Towards a Topography of Fandom(s)

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Abstract
Fan studies is a relatively new field of enquiry and as yet its parameters are only hazily defined. The present paper attempts to provide an overview of some of its constituent elements, eschewing the taxonomic and media-oriented approaches which have been adopted elsewhere for an exploration of the various forms in terms of links and commonalities. A roughly chronological structure is used to introduce areas of fandom, and the concept of vectors is introduced as a means of grouping fan activities.

Introduction
Fans constitute an intense form of media audience and hence are best approached using reception theory. By subjecting fans to theoretical scrutiny we can learn much about the way the disparate aggregation of consumers actively receives media, constructing identities in dynamic interaction with the information environment.

Or not. The fundamental problem with the above paragraph, more significant than any quibbles readers may have with specific phrasings, theoretical implications, or recommended action, is that its first word contains a massive complex of unexamined assumptions, a complex all the more insidious for being so widely shared by those involved in fan studies.

This paper will, at the very least, examine some of these assumptions. I have no problem with the academic examination of fans as a media audience, or with reception theory, per se. But it does appear that in the world of fan studies, the media exert an almost inescapable gravitic attraction.

Ironically, it was media studies that rescued the fan from a previous distortion in the academic space-time field. As Jenson (1992) so aptly put it, “The literature on fandom is haunted by images of deviance.” Both academic and public discourse constructed the fan as pathological, as someone stigmatized for an excessive attachment to something. The reason for this in the
academic field is rather obvious: psychologists were interested in studying pathology, sociologists were interested in studying social deviance; neither group was as interested in studying the nature of attachment. Fans were constructed as pathological deviants by the gaze directed on them. Fans were also stigmatized by public discourse, which is always quick to demonize difference.

Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women* (1992) and Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* (1992) are key texts that initiated a widespread rehabilitation of the fan in academic circles. Both of these texts are based on ethnographic research, and explicitly limited in scope. *Enterprising Women* features an ethnographic study of *Star Trek* fandom, while *Textual Poachers*’ opening bears reproduction:

*Textual Poachers* offers an ethnographic account of a particular group of media fans, its social institutions and cultural practices, and its troubled relationship to the mass media and consumer capitalism. There are, of course, many different types of fans—rock fans, sports fans, movie buffs, opera enthusiasts, etc.; “fans” have a much longer history, fitting more generally into longstanding debates about the popular consumption of fiction or audience response to popular entertainments. As Cultural Studies has directed more attention on the process of reception, and as researchers have begun to construct more precise accounts of both historical and contemporary audiences, we are beginning to develop a more sophisticated understanding of how these groups relate to the mass media and draw upon it as a resource in their everyday life.

This introduction both acknowledges the disparate forms of fan attachment, and defines its limits. Indeed both Jenkins and Bacon-Smith are careful to draw attention to the specificity of their accounts, yet the subsequent explosion in fan scholarship has seen the word “fan” at times taken to mean only participants in “media fandom.” Sandvoss, for example, despite explicitly recognizing the variety of fandom, and even identifying himself as a sports fan, nevertheless writes:

The way in which fans relate to such texts and the performances that follow from this relationship vary between different fan cultures, and indeed from fan to fan. Yet, they are all forms of consumption in which we build and maintain an affective relationship with mediated texts and thus share fundamental psychological, social and cultural premisses and consequences. (Sandvoss, 2005)

Earlier, Sandvoss has acknowledged the dangers both of fans writing scholarly accounts, and of scholars with inadequate knowledge of their object of study. He also warns of the dangers of a normative definition tied to an already formulated hypothesis. And yet, he essentially does that when he defines fandom based on the hypothesis that it necessarily involves the consumption of a text. In a sense, he has no option: he is caught in an inescapable trap. He draws attention to Hills’s (2002) assertion that the nature of a fan is common knowledge. Yet at least Sandvoss attempts a theoretically-grounded definition of the fan (if, perhaps, rather reminiscent of...
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Hills never really does, opening with common knowledge, discussing the problems involved in a theoretical definition, and then arguing that "...fan cultures cannot be pinned down through singular theoretical approaches or singular definitions." (Hills, 2002) Which is a fair comment, except that in his book Hills nevertheless considers only media fans.

With these two heavyweights refusing to tackle head-on the diversity of fan types, it is hardly surprising that other researchers follow suit. They are also restricted by the vagaries of academic publishing. *Participations* is a journal publishing material on fans, for example. But it is subtitled “Journal of Audience & Reception Studies.” Even the *Journal of Popular Culture*, which contains no such limitation in its remit, contains very little fan-related material outside of the media. Many other venues implicitly limit the potential definitions of “fan” by their academic emphasis.

In this paper I will not be analyzing the media consumed by fans. I will not be greatly concerned with fans as members of audiences, or on their reception of texts. Hills pointed out that fan cultures cannot be pinned down with singular definitions; in practice they have been. I will not claim that the definition I adopt in this paper is significantly less of a singular definition than that of the media-heavy approach. But it is a (partial) definition that shifts the focus of attention away from fan object, and on to fan behavior *per se*. And in doing so it accommodates a slightly different—and perhaps wider—range of cultures to those typically explored.

As should already be clear, the definition I will be adopting is based on an assumption that there is a greater diversity among fans than is widely recognized in the literature. The definition has two components. Firstly, it accepts as fans any individuals or groups of people who self-identify as fans. This is a pragmatic decision, but it is based on the principle that identification of someone as a fan must be based on characteristics or behavior of that person and not of some external object. Moreover, it recognizes the extent to which being a fan is a matter of identity, and that identity is partially self-constructed.

The second component of the definition extends beyond self-identification, and recognizes that fan behavior lies on a spectrum. Thus a subject is more or less a fan to the extent that they derive enjoyment from strong attachment to something; participate in activities relating to that something; acquire objects relating to that something; and share their involvement in that something with others (Thorne & Bruner, 2006). The term “something” is chosen deliberately here. Far from being the media text and nothing else, the “something” can range from a text to a person to an activity or even an idea. Scholars of audience studies may assert that *everything* can be considered a media text, and that reception is consumption. Whether or not this is a valid assertion, it has no bearing on the definition adopted here, and in practice has led to a form of myopia.

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A further point which is essential to the project being initiated in this paper is the recognition that fans are not neatly separable into their various categories. A large proportion of fans have multiple interests and affiliations, and this very multiplicity generates some of the shared characteristics which can be observed between different areas of fandom. Hence, this paper is aimed at providing a topography of fandom: a description of some of the surfaces and extents of the conceptual “space” occupied by fans. The term taxonomy might be considered appropriate. It is not used here because the classification it implies is based on difference. In this paper, although different types of fans will be described, the goal is to draw attention to commonalities.

Structure

Definitions and taxonomies frequently have an unfortunate side-effect: “[S]omething is always made peripheral, something is always pushed to the border, or over it, when we engage in definition.” (Harrigan & Wardrup-Fruin, 2007) This is what has happened with the study of fans. The media emphasis of most of the scholars concerned with the field has resulted in the media taking center-stage, and other forms of fan expression being made peripheral.

The problem is that any definition, taxonomy, or description, will lay emphasis. A graphic representation of fandoms will have a center; a descriptive passage of writing will have a beginning and an end.

For this reason, the present paper adopts a loose chronological structure. It is hoped that such a structuring mechanism may also serve to draw attention to the nature of connection and development in the fields of fandom being studied. The graphic representation of fandom(s) in Figure 1, an inevitably simplified attempt to show some of these connections, similarly adopts chronology as a loose organizing principle. Here, the center corresponds to the origin (though as the next section will explain, this origin is a provisional construct based only on linguistic criteria), and the rest of fandom is depicted as an “explosion” from that originary point. In this way, the (graphic) periphery, far from being peripheral, contains the most recent phenomena, among them the areas which have received the most scholarly attention.

There is another important consideration here which is often ignored in writing on fans and their activity: the international dimension. English-language scholarship on the media often banishes foreign and foreign-language material to the periphery. This has been especially true of work on popular culture. Thus, journals such as the Journal of Popular Culture and Transformative Works and Cultures feature papers on TV shows such as Queer As Folk (Hunting, 2012) and The Office (Detweiler, 2012). One has to read carefully to learn that there are British versions of these “American” shows. One has to be even more attentive to realize that these “American” shows are actually US versions of originally British productions. And this is an
example from within the English-speaking world, of mainstream television! When it comes to foreign fandom, coverage of activity outside the English-speaking world is patchy at best. In the 11 volumes of one of the most inclusive journals, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, there have so far been only 6 papers covering fan activity outside the English-speaking world. And yet, this is inevitable given the language barriers.

This paper, too, will inevitably concentrate on English-language fandom. This is not to dismiss or marginalize fandoms in other parts of the world. Indeed, the influence of Japanese *manga* and *anime* on English-speaking fandom is so great that the Japanese term roughly correlating to fan, *otaku*, is now used in English to denote a fan of these Japanese cultural
products. The concentration on English-language fandom, with only passing mention of other countries is, rather, an acknowledgement of the limitations of the author. Nevertheless, in attempting to show the diffuse and complex nature of fandom(s), including areas of commonality and overlap as well as difference, this paper will propose that the same can be expected of non-English fandom(s): namely that there will be distinctively different features, but also areas of surprising similarity and interaction.

Before the name

“Fans” were first called by that name in the 19th century, but behavior which would later be associated with the term has been identified before this. Simonova (2012) identifies activity which she suggests corresponds to modern fan fiction in the 17th century, namely continuations of Philip Sidney’s unfinished Arcadia. But Simonova also mentions earlier examples of behavior which may be considered analogous to that of fans. The interesting point she makes here is that fan activity—understood by her as derivative or transformative activity based on another’s work—is really a consequence of the invention of the modern author. The latter, as Rose (1993) explains, is inextricably bound up in the development of copyright in the eighteenth century. The extent to which fan activity can be defined purely in terms of such transformational activity is questionable. Nevertheless it is uncontroversial that fan activity did not emerge from a void; rather it represents the adoption and adaption of previously-existing practices.

On the other hand, we should beware the widening of the definition of “fan activity” such that it no longer has any power to differentiate. As it is now understood, the concept of the fan also entails an idea of community. Fan fiction thus entails not only the interpretation, transformation or continuation of an existing text, but also the community that both produces and shares such work.

As an example of historical fan activity that did involve such a sense of community, Keller (2011) describes the activities of lovers—aficionados “primarily of practices, ideas, and entities rather than of individuals”—in the early modern period, especially the 17th century. Keller contrasts this with what she sees as the modern focus of fan activity: being directed towards individuals. As the present study will attempt to show, such a focus may not be as universal as Keller suggests. Nevertheless, the “lovers” she discovers do demonstrate the characteristics of fans.

Similarly, there are many affinities between fan activity and collecting. The accumulation of objects by collectors goes back centuries if not more. Baudrillard provocatively claims that collection is essentially a pre-pubescent urge which tails off with the onset of sexual activity and later re-emerges as sexual drive diminishes (Gottdiener, 1994). This suggested status as a
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displaced sexual activity hints at the notion of strong emotional affect or attachment, which is crucial to fans; collection is often a manifestation—here termed “vector”—of fan activity.

It is possible to uncover the roots of fan practice in any number of locations throughout history. It is possible to theorize some of these as the actions of “fans” even before that term was employed. Yet the advent of the word itself provides a useful provisional origin point, the very provisional nature of which reminds us that origins should be treated with as much suspicion as centers.

The first fans

Baseball in the US provides the first recorded instance of the use of the word “fan” (Shulman, 1996). What is noticeable is that this coining coincides with the rise of baseball as a spectator sport, which in turn coincides with baseball’s turn to professionalism. It is often forgotten that prior to the 20th century, baseball and cricket were both played in America. Indeed, the first international cricket match in the world was between the US and Canada, in 1844 (Williamson). But while cricket resisted professionalism, baseball embraced it. By the third decade of the twentieth century, baseball reigned supreme.

The 1887 use of the word “fan” to describe baseball aficionados not only conveys the intensity of affect (“fan” is widely considered to derive from “fanatic”) but also the community alluded to above. For baseball fans appreciated the game as an audience, not just as individuals. Spectators of a sport share in the spectacle—obviously—but fan activity transcends this. For the modern concept of fans to be fully invoked, we must also look for affiliations away from the games, and here we note the organizations that sprang up around teams, bringing together fans (or “supporters” as they were known in the UK) to share their enthusiasms and, crucially, their knowledge.

Jenkins (1992) suggests that the word fan was subsequently applied to the “Matinee Girls” who exemplified the newly emergent female audience for theater at the end of the nineteenth century. On the one hand this appears to be a convenient way of establishing a claim for the early use of “fan” for media fans, while establishing the strand of fan theory which associates fan activity with female discourse. Nevertheless, the idea of Matinee Girls being fans in the sense just established is supported by Schweitzer’s (2009) description of the formation of the “Bachelor Girls’ Club” in 1902: bringing together women who wanted to visit the theater without having to be dependent on an accompanying man. Cavicchi (2011) supports Jenkins’s argument that these were fans in the sense of their attachment to their idols: something which attracted to them the same sort of normative accusations of deviance that have bedeviled fans through their history.

Women fans of the cinema soon had their own magazines: “… fan magazines appeared
on the UK market from the 1910s.” (Stead, 2011) These should not be confused with fanzines, which are actually produced by fans, though the division between material targeted at fans, and that produced by fans, is not always as clear-cut as it appears.

It is also important to note here antecedents of literary fandom. The chronological approach of this study draws attention to the ways in which fandom propagates and influences diachronically. In some cases, strands of fandom appear to “die out.” This would apply, for example, to the Matinee Girls and their clubs, although echoes of their activity can be detected in later movie and media fandom, such as the formative Star Trek fandom described by Bacon-Smith (1992). In other cases the fandom survives, albeit transformed, into the present. We can thus observe fans of baseball who are direct descendants of the first fans. In the field of literature both of these trends are evident. There is, so far as my researches have extended, no longer an active fandom for Philip Sidney’s Arcadia. On the other hand, the Sherlock Holmes stories by Conan-Doyle provide an instructive example of a fandom that has persisted. From publication they attracted avid readers whose attachment to the works marked them as distinct. Not only did many aficionados like to suspend disbelief as to the fictionality of the hero, but they exhibited two other fan characteristics. One was the desire to extend and transform the works, in both stories about Holmes and pseudo-scholarship referred to as The Grand Game, which dates from 1911 (Polasek, 2012). Another was the aforementioned desire for community. Two societies were founded in 1934 to accommodate this in the UK (The Society) and US (Lellenberg); many more have subsequently sprung up. Sherlock Holmes fandom has also seen dramatically transformed offshoots as a result of recent re-interpretations in other media: the most notable being the BBC’s Sherlock (Gatiss & Moffat, 2010) and the film Sherlock Holmes (Ritchie, Sherlock Holmes, 2009) and its sequel (Ritchie, 2011).

Science fiction

In terms of influence on subsequent self-identifying fandoms, the most significant development was that which built up around the science fiction genre during the 1930s. The history of its formation has been extensively covered elsewhere (for example, Bacon-Smith, 2000; Florida Association for Nucleation and Conventions, 2010). For the purposes of this paper, the most significant features of SF fandom are its structure and characteristics, and its influence.

The most important development of SF fandom was its nature as a community, specifically an imagined community. Anderson (1983) coined this term in order to provide an explanation of nationalism, but in doing so he provided a way of understanding a number of forms of human affiliation beyond the physical community. “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.” Thus SF fans “imagined” into
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existence a distinctive, diffuse virtual community with its own jargon(s) and customs (Merrick, 2004). Bacon-Smith (2000) describes some manifestations of this community in 1990s USA, but includes enough references to other times, if not other countries, that we can see some of its breadth. She describes how in the age before the World Wide Web the community was linked both by fanzines and by the "mobile geography" of conventions.

The particular customs and jargon of SF fandom have been well documented, not least by Bacon-Smith and other scholarly accounts, but also in the material produced by SF fandom itself. It should be noted that there is a complex and partially illusory distinction being made here. A high proportion of active members of SF fandom are academics themselves; many of the products of SF fandom are produced with academic rigor. Thus although not "scholarly" by a strict definition based on affiliation with an educational institution, many of these products are certainly scholarly in the wider and older senses. SF fandom is one in which the vectors of knowledge and criticism are especially significant.

Over and above this, it has been argued that SF fandom not only inculturates its participants with jargon and customs, but is in fact associated with distinct speech patterns. Unfortunately there has not been significant follow-up research to an unpublished 1999 report by speech therapist Karyn Ashburn that SF fans differed from the mainstream in pronunciations, articulations, sentence length/word choice and body language.

SF culture went on to influence the culture of a number of other areas of fandom. For example, Pustz (1999) describes how people who were interested in both SF and comics, "so-called 'double fans'," were instrumental in the creation of an active comic fandom, complete with fanzines and conventions. Similarly, the postal Diplomacy hobby was created when SF fan John Boardman realized that a fanzine—he already ran an SF fanzine—could be used to organize games by post (Agar, 1994). Anecdotally, music fanzines also emerged in the late 1960s as a result of SF fans applying their practices to a different subject. In the case of the role-playing games hobby, the influence was both direct, from SF fandom itself, and indirect, from Diplomacy fandom.

Influence propagates in other ways, with probably the most celebrated being the Star Trek fandom which emerged in the early 1970s. Rather than a straightforward transmission of ideas, much of Star Trek fandom emerged from tensions in behavior and expectations between the established, predominantly male bastion of SF fandom, and the influx of new fans of television rather than print, many of them women. The result incorporated many of the structures of SF fandom (not least, fanzines and conventions) but with different approaches and values (Walker, 2011). Star Trek fandom then formed the template for subsequent "media" fandoms generally based on television series or movie franchises. In the age of the World Wide Web, media fandom
became so dominant that it, in turn, served as the model for fandoms of book series (for example, Harry Potter, Twilight) that might otherwise have taken their cues from the more literary SF fandom; as already noted, the same applies to Sherlock Holmes.

Science fiction also provides an example of the spread of fandom around the world. Even before the Internet made such things routine, the culture of SF fandom was jumping from country to country. Although it originated in the US in the early 1930s, SF fandom was rapidly taken up in the UK: indeed there is a long-running debate on whether the first true SF convention was in Philadelphia in 1936 or Leeds in 1937 (Hansen, 1994; Lynch, 2001). As one would expect, English-speaking countries linked up early on, but even non-English-speaking countries established connections with the great “virtual community” of world SF fandom. In Germany, for example, the origins of an SF fan community are seen in the beginning of a letters column in *Utopia-Magazin* in the 1950s, at the instigation of a British fan. Similarly, in Japan, existing Japanese SF fans in the post-war period linked up with world SF fandom thanks to contacts with SF fan members of occupying armies (Lynch, 2001).

**The object of fandom**

It should be evident from the above that there is a wide range in what has been dubbed the “object” of fandom. Indeed, this term may be misleading, for its suggestions both of singularity and passive reception. Fans are fans of sport at various levels: they are fans of sports in general; of teams; of players within those teams. Other fans are fans of the theater; of specific authors, or of specific performers. Still others are fans of literary works; of genres; of authors; even of fictional characters.

This variation in the level on which the fan response operates has persisted from the earliest times to the present day. So called “media fans” may operate on any or all of these levels. Naturally, there are tendencies: certain genres are more likely to attract fans than specific producers or performers within those genres (examples would include the horror genre(s), or *wu xia* movies, though there are exceptions even here, such as Jacky Chan). Moreover, the level on which a fan operates may be hypothesized to influence the nature both of the fan activity, and of the fan affect. To take music as an example, a fan of Justin Bieber can be expected to take a very different approach to that of a fan of experimental German electronic music of the 1970s. This is not to fall into the trap of dismissing the fans of Bieber as being no more than caught up in an infatuation, or those of German electronic music as being passionless pedants. Nevertheless fan activity and affect have numerous dimensions, and these are stronger in some instances than in others.

A further important implication here is that many forms of fandom operate across what
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appear at first sight to be boundaries. One of the dangers of the focus on “media fandom” is that it can reinforce the notion of such boundaries. Fans can be compartmentalized within specific forms according to the fan object. Yet the foregoing identification of the levels on which fans approach fan objects also demonstrates how such levels represent bridges between differing forms. For example, a fan of Sherlock Holmes may at first sight appear to be a literary fan. But Sherlock Holmes is an emphatically transmedia phenomenon (Stein & Busse, 2012). Our fan’s interest in Sherlock Holmes extends to dramatic, film and TV adaptations; it may even extend well beyond these to historical or criminological interests. Similarly, a fan of football may be interested not only in following a favorite team, but in playing or managing, or perhaps enjoying soccer-based entertainments or games. A Star Wars fan may in practice devote far more time and resources to the collection of Star Wars paraphernalia, than to enjoying the original movie series. Fan activity manifests in multiple vectors.

Figure 1 offers a highly expressionistic view of this varied yet interconnected nature of fandom. The center of the circle represents the coining of the term fan, and the perimeter of the circle corresponds to the present. Categories of fan object can be seen to have emerged over time, some developing out of others. The figure also includes a few examples of specific fan objects, and traces some of the connections between them. Only a few important connections are illustrated; to draw in even all of the connections between the selection of items on this figure alone would render the figure unreadable!

Thus fandom, in general, does appear to spread out and cross the boundaries that others seek to impose on it. One of these is even constituted by the fan “affect” itself. It is taken for granted by many that a fan likes the fan object; indeed, for many, the meaning of “fan” is one who is bound up in uncritical adulation. And yet the reality is that many fans are among the harshest critics of their fan objects. Examples of fans highly critical of the creators of their object abound: Jenkins detailing Beauty and the Beast (1992, pp. 120-151), Johnson describing the passions aroused by Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and its fans’ criticism of the program’s creators (2007, pp. 285-300) and Hills documenting the way in which fans of Doctor Who even coined a derogatory term, “fanwank,” for material which appeared to be explicitly designed to appeal to fans rather than non-fans (2010, pp. 58-61). Hills asserts: “Seemingly paradoxically, being a fan means being disappointed by the object of fandom as much as it means appreciating it.” (2010, p. 6)

This effect was also evident in another, contrasting, branch of fandom, the punk fanzine movement that sprang up in the UK in the 1970s. Earlier music fandom had taken its cues from science fiction, or consisted of fan magazines produced by fan clubs. However the do-it-yourself ethos associated with the punk movement resulted in a torrent of publications ostensibly associated with punk bands, but in practice covering a range of topics, and quite as ready to
express criticism as approbation.

Fanzines in the UK mostly affiliated themselves to punk (and spent the bulk of their energy debating what the spirit of that movement had been and fighting over who had followed the true path). But in lots of ways their vibe reminded me more of hip-hop. The writer-editors were like MCs, all swollen ego and competitive hostility, unacknowledged legislators of the music world who were totally convinced of the righteousness of their taste. (Reynolds, 2009)

This amorphous nature of the fan object is taken to a higher level with one distinctive phenomenon, explained in the next section.

Fandom itself

“[A]s various fans have observed, fandom in many ways now spends as much time talking about itself as it does talking about TV shows and movies and comics.” (Busker, 2008)

No matter how much researchers attempt to draw boundaries around fans and their activities, fans find ways of transcending them. In this respect, it is instructive to consider the parallels between fan activity and the social media ushered in by the World Wide Web (Merrick, 2004; Mason, 2012). While fandom is frequently viewed as an activity driven by content, it is perhaps better understood as a medium, a form of community, with associated types of interaction. The interaction may originate in response to a fan object, but it is not constrained by that, any more than the contents of a blog are constrained by topic.

Fandom isn’t about Spock and space ships, Vincent and Catherine in the Tunnel World under New York City, or Dr. Sam Beckett leaping through time. One does not become a fan merely by watching a television show. As any true fan can tell you, fandom has become as much about the friends we make, the ties that we establish, than just about the shows we love. (Yost, 1994)

The vector of community is based on the idea that although fans may be brought together by a shared interesting in something, once the community is constituted, the fan relationship itself may become, effectively, the object of fandom. Hence in many fandoms we find apparently extraneous material. I attended the Science Fiction Worldcon in Glasgow in 2005 not only to study the science fiction fan community, but also to participate in the academic stream of convention programming, which concerned the present state of the United Kingdom in the light of Arthurian legend. Political discussion of this kind, whether or not informed by the object of fandom, frequently appeared in fanzines in SF, media, Diplomacy, music, games and many other fields.

Beyond this, however, lies a realm where the “fan object” all but vanishes. Personal zines, or “perzines,” sprang up in a number of fandoms, ranging from science fiction to gaming. Although apparently associated with a particular fandom through the affiliation of the editor, a perzine was
in practice an expression of the full range of interests of the editor. In this respect, they are clearly
direct forerunners of the modern blog or Twitter account. Perzines did encounter resistance from
some fans who objected to their failure to limit themselves to a singular object of fandom. On
the other hand, perzines thrived on the overlapping margins of fandoms. For example, during
the 1980s in the UK, a number of fandoms acquired significant overlaps. Science fiction, postal
gaming, media, role-playing, and even some branches of music, shared a significant common
audience. The result was an explosion of zines with combinations of these topics, and, inevitably,
which then became perzines, defined not by the specific fandom in which they operated, but by
the tastes of the editor.

Much of the scholarship on fandom to date has taken for granted the fundamental status
of the fan object, and has presented fandoms as almost hermetically sealed groups. What the
perzines reveal is that the fan object is not fundamental (though it is, of course important), and
that fandom is both uncountable and countable, consisting conceptually of both a large number
of (sometimes overlapping) groups, and of an amorphous all-encompassing entity.

To examine it, therefore, it is important to combine a grasp of the fields of fandom based on
fan object, with the various forms of fan activity, or vectors, as they are here termed.

Vectors

Vectors identify fan activity, divorced from the specific nature of the fandom. They are here
expressed in terms of roles adopted by fans.

The vectors which have been identified in this paper are as follows: collector, community,
critic, enactor, knower, spectator, transformer. All of these are behaviors which may be observed
in fans and non-fans alike. What makes them fan behavior is the level of affect, and they are
reinforced as fan behaviors by their coexistence with other vectors.

This analysis is, at least partly, an expansion of the idea of “Affirmational vs Transformational Fandom” (obsession_inc, 2009). The latter proposes a distinction within media
fandom between fans whose main fan activities revolve around appreciating, and those whose
main fan activities revolve around creating. I have expanded this distinction to a wider range of
vectors which may overlap. Vectors which are more likely to be affirmational are the collector,
critic, knower and spectator. The community and enactor vectors are equally likely to apply to
either, while the transformer vector draws directly on the theorized transformational fan.

The vectors can be described in more detail as follows:

Collector

Accumulating materials according to some organizing principle. This vector frequently
coexists with the knower vector. If the material collected is in the form of media, then it may
coexist with the **spectator** vector. Possible examples of the collector vector include *Star Wars* fans collecting toy figures, guitarists with multiple instruments, trading card (and trading card game) collectors, comics fans etc.

**Community**

Relating socially to others with a shared interest. This vector is complex because, as explained above in *Fandom Itself*, it generally operates on a meta-level. That is to say, for it to be a vector of fan activity it must coexist with, and therefore reinforce, other vectors of fan activity. The apparent exception to this is the perzine/blog phenomenon. However, it is noticeable that even in these cases other vectors provide the means of contact and introduction.

**Critic**

Producing exposition or commentary on a fan object. This will generally coexist with the **knower** vector. Science fiction and media fandom are prominent examples of fandom which contain extensive criticism. Arguably, many academics who are passionately interested in a field—such as the work of Jane Austen—and political commentators, are fans in this sense. But such criticism does not have to be so academic or literary. Sports fans are also prone to detailed criticism.

**Enactor**

Enacting involves becoming involved in activity inspired by the fan object. This may take the form of performance or play of various kinds. There may be an overlap with the **transformer**, as, for example, in cases where fans perform "original fan versions" of cultural properties. The most celebrated examples of this vector are the "re-enactors" who dress in historical costumes to bring the past to life, or to create an imagined other world. It also describes costumers (also known as fans of "cosplay"), and role-playing gamers.

**Knower**

Much fan activity involves the acquisition and manipulation of relatively specialized knowledge. Examples include the music fan who painstakingly assembles a documentary "biography" of his or her idol, and the sports fan who carefully tracks the performance of a favored team through statistics, both current and historical.

**Spectator**

A fan who appreciates the cultural production of others can be described by this vector. It applies to fans of movies, books, television, music and various other forms. What distinguishes it from everyday consumption of cultural product is simply the level of affect involved. The spectator vector indicates emotional investment in the object, and the emotional effect doesn’t fade away as it does with usual audiences, but remains strong or increases, for some while if not indefinitely.
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**Transformer**

The *transformer* takes some existing work or cultural property and uses it to generate a new creative work. It is distinct from the *critic*, which generates exposition or criticism, but not a new work. Transformers are most celebrated as fan fiction writers: amateurs who spin their own stories from the characters and situations of an existing text. But they include those who create videos and other works.

One extra dimension to fan vectors should be noted: that specific fan vectors can become fan forms in their own right. An example is cosplay. At first sight it appears to be an enactment fan vector of fans of comics, anime, movies and other entertainments. But it can become a primary form of fandom in its own right.

**Conclusion**

This paper has offered a preliminary sketch of some of the observable shapes and surfaces of fandom (considered as a single amorphous entity). Its purpose is to widen the view of fan activity from the concentration on the media which dominates many treatments of the field. It is hoped that further research will shed light on the interstices, the overlaps and margins of fandom(s), the better to understand how fandom works as a diverse social entity.

**Note**

1 This paper attempts to identify *vectors* of fan activity. These common patterns or behaviors both demonstrate the means by which fans can be identified as such, and link apparently disparate fandoms. See the section on *Vectors*.

2 The term “audience” could be used as an alternative way of denoting this vector of fan activity. However “audience” has acquired such a complex of analytic weight that “spectator” is preferable as a means of referring to the relatively passive activity of taking in media. Neither term is wholly satisfactory, as “audience” privileges listening, while “spectator” privileges watching, while the intention here is to consider either/both.

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