

Blog

Toward a Better Internet



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Gift Logic: Labors of love flourish online under fandom's social norms

Fan culture's cycle of gifting, receiving, and reciprocating helps create and maintain social solidarity

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MAPPING SOCIAL MEDIA

A research project aimed at identifying the “logics” of social media

Before the erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* burned up bestseller lists and made author E.L. James **the fastest-selling author in history**, a large number of people had already read the novel for free. **The only difference** was that in the original version, main characters Ana Steele and Christian Grey were named “Bella Swann” and “Edward Cullen”—characters from Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* novels.

Master of the Universe, originally published online by James under a pseudonym, was a work of **alternate universe** *Twilight* fanfiction. Fanfiction is a type of transformative work—that is, a new creative work that is transformative of some original media. Imagine a story about the continuing adventures of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, though in the case of alternate universe fanfiction, perhaps Kirk is **a barista** and Spock is a veterinarian. And fanfiction (along with other fanworks, like fan art) is the basis of a huge, thriving, and long-standing online community (fandom) that has actually existed since long before it moved online. *Master of the Universe* was part of this community—until it wasn’t.

As Bethan Jones describes in **an analysis of fandom debates around “pulling to publish” fanfiction commercially**, criticism of *Fifty Shades of Grey* focused in part on the violation of a strong community norm against profiting from fanfiction. **This norm stems in part from a desire to protect the status of transformative works as fair use** rather than illegal copyright infringement. The “four factor” test to determine whether a use of copyrighted material is “fair use” considers the effects of the transformative work on the marketplace for the original work—by avoiding selling fanfiction, fans have hoped to cement their transformations firmly as fair use. In the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the book is so far removed from any elements of *Twilight* that copyright is almost certainly not an issue (though there are more recent, fascinating cases of this particular **deep legal question**).

What James' "fifty shades of norm violations" actually illustrate is the strength of the fandom community as a *gift economy*. Anthropologists have **used this term** to describe a number of nonmarket societies, though there are also noncommodified spheres of exchange even in market societies (e.g., organ donation, the economics of zoo animals, or **Burning Man**). In his 1993 book about the WELL, one of the oldest virtual communities, **Howard Rheingold described** "a kind of gift economy in which people do things for one another out of a spirit of building something between them, rather than a spreadsheet-calculated quid pro quo."

It makes sense that a spirit of gifting might flourish more online than in other contexts in capitalist societies. **As media scholar Henry Jenkins pointed out**, companies were relative late-comers to the web, which was originally designed to facilitate collaboration between scientists and researchers, rather than to enable "the metered access expected within a commodity culture." However, even among **many examples of the online sharing economy** (e.g., open source, Wikipedia, couch surfing), fandom stands out as representing a longstanding "labor of love" culture that has existed since before the community even moved online, dating back to Star Trek fandom and printed zines in the 1960s. However, **as Jenkins notes**, the move to digital distribution allowed for an even fuller embracing of the gift economy, as it lowered the cost of sharing stories; authors no longer even had to recoup costs.

In **their introduction** to a special issue of Transformative Works and Cultures on "fandom and/as labor," Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis modify a famous open source saying: "free as in free speech, not free as in beer." Fanworks as "free as in a gift, not free as in without pay," noting that the circulation of fanworks as gifts produces and reinforces identities and relationships within the community. Indeed, this community aspect is incredibly important; in ***The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age***, media scholar Francesca Coppa offers a definition of fanfiction that includes not only rewriting and transforming stories written by others, but also "written within" a fandom community, describing it as "a case study in community production and reception." She also notes that it is typically written *as a gift* for that community, and that in fact "many people write their first story to say thank you for all the stories they read previously, to give something back to the community that's fed them." And even those who consume but do not create fanfiction give something back, by way of sharing and accolades; there is also a strong social norm in fandom towards expressing appreciation, and indeed, **explicitly positive feedback for fanworks**.

Legal scholar Rebecca Tushnet **also describes** a system based on "payment in credit" in which moral claims to attribution are incredibly important. This also means that when attribution is the core value in fan concepts of authorship, plagiarism is one of the most serious crimes a fan can commit. When creators are not paid for their work, credit is critical, particularly acknowledging help received along the way. Karen Hellekson **described fan gift culture** as a cycle of gifting, receiving, and reciprocating, which includes providing

commentary about those gifts with the goal of creating and maintaining social solidarity. The normative violations of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, then, lie **not only in** commercializing it, and in taking a work *out* of the community in which it was created and subsequently gifted, but in failing to acknowledge the labor that fanfiction readers and reviewers did in shaping *Master of the Universe*.

Fan community anger about *Fifty Shades of Grey* was fierce, and this anger was provoked by a single story—what about an entire platform that exploited this gifting culture?

Founded in 2007 by a group of male venture capitalists, **FanLib** was a commercial platform that sought to monetize fanfiction production. Backlash was swift, and the platform shut down by 2008. **Jenkins described** their underlying misstep: “FanLib had done its homework by the standards of the VC world. ... They simply hadn't really listened to, talked with, or respected the existing grassroots community which surrounded the production and distribution of fan fiction.” Though the design and mission of the platform **violated fandom norms around noncommercialism**, it also failed to respect the community aspect of fanfiction production, where membership in that community is an important credential. Or **as Hellekson put it**, they broke the rules of engagement by misreading “community” as “commodity.”

Around this same time, in addition to FanLib sparking concerns about further exploitation of fandom by outside platforms, there was also **a mass exodus from LiveJournal**. LiveJournal had been a comfortable home for many fanfiction creators as it allowed pseudonyms, which were helpful for authors who wished to separate their fan identities from their professional lives. When Russian company SUP bought LiveJournal in 2007, many fans cited policy and design changes that LiveJournal had made that no longer made fan creators feel welcome. The resulting groundswell of support from the community to “own the servers” resulted in the creation of the nonprofit **Organization for Transformative Works** (OTW), and the design and creation of **Archive of Our Own** (AO3), a fanfiction archive that today hosts over 3.5 million registered users and over 7.5 million individual works.

AO3 is notable for a number of reasons, including as a rare example of a technology being developed entirely by the community it serves, especially when that community is made up primarily of groups typically underrepresented in computing (i.e., women and LGBTQ+ people). The first developers behind AO3 decided they would have to “grow their own,” and as a result **a number of fans learned to code** in order to contribute to the archive's development. In speaking with a number of these early contributors as part of my research, I observed how **the design of the archive is deeply embedded with many core values of the community**, including those related to gifting and attribution.

For example, AO3 includes mechanisms to both tag works explicitly as gifts for individuals and to tag works as “inspired by” other works, enabling credit. There is also extensive

support for **fanfiction exchanges**, which are a core part of fandom gifting culture, and which previously required a huge amount of manual labor to organize.

Creators also have the option to “orphan” a work, which allows them to disconnect their identity/authorship from it while it remains on the archive, a feature that discourages removing works from the community while allowing creators to maintain control over their work and privacy. AO3 also has an “open doors” mechanism for importing works from other archives, especially those that might otherwise be shut down. These features, along with the **Fanlore wiki** (also under OTW’s umbrella) are meant to help preserve fan history, which includes the content that was gifted to fandom.

Interestingly, some criticisms of AO3’s design choices are also rooted in the gifting and attribution norms of fandom. Positive comments on stories are an important part of the gift culture and “payment” in credit. When AO3 implemented a “kudos” button that functions much like a “like” button on social media platforms, **many users felt that this design choice disincentivized thoughtful comments**, thus shifting fandom towards consumption over engagement.

However, an important component of **AO3’s success** is the large number of volunteers that keep it going. For example, in addition to developers contributing code and an abuse team that handles policy violations, there is also a small army of “**tag wranglers**” whose labor supports an **impressive search and tagging system**. I am also part of the OTW legal committee, made up mostly of law professors and lawyers who are also fans, which provides a legal advocacy voice for fan creators. And AO3 is also a noncommercial platform without advertising or any other business model; it operates entirely on donated money and time.

Volunteer contributions that fuel the online communities in fandom stem from similar motivations as creating and sharing fanworks—love and enthusiasm for something, whether that thing is a media property or fandom itself. We also see evidence of this spirit of gift-giving in the social support that takes place in fandom. For example, research led by Ph.D. student Brianna Dym **about LGBTQ+ participants in fandom** illustrated how it can serve as a critical support space, and those who receive that support are often eager to give back by helping others and contributing to community resources. **Our research about computational projects in fandom** also pointed to enthusiasm and contributing to a community to be powerful motivators in learning technical skills. And though this community’s **strong social norms do at times fail** and **community values are contested**, most online fandom spaces (including AO3) are far more pro-social than we tend to think of online communities as a whole.

It is unsurprising that gift logic in an online community relies heavily on enthusiasm, volunteer labor, reciprocity, and a strong sense of community and group identity. However, as with other contexts, like open source or Wikipedia, such a system is vulnerable to drop-

offs in participation and even a **tragedy-of-the-commons scenario** where self-interested actors overwhelm those contributing. **The “death” of Wikipedia has been predicted for years**, particularly as volunteer contributions declined from their height.

However, transformative fandom is still going strong after decades and decades, and despite **numerous migrations across online platforms**. Though the “grow our own” philosophy and volunteer-led technological contributions to AO3 are vulnerable to **bottlenecks in expertise**, the community seems to have mostly mastered this inevitable tension between fragility and resilience. If transformative fandom as an online community provides us insight into the “secret sauce” of gift logic, it is likely the genuine labor of *love*.

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