Leaving grade school with an interest in literature and a healthy regard for books, I might have been an automatic shoe-in for “the fanfiction type” of hobbyist. Ironically, as much as I enjoyed reading I never aspired to the role of author or concerted my energy toward writing with any particular interest. At all times I was very conscious of the fact that I devoured texts while producing nothing—making me feel that my participation in literacy somehow lacked legitimacy precisely because it lacked physical “evidence.” Even when I wrote about what I read, I found that it was generally regarded as inauthentic writing because it was less creative.

Robert Yagelsky describes the irony of “Literacy in Our Lives” whereby student experiences with literacy sometimes contradict the established aims of literacy—leading to isolation and alienation from their “native” communities¹ (23). In my developmental understanding of reading as literacy, this kind of isolation emerged in the difference I felt in how reading and writing were valued at school, work, and home. In almost all contexts I found that writers and their written texts were celebrated, while enthusiastic readers were more of a social pariah with readerly-texts that were really only “sharable” with my classroom teacher. In the end I learned to keep my “readerly sensibilities” largely to myself and other kindred spirits as I encountered them.

This project is geared toward understanding the participatory role of readers of online fanworks. Readers represent an important part of these organizations, despite the fact that they are arguably the least visible participants (compared to the writers of fanworks). The experience related above illustrates how community response greatly influences the way individuals connect or disconnect from social practices and, in turn, share or isolate the knowledge they generate. This project attempts to get at the heart of what it means to be a reader and to describe how these values are (or can be) aligned with community goals, practices, and structure in very concrete ways.

¹ “Native” here is taken in the broadest sense of family, friends, peers, etc. and not just racial, cultural, or ethnic terms (although this might also be true).
**Research Question or Problem Statement**
Traditionally, structuralist views of literacy relied upon an “assumed reader” with traditional competencies in order to strike upon rhetorically valuable texts. Very few consider that the flip side of being an “assumed reader” is often the consequence of being an “averred non-writer” – a very troubling consequence. For this reason readers have often been described as “peripheral” members that exist “on the fringe” because of their status as non-producers and non-writers (Lawrence 68). In this study I would like to illuminate the world of the fanfiction *reader* by describing their goals, abilities, and attitudes, as well as pinpointing the cultural currency they create within their communities which makes the creation of fanworks possible. In this way, I would like to change the image of the reader from an empty persona into a participatory role that is inhabited by real people.

**Question 1: What does it mean to be a reader of online fanworks?**
This question attempts to understand the values of readers and to explain in the broadest sense what readers want or require from their community. This is related to how readers retain identity or membership with the group. However, this question is also related to having a sense of purpose to their work and hope for eventual success. In other words, the reader’s work is viewed as a goal-oriented endeavor and the reader’s participatory role is seen as dynamic (that changes as it becomes more aware of this goal). Quite simply, this question asks what readers want and tries to find evidence of these wants being met.

**Question 2: How do online fanworks communities align their goals, practices, and structures to accommodate reader values?**
This question broadens this discourse by coming from the perspective of the community. It describes what the community response is to readers and how this response is expected based on what factors have been integrated and streamlined within the normal community operations. This question once again prompts for a discussion of community goals and values, as well as an examination of how they are reconciled with the readers’. This question also inquires about the ordering of community social structure in order to see how readers are placed within community, as well as how they are allowed to advance or depart from their original roles. This question includes not only a look at community regulations, but also assumptions about how relationships between members flourish and what kinds of tools make community relations easier to maintain.
"Fanfiction" and "fanworks" are still terms under debate by the people who use them. In general terms they are fan-produced texts that revive characters, settings, plots, etc. from pre-existing, published pop culture media in order to expand the original genre in some way. Fanfiction was the original epithet given to these texts because they were for many years fictional prose texts, of varied lengths, by single or multiple authors. However, as fans began composing in multigenre art forms (poetry, songs, illustrations/graphic arts, video clips, etc.) the broader term, "fanworks," was implemented to acknowledge this shift.

What stays consistent over time is the fact that fans attribute their efforts to love for the specific fandom they follow, and this love is not encumbered by the fact that they are amateurs in rhetoric, creative writing & other art forms, criticism, online publishing, etc. K. Faith Lawrence notes that the word ‘amateur’ is derived from the French verb meaning ‘to love.’ There is increased recognition … that they can (and often will) spend more time and effort on their interests because of the love that drew them to the interest than they would from a purely professional interest. Humans were motivated by love long before they were motivated by money. (6)

This quote illustrates that fans are committed to what they do for reasons that cannot be explained by a barter-mentality: what they put in and what they get out of fandom participation are apples and oranges that are not meant to be compared. They expend this energy by “replaying the same scene from different viewpoints and different voices, and … articulat[ing] points of view that were never heard in the source material” (Pugh 134); fans are also notorious for “re-opening” a story to get the ending that they want (Pugh 224).

Looking at readers within online fanfiction communities as their own group is significant because “fan fiction is a genre in which the boundary between readers and writers is shifting and easily crossed. The reader is unusually empowered and may indeed, by dint of playing in the fanfic writer’s sandpit, herself become co-creator. It is in this sense … [it is] ‘democratic” because “fanfic writers do not see their readers as passive consumers” (Pugh 223, 219). Although analysts like to use the word “democratic” to explain social organizations, it is difficult to get at what it means for individual identity within a democratic fanfiction reading environment. Lawrence explains the balance of individual identity and establishing reputation within communities in the following way:

Since the identity only matters for occasions when reputation is needed, there is a definite advantage to both building up a reputation by being involved in the community and to maintain the identity with which that reputation is built. The cost of creating a new identity, whether it is in time, money, reputation or some other commodity is known as identity cost. (Lawrence 15)

What this means is that for readers—who do not produce fanfiction texts themselves--building reputation within the community and the toll of maintaining this identity cost, are very important aspects that can help explain this literacy role.
Methodology and Research Design

In order to describe this reader-role I will focus my energies upon one fanwork entitled “Somewhere Not Over the Rainbow.” This work is a multipart, mixed-genre, collaborative fanwork that is based off of the 2007 six-part miniseries, Tin Man, co-produced by RHI Entertainment and Sci Fi Chanel Original Pictures. This miniseries is based on The Wizard of Oz, a media genre founded on Frank L. Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz published in 1900, popularized by the 1939 film starring Judy Garland. The fanwork itself is housed on LiveJournal.com, while also including a YouTube-embedded film clip “trailer;” both online spaces follow organization structures that display the original texts followed by a comments section for viewers. This particular fanwork was published online in 2008 in 17 distinct parts, 15 of which have been posted and commented upon. For this study I will examine the comments left by readers in order to illustrate how individuals comments capture reader values and create a sense of community according to two models described by Reader Response and Communities of Practice theories.

Reader Response Theory attempts to understand the relationship between readers and the text they interact with. Louise Rosenblatt defines reading as “a constructive, selective process over time in a particular context” (qtd. in Davis and Womack 54). In this case, the particular context is heavily influenced by the prevalence of popular culture and computer/internet affordances.

I will examine question 1 (what does it mean to be a reader of online fanworks?) in this section in terms of reader identity themes and their online agenda setting capabilities. Norman Holland’s idea of “identity themes” describes the reader’s work as a “quest for self-replication and interpersonal renewal” that takes place within textual interpretation (Davis and Womack 63). By examining reader forums as a dataset it becomes possible to see what themes stand out for individual reader identity. In addition to this, reader comments in this forum also have the potential to steer authorial judgment about the future of developing text. Stephen D. Cooper notices this phenomenon in the world of online blogging (the so-called “blogosphere”): “bloggers decide which topics to comment on (gatekeeping) and how much to say about them (agenda-setting)” (Cooper 129). In this way, identity themes that are expressed in reader comments have a way of influencing the continuation of these themes in future parts.

2 http://n-e-star.livejournal.com/108339.html
While Holland and Cooper point out the individual capabilities of readers, Stanley Fish theorizes about the potential of the collective body of readers. Fish defines interpretive communities as “made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions” (qtd. in Davis and Womack 132). In the same way that objectivity does not exist for individuals, Fish contends that interpretive communities operate within an interpretive paradigm that is barrowed from larger, pre-existing cultural contexts (Davis and Womack 134). Because this interpretive paradigm is in place, “a given text will sponsor a range of meanings with which all members of a specific interpretive community will generally agree” (Davis and Womack 138). This sets the framework for my second question (how do online fanworks communities align their goals, practices, and structures to accommodate reader values?), by viewing commenting readers on this fanfiction site as members of an interpretive community.

Defining the interpretive paradigm of any group is a difficult task. However, Communities of Practice theory describes the formation of community around what they do and why they do it. This is especially relevant to online fanfiction communities because these are non-academic bodies that draw hobbyists and amateurs. This theory asserts that communities can exist informally, while still preserving goals, relationships, and learning strategies. Etienne Wenger defines these communities along three parameters:

- **“What it is about”** – its joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members.
- **How it functions** – mutual engagement that bind members together in a social entity.
- **What capability it has produced** – the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time” (qtd. in Smith 3)
**Value of the Research**

What makes fanfiction research important is the realization that this type of literacy act frees itself from reading conventionality. Instead it entertains a more vital approach to reading as an “event” that exists as a “singularity” each time a text is read (Attridge 63). From this perspective, fanfiction writers are daring to interpret, re-interpret, and even mis-interpret events through the creation of new texts in order to locate greater singularity in the event of reading. Traditionally, this kind of act might be seen as primarily subversive. However, from another perspective this brand of literacy is a higher-order form of questioning because it dares not only to pose a question (“what if …”) but to answer the question and contextualize it (“let me tell you about how …”). In this way understanding fanfiction is one way to realize how reading and the role of reader is a pro-active role that is equally powerful as the role of the “original” author/writer; this kind of understanding takes the relationship of reading away from a master-slave hegemonic, where the reader's role is uninspired and purely performative.

This study also offers new media theorists a useful way to conceptualize the kinds of “born new media texts” that are often vaguely described (because of the magnitude of texts that could be delineated by this term) (Selfe ). By having a loose framework of experiential reference points, our abilities to think about composing, responding to, and assessing these forms could become more concrete.

Finally, community is an essential facet of learning, whether it takes place online or in the traditional classroom. By examining unfamiliar learning environments that have been situated around community, teachers gain a better sense of the kinds of values their students partake in. Teachers also get a better sense of how to establish or build community within the ever-changing classroom environment. Examination of fanfiction communities is also important to pedagogy because it represents a moment of peer learning in its ideal state—an ideal that is beneficial to replicate within the classroom.
References


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