

Wizards, Muggles, and the Internet:
Shaping *Harry Potter* Fandom with Digital Media

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Abstract

Harry Potter fandom had taken the world by storm, and continues to grow even today, nearly six years after the release of seventh and final book, in part due to the influence of the internet and digital media. In the modern convergence culture, fans expect certain rights and permissions when interacting with the *Harry Potter* universe, but the original creators often have different expectations. Fan fiction and wizard rock are two forms of fan-made derivative works that have used the accessible nature of the internet to grow fandom, but are also not without their own issues.

Keywords: media convergence, popular culture, digital media, community building, user-generated content, derivative work, intellectual property, Harry Potter, fandom, wizard rock, fan fiction, fanart, fanvids

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Harry Potter is a seven-book series of children's fantasy novels, written by British author J. K. Rowling, chronicling the school years of the series' titular character and encompassing themes of love, death, friendship, bravery, oppression, and survival. A young boy orphaned when the evil wizard Lord Voldemort killed his parents and attempted to destroy him in an effort to prevent the prophecy of his demise coming to fruition, Harry earns a lightning bolt-shaped scar on his forehead; he is famously named The Boy Who Lived. Harry grows up with his aunt's family until he learns he is wizard and is accepted for study at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Other major characters include Harry's best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, and Hogwarts' headmaster Albus Dumbledore. Each novel follows approximately one year in Harry's life, starting just before his 11th birthday and ending with Voldemort's defeat at The Battle of Hogwarts seven years later. (Rowling, 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2007).

The fandom surrounding *Harry Potter* is not a new experience, nor is it a unique occurrence to this particular series; as long as there has been media to consume, there have been fans to enjoy, praise, critique, and obsess over it. With the proliferation of the internet, and the use of digital media and social networking, fandom has grown tremendously, and the fine line between fans and the artists creating the media has blurred even more (Gooch, 2008). This paper explores the phenomenon of *Harry Potter* fandom by way of digital media, using new technologies to create derivative works and to build a community.

Fandom and *Harry Potter*

Fan culture, or fandom, separates itself from those who are simply fans of media by measuring the investment a person makes in a consumable product; this type of community has been part of popular culture since book clubs began forming to discuss Jane Austen's novels and the *Sherlock Holmes* series (Fiesler, 2008). Fandom is built by, for, and about the fans; the community is always open to outsiders, but only if they truly embrace the culture as fans, and if they refrain from condescension through bullying and mockery (Sweeney, 2007).

The modern, digital act of reading blogs and participating in online fandom parallels the former generations' affirmation of "seeing your fellow Americans reading the same newspaper as you" (Tocci, 2009, p. 71); when fans understand that others are as equally involved in the shared text, their investment in the fandom is validated. An infographic from meme-driven blog Cheezburger (2011) analyzed the numbers of the online presence of several fandoms; as of December 16, 2011, *Harry Potter* proved to be the most popular fandom on Facebook, with 11 million more likes than the *Twilight* series. There were also more Potter-themed fan fiction stories than other fandoms, and entries for fanart placed second only to *Pokemon*.



Figure 1: numerical data for *Harry Potter* fandom on several online entities (Cheezburger, 2011).

Although *Harry Potter* is considered children's literature, its fandom has seen no age limit, with enthusiastic readers ranging in age from young teens to senior citizens. According to a study from Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (2007), 44% of households with teenagers planned to purchase the seventh and final book in the series; however, 26% of people aged 50-64 also planned on buying the book, along with another 11% of those over 65.

As of this writing, there are dozens of Harry Potter groups meeting physically and virtually through Meetup.com (<http://harrypotter.meetup.com/>). The largest of these, The Group that Shall Not be Named, boasts a membership of 1,245. Other Potter-specific groups that follow include The Los Angeles Dumbledore's Army, The DFW [Dallas-Fort Worth] *Harry Potter* Meetup Group, The Orange County Harry Potter Meetup Group (CA), Potterdelphia (Philadelphia, PA), and Defense Against Dumb A's Who Don't Get *Harry Potter* (Alexandria, VA).

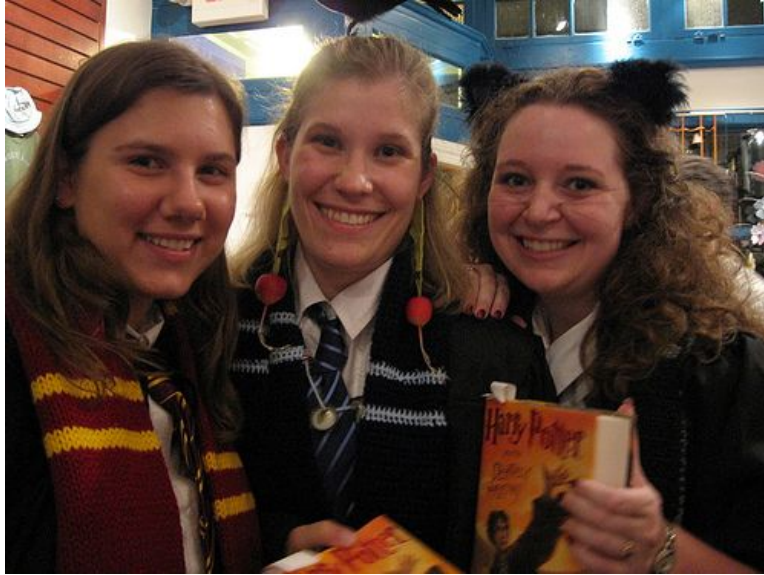


Figure 2: three Harry Potter fans dressed in costumes of their favorite characters at a release party for the seventh and final book in the series. (Piernock, 2007)

Media Convergence and New Media Culture

In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins (2013) compared fandom to the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit*: media through popular culture acquires purpose not through its own value, nor by that provided by the original creator, but according to how much it is consumed, loved, and manipulated by the fans. The time, effort, and money invested by fans grants new meaning to the media, which in turn grants incentive to the original content creators in sharing more with the fandom. Jenkins (2008) defined this as media convergence: “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (p. 2). Relying on multimedia interaction is a staple of fandom, especially in the digital age, and making use of new technologies can foster relationships and

advance the visibility of fandom (Busse, 2006).

User-generated content

Derivative work based on existing media and driven by the fan's desire to interact with the media as a means of self-expression is labeled user-generated content. It is not a new concept, as user-generated content has been available in fandoms going back to the early days of *Star Trek* fanzines, but its emergence has been fostered by an interactive web culture (Fiesler, 2008). The nature of fandom asserts that media not be passively consumed, but thoroughly enjoyed; it invites fans to interact with it, creating new content based on canon, or what is recognized as official or factual based on the fandom's original source material. Jenkins (2008) referred to this as participatory culture, and contended that it is a crucial part of fandom; he also warned that media producers often send mixed messages to the fans regarding the acceptance of user-generated content, as some welcome it as benefiting the fandom while others discredit it as a threat to their property.

Expectations in fandom

While emphasis is placed on canon, fans expect to have the ability and the permission to interact with the source material and manipulate it into other media, giving it purpose and expanding its meaning. Fans consider the media as "something that accrues value as it moves across different contexts, gets retold in various ways, attracts multiple audiences, and opens itself up to a proliferation of alternate meanings" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 267). Members of fandom assume a certain level of participation that is open to everyone, where anyone, regardless of property ownership, can get involved in the creation of content (Jenkins, 2008). This expectation of the

creation of new digital media is similar to the Creative Commons project, which encourages sharing and repurposing media through alternate copyright licensing (Fiesler, 2008; Tocci, 2009)

Fandom Derivatives Using Digital Media

Sweeney (personal communication, May 2, 2013) claimed that “Potter fandom was the first fandom to really make wide use of [digital media] not just to augment existing forms of expression” like fan fiction or fanvids, but to also re-imagine new forms of creative, community-based fandom, like wizard rock. This expounds on Jenkins’ (2008) assertion that one can better understand media convergence by examining the *Harry Potter* book series, derivative works based on that series, and the relationship between the producers of the media and the consumers of the media, i.e. *Harry Potter* fandom.

Fans have used the *Harry Potter* series as the base for a variety of derivative works. Fan art imaginatively reproduces characters or settings from the series (Manifold, 2009), referencing canon as inspiration, to create traditional or digital illustrations, drawings, sculptures, or paintings. Fanvids re-imagine or analyzes themes from the series by slicing footage from the film and adapting it into a music video that conveys a specific emotion pertinent to the theme (Fiesler, 2008; Trombley, 2007).



Figure 3: a digital painting, depicting a scene from the seventh and final book, featuring Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter at the Battle of Hogwarts (Sejic, 2009).

Other media has also emerged, such as the parody feature-length independent film *Harvey Putter and the Ridiculous Premise* (Richardson, 2010), the alternate audio track for the first *Harry Potter* movie *Wizard People, Dear Reader* (Neely, 2004), the puppet-theatre web series *Potter Puppet Pals* (Cicierega, 2006), and the music-theatre-turned-viral-video *A Very Potter Musical!* (Lang, 2009; Lyons, 2009).

This paper will focus on two of the more prominent fan-made derivative works, fan fiction and wizard rock.

Fan fiction

Stripped down to essentials, fan fiction consists of stories written by enthusiasts using

characters and settings from already-existing media, such as books, television, film, and music. While fan fiction has seemingly been part of popular culture “since antiquity” (Thomas, 2011, p. 205), it built momentum with the *Star Trek* fanzines of the 1960s and gained a larger following with the adoption of available internet services in the 1990s. Stories vary in length from drabbles, short tales consisting of 100 words, to full-length novels, to one-shot stand alone stories. These narratives often follow themes and genres that are also found in other literary work, like action/adventure, romance, teenage angst, political revolt, or murder mystery.

Shipping (taken from the suffix of the word *relationship*) refers to stories written specifically about the budding or established relationship between two characters. *Slash* fan fiction similarly deals with relationships, but concerns male/male relationships and is sexually explicit. Sexually explicit female/female fan fiction is known as *femslash*. (Tosenberger, 2008)

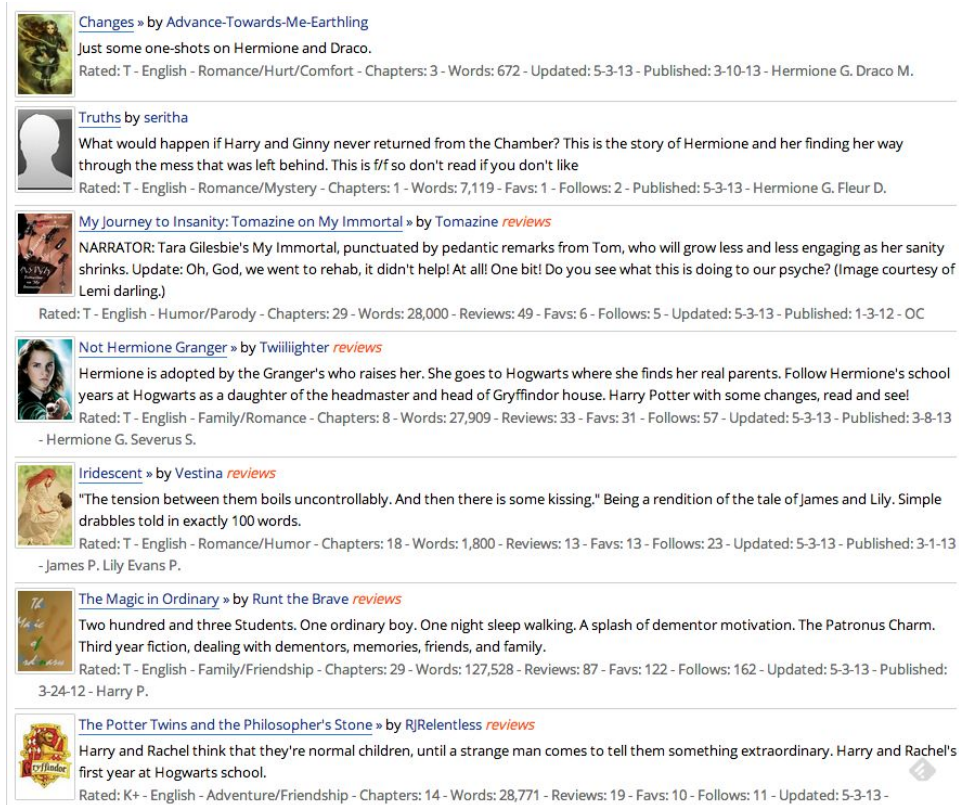


Figure 4: a screen capture of the landing page for *Harry Potter* fan fiction

(<http://www.fanfiction.net/book/Harry-Potter/>)

The recently growth of fan fiction writers and readers is in part due to advancements in digital media technology and the internet (Thomas, 2011), as many fans came of age alongside Harry Potter, and have grown up with emerging technology, computers and the internet at their disposal (Fiesler, 2008). Readers expect stories to have comments open for review and critique, and writers expect fans to provide honest and valuable comments that can spark discussion or offer advice for crafting a better narrative (Thomas, 2011).

Busse (2006) emphatically stated that while individual stories in fandom may not fully take advantage of all of the benefits of modern technology, creation, dissemination, and

reception of those stories clearly does. Using the online fan fiction communities, consumers, both readers and authors, can connect with other fans virtually. This semi-anonymity, paired with the appropriation of Rowling's creations in their own derivative stories, allow fans to express themselves in ways that may be uncomfortable or embarrassing in real-world situations (Jenkins, 2008). Assigning their voice to pre-existing characters allows fans to engage in interpersonal relationships that foster communication and growth, and a critical reflection on life experiences.

There are various web communities specifically for the posting and reviewing of fan fiction, including: FanFiction.net (<http://fanfiction.net/book/Harry-Potter/>), Fiction Alley (<http://fictionalley.org/>), Harry Potter Fan Fiction (<http://harrypotterfanfiction.com/>), The Sugar Quill (<http://sugarquill.net/>), and The Restricted Section (<http://restrictedsection.org/>). Blogging site and tool LiveJournal also hosts fan fiction communities, allowing members to create their own groups to publish and moderate fic content.

Wizard rock

Music has for years played an integral part of fandom; filk, a genre of music primarily performed in the science fiction and fantasy fandoms, is one of the oldest forms of fan-created derivative works. Filk reimagines or develops pre-existing characters or themes from its fandom's canon by creating new words for well-known popular or cultural songs, or by writing wholly original lyrics and music. (Gooch, 2006; Jenkins, 2013)

In 2002, high-school student Joe DeGeorge played shows in the Boston, MA area with his band, Ed in the Refridgerators [*sic*]. During one performance, a fan in the audience shouted out "I love you, Harry Potter!", possibly due to Joe's resemblance to the character. When several

bands failed to arrive for an informal concert hosted in the DeGeorge's backyard, older brother Paul recalled their idea of performing music from the perspective of The Boy Who Lived. The two quickly wrote several songs, and played the first Harry and the Potters show in the shed later that day, for a small handful of friends. (Lewis & Koury, 2008)

The brothers continued to perform under the Harry and the Potters banner, Joe taking the persona of Harry Potter Year Four and Paul of Harry Potter Year Seven. In the beginning, they mostly played shows in the New England area; however, they reached out to other Potter fans through their website and through MySpace, leading them organize several cross-country and international tours.



Figure 5: Joe and Paul DeGeorge perform as Harry and the Potters at the Yule Ball in Philadelphia, PA (Piernock, 2006).

The popularity of the band inspired other musicians, both fledgling and established, to create their own music based around characters and themes from *Harry Potter*, including Draco and the Malfoys (Brian Ross and Bradley Mehlenbacher), The Whomping Willows (Matt Maggiacomo), The Remus Lupins (Alex Carpenter), and The Moaning Myrtles (Lauren Fairweather and Nina Jankowicz).

Wizard rock continued to grow, in part due to its stripped-down, do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic, but also due to the ease of using computer software to record the music, and the accessibility of the internet to distribute it. The social networking site MySpace (<http://myspace.com/>) allowed many new wizard rock bands an opportunity to share their art with other fans, and to promote their music and their shows. Tina Olsen, mother of the band members of The Hungarian Horntails and herself a wizard rock musician, claimed that many days, arguments broke out in the household over who would be using the computers to record music (Lewis & Koury, 2008).

“Wizard rock. It’s is a genre now, legitimately,” asserted Paul DeGeorge (Lewis & Koury, 2008), although Tocci (2009) found the musical diversity in wizard rock varied enough to be called a “movement” rather than a “genre” (p. 108) in the indie music scene. As of this writing, there are 760 active and retired wizard rock bands listed on The Wizrocklopedia (2013). These musicians perform or have performed garage rock, electronica, boy-band pop, folk rock, grindcore, a capella, and hip-hop; these bands almost exclusively host and share their music on

the internet.

Issues in Fandom Arising from Digital Media

The open web has contributed to the expansion and prosperity of *Harry Potter* fandom, but it has also brought attention to issues regarding copyright and access to content. Because property owners often express conflicting messages regarding their opinions on user-generated content, fans are unsure of the direction to take (Jenkins, 2008).

Intellectual property and fair use

Law professor John Palfrey (as cited in Fiesler, 2008) claimed that “Technologies don’t infringe copyright; people do” (p. 733). The proliferation and convenience of the internet and digital media is not the cause of piracy, but merely the agent. However, user-generated content, such as the types mentioned above, are not cases of outright copyright infringement, and many scholars argue that fan-made derivative work should fall under fair use (Fiesler, 2008; Jenkins, 2008; Tosenberger, 2008; Trombley, 2007). They encompass a questionable scope of copyright legality as there are currently no conclusive regulations regarding these derivative works and their correlation to fair use policy (Fiesler, 2008; Jenkins, 2008) as new technologies in digital media move faster than the rate of change for copyright law (Fiesler, 2008).

Although to date, no fan fiction has been legally prosecuted, fans may stifle their own creativity due to fear of litigation (Fiesler, 2008), as many fans have received cease-and-desist notices from attorneys representing either J. K. Rowling, Warner Bros., or both. Heather Lawver, editor for the fan-run newspaper-style website *The Daily Prophet*, rallied supporters of the many people, mostly children, who were hit with notices demanding the dissolution of their websites.

When Warner Bros. discovered they were threatening children, many of whom were terrified, they resolved to stop the practice and find new ways to work with fandom. (Jenkins, 2008; Lewis & Koury, 2008)

Adult content and minor consumers

The universal appeal of the *Harry Potter* books has opened fandom to a variety of readers of all ages. Due to the accessible nature of the internet, fans and outsiders alike have worried about minor children procuring mature content, while others have mobilized against fan-made content featuring underage characters in sexually explicit settings (Gooch, 2008). Rowling has stated that her issue is not with fan fiction written by “genuine Harry Potter fans” but with slash fiction featuring her underage characters (Goddard, 2003).

Several adult-content fan fiction websites, like The Restricted Section (<http://restrictedsection.org/>) and the Harry/Ron slash community on LiveJournal (<http://harry-and-ron.livejournal.com/>), feature disclaimers, urging any minor children to immediately leave the site. The Restricted Section requires readers to sign up for a membership, confirming the user is over the age of 18, before any stories can be read or reviewed, while the Harry/Ron community requires all fan fiction and fan art rated and placed behind an <lj-cut> to hide content from public-facing pages.

Conclusion

Lawrence Lessig (as cited in Fiesler, 2008) conceptualized consumers advancing fandom through technology to construct and share “remixed films, new forms of music, digital art, a new

kind of storytelling, writing, a new technology for poetry, criticism, political activism”; the participants in *Harry Potter* fandom have seen the fulfillment of this vision, by engaging with the source materials to create fan-made derivative works. Fans of the series may have come to it with a simple appreciation, but by interacting with the media and with other fans, they have given it, and themselves, a more meaningful and emotional purpose (Jenkins, 2008; Manifold, 2009).

Jenkins claimed that the popularity of the *Harry Potter* franchise grew due to the love of the fandom, and that the story has become an important part of our culture; because the fans so engrossed themselves and thoroughly engaged with the story in new ways through fan fiction, wizard rock, and other user-generated content, they are “as much a part of the future of *Harry Potter* as [J. K. Rowling and] Warner Bros.” (Lewis & Koury, 2008).

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