season, which appealed for broadcaster HBO to ‘Remake *Game of Thrones* Season 8 with competent writers’<sup>566</sup> as an example of this entitlement.

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<sup>561</sup> Busse, ‘Geek Hierarchies, Boundary Policing, and the Gendering of the Good Fan’, 80.

<sup>562</sup> Nedd, ‘How Fandom Won the 2010s and Why It Will Keep on Winning?’.

<sup>563</sup> Fowler, ‘Thank You for the Support. And the Criticism?’.

<sup>564</sup> Kelly, ‘From *Sonic the Hedgehog* to *Star Wars*, Are Fans Too Entitled?’, Gardner, ‘*Spider-Suits* and *Luke Skywalker*: How Entitlement Is Messing Up Fandom?’, Hassenger, ‘*Ghostbusters*, *Frozen*, and the Strange Entitlement of Fan Culture’.

<sup>565</sup> Greenaway, ‘Fans Are Ruining *Game of Thrones* — And Everything Else’.

<sup>566</sup> D, ‘Remake *Game of Thrones* Season 8 with Competent Writers’.

Greenaway's article is part of a wider trend of media coverage questioning the involvement of fans in the creative process, particularly in terms of 'fanservice',<sup>567</sup> here defined as decisions, both textual and paratextual, made by TPTB specifically to pander to their fanbase rather than for sound narrative reasons.<sup>568</sup> Small examples of fanservice, as for example the inclusion of an original cast member in a reboot (e.g. Leonard Nimoy's appearance as an alternate-universe Spock in the 2009 *Star Trek* movie) or an in-joke drawn from fandom (e.g. *Hannibal*'s onscreen use of its fandom's term 'murder husbands' to refer to the relationship between its protagonists) are generally regarded as acceptable. Indeed, Brennan – drawing on Jenkins<sup>569</sup> and Hills<sup>570</sup> – suggests that 'market logic' (the best decisions for the marketing of a product) and fanservice are not mutually exclusive and can serve the same function, satisfying industry and fans at once.<sup>571</sup>

However, once fanservice is deemed to have influence on the narrative decisions taken by a source text's authors/producers, this tends to be seen as a betrayal of creative integrity. Industry figures, particularly those with creative authority, frequently play down suggestions of fanservice within their works, implying that to provide such indulgence is to compromise their artistic vision. Rian Johnson, for example, who directed *The Last Jedi* (the eighth movie in the main *Star Wars* series), has expressed the view that attempting to pander to fans is not an effective route to storytelling success, stating that, "I think approaching any creative process with [making fandoms happy] would be a mistake that would lead to probably the exact opposite result."<sup>572</sup> Meanwhile, Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and director of *The Avengers*, has expressed a similar view, emphasising the need for boundaries between fan and creator: "I would like always to have a dialogue with the audience, but at the same time you can't create by committee."<sup>573</sup>

Fandom, it seems, has reached such a point of visibility and influence as to be accused of an excess of both, of abusing its newfound power in a way that disrespects and compromises the creativity of professional creators (as, for example, with *Sonic* actor Jim Carrey's reaction to the character's redesign, in which he expressed concern over the idea

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<sup>567</sup> 'Fan Service'.

<sup>568</sup> This use of the term originates but is distinct from its usage in anime/manga fandom, where it refers to 'the random and gratuitous display of a series of anticipated gestures [...] [including] such things as panty shots, leg spreads (spread legs) and glimpses of breasts.' Russell, 'The Glimpse and Fan Service: New Media, New Aesthetics', 107.

<sup>569</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, 114–15.

<sup>570</sup> Hills, 'Torchwood's Trans-Transmedia: Media Tie-Ins and Brand "Fanagement"', 410–14.

<sup>571</sup> Brennan, 'Slashbaiting, an Alternative to Queerbaiting', 114–15.

<sup>572</sup> Qtd. in: Whitbrook, 'Rian Johnson Thinks Catering Foremost to Fanservice Is a Potential Mistake (and He's Right)'.

<sup>573</sup> Qtd. in: Martens, 'Creators, Fans and Death Threats: Talking to Joss Whedon, Neil Gaiman and More on the Age of Entitlement'.

of fans having influence during the creative process<sup>574</sup>). In the following section, I demonstrate that fanfic has been slower in achieving such visibility, largely as a result of its greater wariness over copyright issues, but that AO3/the OTW's legal advocacy and increasing presence as a culturally validating institution has raised the possibility of fanfiction following a similar arc as fandom has over the last decade, with both the positive and negative associations that have resulted.

## Fanfic in the Cultural Shadows

Compared to the upwards trajectory of fandom within mainstream culture, fanfic has lagged somewhat behind. While fan artists sell merchandise on sites such as Redbubble and Etsy, seemingly without serious consequences, and creators and actors endorse their creations (see Figs. 7-9), fic writers remain warier of making themselves so visible. This is in no small part down to awareness that, as discussed in Chapter One, fanfic exists in something of a legal limbo, relying on the tolerance of copyright owners in order to survive unchallenged. This includes an understanding that canon creators prefer to maintain plausible deniability when it comes to use of their copyrighted material<sup>575</sup> and therefore to call producers' attention to specific fics is inappropriate, not to mention potentially embarrassing if handled insensitively (journalist Caitlin Moran's widely-criticised decision to force *Sherlock* actors Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman to read excerpts from an explicit fic featuring their characters<sup>576</sup> still looms large in fandom memory).

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<sup>574</sup> Samhan, 'Jim Carrey Speaks Out On The Sonic The Hedgehog Re-Design: "I Don't Know Quite How I Feel"'.  
<sup>575</sup> Hale-Stern, 'N.K. Jemisin Reminds Us of the First Rule of Fanfiction?'.  
<sup>576</sup> Romano, 'Why Fans Are Outraged at Sherlock and Watson Reading Sexy Fanfic?'.



Figure 7: Bryan Fuller, creator and showrunner of TV series *Hannibal*, wearing a t-shirt featuring a piece of fan art by CamilleFlyingRotten depicting a romantic image of main characters Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter.<sup>577</sup>



Figure 8: Re-tweet by actor Brie Larson of fan art by Bev Johnson/@beverlylove depicting a flirtatious moment between her MCU character Captain Marvel and Valkyrie, played by Tessa Thompson who is also tagged in the tweet.<sup>578</sup>



Figure 9: Re-tweet by actor Michael Sheen, complimenting fan art by Beck Damien/@emptymasks depicting the characters from television show *Good Omens*, in which Sheen appears.<sup>579</sup>

Moreover, in contrast to the supportive actors and producers in Figs. 7-9, a particularly provocative source of criticism of fanfiction comes from some of the very writers whose work transformative fans are responding to. As discussed in Chapter One, the best-known example is Anne Rice's request to have any works based on her novels removed from FFN and alleged threats to sue her fans if they continued to post fics.<sup>580</sup> Even after softening her stance somewhat, Rice still continues to promote the idea that fanfiction's only value is as a training ground for aspiring professional writers, stating in 2012 that, 'If I were a young writer, I'd want to own my own ideas. But maybe fan fiction is a transitional phase: whatever gets you there, gets you there.'<sup>581</sup> For Rice, fic can never

<sup>577</sup> Screenshot from: MyNewYorkEye, 'What Will Be HANNIBAL Season 4 like? - Bryan Fuller'.

<sup>578</sup> Larson, 'We Cute'.

<sup>579</sup> Sheen, 'Oh This Is Lovely'.

<sup>580</sup> 'Anne Rice'.

<sup>581</sup> Qtd. in: Metrowebukmetro, 'How Fan Fiction Is Conquering the Internet and Shooting up Book Charts'.

be anything more than a training ground before one graduates to ‘real’ writing; it has no merit of its own.

Other professional authors, meanwhile, including Robin Hobb,<sup>582</sup> Diane Gabaldon<sup>583</sup> and George R.R. Martin<sup>584</sup> have criticised fanfiction in far stronger terms, utilising the kind of language Patry discusses as being misused by copyright holders to ‘characterize the nature of copyright as property and [...] those who use copyrighted works without permission as thieves or parasites.’<sup>585</sup> Amongst objections including the issue of copyright, the sexual content of fanfic, and the quality of fanfic writing in general, all of these authors specifically invoke the issue of authorial consent and claim that fanfiction is an infraction of it. In one post on her blog, Hobb likens the practice to identity theft, claiming that her reputation with her readers could be damaged as a result of such stories, and then goes so far as to imply fanfiction constitutes a violation of her characters: ‘At the extreme low end of the spectrum, fan fiction becomes personal masturbation fantasy in which the fan reader is interacting with the writer’s character. That isn’t healthy for anyone.’<sup>586</sup> Gabaldon writes in even more provocative terms, likening the writing of fanfic to the selling of children into ‘white slavery’<sup>587</sup> and stating that ‘it’s revolting to see your characters being made to do and say idiotic things, or be forced to enact simple-minded sex fantasies (which is what most fan-fic that comes to my unwilling attention is).’<sup>588</sup>

Even that most enduring of academic framings of transformative fans, Jenkins’ metaphor of the ‘textual poacher,’<sup>589</sup> places fans in a criminal role, stealing from the author for their own gain. Jenkins’ intention in coining this term is to cast fans as resistant activists, reclaiming canon from the clutches of selfish and creatively moribund corporations. However, ‘poacher,’ without qualification, has criminality at its heart, not mere resistance – poaching is analogous to stealing, not to rebellion. Later strongly criticises Jenkins’ terminology, suggesting that, ‘The term [poachers] calls to mind a particular kind of monster: one which hunts in the margins, stealing and slaughtering on the property of others. [...] The use of language demonstrates that while these arguments are largely affirming, they implicitly cast fans as misunderstood monsters as is characteristic

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<sup>582</sup> Hobb, ‘The Fan Fiction Rant’.

<sup>583</sup> Gabaldon’s original posts were deleted, however the text can be found at the following reference: ‘Fan-Fiction and Moral Conundrums’.

<sup>584</sup> Martin, ‘Someone Is Angry On the Internet’.

<sup>585</sup> Patry, *Moral Panics and the Copyright Wars*, 14–15, 86–96.

<sup>586</sup> Hobb, ‘The Fan Fiction Rant’.

<sup>587</sup> Gabaldon, ‘Dear Margaret’.

<sup>588</sup> Ibid.

<sup>589</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*.

of apocalyptic horror.<sup>590</sup> Jenkins' terminology, despite its supportive intentions, helps to further the idea of transformative fans as doing something wrong and getting away with it, rather than engaging in a culturally valid process with a long literary history.<sup>591</sup>

Fanfic writers continue to be acutely aware that, despite fandom's recent trajectory towards greater visibility and legitimacy, their creative work is still largely dismissed and denigrated. Fanfiction is still seen by many as having little cultural or creative value in itself, as being, as Rice suggests above, at best a training ground for inexperienced writers before they graduate to original fiction, and at worst the self-indulgent, oversexed ramblings of a mob of silly women (an impression not helped by the mainstream's greatest reference for fanfiction being FSoG, a work which many fanfic participants lament as reinforcing negative stereotypes about fic's quality<sup>592</sup>). This impression, in combination with the legal precarity of fanfic have had the effect of keeping fanfiction within the cultural shadows, in comparison to fandom's mainstream rise. However, in the following section I examine how AO3 and its advocacy of the legality of transformative works has led to a shift in fanfic participants' confidence in their work and contributed to a rise in fanfiction's cultural capital.

## Fanfic, Legality and Cultural Capital

As discussed in Chapter One, AO3 and the OTW offer a range of assets to their userbase but perhaps the most significant of these is their commitment to advocating for the legality of fanfiction and protecting their users against threats from copyright holders. Prior to the launch of AO3, the fanfic community generally accepted that fic was something to be kept within the safety of fandom's subculture, away from the potentially-litigious eyes of the mainstream. That non-commercial fanfiction existed in a grey area, with no definitive guidance or judgement on whether it was legal or not, was simply a fact of fandom life, with disclaimers asking (often begging) for copyright owners not to sue being a common

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<sup>590</sup> Later, 'The Monstrous Narratives of Transformative Fandom', 338.

<sup>591</sup> Pugh, *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context*; Barenblat, 'Fan Fiction and Midrash: Making Meaning'; Willis, 'Amateur Mythographies: Fan Fiction and the Myth of Myth'; Coppa, *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age*; Hellekson and Busse, 'Introduction: Why a Fan Fiction Studies Reader Now?'; Florschuetz, "'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Canonicity, and Audience Participation'.

<sup>592</sup> audreyii-fic, 'My Problems with "Fifty Shades of Grey"'; inickel, 'Fifty Shades of Grey Is the Reason'; Jones, 'Fifty Shades of Exploitation: Fan Labor and Fifty Shades of Grey', paras 1.4-1.6.

feature of fanfic paratexts<sup>593</sup> (despite the questionable legal power of such statements<sup>594</sup>). To challenge this precarious status quo was seen as a pointless and unnecessarily risky endeavour, with fandom seeming to recognise that protection from legal persecution came, as Lantagne (who volunteers on the OTW's Legal Advocacy project) points out, from 'their ability to fly under the radar and beneath the copyright-holder's notice so as not to provoke the copyright-holder's sense of moral outrage and violation.'<sup>595</sup>

However, the OTW has sought since its inception to bring this discussion into the light, contending that non-commercial fanfic is legal in the United States (in which AO3 is registered) under the Fair Use Doctrine and that, therefore, fic writers have no reason to hide in their online subculture. While the OTW's arguments regarding fanfiction have not yet been tested or backed by legal proceedings, the emergence of its arguments in favour of fanfic's legality has done much to increase the confidence and security felt by fanfic participants, providing a clear and solid defence for the work they create and consume. Indeed, as Chapter One demonstrated, new entrants into the fanfic field are at times surprised by the hesitancy displayed by longer-standing community members to expose and promote their work – some express confusion at the lingering (though much diminished) habit of using disclaimers while, as seen in Chapter Two, some feel confident enough to attempt to monetise their work via platforms like Patreon, unaware of the baggage of threatened cease-and-desist notices older writers carry with them (a somewhat ironic result of the monetisation-opposed OTW's legal work).

This is important not simply from a legal point of view but also a cultural one. As discussed in Chapter One, the OTW argues that fanfic's legality is rooted in the creative effort and skill invested in order to produce a substantially new work based on existing material. In essence, this is an argument that fanfic writers have – and should be acknowledged as having – a contributory role in the cultural ecosystem, something akin to other fair-use based roles as criticism and parody but defined by its own particular purpose, that of expanding and deepening the intertextual web or, as Derecho puts it, the archive surrounding each source text<sup>596</sup> (though this can include elements of criticism and parody). In the following section, I argue that AO3 is a manifestation of Derecho's archontic theory

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<sup>593</sup> 'Disclaimer'.

<sup>594</sup> Tushnet, 'Copyright Law, Fan Practices, and the Rights of the Author', 80–85; 'Fan Fiction', sec. Frequently Asked Questions: What benefit does an author credit provide?

<sup>595</sup> Lantagne, 'Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Lucrative Fandom: Recognizing the Economic Power of Fanworks and Reimagining Fair Use in Copyright', 289.

<sup>596</sup> Derecho, 'Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction'.

and that the OTW's legal advocacy and the resultant rise in fanfic's cultural capital makes it easier for fanfic writers to fill this cultural role.

## Archontic Literature, Intertextuality and the Myth-Kitty

Jenkins famously said that, 'Fan fiction is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk.'<sup>597</sup> In agreement with his typical framing of fans and fic as fundamentally resistant, Jenkins' words rather grandly imagine fic as a reclamation of the cultural storytelling cache from the corporations that attempt to hoard it away, allowing those myths to be reinserted into the ongoing storytelling commons, keeping them active and alive.

Jenkins' point is echoed by Coppa, who sees fanfiction as an integral part of contemporary mythmaking. She argues that:

Our cultural myths, the stories that tie us together, are not about knights but about Jedi Knights, not lords but Time Lords. We love scientists, pilots, warriors and kings, gods and aliens; Prometheus and Icarus, Hercules and Arthur, Thor and Superman. Fanfiction is an essential part of the process by which these characters are expanded and made epic, loved by their fans into greatness.<sup>598</sup>

Notably, Coppa places more emphasis on fanfic as a reciprocal process than Jenkins does. In her version of mythmaking, fic writers are participants in a long-established and widespread process of stories and characters passing into cultural significance through their telling and re-telling. Here, works of fiction become important when they are re-interpreted and remixed, Coppa using the example of Shakespeare, who 'remains relevant because he is constantly interfered with'<sup>599</sup> in new stagings and adaptations, to illustrate her point. This framing suggests a path towards modern fanfic, rather than being viewed in Jenkins' resistant terms, being defined as a form of creative interference – rebranded as transformation – of the type that keeps our myth-kitty (the body of myths shared amongst a society or community) alive by constantly remixing and reshaping it.

As discussed in the Literature Review, numerous definitions and theories of fanfiction are based on this idea of fic as inherently intertextual, various scholars – in addition to Jenkins and Coppa above – working to explain the purpose of fanfic's narrative

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<sup>597</sup> Qtd. in: Harmon, 'In TV's Dull Summer Days, Plots Take Wing on the Net'.

<sup>598</sup> Coppa, *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age*, 26.

<sup>599</sup> Ibid.

interference beyond the simple desire to play with another creator's toys and how that might translate into a specific cultural role for fic writers. Here I focus on Derecho's theory of fanfic as 'archontic literature' for two reasons: first, it frames fic writers as actively contributing to the intertextual web surrounding original texts; and secondly because, as I argue below, AO3 represents a digital manifestation of Derecho's ideas.

In introducing her theory, Derecho directly states that it is her purpose to focus on how fanfiction works as art, rather than on the community behind it as fan studies has historically tended to. Specifically she intends to examine what fanworks 'signify for broader culture—not just on a political level, in terms of whether they serve as adequate forms of resistance to the culture industries or are merely forms of cooperation with media corporations, but on a philosophical level.'<sup>600</sup> Her theory, therefore, shares a similar aim to that of the OTW, which states that it is working towards a future in which transformative works are not only recognised as legal but also are 'accepted as a legitimate creative activity.'<sup>601</sup> In order to meet this aim, Derecho borrows Derrida's concept of the ever-expanding archive, termed the 'archontic principle,'<sup>602</sup> which Derecho defines as 'that drive within an archive that seeks to always produce more archive, to enlarge itself. The archontic principle never allows the archive to remain stable or still, but wills it to add to its own stores.'<sup>603</sup> Applying this principle to textual objects themselves, Derecho defines an archontic text as one that 'allows, or even invites, writers to enter it, select specific items they find useful, make new artifacts using those found objects and deposit the newly made work back into the source text's archive. An archontic text's archive is not identical to the text but is a virtual construct surrounding the text, including it and all texts related to it.'<sup>604</sup>

Derecho's theory points to how fanfiction can act not only to interact with mythology (both classical and modern) but as a modern form of mythmaking in itself, in her suggestion that fan writers can take elements of existing storyworlds and use them to create something new. Interestingly, Derecho's original statement of archontic literature echoes Jenkins' work in seeing fanfic as a resistant process, historicising fanfic as the legacy of 'the act of women entering the archives of male-authored texts and adding their own entries to those archives,'<sup>605</sup> giving examples from as early as the seventeenth century and continuing through to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with such works as Jean

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<sup>600</sup> Derecho, 'Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction', 132.

<sup>601</sup> 'What We Believe'.

<sup>602</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, 3.

<sup>603</sup> Derecho, 'Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction', 146.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001).<sup>606</sup>

However, I argue that while fanfic may be politically resistant, its following of the archontic principle means it is culturally contributory, building out from source texts rather than seeking to replace or erase them, even when its writers are critical of canon. Various other scholars have also used Derecho's theory to demonstrate how archontic literature represents, on a cultural scale, a contributory rather than a resistant act. For example, Kelly uses archontic theory to demonstrate how AO3's fanfic writers have created an archive surrounding Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel *The Price of Salt* (itself a contributor to what Hugh Stevens calls the 'large room, or a library'<sup>607</sup> full of gay and lesbian fiction that stands in for any agreed corpus), which builds on the original text's ambiguously happy ending with a collection of texts which grant the lesbian protagonists a multitude of depictions of their lives as a couple. Kelly points out that these fics play an important role in allowing the novel's then-rare depiction of a queer romance that ends well to remain active and culturally-relevant: "Their very existence constitutes an abundant, multiplying, universally accessible archive of the kinds of "happy endings" for which lesbian readers of the 1950s sought so desperately, and often in vain, revealing both that this need lives on in our contemporary cultural landscape and, most significantly, that it is being met."<sup>608 609</sup>

Leavenworth and Isaksson, meanwhile, examine how the mid-2000s-to-early-2010s trend for softened, sympathetic (metaphorically 'de-fanged') portrayals of vampires in book series *Twilight*, *True Blood*, and *The Vampire Diaries* and their respective screen adaptations was met with a wealth of fanfiction that reinserted monstrousness into the archives surrounding these works. As a result, the potential calcifying of the vampire into a domesticated shadow of itself was averted, fanfic ensuring that 'it is impossible to

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<sup>606</sup> Ibid., 152–61.

<sup>607</sup> Stevens, 'Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Fiction in English', 628–29.

<sup>608</sup> Kelly, "'Lots of Us Are Doing Fine": Femslash Fan Fiction, Happy Endings, and the Archontic Expansions of the Price of Salt Archive', 43–44.

<sup>609</sup> See also: Parker on the shifting focus of twenty-first century lesbian fiction (Parker, 'Contemporary Lesbian Fiction: Into the Twenty-First Century'); Dhaenens et al. on slash fanfiction as queer reading (Dhaenens, Van Bauwel, and Biltereyst, 'Slashing the Fiction of Queer Theory: Slash Fiction, Queer Reading, and Transgressing the Boundaries of Screen Studies, Representations, and Audiences'); Doty on the relationship of queerness to mainstream texts (Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*, 14–20.); Abraham on the 'lesbian novel,' including *The Price of Salt* (Abraham, *Are Girls Necessary?: Lesbian Writing and Modern Histories*, 1–37.); Keller on lesbian pulp novels as representation (Keller, "'Was It Right to Love Her Brother's Wife So Passionately?": Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965'); Massey on slash fiction as a liminal space in which queer and straight women can subvert hegemonic patriarchal narratives about heterosexual characters (Massey, 'Borderland Literature, Female Pleasure, and the Slash Fic Phenomenon'); Donoghue on lesbian literature as intertextual (Donoghue, *Inseparable: Desire Between Women in Literature*, particularly pages 106-113 on "The Beautiful House" as an object of longing for lesbian couples in literature); Liming on identity construction and resistant reading among lesbian readers (Liming, "'Reading for It": Lesbian Readers Constructing Culture and Identity through Textual Experience').

determine what shape the monster will take, or, indeed, where it will come from; sometimes, as we have seen, it is the female protagonists rather than the vampires who are the real beasts. Consequently, even if the canons set boundaries and make definitions, the ever-expanding archives ensure that the monster *will* get us.<sup>610</sup> Even when resistant, then, fanfiction is simultaneously contributory, adding interpretative options to canon rather than usurping it – an archontic text always takes from *and gives back to* the archive. Both these examples point to how fanfic’s archontic contributions perform the function of keeping individual stories and genres from fossilising by exploring and expanding their possibilities, whether in terms of reinterpretations through a contemporary lens or by providing alternatives to a particular narrative trend.

Importantly, they also demonstrate that one of fanfic’s strengths is its ability to do things that mainstream, commercial media cannot, will not, or can only do covertly. This can include fanfic’s well-documented enthusiasm for slash, in comparison to the underrepresentation of queer stories in mainstream media,<sup>611</sup> or fics which make narrative choices that would be unlikely, if not impossible, within canon, as with crossover fics, which combine two or more storyworlds in some way (for example, by having characters from two different properties meet, or by placing the characters from one story in the plot of another).<sup>612</sup> Moreover, as well as these additions to specific texts’ archives, fanfiction also has the ability to contribute new narrative elements to the general storytelling toolbox. This can be achieved by fic writers picking up on trends before the publishing world – as, for example, with the fanfic genre ‘Omegaverse,’<sup>613</sup> which emerged from the *Supernatural* fandom’s popularisation of werewolf tropes<sup>614</sup> and which has crossed over to become a genre in the romance publishing industry.<sup>615</sup> It can also be the result of fic writers taking a niche concept and popularising it, as with their use of the ‘hanahaki disease’ trope (in which a character is afflicted by a supernatural disease that causes flowers to grow in their lungs as a result of unrequited love). The origins of this idea are uncertain, though Fanlore specifies it originally appeared in 2009 Japanese manga *The Girl Who Spit Flowers*,<sup>616</sup> but it

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<sup>610</sup> Lindgren Leavenworth and Isaksson, *Fanged Fan Fiction: Variations on Twilight, True Blood and The Vampire Diaries*, 202. Emphasis in original.

<sup>611</sup> ‘Observations & Recommendations’; Cook, ‘A Content Analysis of LGBT Representation on Broadcast and Streaming Television’, 5–8; ‘Being Seen On Screen: Diverse Representation & Inclusion on TV’.

<sup>612</sup> Samutina, ‘Fan Fiction as World-Building: Transformative Reception in Crossover Writing’.

<sup>613</sup> norabombay, ‘Alphas, Betas, Omegas: A Primer’; Popova, “Dogfuck Rapeworld”: Omegaverse Fanfiction as a Critical Tool in Analyzing the Impact of Social Power Structures on Intimate Relationships and Sexual Consent’.

<sup>614</sup> Busse, ‘Pon Farr, Mpreg, Bonds, and the Rise of the Omegaverse’, 319.

<sup>615</sup> Alter, ‘A Feud in Wolf-Kink Erotica Raises a Deep Legal Question’.

<sup>616</sup> ‘Hanahaki Disease’, 21 October 2020.

appears to have been adopted first by East Asian ‘Boys’ Love’ (BL, a manga and anime genre featuring m/m – male/male – romance<sup>617</sup>) fandom before crossing over to become a popular pan-fandom narrative element (just over 8,000 works are tagged with ‘hanahaki disease’ on AO3 as of 22/12/20, the first dated to October 2014).<sup>618</sup> In addition, despite fanfic’s fundamentally derivative nature, it is occasionally possible for original narrative elements to emerge from it. For example, in 2017 a Tumblr blog dedicated to deliberately bad AU fanwork prompts for the webcomic *Check, Please!* posted the following: ‘AU suggestion: soulmate au where one person finds a goose who leads them to the other person. the difficulty comes in not being mauled by a goose.’<sup>619</sup> One writer picked up this prompt and, within eleven days of the original post, published a fic based on it on AO3.<sup>620</sup> The idea of the soulmate goose slowly picked up traction, with other fic writers transferring it to their own fandoms and eventually became a recognised trope: as of 22/12/20, there are ninety-one fics tagged with ‘Alternate Universe – The Soulmate Goose of Enforcement’ on AO3, covering just over fifty individual fandoms. The soulmate goose has sprung from fandom to become a usable storytelling element that can be added to the archive of any text while also building a small but notable archive of its own, codified in AO3’s tagging system.

All this suggests a valuable cultural role for fanfiction, something akin to literary/media criticism but applied to creative rather than academic or journalistic output and with the potential to make substantive contributions to the storytelling commons. However, Derecho also specifies that part of the process of creating archontic literature is to ‘deposit the material back into the source text’s archive’ and it is this part of fanfic’s archontic purpose which has historically been rendered difficult by its legally-grey status. Modern media fanfiction cannot take the obvious route into the mainstream – i.e. traditional publication – without risking legal action or being forced to first strip out all of its fannish elements as with FSoG or Anna Todd’s *After*. Thus, fanfiction can only function as a shadow archive, its contribution limited to the fan community and restricted from penetrating any further into the intertextual web. Admittedly, it is possible for fanfic to be added to the mainstream archive once properties have crossed into the public domain. Seth Grahame-Smith’s 2009 parody novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, for example, was arguably just fanfiction eligible for publication (and subsequently a movie

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<sup>617</sup> ‘Boys’ Love’.

<sup>618</sup> ‘Hanahaki Disease’, 10 November 2020.

<sup>619</sup> shitty-check-please-aus, ‘AU Suggestion’.

<sup>620</sup> Boxstorm, ‘OMG, Goose Please!’

adaptation, itself an addition both to Grahame-Smith and Austen's archives) because Austen's novel is out of copyright. The same could be said for Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, P.D. James' *Death Comes to Pemberley*, or, arguably, the entire genre of romance fiction.<sup>621</sup> However, the duration of copyright protection is lengthy, commonly lasting for the creator's life plus seventy years, though different terms may apply, depending on the country and form of media – for example, Mexico currently (in December 2020) enforces the longest term, encompassing the creator's life plus 100 years.<sup>622</sup> Such delays in material entering the public domain limits the eligibility of contemporary stories for archontic extension via fanfiction until long after their status as contemporary has passed. Moreover, it is entirely possible for those rules to be changed in ways that further enforce the power of copyright holders, as seen in the USA, where 2019 marked the first time in twenty years that any works newly entered the American public domain, following the 1998 extension of copyright protection from seventy-five to ninety-five years after publication.<sup>623</sup> In order to be able to add back into the myth-kitty outwith these limits, therefore, it is helpful for fanfiction to have not only an argument for the cultural validity of transformative works but also a platform which makes this validity explicit.

AO3's visibility as an archive for transformative works is vital in this sense since, as Mbembe notes, an archive confers status upon the works within it, both in a material sense (the archive is proof that the lives whose traces it preserves did exist and have impact) and an imaginary one (providing artefacts that can be threaded together into a narrative understanding of a society or community).<sup>624</sup> AO3's very existence as a vessel for fanfiction's past, present and future, as discussed in Chapter One, lends a collective validity to the works within it, rendering them more than disparate pieces of textual productivity but as proof of communities with the status of, as De Kosnik (née Derecho) puts it, '*having truly existed*, of their individual and collective cultures *having actually happened*, and therefore of making possible their insertion into history.'<sup>625</sup> Moreover, AO3's design as an archive makes explicit the archontic function of fanfic, providing evidence of the cultural role it performs as both response and contribution to originary texts.

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<sup>621</sup> Thierauf, 'Forever After: Desire in the 21st-Century Romance Blockbuster', 604; Grandi, 'Web Side Stories: Janeites, Fanfictions, and Never Ending Romances', 24.

<sup>622</sup> Schmidt, Treviño, and Santin, 'Mexico: Copyright Laws and Regulations 2021', sec. 1.6.

<sup>623</sup> Fleishman, 'For the First Time in More Than 20 Years, Copyrighted Works Will Enter the Public Domain'; 'The Incredible Shrinking Public Domain'.

<sup>624</sup> Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and Its Limits', 20–21.

<sup>625</sup> De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*, 17. Emphasis in original.

This evidence is clearest in the paratextual material surrounding each fic – most importantly the fandom tag required of all works posted to AO3 (and a conventional feature of all fanfic). Included directly below each fic’s title while browsing, and at the top of the page when reading, the fandom tag (or tags, if it is a work based on more than one source text) acts as explicit credit to the original creator and as a means of intertextual navigation, allowing users to track the connections between the originary text and its transformative archive, as well as the interconnections between the archontic texts themselves. Thus, for example, one can enter the *Pride and Prejudice* tag and find just over 3,000 works contributing to its archive<sup>626</sup> and, from there, drill down into additional tags to find how Austen’s novel intersects with other texts, such as the *Star Wars* universe (thirty fics), the *Harry Potter* universe (fifty-eight fics), or indeed Austen’s other works, including *Persuasion* (fifty-four fics) and *Emma* (fifty-seven fics). In addition, tags can also make clear connections in terms of genre or setting, as with the 47,032 fics on AO3 tagged with ‘Vampires,’ the 42,712 tagged with ‘Horror,’ or the 139 fics tagged with ‘Firenze | Florence,’ making clear the archontic contributions of these fics not only to the individual fandoms they belong to but also on a broader level as building the archives surrounding storytelling elements as well. If intertextuality is contingent upon the interpretative connections made by the act of reading different texts, and archontic theory is an organising principle based in intertextuality, then this is AO3 acting as codified demonstration of the creative results that can arise from those connections. It represents a significant part of the intertextual/archontic web made visible and traceable, exposing the connective tissue between texts and genres.

As a result of their advocacy and the status lent by AO3’s positioning as an archive, AO3 and the OTW have begun to create a foundation for fanfiction to be reassessed outwith fandom as legally and culturally valid, making the case for the role of fanfic writers to be reframed - not as poachers, or rapists, or derivative copyists but as transformative artists. In doing so, they have contributed to a cultural ecosystem in which fanfic has begun to catch up with the rest of fandom in terms of its visibility, while media attitudes towards the fanfic community have begun to shift, indicating an increase in fic’s cultural capital. In the following section I examine how this shift has manifested within the media industry, suggesting that while the rise in fanfic’s cultural capital has resulted in a more positive and reciprocal relationship between the fic community and industry, there remains a lingering wariness over fans’ potential to misbehave.

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<sup>626</sup> All searches in this paragraph were conducted on 22/12/20.

## Mainstreaming Fanfic

Interestingly, fans' increasing confidence in arguing for the value of fanfic in a mainstream context coincides with media creators' own growing willingness to acknowledge fanfiction as a valid response to their work and even, in some cases, as equal to it. Indeed, it is increasingly common for professional writers to come forward as either former or current fic writers, including such prominent names as N.K. Jemisin,<sup>627</sup> Seanan McGuire,<sup>628</sup> and Cory Doctorow.<sup>629</sup>

Similarly, as reboots, remakes and adaptations have become ever-more familiar sources for media/cultural content, so industry figures have become more willing to acknowledge the similarities between their works and those of transformative fans. For example, Damon Lindelof, showrunner of the 2019 television adaptation of Alan Moore's 1986-87 comic book series *Watchmen*, has referred to the show as 'a very expensive bit of fanfic,'<sup>630</sup> acknowledging his own status as a fan of the comics since childhood. Author Neil Gaiman, meanwhile, in a 2017 exchange still celebrated as vindication for the value of fanfic, infamously responded to a question asking if he liked fanfiction (the user stating that they did not), that he 'won the Hugo Award for a piece of Sherlock Holmes/H.P. Lovecraft fanfiction, so I'm in favour.'<sup>631</sup> He also regularly interacts with his fans on social media – especially following the popularity of the television adaptation of his co-written novel *Good Omens* – encouraging headcanons and transformative works,<sup>632</sup> and contributing his own thoughts on interstitial details of his storyworlds, as well as even contributing his own fanfiction<sup>633</sup> (whether an author can create fanfiction of their own work is debatable but Gaiman posted his as an addition to a Tumblr post in much the same way a fanfic writer would, clearly emulating fannish behaviour).

Meanwhile Bryan Fuller – mentioned above as a supporter of fan art – is particularly noteworthy in this respect, referring to *Hannibal*, his adaptation of Thomas Harris' novel *Red Dragon*, as 'my fan fiction'<sup>634</sup> and celebrating the highly productive community of fic writers that sprang up around the show (it has 26,633 works on AO3 as of 22/12/20 and

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<sup>627</sup> Jemisin, 'Also, I've Told y'all This Before'.

<sup>628</sup> starsandatoms and Seananmcguire, 'What Are Your Thoughts on Fanfiction Authors?'

<sup>629</sup> Doctorow, 'Cory Doctorow: In Praise of Fanfic'.

<sup>630</sup> Qtd. in: Stubby the Rocket, 'Damon Lindelof Screens Watchmen Pilot and Introduces a Very Special Guest at NYCC 2019!'

<sup>631</sup> Gaiman, 'I Won the Hugo Award'.

<sup>632</sup> neil-gaiman and Holistic-cinnamon-bun, 'Hi Mr Gaiman'.

<sup>633</sup> neil-gaiman, 'Do You Have Any Idea'.

<sup>634</sup> Prudom, "'Hannibal' Finale Postmortem: Bryan Fuller Breaks Down That Bloody Ending and Talks Revival Chances'.

continues to be one of the site's most prolific fandoms despite the show having been cancelled in 2015 after three seasons). Fuller belongs to the now well-established category of 'fanboy auteur,' described by Scott as supposedly visionary media creators who flaunt their fannish credentials in order to gain credibility with the fan audiences their work targets.<sup>635</sup> Scott points out that 'the fanboy auteur is notably presented as an "affirmational" fan, rather than a "transformative" fan,'<sup>636</sup> in service of the media industry's preferred model of fandom as 'one of reverential respect for artists and properties.'<sup>637</sup> However, Fuller distinguishes himself from other such creators by his self-alignment with transformative fandom, using his cultural capital to raise that of *Hannibal*'s fic writers by placing their work on the same level as his own (as well as his economic capital, having backed crowdfunded campaigns for printed fanwork anthologies based on *Hannibal*<sup>638</sup>). Morimoto does point out that there is at least an element of fan management to this engagement, Fuller appropriating elements of fan culture to promote his product, but also argues that this is 'a small price to pay'<sup>639</sup> for validation by an industry figure who understands and celebrates the communal creative culture of fanfic and aligns himself with it, as in the following quote: 'I feel like it was a unique experience of myself as a fannibal [*Hannibal* fans' term for themselves], writing the show as I imagined it — it was my fan fiction — and then sharing it with other fan fiction writers who then elaborated on it in their own ways.'<sup>640</sup>

In addition to these examples, perhaps the most interesting and enlightening example of the media industry's changing attitude towards the fic community is the evolution of fan-favourite TV show *Supernatural*'s overt depiction of transformative fans, and fic writers specifically, which the next section examines in detail.

## Supernatural, the Author-God and the Transformative Fan

*Supernatural* is a cult American television show focusing on brothers Sam and Dean Winchester, who live out an itinerant existence tracking down and fighting a variety of supernatural creatures, while alternately aided and impeded by the forces of Heaven. The

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<sup>635</sup> Scott, 'Who's Steering the Mothership? The Role of the Fanboy Auteur in Transmedia Storytelling'; Scott, 'Dawn of the Undead Author: Fanboy Auteurism and Zack Snyder's "Vision"'.

<sup>636</sup> Scott, 'Dawn of the Undead Author: Fanboy Auteurism and Zack Snyder's "Vision"', 441.

<sup>637</sup> Ibid., 442.

<sup>638</sup> lovecrimebooks, 'SECOND Stretch Goal Unlocked BY BRYAN FULLER HIMSELF!!'; Fuller, 'OF COURSE I HAVE'.

<sup>639</sup> Morimoto, 'Hannibal: Adaptation and Authorship in the Age of Fan Production', 265.

<sup>640</sup> Qtd. in: Prudom, "'Hannibal' Finale Postmortem: Bryan Fuller Breaks Down That Bloody Ending and Talks Revival Chances'.

show launched in 2005 and concluded its fifteenth and final season in November 2020, having attracted one of the largest and most productive online fandoms (for example, as of 22/12/20 there are 238,898 *Supernatural* fics tagged on AO3, just lagging behind *Harry Potter*'s 286,225 and considerably ahead of *The Avengers*' 158,247, both of which are juggernaut franchises consisting of multiple properties, unlike *Supernatural*'s rather more modest existence on minor American television networks The WB (2005-06) and The CW (2006-20)). The relationship between show and fandom is notoriously love/hate, *Supernatural* fans being some of the most openly and vocally critical of the narrative choices the production team has made.<sup>641</sup> In particular, its attitude towards women has long been the focus of criticism, with characters who are or identify as women routinely being side-lined, demonised (sometimes literally) or 'fridged'<sup>642</sup> i.e. killed off in service of the male hero's plotline or to emphasise his caring/protective side. In addition, *Supernatural* is frequently seen as one of the worst perpetrators of 'queerbaiting',<sup>643</sup> a fan-conceived term which refers to the deliberate embedding of homoerotic subtext within a story in order to appeal to queer and slash-loving audiences, without any intention of following through by converting subtext into text. Repeated or prolonged instances of such behaviour often lead to accusations of producers making false promises in order to retain the interest of their queer-friendly audience members while avoiding offending their more conservative demographics.

*Supernatural* has a long history of metafictional engagement, including episodes in which the characters switch between television genres, are transported to the 'real world' where they must pretend to be the actors who play them, and find themselves in an episode of the cartoon *Scooby-Doo*. It even includes an episode entitled 'Meta Fiction,' in which the angel Metatron contemplates what makes a good story while manipulating the characters into depicting his narrative of choice. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a show with a notoriously devoted but often frustrated and combative audience, *Supernatural*'s excursions into meta also include a long-running plotline dealing directly with the relationship between professional creators/producers and transformative fans.

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<sup>641</sup> Baker-Whitelaw, "'Supernatural' Can Thank Its Fandom for Its Audience Growth".

<sup>642</sup> 'Stuffed into the Fridge'.

<sup>643</sup> Brennan, 'Queerbaiting: The "Playful" Possibilities of Homoeroticism'; McDermott, 'The Contest of Queerbaiting: Negotiating Authenticity in Fan-Creator Interactions'; Fathallah, 'Moriarty's Ghost: Or the Queer Disruption of the BBC's *Sherlock*'.

Much of this metatextual plotline has been dealt with by previous scholars<sup>644</sup> – notably by Fathallah who examines *Supernatural's* constructions of authorship and fandom at length in her book *Fanfiction and the Author*.<sup>645</sup> However, the show has continued to develop its take on transformative fans in significant ways in its later seasons, which have yet to receive as much academic attention. In order not to repeat this previous work, therefore, here I give a brief overview of the key information regarding this plotline from previous seasons, before focusing on seasons 10-15.

The thematic thread regarding transformative fandom originates in the show's fourth season, when the protagonists discover a series of cult novels which seem to depict the events of their lives in accurate detail, and which have attracted a significant online fandom which engages in such typical fannish activities as creating transformative works, shipping (the desire for two characters/people to be in a romantic/sexual relationship), and holding conventions. This element of the show gave rise to two characters with particular significance for *Supernatural's* attitude towards the role of the fan: Becky Rosen, a *Supernatural* 'super-fan' and fic writer with an unhealthy fixation on Sam Winchester; and Chuck Shurley, author of the in-universe *Supernatural* novels and initially said to be a prophet who transforms his visions of the Winchester Brothers' lives into works of (pulp) fiction.

Becky's initial appearances in season five establish her as a stereotypical obsessive fangirl, harbouring romantic desires for Sam Winchester (whom she has never met and, to begin with, believes to be entirely fictional) and unable to separate reality from fantasy. She takes advantage of her connection to Chuck Shurley to lie to and manipulate the Winchester Brothers in order to secure their appearance at the fandom convention she has organised (Shurley's *Supernatural* novels having garnered their own fandom by this point). Most disturbingly of all, when she returns in season seven, it is to drug the object of her obsession, Sam, with a love potion and proceed to marry him while he is under its influence and therefore unable to consent. This development shifted the previously comedic, harmless and (occasionally) helpfully knowledgeable Becky – whom Fathallah has argued could be reclaimed by fans as a representative of Bakhtinian resistant laughter,<sup>646</sup> – into a villainous role, forcing the narrative into a shape which satisfies only herself at the cost of damaging other characters and betraying narrative integrity. This is the

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<sup>644</sup> Busse, 'Geek Hierarchies, Boundary Policing, and the Gendering of the Good Fan', 81–83; Tosenberger, 'Love! Valor! Supernatural!'; Herbig and Herrmann, 'Polymediated Narrative: The Case of the Supernatural Episode "Fan Fiction"'.  
<sup>645</sup> Fathallah, *Fanfiction and the Author: How Fanfic Changes Popular Cultural Texts*, 157–98.

<sup>646</sup> Fathallah, 'Becky Is My Hero: The Power of Laughter and Disruption in Supernatural', sec. 2.

transformative fan as not only obsessive, dangerous nymphomaniac but also as a bad writer, guilty of poor characterisation and lazy plot-building, taking brute-force shortcuts instead of utilising craft to tell the story she wants (not coincidentally, the example of Becky's fanfic shown on the show is of deliberately poor quality, full of clichés and bad dialogue<sup>647</sup>).

Professional author Chuck, on the other hand, is intended as an avatar for *Supernatural's* creator Eric Kripke<sup>648</sup> (as well as, in a further metatextual touch, writing under a pen name composed of a portmanteau of two of the show's writers at the time<sup>649</sup>) and, despite his outwardly shabby appearance, is afforded the role of prophet, while his pulp novels are predicted to become gospels in the future, giving him a power and status far beyond that of the lowly fangirl Becky. This disparity was expanded in season eleven, when Chuck revealed himself to be the show's incarnation of God, establishing a literal Author-God<sup>650</sup> at the centre of the *Supernatural* storyworld.

Had the show finished at this moment it might have been read as a firm reinforcement of the media industry's dismissal of transformative fandom, with its author-avatar having revealed himself as the creator and power behind this universe while its fic author languished as a cast-off and a laughing-stock, both romantically and narratively, having made no appearances in the four seasons since her last. However, in the show's later years, significant changes can be seen in its attitude towards transformative fans and their role in the media ecosystem, with Chuck and Becky undergoing a role-reversal in terms of their moral framing, as well as the airing of an episode which attempts to depict transformative fanworks in a more positive, understanding light.

In its milestone 200<sup>th</sup> episode *Supernatural* chose to expand on this running meta-commentary on fandom by setting the entire episode – straightforwardly entitled 'Fan Fiction' – behind the scenes of a high school production of a musical play based on Chuck's novels. Acting as a commentary on the relationship between canon and fanfiction – the play itself is written and directed by Marie, a character who is an avid but not uncritical fan of the novels – the episode incorporates numerous nods to the show's fans and their practices, including shipping, genderbending (depictions of characters with a different gender identity than that established in canon) and self-inserts. In one exchange, Dean describes the events of his life (i.e. the plot of several episodes) to Marie, who

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<sup>647</sup> 'Becky Rosen', sec. Becky's Fanfic.

<sup>648</sup> Fathallah, *Fanfiction and the Author: How Fanfic Changes Popular Cultural Texts*, 157; Wilkinson, 'The Epic Love Story of Supernatural and Fanfic', 314.

<sup>649</sup> Wilkinson, 'The Epic Love Story of Supernatural and Fanfic', 404 note 122.

<sup>650</sup> Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', 146.

responds by telling him it is ‘some of the worst fanfiction I have ever heard’<sup>651</sup> and offering to share some better examples with him, the show taking a reflexively tongue-in-cheek jab at itself. Later, Dean offers encouragement to a discouraged Marie, stating that while he does not agree with her interpretation of his story, he supports her right to her own artistic vision and to share it with others:

I know I have expressed some differences of opinion regarding this particular version of *Supernatural*. But tonight, is all about Marie's vision, this is Marie's *Supernatural*. So I want you to get out there and I want you stand as close as she wants you to, and I want you to put as much sub into text as you possibly can.<sup>652</sup>

This exchange seems to give the message that the *Supernatural* writers are encouraging peace between the show and its fans, withholding endorsement of their specific headcanons and theories but using the show’s main character as a mouthpiece to support transformative works in general (even going so far as to suggest that to argue against such responses to the show would be churlish and short-sighted, by depicting Dean’s change from outraged supporter of canon to outright encouragement of transformative work as redemptive). It appears to be a moment within this deliberately fourth-wall-breaking episode in which the show reaches out to its fans in quest for a truce.

However, this gesture is somewhat undermined during the episode’s final moments as the play’s mysterious ‘publisher’ is revealed to be Chuck Shurley, who meets with writer/director Marie to give his approval of her production. This final twist is layered with metatextual meaning, particularly in retrospect, with Chuck’s later-revealed role as author-god bringing extra significance to his facilitation and approval of this unmistakably fannish adaptation of his work. It imagines a creator who not only accepts but actively enables fanworks – an incarnation that many would imagine as something of a fannish dream come true – but also portrays a fan writer eager for the approval of that creator, the use of Chuck’s in fact rather tepid verdict (he declares the play, ‘Not bad’<sup>653</sup>) as the episode’s final words lending his statement a definitive tone, literally acting as the final word on the subject. Here, despite Marie’s defence of the validity of her transformative work (a term which the show actually has her speak, further vocalising its writers’ wish to showcase their knowledge of fan culture and confirming the OTW’s success in promoting

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<sup>651</sup> Sgriccia, Kripke, and Thompson, “Fan Fiction.”

<sup>652</sup> Ibid.

<sup>653</sup> Ibid.

the term), she is ultimately placed in the role of the ‘good fan’ to Becky’s ‘bad’ version.<sup>654</sup> Marie specifically seeks out authorial approval (it is she who invited ‘the publisher’ to the show) and acts deferentially towards Chuck, stumbling over her words when she meets him, downplaying the quality of her work and asking for his opinion and reassurance:

Hum... Hi! Thank you... so much for coming! Uh... I know the second act is a little bit wanky, and the first act has some issues, but... What did you think?<sup>655</sup>

Marie fulfils fanfiction’s archontic function by adding her play to *Supernatural*’s archive – both in-universe via Dean’s awareness and acceptance of her interpretations, and textually as an element of the show itself – but her encounter with Chuck suggests that her role is only valid when approved of by a figure of cultural authority.

This makes Becky’s final appearance on the show particularly interesting, since previously she had represented the transformative fan as a dangerously self-indulgent agent of emotional and narrative chaos, the furthest thing possible from Marie’s well-behaved and deferential persona. Becky’s return comes in episode four of the show’s fifteenth and final season, ‘Atomic Monsters.’ As with ‘Fan Fiction’, the episode suggests a shift in the show’s attitude towards its fans, represented by the changes in Becky since her last onscreen appearance in season seven. Allowing Chuck to visit her at home, Becky relates that she has overcome her previous obsession with Sam Winchester (via prolonged therapy) but still remains involved with the *Supernatural* fandom in healthy ways, even making a living from her handcrafted fan art and continuing to write fanfiction to suit her own preferred narrative focus (an indication that, while she may have settled down, Becky retains her resistance to authority). She also has a life outside of fandom, gaining a husband and two children, in which she is shown to be happy and fulfilled (the fact that *Supernatural*’s idea of growth and fulfilment takes such a conservative, heteronormative form is in itself worthy of inspection, continuing the show’s aforementioned problematic history with its women characters, however for the purposes of this argument the depiction of Becky’s life may be taken at face value and assumed to be intended as a sincere depiction of a happy, contented woman).

In response to Becky’s explanation that her own, transformative version of *Supernatural* focuses on the characters’ interpersonal relationships and everyday, domestic

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<sup>654</sup> Busse, ‘Geek Hierarchies, Boundary Policing, and the Gendering of the Good Fan’; van de Goor, ‘“You Must Be New Here”: Reinforcing the Good Fan’.

<sup>655</sup> Sgriccia, Kripke, and Thompson, ‘Fan Fiction’.

lives, rather than the monster hunting of Chuck's novels (and the show itself), Chuck smugly attempts to correct her that the monsters are what audiences are truly interested in. Becky's response is a verbal shrug – 'Meh' – indicating her dismissal of the need for authorial validation and a refusal to pander to the creative authority – she demonstrates her love for Chuck's work not by slavish recreation or curatorial reinforcement (though she is certainly capable of both, earning a living by creating scale models of the locations in the *Supernatural* novels, which also function at the meta level since they are miniature versions of the show's sets) but through transformative engagement with it. Crucially, she rejects Chuck's attempt to trivialise her own writing, speaking for much of the audience watching her when she insists that her creative work is every bit as valid as the professionally-published Chuck's:

BECKY: I'm a writer, too, Chuck.

CHUCK: Oh. I mean, fanfic... it's not really the same thing...

BECKY: Writing's writing. The self-sabotage, the doubts, the struggle against time. So, whenever I have a spare minute, I write.<sup>656</sup>

Interestingly, this refusal creates the central tension in the scenes between the characters, as Chuck reveals that he is suffering from writer's block and low confidence, and has come to Becky in hopes of receiving writing advice and an ego boost from his biggest fan. This switch in power between the characters – the author-god coming to his fan for validation and creative advice – could be interpreted as a reference to the increasing cultural capital of fanfiction, the fic writer placed in a role which allows her to use her interpretative, archontic skills, acknowledging her knowledge and craft and placing her on an equal, if not higher, standing than that of the author. At the very least, it represents an acknowledgement by *Supernatural's* producers that fic writers and their work have real-world value and should be seen as a valid form of writing, a far cry from how Becky's work was previously presented.

This is enforced by the framing of Chuck as villainous – having previously been an ally and a neutral figure, in Season 15 he is revealed as the show's ultimate bad guy – both as God and author. Having been encouraged by Becky to share his work with her, Chuck is angered by Becky's horrified response to his dark, deliberately hopeless second draft (itself a response to her reluctant criticism of his first) and takes revenge by causing Becky's

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<sup>656</sup> Ackles, Kripke, and Perez, 'Atomic Monsters'.

husband and children to disappear (he assures her that they are not dead, he has just sent them ‘away’), followed by Becky herself, who protests that Chuck cannot do this, only to be told, ‘I can do anything. I’m a writer.’<sup>657</sup> Chuck appears to be living out a rather dark authorial fantasy here (one that, as seen in the previous chapter, exists to some extent in the ‘no concrit’ culture of AO3), revelling in the ability to simply remove the critical element of his audience, thereby silencing their complaints and expectations and allowing him to get on with writing his story, his way. Indeed, in a final insult, Chuck proceeds to use Becky’s now-empty home as his new base of operations – in essence, as his private writing room. The author-god has invaded the fan’s safe space, forced her from it as punishment for her resistance, and inserted himself into it in order to further strengthen his authority (the episode’s final scene shows him excitedly typing out new scenes for his darker vision of the Winchesters’ future). This is unmistakably villainous behaviour, an act of ruthless encroachment, with the disappearing of Becky and her family depicted as an act of violence both literally and symbolically as Chuck enacts not just the Death but the Murder of the (Transformative) Reader. Moreover, the return of his creative drive is not seen as a breakthrough but a dangerous transgression by a creator motivated only by his own ego at the cost of both his audience and any remaining narrative integrity. Indeed, in a later episode Chuck is defeated by having his godly/authorial power stripped from him and punished by being forced to live a human life in obscurity, his plotlines derailed and rendered irrelevant by his protagonists.

However, while this seems an even more explicit metatextual olive branch to the show’s fandom than ‘Fan Fiction,’ both redeeming Becky and validating her as an artist in her own right, it is telling that, once again, *Supernatural* cannot quite allow Becky to go unpunished, and not simply because the episode’s treatment of her represents another instance of *Supernatural* fridging a woman in service of a man (or, given Chuck’s celestial identity, male-presenting) character’s development. Moreover, following this episode Becky never appears (or is even mentioned) again, assumed but never confirmed to have been returned to existence following Chuck’s defeat, her agency and already minimal presence in the story taken from her. The show may gesture towards understanding and respect for Becky (and the transformative fan she represents) but its ultimate statement is to punish her by removing her ability to speak on her own behalf or to participate in/respond to the narrative (a punishment even greater than that bestowed on Chuck).

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<sup>657</sup> Ibid.

*Supernatural*, then, gives a useful insight into the changing cultural status of the fanfic writer, as her reputation has shifted from that of a laughable, oversexed, unhinged stereotype, to a more nuanced image of a fellow writer (whether to the in-universe author-god or the screenwriting team itself) who can provide insightful responses to canon and criticise the choices of the creator. Both Marie and Becky (in her last appearance) represent the cultural role that AO3 and the OTW envision for transformative fans, as creators in their own right who add depth and innovation to the originary text's archive. However, in its differing treatment of Marie, the 'good' fan who is rewarded for her deference to authority, and Becky, the 'bad' fan who is punished for her wayward behaviour, *Supernatural* also indicates the fragility of the cultural validation thus far afforded to fan creators.

In the following section I examine the real-life example of AO3's win at the 2019 Hugo Awards and the subsequent fallout from it to demonstrate how fanfic's rise in cultural capital is conditional upon its participants' willingness to stay within the bounds of mainstream culture's approved behaviours.

## AO3, The Hugo Awards and the Cultural Clash of Prizes

Despite the increased cultural capital of fanfic and the lowering of barriers to interaction between creators and transformative fans – in part, at least, the result of AO3's repositioning of fanfic as a valid cultural pursuit rather than an illegal act – there still remains some wariness over the consequences of allowing fanfic writers greater freedom to reach into the cultural archive. For example, despite openly supporting the creation of transformative works, writers such as Jemisin,<sup>658</sup> Gaiman<sup>659</sup> and McGuire<sup>660</sup> are also careful to enforce the limits of this support, pointing out that they refuse to read individual works of fic in order to avoid any accusations of poaching ideas from their fans. The existence of such rules implies, as suggested in the section above on *Supernatural*, that fanfiction's rise in cultural capital is still tempered with industry wariness of fans getting out of control and acting in ways that mainstream culture does not approve of. From this arises an important question for transformative fandom and especially for AO3 and the OTW regarding the stakes of becoming more visible within mainstream culture: will a continued pursuit of cultural capital require a compromise of the freedoms fanfic has historically demanded and,

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<sup>658</sup> Hale-Stern, 'N.K. Jemisin Reminds Us of the First Rule of Fanfiction'.

<sup>659</sup> neil-gaiman and Holistic-cinnamon-bun, 'Hi Mr Gaiman'.

<sup>660</sup> Z, 'Bestselling Author Seanan McGuire Discusses Fandom and Fanfiction'.

if so, is such a pursuit something fans actually want? In order to examine this question, the following section explores what is perhaps AO3's biggest move towards mainstream acceptance – its win at the 2019 Hugo Awards – and the controversy this event resulted in.

As mentioned in previous chapters, in 2019 AO3 won the Hugo Award for Best Related Work (awarded to 'a work related to the field of science fiction, fantasy, or fandom [...] either non-fiction or, if fictional, is noteworthy primarily for aspects other than the fictional text'<sup>661</sup>). Widely regarded as the premier awards in the speculative literature field, and suggested by some commentators as one of the few awards to have a direct positive effect on book sales,<sup>662</sup> for AO3 to receive a Hugo was seen by many as a major step forward in terms of fanfic being acknowledged as having cultural value by literary and mainstream culture.<sup>663</sup> Moreover, in her acceptance speech at the Hugo Awards ceremony, AO3 co-founder Naomi Novik made a point of emphasising the communal nature of the Archive project, insisting that the award was shared amongst staff and users:

We're up here accepting, but only on behalf of literally thousands of volunteers and millions of users, all of whom have come together and built this thriving home for fandom [...]

Even if I listed every founder, every builder, every tireless support staff member and translator and tag wrangler, if I named every last donor, all our hard work and contributions would mean nothing without the work of the fan creators who share their work freely with other fans, and the fans who read their stories and view their art and comment and shared bookmarks and give kudos to encourage them and nourish the community in their turn.<sup>664</sup>

Novik's speech deliberately and distinctly marks AO3's users as part of the team that built and maintains the site, her statement that her speech is 'only on behalf' of the AO3 community as a whole implying that she, at least, sees the award as belonging to everyone associated with the Archive. This is particularly significant given Novik's strong association with AO3 and the OTW – she was the first president of the OTW's Board of Directors<sup>665</sup> and often acts as AO3's public face as she did at the Hugos ceremony – which lends

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<sup>661</sup> 'Hugo Awards Categories'.

<sup>662</sup> Walton, 'Hugo Nominees: Introduction'; Langford, Nicholls, and Morgan, 'Hugo'; Curtis, *Mastering the Business of Writing: A Leading Literary Agent Reveals the Secrets of Success*, 96.

<sup>663</sup> Puc, 'Why Archive Of Our Own's Hugo Win Is so Important for Fandom'; Romano, 'The Archive of Our Own Just Won a Hugo. That's Huge for Fanfiction'; Radulovic, 'AO3's Hugo Award Win Is a Long Time Coming for the Fanfiction Community'; Bambury, 'Why a Hugo Nomination for Fan Fiction Website AO3 Is a Win for Nerds of All Stripes'.

<sup>664</sup> 'AO3 Wins 2019 Hugo Award for Best Related Work'.

<sup>665</sup> 'Organization for Transformative Works/Board of Directors'.

weight to her crediting of the site's users along with its staff. To underline her message of inclusivity, Novik finished her speech with a further emphasis on the award as jointly belonging to all those involved with AO3, inviting anyone present who felt themselves part of the site's community to stand and share in the recognition (reports variously estimate the number of those who stood at between a third<sup>666</sup> and a half<sup>667</sup> of the room). Meanwhile, AO3's users took to social media to express their pride and excitement at the site's win and the perceived boost to the cultural and symbolic capital of both AO3 and its users. As fanfic author, journalist and former member of the OTW's Development and Membership committee Aja Romano put it: "The Hugo win is a huge validation for many fanfic authors — many of whom are used to being dismissed and culturally maligned — that all of their non-professional works are worthy of respect."<sup>668</sup> The Hugo win not only increased AO3's own symbolic value but also promised to increase the cultural capital of all those publishing within it and of fanfiction itself as a writing form, seemingly a validation of the OTW's mission to gain mainstream acknowledgement of fanfic's creative value. However, the subsequent reactions to AO3's win suggest that while mainstream culture may be willing to confer increased cultural capital on some of transformative fandom's activities, and that parts of transformative fandom do covet this kind of acknowledgement, there still remains a fundamental clash between mainstream values and those of fandom, which has the potential to reinforce the barriers between them.

One of the most notable ways in which AO3's users made clear their pride in the site's victory was the appearance of tongue-in-cheek references to sharing in this recognition, some adding phrases like 'Hugo Award winning writer' to their social media names or biographies.<sup>669</sup> Though generally meant in a spirit of communal fun, there were those who took exception to this trend, pointing out that the award was given to the site itself in recognition of the behind-the-scenes work of its volunteers, not to the creators who publish on it, and suggesting that those who spread this joke were being disrespectful.<sup>670</sup> Meanwhile particular exception was taken to a handful of fans who suggested and in some cases went through with manufacturing merchandise bearing legends in the vein of 'Hugo Award Winning Fanfic Writer' (see Fig. 10), as this

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<sup>666</sup> Todaro, 'Fan Fiction Site "Archive Of Our Own" Wins a Coveted Hugo Award'.

<sup>667</sup> Puc, 'Why Archive Of Our Own's Hugo Win Is so Important for Fandom'.

<sup>668</sup> Romano, 'The Archive of Our Own Just Won a Hugo. That's Huge for Fanfiction'.

<sup>669</sup> Hale-Stern, 'Everyone Who Contributed to Fanfiction Site "Archive of Our Own" Is Now a Hugo Award Winner'.

<sup>670</sup> @leeflower, 'The Platform That Is AO3'; Macey | Jennifer Mace (@englishmace), 'Fuckin' This, Folks'.

represented a potential trademark infringement,<sup>671</sup> escalating the impression that AO3's users were engaging in 'bad' fan behaviour.



Figure 10: Enamel pins making reference to AO3's Hugo Award win.<sup>672</sup>

This debate escalated to such an extent that, approximately a month following the Archive's win, AO3 was asked by the World Science Fiction Society (WSFS, the Hugos' awarding body) to post an announcement explaining that the award was presented to AO3 and not to any individual works posted on it. This included the statement that:

while we can all be proud of the AO3's Hugo win and we can all be proud of what we contributed to making it possible, the award does not make any individual fanwork or creator "Hugo winners"—the WSFS awarded that distinction to the AO3 as a whole. In particular, the WSFS asked us to convey this reminder so that no one mistakenly described themselves as having personally won a Hugo Award.

Thanks for sharing our enthusiasm, and consider yourselves reminded! We appreciate every one of your contributions.<sup>673</sup>

The Archive's phrasing in this statement is subtle but pointed, aligning the site with its userbase rather than the WSFS. The careful use of words like 'all,' 'we' and 'sharing' emphasise AO3 as a community composed of both behind-the-scenes volunteers and the site's userbase, a message reinforced by the repetition of 'contributed/contributions' to emphasise that, regardless of the WSFS's wish to divide infrastructure from content, the Archive is a communal project, the result of the efforts of all those involved in it, hence the deliberate assurance in the final line that makes sure to recognise 'every one' of its

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<sup>671</sup> '2019 Hugo Awards Clarification'; 'Archive of Our Own and The Hugo Awards'.

<sup>672</sup> Screenshot author's own.

<sup>673</sup> 'Hugo Award – What It Means'.

users' contributions. In addition, the rather wry, knowing tone of the phrases 'so that no one mistakenly describes themselves as having personally won a Hugo Award' and 'consider yourselves reminded!' serve to suggest to those reading that the Archive recognises the rather heavy-handed, pedantic tone of the WSFS's request and that while it is obliged to post this announcement, it doesn't expect its users to take it at all seriously. Moreover, it suggests that, if forced to choose between the cultural and symbolic capital proffered by the WSFS and the capital it has built by allowing its users creative freedom, AO3 would choose to support its userbase over mainstream acceptance. Although, that said, it is notable that AO3 never gave any sign of actually rejecting the award, managing to maintain both the added prestige of being a Hugo Award winning project while subtly signalling its support of its users' behaviour. Moreover, it utilised the symbolic capital afforded by the award to build its economic capital, offering Hugo-branded merchandise as a gift in the donation drive following its win (see Figs. 11-13).<sup>674</sup>



Figure 11: AO3's October 2019 donation drive banner mentioning its Hugo-branded gifts.<sup>675</sup>



Figure 12: Image depicting design of AO3 and Hugo-branded enamel pin offered as a gift for donors to AO3's October 2019 donation drive.<sup>676</sup>

<sup>674</sup> 'Show Your OTW Pride With Our Donation Thank-You Gifts'.

<sup>675</sup> Screenshot author's own.

<sup>676</sup> Screenshot author's own.



Figure 13: Image depicting designs of AO3 and Hugo-branded stickers offered as gifts for donors during AO3's October 2019 donation drive.<sup>677</sup>

The combination of this tacit support with fandom's history of resistant responses to limitations on their activities perhaps explains why the AO3 community's immediate reaction to the statement was to mock and undermine its seriousness, both in the comments section below it<sup>678</sup> and across social media,<sup>679</sup> continuing to behave 'badly' despite (or because of) the WSFS's clear discomfort. The following Twitter exchange, for example, illustrates the irreverent nature of such responses:

**Post One:**

I feel like the summary of this post should be, "WSFS feels that y'all fanfic writers are having too much fun and it's making them uncomfortable." 🤔<sup>680</sup>

**Post Two:**

I think the summary of this post should be, "WSFS is deeply uncomfortable that they're growing ever more irrelevant as SFF [science-fiction and fantasy] has mainstreamed and expanded—and they have no sense of humor—so they're taking this out on ficcers for some reason," but maybe that's just my read 🤔<sup>681</sup>

Moreover, the AO3 community responded in its own style to the WSFS statement: within twenty-four hours of its publication, one comment in the style of a parody fic had

<sup>677</sup> Screenshot author's own.

<sup>678</sup> idanit, 'Comment on Hugo Award – What It Means'; Surakian, 'Comment on Hugo Award – What It Means'; lizbourne, 'Comment on Hugo Award – What It Means'; inevera13, 'Comment on Hugo Award – What It Means'.

<sup>679</sup> shinelikethunder, 'Good Job, WSFS'; Amy / such heights (@such\_heights), 'The World Science Fiction Society'; @montfelisky, 'This Is so Silly!'

<sup>680</sup> Acks, 'I Feel like the Summary of This Post Should Be'.

<sup>681</sup> Klink, 'I Think the Summary of This Post'.

been transferred as a standalone entry to the main Archive<sup>682</sup> and had already been recorded as a podfic (an audio recording of a fic, the fandom equivalent of an audiobook<sup>683</sup>). This encouraged a rash of similar fics making fun of the WSFS's seemingly uptight attitude, often in combination with fond parodies of favoured fanfic tropes such as soulmates.<sup>684</sup> Tellingly, such responses share the same essentially playful, transformative instinct that underlines all fanworks, AO3's users taking the WSFS statement and creating something new (i.e. a collection of satirical texts) via the application of creative thought and skill, in the same way they would normally build off a media text. Moreover, these texts represent a reinforcement of the resistant possibilities of fanfic, making clear that the community's dislike of limits on their freedom (as noted in the Introduction with regards to Kindle World's restrictions and fandom's tendency to migrate from platforms that enforce constraints on content) is more of a priority than the cultural capital at stake from the mainstream.

This continued defiance of the WSFS's attempt to control the AO3 community's behaviour was met with disapproval by some of the WSFS's supporters, particularly amongst the community on *File 770*, an online science-fiction fan newszine which frequently hosts discussion of the Hugo Awards. A number of the commenters on this site expressed frustration with AO3 and its userbase, as in the comments below:

**Post One:**

The "AO3" community does not get to weigh in on the semantics – it is not their award, it was one conferred upon them by another community.

It's "cultural appropriation" to use a current buzz phrase.

But I want to get past all of that and point the finger at what the real rub is: members of AO3 who are engaging in this behavior are simply being fuggheads about it; they've been told numerous times, by numerous different authorities, how the award is to be referred to and how to reference it in a respectful manner and are flat out refusing to do so.<sup>685</sup>

**Post Two:**

Instead of saying to each other "Hey, it's not cool to disrespect the organization that just gave us this great award", the AO3

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<sup>682</sup> Anonymous, 'Stanley Cup — What It Means'.

<sup>683</sup> Riley, 'Podfic: Queer Structures of Sound'.

<sup>684</sup> For examples of these fics see: 'HugoWank2k19'.

<sup>685</sup> Davidson, 'Comment on Pixel Scroll 9/19/19 The SJW Credential That Sleeps On You From Nowhere'.

community declared with great fervor, “Piss off, we’re having fun and we don’t care about whatever harm it might do to you!”<sup>686</sup>

English points out that ‘any display of indifference or ingratitude on the part of the honored recipient must be executed with great care or it will provoke indignation not only from the presenters of the prize, but from the entire participating community.’<sup>687</sup> The above quotes demonstrate the AO3 community’s behaviour having exactly this effect, the commenters making clear that the capital awarded to AO3 through its Hugo Award is contingent upon the behaviour of its users and that by choosing to ignore the WSFS’ rules and act ‘badly,’ those users expose themselves as undeserving of acknowledgement through their lack of respect for the authority that bestowed it. In other words, by following their transformative and expressive instincts – vital characteristics in the creation of fanfiction – the AO3 community creates doubt over their ability and willingness to toe the establishment line, suggesting not only that this specific group of fans are too troublesome to be granted mainstream acceptance but also perhaps that this is true of all fic writers. Certainly, in the agenda for its 2020 Business Meeting, the WSFS referred to AO3’s nomination as having caused a ‘headache’<sup>688</sup> which ‘only intensified after it won the award,’<sup>689</sup> suggesting that whatever capital AO3 had gained with the WSFS has been diminished by its users’ behaviour, an impression only strengthened by the statement that ‘Our attempts to explicate that the award was for the creation of the website [have], for the most part, fallen on deaf ears.’<sup>690</sup> Whereas AO3’s Hugo Award initially seemed to represent, as Coppa put it, ‘a kind of welcoming home for fan fiction, which has been ... a sort of bastard stepdaughter of the community for some time, and I feel like we’re being kind of invited back to the table,’<sup>691</sup> the fallout from the Hugos seems instead to have demonstrated fanfic’s incompatibility with mainstream culture.

To some extent the fanfic community does seem to desire this kind of cultural validation and the symbolic capital that goes with it – ironically, the fact that so many fans chose to co-opt the problematic references to the Hugo Award win is proof of that – and yet remains unwilling to accept the rules and limitations that necessarily go along with such recognition. This puts the Archive into a difficult position – how to maintain the symbolic capital of being aligned with fannish ideology, while consolidating the symbolic and

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<sup>686</sup> Contrarius, ‘Comment on Pixel Scroll 9/19/19 The SJW Credential That Sleeps On You From Nowhere?’.

<sup>687</sup> English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, 218.

<sup>688</sup> ‘2020 WSFS Business Meeting Agenda’, 33.

<sup>689</sup> Ibid.

<sup>690</sup> Ibid.

<sup>691</sup> Bambury, ‘Why a Hugo Nomination for Fan Fiction Website AO3 Is a Win for Nerds of All Stripes?’.

cultural capital of winning awards (or other forms of mainstream recognition)? For now it seems that AO3 has chosen to side with its users, reinforcing its communal and ideological ties with the fan community. However, as its campaign to legitimise and amplify fanfiction as a form continues to progress, questions over its ability to maintain these ties will become ever more significant and the stakes of mainstream cultural capital versus fannish symbolic capital may result in AO3 having to compromise either its values or its ambition.

## Conclusion

Fanfiction's cultural reputation has long been one associated with shame and derision, drawing criticisms from (some) media creators and generally being regarded as the shallow output of 'hysterical'<sup>692</sup> fangirls without any great cultural value attached. Moreover, its position as legally grey at best has kept it in the cultural shadows, with fic writers wary of defending themselves too loudly for fear of legal reprisals. Even as fandom in general gained acknowledgement from and influence on mainstream culture, fanfiction remained on the fringes, only crossing over when anything identifying it as a transformative work had been removed. As a result, the story of fanfiction has been one of a group of, to borrow Jenkins' phrase, poachers getting away with stealing legitimate creators' work by staying under the legal and cultural radar.

Part of AO3/the OTW's mission has always been to change this narrative by advocating for fanfic as a legitimate cultural activity, on a par with other such interpretative/responsive pursuits as literary criticism or parody. Its approach to this aim involves two interlinked strands: the argument that fanfic does not steal originary texts but builds upon them via the application of creative skill and effort, creating something new in the process and thus qualifying as fair use; and the function of AO3 as a manifestation of Derecho's archontic theory, making clear and traceable the intertextual contributions that fanfic creates. This dual approach has certainly been successful in convincing fans themselves that publishing fic is not something they 'get away with,' the disappearance of disclaimers and even the move towards monetisation by some writers indicating a community that has begun to believe in the value and validity of its practices. Moreover, it has contributed to a media ecosystem in which the balance of fanfic's reputation has begun

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<sup>692</sup> Click, "'Rabid', 'Obsessed', and 'Frenzied': Understanding Twilight Fangirls and the Gendered Politics of Fandom"; Grady, 'Why We're Terrified of Fanfiction'; Barnes Leetal, 'Those Crazy Fangirls on the Internet: Activism of Care, Disability and Fan Fiction', 62–64.

to shift towards the positive, as exemplified by *Supernatural's* increasingly nuanced and respectful portrayal of transformative fans.

Despite these advances in establishing fanfic's cultural role and capital, though, there remains a good deal of work to do in order to assure widespread acceptance of fanfic as a valuable, or even viable, contributor to mainstream culture. Borrowing from Bourdieu, Chin points out that the symbolic value of fannish accomplishment is contained within the fannish *illusio* i.e. it only matters to those invested in fandom and is not necessarily transferable to everyday life.<sup>693</sup> For all that fans may post semi-serious words of advice on how to put fannish activities on one's C.V.,<sup>694</sup> even in doing so they recognise the degree of truth-twisting required to transform fan capital into something acceptable to the wider world. AO3's newly-found status as a Hugo Award winner hinted at the possibility for change in this regard, presenting the potential for fanfiction to be inducted into the literary establishment via the cultural capital of a major award. However the incompatibility of its users' irreverent behaviour and the WSFS' strict policing of its trademark, as well as the lingering impression that fanfic was still seen as a lesser form of writing, quickly crushed this idea, leaving AO3 to choose to support its userbase over its cultural ambitions.

In the next chapter, I discuss a similar dilemma that has arisen as a result of AO3's influence on the social stakes of publishing fanfic, its commitment to free speech weighing against its core value of maximum inclusivity in a way that echoes its developing conflict between cultural capital and creative subversion.

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<sup>693</sup> Chin, 'It's About Who You Know: Social Capital, Hierarchies and Fandom', 252.

<sup>694</sup> resumespeak, 'How to Put "Wrote Fan-Fiction" on Your Résumé'.

# Chapter Four: Social Stakes

## Introduction

In the previous chapter I demonstrated how AO3 has contributed to an increase in the cultural capital of fanfiction but has also affected the cultural stakes involved in publishing fic, revealing a desire on the part of the AO3 community to attain greater cultural status but also misgivings regarding the compromises and restrictions this might require. In this chapter, I examine a similar dilemma with regards to AO3 and social capital, exploring how AO3's core value of maximum freedom of speech clashes with their commitment to inclusiveness, resulting in conflict over which groups the 'Our' in Archive of Our Own in fact includes.

As discussed in Chapter One, AO3 and the OTW have put great effort into positioning AO3 as a platform with strong core values, their promotion of such ideals as feminism and freedom of speech earning the Archive a reputation as a safe space for fic writers and readers. This has been a key element in cementing AO3 as a social hub and mouthpiece for the fanfic community, and in creating a userbase which passionately defends the site and its organisers against criticism. However, its centring of such principles has also involved AO3 and its users in debates regarding the balance of free speech and user safety, earning it objections and opposition from groups claiming that AO3's benevolent reputation masks serious structural failings in its governance and undermines its function as an inclusive space for all fans.

In this chapter I examine AO3's ideological approach to free speech and inclusiveness in order to demonstrate how AO3 has become involved in the struggle over social spaces within the fan community and in the broader frame of internet culture. Beginning with the idea of fandom as a safe social space and what specific safeties AO3 offers its users, I then set out AO3's content policy, including the history of fannish censorship that lies behind it, and question whether it is possible to maintain a policy of maximum free speech without inevitably excluding or alienating some users. In order to illustrate this dilemma, I examine two ways in which AO3's content policy has proved controversial: its apparent prioritisation of free speech over complaints from fans of colour (FOC) regarding the presence of racist content in the Archive; and its permission of sexually taboo content in the face of attacks by censorious in-fandom groups. In doing so, I demonstrate how AO3's commitment to certain values has raised the social stakes of

publishing fanfiction, its users struggling over the social space AO3 provides and which groups are included within it.

## Fandom as a Safe Space

The concept of the safe space emerged from the women's and LGBT movements in the late twentieth century,<sup>695</sup> and referred to physical spaces in which members of marginalised social groups could come together not only to find comfort and support but also to 'speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance'<sup>696</sup> without fear of being targeted for crime or harassment. The concept has been adopted and adapted by groups and organisations in varying fields, perhaps most visibly in education, both in the classroom and on university campuses.<sup>697</sup> It has also proliferated online, with virtual spaces standing in for physical ones and removing many of the entry barriers (especially geographical ones) for individuals seeking like-minded communities.<sup>698</sup>

Fandom is frequently referred to as providing both physical and virtual safe spaces,<sup>699</sup> born from fans' shared affective relationships to their source texts and developing into parasocial and potentially fully-social bonds between each other. However, discussions of fandom as a safe space tend to focus on two specific groups to the exclusion of others: (white) women who use fandom – especially slash fandom – as a space to explore sex and sexuality outside of the cultural and social baggage bound up in traditional romance or pornography; and queer people who find in fandom a safe space for identity work regarding gender and sexuality. Early works in fan studies such as Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women*<sup>700</sup> and Penley's *Nasa/Trek*<sup>701</sup> emphasise the concept of fandom as a space in which women can safely explore and discuss subjects typically seen as

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<sup>695</sup> Kenney, *Mapping Gay L.A.: The Intersection of Place and Politics*, 24; Flensner and Von der Lippe, 'Being Safe from What and Safe for Whom? A Critical Discussion of the Conceptual Metaphor of "Safe Space"', 276.

<sup>696</sup> Kenney, *Mapping Gay L.A.: The Intersection of Place and Politics*, 24.

<sup>697</sup> The Roestone Collective, 'Safe Space: Towards a Reconceptualization', 1346–47; Barrett, 'Is "Safety" Dangerous? A Critical Examination of the Classroom as Safe Space'; Byron, 'From Infantilizing to World Making: Safe Spaces and Trigger Warnings on Campus'.

<sup>698</sup> Lucero, 'Safe Spaces in Online Places: Social Media and LGBTQ Youth'; Clark-Parsons, 'Building a Digital Girl Army: The Cultivation of Feminist Safe Spaces Online'.

<sup>699</sup> Lothian, Busse, and Reid, 'Yearning Void and Infinite Potential: Online Slash Fandom as Queer Female Space'; Meggers, 'Discovering the Authentic Sexual Self: The Role of Fandom in the Transformation of Fans' Sexual Attitudes', 66–71; Fiesler and Dym, 'Moving Across Lands: Online Platform Migration in Fandom Communities', 2–3; Dym et al., "'Coming Out Okay?': Community Narratives for LGBTQ Identity Recovery Work'.

<sup>700</sup> Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*.

<sup>701</sup> Penley, *Nasa/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America*.

inappropriate – including sex and sexuality – without judgement from their ‘real life’ social circle. This view has continued to influence discussions of why fanfiction is dominated by women and why slash remains such a popular genre for fic writers and readers. Popova, for instance, suggests that slash fics featuring arranged marriage can be seen as a vehicle for women writers to explore issues of power imbalance and implied sexual consent within marriage, without the baggage of stereotypical gender roles requiring that only the heroine performs the emotional work necessary to create the expected Happy Ever After.<sup>702</sup> Lothian and Busse, meanwhile, examine the genre of ‘genderfuck’ fic, ‘which uses science fiction and fantasy tropes to alter and reimagine characters’ sexed and gendered bodies<sup>703</sup> and is thus frequently used to encourage/force male characters to become aware of and empathise with the experiences of women in a sexist society.<sup>704</sup> Both examples highlight how fanfiction creates a sympathetic environment in which women writers may employ narrative tropes – both the mundane and the more fantastical – and (fictional) male bodies to safely explore elements of their own experiences as women.

Similarly, fandom is widely regarded as a safe space for LGBTQIA+ people to do important identity work and find a supportive community. Many of the respondents to McInroy and Craig’s study of sexual and/or gender minority youth participants in fandom, for example, described fandom as contributing to their awareness of queer identities, thus facilitating their realisation of their own sexuality and/or gender identity.<sup>705</sup> Dym et al., meanwhile, suggest that fandom’s bringing together of people through shared love of a fan object rather than a common identity may in fact ease the process of engaging in identity work, as ‘The support space’s distance from a difficult topic allows people to control when and how they engage in that identity work.’<sup>706</sup> Furthermore, some scholars suggest that these safe spaces overlap: Lothian, Busse and Reid refer to fandom as ‘queer female space,’<sup>707</sup> while Duffett suggests that slash fic is a shared space for queer and straight women fans to ‘discuss their desires outside the polarizing realm of identity politics.’<sup>708</sup>

However, the value of fandom safe spaces only extends so far, with socially marginalised fans pointing out that they are often excluded from or even harmed by norms

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<sup>702</sup> Popova, ‘Rewriting the Romance: Emotion Work and Consent in Arranged Marriage Fanfiction’.

<sup>703</sup> Busse and Lothian, ‘Bending Gender: Feminist and (Trans)Gender Discourses in the Changing Bodies of Slash Fan Fiction’, 1.

<sup>704</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>705</sup> McInroy and Craig, ‘Online Fandom, Identity Milestones, and Self-Identification of Sexual/Gender Minority Youth’, 188–91.

<sup>706</sup> Dym et al., ‘“Coming Out Okay”: Community Narratives for LGBTQ Identity Recovery Work’, 23–24.

<sup>707</sup> Lothian, Busse, and Reid, ‘Yearning Void and Infinite Potential: Online Slash Fandom as Queer Female Space’.

<sup>708</sup> Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*, 178.

and policies that protect other groups. For example, the popular fanfic genre ‘hurt/comfort’ (which is tagged in 490,077 fics on AO3 as of 22/12/20, constituting around 7% of all works on the site), in which a character experiences pain, injury or disability and receives comfort from another character, can cause discomfort to disabled fans as a result of its tendency to treat disability as something to be cured or that always causes ‘hurt.’ Despite this, fans who criticise this aspect of the genre have at times found themselves harshly rebuked and made to feel unwelcome within fan spaces. For example, in 2010 a hurt/comfort-themed writing challenge was criticised by disabled fans for including disability-related terms such as ‘brain damage,’ ‘chronic illness’ and ‘loss of limbs/limb function’<sup>709</sup> as types of ‘hurt’ in its prompts. As Cheuk points out, not only did the terms used ‘reflect only the dominant medical model of disability that imagines disability as an individual problem located in one’s body, as abnormal to the human condition, and as a loss to one’s ordinary way of living’<sup>710</sup> but they also reduced disability to a problem to be eliminated or fixed. However, fans who pointed this out were met with accusations of encouraging censorship, or of misunderstanding the point of the genre (an accusation repeated in print by fan scholars Zubernis and Larsen<sup>711</sup>), giving the impression that disabled fans are only welcome in fan spaces so long as they do not attempt to call attention to practices which exclude or offend them,<sup>712</sup> a strong indication that fandom’s safe spaces are fragile and unreliable for those who dare to challenge the community’s social norms. In the following section I discuss how this selective safety manifests in AO3, specifically in relation to its values of maximum free speech and inclusiveness.

## AO3, Permissiveness and Safety

As well as positioning itself as a space for all fans, ‘No matter your appearance, circumstances, configuration or take on the world,’<sup>713</sup> AO3 also specifically – and arguably primarily – acts as a harbour for fic writers in general and those who produce taboo or sensitive content in particular. While AO3 was conceived primarily in response to the threat of commercial exploitation by FanLib, it was, as discussed in the Introduction,

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<sup>709</sup> Cheuk, ‘Review of *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, Eds. Hellekson, Karen., and Kristina Busse (2014)’, 288.

<sup>710</sup> Ibid.

<sup>711</sup> Zubernis and Larsen, *Fandom at the Crossroads: Celebration, Shame and Fan/Producer Relationships*, 90–92.

<sup>712</sup> Duchastel de Montrouge, ‘Shipping Disability/Fanfiction: Disrupting Narratives of Fanfiction as Inclusive’, 27.

<sup>713</sup> ‘You Are Welcome at the Archive of Our Own’.

designed during a period in which fanfic and other fanworks containing sexually explicit subject matter were being purged from previously adult-content-friendly platforms, most notably LiveJournal. This left the fanfic community wary of platforms which enforce restrictions on sexual or taboo content (including Kindle Worlds<sup>714</sup>) and has led to similar exoduses of fan users from platforms that change their stance on such content (as followed Tumblr's 2018 purges<sup>715</sup>).

AO3's content policy, by contrast, is characterised by a deliberately and distinctly lenient and hands-off approach to adult, taboo, or other potentially offensive material. This approach was part of astolat's original proposal for the site, which advocated 'allowing ANYTHING – het [heterosexual pairings], slash [homosexual pairings], RPF ['Real Person Fiction' i.e. fics that feature real people], chan [underage sex], kink [non-normative sexual practices or desires], highly adult [explicit sexual content] – with a registration process for reading adult-rated stories where once you register, you don't have to keep clicking through warnings every time you want to read.'<sup>716</sup> Notably, it is almost exclusively sexual content that astolat refers to, ignoring other potentially offensive subjects that might be found in works of fanfic, a narrow focus that, as discussed later, AO3 has been accused of replicating in its policies.

This aspect of the proposal received a great deal of support, including the following comment by fairestcat:

I think this is needed and long past needed. There are of course huge fanfic archives out there like ff.net, but the bigger and more public the site, the more restrictive it is, the more stuff around the edges gets cut off. I don't WANT the public face of fanfic to be only the most easily palatable stuff, with the smut and the kink and the controversial subjects marginalized and hidden under the table.<sup>717</sup>

This comment illustrates that, in their ambition for the future AO3 to function as 'the public face of fanfic,' those fans contributing to its development specifically wanted it to represent free speech as an ideal by allowing the kinds of sexually explicit or taboo

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<sup>714</sup> marlo-noni, 'Wait. Fanfiction, That You Have to Pay For?'; olmmm, 'Wait, How Is It Fan Fiction?'; lizaleigh, 'Pornography: We Don't Accept'; emmagrant01, 'No Explicit Sexual Content?'; dreamsofthings-blog, '...Are We Sure They Actually Understand?'

<sup>715</sup> Hoins, 'The "Flaming Dumpster Fire" of the Internet: How Tumblr's Porn Ban Is Still Impacting Users?'; Liao, 'After the Porn Ban, Tumblr Users Have Ditched the Platform as Promised?'; Hale-Stern, 'Why So Many in Fandom Have Taken to Discord'.

<sup>716</sup> astolat, 'An Archive Of One's Own'.

<sup>717</sup> Fairestcat, May 17 2007 6.45pm, 'Comment on,' *ibid*.

content that other platforms had blocked or restricted. Moreover, they wanted to buck the typical trajectory of such platforms' initially permissive content policies becoming increasingly restrictive as they gain in popularity and visibility. The allowance of taboo subject matter is not simply a matter of leniency for AO3, therefore, but a specific ideological principle and a guiding element in the design and policy decisions underpinning the site. It is also a principle that AO3 must maintain in order to continue to distinguish itself from other platforms which have lost their fannish users as a result of perceived censorship and puritanism – or, in other words, to maintain the symbolic capital bound up in this core value, as discussed in Chapter One.

Specifically, then, AO3's ToS state that users understand their use of the site 'may expose you to material that is offensive, triggering, erroneous, sexually explicit, indecent, blasphemous, objectionable, grammatically incorrect, or badly spelled' and that the OTW is not liable to its users for their exposure to any such content.<sup>718</sup> Moreover, it states that unless a work posted is in violation of some other policy (such as the restrictions on harassment or certain types of content including executable files, trade secrets, and technical data), 'we will not remove Content for offensiveness, no matter how awful, repugnant, or badly spelled we may personally find that Content to be.'<sup>719</sup> AO3 firmly refuses to place restrictions on the type of fictional content it allows to be published on its platform, deliberately stating that personal preferences or beliefs will have no influence on its content policy. This appears to be the reason for their inclusion of the ostensibly flippant language regarding spelling and grammar, to make clear that works will not be screened on the basis of moral or aesthetic preferences (both of which restrictions other fic archives have enforced, some smaller archives even refusing to allow works with spelling or grammar mistakes, or other stylistic issues<sup>720</sup>). As assistant professor of law Lantagne puts it: 'we [the OTW] are not qualified to decide which fics (if any) have more value than others, and I don't think people actually want us to start down that road. The OTW's mission is to advocate on behalf of transformative works, not just the ones we like.'<sup>721</sup>

As a result, the presence of taboo content – especially of a sexual nature – has become a social norm for AO3, resulting in a culture in which writers can feel protected, both in terms of communal support and a certainty that works will not be removed because of their subject matter. The effect of this can be seen via a cursory glance at some

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<sup>718</sup> 'Terms of Service', sec. I.E.3.

<sup>719</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. IV.I.

<sup>720</sup> Thomas, 'Canons and Fanons: Literary Fanfiction Online', sec. 3.

<sup>721</sup> Qtd. in: Minkel, 'The Online Free Speech Debate Is Raging in Fan Fiction Too'.

of the taboo tags contained in AO3. For example, as of 22/12/20, AO3 contains: 174,675 fics tagged with ‘Rape/Non-Con’; 68,644 with ‘Incest’; 165,281 with ‘Underage’ (referring to sexual activity involving a character who is under 18); 2,632 with ‘Necrophilia’; and 5,573 with ‘Bestiality.’ Moreover, the social rule restricting critical comments within AO3, as discussed in Chapter Two, extends to objections regarding offensive content. Readers often defend writers against those who seek to condemn them for writing about taboo subjects and, as noted above, such complainants will find no support in AO3’s abuse policy.

This enforcement of AO3 as a safe space for taboo content is of great value to many of its users, as demonstrated by the below quote:

part of the reason [AO3 is] so great is because they know there’s no one like them out there. they also go to the ends of the damned earth to protect you and to be inclusive, which is why there’s shit like tentacle porn and underage and dubcon.<sup>722</sup> because they’re dedicated to protecting readers and creators to the death. they don’t advocate for it and they have the extensive rating and tagging system because of that (legit the best tagging system i’ve ever seen) but they don’t know if you’re dealing with trauma or if you need to get something out.<sup>723</sup>

Indeed, as this comment suggests, AO3’s permissiveness is also often taken as a sign of its inclusiveness, in that it does not exclude creators on the basis of the content they choose to publish but provides a platform for even the most dubious and taboo of subjects.

However, the glib nature of AO3’s statements regarding content moderation can also be seen as an indication that its approach to content may not be as nuanced as is perhaps required from an institution of the status it has grown to.<sup>724</sup> By drawing an equivalency between spelling mistakes and offensive content, AO3 arguably makes an over-generalisation, suggesting that sensitive topics such as rape or racism require no more attention or moderation than typos or formatting errors. Such flattening of an important and complex issue – regardless, or perhaps because of the playful language AO3 uses to do so – suggests either avoidance or trivialisation on the part of AO3’s policymakers, and therefore an inability or unwillingness to address the consequences of its radically permissive stance on content. And, as discussed below, these seemingly informal, blasé

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<sup>722</sup> Fandom term for ‘dubious consent,’ indicating that the work contains sexual activity in which consent has not been properly established but not definitively denied.

<sup>723</sup> hoenursey, ‘Whew, i Feel Old’.

<sup>724</sup> Gillespie, ‘The Politics of “Platforms”’, 348.

statements contribute to accusations that AO3's approach to content moderation is inadequate and potentially harmful.

In addition to its permissiveness, the other significant factor of AO3's attitude to content is the site's explicit placing of the burden of responsibility for exposure to offensive content on the user's shoulders. The site itself provides no algorithmic suggestions for fics that users may wish to read, has no central feed to channel specific content through, and, within individual categories, displays fics chronologically by default. It has, as Coppa notes, no persuasive architecture of any kind, either to drive users to specific content or to persuade them to spend more time on the site.<sup>725</sup> Instead, users are expected to take responsibility for what they choose to read and for making use of the site's tag-based warning system – itself user-driven, as discussed in the Methodology and Chapter One, and therefore reliant on the care and conscientiousness of those posting works – in order to protect themselves from any content they may find distressing or distasteful. Those users who are 'risk-averse'<sup>726</sup> are advised to be aware that not all works carry full warnings and to consult other users' bookmarks to get a sense of how other readers have categorised that content. Rather than policing or curating the content published on its platform, AO3 prefers its users to perform their own curation, encouraging what it perceives as a thoughtful, self-aware approach to the publishing or consuming of fic via the use of affordances such as tagging and search systems, and leaning on the principle of *caveat emptor* for any works that are not covered by these systems. In this way, the site can promote what Minkel terms a 'free speech maximalist approach to fictional content'<sup>727</sup> while giving its users tools with which to attempt to filter out content they do not wish to consume and essentially absolving itself of any responsibility in the event those tools fail.

This may be seen as a controversial choice in an era in which platforms are under increasing pressure to moderate their content – as seen in the discussion of restrictions put in place by fannish sites such as LiveJournal and Tumblr in the Introduction. However, AO3's non-commercial nature makes this policy easier to enforce – as Tushnet, a co-founder of the OTW, points out, AO3 'is a volunteer, voluntarily-funded space whose commitments are directed towards satisfying users' preferences without the need to generate ad revenue.'<sup>728</sup> Neither AO3 nor the OTW have any shareholders to please or

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<sup>725</sup> Berkeley Center for New Media, 'HTNM Lecture — Francesca Coppa's "Feminist Open Access and Internet Publishing"'.  
<sup>726</sup> 'Terms of Service FAQ', sec. IV. Ratings and Warnings: What kind of content do you allow?

<sup>727</sup> Minkel, 'The Online Free Speech Debate Is Raging in Fan Fiction Too'.

<sup>728</sup> Tushnet, 'Content Moderation in an Age of Extremes', 12.

pacify, therefore they are free to maintain their permissiveness so long as it serves the needs of their users (the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of this choice is examined in more detail later in this chapter). Moreover, the OTW's status as a non-commercial, non-profit entity and AO3's as a platform which hosts fictional content both offer some protection from legislation that might force other platforms' hands on introducing or strengthening content moderation,<sup>729</sup> such as the US's FOSTA-SESTA legislation, which ensures that websites are not immune to prosecution for facilitating sex trafficking and was signed into law in 2018<sup>730</sup> (and has been suggested as one reason for Tumblr's purging of adult content<sup>731</sup>).

That said, the potentially controversial nature of its content policy in the face of such legislation is perhaps why AO3 ensures its userbase must consent to said policy before accessing potentially sensitive works. Prior to entering a work which has been marked Mature, Explicit or Not Rated, AO3 asks users to confirm that they are willing to see adult content (see Fig. 14) and cannot view the work until they have done so (unless they have already consented during their current browsing session or are a registered user who has enabled the option to see adult content without having to confirm their consent).

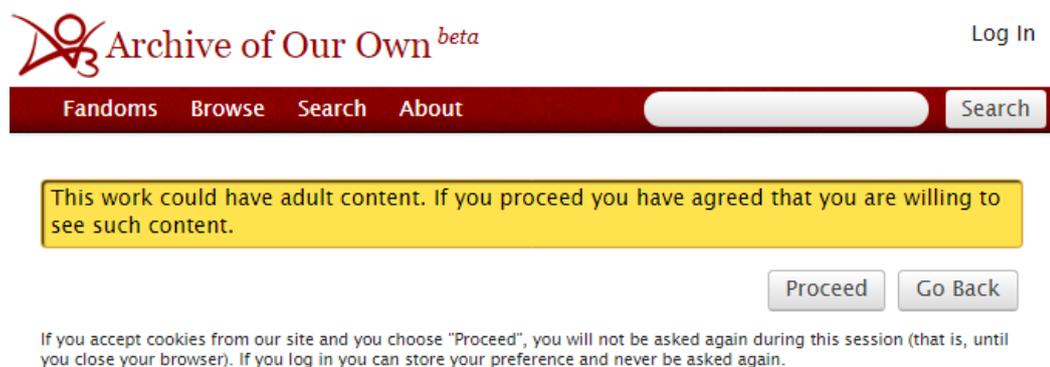


Figure 14: AO3's adult content consent form.<sup>732</sup>

As Tumblr user shipping-isnt-morality points out (albeit in tellingly defensive language), this is a tangible manifestation of AO3's policy that users are responsible for

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<sup>729</sup> 'FOSTA/SESTA and Fans'.

<sup>730</sup> Matula, 'Any Safe Harbor in a Storm: SESTA-FOSTA and the Future of § 230 of the Communications Decency Act'; Romano, 'A New Law Intended to Curb Sex Trafficking Threatens the Future of the Internet as We Know It'.

<sup>731</sup> Rosenberg, 'The Ever-Mutating Life of Tumblr Dot Com'.

<sup>732</sup> Screenshot author's own.

their own experience and, they argue, should be borne in mind by anybody who attempts to criticise AO3 for exposing them to material they are discomfited by:

This, right here? This is asking for consent. It's a legal necessity, yes, but it is also you, the reader, actively consenting to see adult content; and in doing so, saying that you are of an age to see it, and that you're emotionally capable of handling it. [...] If you're not prepared to see adult content, created by and for adults, don't fucking click through this. And if you do, for all that's holy, don't blame anyone else for it.<sup>733</sup>

In other words, AO3's system is designed so that simply by using the site, users knowingly waive any right to be protected against what they might find there or to blame AO3 or writers who publish on it for anything they might be exposed to.

However, a significant problem with AO3's permissiveness can be found in the site's infrastructure itself. AO3 attempts to mitigate the issue of exposing its users to taboo or offensive material with the warning and tagging systems discussed throughout this thesis, the efficacy of which was strengthened in a 2018 update to the site's search system which allowed users to exclude tags from their searches for the first time.<sup>734</sup> Busse argues that these paratextual features provide exactly the kind of space AO3's critics claim to want, allowing writers freedom to publish taboo content while giving readers the ability to filter out material they do not wish to see.<sup>735</sup> And, indeed, it is clear that some writers put in additional effort to ensure readers can avoid such content: 218 fics (18%) in my sample contained warning tags in addition to the mandatory Archive Warnings, while 116 (just under 10%) contained additional warnings in an author's note. However, Busse also points out (rather dismissively suggesting this is an issue AO3's critics inflate) that AO3's system allows for carelessness and abuse,<sup>736</sup> since there is no guarantee that every user will take on the responsibility of tagging their work (regularly acknowledged to be an unpleasant chore) or be motivated to care for their audience's well-being, nor can it control the potential presence of authors whose motivation is to provoke or unsettle their audience. Moreover, the system does not take into account the subjective nature of sensitive material, which may mean completely different things for different individuals and, as discussed later in the section on racism in fandom, may be subject to wildly different priorities. As a result,

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<sup>733</sup> shipping-isnt-morality, 'Good Morning! I'm Salty'.

<sup>734</sup> 'Upcoming Changes to the Search & Filter Functionality'.

<sup>735</sup> Busse, 'Feminist Conflict and the Politics of Fantasy'.

<sup>736</sup> Ibid.

despite AO3's tagging system being praised by the media, academics and its own users, it is not enough to eradicate accusations that AO3 prioritises free speech over inclusiveness, nor to create a safe space that includes writers of taboo or offensive material *and* groups and individuals who may be distressed by the presence of such content.

In addition, there is some evidence that AO3's content policy may have negative effects for users outside the US. For example, in June 2019, AO3 experienced an influx of works from China,<sup>737</sup> their writers flocking to AO3 in the wake of crackdowns by the Chinese government on posting fanworks to platforms based in their country (especially works with homoerotic content), seeing AO3 as a haven for free expression and inclusivity<sup>738</sup> (confirming the symbolic capital bound up in these core values). This lasted only briefly, though – on February 29<sup>th</sup> 2020, AO3 received reports of Chinese users having difficulty accessing the site and later announced that it had been blocked by the Chinese government.<sup>739</sup> The exact reason for the ban is unclear – some suggest that a group of Chinese fans reported AO3 due to their unhappiness with the presence of fics depicting a favourite actor in ways they found offensive, however other reports point out that AO3 would have been vulnerable to censorship by China because of its explicit content in any case, particularly given the introduction of new internet regulations in the country the day after the block was put in place.<sup>740</sup> Either way, it is clear that AO3's permissive content policy was the reason for the ban, Chinese users' ability to access the site becoming one of the costs of AO3's defence of free speech.

Given AO3's location in the US and the deep roots of its stance against censorship, it is unsurprising that it would choose to maintain its status quo in the wake of the Chinese ban. Yet, the exclusion of Chinese users does raise serious questions about the feasibility of AO3's dual commitments to maximum free speech and inclusivity. As Riley neatly points out, there exists an inherent contradiction in a space which attempts to simultaneously serve both these values: 'Some fans point out that a space cannot truly be "safe" without some form of censorship which removes non-safe elements, but that no space which censors its content could actually be safe.'<sup>741</sup> Which, for AO3, raises the difficult question of how to resolve this contradiction and the possibility that it cannot in fact be resolved,

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<sup>737</sup> 'May 2019 Newsletter, Volume 135'.

<sup>738</sup> Jackson, 'Banned From The Chinese Internet, LGBT Fanfiction Writers Find New Home On U.S. Website'.

<sup>739</sup> AO3 Status (@AO3\_Status), 'Unfortunately, the Archive of Our Own'.

<sup>740</sup> 'Blocking of AO3 in China'; Romano, 'China Has Censored the Archive of Our Own, One of the Internet's Largest Fanfiction Websites'.

<sup>741</sup> Riley, *Queerness and Emotion in Fanfiction*, 17.

thereby threatening AO3's social capital as a communal space for all fans and its symbolic capital as a space in which writers can publish without fear of censure. In the following section, I examine this question with regards to AO3's stance on racist content and the broader context of fandom and fan studies' issues with racism.

## Racism in AO3, Fandom and Fan Studies

AO3's tagging system is, as noted above, a key part of its strategy to deal with offensive or hurtful material by helping its users to filter out content they wish to avoid. As well as user-generated tags, AO3 strengthens this system with the use of enforceable tags known as 'Archive Warnings' (AWs), which are designed 'to identify subjects that have been the subject of substantial, recurring debate in many sectors of fandom and provide an easy way to warn for those subjects.'<sup>742</sup> If a fic contains any material that comes under these warnings – major character death, underage sexual activity,<sup>743</sup> graphic depictions of violence, or rape/non-consensual sexual activity – AO3 mandates that either the relevant AW be used, or the 'Choose Not to Warn' tag, which informs the reader that the fic contains sensitive material of some kind but the writer has chosen not to warn for it (often in order to avoid spoiling their plot).<sup>744</sup>

To the existing AWs, it has been suggested that AO3 should add a warning for racist content (which is not forbidden or subject to removal, according to the site's ToS) or – given the complexity of defining what counts as racist material – for fics depicting slavery/enslavement. The latter tag is suggested as a result of the popularity of the 'slavefic' genre on AO3. Definitions of this genre vary somewhat, with greater or lesser emphasis on the sexual elements often included in such works, but generally refers to fics in which one character is enslaved to another, or pretends to be so. Fanlore's definition adds that slavefic 'usually refers to stories in which slavery is used as narrative kink, rather than historical fiction dealing with slavery accurately'<sup>745</sup> but that the term may be used to refer to any and all works, including professionally published fiction, that features slavery or indentured servitude. Blogger Zina (aka Stitch), meanwhile, who has written extensively on

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<sup>742</sup> 'Terms of Service FAQ', sec. IV. Ratings and Warnings. What's the purpose of the Archive Tags?

<sup>743</sup> AO3 defines underage as below the age of eighteen, despite awareness that the age of consent varies internationally, referring to the 'trend to focus on 18 as an important age in regulating depictions of sexual activity (as opposed to actual sexual activity/age of consent, which is regulated in many more varied ways).' See: *ibid.*, sec. IV. Spam and Commercial Policy. Ratings and Warnings.

<sup>744</sup> 'Archive FAQ > Tutorial: Posting a Work on AO3', sec. Archive Warnings (required).

<sup>745</sup> 'Slavefic'.

racism in fandom, provides a more refined definition, focusing not solely on the presence of slavery as a narrative element but also on the point of view utilised by the author:

I generally use “slavefic” not only to refer to stories that use slavery in any capacity that involves romanticizing, eroticizing, or fetishizing the experience of enslavement, but to also refer to stories that have slavery as a marked portion of their background and yet focus on the experience of slavers and saviors rather than the people being enslaved.<sup>746</sup>

This definition distinguishes between works which feature slavery and *slavefics* by defining the latter as fundamentally racist, either by glorifying slavery or by foregrounding slave owners and other non-slave characters at the expense of enslaved ones. As such, it helps to clarify that it is not simply any mention of slavery that causes a problem but the way in which enslavement is employed by the author and that it is those works which take an actively harmful stance on slavery that require moderation.

As of 22/12/20, there are 21,360 works tagged with ‘slavery’ on AO3, and 5,616 tagged with ‘sexual slavery’ (as opposed to 626 tagged as ‘non-sexual slavery’). Without individually reading each entry – a task far outside the scope of this single-researcher project – there is no way of knowing how many of these fics fall under the above definition. That, however, seems to support the argument that the addition of some kind of AW would be warranted in order to aid those who wish to avoid offensive slavefics, as the addition of a mandatory, enforceable AW requires greater care and thought on the part of the author than the more casual user-generated tags which, according to AO3, ‘can be serious or humorous [...] warnings or promises, or whatever else the creator chooses.’<sup>747</sup> Moreover, given that, as mentioned above, the purpose of AWs is to provide an easy and obvious means of warning against subject matter that has been repeatedly and extensively debated by fandom, which racism and slavefics certainly constitute,<sup>748</sup> it seems fair to suggest that AO3 should consider adding a new AW for the first time in the site’s existence (aside from the alteration from ‘Choose Not to Warn For Some Content’ to ‘Choose Not to Use Archive Warnings’ in December 2009, just a month after the site launched to the public<sup>749</sup>). After all, those requesting that AO3 add an AW for slavery are not requesting that the site should ban such content (if that were true, there would be no need to ask for a

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<sup>746</sup> Zina, ‘What Fandom Racism Looks Like: (Not-So) Sexy Slavefic’, n. 1.

<sup>747</sup> ‘Terms of Service FAQ’, sec. IV. Spam and Commercial Policy. Ratings and Warnings.

<sup>748</sup> ‘RaceFail ’09’; ‘Slavefic’.

<sup>749</sup> ‘New Change to the AO3’s “Archive Warning” System’.

warning at all). Instead, they want to work with AO3's affordances in order to better curate their experience of the platform, asking that works which feature slavery should be treated in the same way as those that contain other subjects that are particularly likely to cause distress to a large number of the site's users i.e. they should be required to add either an AW or use the 'Choose Not to Tag' option.

However, as noted by Morimoto in her keynote presentation at the Fan Studies Network Conference in 2019 (FSN2019), AO3 has repeatedly resisted calls to create an AW for racism or slavery.<sup>750</sup> The reasons for this appear to be based in the difficulty of enforcing such a warning and the technical demands it would place on AO3's volunteer staff.<sup>751</sup> This reasoning has been questioned though, by users who point out that AO3 is still in beta and therefore should be open to changes and improvements of the site<sup>752</sup> and that the issue of defining the concepts of racism or slavery to the satisfaction of all concerned – particularly given the wide variety of cultural backgrounds potentially represented in AO3's userbase<sup>753</sup> – equally apply to those of non-consensual or underage sexual activity (indeed, as noted above, AO3 itself recognises that its definition of underage as under eighteen does not coincide with every culture's own age of consent), which nevertheless have AWs attached.<sup>754</sup>

In addition to the debate over AWs, there is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that, when confronted with complaints regarding racist content, the response of AO3's Abuse Team has been to directly state that its policy of maximum inclusiveness refers to content rather than to its users, openly prioritising maximum free speech over any commitment to diversity and inclusivity. For example, in response to complaints regarding an openly racist fic in the Hockey RPF fandom – and its author's offensive interactions in the comments, which included the use of racial slurs – the Abuse Team's response was to invoke their policy of not deleting content for offensiveness and to suggest that the fic's readers were equally responsible for the author's conduct within the comments.<sup>755</sup> This incident has been suggested as proof that AO3's maximum free speech policy actively

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<sup>750</sup> Morimoto, 'What a Difference a Name Makes: Transculturating Fan Studies (Paper Presented at Fan Studies Network Conference 2019, University of Portsmouth, UK, June 28-29)'.

<sup>751</sup> LaDow, 'Tyme LaDow 2020 Q&A: AO3 Content Policy and Warnings'; Tischer, 'Alex Tischer 2020 Q&A: AO3 Content Policy and Warnings'.

<sup>752</sup> naye, 'What's up with the Ao3 and Racism?'

<sup>753</sup> While information on the demographics of AO3's userbase is limited, one 2013 survey suggested that around a fifth of AO3 users self-identify as non-white races (see: *centreoftheselights*, 'AO3 Census: Demographics, Chapter Five: Ethnicity'.)

<sup>754</sup> @tacticalgrandma, 'I Just Keep Coming Back'; @tacticalgrandma, 'Still Exist (& I Think the Existence)'; @saathi1013, 'A Lot of the "Flaws"'.

<sup>755</sup> stopthatimp, 'Ao3 & Censorship'; themardia, 'AO3 and Abuse: A Story About the AO3 Abuse Team'.

damages its claims to be welcoming to all fans, an impression strengthened when Franzeska, former OTW Board member and head of AO3's Abuse Team between 2008-12<sup>756</sup> – who has repeatedly been accused of expressing racist views on fandom<sup>757</sup> – admitted in 2020 that considerations of racism had not occurred to her when writing the content policy for AO3.<sup>758</sup>

The effect of this behaviour on the part of AO3 is to erode the sense of safety FOC feel in using the site,<sup>759</sup> the implication being that their social capital within the AO3 community is so low as to deprioritise their right to enfranchisement and inclusion in favour of allowing AO3's largely white<sup>760</sup> userbase to write and publish whatever they want. This issue has long simmered beneath the AO3 community but it became particularly acute during 2020, as AO3's treatment of FOC began to be more openly questioned in the context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in North America and throughout the world. In common with many other organisations, the OTW published a response to the BLM protests on their site, in the form of a post summarising some of the ways fandom had intersected with the protests and providing resources for further reading on racism in fandom and wider culture.<sup>761</sup> Despite the stated intentions of the post to encourage awareness and consideration of problems with racism in fandom, it was criticised for a number of failings. Firstly, rather than making a specific statement in support of the BLM movement, the OTW chose instead to include their response as part of their weekly column 'This Week in Fandom,' a round-up of significant events in fandom over the previous week, giving the impression of trivialising this important event (an impression not helped by the fact that it was the OTW's first response to the protests despite several weeks having passed since their commencement).<sup>762</sup> Secondly, the language used in the post was criticised for seeming rote and generic, more akin to a piece of corporate bandwagon-jumping than a sincere message of support from a community-focused organisation.<sup>763</sup> Moreover, the lack of any discussion of the OTW and AO3's own problems with racism signalled a lack of consideration and a self-distancing from the

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<sup>756</sup> @bessyboo, 'Also a Reminder'.

<sup>757</sup> Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*, 25–26; Zina, 'What It's Like Being Fandom Critical While Black'; pearwaldorf, 'If I Never See Another Post from Franzeska'; snarlfurillo, 'This Meta Is Awful'.

<sup>758</sup> olderthannettefic, 'What Do You Think about the Write-in Campaign to AO3'.

<sup>759</sup> pearwaldorf, 'If I Never See Another Post from Franzeska'; Zina, 'Fleeting Frustrations #7: Archive Frenzy and Being (Un) Grateful To Our Fannish Foremothers (Stuck In 2002)'; @PastelPyon, 'I Get Wanting to Use Fiction'; @duckgirlie, 'AO3: Racism and Particularly Anti-Black Racism'.

<sup>760</sup> centreoftheselights, 'AO3 Census: Demographics, Chapter Five: Ethnicity'.

<sup>761</sup> Hindes, 'This Week in Fandom, Volume 149 (Original Version)'.

<sup>762</sup> @fansplaining, 'Since That Didn't Happen'; Horbinski, 'Last Year When the AO3 Won'.

<sup>763</sup> Pande, 'I've Seen the AO3/OTW Statement'.

discussion, as though the OTW were trying to separate itself from direct involvement with issues regarding racism. Thirdly, one of the links included in the post was to a fan-made vid which used footage of the climactic scene of *Avengers: Endgame* and its almost-exclusively white cast to create a triumphalist, idealistic vision of the world coming together to destroy racism, which was criticised as an insensitive and performative co-opting of the BLM movement by white fandom<sup>764</sup> and which unfortunately echoed a number of fics posted to AO3 which similarly used the BLM protests as a backdrop for stories involving white protagonists (including one telling the story of how the all-white Avengers solve racism). And fourthly, the post originally included links to posts by Pande and Stitch, both of whom are FOC and scholars of fandom who have previously criticised AO3 and the OTW regarding their handling of racist content and structural racism within the OTW's governance. Both Pande and Stitch were unhappy with being cited in the post, feeling that their names were being co-opted to bolster the OTW's image of allyship without their work having been properly read or understood, and requested that their names be removed, which the OTW eventually complied with.<sup>765</sup>

This controversy resulted in an open letter to the OTW, which expressed 'deep unhappiness with the OTW's inaction on combating racism within fandom'<sup>766</sup> and urged it to consider numerous actions in order to improve its standing, including the hiring of a paid external expert to advise the OTW on how to become actively anti-racist, a public apology for citing the work of scholars (particularly Stitch and Pande) without implementing their suggestions, and to aid with changes to AO3's 'technological structure and abuse policies that address racist content with the same seriousness they currently accord to violence, sexual assault, and underage content,'<sup>767</sup> referring to AO3's AWs. The following day the OTW's Twitter account responded that the OTW was working to address the criticisms levelled at it,<sup>768</sup> while a full statement appeared four days later, in which the OTW apologised for its inaction and pledged to make changes to AO3, including improvements to its search and filter systems, comment moderation and administration tools.<sup>769</sup> Moreover, it included a promise to reassess its AWs and to discuss the possibility of implementing new ones, albeit it with the qualifier that, due to the

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<sup>764</sup> @dhifantasy, 'AO3's Statement Is Everything'; Nadkarni, 'I'm Still Just Staring'; Willow, Jun 14 2020 6.41 pm, 'Comment on,' Hindes, 'This Week in Fandom, Volume 149'; @tacticalgrandma, 'Honestly at Least'.

<sup>765</sup> Pande, 'I Was Waiting to See'.

<sup>766</sup> 'Open Letter to the OTW on Racism in Fandom'.

<sup>767</sup> Ibid.

<sup>768</sup> @OTW\_news, 'We're Working to Address Ongoing Criticism'.

<sup>769</sup> 'Statement from the OTW Board of Directors, Chairs, & Leads'.

complexity of defining, implementing and enforcing any new warnings, this possibility would not be ‘quickly or easily addressed.’<sup>770</sup> However, in the same statement the OTW clarified that its priority with regard to AO3 is ‘maximum inclusivity of content’ which means ‘there will always be significant tension between maximum inclusivity of content and making the Archive a welcoming space for all fans.’<sup>771</sup> This clear ranking of free speech above inclusivity affirms that AO3 will (as the example of the Hockey RPF fic above suggested) tolerate the inclusion of material that is hurtful or offensive to its users, in service of keeping its site free of censorship, confirming that groups such as FOC who may be hurt by such content are afforded less social capital than writers of it.

Unfortunately, the failures of AO3 to promote inclusivity and diversity are reflected within both fandom and fan studies. In an influential 2015 article, for example, Wanzo calls attention to the dearth of research into race and racism within fan studies, as well as the marginalisation of Black scholars in the discipline and urges a rethinking of how it treats whiteness as the default rather than a race itself.<sup>772</sup> This point has been echoed by researchers including Pande, Coker, Morimoto and Chin<sup>773</sup> but while these scholars and others<sup>774</sup> have deepened the research into fandom and race since Wanzo’s article there have also been incidents which highlight the continuing lack of inclusivity that marks fan studies. For example, in 2019 Pande was involved in a Twitter exchange with fellow fan studies scholar Nicolle Lamerichs, who disagreed with Pande’s statement that fan studies does not acknowledge or attend to its problems with racism.<sup>775</sup> This caused an uproar in the fan studies field, Lamerichs being criticised for treating whiteness as the default, derailing criticism of structural whiteness, and tone policing (detracting from the validity of a statement by criticising the tone in which it is expressed rather than its substance).<sup>776</sup> The incident resulted in the cancellation of Lamerich’s keynote speech at FSN2019 (which was replaced by a ‘fishbowl conversation’<sup>777</sup> on the subject of ‘Race, Fandom and the

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<sup>770</sup> Ibid.

<sup>771</sup> Ibid.

<sup>772</sup> Wanzo, ‘African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies’.

<sup>773</sup> Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*; Coker and Pande, ‘Not So Star-Spangled: Examining Race, Privilege and Problems in MCU’s Captain America Fandom’; Wanzo, ‘African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies’; Chin and Morimoto, ‘Towards a Theory of Transcultural Fandom’; Morimoto, *An Introduction to Media Fan Studies*.

<sup>774</sup> Johnson, ‘Transformative Racism: The Black Body in Fan Works’; Goward, ‘Not so Long Ago, and Not so Far Away: Where Is There Room for Oppressed People in Fandom?’; Stanfill, ‘Fans of Color in Femslash’; Martin, ‘Fandom While Black: Misty Copeland, Black Panther, Tyler Perry and the Contours of US Black Fandoms’.

<sup>775</sup> ‘Fan Studies Network Statement on FSN2019 and the Whiteness of Fan Studies’.

<sup>776</sup> Ibid.

<sup>777</sup> ‘Fishbowl (Conversation)’.

Structured Whiteness of Fan Studies<sup>778</sup>) and a statement by the Fan Studies Network acknowledging that ‘Fan studies is a discipline overrun with whiteness.’<sup>779</sup> Meanwhile, in 2020, scholar-fan William Proctor was discovered to have made derogatory remarks about scholars of colour Pande and Samira Nadkarni in an exchange with Henry Jenkins that was unintentionally sent to a semi-public email list.<sup>780</sup> In addition, these emails revealed serious failings regarding the approach Proctor and Jenkins had taken to a series of blog posts on Black comics they were organising, placing non-Black scholars in positions of power rather than giving Black scholars those opportunities.<sup>781</sup> In response, Jenkins published an apologetic blog post, explaining his actions and promising to ‘do better,’<sup>782</sup> while confirming in a post to Twitter that Proctor had stepped down from the proposed series and any further involvement with Jenkins’ blog.<sup>783</sup> Despite these conciliatory gestures and intimations of attitudinal adjustments, however, these incidents only serve to highlight the depth of fan studies’ issues with race,<sup>784</sup> how scholars of colour are afforded less social capital within the field, and how much work is required by fans and scholar-fans in this area in order to improve their approach.

Indeed, I count myself amongst those scholar-fans who have glossed over race in their work – originally, this chapter deliberately left out the issue of racism in fanfic, a result of my hesitancy to speak on this topic as a white scholar, believing it was better to stay silent and allow scholars of colour to do the work of addressing this problem. Having witnessed the above discussion surrounding Pande’s tweet and having attended FSN2019, however, I became aware that it would be not only remiss of me to exclude discussions of race from this thesis but would render my work a throwback to previous generations of fan scholarship in which race was overlooked or marginalised, illustrated by Fiske’s statement in his 1992 essay ‘The Cultural Economy of Fandom’ that he could not give race any attention in that work because no previous scholarship had attended to it.<sup>785</sup>

Moreover, it would have constituted an unfair act of the kind that Pande refers to as causing exhaustion in fans and scholar-fans of colour. These groups are frequently called

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<sup>778</sup> ‘Fan Studies Network Programme’, 17.

<sup>779</sup> Phillips, ‘#FSN2019’.

<sup>780</sup> O’Connor, ‘I Normally Wouldn’t Post’.

<sup>781</sup> Nadkarni, ‘Here Is @DrWilliamProct1’s Semi-Public Email’.

<sup>782</sup> Jenkins, ‘A Personal Statement: How Good Intentions Can Produce Harmful Effects’.

<sup>783</sup> Jenkins, ‘See My Note Below’.

<sup>784</sup> Proctor et al., ‘On Toxic Fan Practices: A Round-Table’; Nadkarni, ‘“A Discipline Overrun with Whiteness”: # FSN2019 and Making a Statement - A Guest Post’; Pande, ‘How (Not) to Talk about Race: A Critique of Methodological Practices in Fan Studies’; Hayashi, ‘Reimagining Fan Studies in the Age of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter’.

<sup>785</sup> Fiske, ‘The Cultural Economy of Fandom’, 32.

upon to do the work of informing and educating their white counterparts, expected to put in the effort of sourcing and producing evidence and arguments so that, instead of doing their own research, white fans and scholar-fans have access to ready-made primers on how to avoid reinforcing structural racism. This creates an unfair burden of labour on fans and scholar-fans of colour while also having the effect of ‘othering’ those groups by making their experience something which must be taught to those who are assumed to be the social and cultural default by dint of their whiteness.

The presence of racism within fan studies is unfortunately reflected in fandom itself, which has a long history of poor minority representation and actively racist attitudes. For example, slash fandom’s preference for pairings between cis males is well documented, so much that there exist a variety of terms for it, including ‘Any Two Guys,’ and ‘Migratory Slash Fandom,’ emphasising the tendency for slash fans to jump from fandom to fandom in search of fresh m/m pairings to ship.<sup>786</sup> Equally striking, however, is that the most popular ships tend to feature characters who are white, giving rise to the amended term ‘Two White Guys’ (or ‘White Cock’).<sup>787</sup> On AO3, for example – where slash pairings are by far the most common<sup>788</sup> – ships featuring two white cis males are considerably more popular than those featuring even one character of colour. Indeed, according to one long-running annual<sup>789</sup> study of shipping on AO3, the top ten pairings between 2016<sup>790</sup>-17<sup>791</sup> and 2019<sup>792</sup>-20<sup>793</sup> never featured more than two ships involving a character of colour (as in 2019) and in fact fell to zero in 2017.

Moreover, there is evidence that when a source text presents multiple possible pairings, those featuring white characters are preferred over those including characters of colour.<sup>794</sup> The *Star Wars* fandom has been particularly notorious for this with regards to the sequel trilogy released between 2015-2019, with the juggernaut ships arising from the films being Kylo/Hux (‘Kylux,’ a pairing between antagonist Kylo Ren and Hux, a minor character who receives very little screen time, both of whom are portrayed as and by white cis men) and Kylo/Rey (‘Reylo,’ pairing protagonist Rey and Kylo Ren, portrayed as and by a cis white woman and cis white man, respectively). Meanwhile, the initially popular

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<sup>786</sup> ‘Migratory Slash Fandom’.

<sup>787</sup> ‘Two White Guys’.

<sup>788</sup> toaststats (destinationtoast), [Fandom Stats] Shipping on Wattpad vs. AO3 and FFN’.

<sup>789</sup> There are no statistics from 2018 as the study took a break during that year.

<sup>790</sup> centreoftheselights, ‘AO3 Ship Stats 2016’.

<sup>791</sup> centreoftheselights, ‘AO3 Ship Stats 2017’.

<sup>792</sup> centreoftheselights, ‘AO3 Ship Stats 2019’.

<sup>793</sup> centreoftheselights, ‘AO3 Ship Stats 2020’.

<sup>794</sup> Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*, 23–26; Coker and Pande, ‘Not So Star-Spangled: Examining Race, Privilege and Problems in MCU’s Captain America Fandom’.

Finn/Poe ('Stormpilot,' pairing Finn, portrayed as and by a cis Black man, with Poe, portrayed as and by a cis Latino man) and Finn/Rey ('FinnRey,' characters as above) ships quickly faded into fandom niches. To compare, the statistics for these ships on AO3 as of 22/12/20 are: 14,542 fics tagged with Kylux; 15,433 tagged with Reylo; 7,765 tagged with Stormpilot; and 1,983 tagged with FinnRey. Similarly, in the *Marvel* fandom, white lead characters Steve Rogers/Captain America and Tony Stark/Iron Man are both portrayed as having close friendships with Black male characters – Sam Wilson/The Falcon and James Rhodes/War Machine respectively – exactly the kind of intimate relationship that transformative slash fans often extrapolate into ships, starting with the original objects of slash media fandom, *Star Trek's* Kirk and Spock. However, both Rogers and Stark are far more often depicted in pairings with other white characters, including each other, than either is with their canonical close friend of colour.<sup>795</sup> For example, on AO3 as of 22/12/20, Rogers is most often paired with his white male friend Bucky Barnes/The Winter Soldier ('Stucky,' 53,346 fics), secondly with Stark ('Stony,' 38,933 fics) and thirdly with white woman and canonical love interest Peggy Carter ('Steggy,' 5,635 fics).<sup>796</sup> In comparison, the pairing of Rogers and Wilson ('SamSteve' or 'American Airlines') appears in only 3,053 fics, less than a tenth of those featuring Stucky or Stony. Meanwhile, Stark's most popular pairing on AO3 is with Rogers (38,933 fics), his second with white woman and canonical love interest Pepper Potts ('Pepperony,' 18,703 fics), and his third with white, genderfluid<sup>797</sup> antagonist Loki ('FrostIron,' 10,373 fics). Only 1,634 fics pair him with Rhodes ('Iron Husbands'), under a twentieth of those featuring Stony. Such patterns are repeated throughout fandom,<sup>798</sup> implying a structural issue with transformative fandom's attitudes towards using characters of colour in slash pairings.

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<sup>795</sup> Coker and Pande, 'Not So Star-Spangled: Examining Race, Privilege and Problems in MCU's Captain America Fandom'.

<sup>796</sup> These figures do not take into account fics tagged as Rogers/Reader – part of a genre of fic known as 'Reader-Insert' in which the reader appears as a protagonist, often referred to as 'Y/N,' which stands for 'Your Name' – as I am specifically examining fics which pair characters from source media.

<sup>797</sup> The MCU's version of Loki has, so far, been depicted as and by a white cis male; however, in Marvel's comics the character has been depicted as a man and a woman, able to switch between genders, and is therefore often seen as a genderfluid or non-binary character, including in fics specifically depicting the MCU version. I have chosen the term genderfluid for them, as I feel it best depicts the flexibility of the character in the spectrum of their depictions. Moreover, while Loki is of an alien species and therefore cannot be defined as white, in the MCU they have thus far been portrayed by a white actor and most often appear as white, while the films do not acknowledge or address any complexities regarding the character's race. For the sake of this comparison I therefore categorise them as white, though this categorisation could clearly be problematised and pushed back against.

<sup>798</sup> centrumlumina, 'Fandom's Race Problem and the AO3 Ship Stats'; Pande and Moitra, "'Yes, the Evil Queen Is Latina!': Racial Dynamics of Online Femslash Fandoms'; Fazekas, 'Queer and Unusual Space: White Supremacy in Slash Fanfiction', 22–30.

This implication is often met with opposition from shippers (those who engage in the imaginative practice of pairing characters/people in romantic/sexual relationships), who may struggle to accept what they interpret as an attack on their individual preferences. Slash shipping is sometimes presented as inherently progressive by its fans, who argue that the genre fights against mainstream media's heteronormativity, or that, as discussed above, it allows women to explore issues of sex and sexuality outwith the social and emotional baggage associated with women and sex.<sup>799</sup> Criticism of slash upends this utopic narrative and, as a result, can provoke anger and defensiveness amongst white slashers. For example, Pande identifies a tendency for those who raise the issue of racism in slash to be dismissed as 'fandom killjoys'<sup>800</sup> – drawing on Ahmed's idea of the feminist killjoy<sup>801</sup> – who ruin the pleasure of writing slash with criticism and political correctness (an argument which tellingly echoes the 'don't like don't read' responses to concrit discussed in Chapter Two). Such attitudes prioritise the pleasure of writing and consuming slash over consideration for and inclusion of non-white fans, becoming, as Pande points out, 'a deeply alienating experience which involves either the internalized acceptance that certain pleasures are simply unavailable, or the identification of being someone who consistently brings unwanted drama to fan spaces.'<sup>802</sup> Slash writers may be so bound up with the pleasure they find in their practice and with the image of themselves as inherently resistant to a patriarchal society that they fail to recognise any criticisms as legitimate, thereby forming a culture of harm against those who do not easily fit into their 'broadly inclusive, woman-centric, and queer-coded community.'<sup>803</sup>

As well as displaying racism in its preferences, fandom has also been marked by repeated events in which FOC are marginalised and misrepresented, examples including a notorious *Supernatural* RPF fic which used the real-life 2010 earthquake in Haiti (an event which mainly affected Black people) as a backdrop for a romance featuring two white men,<sup>804</sup> backlashes against women characters of colour including Nyota Uhura<sup>805</sup> (in the 2009 *Star Trek* reboot movie), and the alleged infiltration of white supremacists into the

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<sup>799</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*; Tosenberger, 'Potterotics: Harry Potter Fanfiction on the Internet'; Zina, 'Internalized Misogyny and That Damned Slash Shipping Post: A Response'; Larsen and Zubernis, *Fangasm: Supernatural Fangirls*.

<sup>800</sup> Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*, 19.

<sup>801</sup> Ahmed, 'Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)'.

<sup>802</sup> Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*, 19.

<sup>803</sup> Ibid.

<sup>804</sup> 'The J2 Haiti Fic'.

<sup>805</sup> Scodari, "'Nyota Uhura Is Not a White Girl': Gender, Intersectionality, and Star Trek 2009's Alternate Romantic Universes"; Pande and Moitra, "'Yes, the Evil Queen Is Latina!': Racial Dynamics of Online Femslash Fandoms', para. 2.5; Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*, 134.

*My Little Pony* fandom.<sup>806</sup> A more recent example, meanwhile, occurred during the BLM protests when fans of K-pop (Korean pop music) began to garner a reputation for political activism, utilising their skill and experience with mobilising on social media to disrupt attempted police surveillance of the protests<sup>807</sup> and white supremacist rhetoric online.<sup>808</sup> Perhaps most notorious of these schemes was a publicity stunt in which some of these fans (along with users of video-sharing platform TikTok) registered for tickets to a rally for then-President Donald Trump in Tulsa – a controversial choice of location given its history of racist violence.<sup>809</sup> The intention was to artificially inflate the expected audience and therefore publicly embarrass Trump and his team when the crowd failed to materialise as expected. Their success – the 19,000-person arena had only a 6,200-person turnout<sup>810</sup> and a second rally was subsequently cancelled<sup>811</sup> – led to a spate of media coverage hailing these fans as socially conscious and politically active,<sup>812</sup> their actions even receiving acknowledgement from US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez via her Twitter account.<sup>813</sup> However, little of this coverage acknowledged the presence of Black fans within K-pop fandom,<sup>814</sup> nor the complicated history K-pop has with the strong influence of Black American culture on the genre.<sup>815</sup> Instead, the idealised narrative being built around K-pop fandom had the effect of continuing to marginalise the voices of Black fans,<sup>816</sup> who have long experienced racism both on the part of the K-pop industry (including such infractions as cultural appropriation, the use of blackface, and the perpetuating of racial stereotypes<sup>817</sup>) and non-Black fans.

Another, older incident is perhaps most relevant to AO3, and therefore this thesis – the 2009 event known as ‘Racefail ‘09’ (or, alternatively, the ‘Great Cultural Appropriation

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<sup>806</sup> Tiffany, ‘My Little Pony Fans Are Ready to Admit They Have a Nazi Problem’; Reich, ‘Nazis Infiltrate “My Little Pony” Fandom’.

<sup>807</sup> Haylock, ‘K-Pop Stans Spammed the Dallas Police Department’s App With Fan Cams’.

<sup>808</sup> McCurry, ‘K-Pop Fans Join Forces to Drown out Opposition to #BlackLivesMatter’.

<sup>809</sup> Stewart, ‘One of America’s Worst Acts of Racial Violence Was in Tulsa. Now, It’s the Site of Trump’s First Rally in Months’.

<sup>810</sup> Wise, ‘Tulsa Fire Department Says Trump Rally Attendance Was about 6,200’.

<sup>811</sup> Liptak and Collins, ‘Sick Staff and Empty Seats: How Trump’s Triumphant Return to the Campaign Trail Went from Bad to Worse’.

<sup>812</sup> Reddy, ‘K-Pop Fans Emerge as a Powerful Force in US Protests’; Tiffany, ‘Why K-Pop Fans Are No Longer Posting About K-Pop’; Kwon, ‘BTS and K-Pop Fans Strike a Blow to Support #BlackLivesMatter’.

<sup>813</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, ‘KPop Allies, We See and Appreciate’.

<sup>814</sup> Stitch, ‘K-Pop Activism Makes Headlines but Black Fans’ Experience Is More Complex’.

<sup>815</sup> Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*; Anderson, *Soul in Seoul: African American Popular Music and K-Pop*; Zina, ‘Cultural Appropriation in the Age of K-Pop Part One’.

<sup>816</sup> de Luna, ‘“They Use Our Culture”: The Black Creatives and Fans Holding K-Pop Accountable’; Chaudry, ‘Black K-Pop Fans Continue to Face Racism Online’; Stitch, ‘K-Pop Activism Makes Headlines but Black Fans’ Experience Is More Complex’.

<sup>817</sup> Chatman, ‘In Solidarity(?): A Critique of the K-Pop Industry’s Support for Black Lives Matter’; Han, ‘K-Pop Nationalism: Celebrities and Acting Blackface in the Korean Media’.

Debate of Doom<sup>818</sup>), which raised serious questions regarding how transformative fandom responds to and depicts characters of colour.<sup>819</sup> Though emerging from issues that had long been present within fandom, the first flashpoint of Racefail itself is generally agreed to have been a LiveJournal post made by speculative fiction author Elizabeth Bear on the subject of ‘Writing the Other without being a dick.’<sup>820</sup> Intended as advice on how to write characters of a different culture than oneself, Bear’s post (which appears to have been altered since its original posting<sup>821</sup>) included guidance on how she, a white woman, would go about integrating characters of colour within her writing. This drew criticism from members of SFF fandom, notably for ignoring the racism inherent in the fantasy genre<sup>822</sup> and Bear’s own inclusion of racist tropes in her work<sup>823</sup> and quickly grew into a months-long debate over racism in the SFF genre and its fandom, involving authors, editors and fans.<sup>824</sup>

This was, as Pande notes, ‘a transformative moment of recognizing other nonwhite fans as present and active in fan spaces’<sup>825</sup> yet, despite the scale of Racefail, it has not had a fraction of the impact of other fandom events such as Strikethrough and Boldthrough. This is particularly notable with regards to AO3 which, as noted throughout this thesis, was influenced by the events of Strikethrough in particular and which has kept the memory of that incident alive within the fanfic community, as demonstrated by the widespread comparisons between LiveJournal’s purge and Tumblr’s 2018 ban on adult content, but has seemingly not paid the same attention to Racefail or its effects and lessons. This is despite Racefail having occurred only two years after Strikethrough and around six to ten months prior to AO3’s public launch. Some FOC claim that this is a telling privileging of white fandom history over Black, indicating AO3’s prioritisation of free speech for its users over its responsibility of care towards its users of colour.<sup>826</sup> As such, both Racefail itself and the lack of meaningful response to it act as further markers of how FOC are made to feel excluded and ignored by the fan community, the withholding of social capital

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<sup>818</sup> Gatson and Reid, ‘Editorial: Race and Ethnicity in Fandom’, para. 3.3.

<sup>819</sup> ‘RaceFail ’09’.

<sup>820</sup> Bear, ‘Whatever You’re Doing, You’re Probably Wrong’.

<sup>821</sup> Gilliland, ‘Racebending Fandoms and Digital Futurism’, para. 3.5.

<sup>822</sup> ‘RaceFail ’09’, sec. Deepa D.: ‘I grew up with half a tongue’.

<sup>823</sup> Avalon’s Willow, ‘Open Letter: To Elizabeth Bear’.

<sup>824</sup> Jemisin, ‘Why I Think RaceFail Was The Bestest Thing Ever for SFF’; De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*, 182–86; Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*, 45–46.

<sup>825</sup> Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*, 76.

<sup>826</sup> Zina, ‘Fleeting Frustrations #7: Archive Frenzy and Being (Un) Grateful To Our Fannish Foremothers (Stuck In 2002)’; snarlfurillo, ‘I Want to Highlight This Thread of Comments’; Jenkins, ‘Squee From the Margins: Interview with Rukmini Pande (Part I)’.

from FOC meaning both their requests for inclusion and complaints about marginalisation are brushed off, trivialised or deprioritised.

For AO3 to contribute to fandom's pervasive marginalisation of FOC is not only harmful to much of its userbase but also has the potential to severely damage its symbolic capital, which is, as demonstrated in Chapter One, dependent on AO3's ability to maintain its core values. By prioritising free speech over diversity and inclusiveness AO3 compromises those values and, while the OTW's admission that it recognises the tension between its ideals is a first step towards improvement in this area, it is possible that AO3's reputation may never recover from this, depending on how (and if) they implement changes. This raises a question: given the damage AO3's symbolic capital has taken as a result of its commitment to maximum free speech, why has AO3 historically been so reluctant to acknowledge or work on this problem? In the next section I suggest that, in addition to AO3's conception as an anti-censorship space, at least part of the reason for its reluctance to consider moderation is the existence of continued attacks on free speech, including by groups from within fandom itself.

## Anti-Shippers

One of the more striking phenomena within transformative fan culture in the late 2010s-early 2020s has been the rise of 'anti-shippers' (often known simply as 'antis' or 'fandom police'/'fanpol'). These fans are a subset of the 'anti-fans' that Gray identified in his mid-2000s research,<sup>827</sup> who deliberately mock source texts, either for enjoyment or out of dissatisfaction with or dislike of canon. Anti-shippers, in comparison, are fans who attack ships and shippers by arguing they are immoral and endorse deviant sexual practices, using bullying and harassment to drive their message across.<sup>828</sup> They are not simply fans who dislike particular ships but abide by the fandom mantras of 'don't like, don't read' and 'your kink is not my kink and that's ok.'<sup>829</sup> Instead, antis are specifically characterised by their vocal and extreme disapproval of ships they feel to be unhealthy or morally wrong<sup>830</sup> and, as a result, their opposition to the kind of maximum free speech that AO3 allows.

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<sup>827</sup> Gray, 'Antifandom and the Moral Text'; Gray, 'New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans'.

<sup>828</sup> The term 'anti-shipper' has previously been used by fandom in different ways but the current meaning emerged in the mid-2010s and has become the standard meaning within the transformative community. See: 'Anti-Shipper'.

<sup>829</sup> Colloquially known as 'YKINMKATO' or 'kinktamoto.'

<sup>830</sup> Klink et al., 'A Roundtable Discussion about the Cultures of Fandom on Tumblr', 177.

The origins of this group are inevitably murky, having developed within the ephemeral spaces of social media and the fragmented fandom community. However, anti-shipping seems to have coalesced into a recognisable movement during the mid-2010s as a result of fandom's migration to Tumblr from LiveJournal and its subsequent attempts to deal with Tumblr's tagging system which, as described in the Methodology, is unmoderated and, in early versions of the site, had no filtering system. This lack of control or oversight meant that since both positive and negative responses to fandom ships were marked with the same tag – for example, a post expressing disgust for the Draco/Harry (Drarry) ship from *Harry Potter* and one supporting the pairing might both be tagged #Drarry – shippers would see non-shippers' content, and vice versa, when searching for posts involving their preferred pairing. Early Tumblr fandom attempted to work around this by introducing the rule 'don't tag your hate,'<sup>831</sup> which asked that those who posted in opposition to a ship did not use the established pro-ship tags but instead created ones to demarcate their negative opinions, for example by using #anti-Drarry on posts criticising the Draco/Harry pairing. Ostensibly, this would allow users to curate their experience and avoid negative (or positive) content they preferred not to see.<sup>832</sup>

An unseen consequence of this piece of fan etiquette, however, was to allow groups based on shared hatred and disgust to band together and, in some cases, to focus their negativity into campaigning against ships they viewed as in some way unacceptable. The trading of reasons to oppose a particular ship began to become a source of social capital within the anti-shipper clique, providing its members with the kind of communal validation that, by definition, they would never receive from pro-shippers. As a result, being accepted by fellow antis became a more important priority than acceptance from any other fan community and antis' behaviour became increasingly extreme, devolving into harassment and bullying of those whose shipping preferences failed to meet their standards. As one anonymous post on fandom discussion site 'Fail Fandom Anon' puts it:

Antis became a social group, a hatred. And once impressing their fellow clique of antis became more important than being accepted by the fandom at large, it metastasized into harassing shippers to impress their little bully clique. It became about the social aspect of being accepted by the "cool kids," i.e., the other antis--and like fandom drama groups in the past, often motivated

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<sup>831</sup> James, 'Toxic Fandom: When Criticism and Entitlement Go Too Far'.

<sup>832</sup> wrangletangle, 'Yes, You Can Tag Your Dark or Triggery Work on AO3 with the Characters and Ships That Are in It'.

early on by the fear that they might come after you if you weren't on their side.<sup>833</sup>

Social hierarchies are a key part of fandom communities – fandoms have Big Name Fans (BNFs) and community leaders, members who build status by producing popular, well-regarded fanworks or by organising fandom events.<sup>834</sup> Similarly, anti-shippers are interested in building social capital within their community but, as the above post expresses, do so by harassing and shouting down other fans and their interests, not only looking to build status in their own ideological niche but aggressively attempting to knock down other fans' social capital through accusations of immoral behaviour. Indeed, Tumblr user haedonistic suggests that a major driver behind the rise of antis is to diminish the social capital of fandom in general: '[Antis] crave social power, they're obsessed with getting their hands on it – and the easiest way to do it, they've found, it to bully other marginalized people out of fandoms and take over entire social-spaces with their unhinged shrieking. Most of their accusations are purely the method through which they accomplish that.'<sup>835</sup> Antis, then, are interested in building power and influence through social capital in order to promote their agenda against fanfiction's acceptance of fictional depictions of sexual taboos, with factions of the group willing to use bullying tactics in order to achieve this goal.

Indeed, many of the tactics employed by antis resemble the bad-faith methods utilised by culture warriors, especially in fandom-adjacent events such as Gamergate<sup>836</sup> and Puppygate.<sup>837</sup> Both these incidents arose within fandom communities – those surrounding videogames and speculative fiction, respectively – and represented aggressive attempts at gatekeeping and policing of their social norms. Gamergate, for example, grew out of accusations in 2014 that a woman game developer had traded sex for favourable reviews of her work, ultimately becoming a full-scale campaign of harassment against a number of women involved in the gaming industry, thereby derailing any sincere discussions of ethics in videogame journalism. Indeed, many commentators have pointed out that Gamergate was not ever rooted in concern over potentially corrupt journalistic practices but in white,

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<sup>833</sup> Anonymous, Mar 7 2017 4.21pm, 'Comment on,' sunnymodffa, 'FFA DW Post # 615 - Don't Waste Good Chocolate. Use the Home Compostable Foil Instead.'

<sup>834</sup> Chin, 'It's About Who You Know: Social Capital, Hierarchies and Fandom'.

<sup>835</sup> haedonistic, 'Exhibit No 5786737'.

<sup>836</sup> Dewey, 'The Only Guide to Gamergate You Will Ever Need to Read'.

<sup>837</sup> 'Puppygate'.

middle-class, cis male gamers' fear that the inclusion of women in the gaming community would damage their social status and power.<sup>838</sup>

The Puppy Campaigns, meanwhile, targeted the Hugo Awards between 2013-16, aiming to disrupt the voting process in order to halt the perceived shift towards diversity and political correctness in speculative fiction culture.<sup>839</sup> Composed of the 'Sad Puppies' and its more radical splinter group the 'Rabid Puppies,' these two groups took advantage of the Hugos' voting system – which allows all current members of the WSFS (i.e. all those who pay for membership of that year's WorldCon, a popular science-fiction convention) to nominate and vote for the awards – by instigating block voting campaigns focused on securing nominations and awards for a collection of white, male authors. Though framed by members of the Puppy groups as a bid to maintain the SF community's preference for plot-heavy, thrilling, space-opera-style stories over more literary and/or 'worthy' works, it was clear that this semi-reasonable motivation functioned as a smokescreen for individuals who disapproved of changes to the status quo of SF culture. Indeed, Puppygate not only shared a similar motivation and at least one key player – Rabid Puppies leader Vox Day<sup>840</sup> – with Gamergate but also the same intentions of social and cultural gatekeeping.

Wilson argues convincingly that the combination of men's right activism and fandom represented by Gamergate and Puppygate is, like the online incarnation of transformative fandom, the result of the internet's ability to connect, organise and mobilise large groups of people with shared interests.<sup>841</sup> Moreover, she points out that the creation of such groups provides power in numbers, giving their members a support system that 'bolsters rather than challenges their own beliefs.'<sup>842</sup> Meanwhile, Stevens and van der Merwe point out that events such as Puppygate stem from their instigators' fear of losing control to those who hold opposing social and cultural beliefs,<sup>843</sup> meaning that, for those fans who do not agree with the liberal-leaning ideology of fandom's 'social justice warriors' (a pejorative term for those interested in social justice issues, especially those perceived as being overly assertive or forceful), such groups may provide an attractive alternative. Anti-

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<sup>838</sup> Wagner, 'The Future Of The Culture Wars Is Here, And It's Gamergate'; Dewey, 'The Only Guide to Gamergate You Will Ever Need to Read'; 'The Guardian View on Gamergate: When Hatred Escaped'; Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity', 6–7.

<sup>839</sup> 'Puppygate'; Oleszczuk, 'Sad and Rabid Puppies: Politicization of the Hugo Award Nomination Procedure'; Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing*, 189–93; Wilson, 'Red Pillers, Sad Puppies, and Gamergaters'.

<sup>840</sup> Oleszczuk, 'Sad and Rabid Puppies: Politicization of the Hugo Award Nomination Procedure', 129; Proctor and Kies, 'Editors' Introduction: On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars', 131.

<sup>841</sup> Wilson, 'Red Pillers, Sad Puppies, and Gamergaters', 432.

<sup>842</sup> *Ibid.*, 433.

<sup>843</sup> Stevens and van der Merwe, 'The Imagined Communities of Toxic Puppies: Considering Fan Community Discourse in the 2015 Hugo Awards "Puppygate" Controversy', 209.

shippers could be viewed, therefore, as the logical end-point of the association between conservative culture warriors and fandom, representing an in-fandom group that mobilises a minority viewpoint (i.e. that the fanfic community's traditional acceptance of sexually-taboo stories is morally wrong and should be curtailed via the use of content moderation and censorship) and utilises toxic activist techniques to force their message to be heard, building social capital within their own sub-culture while attempting to destroy that possessed by those they oppose. Certainly the techniques employed by antis bear a strong resemblance to those seen in action during Gamergate and the Puppies campaigns, not least the fact that transformative fandom is, as discussed previously, widely conceptualised as being dominated by women and that anti-shippers represent a movement dedicated to policing those women's activities.

Moreover, as with Gamergate's infamous slogan 'it's about ethics in journalism',<sup>844</sup> which attempted to defend the campaign as a bid to root out corruption in gaming industry journalism, antis justify their tactics as an attempt to maintain the existence of safe spaces within fandom. Thus, one of the more popular techniques amongst antis takes the form of bad-faith gatekeeping. Fic writers and readers who engage with sexually taboo themes often speak of using such writing as a means of dealing with trauma. The fic genre known as 'darkfic',<sup>845</sup> for example, which features intentionally disturbing material, is known as being appealing for some writers and readers as a venue for processing past trauma and as a space in which survivors can find support and understanding.<sup>846</sup> Despite this, antis have objected to the publishing of such writing, ostensibly out of concern that trauma survivors may be triggered by such material or that minors may be adversely influenced by consuming it<sup>847</sup> (especially since, as mentioned in the Methodology, AO3 allows users to register from the age of thirteen and does not screen for age before allowing access to explicit material). Moreover, antis may twist the argument for darkfic, or other fic that deals with sensitive subjects, as therapeutic, claiming that only those who have experienced past trauma should be allowed to create or consume such content. There are even suggestions that antis attempt to force writers and readers to reveal and detail their

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<sup>844</sup> 'Actually It's About Ethics'; Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity'.

<sup>845</sup> 'Darkfic'.

<sup>846</sup> lucymonster, 'If You Are Anti-Darkfic, You Are Anti-Survivor'; shinelikethunder, 'WELL FUCKING PUT'.

<sup>847</sup> 'Darkfic'.

experiences in order to ‘prove’ that they are creating or consuming taboo content for the ‘correct’ cathartic reasons, rather than ‘immorally’ enjoying the text for any other reason.<sup>848</sup>

Such invasive gatekeeping brings up the second argument antis often lean on: the employment of antagonistic rhetoric that accuses creators and consumers of sexually taboo fanfic of immoral behaviour, arguing that engagement with such subject matter constitutes endorsement of such acts, and perhaps even equates to enactment of them, as demonstrated in the following statements:

**Post One:**

This is just my opinion, but indulging in our worst instincts - justifying them and normalizing them - ultimately does our souls and our societies no favours. The debate we’re having today about fanfiction (or fiction), we’ll have tomorrow about stuff like sex robots. And there’ll be people who’ll say this doesn’t hurt real children, or real women, and on some level they’ll be right. But as we can see today, and there are lots of cases, hardcore fiction and überfree “free speech” do have consequences on our thoughts and behaviour, and do hurt people.<sup>849</sup>

**Post Two:**

“it's fiction uwu<sup>850</sup> they're not real i'm not a pedophile” what you like in fiction directly reflects what you enjoy/desire in real life [...] THAT'S WHY YOU LIKE THEM IN THE FIRST PLACE have you NO goddamn neurons in your system<sup>851</sup>

Both of these posts invoke a popular anti-shipper argument against creating and publishing sexually taboo content. Post One sees such works as having the potential to do harm by normalising taboo acts in real life. Post Two, meanwhile, contends (albeit in rather colourful language) that what one enjoys in fiction is a direct reflection of one’s desires in reality and that creating or consuming transgressive subject matter functions as an endorsement of such acts. These are particularly provocative techniques as they represent an attempt to exacerbate the image of fandom as a space for over-sexed, hysterical women<sup>852</sup> by adding an accusatory overtone that suggests fandom facilitates and protects predatory, deviant sexual behaviour. As such, they represent an aggressive campaign

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<sup>848</sup> @Anarfea, ‘Fandom Police Want a Panopticon’.

<sup>849</sup> awed-frog, ‘Everyone Thinks They’re Humbert’.

<sup>850</sup> An emoticon used to express happiness, particularly in response to something cute. It can also denote a feeling of smugness or, when used sarcastically as in the quoted post, a sense of vapidty.

<sup>851</sup> Anonymous, ‘It’s Fiction Uwu’.

<sup>852</sup> Click, “‘Rabid’”, “‘Obsessed’”, and “‘Frenzied’”: Understanding Twilight Fangirls and the Gendered Politics of Fandom’; Grady, ‘Why We’re Terrified of Fanfiction’; Busse, ‘Geek Hierarchies, Boundary Policing, and the Gendering of the Good Fan’.

against fic writers' social capital, attempting to remove their credibility and right to a space in which to freely publish their works by implying a criminal impulse being hidden beneath the screen of fiction, whilst using shame as a means of enforcing antis' preferred social norms.

This conflation of fiction and reality is a common characteristic of antis' rhetoric and represents an attack of fandom's established reputation as a safe space for women and queer people, and for writers who wish to explore taboo subject matter. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the key ways antis attempt to build up their power and influence in the fanfic community is by targeting AO3 over its lack of content moderation and its promotion of maximum free speech. In the following section I discuss how antis have taken aim at AO3, warping the discussion about content moderation and increasing the stakes for AO3's continued commitment to free speech. However, I also examine how antis encourage a disproportionate defensiveness in AO3's userbase, thereby causing other social groups who criticise or question AO3's policies to feel further excluded from and unsupported by the fic community.

## Antis and AO3

AO3 has been a particular focus for anti-shippers since their coalescence into a recognisable movement around the mid-2010s, the site's status and popularity combined with its refusal to police its content creating an obvious target for their ire. Antis see AO3 as a facilitator and promoter of taboo sexual content, less a safe space and more a dangerous normalising force for concepts they find morally reprehensible. Some argue that AO3 should change their content policy, strictly policing the works that are published to the site and removing and banning all those that contain transgressive sexual acts such as incest and rape. This debate tends to flare up particularly in response to AO3's regular fundraising drives<sup>853</sup> (in addition to those who protest against the site accruing large amounts of money, as discussed in Chapter One). AO3's own posts regarding fundraising or other financial matters frequently attract critical comments, some suggesting that the commenter might donate if AO3 were to block and remove offensive content from their site,<sup>854</sup> others simply taking the opportunity to disparage AO3 and its users.<sup>855</sup> Similar

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<sup>853</sup> Busse, 'Feminist Conflict and the Politics of Fantasy'.

<sup>854</sup> Mehera, 'Comment on "The OTW: By Fans, For Fans, Open to All"'; I didn't know...', 'Comment on "OTW October Drive: Spotlight on Our Servers"'.

<sup>855</sup> dealusis, 'Comment on "Your Donations Help Us Grow!"; abcd, 'Comment on "OTW October Drive: Spotlight on Our Servers"'; fanshipdumpsterfire, 'Comment on "OTW Finance: 2020 Budget"'.

debates also appear on Tumblr, with anti-AO3 posters questioning the moral character of those who choose to donate to a website that showcases such dubious content over other, more worthy causes (this became a particularly popular approach in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>856</sup>) and attempting to discourage potential donors from giving their money to a ‘problematic’ site. The following posts illustrate some examples of antis’ opposition to AO3:

**Post One:**

ao3 also specifically was created to get around censorship and yes, by that they mean the censoring of loli<sup>857</sup> and rapefic and other fetish crap. the mods on ao3 have consistently and repeatedly supported open pedophilic content creators on their site and refuse to do anything about it. I couldn’t give less of a fuck how “feminist” it is, they’ll literally never get my money and they shouldn’t get yours either<sup>858</sup>

**Post Two:**

Hello, my name is White Q\*eer “fandom elder” in my early 30's and i think you should donate to AO3 because it is the only place where i can post my nasty self-masturbatory fanfiction without being called out.<sup>859</sup>

**Post Three:**

people will complain about wikipedia asking for money when they keep breaking donation goals meanwhile ao3 has donation runs yearly they always smash and they like to spend that money on a team of lawyers dedicated to protecting your right of writing pedophilia<sup>860</sup>

As well as the aggression and sarcasm that characterises these posts, they also display a number of other features common to antis’ comments on AO3. Firstly, there is a focus on ‘immoral’ sexual acts – tellingly, antis rarely focus on or even mention depictions of violence despite the prevalence of such content on AO3 (483,164 works are marked with the AW ‘Graphic Depictions of Violence’ as of 23/12/20). These are referred to with a deep sense of disgust, with phrases such as ‘fetish crap’ and ‘nasty’ communicating not just disapproval but moral revulsion at the idea of taboo content being available and acceptable

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<sup>856</sup> itcanmakeyoucrazy, ‘Comment on “OTW Finance: 2020 Budget”’; Anonymous, ‘You’re a Vapid’; anti-tony-god, ‘Like Not Even Getting Into’.

<sup>857</sup> Lolicon, short for ‘Lolita Complex’ is a genre focusing on erotic and/or explicit depictions of underage girls and characters who look physically young. It is named in reference to Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Lolita*. See: ‘Lolicon’.

<sup>858</sup> Anonymous, ‘Ao3 Also Was Specifically Created’.

<sup>859</sup> Anonymous, ‘Hello, My Name Is’.

<sup>860</sup> Anonymous, ‘People Will Complain’.

to AO3's users. Secondly, there is a conflation between AO3's permissiveness and endorsement of the taboo acts being referred to in real life, implying those who donate to it are complicit in this alleged support and facilitation of such acts. Such accusatory, inflammatory language is clearly intended not only to characterise AO3 and its users as deviants and criminals but to provoke reaction and to lure pro-AO3 users into debate, a tactic which has proved highly successful, drawing AO3's supporters into reductive, belligerent or overly defensive responses.<sup>861</sup>

In particular, AO3's supporters frequently refer to the fact that its software is open-source and free for anybody to use to build their own platform, suggesting that rather than complaining about AO3's policies, they should create a space of their own that complies with their content preferences.<sup>862</sup> Unfortunately, such suggestions also reveal how this defensiveness regarding AO3 as a haven of free speech works against inclusivity and actively harms marginalised fans. The tendency for AO3's supporters to suggest those who do not approve of AO3's policies should leave and create their own archive is noted by both Zina<sup>863</sup> and Pande as being a fundamentally exclusionary tactic which, according to Pande 'has the effect of locating the problem of conflict in fandom around those who identify the erasure. Write your own fic, build your own archive, find your own people, essentially establishes whiteness as default.'<sup>864</sup> Rather than engaging with the genuine social problems embedded in fandom, the 'build your own' narrative instead blames the complainants and attempts to excise them from the community, removing those affected by the problem rather than the problem itself.

Moreover, fans' support of AO3 against anti-shippers has also led to declarations opposing the idea that AO3 should concern itself with inclusivity and suggesting that it should not be criticised for such a choice. Remarks such as the following make clear that many of its supporters follow AO3 in placing their right to free speech above any other social responsibility, and react with defensiveness to criticism of this stance:

**Post One:**

Ao3 does not exist to solve deeply embedded social problems, I'm sorry. It does not exist to combat racism, sexism, transphobia,

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<sup>861</sup> aishahiwatari, 'Anyone Who Complains about Ao3'; aneapocalypse, 'If You Don't Support AO3's Policies'; nonbinarypastels, 'No but How Much Audacity and Sheer Entitlement'.

<sup>862</sup> shinelikethunder, 'AO3 Is Open Source'.

<sup>863</sup> Zina, 'Fleeting Frustrations #7: Archive Frenzy and Being (Un) Grateful To Our Fannish Foremothers (Stuck In 2002)'.

<sup>864</sup> Pande, 'This Once Again Has the Effect'.

class discrimination, or anything except \*censorship\* of \*fanfiction\*. That is its explicit purpose.<sup>865</sup>

**Post Two:**

This is a good opportunity to remind everyone that AO3 was founded in response to censorship and the commercial exploitation of fandom. It's a safe space, not for purity culture, but for content creators. All fan works are treated as cultural artifacts worth preserving.<sup>866</sup>

**Post Three:**

Anyone saying AO3 is “problematic” can fuck off my mentions. The Archive exists because authors were banned and their works deleted WITHOUT ANY PREVIOUS WORD when sites like ffnet and livejournal got bought and censored.<sup>867</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, though, these posts also demonstrate, once again, that AO3's core values are its key assets, its commitment to free speech acting as a selling point for its supporters. However, AO3's positioning of itself as an inclusive and diverse space is equally well an asset that AO3 trades on in its aim to draw more users to its site. That it compromises this value in service of free speech, yet continues to trade on it as part of its social and symbolic capital is dubious to say the least and potentially destructive both to its users and ultimately to AO3 itself, should those users choose to abandon the platform or withdraw their financial support, as fans have previous platforms as a result of ideological conflict and some already show signs of.<sup>868</sup> Should this happen, depending on the numbers of users who choose to leave AO3, the site might find itself in trouble in both practical and philosophical terms. Practically, AO3 relies on its users' donations in order to maintain its operations – while it has some money in reserve,<sup>869</sup> a significant drop in donations would seriously impinge upon its continued maintenance and perhaps even its existence. Meanwhile, philosophically, a mass exodus from the site would make it difficult for AO3 to justify its continued existence as a living archive – while it might remain online as an archive of past works, a significant part of its mission is to provide a space for new works to be published and archived. A decrease in publishing activity on the site might not only impinge upon its stated purpose, but also potentially on its tax-exempt status (part of the

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<sup>865</sup> @Scarlettbydoll, ‘Ao3 Does Not Exist To’.

<sup>866</sup> @peach\_onisan, ‘This Is a Good Opportunity’.

<sup>867</sup> @poetdamerons, ‘Anyone Saying AO3 Is “Problematic”’.

<sup>868</sup> @ProfessorDaft, ‘The Thing I Would Ask’; @tego56\_, ‘This Statement Feels Tokenistic’; @no\_detective, ‘Dear @OTW\_News @ao3org’.

<sup>869</sup> ‘OTW Finance: 2019 Budget Update’.

OTW's justification for this status is its ability to provide a repository for fanworks<sup>870</sup>) and the donations it relies on.

While these are worst-case scenarios, they do emphasise how strongly AO3's continued operation is bound up with its users and their approval and underlines that AO3 cannot afford to overlook its users' concerns as its attitude to racism on its platform suggests it may be prone to.

## Conclusion

As mentioned in Chapter One, while AO3 is not a social media site, it does have considerable social capital, both as a community resource and a space in which different cultures meet, interact and form connections (thereby also facilitating its users' expansion of their own social capital). A significant part of its mission statement as part of the OTW is to encourage 'the unhindered cross-pollination and exchange of fannish ideas and cultures'<sup>871</sup> and 'community interaction and input via the OTW's Web site and across the online and offline spaces where fans congregate.'<sup>872</sup> However, at the end of AO3's first decade of operation, its ability to facilitate this kind of social networking has come into question as its radically permissive stance on content has become the subject of intense debate and objections from more than one social group.

Despite AO3 styling itself as a space that is welcoming to and inclusive of all fans, its lack of content moderation inevitably results in the marginalisation of those who feel offended or harmed by such material. It is difficult, if not impossible, to feel welcomed in a space which also contains and encourages the publishing of offensive content – and even AO3's highly-regarded tagging system cannot eradicate this issue. Indeed, following harsh criticisms of its stance on racist content, AO3 itself has admitted that it cannot balance maximum free speech and maximum inclusivity, making it clear that as far as AO3 is concerned, inclusiveness is a goal but free speech is an imperative.

It is, of course, AO3's prerogative to support whichever principles it deems most important and it is not my intention with this chapter to trivialise or dismiss the importance of standing for free speech in the face of ongoing threats to it. Given the censorial attacks by anti-shippers on AO3 and its users, it is easy to understand why AO3 would defend its content policy, particularly when considered in light of its origins as a

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<sup>870</sup> '501(c)(3) Additional Information'.

<sup>871</sup> 'What We Believe'.

<sup>872</sup> Ibid.

response to censorship. Yet, for AO3 to replicate the deprioritisation of inclusivity and diversity that can be seen throughout fandom and fan studies – particularly in the face of suspicions about the presence of structural, institutional racism within AO3 and the OTW’s governance – must be acknowledged as a choice that harms its users of colour and reduces their social capital, while also potentially reducing AO3’s own social capital as a safe, welcoming space and the symbolic capital of its commitment to diversity. Moreover, AO3’s continued trading on inclusivity as a core value and therefore an asset through which to build its userbase, while admitting that there are significant caveats attached to its commitment to this value, has the potential to seriously undermine its reputation as a platform with integrity.

This chapter completes the main body of this thesis; in the following chapter I set out my findings, conclusions and recommendations, and outline how this research has made a contribution to knowledge.

## Conclusion

Midway through the writing-up period for this thesis the world changed, as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold and forced much of the global population into lockdown. Amongst the many jokes that emerged in response to this development, about now having time to work on one's novel, or the reminders that Shakespeare (supposedly) wrote *King Lear* whilst in quarantine,<sup>873</sup> fanfic writers took that advice to heart, producing a wave of quarantine-themed fics for those who wanted to see how their favourite characters might deal with this strange new situation.<sup>874</sup> Along with this timely rise in fic productivity, AO3 also saw a significant increase in activity, the site receiving so much extra traffic in the weeks following the global lockdown that it had to introduce emergency measures in order to allow its servers to cope.<sup>875</sup> If ever there was proof of AO3's value to and status as a central hub for its community – the reasons for and impact of which this thesis has sought to establish – its emergence as a source of comfort and distraction during a global crisis is surely it.

This is perhaps a suitable achievement for a project which was designed specifically to meet the needs and desires of its community in a moment of (admittedly much lower-scale) crisis. From the moment it was proposed, AO3 has been an ambitious venture, designed, as part of the OTW, to act as protector, leader and mouthpiece of the fanfiction community. It has also always been a project with strong ideals baked into its fabric, specifically created as a resistant response to the fic community's anxiety about the encroachment of commercially-focused outsiders looking to monetise their practices, as represented by FanLib. However, the scale of its success – including being feted by *Time* magazine,<sup>876</sup> being globally ranked as the most visited 'books and literature' site (and the 149<sup>th</sup> most visited site overall),<sup>877</sup> and winning a Hugo Award – is unprecedented within the fanfic community and has allowed AO3 to play a significant role in shaping the field in which its participants operate.

The primary purpose of this thesis was to investigate how AO3's rise to become the dominant online fanfic platform has affected the stakes involved in publishing fic, aiming to document and examine the influence and power AO3 and the OTW have accumulated

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<sup>873</sup> Cash, 'Just a Reminder'.

<sup>874</sup> Baker-Whitelaw, 'How Fanfic Writers Are Reacting to Coronavirus'; Çam, 'In A Lonely Lockdown, With Books Slow To Come, Fanfiction Booms'.

<sup>875</sup> 'Emergency Measures Affecting Works'.

<sup>876</sup> Grossman, '50 Best Websites 2013: Archive of Our Own'.

<sup>877</sup> 'Archiveofourown.Org Analytics'.

at a point where they are gaining acknowledgement within mainstream culture as well as the fanfic community. In addition, I have established what sets AO3 apart from other fanfiction platforms and has allowed it to gain its heightened status, what fic writers gain from choosing to publish to the Archive, and what the fanfic community stands to gain, or lose, as a result of AO3 and the OTW's ambitions to make fanfiction acceptable in the eyes of the mainstream. The following section summarises my findings in relation to this aim and to the research questions established in the introduction, while the rest of the chapter outlines my recommendations to AO3 and for further research before concluding with a review of the thesis' contribution to knowledge.

## Summary of Findings

As noted in the Introduction, much of the explanation for AO3's current popularity and status is rooted in the site's origins. The Archive was formed in direct response to a perceived threat, not just of fan labour being exploited by outsiders but of the fanfic community being forced to abandon its ideals in order to have platforms on which to publish. As Fiesler puts it, the fan community faced a choice: 'Would our community values shift to meet those of these pre-fabricated houses, or would we build our own home?'<sup>878</sup> That desire for an ideologically steady home around which the fragmented fic community could orbit resulted in the ambitious Archive of Our Own project, which grew in size and stature at a rate that perhaps not even its strongest supporters expected (indeed, Fiesler admits that if she had written on the subject in 2006, before the Archive was proposed, she 'would have considered it far out of reach'<sup>879</sup>).

Chapter One examined how AO3 proceeded to build its value as a home for the fanfic community from such idealistic origins. Utilising Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital, it established that the site's success can be put down to two main factors: the range of capital it offers to its users and its commitment to promoting a specific set of core values. The chapter demonstrated that, not unlike a traditional publisher, AO3 has a stockpile of capital in various forms, which allows it to offer services and affordances to its users, from the expensive server space necessary to host millions of fanworks, to legal experts to advocate for the legality of those works.

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<sup>878</sup> Fiesler, 'Owning the Servers: A Design Fiction Exploring the Transformation of Fandom into "Our Own"', para. 2.5.

<sup>879</sup> Ibid., para. 3.3.

Most important though, this chapter argued, is the ability of the site's operators to fuse capital and ideology, so that elements of the site from its infrastructure upwards are designed to support its reputation as inclusive and liberal, and therefore boost its symbolic capital. Thus, for example, AO3 melds human and technological capital, its much-celebrated tagging system only functional thanks to the efforts of a team of voluntary labourers who are incentivised to donate their time and effort in return for the opportunity to learn and improve their coding skills – an arrangement that mirrors fanfic's non-profit, non-monetised stance and its traditions of distributed mentoring. Moreover, AO3 is designed around feminist principles, thus enforcing the Archive's mission to preserve the record of 'a practice of transformative fanwork historically rooted in a primarily female culture.'<sup>880</sup> Here the chapter identifies how AO3 distinguishes itself from other fanfic platforms like FFN and Wattpad, both of which have reputations that run counter to those popularly expressed in the fanfic community (for example, in FFN's censorship of adult content and Wattpad's overtly commercial nature and industry ties). AO3, by comparison, was developed from within a strongly principled fan community and built itself around the beliefs articulated by that group, meaning that simply using the site allows fans to uphold certain principles and reject others. To publish on AO3, therefore, can be to make an ideological statement similar to choosing to publish with, for example, a feminist publishing house, allowing users to indicate that they both endorse these beliefs and wish to contribute to the upholding of them (even while many cross-publish on other, less overtly principled platforms).

It is this merging of capital and ideology, therefore, that provides the answer to my second set of research questions, on how AO3 has built its symbolic capital within the fanfic community and what it offers to users that makes it more attractive than other similar platforms. The site is not simply a resource-rich community hub, but a mouthpiece that reflects and promotes fannish preferences and beliefs, actively choosing to develop its capital in ways which (in theory) do not require ideological compromise on the part of its users.

However, this is sometimes a difficult commitment to uphold, as illustrated by Chapter Three's discussion of AO3's Hugo Award win, which revealed some tension between the OTW's ongoing campaign to legitimise fanfic and the fic community's reluctance to adhere to limits placed by those institutions which offer such legitimisation. The fic community has a history of resistance to limits on expression, whether FFN's

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<sup>880</sup> 'What We Believe'.

purge of adult content or Kindle World's restrictions on crossovers and sexual material. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter Four, AO3 has built much of its reputation on its permissive stance on content, both as a multi-fandom archive and as a publisher that eschews content moderation. Yet its pursuit of wider recognition and acceptance as a field of cultural production inevitably brings certain external expectations which the fic community may have no desire to comply with. As Rosenblatt and Tushnet point out, 'It is well established that licensing breeds censorship.'<sup>881</sup> To that it might be added that mainstreaming breeds restrictions, not to mention expectations, neither of which may necessarily sit well with the fanfic community, a possibility which AO3 was forced to contemplate in the wake of the post-Hugo controversy, attempting to balance compliance with the literary establishment it has been courting with maintaining solidarity with its users.

The difficulty of maintaining this balancing act recurs throughout the thesis, Chapters Two, Three and Four demonstrating how AO3's design and policy decisions have influenced the stakes of publishing fanfiction in both positive and negative ways, frequently provoking interrogation and sometimes criticism of the site's choices. Once again using a Bourdieusian concept, that of the stakes of a field – the assets that its participants pursue and struggle over – these chapters demonstrated how AO3 has brought certain beliefs and debates to the forefront of the fanfiction community, influencing the rewards and risks of fanfic participation and testing the site's ability to be flexible and responsive to its users' needs.

Chapter Two focused on the tangible rewards of publishing fic, making clear that some form of return for their labour (both creative and technical) is a driving motivation for many, if not most, of the fic writers publishing on AO3. While there is a tendency within fan spaces to promote a rhetoric of self-satisfaction – i.e. to write for oneself rather than an audience/a response/external validation – it is not lost on fan writers that to publish a work (particularly to a large potential audience such as AO3's three million registered users) is inevitably to ask for attention, otherwise why not simply write the work and consign it to a drawer or digital folder? Moreover, the clear connection AO3 makes between posting and receiving feedback in the site's architecture – not to mention the publicly visible and quantifiable nature of its feedback systems – reinforces the expectation for a tangible response as the natural (even presumable) consequence of publication.

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<sup>881</sup> Rosenblatt and Tushnet, 'Transformative Works: Young Women's Voices on Fandom and Fair Use', 401.

This chapter challenged the notion of AO3 as a gift economy, instead demonstrating that it is an exchange market based on feedback; specifically positive feedback, as the site's culture of condemning unsolicited criticism – whether constructive or not – places value on praise only. It questioned if AO3 is sending mixed messages by promoting the selfless, reward-free gifting model on one hand, and yet emphasising feedback as remuneration for publishing on the other, elevating readers' responses to the primary stake fic writers struggle over. By arguing that the selfless gifting of work (both in the sense of the text itself and the labour required to produce it) is the only viable model for fanfiction to be published under, AO3 risks chilling fan writers' efforts to explore other options. AO3 can allow no flexibility in its approach to remuneration for fic writing, whether as finance or feedback, as it requires its users to buy into the *illusio* of fanfic as a gift given with no expectation of reward. It therefore has a vested interest in creating an economy based on the non-monetary currency of feedback, despite its official stance that fic should be given to the community for free. This lack of flexibility has led to tension within the fic community, as some writers have begun to regard and speak about comments and kudos as a form of payment and to demand a 'proper' reward for their work from their audience.

The chapter also pointed out that AO3's old-school beliefs regarding labour and reward may not be completely in sync with those of contemporary fandom. While other platforms have sprung up that make clear the potential for fanfic to be monetised (albeit not yet at a level that would permit its writers to make a living), including Patreon and Wattpad, as well as a small but very visible number of fanfic-to-bestseller crossover successes such as FSoG and *After*, AO3 has stuck firmly to its non-profit, gift economy stance. Indeed, it has no choice but to maintain this policy as a result of its non-profit status and its legal advocacy team's focus specifically on non-commercial fanfic as legal under fair use.

Chapters Three and Four, meanwhile, demonstrated that there are also less obvious, more ephemeral stakes at stake in the publishing of fanfiction, in the ability to build up cultural and social capital in the fanfic community and the potential to convert these into engagement within mainstream culture. These chapters also demonstrated the potential for AO3 to have both positive and negative effects on the field of fanfic publishing, engaging with my fourth set of research questions which ask whether AO3's attempts to legitimise fanfic are a boon or a threat to the fanfic community.

Chapter Three drew a link between AO3's legal and creative advocacy for fanworks as transformative endeavours and the increased confidence with which fic writers and

readers claim the cultural validity of fanfic as an interpretative response to originary texts. Where previously fic participants were wary of drawing too much attention to themselves for fear of legal repercussions, AO3's active legal advocacy and persuasive rhetoric has diminished the culture of fear surrounding fanfic, evident in numerous ways including the move away from including paratextual disclaimers. Moreover, its function as an archive codifies and illuminates fanfiction's cultural role as an interpretative, intertextual response to originary texts, strengthening the case for fanfic to be accepted as a legitimate cultural activity.

However, the chapter also argued that there are downsides to AO3/the OTW's pursuit of mainstream acceptance for fanfic. An increase in fic's cultural capital can be observed on the part of creators and producers, whether that be in professional writers' admissions of their own fannish writings, or in the shift in media depictions of fic writers, with shows such as *Supernatural* beginning to acknowledge the craft and labour involved in creating fanworks. However, this shift is a fragile one, dependent on the fic community's willingness to toe the line set down by the cultural establishment and, given fans' history of resisting restrictions to their freedom, it is possible that any validation offered by the establishment may be similarly rejected. As the fallout from AO3's Hugo win suggests, AO3 may yet end up in a conflict of cultural stakes, between its own ambitions to gain validation for fanfic, and its users' preference to retain their creative freedoms even at the cost of remaining in the cultural shadows.

Finally, Chapter Four examined the social stakes of publishing fanfic with reference to my fifth research question, on how social capital is distributed amongst the AO3 community and the impact this has on AO3's symbolic capital. It specifically examined AO3 as a community space and how conflict over users' rights within that space has provoked debates over issues of inclusivity and free speech, suggesting that AO3's dedication to its particular principles may have negative as well as positive effects. The chapter focused on AO3's extremely permissive stance on content, which not only warns users they may be exposed to offensive or provocative material but also that AO3 will not remove content on the grounds of personal preferences or tastes. As established in the Introduction, this lack of restriction or moderation is the direct result of previous fanfic platforms like LiveJournal and FFN purging and censoring allegedly offensive content, which AO3 specifically sought to resist by providing a space where writers could publish any content – no matter how taboo or offensive – without fear of having it edited or removed. This policy is, therefore, a significant part of AO3's appeal for many of its users,

who see the freedom to publish and consume what they want without censorship as a fundamental virtue of fanfic in the same way as they view the creative freedom discussed in Chapter Three.

However, the chapter also pointed out that some argue there are serious issues with AO3's maximum free speech policy, especially in relation to its other stated goal of inclusiveness. In particular, the Archive has faced accusations that it allows racist content to promulgate without adequate warnings or affordances to help users avoid such material, a particular problem given the popularity of so-called 'slavefics' on the site. This has led to suggestions that AO3 prioritises the free speech rights of its writers over the safety and comfort of FOC, threatening the symbolic capital AO3 has built up as a safe social space.

In addition, this debate is complicated by the actions of the fannish sub-group known as 'anti-shippers,' who target AO3's permissiveness via bullying and harassment in order to gain social power in the fic community. This group is particularly focused on sexual content and what they see as transformative fandom's culture of acceptance regarding such taboo subjects as underage sex, rape and incest, their aggressive tactics causing over-defensiveness in AO3 and its supporters, which at times spreads to all those who question or criticise AO3. The result of this is that AO3, along with its users, finds itself in the middle of a battle over its commitment to free speech versus its responsibility to make its platform an inclusive space for all fans, raising the question of just who the 'Our' in the Archive of Our Own refers to and whose social capital dictates policy on the site.

With these conclusions in mind, in the following section I outline some recommendations for how the findings of this study might be developed in future research, as well as a number of recommendations for AO3 specifically.

## Recommendations

While I have argued that AO3 has been the most influential publishing platform in the fanfiction community over the past decade, it is certainly not the only site of note. Both the Archive's forerunner and main rival FFN and the relative newcomer Wattpad have significant userbases, whose practices and behaviours are influenced by the sites' affordances. Moreover, it is not uncommon for fics to be cross-posted to some combination of these three sites (and others) and therefore to treat them as completely separate entities, as I have done by focusing solely on AO3, is perhaps to miss out on an

important element of the fanfic field. Applying a similar process to these other sites, by examining their particular stockpiles of capital and how they have leveraged these into a particular status in the fanfic community, would therefore help to uncover the influence these platforms have had on the stakes of publishing fanfic, and to build a more comprehensive picture of contemporary fanfic culture as well as the publishing processes involved in it.

In addition to focusing on AO3 at the expense of other platforms, my focus on contemporary, digital fanfic means that I have all but ignored printed fic, despite its historical significance and its niche-but-extant presence within contemporary fandom. However, the continued existence of zines and the emerging trend for high-quality, crowdfunded ‘fanthologies’ (collections of fanfic and/or other fanworks, often in a printed and bound edition) poses some interesting questions regarding the largely-online fic community’s attitude towards print, as well as the potential for crowdfunding publications, which may benefit from a publishing or book history research approach.

Fanfiction has the potential to provide a fruitful avenue for publishing research in other ways, too. At one point this thesis was planned to focus on a comparison of processes common to traditional publishing and fanfiction, particularly editing and marketing. Influenced by Darnton’s *Communications Circuit*<sup>882</sup> (as well as Murray and Squires’ digital update<sup>883</sup>), which tracks the circulation of physical/digital books through various actors and processes, and which has been used as a representation of the modern publishing industry, this approach would have examined the progress of a work of fanfiction from creation to consumption. Information studies scholar Price has already produced a similar model dealing with fan information behaviour,<sup>884</sup> which I believe would be well-complimented by a publishing-centric version. For example, given that the traditional publishing industry has struggled somewhat with how to implement and manage metadata, it may be instructive for publishing studies to build on information studies research on AO3’s much fêted tagging system.<sup>885</sup> This might work particularly well with reference to the romance publishing sector, building on existing scholarship comparing the romance genre to fanfiction.<sup>886</sup> Romance and fanfic share numerous commonalities, both

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<sup>882</sup> Darnton, ‘What Is the History of Books?’

<sup>883</sup> Murray and Squires, ‘The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit’.

<sup>884</sup> Price, ‘Fan Info Behaviour Model’.

<sup>885</sup> Price, ‘Fandom, Folksonomies & Creativity: The Case of the Archive of Our Own’; Dalton, ‘Searching the Archive of Our Own: The Usefulness of the Tagging Structure’.

<sup>886</sup> Kaplan, ‘“Why Would Any Woman Want to Read Such Stories?”: The Distinctions Between Genre Romances and Slash Fiction’; Morrissey, ‘Fifty Shades of Remix: The Intersecting Pleasures of Commercial and Fan Romances’; De Kosnik, ‘Fifty Shades and the Archive of Women’s Culture’.

representing women-dominated fields characterised by technological innovation (e.g. romance readers' early and enthusiastic adoption of digital formats, and fanfic's contributions to the open source community). Moreover, they both represent fields that rely heavily on self-publishing, generating writing communities whose members are prolific, skilled in self-promotion and marketing, and adept in engaging with their readers in order to build attention capital.

The need for social responsibility within publishing is also an area in which fanfic, and AO3 in particular, may provide a useful model. As discussed in Chapter Four, issues regarding gatekeeping and censorship are becoming increasingly fraught within fanfic, with authors and publishers forced to deal with accusations of, at least, irresponsibility and, at worst, immorality with regards to their content. In combination with an increasingly censorial and puritanical internet, the current era has the potential to provoke complicated and sensitive discussion on the topics of morality in art and entertainment, and the social responsibility of corporations. Fanfic can be a useful culture to examine such issues through, representing a community with a history of resistance to censorship in favour of unfiltered creative expression.

More specifically, comparisons between AO3 and publishing houses with specific ideological stances may prove a fruitful way to consider how such principles may shape and guide the publishing process. I am thinking, in particular, of feminist and queer publishers such as Virago, The Feminist Press, Dreamspinner Press, and Carnation Books, the last of which works exclusively with fanfic writers to publish original fiction. Comparisons with publishers who focus on writers of colour would also be an important and welcome area of study, both for the sake of further illuminating AO3 and fanfic's relationship with race and that of the publishing industry.

Finally, this is an almost-exclusively qualitative study, its only quantitative data being simple statistics drawn from AO3's metadata. While this approach was, I believe, the correct one for answering my research questions and taking advantage of my own skills as a researcher, there is considerable scope for a more quantitative approach to the study of AO3 and fanfic publishing. There is a wealth of metadata available from AO3 which could certainly be used as a route into closer examination of both trends within fanfic behaviour and of individual fandoms, especially in conjunction with research methods such as web scraping, which could harvest and process far more data than an individual researcher. For example, my work on attitudes towards feedback in Chapter Two could be expanded by

use of a quantitative approach, similar to existing studies conducted on FFN,<sup>887</sup> in order to drill down into granular details about types of comment, or which fics tend to receive the greatest amount of feedback.

The above suggestions for further research should be considered as recommendations for how to expand the academy's understanding of and insight into fanfiction as a culture, a community and a publishing field. However, there are also a number of recommendations specific to AO3 to be made from this research. Firstly, while this thesis has demonstrated that AO3's core values are essential to its symbolic capital and that any confusion about or compromising of those values can lead to serious problems, it is also important that AO3 not become dogmatic about its ideology. The Archive was conceived to be a resource that is intimately tuned into the needs of its users in order to best serve them, with its policies and values dictated by fans' wishes yet, as demonstrated throughout this thesis, there are areas in which AO3 places policy before its users' desires. Some of these instances are unavoidable, such as the Archive's ban on monetisation despite some users' argument that they should be allowed to profit from their work. Others, however, such as AO3's encouragement of feedback as a currency, or its apparent prioritisation of free speech over inclusivity, are not so clear cut and AO3 should consider the ramifications of failing to be flexible in how the site is governed. It should also, with some urgency, further clarify its position on free speech versus inclusivity in order to ease the conflict being waged over whether AO3 is truly a space for all fans or only for some.

Secondly, and not unrelatedly, as AO3 and the OTW continue to pursue cultural validation (and therefore visibility) for fanfiction, they should consider the potential costs of their ambition. As Chapter Three demonstrated, while the fic community seems to support the pursuit of mainstream validation in theory, in practice it often rejects the restrictions and expectations that accompany such recognition, as illustrated not only by its repeated migrations from platforms that attempt to limit and control fans' behaviour but by fans' bucking against the WSFS' attempts to rein in their subversive behaviour. While AO3 and the OTW's aim to prove fanfic should be allowed under fair use law is important and valuable to the fic community, they should consider that legal fears may not be the only reason fic participants have traditionally preferred to fly under the radar. Remaining outside mainstream attention also affords the fic community certain freedoms that the media/literary establishment might seek to restrict or deny and AO3 should bear in mind

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<sup>887</sup> Evans et al., 'More Than Peer Production: Fanfiction Communities as Sites of Distributed Mentoring'; Campbell et al., 'Thousands of Positive Reviews: Distributed Mentoring in Online Fan Communities'; Frens et al., 'Reviews Matter: How Distributed Mentoring Predicts Lexical Diversity on Fanfiction.Net'.

that its users may not want to lose these in the pursuit of mainstream recognition such as that resulting from the Hugo Award.

In order to conclude this thesis, the following section outlines how this research makes an original contribution to knowledge.

## Contribution to Knowledge

While AO3 has appeared in previous fan studies scholarship, this thesis is the first extended study to focus on the Archive, its role as a fanfic publishing platform, and its influence on the fanfiction community. As such, and given AO3's rise to become a central hub for online fanfic, the thesis represents an important examination of how this site has achieved its mission to become a vital resource for the fic community and of the power and influence such a platform can wield within its field. Moreover, it demonstrates how fans and their practices overlap with wider debates, particularly regarding internet culture, and can shed light on how such issues play out in action within a specific culture/community.

In addition to this primary contribution, the thesis also provides a close examination of contemporary fan practices and behaviours. My methodology was designed to ensure that the areas of interest the thesis would eventually focus on were, as far as possible, drawn organically from fannish spaces, rather than being the results of my own hypotheses (though, as discussed in the Methodology chapter, personal and algorithmic biases inevitably influenced the material observed). As I completed my fieldwork, it quickly became clear that there were specific areas of discussion and controversy within the current fanfic community and that AO3 had no little influence on these debates. The repeated flare-ups of anti-AO3 rhetoric in response to the Archive's fundraising drives are a good example of this, my year-plus observation of Tumblr bringing this pattern and the impassioned response to it to light in a way mere searching might not have. Moreover, it meant that I could observe how particular events became important within the fic community, as with the 2018 Tumblr purges, which I experienced both as a researcher and a fannish Tumblr user in real time.

One of the most significant contributions this thesis makes is to provide a snapshot of a particular fan community during a period of upheaval not seen since the 2007 FanLib/Strikethrough crisis into which AO3 was born. The Tumblr purges, the rise of anti-fans and online purity culture, the ongoing internet culture wars, and AO3's continued

rise in visibility all combine to make the late 2010s a period of cultural and historical interest for fan scholars as well as for interdisciplinary work with fields including media, computer, and gender studies. This thesis documents many of the discussions and debates taking place within the fan community during this period, emphasising the stakes that fans themselves were engaged by. Indeed, fan voices are as much a focus of this study as AO3 itself, illustrated in the wide range of material quoted and analysed throughout its chapters.

I count my own fannish voice amongst those speaking through this thesis. While I have tried to maintain the balance of scholar-fandom, I do identify as a fan in the sense of not simply enjoying storyworlds but actively engaging with them and the communities that they generate as a key part of my identity. From my own point of view as a fan, and a fanfic producer and consumer, then, the most important result of this research is the recognition that AO3 and the OTW must be open to criticism and accountable to its users. I believe the Archive is one of the greatest gifts to contemporary fandom, characterised by the intelligent and principled management of its capital established in Chapter One, and by the positive impact of its legal and creative advocacy for fanworks, as discussed in Chapters One and Three. However, as a researcher, my prolonged observation of both AO3 and Tumblr also made clear that the Archive was too often feted by its users as a flawless object to be shielded from criticism, and that genuine issues with its stance on important issues such as race and adult content were being overshadowed by attacks from anti-shippers, as discussed in Chapter Four.

AO3 was always intended to change the stakes of fanfic publishing, to remove power from commercial interlopers and, crucially, to keep it out of their reach for good, while providing a safe and stable platform that fic writers and readers could trust and benefit from. It has never attempted to present itself as a neutral, hands-off platform, instead vocally advocating for certain ideological practices (feminism, freedom of speech and expression) while opposing others (censorship, commercialism). As a result, the line AO3 walks is, as this thesis has aimed to make clear, a tricky one. Balancing its mission to meet the needs of a passionate, articulate and oftentimes mercurial userbase with a commitment to reliability, universality and permanence (as much as an archive can be permanent) requires both flexibility and firmness. And while, during its first decade of operation, AO3 has proved itself extremely successful in walking this line, it has not and should not be aggrandised as having done so flawlessly. Those defenders of the Archive as a 'saviour,' above questioning or criticism arguably do as much harm as those who level unfounded criticisms of the site as dangerous or immoral. Instead, clarity of vision and honesty in

intent regarding AO3's successes and flaws, and its values and policies are essential for an organisation of AO3's status and importance to its community. Whether AO3 is able to be flexible and adaptive in this respect as the stakes surrounding fanfiction continue to change will surely be key to its continued centrality in the fanfic community.

To return to my primary research question, then, which asked how AO3's rise has affected the stakes of publishing fanfiction, the four chapters of this thesis demonstrate that its principled approach to platform design and management has given AO3/the OTW power and influence in the fic community beyond what even those who initially conceived the project might have expected. It has become, for many in the fic community, not only the preferred platform for publishing and archiving their works but also a mouthpiece for the rights and beliefs of that community. As a result, it has had a significant role in shaping the stakes associated with publishing fic, from intensifying writers' pursuit of feedback, to increasing communal confidence in the cultural value of fanfic, to emphasising the importance of free speech in an increasingly censorial internet. However, the consequences of this role have not always been positive and certainly not always uncontroversial, particularly as AO3 has moved from a heterodox role in the fanfic community to become part of its orthodoxy, and has made moves towards acceptance by mainstream culture as well. Under increasing scrutiny from within and outwith fandom, it has become clear that AO3's choices and policies do not – and often *cannot* – serve all fans and it is important that AO3 both acknowledge that it cannot please everyone and examine the consequences of who it chooses to include under the 'Our' of Archive of Our Own, in order that its impact on the stakes of publishing fanfic remain chiefly beneficial to both it and its community.

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# Glossary of Fannish Terms

<u>Term</u>	<u>Alternative Names</u>	<u>Definition</u>
<b>Alternative Universe</b>	AU	Fanworks which change the originary text's storyworld in some way.
<b>Anti-fans</b>	Anti-fandom	Those who deliberately mock source texts, either for enjoyment or out of dissatisfaction or dislike of canon.
<b>Anti-shippers</b>	Antis	Fans who attack ships and shippers with arguments that the pairing is morally wrong.
<b>Author's Note</b>	A/N	Paratextual note from the author preceding or following the fic.
<b>Beta Reader</b>	Beta	Readers who perform editorial tasks for fic writers.
<b>Concrit</b>		Abbreviation of 'constructive criticism.'
<b>Fandom</b>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The collected fans of a particular object, group or person.</li><li>2. A community/subculture centred on a shared love of a particular object, group or person.</li><li>3. The state or condition of being a fan of a particular object, group or person.</li></ol>
<b>Fanfiction</b>	Fanfic Fic	Works of fiction based explicitly on a pre-existing source. Often styled as 'Fan fiction' by academic and mainstream media accounts, this thesis uses the fan-preferred single word.
<b>Fannish</b>		Of or relating to fandom; characteristic of fan behaviour/practices.
<b>Fanon</b>		Non-canonical information about a text that has become so widely believed within a fandom that it is considered quasi-canonical.

<b>Fanwork</b>		A creative work of any kind produced by one or more fans.
<b>Fanvid</b>	Vid	A video edit created by fans (known as vidders), in which short clips of footage (often from movies or television shows) are arranged in order to make an argument or tell a story.
<b>Femslash</b>	f/f	A genre of fanfiction featuring the pairing of women characters together in a romantic and/or sexual relationship.
<b>Filing Off the Serial Numbers</b>		The practice of scrubbing a work of fanfiction of any traces of its fannish origin, often in order to attempt to publish it as original fiction.
<b>Genderbend</b>	Genderswap Genderfuck Rule 63	Depictions of characters with a different gender identity than that established in canon.
<b>Kudos</b>		AO3's version of the 'like' model employed by social media sites like Facebook and Tumblr.
<b>Meme</b>		A (typically humorous) piece of content copied and spread rapidly online by means of iterative adaptation.
<b>Meta</b>		Non-fictional writing or discussion that focuses on some element of fandom e.g. canon material, the psychology of a character, or fan behaviours.
<b>Pull to Publish</b>	Pull to Pub	The practice of removing a fanfic from the internet in order to publish a scrubbed version as original fiction.
<b>Self-insert</b>		The practice of an author writing themselves into their own story.
<b>Ship</b>		The romantic and/or sexual pairing of two or more characters. Short for 'relationship.' Those who engage in this practice are referred to as 'shippers.'

<b>Slash</b>	m/m	A genre of fanfiction featuring the pairing of male characters together in a romantic and/or sexual relationship.
<b>The Powers That Be</b>	TPTB	‘The Powers That Be,’ fannish term for any individual with creative or produciorial authority over a text.
<b>Transformative Work</b>		A creative work based on a source text that adds something new to it via imaginative and creative effort.
<b>Word of God</b>		Epitextual statements made by any person considered to have authority over canon e.g. the author, director or showrunner.
<b>Work in Progress</b>	WIP	Any work, published or unpublished, that the writer has not yet completed.

## Appendix One: List of Tumblr Followed Searches

The following are the search terms followed by both Tumblr blogs utilised in my research, as described in the Methodology.

Aca fan  
Acafan  
Acafandom  
AO3  
Archive of Our Own  
Fan discourse  
Fan fiction  
Fan fiction writing  
Fan studies  
Fandom  
Fandom discourse  
Fandom meta  
Fandom studies  
Fanfic rec  
Fanfic recs  
Fanfiction  
Fanfiction meta  
Fanfiction rec  
Fanfiction recs  
Fic rec  
Fic recs  
Shipping  
Shipping discourse

# Appendix Two: List of AO3 Sample Bookmark Tags

The following tags were used to mark features demonstrated or discussed within posts added to my AO3 sample. Any terms that are not defined in the glossary have been glossed.

<b><u>Term</u></b>	<b><u>Definition</u></b>
<b>Activism</b>	social and/or political engagement in order to effect change
<b>Additional kudos</b>	comments left as a workaround for AO3's one-per-fic limit on kudos
<b>Additional material in A/N</b>	story text placed in the author's note
<b>Adoptable</b>	tics made available by their original author for continuation by someone else
<b>Age changes</b>	changes to characters' canonical ages
<b>Age restriction</b>	authorial gatekeeping regarding the appropriate age for readers of a fic
<b>All-caps comment</b>	
<b>Alpha read</b>	fic has been read by an 'alpha reader,' who view very early drafts of a fic in order to provide encouragement and advice
<b>Alternative version available</b>	fic has an alternate version (for example, with any sexually explicit scenes removed)
<b>Angst fairy</b>	writers who specialise in sad stories and take pleasure in their reputation for doing so
<b>Anon author</b>	fic posted anonymously
<b>AO3 crit</b>	criticisms of AO3
<b>AO3 vs FF.net</b>	comparisons between AO3 and FFN
<b>AO3 vs Wattpad</b>	comparisons between AO3 and Wattpad
<b>Apology comment</b>	comment containing an apology by the writer or a reader

<b>Apology in A/N</b>	author's note containing an apology by the writer
<b>Apology tags</b>	tags as above
<b>Archiving</b>	the process of archiving fics
<b>Artist/writer</b>	writers who are also visual artists
<b>Author anxiety</b>	expression of anxiety by the author related to writing/publishing
<b>Author entitlement</b>	authorial expression of entitlement to feedback
<b>Author ID A/N</b>	author's note including information about the author's identity
<b>Author ID tag</b>	tags as above
<b>Author replies</b>	authors replying to comments
<b>Author thanks</b>	paratextual thanks by author (e.g. to audiences for reading, or to beta readers for editing)
<b>Author's gloss</b>	paratextual explanation of something in a fic by its author
<b>Author's note</b>	
<b>Authorship</b>	references to authorial identity or control
<b>Award fic</b>	fics which have won in-fandom awards
<b>Beta offer</b>	offers to beta read for the author
<b>Beta read</b>	the fic has been read by a beta reader
<b>Beta reader request</b>	writers requesting a beta reader for their work
<b>Bookmark comment</b>	comments stating the reader has bookmarked the fic
<b>BTS A/N</b>	author's notes that include behind-the-scenes information about the process of writing or the author's personal life
<b>BTS comment</b>	author comments as above
<b>BTS tags</b>	tags as above
<b>Carrd</b>	website often used to compile lists of online platforms on which the user can be found
<b>Category tags</b>	tags which provide descriptive information e.g. genre, fandom

<b>Challenge</b>	fic created as part of an organised writing challenge
<b>Collaboration</b>	fic created by more than one author
<b>Collaboration offer</b>	offer to collaborate with an author
<b>Collection fic</b>	fic included in AO3 collections
<b>Comment about a different fic</b>	comments referring to a fic other than the current one
<b>Comment anxiety</b>	anxiety about the commenting process
<b>Comment moderation</b>	AO3 feature that allows authors to choose whether comments are published or not
<b>Commentary tags</b>	tags which function as paratextual commentary
<b>Commissions</b>	paid commissions for fanworks
<b>Community</b>	fic containing paratextual reference to a specific community
<b>Community promotion</b>	promotion of other community members e.g. recommending a piece of fan art
<b>Concrit comment</b>	comment which includes constructive criticism
<b>Concrit request</b>	request for readers to give constructive criticism
<b>Continuation request</b>	comments requesting continuation of a fic
<b>Conversational A/N</b>	author's note which has a conversational tone or content
<b>Conversational comment</b>	comment as above
<b>Cope fic</b>	fanfic used as a means of coping with a personal issue
<b>Critical comment</b>	criticism of the fic or writer
<b>Cross-platform</b>	fic published on multiple platforms
<b>Cultural capital</b>	the cultural value of fanworks and other fan activities
<b>Curious Cat</b>	social networking website
<b>Dead dove</b>	'dead dove do not eat': tag for fic containing potentially problematic content which is not explicitly condemned by the text

<b>Defence A/N</b>	author's note containing a defensive statement by the writer
<b>Defence comment</b>	comment containing a defensive statement by the writer or a reader
<b>DeviantArt</b>	online art community
<b>Disclaimer</b>	statement that the writer of a fic does not claim ownership of or profit from the original text
<b>Discontinued</b>	fics abandoned by the author
<b>Discord</b>	instant messaging platform
<b>Discouragement</b>	discouraging reader comments
<b>Discourse in A/N</b>	author's note which refers to some highly-debated issue
<b>Discourse in comments</b>	comments as above
<b>Discourse in tags</b>	tags as above
<b>Donations</b>	writer requests for donations
<b>Don't copy tag</b>	tags requesting that fics not be copied to other websites
<b>Don't like don't read</b>	fannish saying encouraging fic readers to avoid content they do not enjoy rather than complaining about it
<b>Don't normally read comment</b>	comment by a reader that they have made an exception to their usual preferences in order to read the current fic
<b>Dreamwidth</b>	online journaling service
<b>EFL writer</b>	writers who do not speak English as a native language
<b>Emotional A/N</b>	author's note containing an expression of emotion
<b>Emotional comment</b>	comments as above
<b>Encouragement</b>	encouraging reader comments
<b>Event fic</b>	fics created for a specific event
<b>Facebook</b>	social media platform
<b>Fan art</b>	visual artwork based on an original text
<b>Fanfic Appreciation Day</b>	unofficial yearly event in which fanfic readers are encouraged to express their appreciation for fanfic writers

<b>Fanfic as training ground</b>	fanfiction as practice for original fiction
<b>Fanfic award</b>	fan-organised awards for fanfic
<b>Fanon vs canon</b>	comparison between canon and widely-held fannish interpretations
<b>Feedback debt</b>	statement by a reader suggesting they owe feedback
<b>Feedback request</b>	author request for reader feedback
<b>Feminism</b>	reference to the political ideology of feminism
<b>FF.net</b>	fanfiction website
<b>Fic of a fic</b>	a work of fanfic explicitly based on another fic
<b>Fic rec comment</b>	reader comment that they have or will recommend the fic to others
<b>First time writer</b>	writers who have not written/published fanfiction before
<b>Flame comment</b>	deliberately critical and insulting comments
<b>Further reading request</b>	request for more of the author's work to read
<b>Gatekeeping</b>	authorial attempt to control or guide who reads a fic
<b>Gateway fic</b>	fic that encouraged a reader to subsequently consume the source text
<b>Gender tags</b>	tags categorising the gender of one or more characters
<b>Gift fic</b>	fic given as a gift
<b>Gofundme</b>	crowdfunding platform
<b>Guilt</b>	authorial guilt e.g. over taking a long time to publish a new chapter
<b>Guilty pleasure</b>	a work that the writer or reader experiences embarrassment or shame for enjoying
<b>HEA A/N</b>	author's notes which comment on the presence of a happy ending in the fic
<b>HEA comment</b>	comments referencing happy endings
<b>HEA tag</b>	tag confirming the presence of a happy ending

<b>Hiatus</b>	author hiatus from writing or publishing
<b>Hubzilla</b>	decentralised social networking platform
<b>Humorous A/N</b>	author's note containing humorous material
<b>Humorous comment</b>	comment as above
<b>Humour tags</b>	tags as above
<b>Image comment</b>	comment which includes an image
<b>Imagine</b>	short works of fanfic in which the writer describes, seemingly spontaneously, an imagined scenario
<b>In joke</b>	paratextual joke that makes sense only between members of the same group (e.g. fans of the same movie)
<b>Instagram</b>	image sharing social media platform
<b>Interaction request</b>	request or offer to interact with readers
<b>Kinkmeme</b>	collections of prompts, usually on a theme, often hosted on journaling websites such as Dreamwidth
<b>Ko-fi</b>	website for small donations
<b>Kudos</b>	comment regarding AO3's kudos system
<b>Livejournal</b>	online journaling platform
<b>Long Live Feedback</b>	Tumblr-based campaign encouraging readers to leave feedback
<b>Made account just to comment</b>	users who register with AO3 specifically to comment on a fic
<b>Materiality</b>	reference to the effects of reading on specific media (e.g. on an app versus in-browser)
<b>Meta A/N</b>	author's note in which the writer engages in metatextuality (e.g. by having a conversation with the characters in the fic)
<b>Meta fic</b>	fic which employs metatextuality (e.g. by having its characters read fanfiction)
<b>Motivation</b>	paratextual mention of the writer's motivation
<b>Multimedia</b>	non-textual material e.g. images, videos, or links to music

<b>No angst</b>	the fic does not contain any dark or depressing content
<b>No concrit</b>	constructive criticism is not welcome
<b>No HEA tag</b>	tag confirming the lack of a happy ending
<b>No reposts</b>	requests the fic should not be reposted to other sites, even with credit
<b>No smut</b>	paratextual indication that the fic contains no sexually explicit material
<b>Non-diegetic chapter</b>	chapter that does not form part of the story, usually used to inform readers
<b>Orphaned fic</b>	author has renounced their ownership
<b>Outline ending</b>	unfinished fics which include an outline of how the writer envisions the story ending
<b>Pain fairy</b>	writers who specialise in distressing stories and take pleasure in their reputation for doing so
<b>Patreon</b>	subscription-based website
<b>Permissions</b>	permission for a fic to be used as the basis for a new work e.g. visual art, translations, podfics etc.
<b>Pillowfort</b>	social media platform
<b>Pinterest</b>	image sharing and social media platform
<b>Plagiarism</b>	reference to, warning of, or accusation of plagiarism
<b>Porn fairy</b>	writers who specialise in sexually explicit material and take pleasure in their reputation for doing so
<b>Position A/N</b>	author's note referring to characters' preferred sexual positions
<b>Position comment</b>	comments as above
<b>Position tags</b>	tags as above
<b>Pro compliment</b>	complimentary suggestion that the author should write professionally
<b>Profic</b>	author also writes professionally
<b>Promotion in A/N</b>	author's note promoting another work e.g. a sequel

<b>Promotion request</b>	request for readers to promote a fic to others
<b>Prompt comment</b>	story suggestions for the writer
<b>Prompt fill</b>	fics written in response to a prompt
<b>Prompt request</b>	requests for prompts
<b>Quote comment</b>	comments which quote from the fic
<b>Race tags</b>	tags specifically referring to characters' races
<b>Racebending</b>	changes to characters' canonical races
<b>Rare pair</b>	unpopular or uncommon ships
<b>Reader anxiety</b>	expression of anxiety by a reader (e.g. in reference to leaving a comment)
<b>Reader apology</b>	comments in which a reader apologises for something
<b>Reader entitlement</b>	comment displaying entitled attitude e.g. demanding a new chapter
<b>Reader influence</b>	reference to a reader having had some influence on the fic
<b>Reader poll</b>	poll asking readers for their input on an aspect of the story
<b>Reader thanks</b>	comments in which a reader expresses thanks to the writer
<b>Recced fic</b>	indication that the fic has been recommended to others
<b>Reddit</b>	news aggregator and discussion website
<b>Regular comment</b>	acknowledgement of a reader who regularly comments on a specific fic or writer's works in general
<b>Relationship comment</b>	indication of a personal relationship between writer and commenter
<b>Repost</b>	work posted by someone other than the author
<b>Representation</b>	representation of minority groups within fanfic or mainstream media
<b>Request to borrow elements</b>	reader request to use elements of the fic in their own work
<b>Re-read comment</b>	indication that the reader has read the fic more than once
<b>Review comment</b>	substantial analysis of the fic

<b>RP fic</b>	fanfiction written as an ongoing roleplay between two or more writers
<b>RPF disclaimer</b>	disclaimer often included with RPF fics explaining that the writer means no harm to the person(s) being written about
<b>Selective replies</b>	author only replies to some of the comments on their fic
<b>Self-archiving</b>	fics specifically posted by author as a means of archiving their work
<b>Self-deprecating A/N</b>	humorously self-critical comment in author's note
<b>Self-deprecating comment</b>	comment as above
<b>Self-deprecating tags</b>	tags as above
<b>Self-promotion</b>	paratextual publicising of oneself or one's work
<b>Sensitivity reader</b>	readers who assess the writer's handling of a sensitive subject prior to publishing
<b>Series instalment</b>	fics which are part of larger series
<b>Sexuality comment</b>	comment about a character's sexuality
<b>Sexuality tags</b>	tags as above
<b>Shame</b>	expression of shame (e.g. about enjoying a taboo subject)
<b>Social media</b>	paratextual links to an author or reader's social media account(s)
<b>Social ties</b>	indication of a writer/reader social relationship
<b>Subscription comment</b>	comment that the user has subscribed to the fic or its writer
<b>Tag request</b>	reader requests for tags to be added
<b>Timestamps</b>	genre of fic comprising smaller stories which are connected to a larger fic but take place outside of its timeline
<b>Toxic fandom</b>	fandoms containing members who engage in abusive behaviour such as bullying or harassment
<b>Transgressive reasoning</b>	explanation of why the writer has created a story containing taboo, distressing or offensive content

<b>Translation</b>	tics which have been translated into another language
<b>Translation offer</b>	offer by a reader to translate the fic into another language
<b>Trust</b>	expression of or request for trust between writer and reader(s)
<b>Tumblr</b>	online micro-blogging platform
<b>Tumblrgeddon</b>	fannish term for Tumblr's 2018 purge
<b>Twitter</b>	social media platform
<b>Unbetaed</b>	fic has not been beta read
<b>Update schedule</b>	tics whose chapters are published according to a specific, stated schedule
<b>Use of another's elements</b>	the permitted use of story elements created by another person
<b>Warning in A/N</b>	additional content warnings in the author's note
<b>Warning tags</b>	tags as above
<b>Wattpad</b>	online social writing and publishing platform
<b>Wattpad request</b>	request that the writer cross-post the fic to Wattpad
<b>Worldbuilding comment</b>	comment that adds additional detail to the fic's storyworld
<b>Worldbuilding notes</b>	author's note as above
<b>Writer labour</b>	reference to labour expended by the writer
<b>Writer/reader</b>	indication that the writer also reads fic
<b>Writing advice request</b>	reader requesting advice on writing
<b>Youtube</b>	video-sharing platform
<b>Zine fic</b>	tics which are included in printed or digital zines

## Appendix Three: List of Tumblr Database Tags

The following tags were used to mark features demonstrated or referred to in posts added to my Tumblr database. Any terms that are not defined in the glossary have been glossed.

<u>Term</u>	<u>Definition</u>
<b>Accessibility</b>	issues of accessibility in fandom
<b>Adjacent</b>	pairings featuring characters played by the same actors from a popular ship (e.g. Harrison Ford and Carrie Fisher's characters from <i>Working Girl</i> and <i>When Harry Met Sally</i> based on the Han Solo/Princess Leia ship from <i>Star Wars</i> )
<b>Adult content</b>	content deemed inappropriate for children
<b>Aestheticism</b>	philosophical concept that art exists for the sake of its beauty, above standards like ethics or politics
<b>Affirmative</b>	fan activities which collate and restate canon
<b>Amateur/professional</b>	comparisons between amateur and professional writing
<b>Amazon</b>	e-commerce company
<b>Anne Jamison</b>	fan studies scholar
<b>Anne Rice</b>	author
<b>Anti AO3</b>	critical views regarding AO3
<b>Antis</b>	anti-shippers
<b>AO3</b>	Archive of Our Own
<b>AO3 import</b>	fanfiction archives imported to AO3
<b>Apple</b>	technology company
<b>Archontic literature</b>	literature that contributes to the narrative archive of an originary text
<b>Article 11</b>	amendment to EU copyright law, seen as a potential threat to publishing fanfiction
<b>Article 13</b>	as Article 11
<b>Attention economy</b>	economic model in which goods are exchanged for attention

<b>Audiences</b>	references to fan and fanfic audiences
<b>Author anxiety</b>	expression of anxiety by the author related to writing/publishing
<b>Authorship</b>	theoretical ideas regarding the relationship between the author of a work and its meaning
<b>Automattic</b>	company that took over ownership of Tumblr in 2019
<b>Avatar</b>	2009 science-fiction movie
<b>Bad sex awards</b>	<i>The Spectator</i> magazine's annual award for the worst-written sex scene in a published novel
<b>Badfic</b>	poorly-written fanfic (often intentionally so)
<b>Beta readers</b>	
<b>Bourdieu</b>	sociology scholar
<b>Bryan Fuller</b>	television writer and producer
<b>Camille Bacon-Smith</b>	fan studies scholar
<b>Canon</b>	material that forms part of the official story
<b>Carnation Books</b>	independent ebook publisher working exclusively with fanfic authors
<b>Casey Fiesler</b>	fan studies scholar
<b>Censorship</b>	the suppression of speech, writing or other forms of communication considered to be offensive
<b>Chuck Tingle</b>	author of satirical gay erotica, supportive of transformative works and AO3
<b>Collaboration</b>	works created by more than one party
<b>Comments</b>	written remarks on a fic
<b>Commercialism</b>	references to commerce especially with regards to the relationship between art, industry and money
<b>Commissions</b>	paid commissions for fanworks
<b>Concrit</b>	

<b>Consent</b>	issues of consent within fandom, especially relating to sensitive content
<b>Copyright</b>	the legal right of the owner to intellectual property
<b>Crossover</b>	fanfic in which two or more fandoms overlap in some way
<b>Crossover fandoms</b>	overlap between fandoms creating a larger hybrid fandom
<b>Cross-platform</b>	fic published on multiple platforms
<b>Crowdfunding</b>	the practice of funding a project by raising small amounts of money from a large amount of people
<b>Cultural value</b>	the cultural capital of fanfic or that can be gained by participating in fanfic
<b>Curation</b>	selecting or filtering material to suit particular preferences
<b>Data</b>	statistical data about fandom
<b>Demographics</b>	demographic information about fandom
<b>Disability</b>	references to mental or physical disability
<b>Disclaimers</b>	statement that the writer of a fic does not claim ownership of or profit from the text their work is based on
<b>Discord</b>	instant messaging platform
<b>Disney</b>	mass media and entertainment conglomerate
<b>Don't like don't read</b>	fannish saying encouraging fic readers to avoid content they do not enjoy rather than complaining about it
<b>Dreamwidth</b>	online journaling service
<b>Economic capital</b>	material assets that can be converted immediately into money
<b>Fan art</b>	visual artwork based on an originary text
<b>Fan book</b>	print books containing fanworks
<b>Fan community</b>	social information about fans
<b>Fan culture</b>	cultural information about fans
<b>Fan etiquette</b>	standards of behaviour within the fan community

<b>Fan labour</b>	the effort put in by fans to create fanworks or otherwise contribute to their community
<b>Fan ownership</b>	fannish feelings of ownership over source texts or elements thereof
<b>Fandom</b>	
<b>Fandom activism</b>	social and/or political engagement that emerges from fandom
<b>Fandom and age</b>	issues of age within fanfic content (e.g. relationships with large age gaps) or within fandom (e.g. criticism of older fans for their continued involvement in fandom)
<b>Fandom discourse</b>	highly-debated issues within fandom
<b>Fandom history</b>	references to or explanations of the history of fandom
<b>Fandom linguistics</b>	distinct vocabulary used within fandom
<b>Fandom meta</b>	analysis of fandom
<b>Fanfic and porn</b>	references to sexually-explicit content within fanfic
<b>Fanfic and sexuality</b>	references to sexuality within fanfic or its community
<b>Fanfic as coping</b>	fanfic that is used as a means of coping with a personal issue
<b>Fanfic as gateway</b>	fanfic consumed prior to the originary text, leading the reader to seek out canon
<b>Fanfic as training ground</b>	fanfiction as practice for original writing
<b>Fanfic community</b>	social information about fanfic participants
<b>Fanfic culture</b>	cultural information about fanfic and its community
<b>Fanfic discourse</b>	highly-debated issues in or regarding fanfic
<b>Fanfic genres</b>	genres that are specific to fanfiction
<b>Fanfic history</b>	references to or explanations of the history of fanfiction
<b>Fanfic ideology</b>	beliefs and values expressed within the fanfic community
<b>Fanfic intertextuality</b>	fanfiction in relation to the literary theory of intertextuality
<b>Fanfic legality</b>	reference to fanfiction's legal status

<b>Fanfic marketing</b>	activities undertaken by fic writers to promote their works
<b>Fanfic meta</b>	analysis of fanfic as a form
<b>Fanfic publishing</b>	the process of publishing fanfic
<b>Fanfic recs</b>	recommendations of specific fics
<b>Fanfic tropes</b>	narrative themes common to fanfiction
<b>Fanfic vs fan art</b>	comparisons of fanfiction versus fan art
<b>Fanfic word counts</b>	reference to the length of works of fanfiction
<b>Fanfiction</b>	
<b>Fanon</b>	
<b>Feedback</b>	reactions to or assessment of a work of fic
<b>Feminism</b>	reference to the political ideology of feminism
<b>Femslash</b>	
<b>Fetishization</b>	the perception that fans' engagement with a particular social group is disrespectful and salacious
<b>FF.net</b>	fanfiction website
<b>Fiction vs reality</b>	discourse regarding the effect of fiction on reality
<b>Fifty Shades of Grey</b>	professionally published erotic novel originally created as fanfic
<b>Filing off the serial numbers</b>	
<b>Flourish Klink</b>	well-known fan turned industry consultant on fandom
<b>FOSTA SESTA</b>	US legislation which ensures that websites are not immune to prosecution for facilitating sex trafficking
<b>Francesca Coppa</b>	fan studies scholar and a founder of AO3/the OTW
<b>Game of Thrones</b>	series of fantasy novels and the television show based on them
<b>Gatekeeping</b>	control and restriction of who and what is acceptable within the fan/fanfic community
<b>Gender</b>	references to or discussions of gender

<b>Gender bias</b>	the tendency to prefer one gender over another
<b>Genderbending</b>	
<b>Gifs</b>	posts that include moving images
<b>Gift economy</b>	economic model in which goods are given with no requirement of payment or reciprocity
<b>Google</b>	online search engine and technology company
<b>GRRM</b>	author George R.R. Martin
<b>Harry Potter</b>	series of fantasy novels and their movie adaptations
<b>HCI</b>	human-computer interaction
<b>HEA</b>	happy ever after
<b>Headcanon</b>	interpretation of canon held by an individual fan but not explicitly supported by the originary text
<b>Henry Jenkins</b>	fan studies scholar
<b>Heteronormativity</b>	the belief that heterosexuality is the default sexual orientation
<b>Hit to kudos ratio</b>	the number of hits on a fic compared to the number of kudos it receives
<b>Hits to comments ratio</b>	the number of hits on a fic compared to the number of comments it receives
<b>Hugo Awards</b>	literary awards for speculative fiction and associated projects
<b>Humour</b>	posts containing humorous material
<b>Image</b>	posts featuring still images
<b>Innovation</b>	technological innovation by fans/within fandom
<b>Interaction</b>	interaction between fan writers and audiences or between professional writers and audiences
<b>Jane Austen</b>	author
<b>Kindle Worlds</b>	Amazon's project for licensed fanfiction

<b>Kinkmeme</b>	collections of prompts, usually on a theme, often hosted on journaling websites such as Dreamwidth
<b>Ko-Fi</b>	website for small donations
<b>Kristine Busse</b>	fan studies scholar, a founding editor of TWC and former member of the OTW Board of Directors
<b>Kudos</b>	
<b>LGBTQIA</b>	issues relating to the LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, queer/questioning, intersex, and allied/asexual/aromantic/agender) community
<b>Literature</b>	references to literature in relation to fanfiction
<b>LiveJournal</b>	online journaling platform
<b>Mainstream fandom</b>	fandom in mainstream media/culture
<b>Mainstream fanfiction</b>	fanfiction in mainstream media/culture
<b>Mainstream vs fanfic</b>	comparisons of mainstream media/culture and fanfiction
<b>Major Character Death</b>	AO3 warning tag indicating the death of an important character
<b>Mary Sue</b>	an idealised character often assumed to be an authorial self-insert
<b>Media coverage</b>	fandom-related mentions in mainstream media
<b>Meme</b>	
<b>Mental illness</b>	discussions of or references to mental health conditions
<b>Michael Sheen</b>	actor
<b>Monetisation</b>	discussion of fanfic as a marketable good
<b>My Immortal</b>	notorious example of bad fanfic
<b>Naomi Novik</b>	author and a founding member of AO3/the OTW
<b>Neil Gaiman</b>	author
<b>Neurodivergence</b>	differences in mental or neurological function from what is considered typical
<b>Omegaverse</b>	fanfic genre based on werewolf erotica

<b>Online vs RL</b>	online versus offline ('real') life
<b>OTW</b>	Organization for Transformative Works
<b>Patreon</b>	subscription-based website
<b>Pillowfort</b>	social media platform
<b>Plagiarism</b>	unpermitted copying of another creator's work
<b>Platforms</b>	online mediums which facilitate activities such as social networking, content publishing, media downloading etc.
<b>Play</b>	festivals, challenges and other such game-like fandom events
<b>Podcast</b>	episodic audio programme
<b>Podfic</b>	audio recording of a fanfic
<b>Pornhub</b>	pornography-hosting website that claimed to be interested in buying Tumblr after the site's purge of adult content
<b>Positivity</b>	positive attitudes towards fandom and fanfiction
<b>Praise economy</b>	economic model in which goods are traded for attention and positive feedback
<b>Preservation</b>	preservation of fannish artefacts
<b>Printed fanfic</b>	fanfiction which has been printed on paper, especially when made into a book or bookish object
<b>Prompts</b>	story suggestions
<b>Publishing</b>	the traditional publishing industry
<b>Pulling to publish</b>	
<b>Purity culture</b>	online culture which protests against the perceived over-sexualisation of the internet
<b>Queerbaiting</b>	media texts which are perceived to hint at a queer relationship between two or more characters but have no intention of delivering on that promise
<b>Race</b>	issues relating to race and racism
<b>Racefail</b>	incident in SFF fandom which led to discussion of the treatment of POC both by the publishing industry and by fandom

<b>Rare pairs</b>	unpopular or uncommon ships
<b>Reader anxiety</b>	readers' experience of anxiety with regards to fandom activities
<b>Representation</b>	representation of minority groups within fandom and mainstream media
<b>Research methods</b>	examples of methods used while researching fans
<b>Roleplaying</b>	fanfiction written as an ongoing roleplay between two or more writers
<b>Romance</b>	romance fiction
<b>RPF</b>	'real person fiction' i.e. fanfiction featuring real people
<b>Rules of the internet</b>	a tongue-in-cheek list of rules and protocols for behaviour online
<b>Safe space</b>	a space in which members can safely come together over a shared interest and find support
<b>SCP Foundation</b>	communal online fiction writing project
<b>Seanan McGuire</b>	author
<b>Sensitivity readers</b>	readers who assess the writer's handling of a sensitive subject prior to publishing
<b>Shame</b>	feelings of shame regarding engagement in fandom and fannish practices
<b>Sherlock</b>	2010 television adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle's <i>Sherlock Holmes</i> novels
<b>Shipping</b>	
<b>Slash</b>	
<b>Snobbery</b>	elitist attitudes towards fandom/fanfic
<b>Social media</b>	websites and applications which facilitate social networking
<b>Social value</b>	the social capital of fanfic or that can be gained by participating in fanfic
<b>Strikethrough</b>	incident in which LiveJournal purged and blocked 'inappropriate' content, including those belonging to a number of fans

<b>Strong female characters</b>	stock character defined by a spectrum of subjective characteristics e.g. physical strength, lack of sentimentality, ambitiousness
<b>Survey</b>	examples of surveys used to research fans
<b>Symbolic value</b>	the status or prestige associated with an actor in a field
<b>Tagging</b>	the process of adding tags to a post or work in order to categorise or comment on it
<b>Toxic fandom</b>	fandoms containing members who engage in abusive behaviour such as bullying or harassment
<b>TPTB</b>	
<b>Transformative</b>	
<b>Transgressive fanfic</b>	fanfiction that deals with taboo or offensive subjects
<b>Trust</b>	trust between members of the fan community
<b>Tumblr</b>	online micro-blogging platform
<b>Tumblrgeddon</b>	fannish term for Tumblr's 2018 purge
<b>Wattpad</b>	online social writing and publishing platform
<b>Web 2.0</b>	model of the internet that emphasises interactivity, user-generated content, and social media
<b>Women</b>	discussions relating to women