

Documentation

Simplifying Book-to-Screen Adaptations for New Fans

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Introduction

Fans are attracted to new works of fictional media that feature rich character development, captivating story arcs, and diverse, imaginative worldbuilding. Book-to-screen adaptations such as Game of Thrones or Lord of the Rings are common examples that broadened the accessibility of the original work beyond the readers of high fantasy literature, attracting new fans because of the accessibility of the new visual medium.

However, such transmedia adaptations lead to split fanbases who may hold different interpretations and social dynamics. Changes in presentation due to the adaptation to different formats can alter key aspects of the story or characters, creating confusion and further barriers.

For new fans, this depth of existing knowledge and associated fan expectations can be overwhelming, especially if they do not have a direct social connection with existing, more experienced fans. This presents an opportunity in interaction design that can bridge this gap in knowledge and create a sense of belonging that enriches the fan community.

The goal of this project is to help new fans enjoy such adaptations they are interested in through exploration of both the narrative and supplementary content created by existing fans, both of which add context and depth to their overall fan experience.

Scope

Book to screen adaptations

To ground the project in a concrete example, this project focuses only on adaptations of books to other kinds of media. Lord of the Rings is a prime example of a media franchise that comprises a deep well of source information (lore) as well as enduring appeal among a diverse set of fans who have been introduced to it through different adaptations, e.g. books, movies, a TV show, and video games.

New fans without social links in the fandom

Recognizing that most audiences rely on recommendations from trusted friends and family when trying new media and seek out social connections within existing fan communities to use as entry points or guides, the target users for this project are those who lack these pre-existing ties. This user group can often miss out on the communal insights and shared interpretation that connected fans enjoy, which can hinder their full appreciation and understanding of the narrative.

Amazon Prime Video X-Ray

Further focusing on the experience of a particular streaming service such as Amazon Prime allows for bypassing questions about content licensing and seeding initial content. The interaction design can be built around the experience of enjoying supplementary content on a platform that is already primed to do so, utilizing a familiar interface to introduce novel features catering specifically to the needs of new fans. This further enhances the network of entertainment services Amazon already has such as Audible, IMDb, and Twitch, and of course Prime Video X-Ray.

Project outcome

The outcome of this project is the research into the experience of new fans, outlined in this document, along with a prototype showing the enhanced features that Prime Video X-Ray could offer in the form of additional community engagement.

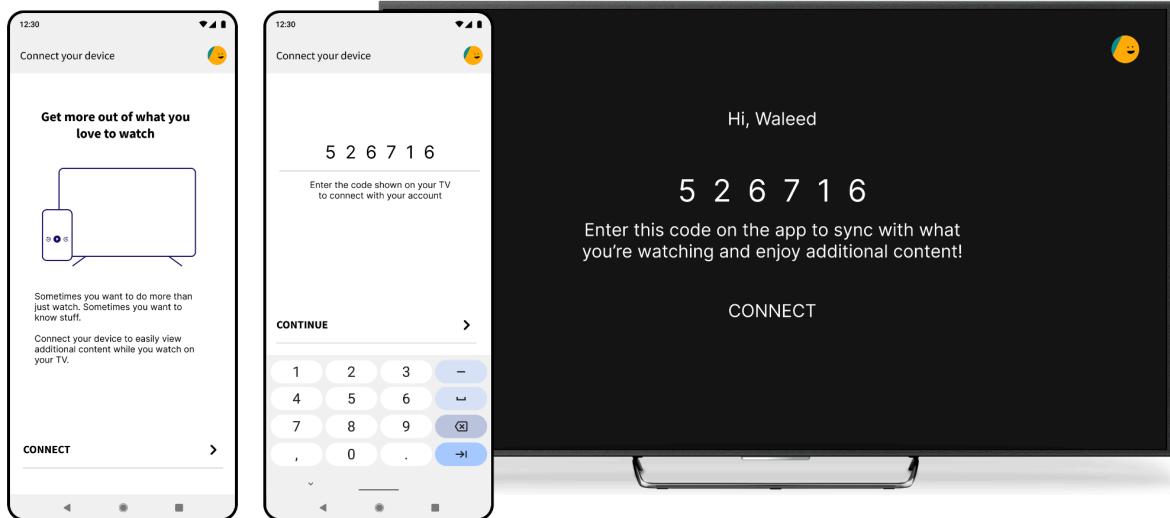


Prime Video X-Ray is extended with a Second Screen companion app, which lets viewers access in-depth supplementary content without interrupting the viewing experience. Fans can browse through additional information and annotations about what they're currently watching and interact with other fans without being limited to only doing that while they're actually watching. Features like community notes and watch parties give new fans quick access to contextual information when they need it and support their engagement with the existing fan community at a level they are comfortable with, while also involving more active fans in the process to share what they enjoy with more people.

The [prototype is linked here](#), and the features are highlighted below.

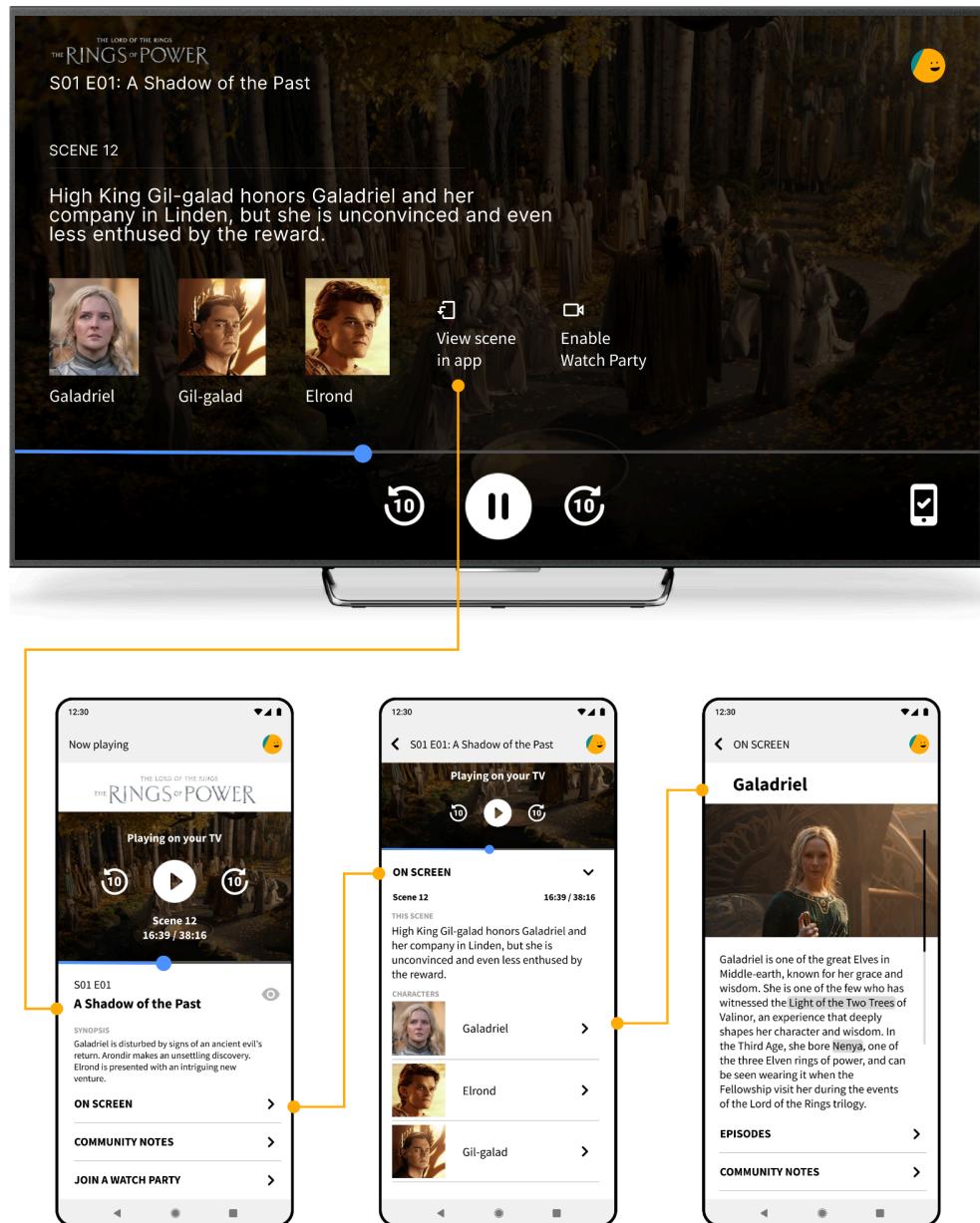
How it works

Connecting the screens



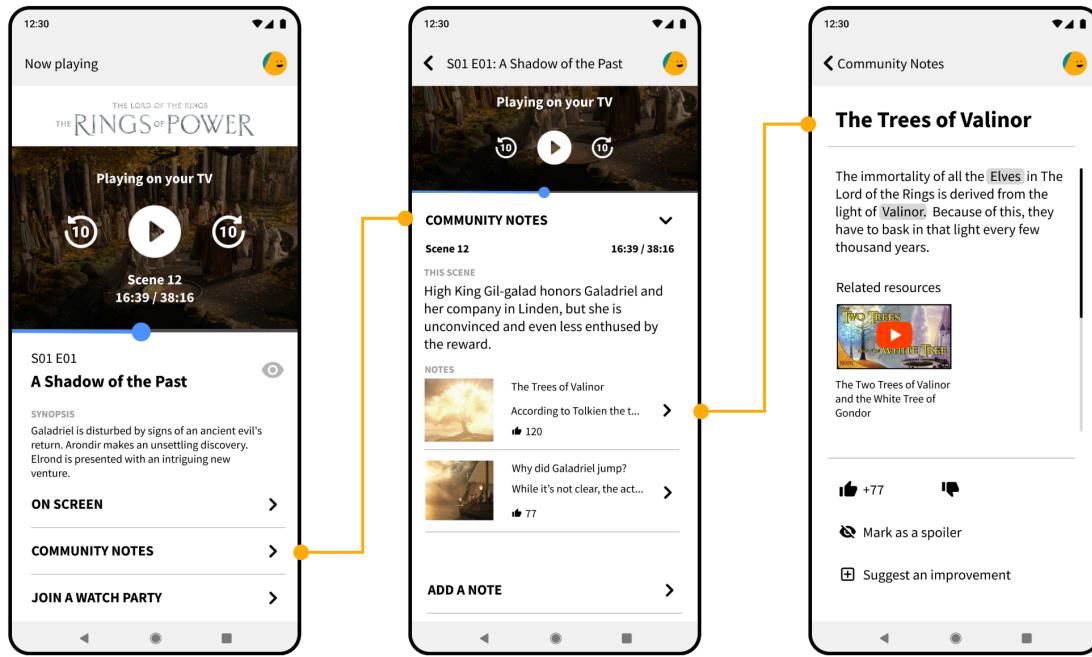
The Second Screen app and the account watching on the larger screen (TV or laptop) are connected together either by logging in to the same account, or using an interaction such as a shared access code to connect the two. This allows the app to track what part of the movie or episode the viewer is currently watching and to show information specific to that scene.

Who's on screen



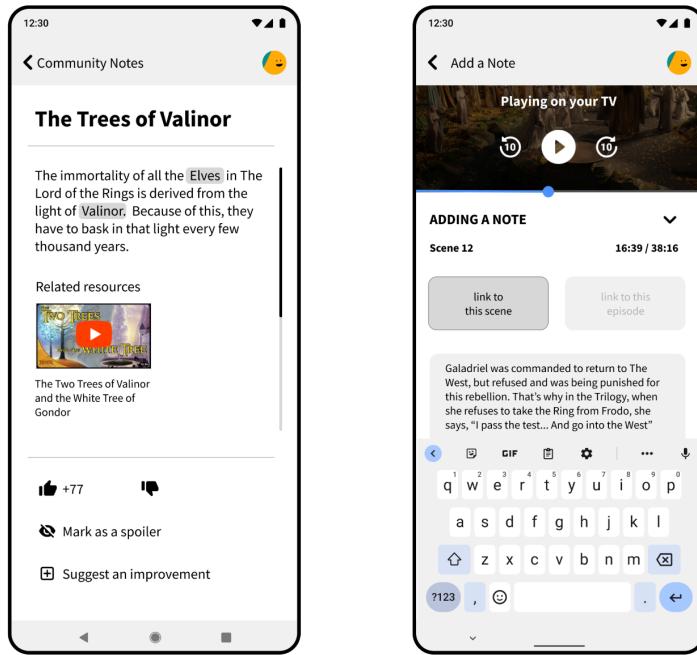
The Second Screen allows viewers to access more information than is possible on the large TV interface. Character bios can contain more contextual information about their history, linking to other relevant community notes and which episodes they appear in.

Multimedia community notes about important details



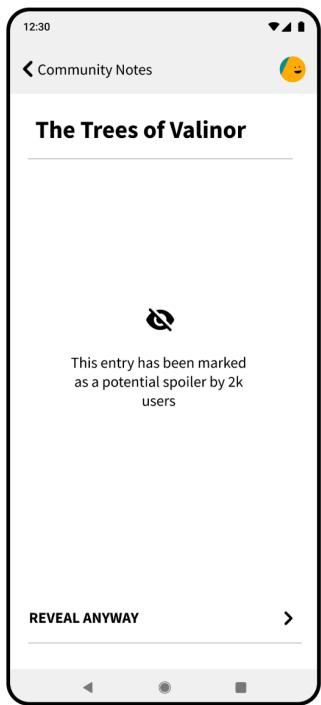
Viewers can read more detailed information about other important aspects of the mythology or lore. These are enhanced by links to other community notes as well as other useful resources that fans want to share, such as explainer videos on YouTube or other multimedia like maps and timelines.

Adding new or improving existing community notes



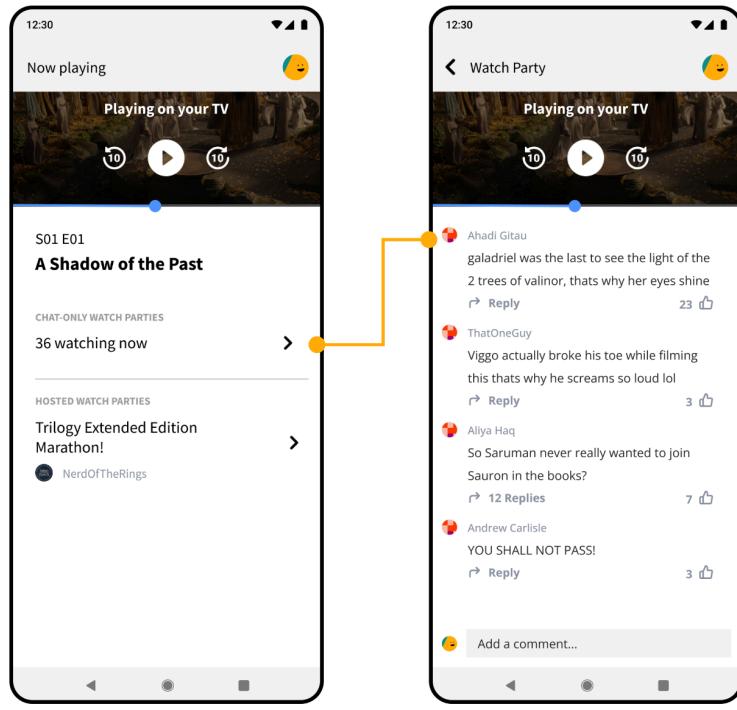
Fans can vote on community notes to highlight what they find useful and interesting. For those that know something they want to share, they can suggest improvements to existing notes or add new ones that can be linked to a particular scene or character.

Controlling how much you see



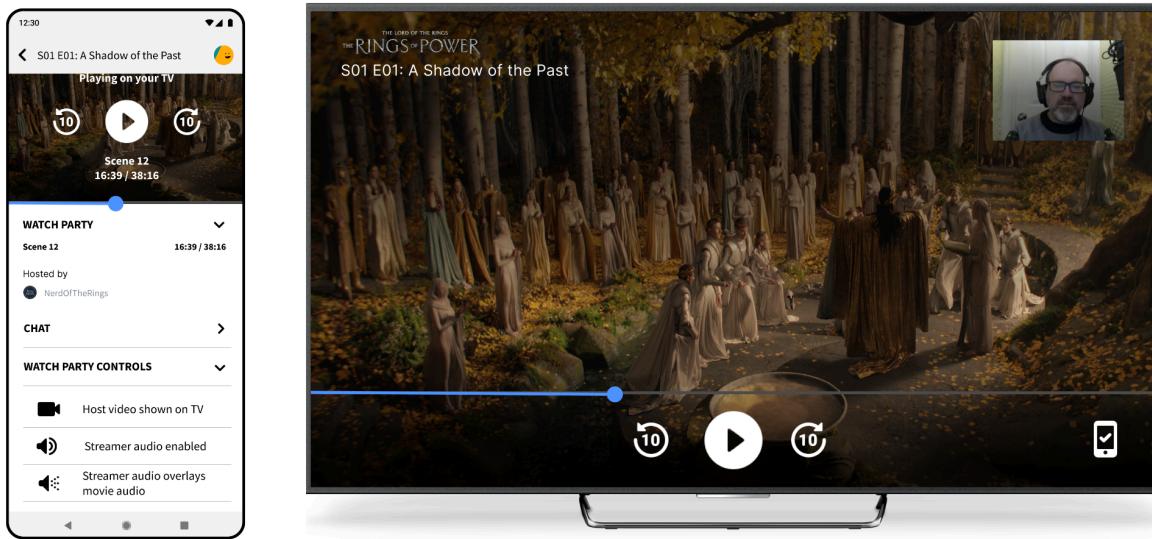
Viewers vary in their tolerance for spoilers. Certain characters or explanations might reveal things that you don't want to know yet, and these can be marked as spoilers which viewers are then able to either back away from or reveal anyway.

Joining a watchparty



Viewers can join a watchparty with others who are watching at the same time, allowing them to interact with other fans in a low-engagement channel. This can be a great way to experience the excitement of watching something together with others who are enjoying it as much as yourself.

Watching a hosted watchparty



In addition to regular chat-based watchparties, viewers can also join hosted watch parties, which are organized and run by content creators who are more actively engaged in the fan community. Viewers are able to control how the streamer's audio and video overlays with the main program. Streamers on the other hand can build a following and engage with other fans without having to worry about content licensing and synchronization challenges as they would need to do when running watchparties on third-party platforms like YouTube.

Defining key concepts

Academic discourse in fan studies is divided into either understanding fan identities and representations, or fan practices. Through an initial literature review I was able to create working definitions of key concepts in these domains that are relevant to this project. This helped create boundaries on what kind of challenge this project aims to address, and for what kind of fan.

Fan

A “fan” can be defined as an individual who has a strong and enduring affinity towards any particular media. Henry Jenkins (2012) sees fans as consumers of media who are also participating in the experience by creating and contributing to it in the form of communities to discuss the media, creating fan art, or writing fan fiction, etc. As such there is a creative as well as communal aspect to the fan identity.

Fandom

A “fandom” refers to the community of fans who collect and engage with a particular media they enjoy. It is a social group that holds shared interests in specific aspects of popular culture. Identifying and participating in a fandom is a form of self-expression and serves as a marker of “social attitudes and personality characteristics” (Groene & Hettinger, 2013). Participating in a fandom is a form of participatory culture, where the fans are involved in the creation and sharing of content and ideas. Because being a fan is as much a social aspect as it is of self-expression, the relationship between a fan and their fandom is important to establish and maintain, and may be different based on their familiarity with that fandom.

New fan

A “new fan” is a person who has recently begun exploring and engaging with some media that they enjoy. These new fans are in the initial stages of exploring the content and the associated fandom, and so while they may have a passion for the content, they do not have a full understanding of the content or the social norms of the surrounding fandom. New fans often approach media through adaptations and may lack connections within existing fan communities, making their exploration more challenging due to limited prior knowledge and social support within the fandom.

Existing fan

An “existing fan” is an individual who has spent a longer time engaging with the media and so has a more comprehensive understanding of the content. Existing fans are typically more engaged with the material as well as the fandom, and so have an influence on the social

norms of participating in that fandom. Plante et al (2020) discuss this in more detail in the context of elitism among fandoms, where one group of fans may believe they are superior in some way to the other group. This could be a result of knowing more, being more engaged, or having access to the creators. In the context of this project, existing fans could be either those familiar with the original work (eg. readers of the Game of Thrones books before the TV show), or viewers of the TV show who are more familiar with the background and elements of the story and plot.

Adaptation

Adaptations are the focus of this project. This is the practice of translating a narrative from one form of media to another, e.g. a series of books like Game of Thrones becoming a TV series. This translation retains essential elements of the original such as plot, characters, and central themes but adapts them in a way that is suitable to the new medium. This often requires modifications to fit the unique demands and strengths of the new format.

Observing Fan interactions

My first research activity was to conduct observation of online activities that were already happening around particular fan communities. I selected two distinct subreddits: r/witcher (over 1 million members), and r/FoundationTV (approx 29,000 members). These are centered around media that (a) qualified according to the definition of complex media as mentioned above, and (b) were also familiar to me. Specifically I wanted to identify issues that casual or new fans were facing, and since these were popular communities focused around only that particular media only, it would give me a more focused snapshot of the community.

The r/witcher subreddit is an active community that discusses the Witcher books, the PC game trilogy, and the Netflix TV show adaptation. The longevity and activity of this subreddit can be attributed to its broad focus, which encapsulates multiple forms of media under the Witcher franchise. A notable meta-debate within the community involves whether discussions should be split to cater to specific media formats, reflecting the subreddit's diverse interests. This community has since merged with another alternate r/thewitcher.

Contrastingly, r/FoundationTV is primarily centered around the Apple TV adaptation of Isaac Asimov's Foundation book series. While it is a smaller and less active community compared to r/witcher, being much newer, it similarly engages in discussions that span different media formats, though such occurrences are less frequent, perhaps because it is geared more towards fans of the TV adaptation. Posts can be tagged according to their relevance to different seasons, books, or general meta discussion.

Common points of discussion across both communities were centered around:

Transmedia Content

- Fans ask whether prior exposure to one form of media, such as books or games, is necessary to understand and enjoy other adaptations, indicating a need for guidance on entry points.
- Questions about the ‘right’ order in which to consume the media suggest a desire for curated experiences that enhance understanding and enjoyment.
- Comparisons between different adaptations highlight an interest in consistency and fidelity to source material

Characters, Storylines, and Themes

- A recurring theme is confusion regarding the chronology of events, often complicated by adaptations across different media.
- Requests for explanations of character or faction arcs suggest a need for accessible summaries or breakdowns that clarify motivations and backstories.
- Discussions about the lore and mythology of the universe suggest fans are interested in the depth of world-building and a need for resources that compile this complex information.
- Debates over canon and “correct” interpretations.

Fandom Dynamics

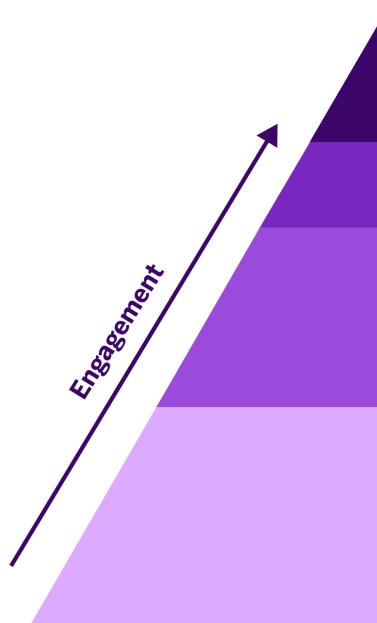
- Sharing of fan theories represents a significant aspect of fan engagement, where fans collaboratively predict or interpret events.
- The prevalence of fan-created content, such as artwork and cosplay, demonstrates investment and level of engagement of fans in the narrative universe.
- Discussion on the themes and ideologies of the creators indicates an active engagement with the narrative on a deeper, personal level.
- Meta discussions about the fan community itself show a self-reflective nature within the fandom.

Levels of Fan engagement

Another theme that emerged from the initial observation was the varying levels of fan engagement. Some participants were clearly less invested and looked for simplified, accessible content to help them catch up without overwhelming detail. However there was a

certain subset that sought richer, more detailed discussions and resources that can offer deeper insights and interpretations.

Fans exhibit different levels of engagement with the content of the media and with their interactions with the fandom. These could range from casual viewers to deeply invested fans, and this level of engagement can influence how they interact with the media and how they participate in the fan communities.



Fandom (2022) conducted a study categorizing fans into distinct identity segments. This segmentation helps in understanding the diverse ways fans interact with and contribute to media narratives. These levels are:

Casual Fans
Enjoy the content in a mostly passive manner. Their engagement typically involves watching, reading, or listening without active participation in broader community discussions or fandom activities. They represent the entry point into the fan spectrum, often consuming content without deeper involvement.

Active Fans

Exhibit a higher level of engagement. They are often participants in online forums, discussions, and social media related to their fandom. Active fans may also attend conventions and are likely to consume additional content such as news, commentaries, and podcasts. Their engagement is characterized by a more interactive and community-oriented approach.

Creator Fans

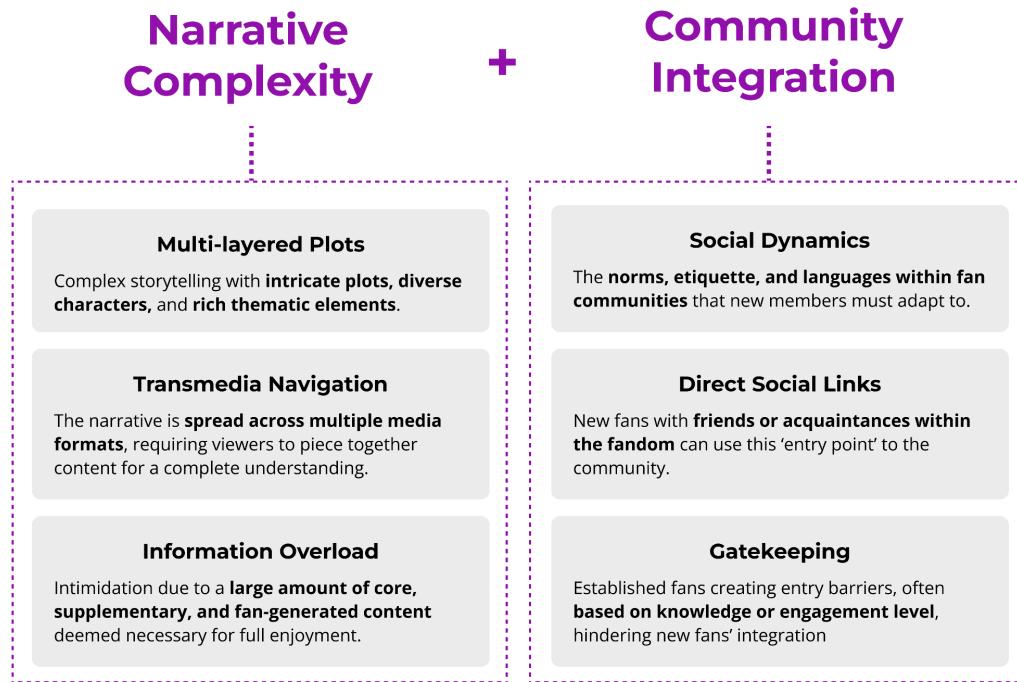
Taking engagement a step further, creator fans contribute original content to the fandom. This group engages in creating fan art, writing fan fiction, making memes, or producing other materials inspired by the original media. Their creative contributions often add to the expansion and richness of the narrative universe.

Super Fans

Immersed in the fan community and often recognized as authorities or influencers. They may manage fan forums, websites, or social media pages, playing a significant role in shaping discussions and perspectives within the fan community. Interestingly, this group may resist the label of ‘super fan,’ reflecting the complex nature of fan identity.

Mapping the experience of New Fans

The experience of new fans emerged as a potential gap in the literature review. While there is a lot of research on fan culture and participatory media as a whole, the specific journey and challenges of new fans entering an already established fandom has not been studied. The challenges that arise for New Fans can be categorized into those related to understanding the content, and those related to their participation in the fandom or community of existing fans.

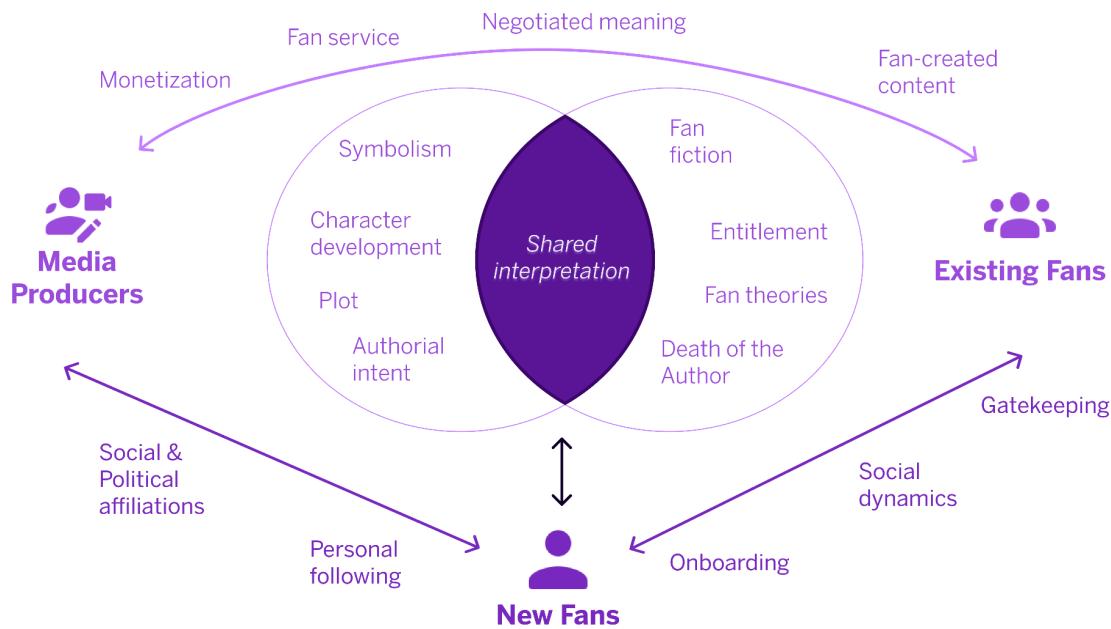


This is further complicated by a variety of factors that influence how a New Fan interacts with media. For example, whether a New Fan approaches new content in the first place is influenced by whether the politics of that content and its creators aligns with theirs.

As Fans interact with content, they engage in an act of communal sense-making (Jenkins, 2013) which is influenced both by the authorial intent as well as creative acts by other fans, such as interpretation or fan fiction. Third, the experience of new fans is shaped by their perception of and interaction with existing fans. For example, Jenkins (2013) and Plante et al

(2017) have written about factors such as shame and elitism that fans feel in owning their identity as fans.

This ecosystem is mapped in a diagram below, which attempts to synthesize the various factors and influences that shape the experience of new fans.



Becoming a New Fan

The experience of new fans is mediated by both the content and the existing community. According to Jenkins (2008), this is rooted in a “shared interpretation,” where both factors shape a collective understanding and appreciation. Expanding this idea, it’s clear that new fans often face the dual challenge of grasping complex narratives and assimilating into established fan communities with their own norms and knowledge hierarchies.

My first round of interviews were aimed at understanding how new fans approach a particular fandom, what challenges they face in understanding complex media, as well as to identify the strategies they use to integrate.

The following key insights emerged:

- Fans seek **personalization** for their recommendations and explanations

- Fans tend to avoid online resources for **fear of spoilers**
- Difficulties when there is **no direct social connection** with the fandom
- **Community insights** help fans with understanding and enjoyment
- **Uncertainty and doubt** when interacting with existing fans

Secondary themes

Other secondary themes that emerged from the interviews include

- **Awareness without engagement:** some fans are aware of particular complex media long before engaging with it, suggesting hesitation due to various reasons
- **Different hooks:** some fans are drawn by the compelling storylines and character depth, while some are drawn in solely by peer recommendations or a creator/actor they like
- **Initial barriers:** Time constraints and the overwhelming volume of content are deterrents for new fans
- **Value of peer guidance:** Fans make some attempts to connect with fan communities either online or through direct social connections
- **Previous community experiences:** previous experiences of others or their own shape how receptive they are willing to be to the fan community

Defining the user group

Several participants spoke about being introduced to new media by their social networks, additionally highlighting the role of friends and family as they continued through the fandom, often customizing or suggesting supplementary material or viewing orders. This aligns with Jenkins' (2006) research, which emphasizes the role that social interactions and connections play in the fan experience.

New fans often start without preconceived notions or biases, potentially offering fresh perspectives. However, the interviews highlighted that these fans can find it more challenging to get familiarized with the content when doing so on their own. Although they reported a sense of satisfaction and independence when doing so, uncertainty about where to start, which resources to trust, and how to interpret vast amounts of fan-driven content, was a challenge.

A pattern that emerged was that those fans without a direct social connection to a fandom faced additional challenges.

Exploring different approaches

Initial research uncovered two primary problem areas, i.e. narrative complexity and social integration with the existing fandom. There are 2 distinct approaches that can address these distinct challenges:

1. Independent exploration

- a. Objective: Empower new fans to independently explore and understand complex lore and narrative
- b. Outcome:
 - i. New fans gain a better understanding of their interest without feeling overwhelmed
 - ii. New fans do not have to rely on existing fans for onboarding or orientation
 - iii. Encourage a deeper appreciation of the narrative

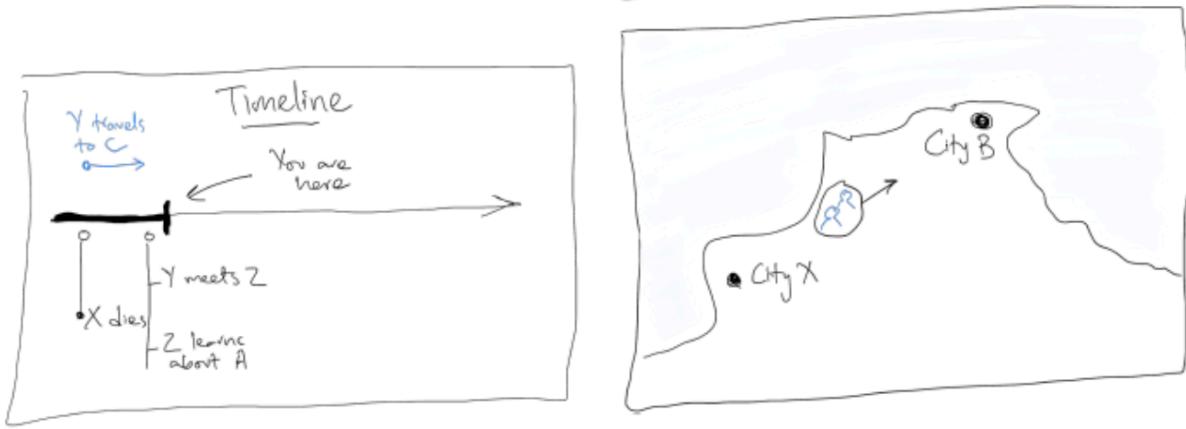
2. Community integration

- a. Objective: Assist new fans in integrating with existing fans by creating a sense of community and belonging
- b. Outcome:
 - i. Promote an inclusive and welcoming fan culture
 - ii. Reduce barriers to social integration

While my initial ideation was a mix of both approaches, my inclination was towards building a design that encourages independent exploration. However testing showed that there needed to be a better balance between this being engaging yet not overwhelming.

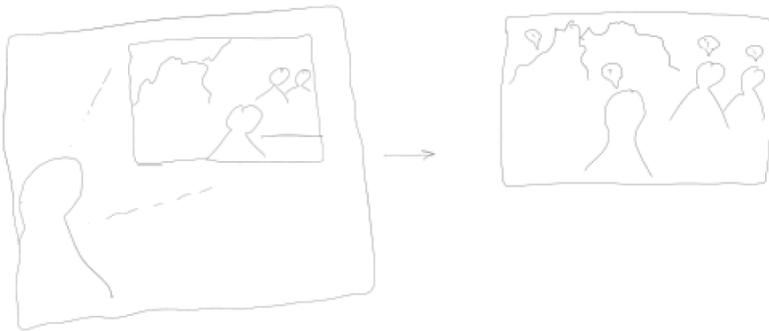
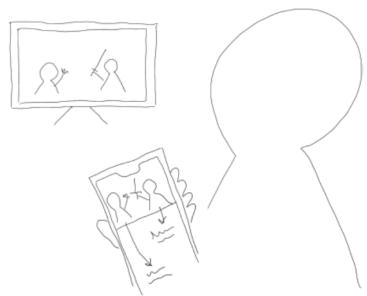
Independent exploration

Narrative Maps



Explore a visual representation of key events, characters, and themes, allowing new fans to understand the progression of events, relationships between characters, and major plot events.

Contextual Annotations



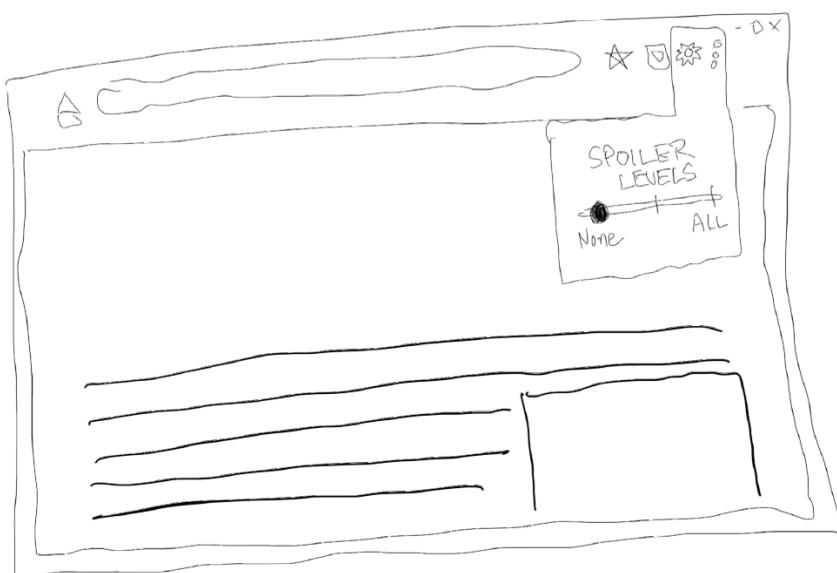
Community-generated, spoiler-free annotations layered onto media content to provide real-time insights and clarifications.

Welcome Kits



Along the same vein as the interactive narrative maps, this concept provides a more physical or tactile approach to building familiarity with the narrative universe. It could feature things like a physical map highlighting key locations or journeys, character cards, place stickers, physical markers to signify characters or locations that can be moved around on the map, as well as booklets or other formats of information to provide a set of information that new fans could find helpful. This kit could also contain other items like stickers or collectibles to help integrate new fans into the participatory and performative act of displaying branded merchandise.

Spoiler-Control



A browser extension that allows new fans to filter out spoilers on social media or fandom websites. Users can set the level of information they want to see based on how far they've progressed in the narrative.

In-Universe Newspaper



Image generated by DALL-E 3 using the prompt “A screenshot of the front page of the Mordor Times from Middle Earth”

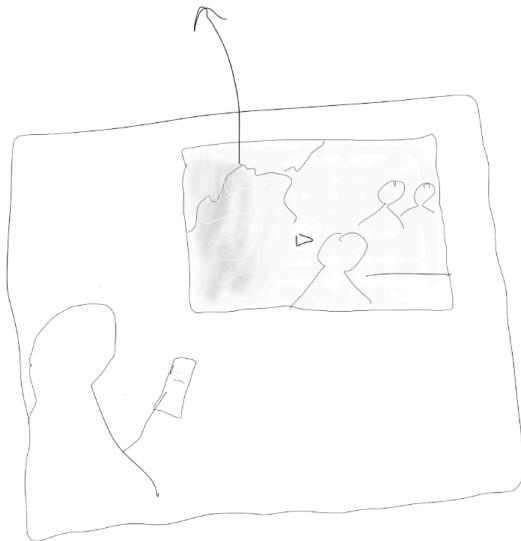
A newspaper that presents events from the narrative universe in the style of current events news. Eg. 'Mordor Times' for The Lord of the Rings universe, providing immersive storytelling and updates on narrative developments.

Time-Capsule Social Media Browsing

An app or website feature that lets fans experience social media as it was at the time of the original release of a show or movie. This historical perspective inspired by the Wayback Machine would offer new fans insights into fan reactions and discussions as they unfolded in real-time.

Character Recaps

Moiraine
Aes Sedai
Cannot use magic
presently



Recaps specifically based on particular characters that show the story and background up to the point in the narrative the viewer asks for a character recap. This would assist viewers recall important moments or details about particular characters on screen.

Community integration

Fan Matching or Buddy system



A platform that pairs a New fan with an existing fan who has a higher level of knowledge about the narrative universe.

Watch Party and discussions



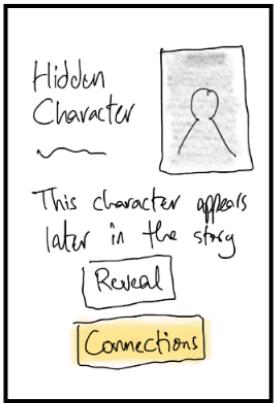
A platform that lets viewers attend watch parties online or in person, helping them find others who are also interested in the same fandom but may be at a different level of engagement or involvement with the community.

Guided Tours

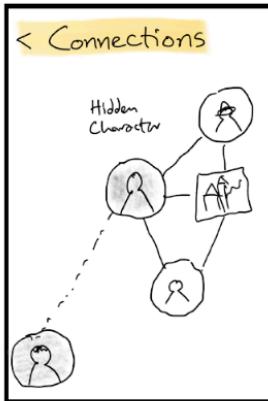
①



②



③



Established fans create multimedia guides or curated experiences for newbies to navigate complex narrative media and fandoms

Initial Concept: Screen Overlays

I developed the concept of contextual annotations further, utilizing an on-screen interface similar to Amazon X-Ray to deliver relevant information about what was happening on screen.

Story Recaps



On demand recaps of the story so far. Traditionally shows place key scenes from previous episodes or seasons in short recaps before new episodes, but since these are a deliberate storytelling tool, they are not always there, often contain snippets of limited scope and so do not always serve the support function new fans might need them for. The proposed idea draws from the popularity of recap channels and podcasts on YouTube, letting fans recap the story up to the point at which the recap is requested.

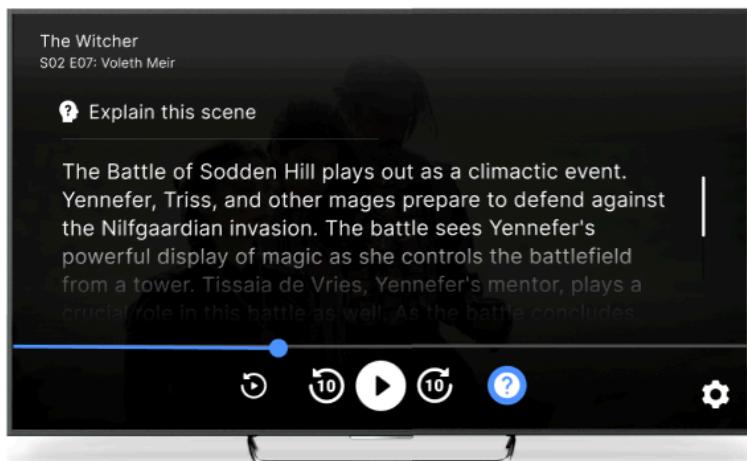
Character Recaps



Fans often have questions about specific characters and how they play into the story and their relationship with other characters. Similar to the on-demand Story Recaps described above the on-screen menu allows viewers to select one of the characters that are currently

appearing on screen and generate a character-based recap on demand. This approach is shown to be technically feasible by Bost et al. (2019)

Explain this Scene



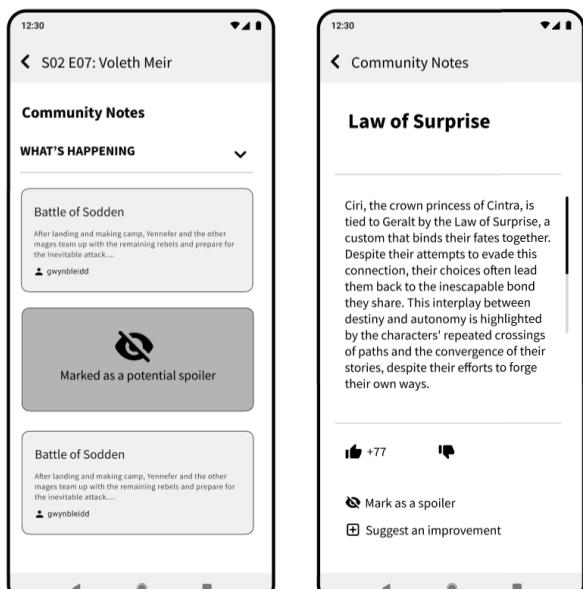
Experimentation with generative LLMs allow for on-demand generation of contextual and highly customized summaries that can be used to explain the events or happenings in a particular scene. These can be contextualized by information about the media, how far along the viewer is in the narrative, and what point in time this explanation is requested.

Community Notes



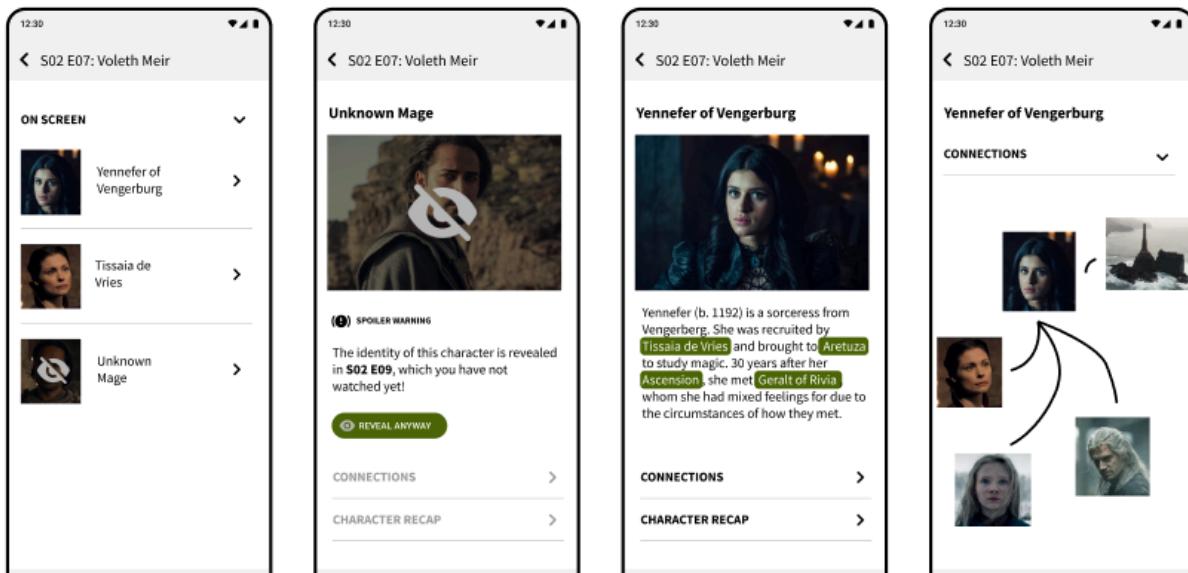
Extending on the X-Ray concept, the Community Notes are user-generated annotations that fans can contribute to help viewers gain additional insight and context about events on screen as well as other concepts like character arcs and narrative themes. Being a community

driven feature, there is a degree of moderation entrusted to the fan community itself in terms of things like ‘upvoting’ or marking entries as potential spoilers that some viewers may not want to see because they have not reached a particular point in the narrative as yet.



These are paired with the corresponding community features on the companion app which lets viewers browse these entries in more detail on a more accessible device. This also allows further interactions such as upvoting, suggesting improvements, or flagging particular entries as spoilers up to certain points in the narrative. Further features of the companion app are described below.

Sidebar



The ‘sidebar’ companion app presents the same information as the on-TV experience but in a more accessible form factor. Some feedback included how viewers used mobile devices while watching on larger screens to supplement or look up certain details without pausing, and this type of interaction can be further explored.

Scoping to book-to-screen adaptations

The initial focus of this project was “complex narrative media”. This included book-to-screen adaptations but also transmedia content, in which the storytelling unfolds across different media platforms and formats. This cross-platform, or transmedia, form of entertainment media creates a multi-layered narrative which contains:

- elaborate plot lines
- diverse array of characters
- extensive backstories
- various themes and symbolic elements

This typically means audiences need to be able to engage with a range of media types and sources to be able to experience the entire story as it spans various channels such as TV shows, movies, books, comics, games, and online content.

Complexity in Transmedia content

An illustrative example of transmedia content is the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) or the Star Wars franchise, where characters and storylines are spread across different movies and TV shows. For example, part of the development of the main character and story of the TV show *The Mandalorian* occurs in another TV show called *The Book of Boba Fett*. Similarly, the character Dr. Strange appears in his own origin story movie, but a significant portion of his character development occurs in the *Spiderman* and *Avengers* movies. More engaged fans therefore feel a need to experience the breadth of this content.

This adds to the complexity, making it challenging for newcomers to track and understand each character’s role and evolution within some larger story being told (Pearson, 2010). Content producers embed various themes, symbols, and motifs into the narrative. Long (2007) writes that such thematic depth requires analytical thinking and often community engagement for a full unpacking. Jenkins (2006) and Booth (2008) highlight that this requires audiences to have a certain level of media literacy to navigate and synthesize information from these diverse sources, but also requires significant engagement with the rest of the fan community.

Challenges with existing fan communities

Fans at all levels of engagement utilize content created by other fans to enrich or aid their enjoyment (Jenkins, 2006). Pearson (2010) notes that this can sometimes lead to perceived barriers to entry where new fans feel excluded from in-depth conversations and

community-created content, especially when they don't have all the different pieces of the transmedia narrative at hand.

An interview participant spoke at length about why they did not enjoy the newer Star Wars animated shows because of this, stating that they did not have the time in life anymore to obsess over every piece of content in the universe, and when they turned to online resources, often felt like an outsider in a community they used to enjoy participating in previously.

This underlined the importance of community in the consumption and interpretation of complex narrative media, but these two different types have their own set of unique challenges that I could not address at the same time. I made the decision to focus only on book adaptations.

Different levels of engagement

A big question I had was what type of user I was designing for. From my initial interviews, I had decided to focus on new fans who lacked an existing direct social connection into the fan community. However these types of fans are inherently less engaged with the material, especially in the early stages of their interest, which I was hoping to support.

This focus allowed me to consider features that support new fans during the critical initial stages, where building a connection to the material and community can facilitate the journey from passive viewers into active fans.

Concept testing and revisions

Adapting interview approach

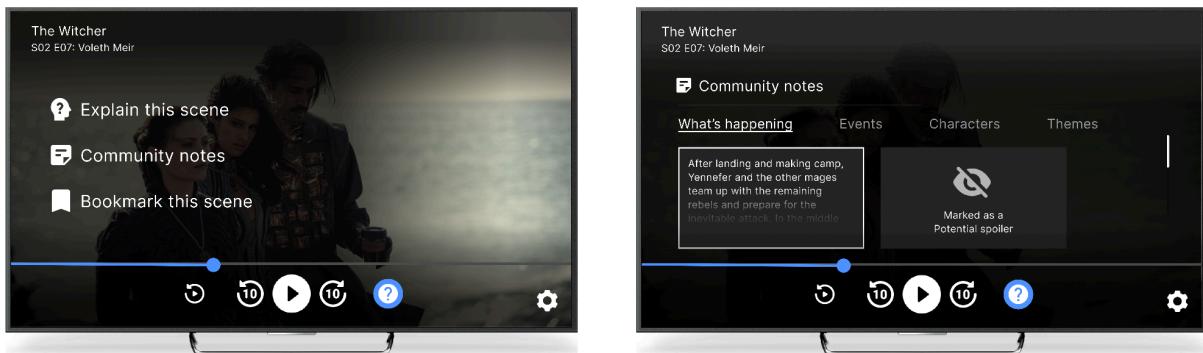
One of the big challenges I faced with this project was researching with participants who fit the bill of "new fans" who were exploring media without an existing social connection in the fan community. Therefore for much of my testing and interviews in the Spring semester I adapted by not limiting myself to talk to only those kinds of users, but to broaden the kind of conversations I was having. While this was not the exact user group I was designing for, it still allowed me to learn about how people enjoy fictional media.

New Fans

Objective

- Test efficacy of concepts from Fall 2023
- Get feedback on the medium of TV screen + mobile device

My concept from Fall 2023 was focused solely on independent exploration. While the content was sourced from the community, there was very limited interaction between new fans and existing fans by design. This involved a pause screen overlay which would let viewers gain additional context and information about what they were currently watching.



Based on initial feedback, the primary question being tested in this concept was whether this level of information was welcome and parseable in the form of overlays on a large screen. The content itself was incomplete.

I tested with 3 participants who had not watched or played the Witcher TV show or video games but were aware of both. Two were interview participants I had talked to earlier about their interest in Lord of the Rings and one is an acquaintance who is a fan of Dune, so while they all have an interest in similar complex media, they were new to the content in the test scenario as well as to the concept itself.

The goal was to assess how effectively the overlay and app enhance your comprehension of complex plot points and deepen your engagement with the show's narrative.

You are watching the Netflix show *The Witcher* for the first time and in this episode, we find out that the Emperor of Nilfgaard has attacked the Northern kingdoms to find Ciri because of the prophecy of the Elder Blood. There seems to be some special connection between the Emperor and Ciri. Your goal is to understand the context and significance of why the Emperor is doing this and how they might be connected. Use the available features of the pause screen overlay to gather this information.

Because there was no real way to recreate an actual moment when a fan would be intrigued or stimulated enough to do this on their own in this quick and dirty setup, the prompt sets up

the curiosity for an event (the invasion) and the motivation behind it. In the first round, the participant did not see any need for character recaps, so I added a prompt about the connection between the characters.

Outcomes

From these sessions as well as discussions with several peers, I learned that while most participants liked the idea of story recaps, there were some questions about how they would actually work. While technically feasible, their utility was not clear. I also got a lot of feedback on the format of the information being not user friendly

In summary:

- Most participants like the character + story recaps
- Some question the scalability and feasibility of recaps generated on-the-fly
- Mixed feedback on the informational screens which show community explanations and notes about the scene
 - Too much information to show on a TV screen; companion app seems more feasible
 - Confusion about spoilers and how to avoid or mark them
 - Don't want to be distracted or pulled out of the narrative
 - Source of information and interaction with existing fans was unclear

Based on this information, I wanted to learn more about

1. The use of second screens amongst new fans (below)
2. Motivation of existing fans to participate in a platform like this (pg 25)

Use of Second Screens

Research by Nielsen in 2019 suggests that 71% of U.S. adults report using a secondary digital device while watching TV. 45% report using them “very often” or “always” to look up information relating to the content or post about it on social media (2018). Nee & Dozier (2017) found that about 24% of US adults use a second device while watching TV, a number they related to early adopters at that time. They also found that “increased second screen activity positively correlates with greater engagement with the televised content” (Nee & Dozier, 2017)

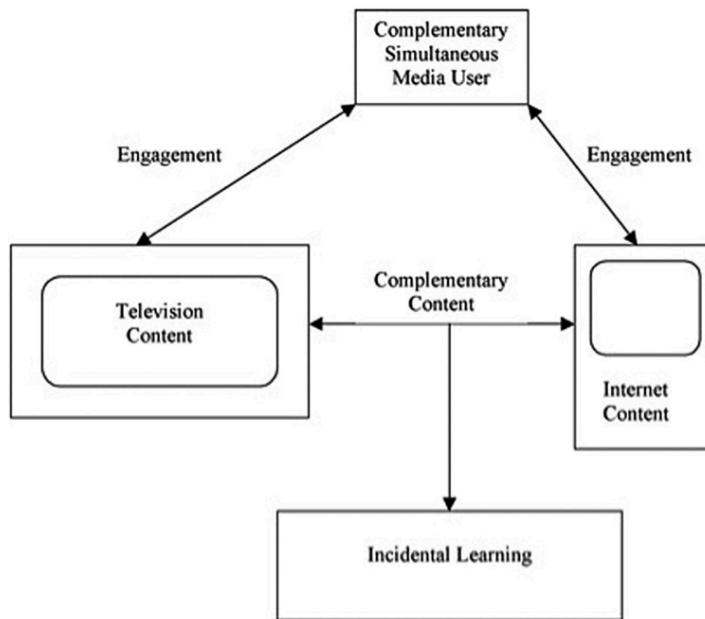


Figure 1. Model linking frequency of complementary simultaneous media usage, engagement, and incidental learning (Nee & Dozier, 2017)

This research is limited in applicability here because the type of content was not defined, and given how media consumption habits change the prevalence may be outdated. There has been subsequent research on news and sports viewers, but not specifically for fictional media which would support this project further.

Secondly, there is a component of interaction versus participation. Jenkins (2006) differentiates between the two on the basis of whether the creator or consumer has more control: for example, voting by audiences at home during a live show such as American Idol (interaction), or looking up related information during a talk show (participation). Research by Fandom.com (2022) categorizes fans into distinct segments based on engagement levels. New Fans can be defined on a spectrum as either Casual, i.e. consume without active participation in community; or Active, i.e. more engaged with content as well as possibly interacting with the fan community to enhance their enjoyment.

Interviews to learn more about second screen usage

Objective

To learn more about second screen usage when watching media, I conducted informal research within my network and spoke to 10 people in unstructured conversations around this topic. Questions related to viewing habits when watching media alone.

- What kind of media content they watched
- What devices they used, and whether it differed based on the type of content
- Whether they used their phones or other devices at the same time
- What they used their second device for

Outcome

- The device used to watch media was different, with some using their laptops or tablets and only a few using a larger TV. The setup asked about their viewing habits when alone, and many have roommates.
- All reported occasionally using their phones at the same time for purposes beyond a random text message or notification, however the duration and purpose varied based on what was being watched.
 - When watching narrative media, some people used their phone to look up content but reported pausing the main video to do so.
 - For other content like YouTube videos or sports, second device usage was more common and unrelated to the content being watched.

Existing fans

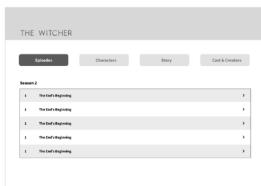
Creating Community Notes

Objective

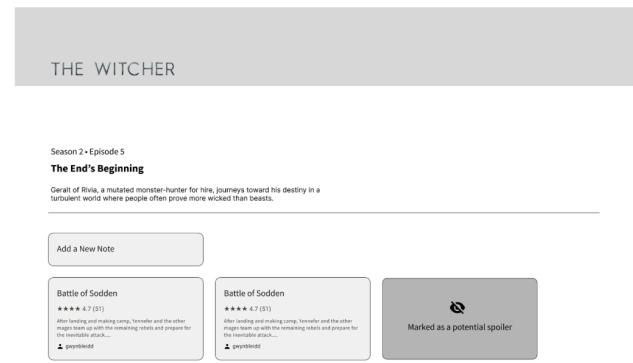
- To test how existing fans would create community notes

To test this I conducted a brief walkthrough of my pause screen overlay concept with two of the interview participants who are content creators on YouTube. To get their feedback on the flow for existing fans adding community notes, I created some basic wireframes.

User selects a particular episode



View existing notes for this episode + Add New



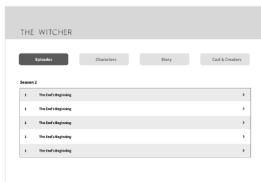
Enter multimedia note



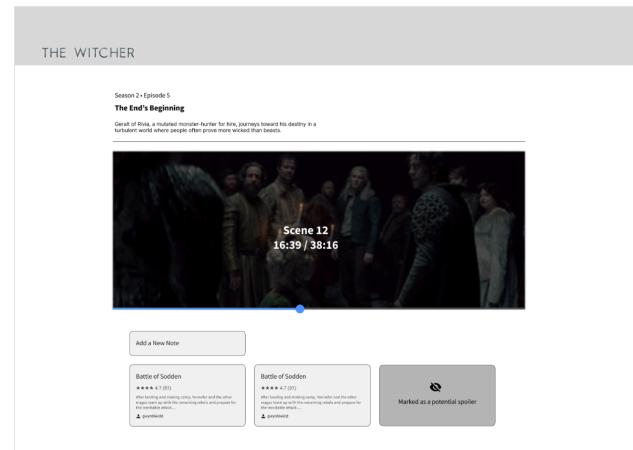
Overall this flow was not well received as it did not provide enough grounding in the content to be useful. Participants said that without a way to connect the notes to particular points in the episode, there would be no way of making it contextually useful. They suggested that allowing users to attach them at specific timestamps or to particular scenes in the episode would make it more relevant and immediately useful, especially if this content was meant to be viewed on a large screen.

In a second iteration (below), I incorporated a seek bar to allow users to select a particular timestamp in the episode.

User selects a particular episode



View existing notes for this episode + Add New based on timestamp



Enter multimedia note



I also wanted to know whether existing fans would take the time to do something like this in the first place, and sought to get feedback on this through interviews.

Interviews to understand content creator motivation

Objective

- Motivations behind fan-generated content
- How existing fans respond to adaptations/differences across media formats
- Interactions within the fan community, focusing on differences in levels of engagement and knowledge

Outcome

Interviews conducted with 3 content creators on YouTube who make explainer videos relating to Lord of the Rings lore have given a range of insights. While all displayed a passion for the source content and a desire to share their interest and knowledge, their interest in interacting with new fans or integrating new fans was not apparent. Secondly, they all had complaints about YouTube in general, but overall seemed satisfied with the platforms they currently use to interact with other fans, and as such the appeal of a new form of community interaction platform as I had imagined does not emerge.

Content licensing

While adding the seek bar made the process of creating notes about specific points in the episode more intuitive, it would require playing the actual media on the platform, leading to content licensing questions. All of the YouTube content creators I spoke with mentioned this was a big problem, and having to work around content licensing issues.

Compensation

When asked about their motivations, all of the interviewees spoke about the joy and satisfaction they felt in sharing their knowledge with other fans. One exception was explicitly not interested in interacting with new fans, but both others mentioned wanting to create content to help others appreciate the depth and breadth of the source material, which inevitably involves reaching new audiences.

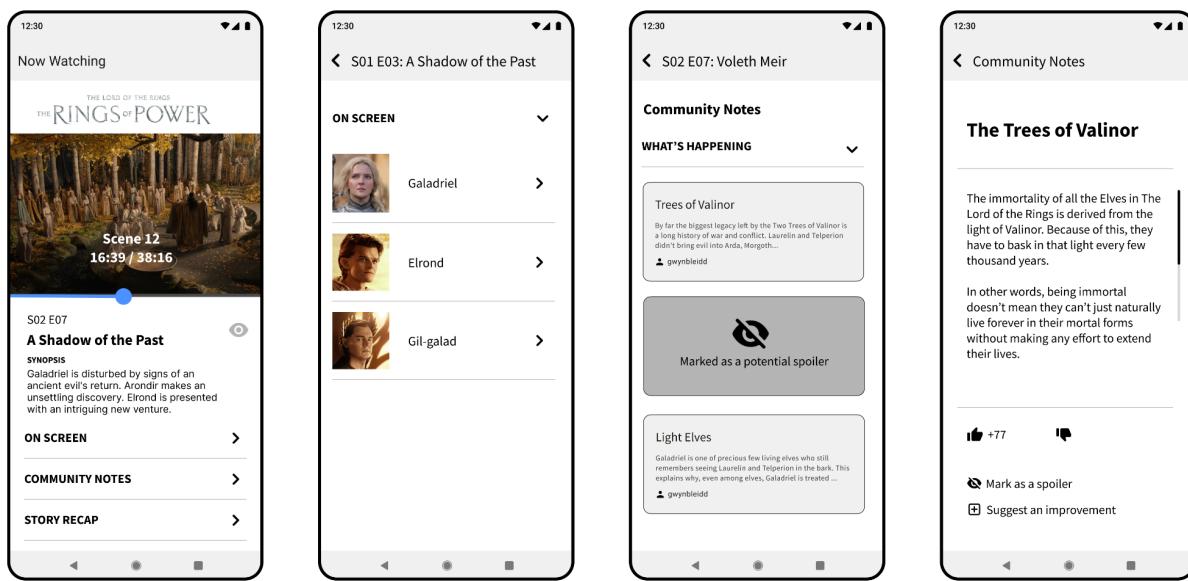
In addition to the altruistic reasons, creating content on YouTube has the potential of providing monetary support in the form of advertising revenue. Two of the participants also have an active Patreon page and members who provide monetary support, while one has started recently and said he does not have a wide enough audience to justify that. When talking about my concept, they commented on having to address this as a way to attract and entice content creators.

Revised ideation

After taking in the feedback from testing my concepts and refining the scope of the project, I was left with two concepts. The first was a revision to the [initial concept](#) after incorporating more insights from my research into usage of second screens. The second was a continuation of an earlier concept around live watch parties that could help new fans integrate with the existing community.

Second Screen

This is a continuation of the companion app concept that was part of my Fall 2023 pause screen overlay concept. However, given feedback about the amount of information being shown on the large screen and the prevalence and utility of second screens, this concept uses only a companion app and is designed specifically for Amazon Prime.



The app tracks which episode is currently being watched and shows supplementary information, which is an extension of the information shown in Amazon X-Ray.

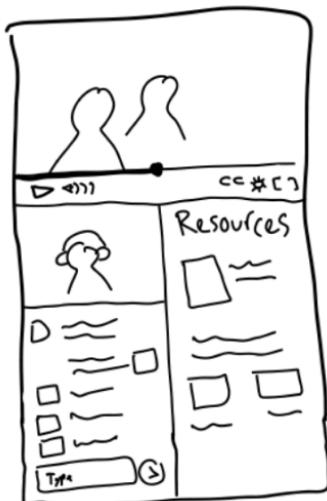
- Eliminates the problem of information overload and getting pulled out of the narrative
- Leverages the second screen which many advanced users are already utilizing
- Designing for Prime provides the initial content that is already part of the Amazon X-Ray feature
- The streaming network can provide incentives to attract participation from other existing fans and content creators

For further testing of this concept, I built a more robust prototype and tested with some of the interview participants I had spoken with earlier, and got feedback from peers.

Some of the feedback that I received from these sessions included

- Lack of control of the media: participants felt they would be sucked into reading content on the Second Screen while the media continued playing. To address this I added media controls and scene selection to the app itself so that users can also play/pause and jump scenes from there without having to reach for another remote control.
- Account link-sync: My initial prototype did not show how the app would sync with what was being watched, so I created a flow showing the connection process.
- More interactions between fans: There is currently no way for fans to initiate asking questions, and they instead have to rely on existing community notes in case they want to know something specific. This is an aspect I could not address in the time I had.

Watch Party



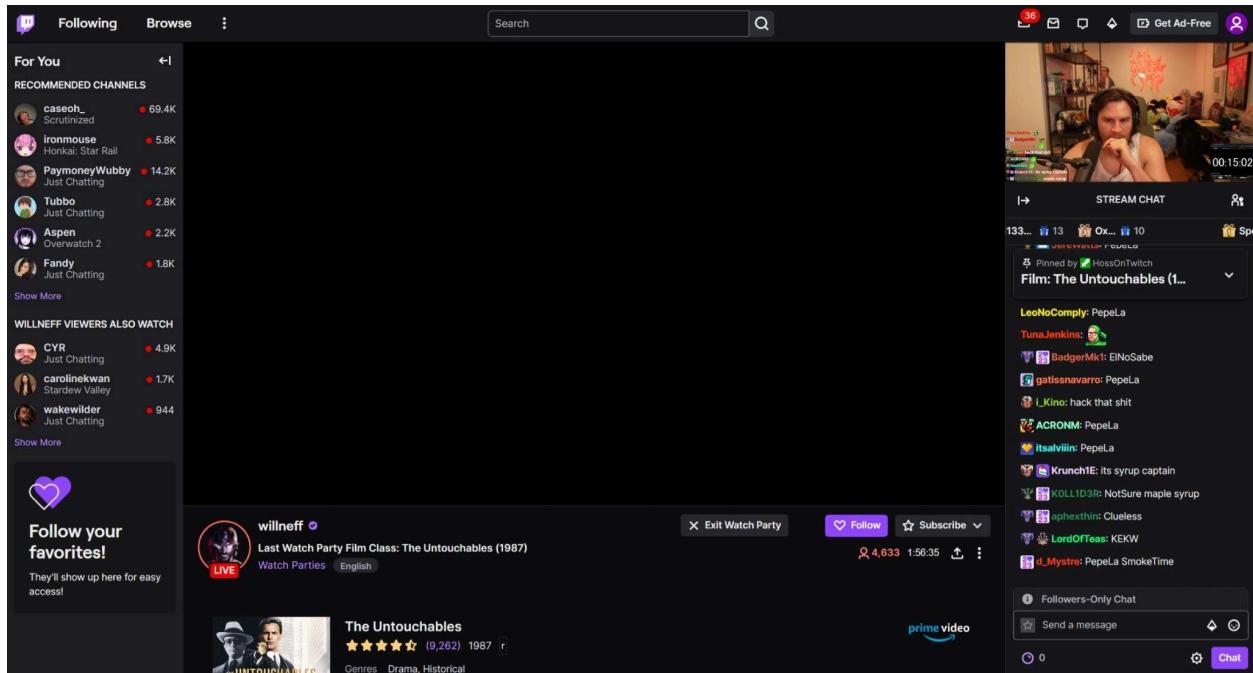
This is a concept that involves a platform that lets existing fans create and run livestream watch parties for popular content. For new fans it provides a low-engagement way to experience new media and get acquainted with the fandom, while experiencing something similar to watching with a friend in the same room who can add context while watching.

It would also allow existing fans to build communities around their content, and possibly monetize their efforts. Designing for a specific streaming platform like Amazon Prime lets us bypass the question of content licensing.

Observation

To understand how hosted watch parties work, I attended 2: one on YouTube and one on Twitch. Both platforms have various features for content creators to host live streams, but neither has features for this particular use-case and both present their own set of challenges in the context of this project. For example, while Twitch is owned by Amazon, there is no integration or connection with the supplementary content on X-Ray, and on YouTube copyright restrictions don't let streamers show any content.

Twitch



Livestream of The Untouchables (screenshot did not capture the video content)

Twitch is centered around livestreaming, so offers a variety of features for content creators to organize and manage their streams. By connecting accounts with Amazon Prime, both hosts and viewers can watch content, view the host's video as well as chat with others watching in the same window.

- Twitch offers viewers independent control of the media and the host's video feed.

- With over 3k viewers on this particular stream, the chat was nearly unusable because it flew by so fast. Most comments were also joke and meme comments relating to either the host or whatever was happening on screen.
- As someone who had never watched The Untouchables before, this supplementary commentary had no additional benefit to help enjoy the movie or learn more about the characters or plot.

YouTube



Screenshot of a live watchparty with panelists on YouTube

Several channels have hosted watch parties on YouTube as well, although because of licensing challenges they are unable to actually show the content. The audience sources content themselves, while the host only displays the timestamp they are currently on. Some of the challenges observed here include

- Licensing: YouTubers do not have broadcasting licenses for the content, so cannot show the media in their livestreams. To get around this they schedule in advance, send out announcements, and ask viewers to “watch along” with their own copies of the media.
- Sync issues: The audience and the host are playing media independently, and have to stay synced up so they are both watching the same thing. In case of disc changes (for Bluray) or breaks, this can get out of sync.

- Audio track overlaps: because there is no control over when the host cuts in, sometimes they begin talking and drown out the dialog. While the hosts were cutting in at various times to talk about the story or the production, at times this drowned out the dialog or the movie soundtrack, which distracted from the main experience.
- Video switching: since the content is not playing in the same view, viewers can only either watch the movie or the video from the hosts. Because of this the chat is also ignored.
- There were fewer people on this stream and the chat was more parsable.

As a next step, I wanted to learn more about the experience of content creators on YouTube with running livestream watch parties, specifically to learn about their experiences as hosts and what challenges they might have faced. However I was unable to schedule interviews with any of the streamers whom I contacted, and instead relied only on the observational insights I had gathered from attending live stream watchparties.

Reflection

Doubts about the problem space

Probably the main thing I've learned about myself as a designer from the experience of running a capstone project is that I enjoy research more than I had originally thought. The topic I chose to work on came about from my own frustration with "cinematic universes" and how modern storytelling is sometimes purposefully fragmented to build these empires. However when I began reading about the research in this space, I was excited to learn there has been a lot of rigorous academic study of not just narrative media and its economics, but also how fans interact with it and with other fans. However this took me in many different directions and I struggled with narrowing down the problem space in a way that I could address in an HCI context.

This meant that for a long while I was unsure what the outcome of my project would be. Although I had gotten a lot of good research compiled, there was still a gap in fan studies about new fans specifically, and simply leaving it as an ecology or framework to map out the needs of new fans did not seem substantial enough, especially after seeing my peers tackle more concrete challenges like overuse of plastic or eliminating data hoarding. Of course each project has its own challenges but I could not overcome the vagueness of my problem space.

Being specific sooner

Perhaps this was because for the longest time I also battled with designing specifically for a particular fandom or for a particular platform. This came from a desire to be strategic about my capstone, to develop a portfolio piece that could be easily marketable. But I do think

working in an ambiguous space taught me more about how to use research to try and ground myself. For example, the insight about second device usage helped me move forward when I was feeling stuck with my work, and identifying a gap in the field of fandom research itself was also encouraging. Another challenge was trying to contextualize the project in an elevator pitch, because while (I felt) I could talk about something like data hoarding and have it make sense to the audience, there were a lot of conditions applied to talking about things like complex media, book-to-screen adaptations, and fan interactions.

If I were to go through the capstone process again, one thing I would definitely want to do is be more specific sooner, so that I can spend more time in a particular use case rather than waffling around it for as long as I did.

Working alone

Working alone on a project like this was also not an enjoyable experience and for that I'm grateful for the cohort setup. While everyone in the class had very different projects, the ability to talk through design work with other designers both peers and on the teaching team was very valuable in shaping the project into what I wanted it to be, as well as what I did not want it to be.

Doing justice

There is still a lot of potential to explore and develop in this space. At times deciding on a particular focus area and just working on those principles was easily backed up and justifiable by research, but at times it also came down to perhaps design philosophy. For example I really wanted to focus on the aspect of independent exploration over just another social network. However there were several different avenues that were left largely unexplored because of this and of course a lack of time and abilities.

Being a human and a designer

There were several points in the project where the work didn't feel worth doing. I think that's a feeling we have to contend with as designers who are trained to be empathetic, curious, and questioning of the world around us. Pushing pixels in Figma doesn't seem very appealing in the face of reprehensible, violent circumstances around us, and being in a field that likes to pride itself for its power to create change feels even more helpless and laughable.

I think overall working on capstone for a year has given me the skills to run a design project independently. It's strengthened my belief that design is messy and can't always be process-driven. Being a designer means being a creator but also an active part of society and

its issues. Especially in the kind of world and circumstances we live in today, personal resilience and adaptability are as important as finding value in the work is to me.

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Appendix 1: Interview protocol

Audience:

Existing fans of Lord of the Rings who are creating content such as explanations, interpretations, and discussions targeted at other fans

Objective:

- Understand motivations behind content creation
- Explore interactions with fans (especially new fans)
- Identify any platform limitations or needs

Theme 1: Content Creation motivation

Kickoff

Can you tell me what inspired you to create content for Lord of the Rings on Youtube?

Follow-up questions:

- How do you decide on the topics or which area of LOTR lore you will focus on?
- What's your typical process of creating a typical video for your channel?
- How has your motivation for creating LOTR content evolved over time?

Theme 2: Interactions with other fans

Kickoff

Can you describe your experiences in interacting with new fans? What have been the rewarding and challenging aspects of these interactions?

Follow-up Questions:

- What common problems or challenges do people new to this fandom have?
- Have you referred or introduced anyone you personally know to a particular media?
- What role do you see yourself playing in supporting and engaging with newcomers?
- Are there specific resources or platforms that would facilitate this?
- How do you feel newcomers impact the fandom and its culture?
- What opportunities and challenges do newcomers present to the community?

Theme 3: Platform considerations

Kickoff

How do you share and promote your content?

Follow-up Questions:

- What platforms do you currently use to share and promote your content?
- Are there any limitations or challenges you face with these platforms?
- What kinds of features could help you with content creation and fan interaction?
- How do you think these changes would impact your engagement with both new and existing fans?

Appendix 2: Observation protocol

Objective: To observe engagement and interaction during livestream watch parties on Twitch and YouTube, focusing on the communal experience and the role of the host.

Themes:

Response to content

- Viewer reactions to key moments in the streamed content.
- Discussions about content-specific elements like plot, characters, or themes.
- shifts in engagement or chat activity in response to the content.

Community interaction:

- How actively viewers participate in chat.
- Types of conversations –content, personal, off-topic?
- Viewer responses to prompts or questions from the host.
- Signs of community-building like inside jokes, references to others in chat, collective reactions

Role of host

- Method of engaging the audience.
- How the host handles technical issues or disruptions.
- Frequency and type of direct interactions with viewers.
- Ability to keep the audience engaged throughout the watch party.

Logistics

- Quality of video and audio
- Effectiveness of the user interface and accessibility features.
- Smoothness in transitions
- Overall organization– start times, duration, breaks..

Appendix 3: Interview protocol for livestreamers

Audience:

Content creators or streamers who have hosted a livestream watch party of fictional content on YouTube or Twitch

Objective:

- Understand motivations behind live content creation
- Learn how they interact with fans while the media is playing
- Identify platform limitations or needs

Theme 1: Content Creation motivation

Kickoff

Can you tell me what made you decide to host a live watch party for [movie/show]?

Follow-up questions:

- Do you usually create content for this type of movie or show?
-

Theme 2: Interactions with other fans

Kickoff

Tell me about how you interacted with your fans who were watching the livestream

Follow-up Questions:

- How do you encourage participation and interaction during the livestream?
- What differences did you find in how your audience interacted with the content and with you?
- Have you tried any special features or activities that the platform offers?

Theme 3: Technical setup

Kickoff

Can you describe what challenges you face during live streaming and how you managed them?

Follow-up Questions:

- What equipment or software do you use?
- How do you synchronize content or ensure everyone is watching in real-time?
- How do you handle moderation, especially with large audiences?

