Chapter 1
Defining Participatory Culture

Introduction by Henry Jenkins

More and more organizations, institutions, and businesses have embraced a rhetoric of participation, yet it is abundantly clear that not all forms of participation are equally meaningful or empowering. Many of the core debates of our time center around the terms of our participation: whether meaningful participation can occur under corporately controlled circumstances, when our ability to create and share content is divorced from our capacity to participate in the governance of the platforms through which that content circulates. Does participation become exploitation when it takes place on commercial platforms where others are making money off our participation and where we often do not even own the culture we are producing?

I first used the phrase "participatory culture" in *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins 1992), when I was contrasting participation with spectatorship; I was really only making descriptive claims about the cultural logic of fandom. *Poachers* described fans (in this case, mostly female fans of science fiction and other genre television programs) not simply as consumers of mass-produced content but also as a creative community that took its raw materials from commercial entertainment texts and appropriated and remixed them as the basis for their own creative culture. My book showcased the relationship between fans, texts, and producers but also the social relations that emerged within fandom as fans created a shared space where their own creative and critical interventions could be appropriately valued. This account of fan culture drew heavily on my own experiences of almost twenty years, at that point, of involvement in fan communities.

My ideas about culture come from Raymond Williams

(1958), who defines culture as "ordinary," the "sum total of human experience," as everything that we as humans create or do together, from the most mundane aspects of our everyday lives to the most cherished expression of our artistic accomplishments or sacred beliefs. So, for me, a participatory culture describes what are sometimes very ordinary aspects of our lives in the digital age. A participatory culture is one which embraces the values of diversity and democracy through every aspect of our interactions with each other – one which assumes that we are capable of making decisions, collectively and individually, and that we should have the capacity to express ourselves through a broad range of different forms and practices.

My initial use of "participatory culture" to refer to fandom (Jenkins 1992) relied on a not fully conscious blurring between forms of cultural production and forms of social exchange; fans understood fandom to be an informal "community" defined around notions of equality, reciprocity, sociality, and diversity. The fans had a clear and (largely) shared understanding of what they were participating in and how their production and circulation of media content contributed to their shared well-being. And there was a clear tension between their culture and that of the commercial industries from which they took their raw materials. In this context, there are strong links between interpretation, production, curation, and circulation as potentially meaningful forms of participation.

The world I described in *Textual Poachers* was undergoing transition, as a community based on photocopiers, the postal service, and face-to-face encounters was giving way to electronically networked communications. At the same time, I was undergoing my own transition, starting work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1989 during the first phases of the digital revolution. My work on fandom came out, for example, alongside Howard Rheingold's early writings about virtual communities (Rheingold 1993). At MIT, I had a ringside seat for debates about the role of new media in education, the promises of digital democracy, and the creative potentials of hypertext

and interactive games. More and more people were using the concept of participatory culture to describe the new forms of cultural production and media-sharing that were taking shape in the early days of the internet. Much of what I was seeing in the emerging cyberculture reminded me of my own experiences in fandom. Critics of *Convergence Culture* (2006) have argued that I saw the new media landscape as fandom writ large, and I suspect this is a more or less fair criticism of where I was at when I wrote the book. I was not wrong to see fandom as one important element shaping contemporary participatory culture. Fans were often early adopters of new media platforms and practices and experimenters with modes of media-making. They were historically among the first to interact within geographically dispersed communities of interest. But they were simply one among many different kinds of communities that had been struggling throughout the twentieth century to gain greater access to the means of cultural production and circulation.

By the time I became involved in the MacArthur Digital Media and Learning initiative in 2005, my thinking about participatory culture operated on a much different scope and scale. I saw us entering an era when the public, at least in the developed world, would have access to much greater communicative capacity than ever before, where a growing number of institutions were embracing more participatory practices, and where the skills and knowledge to participate meaningfully were unevenly distributed. I examined a range of different sites of participatory culture in order to identify the ways they were supporting peer-to-peer mentorship and were encouraging and scaffolding participants as they refined their skills and developed greater confidence in their own voices. The white paper *Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture* (Jenkins et al. 2007), written for MacArthur, was addressed to educators and adopted a definition of participatory culture that places a strong emphasis on its pedagogical potentials:

> A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created).

Embracing Participatory Culture

Mimi: I was very influenced by Henry's work on fandom and his early writing on gaming when I was doing my dissertation work on children's software. It empowered me to pursue work on the participatory dimensions of media culture at a time when digital and online media were still emergent and not the focus of much scholarly attention. Back then, I wouldn't have positioned Henry as a researcher in my field of learning sciences, but I already saw the relevance. I was thrilled when he started doing more and more work that was explicitly educational, looking to participatory culture for a set of positive values for learning and literacy. It was probably overdetermined by our backgrounds and interests, but Henry, Howard Rheingold, and I found ourselves seeing similar kinds of opportunities for participation and learning emerging from new digital and networked media. Where Henry focused on fans, I've tended to focus on geeks, but it feels part of a similar family and a shared tendency to celebrate certain kinds of activated media engagements.

Unlike Henry, however, I came at these issues through the learning sciences, not media studies. As a graduate student at Stanford, I worked out of the Institute for Research on Learning (IRL), where Lave and Wenger (1991) had written their *Situated Learning* book together. IRL was a research institute that focused on social and cultural studies of learning. Unlike traditional views of learning, which focus on pouring content into the heads of kids in a standardized