

Reifying the Fan:
Inspector Spacetime as Fan Practice

Paul Booth

Assistant Professor

College of Communication

DePaul University

Chicago, IL 60604

pbooth@depaul.edu

312-362-7753

Abstract

In this study, I look at the rise of *Inspector Spacetime* Internet fandom as a key component in 21st century fandom. A fictional show-within-a-show on the NBC comedy *Community*, *Inspector Spacetime* is ostensibly a parody of *Doctor Who*. It has also developed its own fan base, mainly through the websites TVTropes.com and Tumblr. I argue that the rise of *Inspector Spacetime* fandom represents a parody of fandom via the tension between production and consumption in a hypermediated culture. *Inspector Spacetime* fandom parody is double-edged. It offers both a reverence for and an implicit critique of fan activities through an analysis of *Doctor Who*. At the same time, *Inspector Spacetime* fandom reifies the boundaries of fandom even as it critiques fan activities.

Keywords: Fandom, parody, *Doctor Who*, *Inspector Spacetime*, *Community*.

Reifying the Fan: *Inspector Spacetime* as Fan Practice

The general awareness and popularization of fandom as a mode of spectatorship and as a particular (sub)cultural practice engender fan practices through digital technology and performance. In this paper, I want to talk about media fans—those people who feel an immense emotional connection with a media text—as a self-aware population. Media fans have provided entry points into media theory in the past (Booth, 2010; Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005). Today, the appearance and popularization of one particular fandom, the *Inspector Spacetime* community which has blossomed online, opens up a number of important issues in fan studies. Namely, what is the role of the fan in the creation of a fan community? What happens when fandom creates a text, and then poaches that same text? It also asks us to question the nature of “fandom” in an age of playfulness and parody, two key characteristics of our contemporary cultural era.

This investigation of *Inspector Spacetime* fans—which, like Hadas’s (2009) examination of *Doctor Who* fans, uses Internet forums and discussion boards as repository of textual discourse—creates an opportunity to view a nascent fandom. *Inspector Spacetime* is a fictional show-within-a-show on NBC’s sitcom *Community*. It is also a parody of the long-running BBC series *Doctor Who*. Previous studies of fans tend to examine groups that cluster around particular media objects. These fan studies, including work about fans of *Star Trek* (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Geraghty, 2007; Jenkins, 1992) *X-Files* (Bury, 2005), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Williams, 2003), *Supernatural* (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012), *Babylon 5* (Lancaster, 2001), *Doctor Who* (Britton, 2011; Hills, 2010; Tulloch & Alvarado, 1984; Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995), privilege a textual model of analysis. This isn’t to say that one particular fandom can’t bleed into other fandoms; in fact, as Jenkins (2007) pointed out, fandom is multifaceted and one can be a fan of

multiple objects at the same time. Yet, *Inspector Spacetime* is not a “text” in the same way as these other long-running cult shows. It is a fictional representation of a cult text, a parody instead of a primary text. *Inspector Spacetime* fandom doesn’t poach the “text” of the show, as it were, as there is no “text” to augment. Instead, the fandom enacts an appreciation and knowledge of multiple texts to create the fan experience.

Inspector Spacetime fandom, in this sense, is tri-textual, as the members of this fan community reference *Doctor Who*, *Community*, and *Inspector Spacetime* with seemingly equal attention. These fans are thus central to *Inspector Spacetime*. They create the text they are fans of, by linking the *texts* of this specific cult tripartite with the *practices* learned from other fan communities. This fan-centric mode of scholarship sees fans and the fan community as central to the fannish experience. This fan-of-fan-experience was also discussed by Roberta Pearson (2011) who noted that fan scholars should distinguish between “those who are fans of a specific text/cultural icon and those who are fans of fandom itself” (para. 5, see also Pearson 2012). Although fans are interrogated into fan communities through texts, it is also often the practices that these communities engender that become more meaningful to the fan. This is not a dichotomous relationship: texts and practices go hand-in-hand. Indeed, we need only look to Roland Barthes (1972) to see the way that both cultural *items* and cultural *practices* can be imbued with symbolic meaning. Today, the act of “being a fan” was one of Barthes’ myths, a practice imbued with symbolic and mythological meaning. Thanks to movies like *Trekkies* (1997), *Galaxy Quest* (1999), and *Fanboys* (2009), and shows like *MTV True Life* (1998), *Beauty and the Geek* (2005), and *Geek Love* (2011), there has been a rise in visibility of fans. Whether it’s watching a DVD extra about how fans “saved” *Firefly* (2002), kept *Family Guy* (1999) on

the air, or brought back *Arrested Development* (2003) on Netflix, fandom of media has become a norm of viewership.

This is a development from previous studies of fandom. The early days of fan research saw a much different portrayal of those people who loved media. John Fiske (1992) wrote about the “shadow” cultural economy of fans—literally, out of the mainstream, not visible, hidden from view. Jenkins (1992) wrote about the negative portrayal of fans, especially in the famous “Get a Life” sketch from *Saturday Night Live*. Of course, such negative portraits exist today: *Fanboys*, especially, offers a particularly pathological portrayal of *Star Trek* fans. But the representation of fans as *active components* of the media economy has increased, popularized, and valorized fandom across the media landscape. The consumers have become producers; not in the way that Bruns (2008) posited, wiping out the two sides of this dichotomy into a “producer” of online media, but rather the dichotomy of production and consumption appears to be strengthened, albeit reversed, by the resolve and desire of the fans.

The evolution of *Inspector Spacetime* fandom reveals particularly salient details about the formation of a fan community, and also demonstrates the complex interaction between media corporations, the fan communities, and the Neo-Liberal impetus for the exploitation of fan labor as key to a producer/creator success (Pearson, 2010). Although the show itself doesn't exist, this doesn't mean it's not “real” to the fans—and this fact engenders generative fan labor. In this paper, I explore the development of *Inspector Spacetime* fandom in three different ways. First, I give a historical overview of *Inspector Spacetime*. Second, I analyze the relationship between fans and producers of *Inspector Spacetime* (or, rather, the producers of *Community*, the NBC sitcom on which *Inspector Spacetime* premiered) and the rise of Travis Richey as a key BNF (Big Name Fan) who seems to straddle the producer/consumer dichotomy. Finally, I describe the

way that *Inspector Spacetime* fandom appears to represent and participate in creating parodic elements within today's contemporary media environment. I conclude that *Inspector Spacetime* fandom demonstrates a fan-centric reification of the boundary between production/consumption, but through a parodic take on the idea of fan identity, it continues to enable fan work within a normative set of practices.

Inspector Spacetime

In "Biology 101," the first episode of the third season of *Community*, the character Abed—himself a representation of a highly media-savvy fan—is introduced to *Inspector Spacetime* as a cult British show. Although *Inspector Spacetime* is usually mentioned once per episode in the third season of *Community*, the text of the show is rarely seen or heard. The first scene, from "Biology 101" lasts approximately 40 seconds. The next clip, from the *Community* episode "Regional Holiday Music" features just about a minute of action between the Inspector and his longtime associate, Constable Reggie. There are various images from *Inspector Spacetime* seen around Abed and Troy's apartment, and during "Remedial Chaos Theory," a brief clip of audio can be heard emanating from a television set. All together, these short clips total about 120 seconds of "actual" *Inspector Spacetime* material. In addition to Barthes' (1972) discussion of mythology, it might be useful to note his famous "Death of the Author" essay: in this case, rather than the disappearance of a coherent author for *Inspector Spacetime*, a "Death of the Text" may be a more appropriate description.

The aspect of *Inspector Spacetime* that predominates more than any other on *Community*, then, is a stylized and personalized representation of the fannish reaction to *Inspector Spacetime*,

as personified by Abed and his best friend Troy. Troy and Abed cosplay¹ as the Inspector and Constable Reggie in episode five, “Horror Fiction in Seven Spooky Steps,” and episode six, “Advanced Gay.” They collect posters of the show, on display in their apartment throughout the season. They play act as the duo continuously, and often speak to each other in character. In “Studies in Modern Movement” they use shadow puppets to act out scenes for party guests. Abed and friend Annie also roleplay as The Inspector and his associate Geneva in “Virtual Systems Analysis.” Furthermore, the characters reference the show as a touchstone upon which other elements in their life can be compared, often saying things like “this is just like *Inspector Spacetime*....” In other words, Abed and Troy as representations of fans of *Inspector Spacetime* are the predominant way the audience of *Community* understands *Inspector Spacetime*, and it is through the lens of their fannish enthusiasm that the show becomes “real.”

But, of course, the show isn’t “real” in the sense that a viewer could watch it. Instead, *Inspector Spacetime* joins other famously fictional television programs—e.g., *The Alan Brady Show*, *Galaxy Quest*, *Itchy and Scratchy*, *The Girly Show*—as a text that plays affectionately with the line between fantasy and reality. In this case it does so as a parody of fandom as well. It is, at once, both real and unreal: the show doesn’t exist but the fans of *Inspector Spacetime*, *Community*, and *Doctor Who* have *made* the show real, interpolating it into existence through fan practices. In essence, the fans have created *Inspector Spacetime* from just a few seconds of produced material.

In doing so, *Inspector Spacetime* problematizes the twinned notion of “canon” and “fanon.” These fans have collected what little “canon,” or officially produced extant information about *Inspector Spacetime*, that exists and from that have created an enormous amount of

¹ Costume-play: dress up as the characters.

“fanon,” fan-created information about the show. All the information about *Inspector* has been compiled mainly in online forums and social websites, and fans have produced a voluminous amount of original material. The resulting dialogue is, as one fan commenter puts it, a “large scale operation,” including multiple writers, actors, and artists all compiling/inventing information about this fake show. As Gray (2010) might have suggested, these ancillary fan-created texts could be considered “paratexts” that pose “their own alternate readings and interpretive strategies” (p. 144).

This is not the first time a fan community surrounding a fictionalized media object has emerged. As Lincoln Geraghty (2007) argued in *Living with Star Trek*, the 1999 film *Galaxy Quest* inspired a “Questarian” fandom online.² This fan community used the fictional television series in the film (a parody of *Star Trek*) as the extant object of their fandom, creating “a franchise back-story for the film...the website imagines a world where *Galaxy Quest* is *Star Trek*” (p. 150). The film tells of a cult show that inspired hundreds of thousands of human fans and, having been beamed into space via satellite transmission, also influenced the development of an alien race. The Thermians saw the series as a historical document rather than a fictional representation. The fan audience of *Galaxy Quest* (the fictional program) can identify with the Thermians in interpolating the show as experientially real. Like the bottom-up production of *Inspector Spacetime* fandom, the Questarians developed a backstory and history for their non-extant text.

The *Galaxy Quest* fan-made paratexts build on the images and discussion of *Galaxy Quest* (and, implicitly, *Star Trek*) in the film. Similarly, the fan-made *Inspector Spacetime* paratexts are not *alternate* to but rather *exemplary* of the tri-part text of *Inspector Spacetime*. The

² <http://www.questarian.com/>

power of the fan here to deconstruct the differences and similarities between canon and fanon is ultimately ambiguous, as much of the paratextual *fanon* of *Inspector Spacetime* is actually based on textual *canon* of *Doctor Who*. In the case of *Inspector Spacetime* fandom, then, this fan work exists in a liminal state between text and paratext.

According to the fanon, *Inspector Spacetime*, like *Doctor Who*, features a time-traveling alien who looks human but has superhuman abilities, and who travels the cosmos with a bevy of companions. The Inspector, like the Doctor, can change his appearance upon dying—the Doctor regenerates while the Inspector metamorphs. Some similarities are obvious: while the Doctor’s traveling machine, the TARDIS, is bigger on the inside than on the outside, the Inspector’s machine, the BOOTH, is slightly smaller on the inside than on the outside.³ Some of the Doctor’s most prized possessions, like his “sonic screwdriver,” have been re-appropriated by the fandom—in this case, turned into the “optic pocketknife.” And the same happened to his most dastardly enemies: in *Doctor Who*, the Daleks; in *Inspector Spacetime*, the Blorgons. Yet some similarities are more opaque: for example, as a Time Lord the Doctor has two hearts and travels with his companions around the universe. As an “Infinity Knight” the Inspector has no heart and therefore needs his human companions to help him *learn* humanity—a nod to an underlying theme of *Doctor Who*, transposed through metaphor to *Inspector Spacetime*.

Although some of the parody in the show-within-a-show stems from Dan Harmon, creator and writer of *Community*, as well as the other writers of the show, the vast majority of the parodic material originates with the fan community that embraced *Inspector Spacetime* from its

³ At the time the fanon was beginning, the name of the ship in which the Inspector travelled was called a DARSIT, an anagram of TARDIS, the Doctor’s ship. However, in March 2012 when NBC/Sony became legally involved with the *Inspector Spacetime* project, the name was changed to avoid copyright violation.

premiere moment on the show. For example, fans of *Inspector Spacetime* write fan fiction, make videos, cosplay, and roleplay at conventions. At two large *Doctor Who* conventions, fans organized panels about the history of *Inspector Spacetime*, and discussed the show's symbolic, metaphorical, and socio-political meaning (never once "letting on" that it was a fake show). Fans have even made clips of the show as if it actually existed.

In *Digital Fandom*, I (2010) argued that we have reached a new era in fan studies, where the object of fandom isn't so much the end product (fan fiction, video, etc.), but rather the creation and formation of the fan community through social media. Turk and Johnson (2012) nuanced this point by arguing that too often fan scholars "erase individual creators by collapsing collaboration into mass authorship" (para. 2.2). Tumblr represents a key technology not discussed in my book, and it is worthwhile to examine how it would fit into Turk and Johnson's examination of unique authorship within a community structure of fandom and media. *Inspector Spacetime* fandom exemplifies the interaction of fans, fan practices, and the trans-fandom of *Community* and *Doctor Who*.

Fans started to write the "history" of *Inspector Spacetime* almost immediately after "Biology 101" aired, with fans taking to Twitter and message boards describing their reaction to the show. The first site to collate material was TVTropes, but Tumblr quickly became the online home for fan-created *Inspector Spacetime* material, most of it now centrally located at *Inspector Spacetime Confessions*.⁴ Much of *Inspector Spacetime Confessions* isn't so much *original* as it is *re-appropriated* from *Community*, from *Doctor Who*, and from various other media texts. And much of the material isn't created by one or two people, but rather is the product of a vast

⁴ <http://inspectorspacetimeconfessions.tumblr.com/>

networked community, a *fandom* (see Booth, 2010; Gray, 2010, p. 146). Ultimately, there really is no “original” text of *Inspector Spacetime*; it’s all based on parodies of other shows.

Indeed, the reality of *Inspector Spacetime* came to a head when *Community* itself went on hiatus in the first quarter of 2012. Although many fans feared that *Community* might have been cancelled during its hiatus—and it’s abbreviated fourth season indicates this is still a possibility—*Inspector Spacetime* cannot logically be cancelled. *Inspector Spacetime*, because it is a text constructed almost entirely by fans, represents a media object with no empirical text. Rather, *Inspector Spacetime* fandom offers both a reverence for and an implicit, articulate critique of fan social meaning and practice.

***Inspector Spacetime* Fandom**

The *Confessions* Tumblr consists of re-appropriated images from popular culture mashed up with humorous sayings and intertextual references to *Doctor Who*, *Inspector Spacetime*, and other pop culture texts. For example, a “confession” from 25 Nov 2011 shows a picture of David Tennant (who portrayed the Tenth Doctor in *Doctor Who*) and Stephen Fry (who played the fictional Seventh Inspector in *Inspector Spacetime* fanon/canon) in front of a Red BT Phone Booth (a BOOTH in *Inspector Spacetime*) with the words “I almost cried when The Doctor and The Inspector met during that Children in Need special” superimposed in white lettering. This image, typical of many of the images on the *Confessions* Tumblr, mashes up elements from *Doctor Who* canon (Tennant, the annual Children in Need specials) with manifestations of *Inspector Spacetime* fanon (Fry, the BOOTH) to re-appropriate both for *Inspector Spacetime* canon.

Given little authoritative text upon which to base their fan texts, the community revolves around the fanon as the key object of the fandom. *Inspector Spacetime* is not unique in this fandom of fanon, as the *Star Trek* fan base offers a similar example of fandom for the *New Voyages* web series. A series of fan-made episodes that mirror the look and feel of the first *Star Trek* series, these episodes purport to “fill in” the missing two years of the original *Star Trek*’s five-year voyage. The web series was funded through fan donations and generated enough fan interest to grow a large audience. Fan scholar Justin Everett (2008) even argued that the *New Voyages* were as popular, if not more so, than the official Paramount production of *Enterprise* (2001). He described the fanon of *New Voyages* as something “substantial and compelling” that points to the enduring popularity of *Star Trek* itself, as well as the fan experience of enjoying *Star Trek* (p. 196).

Furthermore, the early days of the web saw a different *Doctor Who* parody fandom emerge. After the BBC canceled *Doctor Who* in 1989, Virgin Books published a series of novels called the *New Adventures*. Although the canonicity of these novels is disputed, there are elements within the novels that the fan community embraced (see Parkin, 2007). For example, in these novels, the Doctor encounters a television program called *Professor X*, a thinly-veiled reference to *Doctor Who* (see Britton, 2011). *Professor X* is a show about a time traveling scientist with meta-textual similarities to the Doctor. Fans appropriated his story and created a complete fictional universe for the Professor online (now found via the wayback machine⁵). A key difference between the *Professor X* site and the *Inspector Spacetime* fandom is the connection with the extant text. *Professor X* is officially present within the universe of *Doctor*

⁵ <http://web.archive.org/web/19990203054134/http://dcs.ex.ac.uk/~dma/ProfX/>

Who but may not be canonical, while *Inspector Spacetime* is canonical to *Community* but is not part of the *Doctor Who* universe.

This difference may be instrumental in defining the key differences between the two eras in Web communication as well. Fan engagement in the playful web environment of Web 2.0 social media has developed and extended a *trans-fandom* between texts. That is, with a hypermediated and over-stimulated fan audience, connections between media texts may be embraced and built upon more so than in a uni-fandom text like *Professor X*. The nascent fandom of *SuperWhoLock* (a fandom of *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, and the BBC's *Sherlock*) exemplifies this playfulness: fans mix and match texts to create unique fan texts outside what canon offers.

The trans-fandom of *Inspector Spacetime* between *Doctor Who*, *Community*, and the fandom itself allows fans to treat their own work as canonical. In other words, the fan fiction and fan art become the produced media texts to which the consumers in the fan community refer as authoritative. For example, a number of key texts were written one day after the premiere of *Inspector Spacetime* in “Biology 101.” The first appears to have been written by “skrcha” on a TVTropes page.⁶ As the name suggests, TVTropes collects particularly overused or obvious clichés on television; in this case, however, the board summarized *Inspector Spacetime* as a uniquely funny parody of *Doctor Who*. As the board developed through user interaction, a canonized history of the show—complete with eleven Inspectors, scores of associates, and even some screenplays for episodes—was written. The discussion page on the TVTropes website

⁶ Information about the TVTropes page construction comes from a personal correspondence with one of the contributors to the site, BTravern.

includes thousands of posts which explicate key elements within the *Inspector Spacetime* universe, and fit them into the canon.

Tellingly, one of the largest discussions dealt with the only two pieces of officially canonized *Inspector Spacetime* material: the two short scenes shown in *Community*. One was made for the “current” season of *Inspector Spacetime*, the other for a 1981 episode; both, however, starred the same actors, throwing the fanon into heated debate. Through discussion, however, the fan community renegotiated the boundaries of the extant text to make the two scenes fit together (BTravern, personal communication, 01 Apr 2012).

The second key text within the *Inspector Spacetime* fandom is a piece of blog fan fiction based on one of the first mentions of *Inspector Spacetime*.⁷ On 23 Sept 2011, the day after *Community*'s premiere of *Inspector Spacetime*, fan GeorgiatheKiwi saw TVTropes and Twitter and wrote a short fan fiction piece based on the extant information. She added her own reading into the fan fiction. The blog fan fiction demonstrated a number of key elements in *Inspector Spacetime* lore, including the now-fanon loathing for character Jeffrey and the Inspector's characteristic callousness.

A third important text within the *Inspector Spacetime* fan community is the image “The Eleven Inspectors” by ~Carty239, originally posted to Deviant Art, a website designed to showcase user-created artwork.⁸ This image consolidates the role of the Inspector in *Inspector Spacetime*. Organized circularly around a large BOOTH⁹ are eleven faces: each face represents a famous actor or actress who supposedly played one of the Inspectors in a previous incarnation.

⁷ <http://georgiathekiwi.tumblr.com/post/10593501957/look-what-has-happened>.

⁸ <http://carty239.deviantart.com/art/The-Eleven-Inspectors-260707180>.

⁹ Originally, the DARSIT.

Relevantly, unlike the *Doctor Who* actors, who have been consistently white, male, and heterosexual, the *Inspector Spacetime* actors include a woman, Lynda Bellingham, two homosexual actors, Graham Chapman and Travis Richey (the only actor to *actually* play The Inspector), and a Black actor, Christopher Obi. Using parody's double-voicedness (Bakhtin, 1984), this image effectively demonstrates a particular connection to *Doctor Who* while also critiquing the homogeneity of the show. This parodic image circulated wildly amongst the fan population, and played a central role in cementing the mythology of the show.

A final important text within *Inspector Spacetime* canon is the inspectorspacetime message board.¹⁰ As the discussion about *Inspector Spacetime* continued on the boards, what fan scholars might term the “meta-dialogue,” three separate lines of inquiry developed (see Mittell, 2007). The first was establishing a sort of continuity, or a canon, for this new show. The second was establishing characters within the canon, including backstories, names, and actors. And the third was to categorize and formalize the fan work that went into *Inspector Spacetime* fandom. In other words, the fanon became the canon in order to function for the fan community.

From this combination of material from *Doctor Who*, material from *Community*, and continued original material, *Inspector Spacetime* tri-textual, trans-fan work became central to the process of creating the show because of the absence of canonized *Inspector Spacetime*. Fans enacted and performed the roles that they had previously enacted and performed for shows that actually have a text. When such a text doesn't exist, the fan community must rally and organize itself around the *fan-created* texts. Fan fiction becomes the canon, fan art becomes the meme, and the show is taken completely out of the hands of its creators and into the hands of fans, who then become creators themselves.

¹⁰ <http://inspectorspacetime.proboards.com/>.

Reversal of Production and Consumption

Despite the fact that the show itself is fictional and exists only as a parodic text in another show, *Inspector Spacetime* has created fans with a very real work ethic. If fans create a text and then poach that same text, what does this do to the boundaries of consumption and production? This is not textual poaching—it is textual *encroaching*. In describing how *Doctor Who* fans became the vanguards of the *Doctor Who* franchise during the years between series (1989-2005), Piers Britton (2011) used Hills' (2002) work on *Cult Times* to argue that the tenor of fan work changed: they went from reflecting the tactical reading described by Jenkins (1992) to becoming “textual gamekeepers” (p. 67). Similar to Hills' (2002) argument, in which he stated that “unexpected consumption practices, far from challenging the interests of TV producers, and the power relationships through which capital circulates, are rapidly recuperated within discourses and practices of marketing,” *Inspector Spacetime* fans straddle and ultimately reify the producer/consumer binary (p. 36). Yet, unlike Hills' assessment, the fans in this case do not become appropriated by professional producers, but rather end up filling the professional void themselves. Indeed, as I will show, due to the presence of already key fans within the production of *Community*, the *Inspector Spacetime* fandom avoided the idea of the “professionalized fan” demonstrated by Hills' assessment of the “powerless elite” (p. 40)—and in doing so, mirror the “powerless duality” of *Doctor Who* fans mentioned later in his 2010 *Triumph of a Time Lord*.

Hills (2002) referenced Tulloch's (1995) portion of *Science Fiction Audiences* in which he famously defines *Doctor Who* fandom as constructed of the “powerless elite.” That is, fans exist “structurally situated between producers they have little control over and the ‘wider public’ whose continued following of the show can never be assured, but on whom the survival of the

show depends” (p. 145). In *Fan Cultures*, Hills (2002) problematized Tulloch’s assertion, claiming that fan power can only be seen in relation to the larger economic/production system in which fans already sit (p. 37). Indeed, fans may be experts at knowing the minutia of the show, and may even feel a right (a “cultural authority,” as Jenkins (1992, p. 89) put it) to inherently critique the show, but they are powerless to effect any actual change. As this “powerless elite,” fans—at least in the pre-web era of the original *Doctor Who*—find it difficult to connect to the production side of a text but, in many ways, are experts on the information provided by the text.

Inspector Spacetime fans demonstrate both the inherent ideological power of fandom within our hypermediated society as well as the ultimate disavowal of fandom as a mainstream identity by media producers. As Hills (2002) pointed out:

the contradictory limit to the power of the niche market is ... precisely that through seeing its own agenda on screen, fandom loses any possibility of creative textual mutation and thus becomes locked into its own rigidly maintained set of values, authenticities, textual hierarchies and continuities. (p. 38)

In other words, far from being emancipatory figures of authoritative resistance, these *Inspector Spacetime* fans reproduce the same boundaries and reify the same structures as the mainstream media (see Watson, 2010). The binary relationship between production and consumption remains firmly entrenched in the interaction between fans within *Inspector Spacetime* fandom, and between fans and producers about *Inspector Spacetime* fandom.

Specifically, fans of *Inspector Spacetime* enact a fan/producer dichotomy, while at the same time appearing to erupt from it. This eruption is personified in the figure of Travis Richey, who played The Inspector in *Community*, and is the Eleventh Inspector of fandom lore. Richey is both a fan and a producer of *Inspector Spacetime*—he participates on the message boards, tweets

about *Inspector Spacetime* news, and facilitates online interaction by promoting *Inspector Spacetime* at conventions. Lest *Inspector Spacetime* fandom appears to break the producer/consumer binary, Richey symbolized the artificiality of that binary. If *Inspector Spacetime* is seen as a fan-created text, then Richey is an example of a fan with a vested interest in seeing the fandom continue. Beyond his employment as The Inspector, he also has taken it upon himself to create an original web series based on the fanon (Davis, 2012). However, producer control of the *Inspector Spacetime* copyright prevents Richey from using the *Inspector Spacetime* moniker in his series. Just as *Doctor Who* fans in the 21st century are “sometimes catered for by producers...and sometimes powerfully othered as part of a text-function bidding for ‘mainstream’ status,” so too are *Inspector Spacetime* fans a powerless duality (Hills, 2010, p. 214). *Inspector Spacetime* material in *Community* targets a knowledgeable fan community, but the managerial oversight of Sony, NBC, and former-showrunner Dan Harmon constrains fans and enables industry power.

On 30 Sept, one week after his premiere as the Inspector, Richey introduced himself to the proboards message community by posting an introductory statement with some “behind-the-scenes” description [all *sic*]:

[A]s a fan of both “Community” and “Dr. Who,” I am absolutely thrilled to be able to play a role that connects the two. The fervor with which fans have embraced *Inspector Spacetime* amazes me, and the absolute flood of creativity is positively astounding.

Really brilliant. When I was shooting the bit for the Season Premiere, I said on set (to no one in particular, but anyone who would listen) “You guys should do a whole episode of Inspector Spacetime for the DVD! Or Webisodes!” ... When I went home, I contacted Eric Loya, my writing partner ... and told him that we should write an episode, so that if I

get back on set ... I could have the same conversation with one of the producers and follow it up with, “and by the way, here's a script!”. Well, we wrote the episode, and it's good, and I have no idea if it'll ever get made by NBC.

Here he seems to place a foot in both worlds, as fan and as producer, and illustrate his reliance on the community as well as authority over the community. This authority is mirrored later in the post when he begins to correct the fans' parodic writing:

But as a fan, I wanted to say a quick note on the subject of writing a good spoof. ... It all comes down to this: The best spoofs poke fun at the concepts and tropes, not necessarily the specific details. ... In IS terms, it means having a reason for things. ... tools like sonic wrench or sonic Philips Head sound like gags, you know? We want to poke fun at his do-everything tool, so why not something more like a Swiss Army Knife? I always want to ask, “why?”. ... Lets think bigger! Have a reason...¹¹

What we can see in this short post is the tension between the bottom-up grassroots community and the top-down corporate need to control what happens within a canonized text. In a later post, he corrects the fans' spelling of Blorgons (they were being called Blogons) and changes the titles of the Sonic Wrench (to the Optic Pocketknife) and of the DARSIT (which, as I mentioned, was changed to BOOTH to differentiate it from the copyrighted term). Later, he mentions the “official” canon of the show “with the caveat that anything Dan Harmon [creator of *Community*] does would supersede fan-created works.”

Richey's plans to create a web series based on *Inspector Spacetime* successfully raised the funds through Kickstarter.com. He started the Kickstarter on 20 Feb 2012, claiming that he wouldn't take any profit from it. The \$20,000, if raised, would buy equipment (which, implicitly,

¹¹ <http://inspectorspacetime.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=general&action=display&thread=45#ixzz1qjMxmRc5>

he would get to keep). As of 23 Mar, he raised the complete \$20,000 and when the Kickstarter closed on 01 April, he had raised \$25,025 with 643 backers total.

To examine the way this Kickstarter got funding from the fan community, it is instructive to look at how Richey navigates his highly binaristic and malleable position within the fandom and the production universes of *Inspector Spacetime* through a rhetorical investigation of his contributions to his Kickstarter. When he started the Kickstarter campaign, Richey had to rhetorically defend his “powerless duality” position as both a fan and a producer of *Inspector Spacetime*. His discussion on Kickstarter mirrors somewhat his introduction onto the message boards as well. He starts his own discussion by identifying his own fannishness and contrasting that with his production experience: “My name is Travis Richey. I was a fan of both *Doctor Who* and *Community* before ever getting the opportunity to audition for the role of *Inspector Spacetime*.”¹² He follows this by discussing his role in *Inspector Spacetime* as both an actor and as a BNF—Big Name Fan—who could be the proverbial “torchbearer” for the series outside of *Community*. Yet, to do so, he has to integrate his own role as consumer with his role as producer, and has to include his writing partner Eric Loya. This integration comes by way of focusing the attention *away* from Richey as producer to the makers of *Community* as gatekeepers of *Inspector Spacetime*:

After my first scene of *Inspector Spacetime* was shot for *Community*, I instantly saw the potential for the character, and set about creating this web series with my writing partner.... It had to be pitched through official channels. So my agent pitched it.

¹² <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1878253293/inspector-spacetime-the-webseries>.

Following this, he attempts to unite the fans of *Inspector Spacetime* behind his own Kickstarter project. Note the use of the “we” here, as Richey returns to create an identity *with* the fans, as *part of* the fandom:

[Because] fans of *Inspector Spacetime* [are] as enthusiastic about the character as ever, I realized I'd just have to do it myself. Strike that. We'd have to do it. Ourselves. The fans. Because that's what we do. It is, in fact, what made *Inspector Spacetime* anything at all. Fans turned a 15-second clip into a show with 50 years of history!!

NBC, Sony, and the *Community* production team were not thrilled with Richey's announcement, and he made note of such in an update to this post:

UPDATE: Lawyers from Sony and NBC have contacted me demanding that I cease production on an *Inspector Spacetime* web series ... So, I will be removing all references to *Inspector Spacetime* from this series (it only happened in the title anyway), and altering the appearance of the Inspector so that he does not look like Inspector Spacetime. What remains is 100% the creation of myself, my writing partner, and you, the fans. If you would still be interesting in seeing the series that would have been Inspector Spacetime, I appreciate your support.

His next paragraph illustrates his role of *producer* instead of *consumer*: “So I'm going to make the [UNTITLED] series, and I need some help to do it.. ... For that, I'm turning to Kickstarter to raise a minimal budget for equipment only.” And then he returns to the fandom: “We're making this show because I know fans want to see it. I know, because I'm one of them.”

Ultimately, as Richey has begun to dominate the *Inspector Spacetime* fandom, the community seems to have fallen in line with more traditional fan communities: being beholden to an extant text, working within the boundaries set by the media corporation, and participating

in the Neo-Liberal experience of hierarchy within the fan institution. *Inspector Spacetime* fandom mirrors the nuanced but unsteady “powerless duality” between fans and producers noted by Hills (2010) in terms of *Doctor Who*. As I show in the next section, though, the possibilities of *Inspector Spacetime* for parody create a conception of contemporary media and illustrate the generative properties of social media for creative expression.

Parody as Transgression

In previous research about fans, including Jenkins (1992), Hills (2005), and Booth (2012), fans were seen to enact active and transgressive readings of texts. Fans do not transgress for transgression’s sake, but rather fan fiction becomes an explicit manifestation of an implicit activity that we all do on a daily basis. Whenever we encounter a media text, be it *The Secret Garden* or *Inspector Spacetime*, we actively engage in understanding the material in our minds. We create meanings from the texts we read, becoming, as de Certeau (1984) described, tactical readers, who “make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open” (p. 37). The fan similarly transgresses on the “space” of the producer in order to “poach” his/her own meanings.

But how to transgress what’s not even there? *Inspector Spacetime* fandom has created a new form of transgression—where the boundaries of fandom itself become transgressed. In sorting through the numerous transgressions of the *Inspector Spacetime* fandom, fans must compensate for the endless possibility of excess that the digital allows. Instead of transcending the boundaries set by the pseudo-narrative framing of the *Inspector Spacetime* “text,” the online creations of fans demonstrate a transgression of contemporary fans transgression: In other words, fandom here becomes a parody of itself (see Booth, 2012).

In this case, the parody seems to have shifted from a comment on the way fandom functions, to a parody of fandom's revolutionary potential. As Hills (2002) asserted, fandom always has to exist within a particular economic system:

Viewing cult TV fandom as a niche market does not mean discussing the simplistic "empowerment" of fans. Target marketing also involves the cultural and economic disempowering of cult audiences via their niche isolation from wider "coalition audiences" and via the related decline in the wider economic viability of the fans' favoured media text(s). (p. 36)

As *Inspector Spacetime* fandom demonstrates, when that system does not exist (or exists only partially created), fans will re-create that system of authenticity, power, and influence. For although the *Inspector Spacetime* fans may be changing the "powerless elite" stigma of traditional fan studies, they aren't actually breaking out of the traditional media paradigm. They are, in short, merely reversing the producer/consumer binary. Production and consumption are here encapsulated via a classic parody of fandom within fans' own use of the show.

The shift from a fan-based production of *Inspector Spacetime* on Tumblr to a producer-created production of *Inspector Spacetime* on a web series brings with it a host of issues related to consumption. Because Tumblr is constructed from mashups of images and videos from around the web, it exists in a liminal state between produced and consumed. Tumblr, then, is a parody of our hypermediated, ironic environment, a slideshow of references that becomes, not a source of parodic intent, but rather a "repository of genres, styles, and codes" (Felluga, 2011, n.p.).

Fandom can also be seen as a type of parody. It can have bite. Parody and transgression are two sides of the fannish coin, both a literal breaking of (textual) boundaries. Ultimately, parody works through innate cultural knowledge (Davisson & Booth, 2010, p. 15), for to parody

a text, one must use knowledge of that text to exceed the boundaries of that text. To transgress a text, one must also know the boundaries of that text. Both the acts of parody and transgression firmly cement these boundaries. The *Inspector Spacetime* fan community parodies the notions of fandom by both breaking and reifying the boundaries of what it means to be a fan. Far from revolutionary, however, *Inspector Spacetime* fandom reproduces fan mythology in new contexts.

Conclusion: UWSAASTWCATTT and Beyond

On 23 Mar 2012 the *Inspector Spacetime* Kickstarter fund met the minimum goal of \$20,000 for the web series, now tentatively (and less-copyright infringly) titled the “Untitled Web Series About A Space Traveler Who Can Also Travel Through Time.” And on *Community*, the show *Inspector Spacetime* has become a character in its own right. In the final shot of the last episode of *Community* before it went on hiatus, all the main characters are huddled around the television, about to watch the *Inspector Spacetime* Christmas Special (a parody of both the yearly *Doctor Who* Christmas special and the infamously bad *Star Wars Holiday Special*). As the camera slowly pans back, the group frames a poster of *Inspector Spacetime*. After its return, an entire episode was devoted to exploring Abed’s fandom and fantasy of *Inspector Spacetime*. What was once a show-within-a-show now seems primed to become a show in its own right, albeit one differently titled.

Throughout the *Confessions* Tumblr, the proboards message boards, and the online fan-creations, fans have propelled *Inspector Spacetime* into existence. I (2010) concluded *Digital Fandom* with a sentence that resonates with the same meaning that *Inspector Spacetime* fandom uses today: “with a philosophy of playfulness ... participants in New Media enact the mediated communities they join” (p. 192). *Inspector Spacetime* fandom takes that idea and runs with it:

their “philosophy of playfulness” eclipses the text itself, promoting fanon over canon but establishing traditional fan practices within the work.

The implication for the *Inspector Spacetime* fannish parodies reveals a shift from the traditional fannish obsession with breaking boundaries of the original text to a new fannish activity of concretizing those same boundaries. When these fan-created parodies of *Inspector Spacetime* exaggerate, it is not to point out *Inspector Spacetime*’s moments of excess, but rather the implausibility of its fan base. In doing so, the parodies reify the fannish community while relying on the acceptance of fandom in order to make its voice heard.

In a year or so, it may be that *Inspector Spacetime* will have run its course. With the Kickstarter campaign for UWSAASTWCATTT funded, the show-within-a-show has become a show, albeit a web show that may or may not meet fan expectations. And that’s a litmus test here: the fans have spoken and the fan labor that went into creating *Inspector Spacetime* is now being used by a media producer *and* a media fan in the same moment. So what will a fandom of *Inspector Spacetime* look like after UWSAASTWCATTT?

Considering that the fan community for *Inspector Spacetime* became more active and vocal during the Nov 2011-Mar 2012 *Community* hiatus, it would seem that *not* having a text proved to be inspirational. The “gap” in *Community*’s airing helped fuel the fandom (Hills 2002). During the hiatus, six or seven *Inspector Spacetime* images appeared on Tumblr each day. The proboards message board continued to get posts describing the show. Fan fiction canon continued to be written and a secondary market of fan merchandise thrived on sites like Etsy and Threadless. The show didn’t disappear, even though it never “appeared” in the first place.

Inspector Spacetime offers us a metaphor for understanding fandom in the 21st century. The idea of “being a fan” is a multifaceted and complex aspect of one’s identity, as Sandvoss

(2005) and Jenkins (2006) have pointed out. But as the *Inspector Spacetime* fandom has demonstrated, “being a fan” can be a powerful and important identity in and of itself. The trans-fandom of *Inspector Spacetime* reinforces this traditional fan identity.

Acknowledgments

Portions of this paper were first presented in colloquia at the University of Illinois-Chicago and Northern Illinois University. I am indebted to the various audience members who commented, critiqued, or complimented aspects of the article. Special thanks to David Gunkel, whose helpful comments solidified some of the background theory. I am indebted to the two anonymous reviewers who provided helpful suggestions for revisions, including thoughtful theoretical discussions. Finally, thanks to GeorgiatheKiwi for kind permission to use her work, BTravern for the discussion of the TVTropes, Travis Richey for helpful thoughts on *Inspector Spacetime*, and Tom Vincent and Katie Booth for the extra pairs of eyes.

References

- Bacon-Smith, C. (1992). *Enterprising women: Television, fandom and the creation of popular myth*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. (C. Emerson, Ed. & Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. (A. Lavers, Trans.). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (Original work published 1957).
- Booth, P. (2010). *Digital fandom: New media studies*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Booth, P. (2012). *Saw* fandom and the transgression of fan excess. In T. Gournelos & D. Gunkel (eds.), *Transgression 2.0: Media, culture, and the politics of a digital age* (pp. 69-84). London, UK: Continuum.
- Britton, P. (2011). *TARDISbound: Navigating the universes of Doctor Who*. London, UK: I. B. Tauris.
- Bruns, A. (2008). *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Bury, R. (2005). *Cyberspaces of their own: Female fandoms online*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Davis, L. (2012, Feb 12). There's going to be an Inspector Spacetime web series! *Io9.com*. Retrieved from <http://io9.com/5886382/theres-going-to-be-an-inspector-spacetime-web-series>
- Davison, A., & Booth, P. (2010). Intertextuality, parody and polyphony in Pepsi's® 2009 presidential inauguration campaign. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 29(1), 68-87.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. (S. Randall, Trans.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Everett, J. (2008). Fan culture and the recentering of Star Trek. In L. Geraghty (ed.), *The influence of Star Trek on television, film and culture* (pp. 186-198). Jefferson, NC: McFarland Pub.
- Felluga, D. (2011, Jan 31). Modules on Jameson: On pastiche. *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. Retrieved from <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/postmodernism/modules/jamesonpastiche.html>
- Fiske, J. (1992). The cultural economy of fandom. In L. Lewis (ed.), *The adoring audience: Fan culture and popular media* (pp. 30-49). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Geraghty, L. (2007). *Living with Star Trek: American culture and the Star Trek universe*. London, UK: I.B. Tauris.
- Gray, J. (2010). *Show sold separately: Promos, spoilers, and other media paratexts*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Hadas, L. (2009). The web planet: How the changing Internet divided *Doctor Who* fan fiction writers. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0129>
- Hills, M. (2002). *Fan cultures*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hills, M. (2005). *Pleasures of horror*. London, UK: Continuum.
- Hills, M. (2010). *Triumph of a Time Lord: Regenerating Doctor Who in the twenty-first century*. London, UK: I. B. Tauris.
- Hoffberger, C. (2012, Mar 05). "Community" fans rally around "Inspector Spacetime." *Dailydot.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.dailydot.com/entertainment/community-inspector-spacetime-kickstarter/?utm_medium=twitter&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=community-inspector-spacetime-kickstarter/](http://www.dailydot.com/entertainment/community-inspector-spacetime-kickstarter/?utm_medium=twitter&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=community-inspector-spacetime-kickstarter)
- Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Jenkins, J. (2007). Afterward: The future of fandom. In J. Gray, C. Sandvoss, & C. L. Harrington (eds.), *Fandom: Identities and communities in a mediated world* (pp. 357-364). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Lancaster, K. (2001). *Interacting with Babylon 5: Fan performances in a media universe*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Mittell, J. (2007, Mar 28). Lost in the margins. *Just TV*. [Web log]. Retrieved from <http://justtv.wordpress.com/2007/03/28/lost-in-the-margins/>
- Parkin, L. (2007). Canonicity matters: Defining the *Doctor Who* canon. In D. Butler (ed.), *Time and relative dissertations in space: Critical perspectives on Doctor Who* (pp. 246-262). Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Pearson, R. (2010). Fandom in the digital era. *Popular Communication*, 8(1), 1-12.
- Pearson, R. (2011, 14 Aug). Aca-fandom and beyond: Roberta Pearson and Alexis Lothian (part one). *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*. [Web log]. Retrieved from: http://henryjenkins.org/2011/08/aca-fandom_and_beyond_roberta.html
- Pearson, R. (2012). "Good Old Index"; or, the mystery of the infinite archive. In L. E. Stein & K. Busse (eds.), *Sherlock and transmedia fandom: Essays on the BBC series* (pp. 150-164). Jefferson, NC: McFarland Pub.
- Sandvoss, C. (2005). *Fans: The mirror of consumption*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Tulloch, J., & Alvarado, M. (1984). *Doctor Who: The unfolding text*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

- Tulloch, J., & Jenkins, H. (1995). *Science fiction audiences: Watching Star Trek and Doctor Who*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Turk, T., & Johnson, J. (2012). Toward an ecology of vidding. *Transformative Works and Culture*, 9. doi:10.3983/twc.2012.0326
- Watson, J. (2010). Fandom squared: Web 2.0 and fannish production. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 5. doi:10.3983/twc.2010.0218
- Williams, R. (2003). *Spoiler whores and shipper wars: Hierarchy and power in the on-line Buffy the Vampire Slayer fan community*. (Thesis), University of Cardiff, Wales, UK.
- Zubernis, L., & Larsen, K. (2012). *Fandom at the crossroads: Celebration, shame and fan/producer relationships*. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press.