



Selected Papers of Internet Research 16:
The 16th Annual Meeting of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Phoenix, AZ, USA / 21-24 October 2015

FANBOYS, FANGIRLS, AND GEEKS PANEL

This panel examines the contentious and developing nature of fandom in 21st century media. Within the theme of this year's conference this panel will examine how fandoms reimagine their relationship to the author generated texts and towards one another as a community. Given that fandom is often viewed as a cohesive and joined community, the authors seek to understand the cracks and faults within this idealized concept. By looking at these areas the panel will examine how the view of a homogenized community of fans falls apart. The papers on the panel express a particular interest in the contentious nature of fandom infighting and its relationship to the broader media field. It covers a broad view of different fandom communities, from video games to Supernatural, and will discuss often marginalized or challenged viewpoints and engage in discussions of the relationship between fan, media, and creator.

Dating Amy Farrah Fowler: Essentializing Femininity and Othering Women in STEM

Bridget M. Blodgett
University of Baltimore

Amy Farrah Fowler is one of the standout female characters of *The Big Bang Theory*. Amy is a dedicated neuroscientist and is often characterized as being the female equivalent to Sheldon's presentation of male geekiness. She is an interesting character for illustrating the problems that women's representation in geek media. Amy is often portrayed as being as smart as Sheldon in an area that is just as hard a science. But when we see her as a character one of her defining traits has been her lack of female friends and the "real" experiences of womanhood.

In the discussion of why there aren't more women game designers in the #1ReasonWhy twitter discussion multiple women in technology reported that others have said they can't actually be women or are so weird their experiences are discounted. Women in STEM fields are strongly othered by the group whose interests they share and also told they can't identify or fit in with other women by those same people (Beede, 2011).

Methods

The authors collected tweets in a spreadsheet using the Twitter Archive Google Spreadsheet (TAGS) template (Hawksey, 2013). The data was collected hourly from

November 26th through November 30th. Through an analysis of dominant @replies and RTs this paper examines the theme of othered womanhood that arose within the #1ReasonWhy hashtag. The authors performed opening coding on the selected text of the collected tweets which resulted in a set of themes which emerged from the data. This coding occurs in an iterative process that is meant to capitalize on the ability to compare the data as it is collected.

Data

A conversation on the marginalization of women in the games industry was started in November of 2012 when a game designer tweeted the question, "Why are there so few lady game creators?" That tweet caught the attention of several female game designers and enthusiasts who started a hashtag to discuss the many different reasons: #1ReasonWhy. Each tweet became a testimonial, and the hashtag's contents added up to a portrait of the industry's systemic discrimination. The hashtag detailed women's experiences with sexism and obstacles that prevent women from joining game development. Tweets about the othering of women and femininity were very common within the discussion. This was observable at both the group level and at the individual level.

Many tweets shared stories about how the category of women was treated by developers within meetings, marketing, and other planning sessions by the gaming industry.

Women and the elderly are synonymous with the concept of "lowest common denominator". #1reasonwhy #respectyouraudience

It was common for women as a group to be labelled as disinterested and unskilled in playing games. Since they aren't part of the core development group their needs and interests are often ignored or seen as being a "special addition" to a game title.

These conceptualizations help to create an idea of the normal or regular community and audience for games that explicitly does not contain women. It allows for women to become a bounded and classified group, separated from the default group of players and producers.

I once watched someone play a commercially successful game that let you pick between "Female" and "Normal." #1reasonwhy

The expression of femininity is seen as being tied to other harmful cultural cues. Often expressions of femininity or feminine interests was cause for the dismissal of women as real participants within the community.

"You're pretty, so I have to remind myself that you can also be intelligent."
#1reasonwhy

For individual women, this dismissal of their group could become quite targeted and harmful to the incorporation of their voices within the community. In particular, for female developers it often lead to their voices being ignored since classification as women and their interest in games mutually exclusive categorizations.

Worked on game with other women, targeting women -- but men on team told us we didn't know what the audience really wanted. #1reasonwhy

I once had product feedback dismissed about a female-targeted game because I "wasn't a normal woman". #1reasonwhy

For a woman to fill both groups is impossible, therefore they must either not be a woman or their interest is not genuine. This places female developers and players within a paradox where they must prove themselves to be sufficiently skilled to surpass the limitations of the femininity but in doing so they invalidate their gender identity.

Because if I succeed, I'm exceptional. And if I fail, I'm proof that women shouldn't be in the industry. #1reasonwhy

Discussion

Amy consistently shows an enthusiasm for stereotypical female experiences that she never received in her early and formative years. The actions that she had instead are usually ones that could be understood as being either masculine or towards masculinized hobbies and her interest in science. This connects and reinforces a strong cultural theme that women who engage with technology and science are unfeminine. As the #1ReasonWhy comments highlighted to having interests within STEM fandoms means relinquishing the right to exist as a woman. Female fans become de-gendered so that the community can include them without experiencing the dissonance caused by the construction of these identity groups.

Within this mindset to be a woman is to engage with all the gendered trappings of the femininity. Women are not seen as having a wide range of varied interests but instead are reduced to a limited set. Media depictions of women in STEM related fields or women having STEM-related interests often help to support this mindset. The main growth arc of the character Amy Farrah Fowler is centered on her fulfilling a secret desire within her cold, logical exterior for the genuine experiences of womanhood. She is not shown as being the scientist who also likes going to dance clubs but as an outsider to this female community that must examine and plan their interactions like they would a lab study.

Amy's depiction within the show is both an accurate summary of how women with STEM interests are often viewed and treated by others (Consalvo, 2008; Nagle, 2013). She also acts as a problematic emblem for women to rally around since her development fails to heal this schism between STEM interests and femininity. Within the show Amy both represents the common problems women face and our inability to move beyond flawed classifications systems that separate the female from the scientific. As a product of culture, the character Amy Farrah Fowler helps to show that the separation of the female-coded from the technical is only natural. She acts as an example for those who wish to exclude women from gaming and software development.

References

Beede, D., Julian, T., Langdon, D., McKittrick, G., Khan, B., & Doms, M. (2011). Women in STEM: A gender gap to innovation. *Economics and Statistics Administration Issue Brief*, 04(11). http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1964782

Consalvo, M. (2008). Crunched by passion: women game developers and workplace challenges. In Y. Kafai (Ed.), *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hawksey, M. (2013). Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet TAGS v5. *CETIS MASHe*. Retrieved from <http://mashe.hawksey.info/2013/02/twitter-archive-tagsv5/>

Nagle, A. (2013). Not Quite Kicking Off Everywhere: Feminist Notes on Digital Liberation. In C. Fowley, C. English, & S. Thouësny (Eds.), *Internet Research, Theory, and Practice: Perspectives from Ireland (157-175)*. Dublin, Ireland: Research Publishing.

It's Not Just Subtext: Constructing the Fan Girl as Creator and Subject in Supernatural

Anastasia Salter
University of Central Florida

Supernatural, the CW's long-running show about two brothers hunting demons, has built a very active fanbase. A series of meta-episodes have allowed the show's creators to engage the fandom directly by creating a Supernatural novel series within the show, with its own fandom. The 200th episode of Supernatural takes another step in constructing the fan as subject: entitled "Fan Fiction," it centers on young women fans creating a musical based on the Supernatural characters. This convergence of canon and fanon raises issues of the power dynamics between creators and fans, as well as the gendered assumptions surrounding the stereotype of the "fan girl" and her relationship to a text. By depicting the fan girl as author within the canon, Supernatural has placed fan production under the sometimes harsh gaze of the show creators, subjecting them to the critique and hostility of the characters even as fan fiction is used as a method for advancing the characters' own self-awareness. This complex relationship with the fan gaze (and particularly the fan girl gaze) makes these meta-episodes an ideal site for examining the remediated audience.

Becky and the Fan Girl as Predator

Over ten seasons, Supernatural has branched to include its own metaverse, including a series of in-universe Supernatural books, and a corresponding fandom that the brothers interact with. The first acknowledgement of the Supernatural fandom occurs in Season 4 with "The Monster at the End of This Book," which reveals the existence within the show's universe of Supernatural comic books as well as their author and fans. As Laura Felschow (2010) critiques: "The acknowledgment of fan behavior within this episode is not an overt invitation to participate, but a demonstration that the producers/writers of the program are aware of exactly what their fandom is doing without an invitation...Fans may feel a certain way in response to the episode, but they cannot change it." The cult fan is primarily embodied in Becky Rosen, who is introduced in Season 5 after she is sent to the Winchester brothers with a message. Becky serves as an outright parody of online fans of Supernatural itself: her online handle is "samlicker81" and she is a fanfiction writer and stereotypical "fan girl."

Becky's agency, on the other hand, is portrayed negatively. In season 7's "Time for a Wedding," Becky reappears as a villain: she drugs Sam with a love potion to make him marry her. At this stage, her fandom crosses a line and Charlotte Howell (2013) suggests that Becky "represents a caricature of female fandom that has persisted despite the growth of nerd culture and influence of fandom studies. Becky may be a textual poacher, but she's also a character who gropes a stranger merely because she thinks she knows him through devotion to a text." The act of typing Sam up is particularly suggestive of the destructive impact the creators of the show associate to the gaze of the female fan. As KT Torrey (2012) states: "the threat that Becky poses to Sam, to *Supernatural*, lies in her status as a woman and as a fan writer, as a figure who can upend the central narrative by affixing the masculine to her "rightful" place as the signifier of meaning while claiming the role of producer for herself" --it is the threat of a woman to a hypermasculine narrative in which women have been repeatedly marginalized.

Marie and the Fan Girl as Creator

More recently, the depiction of *Supernatural* fans and their relationship to the text has changed, and with it some of the gendered aspect of the fandom. The announcement of the 299th episode was met with some trepidation from the community, as previous mentions of fanfiction had been negative and dismissive of fans as producers. However, the episode proved to be the most positive and fan-aware meta-episode the show has produced. Fan and columnist Aja Romano (2014) noted that the episode marked a moment of validation for women in the fandom: "In *Supernatural*'s case, the evolution has been—dare we say it?—a progressive one, a steadily shifting narrative that seems to be ever-so-slowly moving away from the many years of geek-shaming and repudiation of its mostly female fandom. We might even be moved to call it a feminist evolution. Chalk it up to SPN's musical episode. We like singing and dancing. But even more, we like fan girls, fandom, and the celebration of fanwork."

The episode opens with two young actresses emerging onto a stage with wigs and costumes that immediately invoke Sam and Dean. It is quickly revealed that they are starring in a musical being directed by another young woman, Marie. The "real" Sam and Dean come to investigate the disappearance of a teacher and walk in on the first song of the musical, an interpretation of the traditional pre-credits sequence *Supernatural* uses to recap story plots: "The Road So Far." The clear relationship between the two and their teenaged female doppelgangers is parodied when the two flash their fake FBI badges at the same time as the actresses. The reaction of the two at first recalls their previous encounters with fans or the even less friendly depiction of fans as authors on *Sherlock*. While previous episodes have only depicted fan women as predators (literally, in the case of Becky's use of a spell to ensnare Sam as her husband) and otherwise as a minority within the *Supernatural* fan community, the 200th episode thus placed teenage girls front and center as fans and producers. Marie is even given the opportunity to call the canonical events of the show since the book series theoretically ended with season 5 "the worst fanfiction ever," and she defends her own work as "transformative fiction:"

Dean Winchester: There is no space in "*Supernatural*."

Marie: Well, not canonically, no, but this is transformative fiction.

Dean Winchester: You mean fan fiction.

Marie: Call it whatever you like, okay? It's inspired by Carver Edlund's books... with a few embellishments.

"Fan Fiction," *Supernatural* (2014)

However, Dean is less than thrilled with Marie's interpretation of his life, particularly when Marie explains a moment with a veiled reference to Wincest, a popular pairing in slash that they previously encountered through Becky's writing:

Dean: What are they doing?

Marie: Oh, uh, they are rehearsing the B.M. scene.

Dean: The bowel-movement scene?

Marie: No. The boy melodrama scene. You know, the scene where the boys get together and they're—they're driving or leaning against Baby, drinking a beer, sharing their feelings. The two of them—alone but together. Bonded, united. The power of their pain...

Dean: Why are they standing so close together?

Marie: Uh... reasons.

Dean: You know they're brothers, right?

Marie: Well, duh. But... subtext.

"Fan Fiction," *Supernatural* (2014)

The "Wincest" pairing is one of the more popular examples of an incestuous pairing in fandom, but it is far from the only example. Incest has rarely been a barrier to fanfiction writers. Wincest, however, is not the pairing that brings *Supernatural* into the master league of queer baiting on television. That honor belongs to Destiel, or the pairing of Dean and Castiel. This pairing is the next we view through Dean's eyes, portrayed by the young actresses:

Dean Winchester: What are they doing?

Marie: Ummm. Kids these days call it hugging.

Dean Winchester: Is that in the show?

...

Marie: Oh, it's just subtext. But then again, you know, you can't spell subtext without S-E-X.

Fan Fiction, *Supernatural* (2014)

This moment is notable in many ways: Castiel's love song "I'll just wait here then" is presented in the episode as a reframing of a canonical moment, using a line from Castiel's own dialogue when he waited on the side of a road while Dean slept. And of course, both Dean and Castiel are being "played" in the musical by young women, who Marie notes as the "couple in real life." Lothian, Busse, and Reid (2007) examine the construction of slash communities as a "queer female space," which describes "not only the queerness of women's sexual fantasies but also how these queer fantasy acts often lay the groundwork for nonvirtual queer acts and lives". This nuance of representation is rare in depictions of fan girls on screen, and the presence of lesbian couples acknowledged without a dramatic reaction likewise remains rare.

If Becky is *Supernatural*'s version of the dangerous and unacceptable fan girl, than Marie is perhaps the show's apology for previous wrongs. Marie is active in all of the most controversial fan practices. She is presented in the meta-context as a director with her own vision, one which the characters that are her subjects initially reject but

eventually acknowledge as valid. That validation is a rare outcome of the depiction of a fan girl, as a comparison to more infamous moments of fan critique. The episode even includes a moment of acknowledgement by Dean that fanfiction writers should keep working: as Claudine Hummel writes in her review of the episode, “Dean tells Marie—and therefore fans everywhere—to keep writing because “I have my version and you have yours” (2015).

However, this embrace of the fan girl as producer is not without its problematic moments. Notably, the episode buys into the idea of most fan girls as adolescent girls, infantilizing them in the male gaze alongside the far more mature Sam and Dean. Furthermore, the episode was also not without its own version of the destructive and dangerous fan girl, this time embodied by the episode’s villain, Calliope. A Greek muse of storytelling, Calliope is attracted to stories, and this time she has fixated on *Supernatural: The Musical*: “*Supernatural* has everything. Life, death, resurrection, redemption -- but above all, family. All set to music you can really tap your toe to. It isn't some meandering piece of genre dreck, it's... epic” (Fan Fiction, 2014). However, Calliope expresses her “appreciation” by planning to consume the show’s author and the inspiring characters Sam and Dean, suggesting that the moment Calliope fixed her “fan girl” gaze on the show her goal was the type of ownership that could only come through destroying the original. Calliope’s fixation is also notable as she is an adult woman and a monster who has to be defeated.

These contrasting depictions of fan girls serve as a reminder that the fan girl as author remains an object of suspicion, subject to the creators’ evaluations for their worthiness. Even the endorsement of Marie’s work by both Dean and the internal “author” of the *Supernatural* series, Chuck, can be read as the need for external validation of the fan girl’s gaze (and interpretation of “subtext”) by the central authorities of the show, and perhaps even by the canonical rules set by the characters themselves.

References

Felschow, L. (2010). "Hey, check it out, there's actually fans": (Dis)empowerment and (mis)representation of cult fandom in *Supernatural*. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 4. <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/134>.

Howell, C. (2013). The Gospel of the Winchesters (And Their Fans): Neoreligious Fan Practices and Narrative in *Supernatural*. *Kinephanos: Media, Fans, and the Sacred*, 4(1). http://www.kinephanos.ca/Revue_files/2013-howell.pdf.

Hummel, C. (2015). *Supernatural 200th Episode Review*. Retrieved from <http://www.fan-front.com/supernatural-200th-episode-review/>.

Lothian, A., Busse, K., and Reid, R. (2007). "Yearning Void and Infinite Potential": Online Slash Fandom as Queer Female Space." *English Language Notes*, 45(2) : 103-111.

Torrey, KT. (2012). "He's Best When He's Bound and Gagged: The Female Gaze as Counterplot in *Supernatural*". Retrieved from <http://www.kttorrey.com/research/hes-best-when-hes-bound-and-gagged/>

Please Don't Tweet That: RPS and Resistance in *Supernatural's* Convergent Canon

KT Torrey
Virginia Tech

JSA Lowe
University of Houston

The previous paper raises the question of how female fans of the CW's *Supernatural* have perceived their repeated incorporation into the show. In this work, we consider how *Supernatural's* canon has become a further site of institutionalized convergence, wherein key elements of the actors' lives away from the camera have been positioned as part of the same transmedia ecology that encompasses the fictional adventures of the Winchesters and the practices of the show's fans.

Certainly, as critics of the series have suggested, the folding of what were once perceived as "deviant" fan interpretive practices into *Supernatural's* diagenetic narrative can be read as an attempt to restrict fan behavior (Stein 406); the positioning of the actors' "personae" as part of that same narrative ecology might be similarly interpreted (Arrow 328). In light of this ecological convergence, we argue that Real Person Slash (RPS)--fanfiction exploring romantic and sexual relationships between same-sex members of the *Supernatural* cast--offers its readers and writers a means of queering these ongoing attempts at containment.

In this study, we analyze a cross-section of "Cockles" fanfiction--RPS featuring actors Misha Collins and Jensen Ackles-- inspired by the actors' annual joint appearances at Jus in Bello, a fan convention held in Rome. Guided by Stein's notion of transmedia authorship and Ford's discussion of "accretion texts," our findings suggest that the readers and writers of these RPS texts recognize the ecological and accretional--rather than static and "drillable"--nature of *Supernatural's* convergent canon. That recognition, in turn, fuels the creation and consumption of fanfiction that playfully misreads this convergence and thus resists the series' attempts at containment. Ultimately, our study points towards the liberating effects that may be afforded by the convergence of fan, actor, and fictional character within transmedia ecologies.

Archive Warning: RPS

As boundaries between creatives and fans increasingly appear more symbolic than actual, ways of meaning-making once exclusive to fans now have become part of the corporate discourse around media texts. Few series have embraced this conceptual flux with as much vigor as *Supernatural*, wherein fan bodies, language, and modes of production have themselves been incorporated into the events of the series. Such

incorporations, as Stein argues, can be read as a “tool through which producers attempt to shape and control fan culture, fan investments, and fan authorship” (406). For example, once highly taboo discussions of the slash pairings Wincest and Destiel have now been mentioned within the series, and are at times discussed by the series’ actors at fan conventions. In this way, bringing slash into “canon” has leached these narratives of some of their transgressive power.

RPS, however, a significant subgenre of Supernatural fanfiction, centers not on the show’s characters but on the series’ actors themselves. While Flegel and Roth argue that Supernatural fandom is generally accepting of RPS, the backlash against it in online fan communities has become increasingly vociferous over time (1.2). Fans who share RPS content are keenly aware of this perception: some rationalize their “invasion” of celebrities’ private lives, while others carefully tag work so that fans who wish to avoid exposure to RPS can do so. These efforts underscore the perception of RPS as inappropriate, even within a fandom known for its affection for a same-sex incestuous pairing.

Conventional Personae

While RPS is not a phenomenon unique to Supernatural, the series’ relationship to the genre is distinctive in that the show’s institutional apparatus has positioned the lives of the show’s actors as sanctioned paratexts to Supernatural’s fictional canon (328). These personae became prominent early on, when actors first began interacting with fans at conventions, where, during Q&A panels and more intimate Meet & Greets, fans have the opportunity to learn about the actors’ lives outside their roles. Such conventions remain a central feature of Supernatural fandom, a prominence reflected in the producers’ decision to set an episode at a Supernatural convention and in the widespread circulation of convention content online.

Over time, the “careful constructs and slips of actual personality” that characterize the actors’ personae at conventions have become part of the “sanctioned reality” of Supernatural, even for fans who have no interest in RPS (Arrow 328). First, fans routinely capture and distribute convention content online on Twitter, tumblr, and YouTube. Further, the series itself has featured satirized versions of these personae; in “The French Mistake,” the Winchesters’ visit to an alternate reality incorporates exaggerated versions of Padalecki, Ackles, and Collins, along with plot points mirroring facts about the actors’ real lives. The actors’ social media presences further inform fans’ familiarity with their personae, now co-constitutive elements of the show’s canon: the “official or sanctioned ‘reality’ as defined by the source material,” an evolving bricolage comprised of fiction, fandom, and “real life” (Arrow 328).

Queering Our Own Containment

Although this ecology continues to evolve, there is some consensus among fans as to the nature of the actors’ personae. Ackles, for example, is seen as the cast’s “grumpy old man”; despite his relative youth, he is known for his open contempt for technology and social media. By contrast, Collins is characterized by “his perceived marginality and

transgressiveness” within the Supernatural cast—particularly as compared to the seemingly straight-laced Ackles (Stein 415).

These established personae, however, are complicated when the actors appear onstage together, which occurs only at the annual Jus in Bello convention in Rome. There, Ackles’ stock role as conventional and resistant seems subsumed by Collins’ coquettishness. While most of Supernatural’s actors engage in physically intimate onstage behaviors with members of the same sex at conventions—behavior typically presented as evidence of on-set camaraderie, rather than romantic or sexual attachment—the seemingly out-of-character interactions that mark Ackles and Collins’ co-appearances offer ample inspiration for RPS fans.

In this study, we examine a cross-section of Cockles fics inspired by events at the 2011-2015 Jus in Bello conventions. We explore how fan writers use Cockles fic to “sew...together these available elements” of the actors’ personae, along with their perceptions of the characters the two men play on Supernatural, in order to queer the series’ attempts to contain fans within the convergent ecology of Supernatural’s canon (Stein 410).

Ultimately, our findings suggest that whereas slash fiction was once the primary tool for transgressing and resisting the romance narrative—just as the show itself both teased and withheld such pairings—RPS now offers a techne for fans to queer their own containment within Supernatural’s storyline. We argue that Cockles fanfiction in particular offers female fans a vital site of resistance wherein they can playfully misread Supernatural’s convergent canon, an opportunity the series itself seems increasingly designed to constrain.

References

Arrow, V. “Real Person(a) Fiction.” *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World*. Ed. Anne Jamison. Dallas: SmartPop, 2013. 323-332. Print.

Fiegel, Monica and Jenny Roth. “Annihilating love and heterosexuality without women: Romance, generic difference, and queer politics in *Supernatural* fan fiction.” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 4 (2010). Web.

Ford, Sam. “Fan studies: Grappling with an ‘Undisciplined’ discipline.” *Journal of Fandom Studies* 2.1 (2013): 53-70. Print.

Stein, Louisa Ellen. “#Bowdown to Your New God: Misha Collins and Decentered Authorship in the Digital Age.” *A Companion to Media Authorship*. Ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 403-425. Print.