

Crowdfunding: A Spimatic application of digital fandom

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Booth, Paul. "Crowdfunding: A Spimatic Application of Digital Fandom." *New Media and Society* 17, no. 2 (2015): 149–66.

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Abstract

The digital environment has opened up new opportunities for fans to engage with the production process of their favoured texts. The successful Kickstarter campaigns for Rob Thomas and Kristen Bell's *Veronica Mars* film and Zach Braff's film *Wish I Was Here*, and the failed Kickstarter campaign for Melissa Joan Hart's film *Darci's Walk of Shame*, each illustrate how the entertainers drew (or did not draw) on specific support from his or her own fan communities to generate funds and word-of-mouth publicity. In this paper I augment studies of digital fandom by integrating the technosocial concept of the Spime into the relationships forged between the technology of crowdfunding and the affect of particular audiences. I illustrate how 'crowdfunding fandom' changes the unique posthuman experience of 21st century participatory culture by interpreting fandom in a Spimatic network. This ultimately more fully integrates the fan into the production process, creating a truly 'participatory culture'.

Keywords

Crowdfunding, crowdsourcing, fan, Spime, internet of things, participatory culture

Crowdfunding: A Spimatic application of digital fandom

In 2013, three high-profile Kickstarter campaigns each drew on specific fan audiences to garner both money and attention for new projects. In March 2013, Kristen Bell and Rob Thomas, of *Veronica Mars* fame, quickly became Kickstarter superstars by completely funding a *Veronica Mars* movie within eight hours of opening the project. Popular press (e.g., Goodale, 2013) and academic blogs (McNutt, 2013) touted the new era of film funding this heralded (Bishop, 2013), while others illustrated antecedents for this type of film funding (McCracken, 2013). A few weeks later, Zach Braff, from the television sitcom *Scrubs*, took to Kickstarter to fund his own indie film called *Wish I Was Here*, although this was met with more ire than Bell and Thomas's endeavour (Fernandez, 2013). And a month after Braff's Kickstarter was fully funded, Melissa Joan Hart (known to fans of 1990's American children's sitcoms as the titular lead in *Clarissa Explains it All*) attempted to use Kickstarter to fund her romantic comedy *Darci's Walk of Shame*. Unlike Bell and Thomas's and Braff's campaigns, Hart's campaign failed to earn the two million dollars she had set as her goal (June, 2013)

In each of these cases, the entertainer drew on specific support from his or her own fan community to generate funds. As exemplars of an active audience, fans have served to clarify and represent larger concerns within 'participatory culture' for fan studies scholars (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, 2013; Scott, 2013). At the same time, as fan researchers we need to be cautious to avoid making 'fandom' and 'participatory culture' synonymous. As Leora Hadas (2009: 1.2) has noted:

while the logic of participation might seem to mirror the logic of fandom ... they are not one and the same; ... even an interpretive fannish community cannot be seen apart from its own norms and ideals; and ... the loose and open nature of participatory culture as idealized in the Web 2.0 model might, in fact, clash with these ideals as much as it might clash with the wider cultural model of production it is threatening to replace.

As she goes on to show, while some fans may embrace the emancipatory model of participation and utopian egalitarian in Web 2.0 spaces, other fans maintain strict hierarchical functionality, neo-liberal notions of capital, and regulation of fannish content. Fandom is not a homogenous grouping, and the boundaries between fannish groups often remain entrenched (Hills, 2002, 2012). The type of participatory culture most commonly associated with the Web 2.0 technostucture, with what Jenkins et al. (2009: 7) describe as ‘relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of information mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices’, is neither universal nor all-encompassing. Instead, different fans embrace different aspects of the web for different purposes (Booth and Kelly, 2013). Such is the power of fandom, to resist easy typification.

The problem with linking fans to participatory culture is that it simplifies both fan activity and audience participation. As I (Author, 2013) and others (Hills, 2010; Bury, et al., 2013: 316) have noted, there is an ‘over-emphasis on participatory fans in the academy’. In fact, there is a great variety of fan activity that runs the gamut from highly creative works to simply experiencing emotional satisfaction. Fan activity can be incredibly transformative, but it can also, for example, be what Hills (2010: np) calls ‘mimetic’, or the ‘desire...to replicate what’s

seen on screen'. To attempt to harness one particular type of fandom to generate funds for a media project might mean shutting other fans out of the process.

Similarly, participation is a more complex proposition than just 'doing things' with the media – as Amazon.com's 2013 drive to monetize fan fiction through Kindle Worlds illustrates. That May, online retailer Amazon.com announced that a range of popular media series, including *Gossip Girl* and *Vampire Diaries*, would become available for authorized fan fiction to be sold on the website (Amazon Publishing, 2013). Fans could write stories (following strict guidelines) to sell and collect royalties on. Although problematic for a number of reasons (see Baker-Whitelaw, 2013; Robertson, 2013), Kindle Worlds also demonstrates that participation in cultural processes is a difficult tightrope to walk. By limiting the authorized fan fiction to specific types ('no porn' ... 'doesn't violate laws or copyright...' 'no crossovers', et al. [Baker-Whitelaw, 2013: np]), 'participation' becomes a directly modulated and regulated activity by Amazon. This authorization can also be tacit, as even the act of using an Internet service to share creative fan work can be subject to the whims of the owner of the service (as some *Harry Potter* fans who used LiveJournal found out when their fan fiction blogs were deleted in 2007). Far from the 'open and empowering playground in which the entire audience can play, regardless of their level of involvement, experience, or competence', as Hadas (2009: 2.4) defines participatory culture, creative online fan fiction demonstrates that participation is often regulated, overseen, and authorized. Fans can play in the professional sandbox, but can't build their own boxes.

A new model that links participatory culture and fandom needs to be explicated. In this paper, I want to develop a more robust understanding of the way 'participation' can be enabled and generated online, using crowdfunding films via fandom as case studies. The opportunities

for fans to become involved in the filmmaking process opens up new models of participation, empowered by a redefinition of the underlying technosocial structure of digital fandom's interaction with the media. To this end, I augment studies of fandom by integrating Bruce Sterling's technosocial concept of the Spime into the relationships forged between the technology of crowdfunding and the affect of particular audiences. This 'Spimatic' appreciation of the *process* of fandom highlights changing paradigms of fan viewership in participatory culture. I will conclude that, rather than through exemplary *products*, a Spimatic fandom sees the *process* of fan activity as key to fan affect through participation. Just as the Spime exists through both space and time, so too does fannish input into creating and crowdfunding media projects parallel the spatial and temporal situation of particular fandoms. I describe how crowdfunding fandom changes the unique posthuman experience of 21st century participatory culture, illustrating fandom as a node on a Spimatic chain. This ultimately more fully integrates the fan into the production process, creating a truly participatory *culture*, rather than just participants of one.

Spimatic Fandom

To track the participation of fans as part of the digital production process via crowdfunding, I apply the concept of the Spime to fan studies. The Spime is a technosocial construct first developed by futurist and science-fiction author Bruce Sterling. A portmanteau of 'Space and Time', the concept of the Spime defines a trackable entity, a 'protagonist of a documented process. It is an historical entity with an accessible, precise trajectory' (Sterling 2005: 77). In Sterling's (11) words, Spimes are:

manufactured objects whose informational support is so overwhelmingly extensive and rich that they are regarded as material instantiations of an immaterial system. Spimes begin and end as data. They are designed on screens, fabricated by digital means, and precisely tracked through space and time throughout their earthly sojourn.

In an age when we can follow the history of an object from its very (digital) conception to its final (physical) destruction, the tangibility of an object describes only one portion of a much longer cycle. When I purchase a book on Amazon.com, my copy of that book does not begin and end with a physical object. Instead, from the publisher's first input of data into the Amazon's servers to the (eventual) barcode associated with the book when I donate it to a library, that book becomes part of a process that integrates digital and physical into one – a Spime. And it's a personal Spime – it defines just *that* copy of the book, *that* digital imprint. In addition, any meta-information recorded about the production of the book – the type of paper used, the fonts typed, the marketing, even the author's website – become part of the book's Spimatic identity. That book's existence in my hands as I read it is just one part – often the shortest part – of its Spimatic life cycle. This cycle, defined by and inclusive of the physical object at its heart, can be applied to the development of a crowdfunded campaign. From the virtual position of a concept before it exists through its finished product, crowdfunding offers an exploration of the Spime in a new context. The digital age sees the beginning of a 'synchronic society', where items are no longer simply tangible, but have become a 'process' in a longer cycle (Sterling, 2005: 52). The Spime is 'a set of relationships first and always, and an object now and then' (77), and represents the digital and tangible process an object goes through from its conception, to its physical presence in one's life, to its destruction. Applying the concept of the Spime to fandom in terms of

crowdfunding media campaigns allows us to note and augment the saliency of fan work in the production process.

For media fan researchers, fandom offers a way of exploring the activity and participation of audiences. Henry Jenkins's (1992) canonical *Textual Poachers* highlights this connection in its subtitle: '*Television Fans and Participatory Culture*'. By examining the emotional attachment that individuals can feel for a media text, the creative work that fans engage in, and the communities that develop around media texts, fan studies attempts to engage in a socio-cultural critique of audiences, to develop media studies, and to analyse the activities of fan communities. Other fan research since Jenkins has expanded on the performance of fans (Lancaster, 2001), the contradictions of fan studies (Hills, 2002), the technology of fandom (Booth, 2010), and the psychology of fandom (Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005; Zubernis and Larsen, 2012). Much fan research has attempted to problematize the dichotomy of production and consumption, terms which are not so much dialectical as they are sliding identifiers on a continuum (Author, 2013). By more fully integrating the concept of the Spime into fan research, the perception of consumption and production as *practices* shifts to see them as one cogent and chronological *process* instead. While Bruns (2008: 2) identifies this process as 'produsage', where 'the role of "consumer" and even that of "end user" have long disappeared', I assert that consumption and production remain tethered but not blended. Applying the Spime to fan crowdfunding illustrates how consumption and production are uniquely positioned as nodes in a network of fan activity.

As a concept, the Spime expands on the technological infrastructure of human discourse; yet, it has traditionally been associated with *technological developments*. To that end, the concept of the Spime has been in the past usefully applied to multiple technological discourses, including philosophical concepts of virtuality (Garassini, 2008), the notion of physical hypertext

(Bonanni, et al., 2009), marketing new technologies (Patel, 2009), even food production (Maciag, et al., 2010) and environmental issues in new technological development (McFedries, 2010). But the Spime could also usefully be applied to issues of culture as well as issues of technology; culture and technology not being opposed so much as complementary. As Allen-Robertson and Beer (2010: 530) note, focusing solely on the technological infrastructure ignores much value in ‘resonance between [the Spime] and the range of debates that are occurring in sociology and across the social sciences with regard to possible viable future directions’ of research. They take a meta approach to the Spime in their study, viewing the Spime as an *idea* that can be traced throughout space and time, effectively giving a Spimatic trace to a non-physical object. In the same way as Allen-Robertson and Beer (5423) treat ideas as ‘objects that can be followed and visualised along their lifecourse’, so too do I use a Spimatic reading to illuminate the patterns of process and progress of non-physical entities. Sterling (2005: 43) notes this connection as well: ‘Spimes are information melded with sustainability’. In order to exist across multiple frames of *presence*, the Spime must follow the trajectory of its own identity. This ascribing of autonomy to both physical and digital objects problematizes notions of online participation. As the Internet becomes ‘peopled’ with autonomous objects, its programmable functionality highlights the unstable relationship between things, people, ideas, and corporations.

Paradoxically, this unstable relationship emerges at a time when power is more and more perceived to be in the hands of individuals online. As Leora Hadas (2009: 3.3) notes, discourses of Web 2.0 – a ‘decentralized, nonhierarchical model, relying on and appealing to the collective power and interest of countless users, the long tail of the curve, rather than merely to the bulk of powerful companies and advertisers’ – assumes that all users have some effect on the

development of web technology. Hadas (3.4) hints at the way technology drives this perception, at least in terms of fandom:

In theory, the participatory logic of the Web 2.0 ethos is the same one that has been driving fandom for as long as the concept has existed. The cultural shift toward participation mentioned above has been driven forward by the technologies and attitudes that characterize this model, and has driven them in turn, as once clear-cut borders between consumers and producers are steadily eroded.

Previous research into digital fandom (Booth, 2010), examines the way that new technology shapes fannish work – the specific affordances of social media that influence the development of fan communities, especially in the way those communities interact online. But reading this technology through a Spimatic lens offers a different interpretation: that fan communities grow and change *through time*, and the interaction between the entire network of relationships – fan, media text, producer, technology – creates unique trajectories for each fan within that community. Crowdfunding as a fan activity offers us one exemplar for this trajectory – fans helping to finance a film highlights the campaign as the beginning of the Spime, while fans experiencing the film in theatres or on DVD, or failing to support the film at all, portends the closure of the Spime.

Crowdfunding

Crowdfunding, or the grassroots financing of projects using social and other online media, provides a contemporary avenue for exploring the interaction between users and technological systems within a participatory culture. In this paper I'm discussing crowdfunding as a media process, but other applications exist, including crowdfunding civic projects

(Grossman, 2012) and crowdsourcing finances (Tapscott and Williams, 2006). Crowdsourcing describes distributing projects to many individuals – the adage of many hands make light work applies here. Brabham (2013: 122) notes four types of crowdsourcing practices: (1) knowledge projects, involving the collation of information; (2) broadcast projects, involving the search for solutions to empirical problems; (3) peer-vetted creative projects, involving the creation and selection of creative ideas; and (4) distributed projects, involving crowds analysing large amounts of information. *Crowdfunding* is a specific type of crowdsourcing project, where individuals donate money instead of time, energy, or work to help fund a project. There are many economic models used to develop theories of crowdfunding (Agrawal, et al., 2013); two of the more common are the commons-based peer production model described by Benkler (2006), in which the creative energy of communities is coordinated into meaningful projects, and the model of collective intelligence (Lévy, 1997), in which individuals are empowered as part of a community to contribute meaningful value to information transactions. Both these models position crowdfunding as an extension of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), although as have previously been described (Booth, 2010; Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2013), new models of economic theory might be necessary to fully articulate the cultural ramifications of crowdfunding.

Specifically, the use of fan audiences as generative of capital demonstrates a procedural look at fan affect, what Booth (2010: 24) has called the ‘Digi-Gratis’ economy. In the Digi-Gratis economy monetary, social, and cultural values for products are interchangeable. Fans may give money to buy memorabilia, donate time to staff conventions, or spend energy creating fan fiction, vids, or other cultural products: each element becomes one node in a network of value and exchange within an affective media environment. As Pelleflamme, Lambert, and

Schwienbacher (2013) note, raising funds tends to be easier if the donators already have an emotional investment in the project (see also Sørensen, 2012).

To put this in crowdfunding terms, fans can be seen to be one aspect of the filmmaking process. They are asked for money, donate the money, and then the producers use that money to create the film (which fans then pay to see). For example, I've (Author, 2013) discussed the way fan audiences can develop and focus crowdfunding projects into the pleasure of production, specifically looking at *Inspector Spacetime* fandom. For the fans of *Inspector Spacetime*, a parody of *Doctor Who* as seen on the NBC sitcom *Community*, participation in a Kickstarter campaign to generate an *Inspector Spacetime* webseries (separate from *Community*) not only gave them the pleasure of creating new fan work, but also provided a tangible (if momentary) sense of *being a producer themselves*. Providing capital generated notions of participation. At the same time, however, these notions did not end up making fans *into* producers; instead, they reified the boundary between fan and producer by establishing a clear demarcation among participants on the Kickstarter campaign. The actual producers of *Inspector Spacetime* (NBC-Universal and Sony Pictures) threatened to sue if that name was used, so the creators of the Kickstarter were forced to change the name (and identity) of the series to *Untitled Web Series About a Space Traveler Who Can Also Travel Through Time*, further alienating the fans that contributed to an '*Inspector Spacetime*' Kickstarter.

Indeed, crowdfunding is truly only made possible by these personal, 'ubiquitous connections' of the digital age, as contemporary participatory culture uses transmedia connections to develop new modes of interacting with the media (Delwiche and Henderson, 2013: 7). As Sue Thomas (2006: 388) notes, these readings become cyborgian, especially in relation to the existence of the Spime:

So, a spime is a phenomenon that exists at various times either virtually, as data, or materially, as physical object, or both, depending upon its cycle? Well, we can easily grasp that notion because today we are very accustomed to sometimes inhabiting cyberspace with our virtual personae and manipulating virtual materials such as emails, images, and other items; and other times inhabiting physical space such as streets, fields, and houses and manipulating physical materials such as bottles, books, and furniture. We have grown used to the binary of online/offline, but unfortunately that comfort may be about to come to an end.

By following a crowdfunding campaign from opening video to funded project, one could theoretically see the birth of a new form of creative product – one formed not just from corporate control and organization, but also from crowdsourcing and fan involvement (Brabham, 2013), a hybrid system of production and consumption. Similarly, the fan fits into this paradigm as well, augmenting the production process with the sheer digital presence of the fandom.

Crowdfunding exists at a unique rupture between the neoliberal emphasis on the role of individual, and a more open, participatory model of networked action. On the one hand, participants in crowdfunding campaigns become indentured to the process, letting their own unique opinions guide the larger paradigms of financial payment. On the other hand, only by a form of networked humanism can crowdfunding function. But at the same time, this networked humanism is itself engendered by a technological apparatus, the Spime. This ‘spimatic’ process also integrates the interaction of production and consumption. Far from polarities, these two conceptions coexist within the paradigm of crowdfunding, creating new opportunities for cyborgian identities.

For Sterling (2005: 53), such cyborgian opportunities develop through time. He calls our current society a ‘synchronic’ one, which places:

high value on the human engagement with time. We human beings are time-bound entities. So are all our creations. ... So we are not object, but processes. Our names are not nouns, but verbs. Our existence does not precede time or postdate time – we personify time.

Fans, engaged in crowdfunding endeavours, not only personify the campaign, but also personify the production process of the campaign, from inception to reception. Fandom turns the production process into a synchronic process, highlighting the important and valuable role that reception has at all stages of creation. Rather than seeing the production process in stages – pre-production/production/post-production, e.g. – a Spimatic examination of crowdfunding portends a more fluid process of participation and observation. We can see this process in action by looking at three fan-based Kickstarter campaigns in more detail.

Kickstarter Campaigns

The Spimatic reading of crowdfunding illustrates the procedural logic behind fan participation. The three crowdfunded campaigns in 2011 analysed here demonstrate different levels of fan engagement in the process. While the final existence of the *film* (as a demonstrable *product*) is easily established (*Veronica Mars* and *Wish I Was Here* were funded; *Darci's Walk of Shame* was not), the continued existence of the *Spime* (as a comprehensible *process*) of each of the campaigns allows for a more concrete exemplar of the crowdfunded campaign's synchronic actuality. Specifically, all three campaigns are Spimatic, but the presence of an active fandom in the case of the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter campaign reveals a more participatory

Spime and the lack of a fan presence in *Darci's Walk of Shame* exposes a less participatory Spime. From this, we can conclude that, even though as a concept the Spime doesn't need individuals' participation, a participatory culture imbricates the Spime more fully into the media environment.

This imbrication occurs because, for Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013), the contemporary media environment isn't so much engaged in a technological transformation as it is a social one. With access to more and more information, individual consumers are beginning to 'spread' media content beyond the boundaries it was originally intended for. Spreadability – the potential for 'audiences to share content for their own purposes' (3) – is a paradigm shift in the way we think about media distribution: if the broadcast paradigm saw media circulation limited to an elite few, spreadability sees more distribution power to the masses. As spreadability grows, Jenkins, Ford, and Green (35) assert, 'the media industries understand ... that the rules are being rewritten and relationships between producers and their audiences are in flux'.

Each of the fan-based Kickstarter campaigns follows Jenkins, Ford, and Green's (2013: 230) logic, in that:

the circulation of independent films, games, music, and comics typically demands participatory mechanisms to compensate for the lack of promotional budget. Their communication strategies often court niche and subcultural communities imagined to have a strong affinity with their genre or message.

Indeed, Kickstarter itself has spreadable characteristics. Specific campaigns often draw on the word-of-mouth of individuals who spread information about each project. And once a donation is given, Kickstarter encourages the donator to post news of the donation to social media like Twitter and Facebook. In the case of the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter, for example, I first heard

about it on my Facebook wall when two colleagues and a friend each separately posted that they had contributed to the campaign, spreading not only their own generosity, but also news of the project itself. As Kuppuswamy and Bayus (2013) note, this spreadability increases as projects near completion, both because project creators make final pleas for more donations (if not funded) and because more people wait to donate until the end of the campaign.

To examine each Kickstarter project on its own, however, we risk inducing specific characteristics from particular campaigns. As Gray (2011) suggests, individual Kickstarter campaigns appear to harness an ‘amorphous’ crowd that does not aggregate into a community. However, seeing multiple projects as all stemming from the same ‘crowd’ allows us to see the ‘community of participants’ (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013: 249) – the crowd itself becomes participatory, engaging in ‘the production and distribution’ of media products themselves (Aitamurto, 2011: 431). In other words, crowdfunding fandom inherently alters the experience of online participatory culture. Fans’ active reading strategies and creative work have been previously analysed in fan studies as participants within the moment of reception. With a Spimatic reading of crowdfunding, fans become more participatory as nodes on a Spimatic network. This ultimately more fully integrates the fan into the production process, creating a truly ‘participatory culture’.

This participatory process holds true whether or not the crowdfunding campaign could be considered successful. For example, the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter opened on 13 March 2013 and within one day had surpassed its \$2 million goal. When it closed on 12 Apr 2013, the campaign had over 91,500 backers who invested a total of 5.7 million dollars towards the making of the film. Warner Brothers became involved in the project soon afterwards, offering to distribute the film and as of June 2013, the movie had started filming, with a 2014 release date.

By all accounts, this particular Kickstarter campaign was a success, and the thousands of people who invested will know that their money has helped bring this fan favourite show back on the screen.

This strong fanbase is the reason for the highly visible success of the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter. In the three years the show was on the air (2004–2007), it was critically acclaimed but had a relatively small audience. However, the audience was loyal and dedicated, as San Diego reporter Karen Peterson (2006) describes of a *Veronica Mars* fan convention. Along with other fan campaigns, the *Veronica Mars* fandom became highly invested in restarting the show – the *Veronica Mars* ‘Cloud Watchers’ organized viewers to garner higher ratings during the show’s airing, and later sent over 10,000 Mars candy bars to The CW to try and save the show from cancellation (Empire, 2012). This parallels similar efforts by other fan groups to get their favoured shows back on the air – *Star Trek* fans’ famously writing letters to CBS, *Jericho* fans sending peanuts to CBS, and *Roswell* fans mailing Tabasco sauce to the WB – although rarely do the shows get renewed, and if they do, it’s only for a little while.

Traditionally, we might view the activity of all these different fan communities through a reception studies lens. That is, each of these fan groups was active and participatory in the media environment, but only *after* they had already been consumers of the show. *Jericho* fans and *Roswell* fans sent food items because characters on those shows mentioned that food – it was a direct reference to what had been outlined on air. Taking quite literally Jenkins’s (1992) ‘poaching’ metaphor from *Textual Poachers*, these fans took their ‘save-our-show’ campaigns directly from the text itself. In no way is this intended to demean the act of these fans – they are, as Jenkins notes, using the resources at their disposal to interact as best they are able given the media environment.

What the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter campaign illustrates, however, is the presence of fans' active receptive practices within multiple aspects of the production process. Similarly, the receptive practices of the filmmakers towards the fan campaign via acknowledgement of fans' work may have helped spur fans to want to donate to the Kickstarter. In a transmediated text like *Veronica Mars*, specific identifiable moments of 'production' and 'reception' are difficult to articulate and differentiate. As Henry Jenkins (2006: 95–6) has defined, transmedia storytelling 'represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience'. For Jenkins (2003), transmedia is a new way of storytelling stories – not as singular entities, but rather as nodes in a narrative network. In its move from television to film, *Veronica Mars* has created a transmedia franchise. But this makes identifying those moments of reception and production more difficult – when *Veronica Mars* fans attempted to get the show back on the air in 2007, their efforts were highly visible to the *Veronica Mars* production team. According to an article at the time, Thomas even noted fans efforts to save the show (Menon, 2008). It's possible that the post-reception influence of fans on the show helped to convince Rob Thomas and Kristen Bell to crowdfund the film. In the video promoting the campaign (itself a 'spreadable' component of Kickstarter projects), both Bell and Thomas mention the *Veronica Mars* fandom by name – calling them an affectionate 'Marshmallows' – and use community-based language like 'this is *our* chance to make the *Veronica Mars* movie happen', fully involving the fan community in the project.

The interactive potential of fans and producers becomes fluid in the digital environment; crowdfunding presents a useful metaphor for seeing this procedural relationship grow and develop. Furthermore, one way to identify moments of activity of this relationship is through the

Spime. If the entirety of the *Veronica Mars* transmedia franchise can be identified as a Spime – from the moment it was conceived of by Rob Thomas until its final download decades from now – then fans and producers have an equally participatory role to play in this Spimatic construction. The influence of one upon the other cannot be measured simply in dollar amounts or volumes of fan fiction produced. Rather, the *collaborative potential* of both groups portends a truly participatory media environment.

Although not as successful as the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter, Zach Braff's *Wish I Was Here* Kickstarter campaign also demonstrates the participatory potential of fan through the Spime. Specifically, *Wish I Was Here* did not generate the same positive press as did the *Veronica Mars* project. Braff started his campaign on 24 Apr 2013 and as of 24 May, had raised over 3.1 million dollars with 46,500 backers. This total was over a million dollars more than he had originally planned. Braff's film, a follow-up to his successful indie hit *Garden State* (2004), met with ire from many online. The reason for this is aptly summed up by NBC's Maria Fernandez (2013: np): 'someone with plenty of money of his own and direct access to Hollywood resources has no business playing in the kiddie pool that is supposed to be Kickstarter'. Even *The New York Times* questions the ethicality of his funding the film through Kickstarter when he has plenty of money himself (Klosterman, 2013). Further, such ethical discussion didn't appear with the *Veronica Mars* campaign, even though Kristen Bell is also a high profile actor who also has a large bank account. And, Salon.com's Erin Keane (2013: np) defends the project: anyone who thinks 'Kickstarter [is] an amazing resource for cash-strapped innovators who might otherwise not have access to more than their own savings accounts', she argues, is 'thinking like a production company, not like a fan who doesn't mind buying into a glorified fan club to show her support for an artist she likes'. In other words, Braff's campaign

succeeded because of his own personal star power and fannish influence. Although *Wish I Was Here* is not part of a franchise, Braff's indie film *Garden State* and his work on the TV show *Scrubs* gives his fans the power to articulate a previously established relationship with him.

Braff also establishes a clear connection with his fans via the video on his Kickstarter page. The video opens with him articulating his knowledge of his fan base, by joking about his most commonly asked question – ‘Can I mount you and yell ‘Eagle!’?’ – and sitting next to a poster for *Garden State*. The joke is similar to many from his earlier show *Scrubs*. He then appeals to his fans’ appreciation of his previous work (Donald Faison, co-star of *Scrubs*, makes a cameo in the video) and explains that he would like final cut/casting decisions on his movie. Throughout the video, Braff clearly situates his audience as *his fans* – making sure they are included in the process. ‘Most importantly’, he says, ‘[*Garden State*] became a very special film *to you*, who did understand what I was trying to say’. This articulation maintains a separation between Braff as producer and his fans as viewers:

I want to bring you, my fans, the truest representation of what I have in my brain. That means I’ll have the final cut over what ends up in the movie and I get to only cast the actors I think are perfect for the roles. Please help *me* make another movie *for you* like *Garden State*. (emphasis added)

It is clear that Braff distances himself from the fans, using less-inclusive language and singular personal pronouns. Braff’s ownership of his own production may have caused some of the negative backlash from fans. Throughout the video, Braff aims to connect with his fan base, but also holds them at a distance. Yet, from a Spimatic point of view, the same participatory potential seen in the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter emerges here as well. The fans are spurred to donate by the previous receptive and productive practices they’ve engaged in in the past.

Although the Spime of *Wish I Was Here* is similar to the *Veronica Mars* Spime, the specific outcome of that process can vary greatly, as Spimatics is participatory, not hierarchical.

Finally, former child star Melissa Joan Hart's Kickstarter campaign for her romantic comedy *Darci's Walk of Shame* utilized a video like Braff and Bell did, but failed to make the \$2 million minimum to fund the project. She cancelled the campaign two weeks early (although, given the statistic that most Kickstarters get funded in the last few days, that may have been a mistake; see Kuppuswamy and Bayus, 2013). At the same time, however, Hart's campaign illustrates many of the same Spimatic elements as the other two. What is intriguing about Hart's failed Kickstarter project is not just in the ways it failed to attract an audience, but also in the way it continues to unfold as a *process*. The participatory culture of the project suffered by neglecting the fan spimatic.

The reasons for the failure of Hart's project could be attributed to many elements, but perhaps most salient is the fact she did not appeal to her fan base in the same way as Bell and Braff did. If fandom is itself always a process, then alienating a section of fandom through temporal negation may have hurt her chances for financial donation. Melissa Joan Hart, made famous in the mid-1990s for starring in Nickelodeon's *Clarissa Explains it All*, has a fan base aged in their twenties and early thirties. Since *Clarissa*, Hart has appeared in another children's show, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, and currently stars in *Melissa and Joey*, a sitcom aimed at families on the ABC Family network. Rather than reaching out to her fan base via direct address, Hart's video on her Kickstarter page stars her and her mother, reading through scripts that take familiar elements from her previous works and mock them. 'I think you need to do something different', her mother says. They note how Hart has moved past her roles on Nickelodeon and in *Sabrina*, and her mother suggests she take a new as an adult. Hart admits 'I don't know anyone

who's going to put me in a movie like this'. When she directly addresses the audience, Hart doesn't appeal to her fan base's early years – she says 'I need your help to prove to people that *I'm more than* just Clarissa or Sabrina' (emphasis added). Any fans attached to her previous work are shut out by her direct address. Literally talking to the fans, she tells them she does not want to appeal to them. She distances herself from her fan base, and her fans did not get behind the film, as they were alienated from the production process.

So while the film failed to be funded, its Spimatic influence also suffers – but it doesn't die. Because fans were not involved at different times, nor invoked at the 'proper' times, the Spime of *Darci's Walk of Shame* could not imbricate fandom into the participatory paradigm. Hart's video had the opposite effect than was intended, according to the *LA Times* (Sperling, 2013: np): 'fans of the '90s child star ... weren't so interested in watching her play a single thirtysomething forced to attend her sister's wedding solo...Hart's project lacked a nostalgia factor'. But more so than nostalgia, it also lacked a specific acknowledgment of any Melissa Joan Hart fan's work. Crowdfunding through fandom works through recognition of participation. It becomes participatory through previous interaction. Hart failed to recognize her fans as a unique group, and the Spime couldn't continue as a film – instead, it continues as a presence within the Kickstarter pantheon of failed campaigns, and as the topic of analyses like this one.

Conclusion: Spimatic Participatory Cultures

If, as Aitamurto (2011: 433) notes, 'participation, specifically ... donations, [is] a manifestation of a participatory culture', then each of these three Kickstarter campaigns engages the participatory culture of its fan base in different ways. This is to be expected – as Sterling (2005: 12) notes of the development of the Spime:

technocultures do not abolish one another in clean or comprehensive ways. Instead, new capacities are layered onto older ones. The older technosocial order gradually loses its clarity, crumbles, and melts away under the accumulating weight of the new.

We are only just beginning to learn the best ways to harness fandom's affective potential and economic viability for crowdfunding purposes. It may be, as Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013: 234) assert, that 'the greatest advantage' of crowdfunding media projects 'may rest with those producers whose work operates within genres with strong fan followings (animation, science fiction, horror) and who speak to well-defined populations (minority and activist groups)'. Certainly, this appears to be the case with the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter campaign, which tapped into a rich vein of fannish enthusiasm for the series. Additionally, the fact that Thomas and Bell had largely identified the group by a particular name, declaring it into being through nomenclature, solidified the identity of the fan group. Neither Braff nor Hart has particularly 'well-defined populations' of fans following them (not to say they don't have fans, but rather than their fandoms are more mainstream and diffuse than the idiosyncratic *Veronica Mars* fans). Yet, even in their assertion of fandom's particular value, Jenkins, Ford and Green assert a separation between fan and producer – the producers 'work' while the fans 'follow'.

However, I'd like to posit a more complex rationale for why the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter campaign succeeded so wildly while the others did not. It still revolves around fan audiences, but instead of seeing them as separated from the production process, it argues that fans are actually imbricated into the very system through their Spimatic value within the complex *process* by which texts becomes actualized. For Sterling (2005: 79), 'in the age of Spimes, the object is no longer an object, but an instantiation. My consumption patterns are worth so much that they underwrite my acts of consumption'. The Spimatic effect of a

Kickstarter campaign means that even if a product fails to materialize, the overall process continues to exist. As a case in point, Kuppuswamy and Bayus (2013: 18) discuss the failed Kickstarter campaign for the HanFree iPad accessory. In 2011, Seth Quest created the campaign in order to fund a project for a hands-free stand for the iPad. Raising \$35,000, Quest not only exceeded his target goal of \$10,000, but also garnered 440 supporters.¹ However, the publicity surrounding the campaign may have hurt Quest more than helped – Agrawal, Cataslini & Goldfarb (2013) illustrate that the disclosure of funds hampered Quest’s ability to bargain with potential suppliers. The HanFree accessory failed to materialize, and Quest was forced into bankruptcy. Although the *product* does not exist – to date, there is not HanFree accessory, and all the backers lost the money they invested – the *process* is forever inscribed online and in print. The website for the Kickstarter campaign houses digital information about the project, and the aftermath of its failure is enshrined on website (and scholarly articles) in perpetuity. As a product, HanFree is nowhere; as a Spime it is everywhere.

Looked at through traditional models of economic development, fans’ support of *Veronica Mars* is certainly a success story and non-support of *Darci’s Walk of Shame* a failure. To be fair, one will produce a movie and one won’t. But using a more Spimatic analysis we can see the overall pattern of success for the model both campaigns engender. It’s not just about the film that gets made at the end of the campaign (after all, the film could be considered a box office failure even when it does get made), but the process by which fans become integrated into the production of the film. And as the Spime illustrates, the generative potential of fandom does not just happen at specific moments of reception, but rather becomes emblematic of the entire

¹ <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/831303939/hanfree-ipad-accessory-use-the-ipad-hands-free>

process of creation. Fans are always-already imbricated within the digital media system, from start to finish.

As Aitamurto (2011: 429) notes of crowdfunding journalism, the effect of crowdfunding on media production also forces individual filmmakers to ‘renegotiate their role and professional identity to succeed in the changing realm of creative work’. The role of producers, just as much as fans, needs to be re-examined. Crowdfunding via fandom is generative and has the potential to remake not just the economy of media production, but its cultural impact as well. At the same time, such support can be problematic, as producers are asking fans to, in effect, front the cash in order to get projects made but giving them little say on the evolution of the product. By involving the audience in such a direct manner, media producers can rely more heavily on the communities that develop around particular cult texts, but continue to leave fans ‘voiceless’ in the production process. We must be careful in asserting the primacy of any model of fandom, as each has flaws and blind spots.

In this article, I’ve illustrated one way that fan studies and technology studies can integrate in order to demonstrate changing paradigms of audience involvement in the media process. Fandom is an inherently emotional experience; digital technology can facilitate and channel that emotion into new avenues. New concepts in technological development, including the Spime, can be usefully applied to non-corporeal procedures, like media creation and idea generation. Fandom excels at both, and applying theories of the Spime to fandom through the model of crowdfunding portends a more emotive, affective *process* of media creation. Fandom is traditionally participation after-the-fact; the Spime allows us to see fandom as generative of meaning throughout the entire participatory process.

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