

**Fandom Studies:
Fan Studies Re-Written, Re-Read, Re-Produced**

By

Paul Booth

An Abstract of a Thesis Submitted to the Graduate
Faculty of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major Subject: COMMUNICATION AND RHETORIC

The original of the complete thesis is on file
in the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Library

Approved by the
Examining Committee:

June Deery, Thesis Advisor

Michael Century, Member

Ekaterina Haskins, Member

James P. Zappen, Member

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
Troy, New York
May 2009

ABSTRACT

The media of the digital age have significantly altered our contemporary cultural and scholarly landscape. Although scholars have published books in recent years that have detailed this shift in *media technology*, few have remarked in detail about an equally dramatic – and necessary – shift in the *study* of that media.¹ This dissertation provides an augmentation to traditional media theories as well as an analysis of the shift that needs to occur in the way that scholars, students, and audiences in general respond to and discuss digital media. I use the literature of fan studies to provide a practical application of, and bring focus to, these changes in media theory. Fans, more than many other groups online, are a highly visible, highly energetic, and highly creative group of people.

As I demonstrate, fans enact a tri-part process of textual appropriation: fandom becomes a means for *re-writing* the meaning behind the source text, for *re-reading* these texts through the mutual collaboration of divergent parties, and for the *re-production* of this mutual collaboration in larger cultural contexts. By re-write, however, I do not mean to indicate fans merely revise online; rather, by “re-write” I indicate the way fans reimagine or reconceptualize the media object. By re-read, I do not imply that fans are literally reading again the same text, but rather that the influence of the fan community causes a re-envisioning of the fan-created fiction. By re-produce, I do not mean that fans merely meet offline, but that the mores and social norms of the fan communities can be applied in different environments.

To articulate this model of fandom, I elaborate upon two concepts central to my thesis, the Web Commons and the Digi-Gratis economy. The Web Commons defines not a change in technology, but a shift in the way we can describe the use of the web. I argue that fans make use of the web’s communicative properties to form social groups that mirror traditional conceptions

¹ Henry Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), Axel Bruns’ *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), and John V. Pavlik’s *Media in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) are three prominent examples.

of the feudal commons. The Digi-Gratis economy is a new way of conceiving of online economics. Whereas fan studies in the past used a model of de Certeau's concept of "textual poaching" to describe fans' productive work with consumptive practices, a concept that emerges from a market economy mindset, I add gift economy antecedents to this model. I show that online interactions between fans and media producers emerge not from solely a market economy, nor from a gift economy, but from a mash-up of the two.

To describe further these changes, I develop new terminology. Each neologism I call an "in-between" to describe how it exists outside and opposed to traditional polarities. First, *intra-textuality* describes the internal construction of the blog *document*, a new form situated "in-between" traditional texts and intertextuality. The *narrative database* is situated "in-between" narrative discourse and narrative story, and is constructed through the process of *narractivity*, "in-between" interactivity and narrative. Further, the *interreal* is a space located "in-between" the virtual and the real, made salient through *identity roleplay* on social network sites like MySpace. Finally, *demediation* is a process "in-between" hypermediacy and immediacy, where media technology's ubiquity effaces mediation through *hyper-immersion*.

Thus, *Fandom Studies* introduces, problematizes, and explains new conceptions in scholarship brought about through the advent of new media. My analysis of fan interaction with cult texts on the Internet reveals not so much a new definition of fans or fandom, but rather a new definition of the web, of the activities that go on there, and of the divergent ways we talk about it.