

**Augmenting fan/academic dialogue: New directions in fan research****Paul Booth**, DePaul University

Booth, Paul. "Augmenting Fan/Academic Dialogue: New Directions in Fan Research."

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Fan studies as a discipline is still in its infancy. But even given this nascence, there have been significant shifts in the ways that it has theorized, studied and investigated fans over the first two and a half decades of research. As scholarship, fan studies has moved away from ethnographic investigations of *fans* as the main object of study to focus instead on the output of *fan discourse* as the key mode of examination. At the same time, scholars like Henry Jenkins and Matt Hills, both central to the discipline, have opened dialogue about the nature of the fan/academic, often called the 'aca-fan'. This article uses the lens of aca-fandom to analyse fan answers to interview questions at a large Midwestern *Doctor Who* convention. Fans were asked about the role that fan studies has played in their life, how they perceive the study of fans and whether fan studies as an academic discipline has an effect on their fandom. The fans' answers reflect a critical awareness of fandom but a general ignorance of fan studies. This article argues three points to take away from this. First, fan studies needs to refocus attention back onto fans themselves through ethnographic work. Second, the discipline needs to refocus its output less on esoteric academic titles and more on popular venues. Finally, fans and academics should

engage in specific dialogue to open up avenues for new fannish and academic exploration.

### **Keywords**

fan

*Doctor Who*

convention

aca-fan

academy

interview

### **Augmenting fan/academic dialogue: New directions in fan research**

2012 marked the twentieth anniversary of *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins's (1992) canonical and well-travelled research into fandom.<sup>1</sup> It also marked the twentieth anniversary of Camile Bacon-Smith's (1992) look at female fan communities and conventions, *Enterprising Women*. And it marked the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Lisa A. Lewis' (1992) fan-centric anthology, *The Adoring Audience*. It seems to be, therefore, a good time for fan studies to take a step back to examine where it has been, what it is currently doing and where it could go in the future.

In this article, I connect and extend these themes of the early fan studies books – that is, fan practices, identities and conventions – through a study of contemporary fan self-knowledge. In November 2011, I attended a *Doctor Who* (BBC: 1963; BBC-Wales:

2005) fan convention with the intention to interview as many fans in attendance as I could about their knowledge of and relationship to fan studies as an academic discipline. I wanted to expand on recent literature about fan interaction on digital technology (Baym 2000; Booth 2010a; Bury 2005; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Jenkins 2006a; Pearson 2010), to open up dialogue about off-line fan practices, and how (or how not) fan studies itself has affected fans. This article attempts to bring fans into the current aca-fan dialogue.

In the twenty years since *Textual Poachers*, *Enterprising Women*, and *The Adoring Audience*, few off-line ethnographic studies of fans have been published. There is good reason for this: in addition to the difficulty in finding a large enough sample from which to generalize, the ease and accessibility of the Internet has opened up enormous avenues for research (Markham and Baym 2008). Additionally, fans themselves have flocked to the Internet, and researchers have followed suit (see Jenkins 2006b; Stein 2006).

As a discipline, then, fan studies appears to be becoming more circumspect about its main object of study. Yet, the interviews conducted for this project reveal that fans have a self-professed interest in learning more about the practice of being fans, as well as a desire to participate within academic conversations and communities. Already, some fan studies organizations (like the excellent work being done by the Organization for Transformative Works and its complementary journal *Transformative Works and Cultures*) have been partnering with fans, engaging in discourse with fans, and including fans within the research process (see Jenkins 2009). I think this is important work and necessary for the continued success of fan studies. This present study demonstrates that

this practice should continue and be expanded to include other avenues in publishing and research projects.

At the same time, it is important to note that fandom and academia are not mutually exclusive identities. Rather, as Katherine Larsen (2012: Par. 10) describes in an interview with Jenkins, writing scholarship as a fan is ‘like trying to speak with two different accents at the same time. It can’t be done’ (see also Zubernis and Larsen 2012). Indeed, to describe a ‘split’ between fandom and the academy:

runs the risk of privileging one group over the other. To say that I ‘write like a fan’ when I’m participating in fandom and that I ‘write like an academic’ when I write about fandom has the appearance of placing one above the other rather than simply acknowledging that there are two different audiences involved. The moment we pull ourselves out of fandom to begin writing about it as academics, we assume a superior position – we are outside and above. It’s no wonder fans distrust us. On the other side, if we didn’t write as academics, then our colleagues wouldn’t take us seriously. It’s impossible to please both audiences simultaneously. (Larsen 2012: Par. 11)

Given that fandom and the academy are not necessarily dichotomous, this article calls for articulating a stronger bond between the two ‘audiences’ (see Hills 2007), enabled by dialogue and specific attention to areas of overlap.

To this end, this article is the start of what I hope will be a longer conversation about fans, fan practices and the role of academe in the way fans are understood by others

and by themselves. As I will show, this is a necessary step in academic dialogue about fans. In a way, it is already happening: fan studies, conceptualized as ‘waves’ by J. Gray et al. (2007), has turned to look at itself, as the recent ‘aca-fandom’ discussion on Jenkins’s blog (2011) demonstrates. In previous work, I have explored the way that fans and academics are similar (Booth 2010b; see also Hills 2002; Hills 2007; McKee 2007; Mittell 2009; Pearson 2007; Tulloch 2007). This study asks fans a number of questions to discover whether or not they see an influence of academia on fandom. I show that fans seem to have a critical self-awareness but are largely unaware of the work that fan studies has done and is continuing to do. I believe that fans should enter the academic discourse about fandom more openly, and to do that I believe fan scholars should be more engaged with fan communities.

### **Fan studies and the turn to aca-fandom**

In their introduction to the collection *Fandom*, Gray et al. (2007: 2–10) enumerate three waves of fan studies as epistemological breaks in the focus of the discipline. Without meaning to copy their discussion of the history of fan studies, I think it is important to briefly outline the key points in this history. Following this outline, I will add my own ‘fourth-wave’ of fan studies, which I see as a turn to meta: the examination of fan studies itself.

Specifically, in the first wave of fan studies, ‘the consumption of popular mass media was a site of power struggles and fandom the guerilla-style tactics of those with lesser resources to win the battle’ (Gray et al. 2007: 2). The first wave dealt with fans as collective entities within a media political economy. Making visible the tactics, resources

and activity of fandom, the first wave demonstrated fandom as ‘more than the mere act of being a fan of something: it was a collective strategy, a communal effort to form interpretive communities’. This inaugural wave of fan studies literally *studied the fan* as key to the tactics of subcultural resistance engendered by all readers. Typified by Jenkins’s (1988: 86) original ‘*Star Trek* rerun, reread, rewritten’ article for *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, this first wave attempted to defeat the common view of the fan as ‘scandalous category’ within popular and academic literature. Although the net effect of the first wave was to extol fan work, such criticism sidesteps the larger issue of first wave fandom, which was bringing to light a previously pathologized practice (Jensen 1992).

The second wave of fan studies dealt with the ‘replication of social and cultural hierarchies within fan- and subculture... as a reflection and further manifestation of our social, cultural, and economic capital’ (Gray et al. 2007: 6). In other words, fandom moved from an analysis of an individual’s consumption to the larger issues of the fan community’s social dynamics. This era of fan studies is exemplified by C. Harris and A. Alexander’s (1998) anthology *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity*, in which fandom began to be seen as *reproducing* cultural patterns that lay outside the subculture. In other words, the second wave saw fandom as no longer ‘extraordinary’, but rather as one space of consumption that mirrors larger issues across multiple cultural realms. As Gray et al. (2007: 6) suggest, however, this second wave ‘had little to say about the individual motivations, enjoyment, and pleasure of fans’. The fan was being left out of fan studies; the discipline was becoming concerned less with fans and more with

the role of fandom as a general component of an always-already hierarchy of power within the media environment.

The third wave of fan studies departed from both these emphases and concentrated instead on the expansion of fandom into everyday life, on the way that fans have become more common audiences, integrated into the larger media system. This third wave constituted a break with the other two because, as the authors state, ‘fandom is no longer only an object of study in and for itself. ... [The] third wave work aims to capture fundamental insights into modern life’ (Gray et al. 2007: 9). Although not mentioned in the discussion of the third wave, Jenkins’s (2006a) *Convergence Culture* epitomizes the way fandom can be used as a proverbial stepping-stone into understanding other aspects of the media environment, including political change, producer/consumer relations and media literacy. In other words, third wave fan studies examines the relationship of fandom to areas of scholarly pursuit other than reception studies, and the relation of fans to aspects of culture other than the popular.

With each ‘wave’ of fan studies, the actual *fan* as a central identity moves further from the realm of enquiry. Although much value can be found in research at the periphery of the object – indeed, fan studies as a field has grown rich with detailed, exciting and vibrant scholarship, as Gray et al.’s collection demonstrates – I contend that the discipline should also turn back to examine its roots: the fans themselves. This is not to say that we should abandon the important progress the field of fan studies has made in defining itself, its object of study and its methodologies. Instead, I would call for an augmentation of fan-centric dialogue to the academic community, and a more concrete sharing of academic work on fans with the fan community. Gray et al. (2007: 7) note how

a shift in the technology of fandom – ‘many [fan] communities’ migration to the Internet [includes] the thousands of fan discussion groups, web sites, and mailing lists populating the Web’ – heralds a shift in the study of fans as well. In other words, just as fandom has moved online, so too have fan researchers. This online environment could be used for fans and academics as a generative medium for more engaged, sustained and influential dialogue between all media audiences (Hills 2007).

Although much fan work has moved online, there is still an enormous off-line component of fandom that should also be described and theorized if fan researchers are to understand fully twenty-first-century fandom. Fans do use the Internet to meet up, form communities and create original texts, but they also meet in real life to discuss, cosplay, game and engage in group viewings, among other activities. Fan researchers need to take this off-line practice into account. The best way to do this, as first wave fan studies would indicate, is through ethnographic methodologies that emphasize the fan’s voice as well as the researcher’s. But instead of falling prey to the Othering and emancipatory talk of first wave fan studies (Gray et al. 2007: 3–4), fans themselves could become more involved in the discipline for it to become more inclusive and progressive, a third wave paradigm.

The turn to include fans in fan research necessitates a revision of contemporary fan studies practices. We have reached a fourth wave: a turn from analysing *fans* to analysing *fan studies*. For many fan scholars, fan studies has already become meta: the discipline has been under scrutiny from the disciples. The ongoing discussion of aca-fandom, for example, stems from a need to reflect on where we have been and what we are doing. Although Jenkins’s (2011) blog conversation demonstrates the multifaceted meanings of the term ‘aca-fan’, for the purposes of this article I will be defining aca-



fandom as the hybridized identity between scholarship and fandom within one conception of being, much as in M. Hills (2002: 71–89). That is, a fan who analyses the object of her fandom could be using an aca-fan methodology, while an academic who researches something she is enamoured of is also participating in aca-fandom. Far from separate, dichotomous identities, the fan and the researcher, as Hills (2007: 46) states ‘can no longer be “set apart” from the culture and ideology it studies, but is rather “set in relation” with these contexts’.

The existence of the ongoing dialogue about aca-fandom within the fan studies community demonstrates a shift in the way academics are thinking about the discipline. Starting with *Fandom*, and moving to recent blog discussions (Jenkins 2011; Mittell 2010), a Flow TV special issue (Tait 2010), two Society for Cinema and Media Studies conferences (2011, 2012), and a new book (Zubernis and Larsen 2012; see Jenkins 2011 for further connections to aca-fandom), fan studies academics are indicating ‘the unsettled nature of aca-fandom today and the desire to keep the debate alive’ (Tait 2010).

In the rest of this article, I will argue that opening a dialogue between fans and scholars is a two-way street. Scholars should integrate fans into their research more (ever mindful of the limitations of ethnography, however (Hills 2002)), and can dialogue with fans. Fans could access more critical scholarship about fandom or about their particular text. In both cases, this would refocus the nature of the aca-fandom discussion by engaging in a dialogue between the fan and the academic. Through just one example of this type of dialogue, the analysis of a series of interviews with fans about their experiences with fan studies, I will show how aca-fandom can flourish as a key wave of fan studies as the discipline continues to expand into the future.

### **Fan conventions**

In order to examine the way – if at all – fan studies has approached fandom itself, a group of graduate students and I conducted a series of in-person interviews with fans at a local convention. As F. Coppa (2006) has shown, fans have been meeting at conventions since at least the 1930s, although as a ritualized practice it did not become a large-scale fan activity until the 1970s (see also Coppa 2008). Winston (1979: 17) illustrates the power of these early fan conventions in her history of *Star Trek* fan conventions: ‘Our January 1972 convention did it. We lit the fuse, and fandom burst into flame. Up until that time, “Star Trek” fandom had been underground... [then] thousands and thousands of fans discovered a most marvelous fact: They were *not* alone’ (author emphasis). Convention attendance remains one of the largest off-line fan practices.

In November 2011 we attended a local *Doctor Who* convention, Chicago Tardis. Tardis has approximately one thousand attendees over a three-day weekend. It is organized and run by a group of local *Doctor Who* fans, which makes it significantly different from many contemporary conventions. Many conventions today, including the *Star Trek* (CBS: 1967) conventions originally described by J. Winston, have been taken over by corporate owners, like Creation Entertainment. By remaining independent, Chicago Tardis does not benefit from the large-scale operations Creation brings, but also is not controlled by business operators and can accommodate a diverse set of fans, interests and panels. For example, this research project was relatively easy to set-up, as my interaction with Chicago Tardis consisted of me e-mailing the programming and publicity chair directly without having to navigate corporate bureaucracy.

I designed the interviews to take approximately half an hour. For a full list of questions, please see the Appendix. I advertised in the conference programme, asked the programming and publicity chair to introduce the study at the opening ceremony of the convention and set up a table in the main Dealer's room. Furthermore, I had the graduate students, each equipped with a microphone and a recorder, roaming the hallways of the convention for people who might be interviewed. Of the 1000 people at the convention, I had hoped that 25–30 would stop to talk to us.

By the end of the convention, I had 110 full interviews, 10 per cent of the convention population. However, it should be noted that this is a relatively self-selected sample: not only are these self-professed fans, but they are also so invested in *Doctor Who* that they would come to a convention, many from hundreds of miles away. Thus, although they may be a good sample of Chicago Tardis *Doctor Who* convention-goers, they may not be completely representative of all fans everywhere – different texts have different fans, and different convention-goers. As Liz,<sup>2</sup> one of my interview subjects, remarked:

Fandom is... a specific subculture. Anime fandom doesn't have the same tropes as costume fandom, doesn't have the same tropes as this *Doctor Who* fandom, doesn't have the same tropes as the print fans. And so on. I could keep going. And, for one thing, you can't analyze the print fans and then turn to the anime fans and say, 'you all think X'.

Indeed, while it would be a mistake to generalize from such a small sample, the data uncovered in this project reveal a certain level of consistency even among this diverse group of *Doctor Who* fans, so much so that it would be useful to engage in a similar study at more conferences for different types of texts. The value of this project, then, stems from the type of its engagement with the fan community.

For fans, going to conventions can be a ritualized process, with many fans detailing to me their preparations before they go: laying out the specific costumes, pre-figuring which panels to attend, frontloading work to avoid feeling rushed when coming home. (In many ways, the ritualization of fans at conventions mirrors similar ‘pre-trip’ rituals enacted by academics before conferences). Most of the interview subjects had been to Chicago Tardis before, and most had attended multiple times. The behaviours I observed supported Hills’s (2001) examples of fan ritualization: fans use the convention, Hills suggests, to separate the fan identity from the ‘non-fan’ identity.

If that is the case, then the fans I observed and interviewed at the convention were not only self-aware, but also proud of their fan identity. One subject, Susan, commented that being a fan meant ‘being involved, feeling a part of something. Not just feeling a part but feeling a member of a group. Not an outsider’. Tom discusses how fandom takes:

a certain amount of dedication. Keeping up on it, watching the new episodes and being into the full spectrum of it, not just being one of the people who watches the new stuff, being into the whole, [and] wanting to understand the whole series and just wanting to soak in as much information as I want about it. Just being excited about it.

More fans than not saw their fandom just as Ian did: ‘it’s just a really big part of me and who I am’. Fan identity is intimately tied up with the convention space and the communal atmosphere of the con.

I attended the convention with three stated goals. The first goal was to examine, through interactive interviews with fans themselves, the individual fan’s knowledge of fan studies as a discipline, and the ways in which it may or may not make fans self-aware of their practices. The second goal of this research project was to investigate the impact of fan studies on fans themselves. This question is doubly important to me. First, as a fan and an academic myself, like L. Zubernis and K. Larsen (2012) illustrate, I have to navigate two worlds with one identity at conventions. The paradox of aca-fandom is that one must keep a foot in each world, but not become wholly subsumed by one identity over another. Second, as a popular culture scholar concerned with the depiction of the academy as an ‘ivory tower’, I feel invested with a particular drive to make cultural studies scholarship appeal and be of interest to the cultures that it describes and analyses.

The interviews I conducted for this research take fan discussion as a central text for analysis. However, as Hills (2002: 65) discusses, ‘the significantly affective nature of the fan’s attachment renders ethnographic methodology problematic’. That is, fans’ self-reporting, of the type I engaged in for this article, may not be accurate and comprehensive. Hills usefully points out that fan-talk, like any ethnographic subjectivity, cannot by itself be evidence of fan knowledge: it has to be analysed and interpreted to focus on the ideology behind the discourse. In order to do this, scholars must ‘learn... that their own accounts are also “deficient”’ in their subjectivities (Hills 2002: 71). Hills’

solution to this, then, is to engage in auto-ethnography to aid the researcher in developing an identity as *both fan and scholar* (an identity itself problematized by Larsen (2012)).

To that end, therefore, I allowed my own identity as a fan to influence the interviews, as a way of effacing any fan ‘justifications in the face of “external hostility”’ (Hills 2002: 66). Thus, I also told subjects of my third goal of attending this convention, which was to complete my *Doctor Who* Target-brand book collection, which I did with my purchase of *Fury from the Deep* (Pemberton 1986). I offer this nugget of personal information as a way of indicating that I believe my role in this study both benefitted and suffered from my status within this convention as a outspoken fan myself: I spoke the same language as the fans, as it were, and could readily identify with their own fannish obsessions. As interview subject Jacqueline noted, ‘when [academics] actually do like the stuff it helps’. For example, although I did not cosplay, I did wear a lapel pin with a *Doctor Who* character on it, which readily identified me as a fan, and on which some of the fans commented. This form of aca-fan duality allowed me to perform two proverbial identities: the performance of a fan and the performance of an academic (see also Duchesne 2010). Yet, this self-identification may, as Hills (2002) indicates in his discussion of ethnography as a methodology, have hurt my results as well: interview subjects, seeing my own fandom so prominently displayed, may have been swayed by my own voice as a researcher as well as a fan. In contrast, however, the graduate students who conducted 75 per cent of the interviews did not necessarily share this fandom and offer a contrasting point of view.

### **Integrating fandom into fan studies**

What I found is many fans were not aware of the academic study of fans, but that some had heard of *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins 1992), *Enterprising Women* (Bacon-Smith 1992), and/or *Doctor Who: The Unfolding Text* (Tulloch and Alvarado 1984). But this ignorance should not be confused with disinterest. The most common reaction I received when I asked fans about this awareness is, as Janet remarks, that she was unaware of fan studies, but could 'see where it would be very interesting'. Most of the fans interviewed had not heard about the academic study of fandom, but the majority that had not were extremely interested in finding out more and completely unsurprised that it was a topic of academic research. Fans find themselves and their fandom interesting. When asked about learning more about fan studies, for example, Graham said:

I think I'd be more interested just because there is that critical analysis of the show or of the fans. Just like, what you guys are doing. What does it mean to be a fan? I find that intriguing. How people work, that's part of the reason I like the show.

That being said, and as Hills (2002: 19) has pointed out in his discussion of the 'scholar-fan', fans themselves perform academic-style work through their fandom. Fans use content analysis to find common themes, rhetorical analysis to understand character motivations, narrative theory to examine intricately plotted stories, etc., Turlough, a fan at the convention, makes this same argument:

This is like a hobby for [fans], and for academics this is something that someone makes a career out of which is incredible. [Fans] kind of turn themselves into academics and they don't even know it. Fandom is just so well suited to academia because there's this need for comprehensiveness.

Turlough had more to say on his knowledge of contemporary fandom, and interestingly uses the language of fandom to discuss academia:

I went to a convention in September and I tried to befriend a Media Studies professor who's really awesome. She's at the University of Kansas. She talks about fan sites and how they're really archival. [Fans] are doing what academics do except they don't know it. This professor was obsessed with Swedish punk bands... a huge Swedish punk band scene online.

Undoubtedly, talking about Nancy Baym here (see Baym 2007; Baym and Burnett 2009), Turlough uses fan discourse to talk about the academy. Conversely, many fans use academic language to discuss fan discourse. For example, Terrance discusses 'the reason why *Doctor Who* fans embrace the gay community so much. Of course, I'm speaking from my white male privilege of course, so...take anything I say with a grain of salt'. The interplay of and similarities between the different discursive styles (the use of 'white male privilege' is a common discourse in cultural studies) seems to demonstrate the flexible and porous identity betwixt the fan and the academic.



Russell, a local fan who had heard of fan studies, argues that it is good for fandom to study and be studied:

Oh yeah, you're going to find an academic interest in just about any culture or counter culture, sub-culture. It's... good to have an academic interest because people might look at something like *Doctor Who* and they might scoff at it saying it's just a TV show, it's a bunch of nerds getting together and watching a TV show and talking about it but I think what we're understanding now is that cultures can be driven by something like that. *Doctor Who* fandom is becoming a culture. It's been a culture, it's getting to become a larger culture and when you have cultures forming you really do need to study those. You really need to watch them and see how they grow and involve and how they impact society in general.

And Patrick agrees that fans need to become involved in academic work:

In some ways I feel like it's hard to kick fans along. Fans can get very complacent sometimes. I'll be on a panel, [and] start talking about diversity and people don't want to know. And back in the day, talking about, we need more women in *Doctor Who*. 'No way, no way.' And now that there are more women in *Doctor Who* professionally and... that kind of argument has sort of been won in some sense. You start talking about race and you start talking about other things and it's a very tough thing. Because... the sort of meta-criticism is very hard to stick and... I think those questions need to be asked.

Romana made a particularly strong argument that fans are *already* academic, in relation to a recent panel at Chicago Tardis about *Doctor Who* and feminism: ‘Just listening to Janet Fielding [who played character Tegan] right now when she was doing her feminism panel and you’re sitting there grinding your teeth because you want to say something. Fans always have to talk’.

Nevertheless, the view of academia does not always seem rosy, especially for fans who were part of the first wave of fan studies. Freema was quick to correct me as to the primacy of my research:

This isn’t the first academic study of fandom. There was *Enterprising Women*. There were a couple of *Doctor Who* analytical studies. Unfortunately when I read the books it’s like, they don’t have the vaguest idea what they’re talking about. I’m sorry, you’re looking at it from an outsider’s point of view.

This notion of ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ harkens back to the first wave of fan studies research, and Freema seems to critique Bacon-Smith (1992), especially for her ‘outside-looking-in’ status as a non-participatory researcher.

Colin also was eager to show his knowledge of academic work on *Doctor Who*:

Not to be insulting but you’re not the first academic who tried to study *Doctor Who*. There’s a well-known book by [John]Tulloch back in the 80’s, just as the

show had reached what was then its peak with Peter Davison and American syndication and all that.

Some fans discovered fan studies accidentally when they were in college, finding books here and there in the library. For example, Amy recalled that she:

wasn't aware that there was an academic study. It was more of a first time for me delving into the subject so when I actually found books that were written in the 70s and 80s about fandom... I was looking at this and wow this has been around for awhile.

Some fans had an active role in the first wave of fan studies, like Kat, who was a student of Jenkins and participated in his interviews for *Textual Poachers*:

There's a scene set in *Textual Poachers* in my living room. He came over... and hung out with us for a weekend and watched how we worked together and separately. And I think that the academic presence, the academic validity has done an awful lot to demystify fan culture, to make it more socially acceptable. I don't think you would have shows like *Chuck* or *Big Bang Theory* without the academics having started looking at this interesting subculture and say, wow, this is kind of cool but it's understandable. ... It's easier to talk about it now than it was before the academic community started becoming involved.

Many of the fans I spoke to seemed to realize the importance of fan activities in the industry, at least in terms of influencing producers today (see Pearson 2010). As Manning notes, ‘I can definitely see that happening, starting with the giant producers of the shows seeing how fans react to their shows and then making little references or head nods to the fans, like either within the shows or within products that they send out’. Jane agrees with him, stating that ‘Tomorrow’s professional authors are today’s fan writers, and I know a couple of people over the years that have gone from writing fan fic to being professional authors. And so if they don’t start there, how are they going to start?’

After discussing how academic dialogue about feminism might have nudged *Doctor Who* fandom to treat women in the show differently, Patrick appeared to turn more self-reflexive and illustrated how his fandom helped his academic work (something I have also experienced). He notes that he has:

actually had quite incredible success in academia.... Honestly, it’s all my fan background. I think in a way [we] do bring a thoughtfulness from the academic side into fandom. I kind of meld the two together. But also there’s an amazing amount of fan stuff that’s helped me in academia.

Similarly, John was thrilled to learn about me coming back to Chicago Tardis to present the results of my research, saying that:

I think the idea that you’re going to write and publish some commentary on fans of *Doctor Who* makes me excited to see how our comments are viewed in context

of what other people are saying actually. It enriches the experience to see that context in what we do with our comments.

Alex, similarly, notes that ‘academic fans who are working on books on fans, that that can help. It can help change things so that’s good’.

### **The impact of fan studies**

Since fans seem interested in learning more about fan studies and the way that researchers are exploring fandoms, then it makes sense to see how effective fan studies researchers have been at circulating their research to fan communities. There is a perception of non-influence, as Astrid responded when asked about the possible impact of fan studies on the progression of fandom: ‘No I don’t think so. You’re having no impact’. I asked fans to discuss their knowledge of fan studies, either in particular (e.g., ‘do you know any particular studies of fans?’) or in general (did you know that there were researchers studying fans?). I discovered two avenues for academic researchers to explore. First, some fans were aware of one particular book, *Chicks Dig Time Lords* (Thomas and O’Shea 2010), which had recently been written by women about their *Doctor Who* fandom, and had won a Hugo Award. Although not a ‘scholarly’ book, *Chicks Dig Time Lords* does analyse *Doctor Who* fandom from a critical standpoint. This suggests that one role that aca-fen can play in both the academy and in fandom is to produce fan studies based in particular texts, instead of more general fan-themed works as have been written. (Also, titles are important: if a scholar’s article or book title mentions the fan’s show, the fan is more likely to pick it up.)

Second, some fans had read titles published in Open Court's 'Popular Culture and Philosophy' series (most obviously, the *Doctor Who and Philosophy* title (Lewis and Smithka 2010)). As described on their website (2012), this series 'has brought high-quality philosophy to general readers. The volumes present essays by academic philosophers exploring the meanings, concepts, and puzzles within television shows, movies, music and other icons of popular culture'. Barry mentioned to me that he would be interested in reading more *Doctor Who* themed work in that series: 'More people are interested in what makes people fans'. Perhaps a Fandom and Philosophy title would have mass fan appeal. This represents another avenue for fan researchers to tread if they wish their work to be not just accessible, but also *accessed*, by fans – short, specific volumes that engage with academic ideas in a more user-friendly way.

I also discovered that, of the fans that were aware of and had investigated fan studies on their own, they were highly invested in this world. Many were already academics – although they would not have described themselves as aca-fen, as the term seems central only to the fan studies discipline – and they were critical of their own fandom. Some had degrees in complementary fields, such as English, Media Studies or Anthropology. For example, Chris told me that he was unaware of fan studies, but 'very much interested in media studies'. Recently earning a Master's in adolescent literacy, Chris 'really tried to push with [his] reluctant students [his] experience in fandom to say, "Hey you can write a critical literacy essay about *World of Warcraft* or *Star Wars* or baseball or whatever"'. Following Jenkins et al. (2009), Chris's work with participatory culture and fandom is a way to 'engage students in higher-level learning. Instead of talking about some Mark Twain – yes, they should read it – but they would get more

passion and more critical thinking if they took' a fan studies approach. Sydney tacitly seems to agree with Chris, arguing that:

if anything... it will probably make us feel appreciated, that [fandom's] gained a level of legitimacy where it could be studied on this level.... To actually speak honestly and describe your level of fandom and how you participate acknowledges fans as also human beings of various interests and not just some goofy stereotype you see on *The Big Bang Theory*. It's certainly nice that it can be legitimate and it can also be studied objectively.

As Jenkins writes towards the end of an interview with Hills:

A generation of academic-fans have taken over the academy, and so there's certainly not the problematic relationship between fandom and the academy that there was when Constance Penley and I first outed ourselves as fans within the academy.... What our generation did was... to create a space of comfort between fan and academic. (2006c: 16)

This comforting space is meaningful, especially to those who are aware of and interested in fan studies. For example, Sylvester, someone who suffers from Attention Deficit Disorder and depression, knows about fan studies, and found that it:

helped [by] continuing to expose me to the fandom, to other strange sorts. [It's] helped me gauge what is normal [and] what isn't normal. 'Don't geek out too much because you know when you see someone who geeks out too much how it affects you'. And you can actually think about that. It helps out a lot.

As illustrated above, the only three academic books about fandom that participants knew were *Textual Poachers* (1992), *Enterprising Women* (1992) and *Doctor Who: The Unfolding Text* (1984). Two of these books are foundational in fan studies, and one is foundational in the critical study of *Doctor Who*. Each of these was written twenty to 30 years ago. This might indicate that it simply takes a long time for academic literature to get to those that it studies; however, I do not believe that is the case with these three books. Instead, I think the reason these three, in particular, are known to fans is because they are part of that first wave of fan studies, the wave that conducted in-person ethnographic interviews to explore fandom, or is specifically about *Doctor Who*. If anything, I believe this shows the longevity of fan research. The fans interviewed for each of these books passed along that information, and those recipients passed it along: the generation of fans today know about it because these fan researchers worked in-person, in-convention and (importantly) were aca-fen. The reason studies of fans today are not as well known, I think, is because they are more esoteric.

Perhaps the most reasoned rationale for wanting to share academic knowledge with the fans was addressed by River, in a dialogue about the complex nature of knowledge acquisition:



It is because everybody wants knowledge. Everyone wants to know what's going on, regardless if it's in what I call 'geekland' or it's something obscure, everyone wants to know something and I think it's really good to have an area where you can find out more about it. Even if you just want to be a casual viewer. That knowledge could pay off. Because you never know when it might come in handy.

Fans and academics share many viewpoints: the idea that knowledge is communal, the prioritization of some foundational knowledge over others, the canonization of materials, the hierarchy of group dynamics and the intertextual nature of information, among others. For those within the multiple aspects of the aca-fan identity, these commonalities may prove handier than any other difference.

### **Conclusion**

A greater dialogue between self-professed fans and academics would augment the already-strong work being done in fan studies, and would bring a fannish voice back into scholarship on fans. This is not to ignore the positive momentum of fan studies over the past two and a half decades, but rather to supplement and expand contemporary research with traditional methodologies. As mentioned, the Organization for Transformative Works already works with fans on maintaining and legitimizing fan discourse. One of the fans I spoke to, Liz, had worked with Jenkins (1992) on *Textual Poachers*, and had read with interest Bacon-Smith's (1992) *Enterprising Women* when it came out. Liz had been deep into *Beauty and the Beast* fandom and had been interviewed by Jenkins for his

chapter on gender in *Textual Poachers*. She remarks about his acceptance of fan practices and willingness to work with fans to make sure he detailed their participation correctly:

There were rewrites because he got it wrong. For one thing he felt that the fandom was not speaking with a unified voice. He was talking about ‘the whole fandom’ feels this way. The whole fandom was having a rather vicious fandom war about the subject. So it was not fair to say ‘and they all think this way’. There was blood on the streets, and friendships being broken, because people did not all agree on this.

And when she read *Enterprising Women*, she found Bacon-Smith’s assumptions about ‘the whole fandom’ to be simplistic:

I enjoyed *Textual Poachers* because *Textual Poachers* was descriptive. You know, ‘I see the fans doing X. I see them displaying this behavior and that behavior and this behavior and this is kind of funky’. *Enterprising Women* was prescriptive. ‘Fans. Do. X’. My personal copy has got some really scathing commentary in the margins.

For Liz, the contrast between the two books was monumental: Jenkins worked *with* fans to find their own voices and Bacon-Smith looked *at* fans to express her academic study. Fan studies today could take a lesson from the past by integrating fan voices as part of the research process, and producing additional research aimed at a fannish audience.

There are many ways to facilitate this interaction, and interviews are just one of them. What the interviewees at Chicago Tardis demonstrate is that fans are *interested* in being a part of research and *value* the research that is being done. For academics and for fans, there is a strong connection between media texts and objects of study. As Alistair, a professor at a small Midwestern college, remarked, ‘You have this sense that you want to be part of that world and every time you’re watching a *Doctor Who* episode and the police box disappears at the end, there’s that tug that I wish it was taking me with it’. As for fans, so too for academics: to be ‘whisked away’ without distraction in fan research is a wistful goal for many the researcher.

To that end, I have three further suggestions for enabling this academic/fan dialogue to conclude this article: publishing more fan-friendly works, speaking at fan conventions and using social media more publically.

First, I would suggest that many fans seem less interested in reading academic tomes linking fandom to esoteric critical/cultural theories than they are about reading books that use an academic lens to investigate the object of their fandom. In other words, textual analysis of the *text* or the *fandom* might appeal more than critical studies of fans, or abstruse discussions of meta/aca-fandom. This is not to suggest that researchers should stop writing academic work that further connects fandom to issues in contemporary media studies (see the third wave of fan studies). There is much academic value in this exploration and should be nurtured, fostered and encouraged. I personally find critical studies engaging and informative, and have enjoyed the aca-fan debates of the past few years. However, as academic writing becomes more obtuse and specific, it does leave the fans out of the conversation. I would suggest, then, that *in addition* to writing academic

articles or books about fans (and furthering the scholarship of fan studies), academics also *abstract* that work into shorter, more reader-friendly pieces. Not only would this increase readership of articles and books (and add a line to the vita), but it would also keep fans abreast of contemporary scholarship.

Second, and related to this point, I would suggest that fan academics start to present at fan conventions like Chicago Tardis, Comic-con, Wizard-Con, MediaWest, C2E2 or others. Sharing fan research with fans may encourage more fan participation (and may create more fannish self-awareness, combating Hills' (2002: 66) 'reduction of subjectivity' engendered by ethnographic fan research). For instance, Amy states that after learning about fans studies, she:

actually started taking more stuff back and looking at myself as a fan and okay where do I stand on this. And then a lot of times when I discussed about my fandom with other people either who are fans or are not fans, whenever I'm talking to them about things. I'm constantly taking an objective perspective of what I'm saying. 'What does this make me look like as a fan, what type of fan am I being?' It helps me become more aware so that I don't, maybe offend anybody.... when you're talking about academia and fans and how they interact with each other, I wonder how many people who are at this convention have done such a thing. I wonder if they have looked into fandom or they've written a research paper on their fandom.

Discussing fan practices and research at conventions allows researchers more opportunities to share in the fan experience, and gives fans an opportunity to voice issues with methodology and research as well. Paul notes that more knowledge of fandom would lead to fewer stereotypes of both fans *and* academics, especially if:

the academics can make the article available in such a way that fans get ahold of it. That's one of the problems. ... Maybe we need to find a better way to let people know this will be an academic, this will be a 'thinky' panel. We're going to have think ideas in here.

Finally, I would suggest that fan researchers become more involved in social media. Twitter, social network sites and especially blogs offer greater opportunities to share research about fans with a greater multitude of scholars and media fans. Some fans I spoke to use social media to write about their text, while others use it to stay in contact with the friends they've made at conventions. One of the fans I spoke to, Nyssa, was already aware of fan studies because of Jenkins' blog. Nyssa notes that the popularity of *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* has:

definitely had an effect on the perception of fans. Certainly in mainstream media, they tend to go to Aca Fans for quotes. I think that might skew things a little bit but it also at the same time, it's going to have one of two effects. It's going to have people take you more seriously or it's going to say, 'Geez, people actually spend their time studying this stuff?' And that's just going to depend on the

individual person on the outside observing it. Certainly a lot of the people I interact with online, friends I've had for 15, 20 years, a lot of them are in academia. Or people I have who are more online acquaintances are more in the acafandom circles. I know people who've been published in various essays collections and journals. And it's always interesting.

As Nyssa demonstrates, fans are interested in fan research, and making academic studies more accessible and more readable will appeal to a greater number of people. Paul agrees with Nyssa, and in reference to the interview I was conducting commented that he

likes this study because this is a study that's looking at what people do with their lives and a lot of academic studies are studies, one might say, of academic studies. They don't provide something that anyone except the 30 people in America who will read your academic journal article will benefit from. ... Studies that help us understand the world around us. Even if they're only theorized, they give us a theory that people can agree or disagree with... if people have begun dialogue you've already started the education process.

For fans, becoming part of the conversation matters.

The shift in methodology and scholarly output suggested in this article may seem problematic to some. Indeed, there are pitfalls to including ethnographic research into scholarship on fans, including the essentializing of academic and fan identity. Rather than suggesting that fans *cannot* theorize their own actions, or that academics *cannot* know

things about cultures they observe – qualifications that are useful to note but ultimately reductive – this article has attempted to show that engaging in dialogue between fan and academic, regardless of whether fans are self-critical or academics knowledgeable, can have positive consequences. Furthermore, we can acknowledge how far fan studies has come in the past quarter century and still see new avenues for exploration. Indeed, it is important not to tilt too far to the fan-side of the publishing world as well. There is still much value to be gained from academic publishing and speaking to an academic audience. The point of this article is that fan scholars must not *solely* publish in those arenas, but should make scholarship more accessible.

Fans are a vibrant group of interested readers. If the third wave of fan studies shows a movement towards more grand applications, this article argues that we should involve those that are most directly affected as well, fans themselves. Stimulating a stronger dialogue between fans and scholars – or between fan-scholars and scholar-fans – can more produce more fruitful collaborative work, and a more robust field of scholarship.

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### **Appendix: Fan interview questions**

1. Is this your first Chicago Tardis?
  - a. How often have you been to Chicago Tardis?
  - b. Are you here with anyone?
  - c. What made you come to Chicago Tardis?
2. What does being a fan mean to you?
3. Tell me about your level of involvement in *Doctor Who* fandom?
  - a. You can feel free to describe types of fan activities, etc.
4. Tell me about your first or most memorable experience with *Doctor Who*?
5. Can you tell me a little bit about when you first considered yourself a fan and not just a viewer? (You can discuss fan hierarchies here if you'd like)
6. How do you express your fandom (what do you do to be a 'fan')?
7. Have you changed the way you participate in your fandom over the years?
8. What changes have you observed in fandom since you started considering yourself a fan?
9. Were you aware of the academic study of fans?
10. Knowing that people study fans, does/would that change the way you participate in your fandom?

Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written for the 2012 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference.

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<sup>2</sup> All interview names are pseudonyms (based on *Doctor Who* characters and actors). No personal information was collected. I have edited the quotations for readability but have not altered the content.