VIRTUAL FAN COMMUNITIES:
THE CASE OF *HARRY POTTER* SLASH FANS

by

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Based on the presumption that the Internet cannot be treated as a homogeneous medium but more as a set of environments, the way in which fans of Harry Potter books and movies grasp opportunities given by environments such as World Wide Web and Live Journal to embed in them the variety of their practices is presented.

INTRODUCTION [1]

Slash fans rewrite texts of culture so as to present existing relationships such as friendship, companionship, rivalry and enmity between male heroes of movies, TV series, books and games as homosexual. Their interpretive and narrative practices lead to creation of a variety of texts, the most important of which are stories (fanfics), art (fanart) and music videos (fanvids). Around these texts and through these practices the life of slash fan community, most widely known as slash fandom, is constituted.

Before the popularization of the Internet the slash fan community was a members-only party (Bacon-Smith 1992). To get to know the culture enough to research it on its social, symbolic and material level, a scholar was forced to undergo a long and tedious process of initiation into the fan community. First, he had to find a mentor to tutor him in fan interpretive and narrative strategies by means of participation in activities of a local fan community such as common watching and discussion of the canonic text as well as its interpretation in a corpus of fan works such as fan fiction or fan art. The only way to go beyond the local community was to attend a convention: a large meeting of fans of a particular book, movie or TV series. Conventions

gave fans an opportunity to get to know one another and simply to have fun, but their other functions were the socialization of fans into new ways of participation in fandom's life as well as the distribution of fan texts that could otherwise only be sent by mail and to a limited number of people who ordered their own copy of a fan magazine in which fan fiction and fan art were published (so called a fanzine).

Sold at conventions, sent by mail or lent by fan libraries, fanzines were the most important channel of distribution of fan texts. They were also the main channel of communication of the whole fandom. Apart from reviews of media texts on the topic of fan's interest, they included interviews with most distinguished fan writers and artists, fan fiction, songs, poems, illustrations of canonic text and fan fiction, information on upcoming events, discussions, letters, etc. In their materiality and social circuit they were the sheer realization of the „for fans, by fans" rule that demanded reciprocality, honesty and taking no financial profit from the practices crucial for the community.

Fandom's history can be observed as a history of changes introduced by emerging new media. The aim of this paper is to investigate what changed in fandom since the invention and popularization of the Internet.

METHODOLOGY [2]

The research perspective applied in this paper draws heavily upon Henry Jenkins' and Matt Hills' „scholar-fan" and „fan-scholar" approach (Jenkins 1992, Hills 2002). Both researchers relate to newer movements in ethnography in which participation in the particular culture is almost as important as observation, distinction between an ethnographer and the examined society is blurred, and members of the social group are self-conscious subjects capable of meta-analysis of their own situation as well as objection to any totalizing interpretations on the side of the scholar. In their works, the researchers draw upon their knowledge of fan practices to translate it into scholarly language and go beyond their emotional involvement in the fan community to make it an object of their study by means of participant observation, content analysis of fan texts and everyday discourse analysis. Such is also the perspective of this paper.

The ethnographic character of this study is based not only on the way of

defining the researcher's position, but also by the perception and construction of the object of study. Slash fandom represented here by the virtual community of *Harry Potter* fans is seen and researched as a community of practice. According to this approach, fans are perceived to be actors engaged in a project and as a social group they can be examined through their everyday activities (practices) such as socially organized language activities seen in the context of shared interpretive and narrative strategies (Baym, 2000), as well as the context of the medium.

Neil Postman defies common perception of a medium as a tool invented to satisfy certain needs and enhance human domination of the world and defines it as „the social and intellectual environment a machine creates" (Postman 1986: 86). Internet is not a tool, neither is it a machine: it is a social space that can be divided into many environments. Every of these environments, drawing upon different opportunities given by the medium, creates another communicative reality and thus must be examined in its specificity with its language, customs, hierarchies, norms and values, and practices. This paper distinguishes three main Internet environments that constitute *Harry Potter* slash fandom: fan websites, fan fiction archives and Live Journal communities.

FAN WEBSITES [3]

The Potions Master's Office,[1] a typical fan website, welcomed its guests with an index page that, as majority of slash websites, was at the same time a warning: „if you object strongly to homosexuality, don't read slash. You won't enjoy it. And please don't email slash authors to tell them how revolting you find their work. Stick with the het fanfic. Slash isn't for everyone, and not all slashers like all slash." The main page introduced us into the theme of the website (slash fan fiction devoted to the pairing of Severus Snape and Harry Potter) and warned those who came there by accident of what they might come by. Such was also the function of the site's layout constructed from film footage so manipulated that it legitimized the relationship in question.

Most of the websites include „adults only" warning. Femme(Slash) chose another form of filtering content: in order to read stories featuring

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[1] Femme(Slash), *The Potions Master's Office.* Retrieved January 25, 2005, from http://potionsmaster.slashcity.net/.

sexual scenes (labeled as „NC-17") one needed a password that became available only after contacting the webmaster with an e-mail that states: „I am over the age of 18, understand what slash is, and live in an area where accessing slash is legal".[2] Limiting access to fan fiction by means of password protection is a common practice used in order to prevent search engines from indexing pages and thus to minimize risk of possible legal intervention from parents and non-fans.

Page *News* informed visitors of updates, the last of which took place in May 2003 which meant that at the beginning of 2005 the website was practically dead – and it no longer exists in 2006 when the only way to get to it is through the Wayback Machine. This fact does not indicate that the author stopped writing or that she no longer participates in fandom's life, though. She moved to another environment – to Live Journal that gives her a possibility of fast and easy updating and lets her keep in contact with other fans thanks to the system of comments.

Apart from publishing her own works, the author recommends particularly liked Harry/Snape stories. The information included: author and title, rating, short summary as well as Femme(Slash)'s justification for highlighting it. This page can be analyzed as a form of reader's feedback to the writer. Asynchronous nature of communication between the reader and the writer in the fanzine fandom made it impossible to express one's opinion of the story in other way than talking to the author at convention or in rarely published letter to the editorial board of the fanzine. The Internet enabled fans to react immediately to any story published and to interact with the author in a way that could immensely affect the development of the plot. According to fan *savoir-vivre*, feedback is a necessary reaction to the text that had been liked, the only sign for the writer to know that her works are really read (apart from the website's statistics which can be misleading because of including author's own visits). Feedback is crucial to the very existence of fandom defined as a community of interpretive and narrative practices because it encourages writers to further work and thus maintains the community itself.

So defined, feedback is a norm of conduct that requests a review of every

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[2]   Femme(Slash), *NC-17 Registration.* Retrieved January 25, 2005, from
      http://potionsmaster.slashcity.net/register.html/.

story read by a fan and that expects this review to be positive (in a form of praise and encouragement only) or constructive (in a form that consists not only of praise and encouragement but also of textual and literary criticism). The application of this rule means that bad fiction – meaning badly written or not fitting into one of the many conventions is, if not ignored, then at least not labelled as such because it could lead to hurting author's feelings and discouraging her from further writing.

Femme(Slash)'s website was an example of a typical website of a fan writer. Its main function was to archive and promote the owner's fiction and not to interact with the visitors (the only way to contact the webmistress was to send her an e-mail or find her on Live Journal). She was consequently realizing the norms of the fandom and presenting some aspects of fan fiction's functioning as a practice: the importance of positive feedback, recommendation of the most interesting stories to other or new fans, the need to keep fan practices secret or at least to restrict access by publishing warnings and using password protection, and fandom's hierarchy based on popularity and the way of participation in fandom's life. The *Fic Recs* page settles the owner's status as the one of the active and critical participant while linking to websites of other writers and thus increasing their popularity.

FAN FICTION ARCHIVE [4]

From reader's point of view, the most important part of an archive such as *Ink Stained Fingers*[3] is its search engine. It enables the visitor to look up stories by author, title, status (finished story or WIP – work in progress), date of being added to the archive (last week, month, three months, half a year and a year), main pairing, warning (i.e. violence, rape, death story), rating and genre. The search results are displayed in a form of a typical header attached to a story in order to inform or warn the reader. The header gives the potential reader almost all necessary information about the author and the title (linking to the story itself), file size (more than 100K indicates a novel-length story), the address where she should send her feedback (and author's encouragement to do so), the date of submission, the topic, rating, pairing and status, as well as the summary. It is also a sheer realization of fan code: someone not accustomed to such labels is doomed to choose blindly until

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[3] *Ink Stained Fingers*. Retrieved November 10, 2006, from http://inkstain.inkquill.net/.

she learns how to read the mysterious abbreviations and strange slang expressions.

Submitting a story to the archive requires unification of its form: all stories are preceded by similar headers, appear in the same background, in the same font among thousands of others. Beyond the published texts stand all the authors and readers who regularly visit the archive to gain access to texts that confirm their involvement in fandom by sharing interpretive and narrative strategies. Their participation is made even more tactile by the feedback mechanism of the archive. Every story ends with an encouragement to inform the author of one's impressions. Submitted comments are displayed publicly as a visible sign of fan's devotion.

Ink Stained Fingers is an open archive in which everyone can publish with no selection prior to the publication. *PSA*[4], another Harry Potter slash archive, remains closer to the traditional fanzine. All submitted stories are examined by an editorial board and only those with supreme value are published. Apart from the authority of website's owner and active participant in fandom's life, they wield power to decide whom to grant voice. This power is often contested but also supported by the ones who welcome texts of better quality. In this case, archive is a digital fanzine with its editorial board and structures of power, but free, accessible to all members of the fandom, and giving the possibility of interaction. As in the *Ink Stained Fingers* case, it can also be organized by the rule of openness and a liberal conviction that the greatest good lies in the greatest diversity and that Internet users as thinking subjects are able to choose the content fitting their needs and to evaluate it. From this standing, editors of a closed archive appear to be a board of censors objecting to the basic rules of open society.

LIVE JOURNAL COMMUNITIES [5]

Live Journal does not appear to be different from typical weblogs – registering and logging in gives the possibility of posting to a personalized (by means of chosen colors, background image, user icons, links to other blogs and websites) space of one's journal. Structure of the website defines comments as secondary to the owner's post by setting them on a page that can

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[4]   *The Potter Slash Archive.* Retrieved November 10, 2006, from http://glassesreflect.net/psa.php/.

be accessed by a link from the main page. Posts are displayed in antichronological order, the older ones accessible by a subpage „Calendar".

The first feature distinguishing Live Journal from a typical blog is the emphasis put on interaction. „User's profile" contains not only a short biographical note, information of the account's status and statistics of written and received comments, but also a list of interests (that are also links to all other users sharing the same passion) and a list of friends (blogs that are read and tracked on a „Friends" page displaying all friends' posts in an antichronological order) and communities that one is subscribed to.

Such an organizing of weblog space enables easy searching for people of similar interests and enlarges the number of receivers of the user's statements. The friends' list, statistics of comments and the number of groups one participates in tell much of user's popularity and her status in fandom. Big Name Fan, fandom's celebrity whom can be a particularly distinguished writer, fan artist or a webmistress of an archive, can have hundreds of friends subscribing to her blog to be up to date with her work, to have a possibility of easily leaving feedback through comments to one's post and, last but not least, to be close to the celebrity herself.

This stress put on interaction is best seen in so called Live Journal communities which are groups founded for discussion on a particular topic (i.e. a group for fan-scholars *slashphilosophy*[5] or a group which functions mostly as an archive with feedback in a form of comments to writer's post - *harryslash*[6]). Such a group is settled somewhere between a blog run by one person whose main aim is to start a discussion between commenting people and a mailing list with which it shares its egalitarianism (all members have same right to take part in discussion, moderator's interventions are rare). As a result an environment is created, in which the main page is public (if not restricted to the members) and on topic but the system of comments (and comments to comments) tends to be more of an informal conversation on every topic possible.

Thanks to this junction of the individual and the social, Live Journal is now the focus of the fandom's life. By taking this dominating position it

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[5] SlashPhilosophy Community. Retrieved November 10, 2006, from http://www.livejournal.com/community/slashphilosophy/.

[6] HarrySlash Community. Retrieved November 10, 2006, from http://www.livejournal.com/community/harryslash/.

leads to „death" of many mailing lists and individual websites whose members and webmasters move to an environment open to all fan texts and practices. One can't help but wonder if this is a change for good: concentrating all fan practices in one place is undoubtedly an improvement for anyone who knows where and how to look for information but the said egalitarianism of Live Journal does not seem so obvious even when it comes to communities – every post by a fandom's celebrity is in a center of attention and triggers hundreds of comments while a post by a common user often goes unnoticed. In a situation when all the posts and comments are public it is bound to exert tremendous pressure over anyone who wishes to become a full-value member of a fandom. Perhaps it is only now that one can see how utopian a vision of fandom as a community of equals sharing love of a source text and common practices was. The one of high status is now not only a writer, fan artist, fanzine editor, webmaster, moderator or other activist but above all the one who managed to gather a group of friends big enough to ensure her non-anonymity.

Live Journal helped to solve many problems by enabling fans to publish their works both for the closest group of friends only and, through many communities, for a whole fandom. Publishing fan fiction, fan art and fan video in personal yet public weblogs made possible a closer contact of a writer and a reader – the reader can not only keep track of author's progress but also start a public discussion through her feedback and comments. Mutual „friending" increases position of both sides – the celebrity becomes even more popular and the reader's comments become worthy of reading. Live Journal offers insight into those aspects of other fan's life, which she is willing to share. Bonds strengthened by attention and support are reflected in social behavior in communities and often lead to creation of cliques that may, with time, cause changes in the system of values of the whole fandom.

CONCLUSION [6]

Are Internet and fanzine fandom different only to some extent? Are fan websites and fan archives only new versions of a fanzine? Is discussing things in a Live Journal community the same as in a panel room at a convention? The aim of this paper was to show that this was not the case. The Internet is not just a tool giving better access to information. Possibilities

opened by this medium change impersonal relations and enforce a new kind of contact – they change social conditions. The texts themselves might not have changed much – but the practice resulting in their production changed completely.

The dichotomy of Internet and fanzine fandom is commonly used to emphasize the change that occurred within fan community: such was also the aim of using it in this paper. One cannot limit social life to a binary opposition, though. „Old" media have not ceased to exist; they have found a niche in which they can pervade in changed social reality. Fanzines are still being published – their materiality and aesthetics appeal to every fan who is also, by definition, a collector. Fanzine editors adapted to a new medium by creating websites promoting and distributing their products or by switching from paper to digital fanzines. Despite their active participation in Internet fandom, fans still attend and organize conventions that are now more of a celebration than necessity. The opposition of the old and the new, however defined and estimated, is important for building group identity of fans sharing experiences and attitudes towards different media. In fact it has been often transgressed through well grounded in tradition and yet in a new cultural context practices of fans.

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