

RUNNING HEAD: RE-READING FANDOM: MYSPACE CHARACTER PERSONAS  
AND NARRATIVE IDENTIFICATION

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On the “About Me” section of her MySpace profile, the user “Luke” (2007) writes:

My name is Luke Danes. [...] I have had 3 women in my life. Anna Nardini to whom I had a kid with and I didnt find that out until 11 years later. Nicole to whom I lived with and got married then divorced. Then the best thing to walk into my life Lorelai Gilmore. We were married and we were having a kid. Then some things happened and she left. [...]Then Kiwi Lorelai came in the picture. I thought we broke up so I went on the market again. Well I hurt her. So we got back together and she was raped. She is about to have a baby so she freaked out and broke up with me and I am not sure on where it is going if it is going anywhere at all [all sic].

Although this “About Me” section may seem to be a detailed account of the author’s life, it is, in fact, a great deal more complicated than it first appears. The author of “Luke” has not summarized her own life, but rather the life of the *character* named “Luke Danes” on the television show *Gilmore Girls* (2000). As media fandom has moved online, fans have started to use a variety of different means to interact with, and to create, texts: “Luke,” as one of these new fans, is using new media to participate in a new form of fan fiction. New media produce new modes of fandom, and as Sandvoss (2005a) shows, if a media object “is part of the fan’s (sense of) self,” then a change in the type of media will influence a fan’s own sense of self (p. 101). Yet, traditional studies of fandom have

concentrated on the fan as part of a political economy between producer of media content and consumer of media content. The “media text” itself is seen as whole and objective – an entity received and consumed by the fan. The fan may “poach” the text (Jenkins, 1992), may reinterpret it (Baym, 2000), or may make “a tactical response” to it (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995); but importantly, will first *consume* the text, and only then will interpret it. The gastronomic metaphor of fandom has provided a sense of the media text as a concrete “whole” upon which the fan feasts.

“Luke’s” complex interaction with the *Gilmore Girls* media text begs a different set of questions, however: How do we go about understanding this new fan, and how does the complicated narrative in play influence her creative practice? In order to answer these questions, I re-examine de Certeau’s (1984) twinned notions of tactical reading and textual poaching by exploring the interactive relationship between identity construction and narrative texts on fan-created MySpace character profiles. In this re-examination, I show how new media “texts” are diverse *practices*, not discrete *objects*, that represent a cultural blurring of De Certeauan tactics and strategies. There are two consequences that follow from this exploration. First, “poaching” is no longer the most applicable metaphor for fan reappropriation of media texts, as the tactical reading conjectured by de Certeau and postulated by Jenkins (1992) as part of fandom is necessarily determined by the very strategies it hopes to overcome. Second, the transmediated nature of MySpace character profiles also problematize de Certeau’s (1984) tactical action, as fans now propose new ways of identifying with a media text.

Transmediation, the concept that media texts no longer encompass individual texts, but rather a convergence of texts across different mediation, has led to a more

complex understanding of the fluid nature of media (Jenkins, 2006). Through the reconstruction of distributed fragments of narrative across a transmediated narrative text, a MySpace fan can use narrative to help create identity online. This identity creation is how, in traditional fan fiction studies, the fan both differentiates herself from the media text *and* how she identifies her own personal appreciation for the text (cf. Bacon-Smith, 1992; Penley, 1997). This appreciation, what Hills (2002) describes as the “durability of fans’ attachments,” challenges the traditional notion of political economy of media: as fan attachment cannot be “entirely reducible to ‘economic’ models.” (p. 35). The interconnected relations between self/identity, community and fandom on MySpace, however, further complicate Hills’ conception of fan attachment.

Further, in an era when the mass media saturate our lives, fandom is a way of creating organized meaning out of texts. Fans are no longer poaching texts; but ripping and shredding texts, combining them and reworking them to create something entirely different. Fans have moved beyond “textual poaching”; fans are no longer a blurred dynamic of “consumer and consumer-as-producer” (Hills, 2002, p. 39). Contemporary fans have instead coupled tactics and strategies, which forces us to re-read de Certeau’s theories as a rapid and inexorable destabilization of the producer/consumer dichotomy. The new digital “economy” is based on a process of the cultural distribution of textual meaning, where cultural distribution doesn’t just “interact with systems which belong to the economy ‘proper,’” but is “underpinned by the lived experiences of fandom” (Hills, 2002, p. 35). New fans use digital technology not only to create, to change, to appropriate, to poach, or to write, but also to share, to experience together, to become alive with the fan’s community.

## Poaching de Certeau

MySpace.com is one in a growing number of online social networking sites on which users create and view persona<sup>i</sup> profiles. Mayfield (2007) describes social networking as a communal experience:

People joining a social network usually create a profile and then build a network by connecting to friends and contacts in the network, or by inviting real-world contacts and friends to join the social network. These communities retain the interest of their members by being useful to them and providing services that are entertaining or help them to expand their networks. MySpace, for instance, allows members to create vivid, chaotic home pages (they've been likened to the walls of a teenager's bedroom) to which they can upload images, videos and music (p. 14).

In essence, a MySpace persona becomes a public display of two types of identity: a form of a real-world identity, and a simulated<sup>ii</sup> identity. In this way, identity is fractured between the *lived* and the *written*: on one hand, MySpace users indicate that identity is a *part* of them, and on the other that it is *apart* from them.

This change in identity formation heralds a change in the study of audiences. Contemporary studies from Fiske (1987, 1992) to Abercrombie and Longhurst (1997) and Sandvoss (2005a, 2005b), see audiences as active participants in their own meaning-production. These analyses conceptualize these active audiences as essentially beholden to the economic power of the producers, as they “produce ‘indeterminate trajectories’ that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and

prefabricated space through which they move” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 34). Any tactical use of media is always already determined by the strategies of the producer: there can be no tactics outside the space of the other. For Jenkins (1992), this tactical model inaugurated fan studies itself: as “textual poaching” became synonymous with fan practices.

New digital web technology, however, shifts the analysis of audiences away from political economy and towards instead a critique of shared cultural content. This shift sees a radical modification in the meaning of “media text,” where Marxist analyses are no longer enough to describe contemporary fan practices. Traditionally, a “text” is an object – a thing that can be contained; goods that are tangible and objective. Williams (2005) theorized a redefinition of the way economic models could be examined – products not as cultural commodities, but rather as “conditions of a practice” (p. 49). Problematically, however,

...we have no built-in procedure of the kind [of analysis] which is indicated by the fixed character of an object. We have the principles of the relations of practices, within a discoverably intentional organization .... But what we are actively seeking is the true practice which has been alienated to an object, and the true conditions of practices ... which have been alienated to components or to mere background (p. 48-49).

The reason we have no built-in procedure for analyzing this “alienation” of practice is because we have been – and continue to be – tethered to an economic model of analysis: the modes of production and the modes of consumption, however passive or active, are still tied to this economic binary. Today, in the electronic age “goods” are

shared data, intangible and fleeting “practices” of collective content. MySpace allows fans to explore their own identity formation – their own personal “goods” – in a public, conceptual space of their own creation. Fans use MySpace to create personas of fictional television characters, and through role-play with these characters, identify with, and insert themselves into, the narrative of that show. In doing so, fans integrate themselves not only into the text itself, but also *into a community of other fans*. Sandvoss (2005a) has shown how fans of a text can “build an intense identification with their object of fandom” (p. 101). For the user, the program text has become more than a TV show: it is now a deliberate fan-communion across media.

MySpace thus provides a new space where profiles of offline people and profiles of characters mingle. This new space conceptually differs from the “space” of the producers’ construction, the space in which, as de Certeau (1984) asserts, “elaborate theoretical places (systems and totalizing discourses) capable of articulating an ensemble of physical places in which forces are distributed” exist (p. 38). Thus, instead of *tactically* poaching the source text, as fan scholars such as Jenkins (1992) have asserted, these new fans articulate another way to create meaning: through the cultural, communal relationships of members of a fan community. Meaning is not “taken,” it is “formed” by the fan community. Meaning is not “encoded” or “decoded,” but rather re-coded, articulated in a formal sense through fan practices (Hall, 1980). As Williams (2005) might say, fans are now treating source texts not as objects, but as “practices.”

De Certeau’s (1984) conception of tactical reading has been previously questioned. As Hills (2004) has shown in a special issue of *Social Semiotics*, the conception of de Certeau’s strategy/tactic model of audience reception tends to be a “‘flat’ or one-

dimensional model [and] needs to be reconsidered as a multi-dimensional and thus relative homology, whereby fans can carry unequal forms of cultural power into their fan culture” (p. 147). Hills reads De Certeau’s consumptive audience as active but weak, and posits instead that fans have a greater amount of cultural power for production. Yet Hills’s fans remain mired in the space of the producer. His fans’ tactics are still determined by the strategies upon which they are based. For fans on MySpace, however, the activity of narrative construction is a powerful and dynamic tool. As an aspect of a fan’s community, MySpace can be perceived as a part of real life, while also separate from real life. As boyd (2007) indicates, MySpace offers “publics, not simply public” spaces, illustrating how *different* spaces exist and are constructed on MySpace (p. 8). Jenkins (2001), as well, argues in a video podcast that online spaces are seen, specifically by youth culture, as separate from other spaces: “they often present themselves as a utopian space that is totally removed from the world of school and the world of home. They’re described as a place where people can have their own identities....” MySpace interacts with, complements, and even sometimes overrides “real” space. Consequently, this new space offers fans on MySpace creative agency for two practical ends: to produce new identities and to construct portions of original narrative.

The first result of this creative agency is the fragmentation of online identities. In the past, any public display of identity would have been intimately tied to the physical body. The body provides a visual sense of who we are, as throughout humankind’s history, we have been identified by physical, observable bodily factors: our race, our sex, our facial features, et al. Online, however, there is “no body” upon which to base identity. No longer linked to the body, an online identity can be constructed in a variety of ways.



Turkle (1995) shows us the multiplicity of identity construction in her description of online textual gaming, and describes how we use different identities for different effects: online, one can be powerful, even if one is weak offline. Stone (1996) echoes this, arguing further that online, we present *multiple* identities and personalities. Psychologist Wolfgang Kraus (2006) illustrates this multiplicity when he writes, “belonging [to an identity] becomes – generally speaking – a question of choice, which must be answered by the individual” (p. 108). Our online identity “is not grounded in history and politics, but is a pastiche, a mosaic, made up of ephemeral fragments” (Agger, 2007, p. 110). Sections of our identities exist in different forms in different locations: part of an identity can be seen through a profile on MySpace, part through photos on Flickr, and part through likes/dislikes on digg.com.

A MySpace persona is thus a deliberate construction, an amalgam of characteristics both visible and non-visible that is considered by the person creating the persona to be important. Importantly, all personas are equal: one virtual self occupies the same space as another virtual self. Take, for example, the case of Lonelygirl15. Lonelygirl15 was a young vlogger who, in 2005 and 2006, described the intimate details of her life to viewers on YouTube. In 2006, however, Lonelygirl15 was discovered to be a fabrication. Two men had created the persona “Lonelygirl15” and had hired a 19-year-old actress named Jessica Rose to play her as a simulation of a vlog. Fans of Lonelygirl15, however, didn’t: instead, they “seemed to take the revelation in stride” and “to many, it didn’t seem to matter whether she was real or not” (Davis, 2006, p. 239). Lonelygirl15’s *persona* was what mattered to these fans, not her ontological status as

fictional or real. What matters in online interaction is *not* the offline identity, but rather the multitudes of online identities that the user depicts.

Following this, the second result of the new creative agency of fans is the construction of transmediated narratives. Fans can make self-conscious connections between mediated narratives and their multiple senses of selves. As Ochs and Capps (1996) show, “narrative and self are inseparable” (p. 20). A MySpace persona provides not only a snapshot of whom it represents, but also a constantly updated – and updatable – narrative of her life. The use of narrative as a form of identity construction is demonstrated by Kraus (2006) when he points out how “the starting point for an identity theory ... lies primarily...in narrativity as a multifaceted resource for the understanding of self-construction” (p. 105). Through the use of comments posted back and forth between personas, as well as through stories posted by users of MySpace on their personas, viewers of MySpace can read a narration of the lives of the people in those personas. With this identity/narrative melding, fans sidestep the intensions of the media producers by deliberately inserting their identities into those of the characters, and thus into the media text itself. By creating their own place of identity construction, their own digital space, fans shift their personas to a conceptual space *between* real and simulated, a space of their own construction.

These two shifts, of identity construction and narrative completion, call for a redefinition of de Certeau’s (1984) textual poaching. By textual poaching, de Certeau argues that

The reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author’s position.

He invents in the text something different from what they “intended.” He

detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings (p. 169).

This “poaching” of meaning occurs any time one reads: as de Certeau makes clear, any particular reading follows a different trajectory than any other. “Readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write” (p. 174). For Jenkins (1992), textual poaching offers “an alternate conception of fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests” (p. 23). Fandom is a form of continual poaching on others’ works.

This poaching, this movement, can only take place, according to de Certeau (1984), in the space prescribed by the writer. De Certeau describes this space as “a place of power” where producers make and insert intended meaning into a text (p. 38). Importantly, he conceptualizes the production of a text spatially, using the metaphor of the city: created with certain routes laid out, the city allows pedestrians to walk their own path, to define their own “rhetoric of walking” (p. 100). In this way, city planners may *intend* one path to travel, but pedestrians can tactically traverse another. Pedestrians cannot *create* a new path, but can *reappropriate* a city path for their own use. Textually, this space can be thought of as the sum total of all the narrative meaning of a particular media product, and as such, we always “poach texts” tactically and find our own meaning within the strategies of meaning produced in “the space of the other” (p. 37). This poaching of meaning must occur, writes de Certeau, “into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a

distance” (p. xix). Jenkins’s (1992) interpretation of the fan hinges on this fact: “like the poachers of old, fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness ... fans lack direct access to the means of commercial cultural production” (p. 26). Fans, in other words, “are peasants, not proprietors” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 27).

Yet, these “peasants” remain tethered to the land of the nobles. Networked digital technology, alternately, indicates a need to re-read de Certeau: in short, the creation of new digital spaces, imbued with characteristics of *both* reader *and* producer, where identity is both internalized *and* externalized, create *new* avenues of identity-making, where the dynamic of tactic and strategy breaks down. New fans are redefining the limits of consumption itself. More so than the traditional fandom described by Jenkins (1992), in which its “very existence represents a critique of conventional forms of consumer culture,” these new fans represent a critique of the very presence and expression of consumerism itself. Fandom is starting to articulate a revolutionary attitude, one in which the attitudes and assumptions heralded in the first hundred years of mass electronic media become threatened, altered, changed and rearticulated. Notions of the self, of narrative, and of community are all changing through technological innovation.

What MySpace demonstrates is the power of fans to become proprietors of their own textual spaces. By creating additional aspects of a media text on MySpace, fans can create one part of a distributed narrative. A distributed narrative is a conception of serialized narrative form experienced in discrete units, separated by time and space (Walker, 2005). Walker examines distributed narratives as “things that are not *things* but connections” (p. 1). What holds a distributed narrative “together,” what unites the disparate elements, is the desire for narrative unity. Viewers attuned to Western

conventions watch these elements and, in a “general stretching and redefinition of narrative itself,” recombine them (Thompson, 2003, p. 105). To envisage narrative as fragmented is to grant salience to an understanding of narrative not just as an activity or process, but also as a space, as an environment upon which meaning can be inlayed. It is this sense of narrative that Jones (2004) invokes when she writes that narratives can “present exotic and ethereal fictional worlds to which the alchemy of textual data and imagination transports the reader” (p. 83). For fans of these distributed narratives, the pleasure comes not just in the understanding of the narrative, but in participating in the construction of it as well. MySpace facilitates this pleasure: it offers a construction zone for extant narrative completion.

As part of this fictional world, fans’ creation of MySpace personas for TV characters intimately and necessarily entangled them in an identity conflict. Offline, we can tell the difference between a TV character and a physical person because of the screen; one is mediated, the other is not. When a character becomes the object of affection for a fan, it is usually mediated through a technology that clearly delineates a separation between the real person and the simulated character. On MySpace, however, the personas of users exist in the same space as those of the personas of the characters. As we have seen with *Lonelygirl15*, it is online identity that matters: all virtual personas have equal status. When two personas interact, we find that fans connect their online identity with aspects of the object of their fandom by incorporating themselves into that text.

Consequently, MySpace character personas are not examples of de Certeau’s (1984) tactical responses of readers, nor of strategic productions of unique meaning, but

rather represent a mode of reception where traditional Marxist or neo-Marxist analyses are no longer adequate to describe a world where technology allows producers and consumers interchangeable roles. As Benkler (2005) indicates in his book chapter, traditional economic theories cannot account for both the collaborative potential of online production, as well as the actualization of that potential. Because, as we have seen, a MySpace character persona combines elements of distributed narrative (from the producer's space) with elements of identity (from the space of the reader), it exists "not here or there, one of the other, but neither the one nor the other, simultaneously inside and outside, dissolving both by mixing them together" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 174). The response of the fan to the source text is no longer tactical or strategic. MySpace denizens don't treat the text as canon, but rather as fodder. Fans rely on technology not just as a tool but also as a necessary and catalytic mechanism to alter their subjective experiences of cultural life. Fans liberate the experience of consumptive viewership.

### Re-Writing MySpace

Through a process of re-reading and re-writing a media text, fans participate in an ongoing process of meaning-making. More than "fan fiction," however, MySpace profiles bind tactical reading with strategic production, dissolving the binary between the two. MySpace.com has hundreds of millions of subscribers (Adest, 2006). Tying together narrative, identity formation and fan fiction, these personas relay specific identity information not about persons, but about personas; not about offline identity, but about simulations. These fan profiles provide a new conception of textual "poaching" in

three ways: through narrativized dialogue, through branched narratives, and through fan-created dialogue.

### *Identity through Narrativized Dialogue*

The first way these fans use MySpace to problematize de Certeau (1984) is by interactively building identity using both fictional characters and fellow personas. To construct a simulation, an online identity, one must post text as a form a self-identity. The *space* of this post says a lot about one's identity. For example, posting a comment to a fan's persona can indicate similarities and differences upon which to build identity. We can observe this in Figure 1, the comments section of a character persona of *Gilmore Girls*<sup>iii</sup>. The poster "[[gone 2 camp b bak friday!!!]]" (Gilmoregirls3<sup>iv</sup>, 2007) writes "DUDE i love gg its my fav show ever!!!!!! I love ur space its so kute!!!! [all sic]." Gilmoregirls3 here establishes her identity as fan of *Gilmore Girls* ("gg" is a common fan abbreviation for *Gilmore Girls*), and builds an identity around the "[My]space" site that she visits – "its so kute" expresses her opinion about the site. The choice of where to post is a vital one for online communication, as posters gain identity credibility through the location of their posts (Donath, 1999).

By posting comments that respond to, and elicit a response from, the other members of the discussion, a poster actively creates an identity through difference. Kenneth Burke (1969) writes that identity is negotiated by examining what one is *not*. Identification thus functions "first by inducing the auditor to participate" and "next by trying to include a partisan statement" between interlocutors (p. 59). We can see how the posting of a particular statement can be contrasted to the other statements made on the

profile. A reply to the poster's comment might reveal a difference between the two, or might reveal a similarity – either way, it will reveal an identity for both posters<sup>v</sup>.

Importantly, this formation of identity hinges on the interactive response of others. To build identity, the Internet deconstructs one-way communication, as Poster (2001) describes: “subject construction ... occurs through the mechanism of interactivity” (p. 78).

This interactivity ties narrative to identity online. We can see this on the official *Veronica Mars* MySpace site, created for the CW, the network on which *Veronica Mars* aired (VMCW, 2006). The site appears to be created by the CW with the intent of giving MySpace users and fans of *Veronica Mars* the ability to communicate *with the character*. Figure 2 shows the “above the fold” area of VMCW, the area that can be seen without scrolling, in which a number of salient identity issues become apparent. The first indication that we are on a simulation profile's site is that the first section of Veronica's social network, the first nine “friends” in Veronica's list, displays additional characters from the show (Figure 3). Each link demonstrates how the CW makes simulated personas out of characters. The social network of the characters creates a further identity for Veronica, because it situates her within a complex series of relationships that mirror the relationships the personas of non-character people have on MySpace. Further down the page, however, a more scattered list of friends becomes apparent (Figure 4). A mixture of personas of fictional characters and personas of offline people, these friends confuse the issue of VMCW's (2006) reality. Of note, one “friend” is the CW itself, while another friend is the show that immediately preceded *Veronica Mars* on the CW network, our other case study, *Gilmore Girls*. This normalizes the television world:



suddenly, everything that exists on the CW seems to exist in the *same simulated world*. Importantly, this simulated world seems to mix easily with our own world. To become friends with “real” personas is to make the VMCW profile more authentic to MySpace.

The narrativity of the VMCW (2006) site also helps build the identity credibility of the character of Veronica Mars. Figure 5 shows the posted comments on VMCW’s profile, which are continually updated. Other personas on MySpace can write comments and post them on the website for anyone else to see, and each comment is displayed in reverse chronological order, like the entries on a blog. The latest entry, from “Aneeda burrita?” reads, “so about the new pic...LOVE IT!!!” The reference implies that the VMCW profile recently changed the main identifying picture. When one persona changed her picture, a second persona responded.

“Aneeda burrita?” identifies with Veronica Mars and tries to build *her own* identity through the posting of comments that others can read. In this way, as a fan, “Aneeda burrita?” navigates her identity through another’s profile, hoping that when others see her comment, they will click over to view *her* profile. Veronica Mars acts as a surrogate persona for the identity construction of other personas, through the narrative relationship between the sites. By creating a new narrative space in which to construct her own identity, “Aneeda burrita?” has fostered the relationship between fictional character and real friend. The persona of Veronica Mars has been used to increase the online identity of others.

By conversing on the site, not only does “Aneeda burrita?” create a *personal* identity through the location of the post, but also creates a presence within the world of *Veronica Mars*. She could be Veronica’s friend – just as the nine “fictional” friends in

Veronica's list are. It is more than a form of parasocial desire<sup>vi</sup>: it is intertextual realization. By placing herself there, she creates a unique space, a unique identity, both "outside and inside" *Veronica Mars* and her own identity space (de Certeau, 1984, p. 174). This new space is inhabited by real and simulated personas, and in the creation of this space, "Aneeda burrita?" replaces the narrative of *Veronica Mars* with her own narrative of identity construction.

### *Identity Through Branched Narrative*

A second way MySpace fans problematize the "textual poaching" metaphor is by changing the narrative of the show itself through interaction with character personas. This interaction hinges on the possible re-readings of a media text. Importantly, to enact this method of forming identity on MySpace, a fan must *write* on a MySpace persona a form of exactly how they want to be identified. This can be seen in a second example, an "About Me" section on the "sookie123" (2007) MySpace page, which establishes elements of *both* the character *and* the fan:

Hi There!! My name is Sookie! I'll go ahead and tell you a little about myself. I am married to a wonderful man named Jackson. He makes me very happy. We have the greatest two children in the world [...] AIM~  
sookie1921 Ü• I'M A ROLEPLAYER Ü•

The umlaut serves as a bridge between the character's world and the fan's. The fan has created an identity of "roleplayer" for herself, and while this is obviously not her complete identity, it is the *performed* identity in the online space (cf. Goffman, 1959, p.

30). Because the poster has only the text of the message in which to create an identity, the specific content of posting is, in itself, a definition of the poster.

Yet, in creating an identity that bridges the divide between person and role, the poster also enables a way of tying narrative and identity together through the *changing* of a narrative. The insertion of an alternate identity into the media text alters the narrative and creates what Jenkins (2006) calls “‘I Wonder Ifs,’” or narratives that “‘explore ‘possibilities’ that are hinted at but not developed within the [texts]” (p. 181). By adopting a different narrative from what is considered canonical by the viewers, fan profile creators can tie their own online identities more directly with a set of values that may or may not differ from other fans. They become identified through their differences.

For example, the *Gilmore Girls* fan profile zachandstaceforever (2007) has hypothesized a text in which protagonist Rory did *not* break up with lover Dean during her college years, and instead stayed with him throughout the rest of the series. This contradicts the continuity of the series, which saw Rory later falling for different men, including rebel Jessie and heartthrob Logan. In Figure 7, the character of Rory, portrayed through the persona of the MySpace profile, enacts a dialogue with another profile through the comments section that articulates this separate narrative. Through this textual dialogue, the Rory/Dean narrative continues as a separate branch from the show. For example, she writes “they [Rory and Dean] order their food and wait for their food to come. rory [sic] sips her coffee.”

In this way, the person behind the zachandstaceforever (2007) profile builds her own online identity by identifying with a particular characterization of the show. It’s not just that zachandstaceforever distances herself from the (diagetically correct) character of

Logan, but also that she allies herself with the (diagetically incorrect) character of Dean. By deliberately altering the narrative, and displaying this alteration in a public profile, zachandstaceforever describes her online identity through the fictionalization of an already fictional narrative: she doesn't so much *build* on the narrative as *branch* from it. The contrast could not be more explicit: Logan is the son of a rich newspaper magnate (think ironically of MySpace's owner, Rupert Murdoch), and is portrayed as a rogue and playboy who settles down with Rory despite his womanizing tendencies. Dean, on the other hand, was working-class but honest boyfriend who proclaimed his love for Rory early in the series. By "siding" with Dean over Logan zachandstaceforever establishes a number of traits that she feels strongly about: loyalty, hard work, love-at-first-sight, etc. Dean characterizes these traits, and by re-focusing the narrative around him, zachandstaceforever creates her own identity through a separate narrative.

This new identity, built from pieces of *Gilmore Girls*, from pieces of the textual elements zachandstaceforever (2007) has posted elsewhere online, and from the elements of her *own* life included in her persona, establishes a new mechanism for textual appropriation that integrates production *and* consumption. Zachandstaceforever removes herself from the *Gilmore Girls* political economy by changing the space of the text: the space that zachandstaceforever knows as "*Gilmore Girls*" is different from the one that others watch on television: her space is one of her own creation. Through the creation of her public identity, zachandstaceforever links tactical and strategic readings.

### *Identity Through Fan-Created Dialogue*

The third problematization of fan poaching sees a combination of the previous two:

through the creation of *both* a unique identity *and* a branched narrative, the new fan realizes a communal relationship between MySpace users, as well as a new thread in a transmediated narrative. Just as there is a tension between the experience of *Gilmore Girls* on the CW and *Gilmore Girls* on zachandstaceforever (2007), there is also a tension between identity formations within the individual poster. The desire for a unique identity is shaped and structured by a tension between communal expectations and individual desires. Burke (1969) identifies this as “socialization, considered as a moralizing process,” in which one uses societal expectations to negotiate one’s own identity (p. 39). Individuals willingly alter their identity to match a group morality, and then negotiate identities within an online environment between the individual identity of the user, the group identity of the community, and the social identity constructed from the interaction of the two.

Social identity forms from the networks within digital communities that foster a deliberate growth of cultural norms. Within each community a specific presentation of what is accepted as proper and normal functions to define the boundaries of that community. In an Internet environment, a person “must construct her identity,” yet online writing also becomes “a cooperative effort, which is designed to overcome the barriers of authority” (Bolter, 2001, p. 116). In order to have an effective post, a poster must necessarily construct an identity that is different from others, but similar enough to warrant being in on the same page.

We can see this third identity construction in the *Gilmore Girls* profile titled “coffeeluvr4life” (2007). In Figure 8, the user has posted a picture of the *actress* Lauren Graham, described the *character* Lorelai Gilmore (“Don’t I look stunning?”), and

commented as the *poster*, coffeeluvr4life (“\*laughs\* yeah right...”). Our user has shown she is a fan of *Gilmore Girls*, by positioning herself on a profile. Yet, she also differentiates herself through an ironic distancing from the act. She is a fan, but a fan with a different enough personality that she can be identified as *separate* from that notion of “fan.” She needs to be *different* from other fans, but not so different as to be ignored as a fan. Further, she includes the actress’s identity to place the persona in the “real world.”

This third form of identity construction on MySpace can also be seen in a fan-constructed site for *Veronica Mars*. Fans not only refer to these characters as real people, but also vicariously live through them: instead of simply *thinking* that characters are real, fan audiences can self-consciously *create* the characters’ reality. Figure 9 illustrates the same type of “above the fold” layout in the CW website for *Veronica Mars*, but this fan site (VMz, 2006) uses the characters on the show to promote a more individual identity. The layout of the profile in Figure 9 represents a more personal approach to the website. In the case of VMz, the site is designed *as if it represented the personality of Veronica Mars*. Using the idea of a distributed narrative of the *Veronica Mars* text allows the creator to imagine that the narrative of the show continues online, through MySpace.

Further, Figure 10 shows the fan fiction dialogue between *Veronica* and other *Veronica Mars* characters’ profiles. The two posts represented here come from personas of characters: who actually writes these comments is unclear. The profile here of the character “Dick” narrates, in the third person, what has happened:

Dick rolled his eyes. God, she was pathetic. And Logan was pathetic, too.

He couldn’t believe that something so ‘wonderful’ (as Logan had

previously described it) as love could turn two people into completely different people than they'd been before (VMz, 2006).

Interestingly, the two people that "Dick" refers to had broken up in the show before this post was made; therefore, the events referred to are unique to the MySpace fiction.

In order to function as fan fiction, however, this text must necessarily be separated from the text that exists as the "authentic" *Veronica Mars*. In writing this new text, VMz creates a digital environment outside the reach of the CW. Although the characters are shared, they are imbued with enough original identity creation that to articulate their relationship with the "original" media producer is to assert the fan artistry that went into creating them. The texts are only created through the *communal interaction* of personas. For fans, MySpace allows an ever-evolving space for the creation of meaning from extant narratives.

### Conclusion

Henry Jenkins (1992) closes *Textual Poachers* with a reminder. We cannot afford:

to ignore the connection that places fan culture on a continuum with other media consumption. We can, however, insist that any theory that is constructed to account more generally for the relationship between spectators and texts not preclude the existence of the [fan's] practices (p. 287).

It is my hope that this paper has shown that, to account for the existence of new fan practices in new media environment is not only to perceive fan culture on a "continuum

with other media consumption,” but also to break the very binary in which such economic thinking places us. Through an examination of these MySpace sites, we can see how MySpace users blur the binary between de Certeau’s (1984) strategies and tactics of reading. These fan users not only build characters from extant media, but also use these characters for their own identity play. Identity and narrative are becoming more fluid and more dynamic in digital environments, and as this fluidity continues, the line between “what is production” and “what is consumption” becomes even more blurred. Fans articulate this obfuscation by underscoring a disparity between the creation of cultural capital and the creation of cultural content.

The result of this is a shakeup of the theoretical binary between consumer and producer. Mark Poster (2001), in his analysis of media, describes how “electronic media are supporting a ... profound transformation of cultural identity” (p. 72). De Certeau’s (1984) analogy becomes obvious: producers and consumers are at war with one another over meaning. Producers encode meaning through strategies of power while consumers tactically decode their own meaning through “movements that change the organization of a space” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 38). In this, however, the tactics of the consumer are necessarily determined by the very strategies they fight against. MySpace personas, however, don’t just change the relationship between strategies and tactics – they change the field of battle entirely.

Through a focus on fan studies, we can observe the ways that the technological creation of meaning has an effect on culture in general. Because of the collaborate nature of the web, an economic analysis leaves gaps in cultural theory that must be examined. By melding identity production and narrative completion, MySpace personas merge two



worlds, the real and the simulated. They represent a blending that removes tactics and strategies from “the space of the other” and present them in a new conceptual space (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37).

Contemporary media studies will need to adjust with the changing audience: “developments in digital technology aren’t a cumulative ‘add on’ to media studies that can be adequately explained through the existing concepts, categories and research” (Merrin, 2008, ¶73). We need an adjustment not just to our research, but also to the foundational conceptions of media theory and practice. Through the personal intake of media and mediated entertainment, audiences produce their own identity. Perhaps Merrin (2008) puts it most succulently: “What is fundamental [in contemporary media usage] is the way in which these users are reconfiguring their own social relations and expectations and producing entirely new modes of experience and knowledge” (¶7). Through narratives online, the creation of a simulated identity feeds back onto a real world identity. Our initial example, “Luke” (2007) is doing more than creating fan fiction, more than producing through consumption. She is creating a reality made up of simulation. She inhabits a new space – her space – in which she becomes part of the text. She is not changing the media landscape: the media landscape is changing and she, as well as other new fans, is one vanguard of this new, digital era.

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## Endnotes

□

<sup>i</sup> For this paper, I use the term *persona*, as well as its counterpart *person*, in specific ways. A *person*, a physical entity spatially separated from the computer, posts information about herself online. This information becomes a *persona*, a digital representation of the person ontologically dependent on the computer for its existence. *Personas* are what danah boyd terms “digital bodies,” or sites where people “carefully choose what information to put forward, thereby eliminating visceral reactions that might have seeped out in everyday communication” (boyd, 2007, p. 12). *Personas* are not the same thing as the *person* that posts; in this difference lies the relationship between the real and the simulation. I contend that the difference between a *person* and a *persona* exists as a phenomenological aspect of identity.

<sup>ii</sup> Espen Aarseth’s elaboration on the term “simulations” might be a useful analogy here. For Aarseth, a “simulation” is a cybertextual “empirical element that is not found in fiction” that exists “somewhere in between reality and fiction.” These simulations are “not obliged to represent reality, but they do have an empirical logic of their own” (1994, pp. 78-79). MySpace *personas* change the ontological status of the fictional characters into Aarseth’s versions of “simulations.”

<sup>iii</sup> To find character profiles from these millions, I searched MySpace by typing character names into the search form. This searched all 100 million profiles for instances where the name registered on the account was that of the character, not of the fan. Interesting, already there is a connection here between online identity fragmentation and narrative realization. For *Veronica Mars* (2004), I searched solely for the title character. For *Gilmore Girls* (2000), I examined profiles for all the main characters (Lorelai Gilmore, Rory Gilmore, Sookie St. James, and Luke Danes).

<sup>iv</sup> In this case, I have used a pseudonym for the poster; throughout this paper, any fan site that lists the *character* as the MySpace *persona* I have retained the name, but any site that uses the *person* as the *persona* I have changed the name. However, I do this while fully aware that any names online may in fact be pseudonyms anyway.

<sup>v</sup> As it happens, when checked, *GilmoreGirls3*’s MySpace had no reply.

<sup>vi</sup> Parasocial desire being derived from the theory of Horton and Wohl (1956), it describes the relationship or interpersonal bond that forms between a viewer and a character or figure on television. This bond, which can be as strong as an interpersonal bond between two physical people, has offered a way of conceptualizing the attachment people feel to characters as well as news anchors and other media personalities.