

Archive of Our Own and the Gift Culture of Fanfiction

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("Archive of Our Own", image source: <http://so-you-wanna-read-fanfiction.tumblr.com/>)

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## I. Introduction

At the Minneapolis Creation Convention “Salute to *Supernatural*” 2015<sup>1</sup>, Master of Ceremonies, Richard Speight Jr.<sup>2</sup>, began the day’s theater events by going over the rules and regulations. He acknowledges that the signs outside the room all vehemently insist that there should be no audio or video recording or picture taking inside the theater. He then tells the audience to ignore those warnings entirely, declaring that they (the *Supernatural* convention crew) *want* us (the fans) to record the event, “we not only encourage it – we *insist!*” Record the panels and post them online and share them everywhere, he announces, because “*you* are our promotion team!”

Thus, we see that the *Supernatural* convention crew, over their many years of running cons and meeting fans, has realized the truth of fandom: fandom doesn’t take from its commercial source material (as the venue runners feared fans would “steal” from the panel by taking pictures and video) but add to its larger value (by acting as a free marketing and promotions machine, spreading the word of the show and thus encouraging others to consume it and its related materials.)

Fannish additions make the source material *more* valuable to the original creators, not less. The existence of fandom (and accordingly, consumers) is what allows the TV shows and movies that inspire fannish devotion to continue producing content. As *Supernatural* star Jared Padalecki said to the massive theater of fans who’d gathered at the Minneapolis convention, “y’all couldn’t exist without us, but we couldn’t exist without you.” So, the relationship between fandom and fan object is not parasitic, but symbiotic.

However, commercial producers of these pop culture media products often don’t see the situation as such. The relationship between corporations and fandom has been highly contentious: commercial media producers often consider fan producers to be “stealing” from their copyrighted works, and fans are regularly threatened with societal shame at best and legal action at worst for their transformative fanworks (fanfiction, fanvideos, etc.)

Fans operate within a gift culture, embedded in a larger commercial culture. Some works fans give freely to one another as gifts meant to solidify relationships and communities, some works fans sell online through sites like Redbubble and Etsy. Different types of fanworks circulate differently, with fanfiction largely remaining in the realm of the gift culture, whereas fanart is regularly sold for a profit, as one can see with a quick Google search or by wandering around any given comic convention. However, there have been some recent events that have changed that, namely, the worldwide success of fanfiction-turned-original-novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The novel called into question traditional fannish gift-giving practices, as well as the legal and cultural implications of publishing fanfiction as one’s own, original fiction. This step in the direction of commercialization of fandom (a process that has been going on for decades with corporations constantly trying to bring fannish practices under their commercial control)

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<sup>1</sup> One of more than a dozen yearly *Supernatural* (a popular sci-fi TV show) fan conventions that take place across the country.

<sup>2</sup> Recurring guest star and fan favorite on *Supernatural*

brings to the forefront the question: Does the commercial success of fanworks mean the end of the fannish gift culture?

My work here is to study the fannish gift culture, investigating its current state, value, and usage. How does it relate to the concepts of gender and community? How has it been shaped by the Internet, capitalism, and evolving fan culture? In this paper I will endeavor to address these questions. I will begin with a literature review focusing on fanfiction and its relation to gender, community, and the gift culture, and then move into my own analysis, studying the fannish gift culture as it is embodied in the fanfiction site Archive of Our Own.



## I.A. Literature Review

### 1. Fans and Fandom

What and who are fans? Specifically, who are the fans who are also the writers and readers of fanfiction? (Throughout this work, I will typically use the word “fan/s” to refer to the fans constituting the fanfiction community, as opposed to the larger sense of fan, such as a more casual media fan, or a sports or music fan.) These fans are overwhelmingly female (Hellekson & Busse 2014). Fans are younger and more diverse than they used to be (Karpovich 2006, 186). Fans are smart, and science and tech-savvy. Fans have always been “early adopters” of technology, to use the phrase of Henry Jenkins, and so were ready and willing to make the move to the Internet, where a majority of fannish activities now take place. (Karpovich 2006, 173; Coppa 2013, 303).

Fanfiction (also referred to as “fanfic” or simply “fic”) fans are a subset of “media fandom.” Media fandom is generally agreed to have begun in the 1960s with the sci-fi TV show *Star Trek*, and the passionate fanbase it created. Media fandom began to break away from its science fiction roots throughout the 70s, leading into a “non-genre fandom explosion” in 80s, and continuing into fandom’s move to the Internet in the 90s (Coppa 2006, 51). The term “media fandom” indicates a different group of fans than those who are more casual, and/or less interested in creative production.

The form and practice of fandom has evolved greatly over the years, largely through changes in technology. Thus, perhaps the most significant shift in fandom has been from “analog” fandom to “digital” fandom – i.e. the change from the days of paper and comic cons, to the Internet. This is, in fact, a somewhat false dichotomy, because the many different phases of fandom and technology overlap, with no new form of communication and creation completely taking the place of the old (*metafandom* 2015). Beginning in the 60s, when media fandom as we think of it today was born, fannish communication and creation took place on paper – through mimeographed fanzines and other printed forms, sent through the mail and exchanged in person at comic conventions (Coppa 2006). These paper and in-person fannish interactions continued into the 90s, when the Internet explosion led fandom to its new, digital home (although comic conventions and other in-person and physical/paper based fan creations continue to exist and thrive.) On the Internet, fandom has gone through a variety of phases and fads, with early Internet fandom being largely conducted through mailing lists and primitive message boards, then moving towards individually curated websites and forums, and fairly recently migrating to websites like LiveJournal that incorporate social and creative aspects (*metafandom* 2015). The most recent phase of Internet fandom largely focuses on social media and sites like Tumblr, a very popular microblogging site, and popular fanfiction archives like FanFiction.net (whose popularity has taken in a hit in recent years) and Archive of Our Own.

Fiske (1992, 48), one of the earliest and foremost scholars of fan studies, stated that “[f]ans are among the most discriminating and selective of all formations of the people and the cultural capital they produce is the most highly developed and visible of all.” Fans are fundamentally active, they’re not “passive consumers of media,” they are producers (Coppa 2013, 303; Stanfill & Condis 2014). Fans aren’t submissive to but dominate mass-produced media texts and commodities (DeKosnik 2012, 103). Media

fandom is “transformative,” whereas the nerdy white fanboy that is often portrayed as the typical fan in mainstream media can be considered “affirmative” (Hellekson & Busse 2014, 3-4).

An affirmative fan can be understood as the type of fan whose purview is to “collect, view, and play, to discuss, analyze, and critique” (Hellekson & Busse 2014, 3). Transformative fans “take a creative step to make the worlds and characters their own” (Hellekson & Busse 2014, 4). These fans make creative works that are not “derivative” of source materials but “transformative”; they take inspiration from the source text and transform it into something different, something more. These “transformative fans are always strongly emotionally invested,” and often critical of source text (Hellekson & Busse 2014, 4). Thus, the mainstream’s idea of a “fan” is of an affirmative fan, while fanfic readers and writers tend to fall into the category of transformative media fandom.

## 2. Glossary

Here are some fannish terms to know that will be used later on in this paper:

### *Fanon and Canon:*

To understand fanfiction, one must understand the canon and the fanon it’s built on. The *canon* of a fandom’s fanworks can be defined as “the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, settings, and characters” (Hellekson & Busse 2006, 9). For example, part of the canon of Star Trek: The Original Series is that Captain James T. Kirk is captain of the starship Enterprise, with Spock as his first officer.

The *fanon* is “the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fantext...particular details or character readings” (Hellekson & Busse 2006, 9). Part of the fanon of the Star Trek slash fandom is that Kirk and Spock are, in one way or another, in love. For fans, the canon is always filtered through the fanon, and fanon is always a work in progress.

*Ship:* A “ship,” short for relationship, is a word indicating the emotional/romantic/sexual pairing of two characters, for example, the characters Dean Winchester and Castiel from the TV show *Supernatural* are often paired in the ship called “Destiel.” These ships are very often not canon relationships, but fan constructions of what could be between two characters. In the Destiel example, the characters share a strong bond of friendship, and fans note a great deal of homosexual subtext to their interactions, but they are not a couple canonically. Ship can be a noun or a verb, as in “Destiel is my favorite ship” or “I ship Destiel so much.”

*Slash/het/gen:* These are some of the most common types of fanfic. “Slash” fic means that the two characters paired in the fic are male, thus, it is male/male (ex. Dean/Castiel.) “Het,” short for heterosexual, fic involves a heterosexual pairing (ex. Clint Barton/Natasha Romanov from the Marvel comic and movie universe). “Gen,” short for general, fic doesn’t center on a romantic or sexual pairing. This type of fic may revolve around a mystery or case for the characters to solve, it could be a character study, or essentially any story where a ship isn’t the focus of it.

*RPF/RPS*: “Real Person Fic” (RPF) is fic that ships real people rather than fictional characters. Some of the most popular RPF is of the various band members in 1-Direction. Since the majority of fic is slash, RPF is sometimes called Real Person Slash (RPS.)

*AU*: “AU” is short for “Alternate Universe.” This is a kind of fic where the story doesn’t take place in the usually setting or canon, and/or the characters play different roles. For example, a *Sherlock* “cops and robbers” AU could, instead of portraying Sherlock as a consulting detective and Watson as his trusty sidekick as the BBC TV show does, have Sherlock as a criminal mastermind and Watson as the police detective trying to hunt him down. Other AUs can be much more fantastic, such as a mermaid AU (i.e. the characters are mermaids), or take the characters down to a more ordinary level, like in the very common Coffee Shop AU (where much of the drama takes place in a coffee shop, centering on the central pairing’s chance encounter there, usually with one of the characters as a barista, and the other as a loyal customer.)

*Beta*: A “beta” is a fan who edits another fan’s fanfic, checking for the usual editorial issues like grammar and flow, while usually also providing emotional support and friendship to the author.

*Filing off the serial numbers*: “Filing off the serial numbers” also known as “pulling to publish” is the practice of taking a piece of fanfiction and changing the names and other descriptive details that place it in the fictional universe that inspired the fic, so that it can be professionally published without copyright and legal issues.

### 3. What is fanfiction?

It is difficult to define what does and doesn’t qualify as fanfiction. The idea of “derivative amateur writing” is ancient, and encompasses a huge amount of literature. (Hellekson & Busse 2014, 6). Fanfiction, depending on the breadth of one’s definition, can go back as far as the Greeks or the Middle Ages (Hellekson & Busse 2014, 6). Fanfiction in its modern form, however, is generally considered to have begun with *Star Trek* fanfiction in the 1960s, or, at a stretch, with works inspired by Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes (Derecho 2006). To distinguish fanfiction, as understood in its modern fannish context, from other derivative or parodic works, the most useful definition for current discussion is “reworkings of currently copyrighted material” (Coppa 2014, 219). Other distinguishing characteristics of fanfic include its non-commercial nature (thus, professionally published tie-in novels do not count as fanfic in this sense) and its heavy intertextuality (where a single line can reference a wealth of compressed meaning) (Tosenberger 2014, 13). Fanfic can be characterized as a broad swath of stories all sharing a common base, but with an infinite variety of small, but significant, differences. For example, there are currently over 45,000 works of Dean/Castiel fanfic (fic focusing primarily on the relationship between the two fictional characters Dean and Castiel from the TV show *Supernatural*) posted to Archive of Our Own (the fanfic archive that will be the focus of the rest of this paper), and the tens of thousands of differences between these stories indicates the near infinite interpretations of the canon and fanon that have been and can be explored (De Kosnik 2015).

Fanfic is best understood as not just a form of literature, but as part of a variety of different creative traditions, including archival and Archontic, palimpsest, mythology, and performance/drama:

### *i. Archive and Archontic*

Fanfiction is an archive, and its archival nature is integral to understanding and appreciating it (De Kosnik 2015, 125). Fanfiction is not a lone written work; each work of fanfiction adds to the depth and possible interpretations of the source text, and enhances and compliments the reading of all the other fics in the archive. It takes a community of readers and writers to create this archive, making fanfiction singular among written works for its communal nature. Similarly, fanfiction can be understood as “Archontic literature,” an idea deriving from Derrida’s concept of archives, and outlined by Derecho in terms of fanfiction in 2006. “Archontic” is partially synonymous with “archival,” but involves not only the idea of an archive, but also that of a (female-dominated) community and tradition of addition to other works.

“Archontic” has a more positive connotation than other words used to describe fanfiction, like “derivative” or “poached,” and it’s also more specific and accurate. It involves the idea that one text should not be privileged over another, because texts and their contexts constantly change and update and grow. A person who writes or reads fanfic inherently acknowledges this; that texts contain many varied and valid potentialities. This terminology also implies intertextuality in a purposeful sense. Much like every work of fic adds to and changes the fanon, “every addition to an archive alters the entire archive” (Derecho 2006, 70). Archontic is also a useful way of understanding fanfiction because, like in the fanfiction tradition, women and Archontic literature have a long history. Derecho (2006, 68) argues that “[women’s] efforts to add to male narratives [through additive, Archontic literature] were, for the most part, resented, minimalized, or ignored by their male counterparts.” In part, this is because Archontic literature has a history of existing to point out inequality and discrimination, something not appreciated by those in power (Derecho 2006, 70). Derecho (2006, 70) further argues that “Archontic lit is inherently, structurally, a literature of the subordinate” and thus, it is a natural home to the female writers of fanfic, as a form of writing that is empowering to its users through its very nature of working outside of mainstream structures.

### *ii. Palimpsest*

Fanfiction can be understood as a “palimpsest,” because of its emphasis on intertextuality and additivity, involving the “non-hierarchical, rich layering of genres...complex continuum of themes, techniques, voices, moods, and registers” in which “the initial text...is reworked in a postmodern, multivocal, and intertextual fashion” (Stasi 2006, 119). This understanding of fanfiction also helps to point out the problematic nature of the use of words such as “canon.” Canon implies authenticity, and authority. But if the “canon” is understood as part of the palimpsest, then it becomes part of the whole, and can be understood as a piece of a “collective interpretive process” (Stasi 2006, 120).

### *iii. Mythology*

Fan texts can also be considered part of the creation of a mythology, with the canon (simply) as part of that (Stasi 2006). Similar to myths, the “facts” of fanfiction, i.e. the canon, are relative; what’s important is one’s personal interpretation of fan objects (Sandvoss 2005, 134-6). And, as mythology grows and inspires new myths, fanfic can inspire its own fanworks (Stasi 2006). Whether it is complimentary works

inspired directly by the content of a certain fanwork, like a piece of fanart depicting a scene from the story, or the creation of an entire new piece of fanfiction inspired by another author's rendering of that fictional universe, fanworks beget fanworks.

#### *iv. Performance/Drama*

Fanfiction can be understood as a sort of theatrical performance. It involves depicting distinctive iterations of fundamentally similar characters (Hellekson & Busse 2014). In drama, repurposing and reimagining an interestingly different but fundamentally similar version of a story is good and normal. In the same way theater is produced by a community of people, so is fic. There is a strong embodiment of both the author of the original script and the contemporary creators in a work of theater, and in fic, both the fan and source authors are very present. The source is important as the basis for some combination of character, setting, and theme, while the fic author's interpretation of the canon and fanon is unique, and what gives that piece of fanfiction meaning and value (Coppa 2014).

Fanfiction is a performative space, and this performance creates fan identity (Hellekson & Busse 2014). In theater, different characters and bodies can be explored on the stage; fanfiction allows fan authors to explore not only the potentialities of a fictional universe, but aspects of their own bodies and identities. If one shifts the paradigm for understanding fic from the literary to the dramatic, fic's focus on bodies is natural, not a flaw (Coppa 2014). Similarly, considering that so much of fic is inspired by visual media (television and movies) the visual and physical focus of much fic is logical.

Thus, fanfiction can be understood as an archive, Archontic, palimpsest, mythology, and a type of performance. These ways of viewing the fanfiction enterprise are complimentary, offering different layers of meaning for various aspects of fanfiction and fic writing, from identity to community to intertextuality. One important takeaway from this diverse array of interpretations is that fanfiction is worthy of study for its own (literary, creative) merits, not just as the focal point of a community of scholarly interest, or as a legal, moral, or psychological conundrum to be analyzed (Stasi 2006).

#### **4. Gender & Sexuality**

The fanfic community is predominantly female (Hellekson & Busse 2014). Although this gender divide has lessened with the access and anonymity provided by the Internet, women still make up a clear majority. (Hellekson & Busse 2014). The groups of affirmative vs. transformative fans, discussed earlier, tend to break down across gender lines. Female fans are more transformative, and male fans are more affirmative. The mainstreaming of fan behavior has led to greater recognition of fans, but this representation still tends to invoke negative stereotypes, as well as almost exclusively depict white, male, affirmative fans (Busse 2013). It has been theorized that perhaps male fans don't have the same transformative drive since media products are already tailored for them, and that is why they remain affirmational while women are driven to create new works (Busse 2013).

Historically male "fandoms" such as sport fandoms have usually been considered acceptable, compared to things like media fandom which contain women and non-masculine men, and are thus unacceptable (Tosenberger 2014). Anti-fan rhetoric is inherently gendered, using terms like "hysterical," and "girly," to

describe fannish behavior (Busse 2013). Women and their activities are almost always at the bottom of geek/fan hierarchies, for example, performing a traditionally male fannish activity like “collecting comic books or speaking Klingon is more acceptable within and outside of fandom than” the traditionally female fannish activities of “creating fan vids or cosplaying” (Busse 2013, 75). Further, behaviors performed by both genders are demonized when women do them. Fangirls are told that they like stuff for the “wrong” reasons, like finding the actors of a show attractive; in general, adult women being sexual beings is “wrong” even if the same is lauded in men (Busse 2013, 87).

So, although fannish activities in general have gained some measure of mainstream visibility, they are still laced with shame, especially those activities performed by women. The Internet provides a safe space for fans to exist in relative peace. Mainstream media regularly vilifies fans for being obsessive or “crazy,” while fans police their own boundaries with conflicting declarations of what constitutes a “good” or “good-enough” fan. The Internet allows anonymity for fans who seek to avoid the shame they sometimes face from the mainstream, as well as fan communities, for their fannish activities.

Fandom in its modern incarnation on the Internet also allows fans to safely play with and explore their identity. Although earlier scholars believed that the fanfic community consisted of heterosexual women, more recent studies have shown that there are significant numbers of queer writers of fanfiction, or at least a higher percentage of queer people than the general population (Busse 2006). This may be in part because some fans join fandom to create/cement/empower their social identity, including their gender and sexual identity (Fiske 1992). The Internet is especially adept at this process, since it can provide a protective veil of anonymity so that a possibly harmful link between online and “real” selves can be mediated; allowing fans to explore their (gender, sexual, personal) identity safely (Lothian 2013, 542).

## 5. Community

What is fandom? To many fans, “Fandom is a way of life” (Coppa 2014, 232). Fandom is a group of people that collaboratively creates an archive around a source text (De Kosnik 2015). Fandom is a gathering around “common media” and a common love (De Kosnik 2012, 101). Fandom is production and creation. Fandom can and will form around any cultural media product that sparks interest in its audience. The most popular types of fandom tend to form around TV shows and movies, as well as books and video games, with different fandoms then forming different communities underneath the unifying umbrella of love for the source text.

The term “fandom” implies a community of fans, complete with practices and norms, centered around a media product and its creators, context, tie-ins, etc. Thus, the word “fandom” is approximately interchangeable with the term “fan community,” but tends to imply a larger group of people, as opposed to a subset of fandom which forms a community around an aspect of fandom, like the *fanfiction* community.

Fandom is fundamentally about community and collaboration (Jones 2014). The fan community is created and identified by the “reciprocity and free circulation of fan works”, and the meaning of these fanworks “resides as much in the social ties created by the exchange of narratives, the sharing of gossip,

and the play with identity as it does with the words on the page” (Scott 2009, [2.10]; Jenkins 1992, 222). Fandoms can even take on a life of their own, largely separate from the media content which spawned it.

Community is one of the (if not *the*) most important differences between professional writing and fic. Interaction during the creation of fic is “visible and central” (Hellekson & Busse 2006, 28). The creator of meaning is the collective fandom/community, not just any one author (Hellekson & Busse 2006). This collaboration can be explicit, as in fics with multiple authors, or implicit, in the public posting of the work inviting comment, during which the fic moves from being the author’s work in progress to the audience’s work in progress, as they add to the meaning and interpretation of the story (Hellekson & Busse 2006).

## 6. Gift Economy

Fanfiction is part of a gift economy. A gift economy operates through three major activities: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate (Hellekson 2009). Gifts are given and received by the various parties, and although there is no distinct exchange of goods or money, there is an expectation of reciprocity. Unlike in a market exchange, this reciprocity involves unspecified terms of exchange, which nonetheless define the relationships between the people involved (Klamer 2011a). Gifts support social relationships and other things of no specific monetary value.

In scholarly work, fanfiction is referred to as part of a gift economy and a gift culture. These terms are used, if not synonymously, then similarly. Gift “culture” tends to imply something larger than an “economy,” in that fans may give and receive gifts within the gift *economy*, but fannish tendencies to value community over financial reward falls under the purview of the larger gift *culture*. In this paper, I will use the terms somewhat interchangeably.

In the fan gift economy, fan labor is fans’ gift to fandom. Fanfic, fanvids, and fanart are some of the most common types of gifts, while the “gift of artwork or text is repetitively exchanged for the gift of reaction...” (Hellekson 2009). Fan gifts construct and are the means of entrance to community, and are the most central topic of discussion other than whatever original media the fandom formed around. Gifting is used to create and reinforce social ties among fans; fanworks are often of little or no monetary value, only having meaning within the fan community and context (Hellekson 2009). Fans chose community, rather than money or larger social acceptance, to be the currency of their economy, and thus the centrality of community is fundamental to the gift culture’s continuing presence. (Flegel & Roth 2014).

In addition to building community and cementing social ties, gifts given in a gift economy serve to increase the giver’s status within the group. Fan interactions can be compared (metaphorically) to a potlatch for status. Merriam-Webster defines a potlatch as “a ceremonial feast...marked by the host’s lavish distribution of gifts...to demonstrate wealth and generosity with the expectation of eventual reciprocation.” This term as part of the gift economy was introduced by Marcel Mauss in his foundational work “The Gift,” and was taken up by fan writer Rachel Sabotini in the late nineties as a way of understanding fannish interactions. To achieve truly high status in a fan community, Sabotini says

one must create artwork (fic, vid, fanart, etc.) versus the other “dishes” of meta, commentary, recommendation lists, etc. (Sabotini 1999).

The gift culture exists in large part so that fans can continue doing what they love without incurring the wrath of copyright owners. However, it is also related to the fact that the fan community consists of a majority of women (Hellekson 2009). The gift culture is founded on maintaining social ties, versus commercial or economic ones, thus it is inherently gendered (favors females) since this job historically has fallen to women in society (Hellekson 2009). Scholar and fan Kristina Busse says of her fellow fans that “most of us feel strongly that the gift economy is a value, not a necessity...We don’t charge for our stories...mostly because we’re sharing our love for the worlds and characters of the source text with fellow fans and friends and don’t want to charge them!” (Flegel & Roth 2014). The gift economy is integral to fan culture because it not only protects them from legal issues involved with trying to profit from copyright-adjacent material, but because it values community and gender, two elements which define fandom.

## 7. Distribution of fanworks

The legal standing of fanworks is currently a topic of much debate. Fanworks do make use of copyrighted material, and so many corporations consider the distribution of fanworks to be an act akin to piracy. However, as previously discussed, fanworks are “transformative,” and so many fans advocate that fanworks should be legally protected under Fair Use laws, as something similar to parody, where the source material is integral to the interpretation of the new material, but the new material is distinct from the source.

Within fan communities, conflict over the commercialization of fanworks is complex, with different fans viewing and participating with the issue differently (Chin 2014). Stanfill (2013) describes the conflict as “[o]ne side champions the right of the individual fan author to profit from her labor; the other laments this insertion into capitalist exchange as undermining fan community and its noncommercial traditions.” The issue is not as simple as gift vs. commercial culture, however, since the two cultures are not distinct but intertwined.

Industry has been making increasing inroads into fandom, not just declaring fanworks to be derivative and demanding their removal from the websites that host them, but actually appropriating them for their own use (Stanfill 2013). Corporations have begun to see the profit that can be made from the free labor of fandom, and begun to adopt to adopt models referred to by one scholar as a “regifting” economy (Scott 2009). In these models, corporations use the promise of insider access and free content to encourage fans to visit and post their own works to corporate websites, thus increasing advertising revenue and performing valuable marketing for virtually no cost to the company (Scott 2009). Corporations don’t respect fan communities and traditions, and many fans fear that this “warped version of fandom’s gift economy that equates consumption and canonical mastery with community” will consume the non-commercial, community-based fandom they know and love (Scott 2009, [3.2]).

One fan, *astolat*, worried that “...we are sitting quietly by the fireside, creating piles and piles of content around us, and other people are going to look at that and see an opportunity. And they are going to end



up creating the front doors that new fanfic writers walk through, unless we stand up and build our OWN front door.” (Coppa 2013, 302). The front door *astolat* described in 2007 came into being in 2009 in the form of the Archive of Our Own. The Archive (abbreviated as AO3) and its parent group, the Organization for Transformative Works (abbreviated as OTW), have been described as the “crown jewel of online fandom.” (Stanfill & Condis 2014). AO3 is an online archive for fanworks, where anyone can sign up and then post fanfic (and vids, and art, and virtually any other fanworks) for free. The site is a non-profit, created and run by fans, “dedicated to providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture” (Coppa 2013, 306). The OTW and AO3 serve as a “positive alternative” to the “commercialization of fan culture” (Coppa 2013, 305). AO3 efficiently and effectively archives fanworks that may otherwise be lost to time, it provides visibility and respectability in its high-quality functioning and organization, and it is a concerted effort on the part of a community of women to provide a valid alternative to male-dominated capitalism (Coppa 2013; Flegel & Roth 2014). The majority of this paper will be focused on an in-depth analysis of AO3, its structure and function, and its implications for fandom and beyond.

## I.B. Research Question and Thesis

The research question that began this study was: what are the values of media fandom, and what is the relationship between these values and the form and function of AO3? An investigation into the literature of fan studies revealed that three of the fundamental aspects of fandom are its gender, its community, and its gift economy. These three facets are not merely *characteristics* of fandom, although they do define it in many ways, but *values*. Fandom values its gendered nature, its community, and its gift economy.

So, I began an analysis of AO3: its inception, its development, and the details of its structure. This led me to construct my thesis: AO3's form and function reflects and incorporates the values of media fandom, in particular, the key values of gender, community, and the gift culture.

Because of how integral these values are to fandom, it is only natural that a site created by fans for fans would incorporate these values into its form, and reflect them in its functioning. From the post that inspired AO3's creation to its founding organization's statement of values, gender, community, and the fannish gift economy are respected and protected. AO3's fic headers incorporate gendered ideals of care and respect, the archival nature of the site supports the centrality of community, and the inclusion of options like the "gift" feature and built-in methods of reciprocation (comments, bookmarks, and kudos) for the gift of fanworks supports the continuation of the fan gift economy. These are just a few examples of how fannish values are realized in AO3; the body of this paper will address in-depth how gender, community, and gift economy, along with other aspects of fandom like creativity, exclusion, commercialization and the Internet intersect with AO3's form and function.

## I.C. Overview of paper

There are four sections to this paper: I) this introductory section including the literature review and my thesis, II) an introduction to and discussion of the Organization for Transformative Works and its fanfiction site Archive of Our Own, III) an analysis of AO3, focusing on the structure and function of AO3 and how it relates to fandom and fannish values, and how users interact with the AO3 site, and IV) the paper's conclusion.

The third part of the paper, the analysis of AO3, flows somewhat logically from AO3's inception, into an analysis of the site's name, its function as an archive, and then its purpose as an alternative to the commercial style of publishing of traditional fiction, before diving into an in-depth analysis of the site's structure. This constitutes the largest part of the paper: an analysis of the way AO3's formatting of a fic header (and surrounding ephemera) derives from and reflects fannish values. Following this is a related discussion of how the "reciprocation" aspect of the gift culture is reflected in comments, kudos, bookmarks, and the gift culture in general by the "gift" and "inspired by" options. The last part of this section focuses on how the site and users communicate, highlighting the community aspect of the site in particular, and its roots in both fannish and Internet culture.

The paper concludes with a summary of my analysis, noting its significance not just in the world of fans and fandom, but in terms of how fanfiction and sites like AO3 can show how (female) fans can subvert capitalism and the patriarchy through the production of socially resistant texts, distributed and enjoyed outside of commercial structures.

Some brief technical notes: in terms of formatting fannish texts, i.e. primary sources like Tumblr posts, I will quote the exact formatting of the original post, including lack of uppercase letters or other grammatical oddities, so as to keep true to the purposeful, aesthetic choices fans make when formatting their posts in that way. Similarly, many of these posts are attributable only to a fan's username, which I will also not correct for case, and which I will italicize for clarity. For example, the post "the three generations of fanfiction" would not be capitalized, and that post's creator's username would be written as *metafandom*. Additionally, with many of these fans, their gender is not explicitly stated, so I will refer to unknown individual's using "she/her" as a neutral form of address, since fans are statistically more likely to be women - not intending to assume or misgender anyone, but merely for the sake of grammatical ease.

## II. OTW & AO3

In this section of the paper, I will provide an overview of the Organization for Transformative Works (the OTW) and Archive of Our Own (AO3), the parent organization and the fanfiction archive that is the focus of this study, respectively. I will explain that I chose AO3 as the focus of my study because of its reputation for quality, its lack of censorship, and its non-commercial nature, and I will provide an overview of the OTW's founding principles, and how they relate to the three main elements of fandom (gender, community, and gift culture.)

### II.A. Why AO3?

It should be noted that although AO3 is the focus of this analysis, it is just one fanfiction archive, and so represents only one specific segment of the fan community. In fan *destinationtoast*'s Tumblr blog's FAQ, she addresses the question: "Do you think AO3 is representative of fandom as a whole?" (*destinationtoast* "FAQ").

She responds: "Not at all — in fact, I know it isn't. I've done a few comparisons across AO3, FFNet, Wattpad, and/or Tumblr, and the different platforms behave very differently. Additionally, AO3 is relatively new and growing rapidly, so it heavily overrepresents very recent active fandoms. Many older fandoms may not have migrated to AO3 much at all, and even some current fandoms may be far more active elsewhere."

There are a fair number of other places for posting fanfic, like the aging LiveJournal and FanFiction.net, the up and coming Wattpad, as well as other less fanfic-specific sites like DeviantArt and Quotev. So, why choose AO3 from among these various sites?

#### 1. Quality

AO3 is generally considered in fannish communities to be the home of the most quality fanfiction. AO3 has a reputation for well-written, mature work. One fan describes AO3 fanworks as: "literally the most well-written stories you'll ever have the privilege to read. better than most classic literature. you've read published novels that weren't this beautiful. you feel like a better person after having read this story" (*sparklesmikey* 2015). Another fan says in a Tumblr post that "no matter what happens as long as AO3 exists i will be fine" (Lucy 2015).

The site itself is also considered to be high-quality, from its accessible formatting to its excellent search tools, and for which AO3 has garnered serious journalistic attention. It earned a place on Time's 50 Best Websites of 2013, where it was called "the most carefully curated, sanely organized, easily browsable and searchable nonprofit collection of fan fiction on the Web" (Grossman 2013).

Not long ago, LiveJournal (often referred to as LJ) was the focus of many scholarly studies of fanfiction. It was a huge innovator in terms of community in particular; as a place for fanfiction writers to gather to share and discuss each other's works (Busse 2006). Nowadays, LJ has begun to fade away from the Internet landscape, going the same way that other previously popular social media like MySpace have gone, while AO3 continues to grow (Vella 2015). AO3 has eclipsed LJ's place in fandom in part because

of how well-suited it is to browsing, finding, and reading fic. Unlike LJ, AO3 was created explicitly as an archive for fanfiction, and it functions excellently in that capacity. LJ, however, was less suited to the job in part because it was focused on enabling community. The formatting wasn't built for fic, so fic updates (i.e. posting of new chapters to on-going works) were mixed in with all of that user's personal posts, making it harder to follow the progress of the fic. AO3's ease of use made it the clear champion of the two in the field of distributing fic, thus contributing to LJ's waning popularity, and making AO3 the poster child of quality fanfic.

## 2. Censorship

AO3 allows any and all transformative content, in direct opposition to other supposedly fannish sites' forays into censorship. For example, FanFiction.net is a significant fanfiction site which could be worthy of analysis. It has more fanfiction uploads than AO3 (though it has been in operation for many more years) (*destinationtoast* 2015b). However, in 2001, FanFiction.net banned Real Person Fic, and in 2002 they banned "NC-17," or in other words "explicit" fic ("FanFiction.Net"). These policy changes by FanFiction.net displeased many in the fan community, and led to many fans recognizing the need for a fannish site of their own, where they wouldn't be censored by a third party. Thus, FanFiction.net's choices were actually part of the impetus for the creation of AO3.

## 3. Non-Commercial

A new website featuring fanfiction that has garnered some mainstream attention, particularly for their corporate partnerships, is Wattpad. Wattpad came into being as a mobile-friendly place for reading content in general, but fanfiction is now the third most popular type of reading on their site (Romano 2012). It has a reputation among some fanfiction circles for hosting a lot of low-quality, teen-written, RPF (Real Person Fic, one of the lowest types of fic on the fandom totem pole) (Hellekson 2015; *sparklesmikey* 2015). They are distinctly commercial, using advertising and corporate sponsorships of stories in experimental attempts at making profit (Heine 2015).

So, unlike AO3, they are distinctly a commercial venture, rather than being fannish in nature. Many more "traditional" (and especially older) fans are wary of this new corporate toehold in the world of fanfic. After a history of being burned by corporations with cease-and-desist notices for supposed copyright infringement, fans are understandably edgy at the thought of entangling fannish and corporate interests. Wattpad could (as other sites have in the past) make money off of fan writers and then leave them to the corporate wolves if legal issues arose. Distaste at the idea of a commercial site making money off of fanworks while also offering no protection of these gifts is understandable.

AO3 offers the complete opposite of this legal and commercial nightmare. AO3 is part of a non-profit organization, and an explicit supporter of the fan gift culture to boot. AO3's parent organization, the Organization for Transformative Works, even has a legal team working to legitimize fan activities in the eyes of the law. AO3 works (in a legal, and a more social manner) to protect the gift culture and fandom from the idea that creative validity must come from the masculine world of commercialism. AO3's stance on legitimacy outside of capitalism is indicated by the high level of professionalism in the site's appearance and maintenance, combined with the site also being explicitly fannish, and pro-fandom.

Thus, the non-commercial and distinctly fannish nature of AO3 has endeared it to many a fan, earning it respect and popularity in many fanfiction writing circles.

Fan *nevrwhere* asked fellow fan-blogger *destinationtoast*, in reference to her lack of knowledge about Wattpad, “Am I missing out on fantastic stories because I only browse AO3?” (*destinationtoast* 2015a). *destinationtoast*’s response is balanced and considerate, citing Wattpad’s mobile-friendliness and cultural visibility as positives, but concludes by saying “it would be sad if the next generation of fan authors never found their way to the wonder that is AO3...because of Wattpad.”

AO3 is often characterized in adoring terms as a beloved archive of fanworks. It’s considered a high-quality site with fanworks to match, it has none of the censorship which has driven fans away from other sites in the past, and it’s non-commercial and protective of the fannish gift culture. For these reasons, the study of that site and its community provides the most interesting insight into modern fanfic culture.

## II.B. OTW Principles

In order to understand AO3, it is important to first understand their parent organization, the OTW, and the principles that underlie its founding.

The Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) is a nonprofit organization established by fans to serve the interests of fans by providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture in its myriad forms. We believe that fanworks are transformative and that transformative works are legitimate.

The OTW represents a practice of transformative fanwork historically rooted in a primarily female culture. The OTW will preserve the record of that history as we pursue our mission while encouraging new and non-mainstream expressions of cultural identity within fandom.

...We are proactive and innovative in protecting and defending our work from commercial exploitation and legal challenge. We preserve our fannish economy, values, and creative expression by protecting and nurturing our fellow fans, our work, our commentary, our history, and our identity while providing the broadest possible access to fannish activity for all fans (“Annual Report 2014”).

This excerpt from the OTW’s statement of mission, vision, and values highlights several aspects of fanfiction communities that scholarly studies over the years have also found to be consistently important: gender, community, and gift culture.

### 1. Gender

The fanfiction community is predominantly female, and the creators and runners of OTW/AO3 reflect that. 9 of the 11 members of the Archive’s main development team are female, making AO3 one of a small number of open source web projects run by majority-women (“How Well do You Know AO3?”). The OTW/AO3 values this genderedness, and the form of community that goes with it. The friendly, communal nature of AO3 can be compared to other (majority-male) user-generated-content run websites like Reddit, which has a history and reputation for being problematic, distasteful, and even misogynistic (Vella 2015). AO3 is a safe place on the Internet for fans in general, and for women in particular.

### 2. Community

Part of what makes AO3 distinctive is that its community of users is also the community that created it. The OTW and Archive of Our Own are “run by fans and for fans,” (Hellekson 2015). The OTW has almost 500 fan volunteers working on its various projects, from legal advocacy to maintaining AO3 (“How Well do You Know AO3?”). The fan community inspired and supported the fans that became proactive in meeting fans’ need for an Internet space of their own, and the fan community is now enjoying the benefits of the on-going hard work done by the OTW and their volunteers. AO3 has been successful, growing and expanding steadily over the years since it entered open beta (“How Well do You Know

AO3?"). According to an announcement in February of 2014, "[t]he site has over 270,000 registered users (with at least 1 million unregistered users visiting each day) and is still growing" (Rebaza 2014).

### 3. Gift Economy

The OTW is a non-profit, unequivocally in support of the fannish gift economy. They state proudly that they value their "volunteer-based infrastructure and the fannish gift economy that recognizes and celebrates worth in myriad and diverse activities" ("Annual Report 2014"). This gift culture has clearly not hindered the expansion of the site, as seen by the milestone 1 million fanworks reached in early 2014 (Rebaza 2014). Fans are happy to help the site they love stay up and running, and donate generously to ensure it can continue to function and improve. The OTW received a record \$182,930.34 in their fall 2014 fundraising drive ("Annual Report 2014"). Additionally, fan-run endeavors (external to AO3) to help support AO3 have been successful, with fans raising \$16,729 in 2013 in a fic auction, in which fans bid for custom stories by their favorite fic authors. AO3 proudly stays entirely non-commercial, while continuing to grow and thrive.

### **II.C. Conclusion**

Because of AO3's non-commercial, non-censoring nature, and its good reputation with fans, it provides an excellent subject for analysis. The alignment of its founding principles with the fandom's gender, community, and gift economy further mean that it is an appropriate and rich source of material for investigation. The next section of the paper will dive deeply into the Archive of Our Own site, and how its structure and function embody and encourage the key elements of fandom: gender, community, and gift economy.



### **III. Analysis of AO3**

From its inspiration and creation, to its name, to its function as an archive and a haven for non-commercial distribution, to its organization and formatting of the fic posted to the site, and its built-in methods for fannish reciprocation, AO3's structure and function reflect and support the three distinguishing elements of fandom: gender, community, and gift economy. The following sections will provide an in-depth analysis of AO3, and explore the integration of gender, community, and gift culture into the site's form and function, from its beginnings as a fannish dream in the 2000s, to its opening in 2009, to the way that fic is given, received, and reciprocated on the site today. The largest of these sections is III.A.5. "Analysis of a Fic Header", which contains a detailed break-down of an AO3 fic header, analyzing the meaning, use, and significance of (virtually) every aspect of the formatting of an AO3 fic. This section concludes with a discussion of how the site has built the gift culture into its functioning particularly through options for reciprocation, and the gifting of fic.

### III.A. Structure and Function of AO3

#### III.A.1. *astolat*'s List of Features and the Origins of AO3

In 2007, fan *astolat* made a post that garnered hundreds of comments and directly inspired the creation of Archive of Our Own. She wrote “We need a central archive of our own... Something that would NOT hide from google or any public mention, and would clearly state our case for the legality of our hobby up front, while not trying to make a profit off other people's IP [Intellectual Property] and instead only making it easier for us to celebrate it, together, and create a welcoming space for new fans that has a sense of our history and our community behind it” (*astolat* 2007).

This post consolidated and formalized long-discussed fan thoughts and desires for a safe and friendly place for their fic and community. This became a cause that was taken up by a community of motivated fanfic writers and readers, and which blossomed into the AO3 known and loved by fans today. *astolat* was remarkably prescient in her description of the features she felt were necessary for AO3 to succeed. Her words concisely outlined key points that would appear, often exactly as she laid them out, in the modern Archive:

“I think the necessary features would include:

- run BY fanfic readers FOR fanfic readers
- with no ads and solely donation-supported
- with a simple and highly searchable interface and browsable quicksearch pages
- allowing ANYTHING -- het, slash, RPF, chan, kink, highly adult -- with a registration process for reading adult-rated stories where once you register, you don't have to keep clicking through warnings every time you want to read
- allowing the poster to control her stories (ie, upload, delete, edit, tagging)
- allowing users to leave comments with the poster able to delete and ban particular users/IPs but not edit comment content (ie, lj style)
- code-wise able to support a huge archive of possibly millions of stories
- giving explicit credit to the original creators while clearly disclaiming any official status”

Every single one of these features came into being in the realized Archive, and many of them are what make the Archive such a success story both as a fannish endeavor and as a website in a larger sense.

i. The phrase “run BY fanfic readers FOR fanfic readers” is essentially the motto of AO3 – similar phrasing can be found in their mission statement, almost all their organizational literature, and almost all of the works written about them (“Annual Report 2014”; Coppa 2013). It is the cornerstone ideal of the entire operation. It is what makes AO3 so special to fans, and so fascinating for academic study. These words give the fan community prominence and visibility – AO3 doesn’t hide fandom in the shadows, it celebrates it proudly. It also explicitly disavows any third-party motivations for collecting masses of user-generated content, unlike other sites which make advertising money through the page views fans’ creative works draw in. It shows that AO3 values community in the same way fans do, because those running AO3 *are* fans. It also holds subtler implications that fans’ creative power is significant, that they’re self-sufficient, and quite capable of thriving outside of capitalist structures.

ii. The feature “with no ads and solely donation-supported” places AO3 firmly outside of the commercial world and inside the feminine fan gift economy which is foundational to the OTW’s mission. So, from the start, AO3 was built on the ideal of the gift economy. The success AO3 has had with its donation drives shows that fans are willing and able to subsidize the continuation of this fan gift economy. This has also proven a smart decision in the long-term, since the lack of ads makes AO3 a place of welcome respite in the advertising-saturated Internet.

iii. The “simple and highly searchable interface and browsable quicksearch pages” have made AO3 incredibly useful and accessible to long-time fans and newcomers alike, as well as earned AO3 prominence in the form of being listed as one of Time’s top 50 websites of 2013. This feature has proven to be invaluable in earning AO3 its reputation for quality, allowing AO3 to stand tall among the other fanfiction sites like FanFiction.net, LiveJournal, and Wattpad.

iv. *astolat* wrote: “allowing ANYTHING -- het, slash, RPF, chan, kink, highly adult -- with a registration process for reading adult-rated stories where once you register, you don't have to keep clicking through warnings every time you want to read”. AO3 is distinguished by the fact that it is one of the only fanfiction archives that has no form of censorship, for content or quality. For example, FanFiction.net’s now infamous move from several years ago to censor certain types of fic related directly to many fans, feeling unwanted and harassed, fleeing the site for other fanfiction archives, like the nascent AO3.

Overall, different forms of policing of content lead to different audiences and the formation of different fan communities, often differentiated by things like age. For example, Wattpad’s rules for content (along with its mobile-based formatting, and other factors) formed a culture in the fanfiction parts of the site leading it to generally be frequented by younger users (*destinationtoast* “What is Wattpad?”) AO3 believes that fan communities should be able to do their own policing of content, rather than a third party with different (and often commercial) interests (Hellekson 2015). AO3 also goes the extra mile, not merely choosing not to censor, but actively fighting for legal protection of fanworks rather than allowing individual fans to take the fall for supposed copyright infringement, as other sites do when they immediately remove fanworks at the demand of corporations (Coppa 2013). This is, again, part of the ideals of the fan community and the OTW, which explicitly values “the unhindered cross-pollination and

exchange of fannish ideas and cultures while seeking to avoid the homogenization or centralization of fandom” (“Annual Report 2014”).

In particular, the call for a registration process in which once a fan registers she isn’t forced to continue clicking through warnings whenever she reads adult-rated stories was particularly insightful. It allows for easier, uninterrupted reading, and it helps to create the feeling of an open and safe fan community – fanfic readers aren’t constantly “warned” about the content of their fare. This helps to lessen fan-shame, perpetuated by fans and those in the mainstream alike, for the prevalence of adult-content in fanworks. AO3 gives fans the freedom and safety to give, receive, and reciprocate fannish gifts in peace.

v. “allowing the poster to control her stories (ie, upload, delete, edit, tagging)”. This relates to the idea of AO3 being “by fans for fans,” and grounded on the ideal of serving the community. Fanworks have historically been considered suspect, even deleted from various sites for their supposed derivative nature. AO3 believes fans should be considered legitimate creators and authors, and so, affords fans the respect of those roles, in the form of creative control over their own works. This stance differentiates AO3 from other supposedly fannish websites, which are really commercial endeavors which reserve the right to take down or make use of, depending on their whim, the works posted to their site. This aspect is fundamental to the Archive’s mission to preserve and protect fannish history and works.

vi. “allowing users to leave comments with the poster able to delete and ban particular users/IPs but not edit comment content (ie, lj style)” This style of commenting has been an important facet of fan culture for a while now, especially during the height of LiveJournal<sup>3</sup>’s (“lj” or LJ) popularity. It allows for the integrity of comment content to remain, while giving fic authors the authority to make their fic a safe space for conversation and community, by removing toxic commenters. (See more on comments in Comments, Bookmarks, and Kudos)

vii. *astolat*’s post declared it necessary that AO3 be “code-wise able to support a huge archive of possibly millions of stories”. AO3 reached a million fanworks in 2014, and is continuing to expand (“How Well do You Know AO3?”). Assuming AO3’s popularity continues to grow as it has, then the foresight to prepare for millions of uploads was important indeed. This feature shows this individual fan’s realization that fans would only create more and more content with increased access to online tools of creation in the future. And, this prediction of a profusion of fanworks has been realized with the steady growth of AO3, showing the dedication and productivity of the fan community, and the success of the gift economy in the setting of AO3.

viii. “giving explicit credit to the original creators while clearly disclaiming any official status”. This feature, the last of the ones *astolat* considered to be necessary to the success of the archive, illustrates the interesting and complicated issue of fanworks’ legitimacy. *astolat*’s reminder to give “credit to the original creators” while also denying “official status” relates to the traditional fannish practice of giving credit where credit is due, shows the problematic fan conceptualization of fanwork as

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<sup>3</sup> LiveJournal was perhaps the most popular site for fanfic fans, not too many years ago. In much the same way that AO3 is the center of my current research, LiveJournal was studied by academics as a place distinctive for its fan community (Hellekson & Busse 2006).

derivative, and indicates the legal issues that derive from the creation and distribution of transformative works.

a. The fan community has always recognized the importance of the source texts which inspire their transformative works. To be a fan means to care very strongly about something and perform this affection outwardly, thus, by their nature, by their very existence, fans give credit to the “original creators.” Fans have always had a tradition of recognizing the varied people and texts involved with the creation of their works. This includes the source material (indicated explicitly by mentioning it in the commonly used fic headers, and implicitly in the obvious understanding that a fanwork is related to a previous work by definition), the betas (individual fans who help authors edit fanworks before their posting), and the community at large (who contribute to the creation of the fanon, as well as the on-going interpretation of the fanwork through comments, recs, and discussions.)

b. This terminology of “original” used in *astolat’s* post is problematic, but hardly uncommon. This word has been discussed by many academics since it seems to indicate that only the source is “original,” therefore making transformative works somehow lesser (Derecho 2006; Stasi 2006; Flegel & Roth 2014). Many fans have internalized this idea, thus believing themselves to be less than “true” creative workers. This is part of the reason why so many fans stick firmly to their gift economy. Some of them believe that their work doesn’t comply with society’s common legal definition of “originality” and so they don’t deserve to profit from it. However, there are also many fans (like those who created AO3) who think of fan works as transformative, and understand them differently in light of different traditions of creative production. For example, fanfiction can be understood not just as a form of literature, but as an archive, as Archontic, as palimpsest, as mythology, and as performance or drama (De Kosnik 2015; Derecho 2006; Stasi 2006; Sandvoss 2005; Hellekson & Busse 2014). What one has to realize about fanfiction is that it’s much more than the unwanted stepsister to “real” literature, as it is often portrayed in the mainstream media. It is part of a long-standing creative tradition, worthy of respect and legitimacy, especially when one realizes that the idea of being able to own a story is actually a relatively recent legal idea and not an indisputable ethical stance (Coppa 2014).

c. In addition to being a matter of ethics among fans, shying away from commercialization and other forms of mainstream legitimacy has long been fandom’s method of staying clear of corporate legal radar and the accompanying copyright issues. The OTW has made headway in various legal channels, working to place fanworks under the protection of fair use law (“Annual Report 2014”). However, AO3 is still, in many ways, on the fence about fanworks and profit. The OTW’s legal advocacy group works towards and believes in the legal and creative legitimacy of fanworks, while still delicately avoiding the issue that will inevitably eventually come up: if fanworks are legitimate, then shouldn’t fans be able to profit from them? Much of the OTW’s legal fair use argument comes from the standpoint that fanworks don’t detract from the “original” (note the implications of this word) work’s profitability, and that they in fact increase profits for the original copyright holders through free marketing and publicity. There is no easy answer to this legal conundrum, and the OTW’s uneasy position on the relationship between legitimacy and profitability displays the diversity of opinion and conflicting ideals in the fan community.

### III.A.2. Analysis of Name of Archive of Our Own

In 2007, *astolat* used the phrase “a central archive of our own,” to describe her dream of a fanfiction archive, and in 2009, this dream was realized. The name of AO3, “Archive of Our Own,” was inspired by Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” (“How Well do You Know AO3?”)

#### i. Space

AO3’s reference to the phrase a “Room of One’s Own” can be taken fairly literally, in that fans need a space of their own - server space in this case. Fans have been sidelined and mocked by mainstream culture for decades, and the creation of safe spaces for fans to gather and celebrate their fannishness is something that fans have been doing for just as long. Since media fandom was born in the 60s, fans have wanted to pass around slash zines and read each other’s Kirk/Spock fic. Fan gatherings like comic conventions and the like fulfilled the need for community in pre-Internet years, and online communities like LiveJournal and then Tumblr are modern day Internet equivalents. Now, instead of paper zines at comic cons and distributing fanworks through the mail, fans have sites like AO3. On AO3, fanworks can be archived safely and given to infinite numbers of fellow fans for consumption and reaction. And perhaps most importantly, fans can do this in their own, safe, online space.

On AO3, fans don’t have to compete for server or social space, like they might on websites aimed at fans in general. And unlike at comic cons or on more general fansites, AO3 is tailor-made for the fanfiction community in particular. Comic cons, while advertised as “the ultimate fan experience,” are a specific fan experience that is unquestionably gendered male. Comic cons in general focus on male-gendered fannish practices like the collecting of comics, they are fundamentally capitalist in their generally over-priced nature, they features endless rows of white male comic creators selling their wares with not a woman creator in sight, they sell “art” and materials depicting female comic and pop culture characters nearly pornographically, and thus encourage misogynistic interaction with women in general by showcasing a treatment of women as sex objects, with phrases like “ah, she’s still fine but she used to be hotter” in reference to aging female sci-fi stars and seemingly professional photographers calling out “hey, just trying to get a picture of the hot chicks” around female cosplayers being commonplace.

On AO3, fans don’t have to feel like the unwanted little sister of their male fan counterparts, like they have often been made to feel at comic conventions. Archive of Our Own is the fanfic community’s room of their own.

#### ii. Profit, Legitimacy, and Morality

De Kosnik (2009) notes that Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” advocated that women writing fiction deserved to earn the means to support themselves from their labor. Thus, Woolf’s “room” is supposed to be paid for by the profits earned by women’s writing. However, the Archive inspired by her words is a non-profit that unambiguously supports the perpetuation of fan’s gift economy. This indicates some disparity, perhaps even hypocrisy, between the ideals of the work inspiring the site’s name and the site’s stated goals.

But, this careful treading of the line between the competing desires to gift and sell fic is what makes AO3 so representative of the fan community. Fans have a plethora of views on the concept of commercializing fanfic. However, both the fans who want to protect the gift economy and those who want to move into the commercial economy are similar in that they both want to legitimize the work fans do. Those in favor of commercialization believe that if fanfic is legitimate, then it should make money, while firm supporters of the gift economy advocate that commercial value isn't the only form of legitimacy. The OTW works to make fanworks legally and culturally legitimate while not making an explicit statement about whether or not this legitimacy should or needs to imply a commercial aspect.

Part of this question of legitimacy is the question of morality. The OTW works to show that the creation and distribution of free fanworks is not immoral, and it is not a threat to the commercial copyright holders who threaten fan creators with legal action. There is actually a certain amount of irony to these threats by corporations, when they are what encourage the practice of pulling to publish, which thus erases the very credit-giving tradition that makes fanfiction such a moral endeavor. Fans have a long standing tradition of giving credit where credit is due; whether this is to the author of the work that she's recommending, to the betas who read her work, or to the community at large for their support and inspiration - because fanfiction is "an ethical practice" (Derecho 2006). The writing of fanfic can be a form of resistance to the oppressing mainstream, an avenue for the silenced voices of women and those of less-accepted gender and sexual identities, and a distinctly non-commercial endeavor that struggles for legitimacy outside of the crush of capitalism. However, the idea of fans profiting from their fanworks, rather than merely sharing them among fans, makes the legal issues a bit more complicated. But corporation's threats of legal action only prompt the morally questionable (by society's and by fandom's standards) behavior of pulling fanfiction to publish.

So, returning to the OTW/AO3 and the gift economy: they clearly support a non-commercial world of fanfic, but if their legal advocacy continues to make progress in the direction of legal legitimacy (and the general morality) of fan transformative works, then the profitability of fanwork seems to be the logical next step. Whether or not OTW advocacy will take that step remains to be seen. Some scholars (Flegel & Roth 2014) have wondered whether the OTW's support of the gift economy is a noble defense of female-dominated structures of exchange and community, or merely a shield from corporate attack and a way, however unintentional, to keep women in an un-paid ghetto of "labors of love." It seems likely that it is some combination of these ideas, since the fans who have contributed to the site's success no doubt are on both sides of the argument, as well as all the places in between.

But no matter what exactly the reasons are behind the perpetuation of the gift culture in AO3's structure, it has proven to be effective, at least for the time being. It has been a huge success with fans (evidenced by its positive reputation and exploding usage) and has even been given kudos by mainstream media for having an intelligent, understandable interface and search function ("Annual Report 2014"; Grossman 2013). And, its non-commercial nature has kept it out of the hands of male-dominated corporations and the traditions and histories of discrimination that come with them. It provides a place where young fans can be initiated into the fannish gift culture and gain an understanding of the female history and traditions of fanfiction writers and readers. It preserves many

fan traditions and communities, while also creating new ones. In this manner, AO3 functions as an archive: preserving not only fannish traditions, but a wealth of fanworks complete with context.



### III.A.3. AO3 as an Archive

AO3 functions largely, as the name would suggest, as an archive – a place for fanworks to be safely and sanely stored and organized. One specific way AO3 works as an archive is through its option for fans to create collections of fanworks. AO3 also fulfills two important functions for any archive: preservation of materials (the fics themselves) and context (from the fanon to community reactions to related fics.)

#### i. Fan-made Collections

##### *a. Organization and Context*

Fanworks have meaning outside of their own text, thus, AO3 offers options to house fic in a manner that keeps the wider meaning it gains from community and context intact. One way it does that is through collections. A collection is a group of related fanworks listed together under the name of the collection. These can be created by any AO3 user, by clicking “browse” then “collections” then “new collection,” at which time the user will be asked to offer some information about the collection, like a title, fandom, introductory paragraph for those visiting it, etc. Some examples of collections are “Daredevil AUs<sup>4</sup>” or “Destiel kinkmeme<sup>5</sup>.” In addition to simply serving as a place to gather related fics, AO3 also offers the option when creating a collection to format it specifically as a collection for a gift exchange or a prompt meme challenge, two forms of long-standing fannish fic-writing events, in which fans write specific fics for each other in the form of an exchange or as a gift to the larger community. Thus, AO3 provides the structure for organizing the logistics of these fan events, as well as a place to house the results. This feature is better, easier to use, and longer lasting than, say trying to tag related fics on a site like Tumblr that isn’t devoted to fic. Once again, AO3 is answering a call within the fan community for a place to not merely store their works, but for them to be organized in a rational way that can increase their meaning by their relation to other works. These collections not only help organize fic within its fannish context, but also create and support community, serve in the initiation of new fans to fandom, and function as part of the fannish gift economy.

##### *b. Community*

These collections can be formed around a community, or even create a community, of fans with similar interests. Making, maintaining, or even just participating in a collection can be a challenging and time-consuming effort, especially if one is new to fandom. AO3’s FAQ on collections and challenges is fairly dense and wordy, complex enough to merit an additional tutorial section on how to participate in collections. The complexity of AO3’s instructions for collections (as well as the general functioning of the site) serves to construct the community by excluding those who don’t have the patience, intellect, and/or determination to wade through long instructions, complete many steps, and fill out forms to participate in these collections, and their related communities. These instructions also serve as literal

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<sup>4</sup> *Daredevil* is a Netflix original series about the Marvel superhero Daredevil. An AU is an alternate universe (see glossary).

<sup>5</sup> Destiel is the portmanteau for the Dean and Castiel ship from the television show *Supernatural*. A kinkmeme is short hand for a place where people post ideas for fic they want to read, and discuss and comment and fulfill these ideas.

tutorials for how-to-fan. So, AO3's collections can serve as a form of initiation into, as well as construction of, a fannish community.

### *c. Gift Economy*

These collections are very explicitly part of the gift economy, as the formation of these collections often involves formalized exchanges of fic, which are referred to as "gifts." The mechanics of giving, receiving, and reciprocating are all incorporated into the functioning of collections, especially the specific form of collection "the gift exchange." It supplies the method of uploading fic (to give), the option to gift the work to a specific person or persons (to receive), and gives fellow authors the opportunity to gift their own fic in return for the fic they received (to reciprocate). AO3 provides a structure for these options to occur, allowing the fannish gift economy to operate easily and effectively.

## ii. Archival Function

De Kosnik (2015) says "[a]ny work of fanfiction, no matter how splendidly written or laden with scandalous content, can only ever be properly understood as one of a vast archive" (125). Archive of Our Own is primarily, fundamentally (and obviously) an archive. Of the ways of understanding fanfiction previously presented in the literature review, "fanfiction as archive" is the most pertinent to the present discussion of AO3.

### *a. Archive function: Preservation*

One of the primary functions of any archive is to preserve material. AO3 is no different, with a desire to preserve and protect fannish history stated in their declaration of mission, values, and vision. Some of the ways AO3 fulfills this task is by 1) offering the option of "orphaning" fics, 2) keeping copies of comments, and 3) by housing at-risk fan archives brought in by the Open Doors Project.

#### 1. Orphaning

Archive of Our Own is constantly changing and growing with new additions. However, one of the downsides of each new work adding to the meaning and context of all the other works is that the removal of a work can then have a disproportionately negative affect. When an archive loses a work, it is not merely the single piece of writing that is lost, but a piece of the context it constituted. The fic is removed from bookmark and rec lists, from any collections it was a part of, and can even be lost to the fanon as the memory of the work fades in its absence. In order to combat this, AO3 offers users the option to "orphan" their works as an alternative to deleting them, thus helping to preserve the archive's integrity ("Archive FAQ: Orphaning"). When an author orphans her work(s), then her username and all other identifying data are wiped from the fic, and the fic is attributed to the "orphan\_account." Thus, if an author wants to separate herself from her fic for whatever reason, the archive need not lose her additions to the archive. The archive and all links to and bookmarks of the fic remain intact, while the fan author is allowed to clean house on her Internet persona.

#### 2. Comments

It is said that nothing can ever truly be deleted from the Internet, but that does not mean that everything is permanently or well archived. Fans have often wished that they could see the fics they've commented on in the past, but perhaps didn't bookmark or otherwise save. AO3 provides the option for users to turn on copies of their comments, so they can keep track of the comments they've made, and find the fics they've commented on. This relates to how AO3 is working to provide a comprehensive fan space, a true archive, and fulfill longstanding fan wishes. Before AO3, these works would have been nearly impossible to find since fics were scattered across the Internet on different archives of varying searchability. Now, however, with AO3 as an archive, fans can reliably find fics they read and enjoyed in the past. Thus, AO3 serves its function as an archive in the sense of a place of safe-keeping for fan history.

### 3. At-Risk Archives and Open Doors

The AO3 feature of "collections" is not only a place for fans to store new collections of fanworks, but it is also where imported archives live.

The Open Doors project rescues fanfiction archives that are in danger of disappearing from the Internet, and brings them into Archive of Our Own. For example, the *Smallville*<sup>6</sup> Slash Archive once existed as its own site, but the site operators could no longer keep it up, and so it was brought into AO3 as part of the Open Doors project. Open Doors has "several subprojects and rescue efforts aimed at archiving and preserving different kinds of fanworks and artifacts of fan culture" ("Open Doors"). This effort to save fanworks, while admirable, does raise the worry: "Why are you importing archives onto the Archive of Our Own? Why not just save the entire archive and host it on the OTW's servers?" ("Frequently Asked Questions...").

The OTW responds: "Preserving fannish history is a central part of our mission – we love the plurality of fandom and want there to be many individual archives, and we want to ensure that if someone can no longer maintain an archive, this bit of fandom isn't lost. We'd love to be able to preserve the archives themselves, but the resources required are too big... By importing archives onto the AO3 but making them into distinct collections, we are able to save the wonderful fannish creativity and a little of that individual identity, while ensuring we only have to support one set of code, one lot of servers, and one support team."

The context, the ephemera of fic (the original formatting of the fic posting, the place it was posted, the state of the fanon when it was posted, the current status of the fan who posted it, the content/style of the previous fic that author had written, comments and reviews written by readers when it was posted, the rec lists it was included on, etc.) matters, and how the works are archived changes the way they are consumed (Lothian 2013). The OTW and AO3 do not ignore the problems that come with removing works from their original archival context, but address them, and choose the lesser evil between losing

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<sup>6</sup> *Smallville* is a popular sci-fi television show from the early 2000s depicting the life of Clark Kent (AKA Superman) as a teenager in his Kansas hometown, Smallville. The primary dynamic of the show was between Clark Kent and his best friend (and later, worst enemy) Lex Luthor, and this relationship spawned an outpouring of slash fic for the decade that the show was on.

the archival context and losing the content of that archive. AO3 has realized that archiving creates a “traceable history to claim with pride and a future to look forward to” (Lothian 2013, 547).

### *b. Archive Function: Context*

Fanfiction is more than just one piece of writing, and so a single work of fic’s complete, rich meaning can’t be understood without its context and community. This added meaning can come from additions by the author, additions by and the context of the fan community, the context of the site itself, and the context of the fanon. AO3’s structure encourages the preservation and creation of this context.

#### 1. Author

The fan herself can enlarge the scope of her fic, for example, by making a fic part of a series. These series could include the addition of a prequel or sequel(s) to the fanwork, or a second version of the story told from the perspective of a different character. Series offer fans the option to create and add to their own fictional world in an effective, organized manner, within fandom’s larger universe.

#### 2. Community

The larger community can add to a work’s meaning. For example, there are the comments on the fic, which can themselves become part of the joy of reading a fic. In the comments, other fans can explore the ideas of the fic further, be pointed towards elements of the fic they missed on their first read, and discuss with the author her inspiration and feelings about the fic. If a fanfic strikes a chord with another fan author, then she may even be inspired to continue writing in this particular fan-incarnation of a world, and gift the original author with what is essentially fic of a fic.

#### 3. Site

The structure of AO3, from the search engine to its header format, gives the stories it holds meaning outside of their own text. The tags, pairings, warnings, etc.<sup>7</sup> on a fic aren’t merely used to judge and choose a story, but to help give the reader ideas of what to expect, and thus increase understanding and pleasure with the story. Reading the tag “coffee shop AU” can give the reader certain expectations about what the story will contain, which can then be met or subverted in fascinating ways, adding depths of layer to the story. For example, a story tagged as a coffee shop AU can lead into a short, funny, sexy romp or a 300,000 word exploration of a character’s mental health and sexuality (or, sometimes, a mix of both).

#### 4. Fanon

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<sup>7</sup> These are all components of an AO3 fic header, the space before the text of a fic that includes identifying information about the content. Tags include information about the content; the pairing indicates what the central relationship of the story is, if there is one; and warnings alert the reader to the maturity level of the content in regards to sex and violence. All of these will be discussed in-depth in the later section III.A.5. Analysis of a Fic Header

Derecho (2006) argues that “every addition to an archive alters the entire archive” (70). In a fannish context, this can relate to the idea of fanon<sup>8</sup>. Every new piece of fic adds to and changes slightly the collective understanding of a fictional universe and characters which inspires the fanon, by offering new details and themes and readings of the source text. For example, at some point in the history of Destiel<sup>9</sup> fanfic, an author wrote a story in which Dean was attracted to Castiel’s wings, and thus was born the idea of a “Wingfic,” in which Castiel’s wings are of aesthetic/romantic/sexual importance in the fic. This first story (whatever it was) then affected all future Destiel stories afterwards: it most likely defined or at least contributed to a unified description of the appearance of Castiel’s wings in fic (usually as huge and black, a description only partially supported by the show), how they are connected and function in relation to his body (information not at all mentioned in that show, but fairly consistently described in fic), and more generally influenced the writing of Destiel fic in that if one includes mentions of wings, the reader usually has some idea of the norms of Wingfic and thus expectations to be met. So, each new addition can affect the fanon, and therefore the future writing and reading of fic. AO3 understands this, as evidenced by their tagging system in which frequently used tags, often relating to common fanon concepts, can become canonized into the system, and added to the archive. For instance, the previously mentioned “Wingfic” is a canonized tag with over 600 results in the *Supernatural* fandom listing.

The orphaning option, comment copies, and Open Doors initiative are some of the ways in which AO3 has made serious progress in the preservation of fanworks and history. They also have worked to preserve the context of old fanworks as completely as possible, and encourage a rich, healthy environment for the creation of new ones. AO3’s success comes from its embrace of the archival nature of fic, as well as fandom’s gendered community and gift culture. AO3’s gift culture is a viable alternative to the unfriendly-to-fic environment of traditional publishing.

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<sup>8</sup> See glossary

<sup>9</sup> Mega-popular pairing of the characters Dean and Castiel from the TV show *Supernatural*

### III.A.4. AO3 “Publishing” vs. Traditional Publishing

Fanfic is structurally (as well as socially) different than professional (original) fiction, and as such, requires a different place and manner for distribution – AO3 provides this service. From reasons like the copyright issues surrounding attempts to share fic (even non-commercially), to the fast, continuous manner of fic updating, to fic’s socially resistant content, fanfic is virtually unmarketable in today’s legal and commercial system. However, AO3 fulfills the need that arises from this unmarketability, by providing an outlet for distribution, and encouraging a fan culture that values fic for its creative, not monetary, value.

Here is a quick overview of some of the major differences between fan and professional fiction:

Fanfiction	Professional Fiction
Archive	Market
Gift Culture	Commercial
Fannish Culture	Professional Culture
Posted	Published
Transformative	Mainstream Legitimacy
Near-complete Creative Freedom	Commercial and Professional Restrictions
Legal (Copyright) Issues	Legally Protected
Collaborative	Individualistic
Fast, efficient distribution and updating	Lengthy, long-term distribution and creation
Largely Internet-based	Largely Paper-based
(Often) Socially Resistant	(Often) Socially Conservative

#### i. “Publishing”

Posting or “publishing” to AO3 is an entirely different process and experience than traditional publishing is. Merriam-Webster defines publishing as “the business of producing books, magazines, etc., to sell to the public.” Here, the most obvious difference between traditional publishing and AO3 “publishing” is the commercial nature. Publishing, as an idea, is based on *selling* the work in question. AO3 is a non-profit, with explicitly non-commercial ideals, thus, the term “publishing” is not well-suited to this context. “Posting” works better, since it implies that the work is *placed* into AO3’s forum, not prepared for sale by AO3. The functioning of AO3 assists in and encourages quality in the works hosted on the site, but it does not directly interfere with their production, and it especially does not try and profit off of them.

The distinctions between fannish methods of productions and corporate ones are important, not just as an academic exercise, but to fans as well. Fans purposefully use non-professional language to differentiate themselves and their modes of creation from commercial ones. They use “betas” not editors, they “post” they don’t publish, and they tend to call themselves “writers” not authors. While

the word author is not inaccurate when describing fanfiction creators, fans tend to favor the less formal, less professional connotations of the word “writer.”

Fans and their often purposeful decision to avoid commercialization and professional structures makes a statement that legitimacy doesn't just come from profit and mainstream acknowledgement. To think that fans' avoidance of commerciality is just motivated by legal fears assumes that fans *want* to go commercial at all. A great many fans simply wish to be left in peace with their works and community, and others would rail against the assumption that one must be paid to have creative legitimacy. Other fans are afraid of how corporate interests could impinge on the quality of their fanworks with a capitalist system of deadlines, budgets, and censorship of the fannish freedom to pursue any and all creative avenues. Fans have found support and acceptance within their fannish gift economy and community, and created sites like AO3 through purely fannish effort, proving that fans can protect their fannish traditions, history, and integrity outside of capitalist systems.

Fanfiction is fundamentally, structurally different from “professional” fiction. AO3 acknowledges, respects, and celebrates these differences, and this is integral to its success as a website and a fannish endeavor. Though fanfic in general sometimes suffers from similar biases as traditional publishing does (for example, bias against shorter stories for their supposed lack of merit) it still provides a forum for diverse works to be posted and appreciated for the art that they are.

Overall legal issues make fanfic unmarketable, and the nature of fanfic (collaborative, quickly and infinitely updateable, and socially resistant) makes it structurally incompatible with traditional publishing besides.

## ii. Unmarketable & Structurally Incompatible

### *a. Legal Issues: Copyright*

Much of fanfiction is virtually unmarketable because of copyright issues. Fanfiction is, at the moment, treading an uneasy line between arguments of violating intellectual property and copyright laws on the one hand, and being protected under Fair Use on the other. These issues are clearly going to take a great deal of time and legal fees to be cleared up, and thus, the easiest route to publication of fanfiction currently is filing the serial numbers off<sup>10</sup>. When a piece of fanfiction is thus stripped of all identifying markers of the copyrighted material that inspired it, it becomes (legally speaking) an original work that can be published professionally. However, this also strips the work of all its intertextuality and depth of meaning, removing it from its fannish context and all the significance thus given to it, consequently reducing its value to the fan community and as a creative work.

For example, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is an erotic romance novel published under the pseudonym E.L. James, which was originally a piece of *Twilight* fanfiction called “Master of the Universe” (Jamison 2013). *Fifty Shades* sold more than 100 million copies, earning it a place among other bestselling series such as *Harry Potter* and, somewhat ironically, *Twilight* (Boseman 2014). James filed off the serial numbers of her fic,

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<sup>10</sup> Removing references to copyrighted material in order to sell the fic (See glossary)

removing virtually all references to the *Twilight* fictional world, thus converting it into “original” fiction that could be sold. However, this practice “depletes the fan text of its narrative force” leaving it “meaningless, a set of seemingly empty signifiers” (De Kosnik 2015, 123).

One type of fanfiction that would be a legal nightmare to try and publish professionally is the cross-over fic. Fanfic allows authors to blend fictional universes and mix and match different characters, exploring the creative possibilities of what may happen if, say Sherlock Holmes met Captain Kirk, or Frodo went to Hogwarts. These cross-overs can be great fun for both the writer and reader, and are part of what makes fanfic special as a genre of creative work. However, selling such fic would likely involve at least two corporate entities agreeing to work together to publish and market the work. Considering that no clear legal path has yet been laid down for fanfic of just one copyrighted universe to be published professionally, successfully selling the idea of a work using characters and settings from multiple copyrighted universes seems highly improbable.

#### *b. Legal Issues: Collaborative*

The communal nature of fic poses additional legal problems. Fic collaboration is manifested on both sides of the work; not only does it take a community of readers to mold the creation of a fic, sometimes it takes more than one author to bring it to life. Some fan authors work together to create a fic, with different people writing the POV of different characters, or alternating chapters, or contributing to different aspects of the fic like dialogue or plot. So, fics can be multi-authored, in which case the writing of fanfiction serves directly as a builder of community.

Similarly, fic is often accompanied by a variety of works inspired by the fic, created by fellow fans, and easily added to the original post to enrich the experience of the fic. These works could include fanart inspired by the fic, a “podfic” (an audio-book-like recording of the fic), a translation of the fic, or even a playlist inspired by the work that the reader can listen to while reading to set the mood. This sort of collaborative effort is, while certainly not unique to fic, marked in fan fiction communities by the explicit acknowledgement of the group effort. While an average professionally published novel will have involved the work of a good many people, it is usually only the author’s name found on the cover. As discussed earlier, giving credit is part of fan culture, and the openly communal nature of fic is something that doesn’t mesh well with the individualistic ideology of corporate publishing.

This clash of corporate/fan methods of production can be seen in the publishing of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. That novel was published under the name of one author, E.L. James, thus portraying it as the work of a single creative individual. It ignored the significant emotional and creative support of the fan community that went into the creation of the original fic, like the comments and reviews that helped shape each new chapter of the on-going fic and inspire the writer to keep creating. Additionally, pulling fic to publish also means that, for legal reasons, the original fic must be deleted from all the places it was posted on the Internet before it can be professionally published. Thus, when E.L. James pulled her fic to be published, the fan community lost a part of its archive. (Jones, 2014.)

#### *c. Speed and Updating*



Another aspect of fic which makes it incompatible with traditional publishing is the speed with which it is produced, disseminated, and updated. No traditional publishing house could contend with the nearly instant updating power offered by sites like AO3, where editing or adding to a work can be done at the touch of a button, with that work's subscribers notified via email immediately. The fast-paced nature of fanfic production is something sometimes derided as superficial by "real" authors, but in the context of fandom it is a positive not a negative. While your average fan of a series of professionally published novels may have to wait months or years for the next book in the series to arrive, a fanfic reader might have to wait mere days or hours for a new chapter to be posted.

This does entail some issues with quality; after all, a book edited over the course of months by a team of professionals will be held to very different standards than a 3000 word chapter update, at best edited by a beta or two. However, while professional authors may devote more time to one work than a fan author, they are also bound to the schedule of their publisher. If they have a deadline, they generally have to meet it, whether or not they feel their work is ready. And once that work is published, it is complete – the author can't update it later. Fanfiction doesn't suffer from these constraints. If the author isn't ready to post her work, she doesn't have to. If the author doesn't think her fic is quite turning out right, she can post it anyway, and ask for the help and feedback of the community to fix any errors and help guide the progression of the plot and character development. Thus, fanfiction is forever a work in progress of the author and the audience.

#### *d. Resistant*

The last point I'll make on the incompatibility of fanfiction and traditional publishing structures is the socially resistant nature of so much of fic. As previously stated, the majority of fanfiction on AO3 depicts male homosexual relationships, and a decent amount of fic contains explicit sexual content (though neither is a completely defining characteristic of the genre.) Although it seems the old adage "sex sells" has proven valid in light of the recent *Fifty Shades of Grey* success story, rife with very graphic sex and BDSM themes, it may have been a different tale if the explicit sex didn't involve a heterosexual couple. Heterosexual or "het" fic is far less common than homosexual or "slash" fic, which is one of the (many) elements differentiating it from the commercial book genre of Romance, which fic is sometimes compared to. Explicit sex and relationship stories *have* found their place in professional publishing in the genre of Romance, but they are still often considered by the mainstream to be trashy, "chick" novels, devoid of any meaningful content. Many who have read both romance novels and fanfic would not disagree with this assessment – a lot of professionally published romance novels can't hold a candle to the quality of romantic fanfic (Days 2013a). Fanfic, not being constrained by corporate pressures and rules, can explore and involve much more than commercial romance novels can. Fanfic can be as long or short and as heavy or light on plot as the story demands, it can take place in any conceivable setting (from the old West to a spaceship in the future to underwater in a kingdom of mermaids,) it can feature characters with non-mainstream gender and sexual identities (like demisexual, pansexual, or asexual), and it can explore sensitive political and social issues freely.

#### iii. Example: Crack Fic

A perfect example of a work that would never, and perhaps *could* never, be produced in a capitalist corporate scheme is the “crack” fic. In fannish vocabulary, “crack” implies a fanwork that is purposefully silly, and often nonsensical, especially if the audience isn’t intimately familiar with the shows, movies, books, and/or fan cultures that the work is based in. A crack fic can combine different elements from various fictional universes, or remain in merely one universe but entirely ignore the constraints of canon and/or fanon for humorous purposes.

A crack fic is incompatible with traditional publishing because it usually employs content from a variety of copyrighted sources, and it’s unmarketable because no corporation would concede to their copyrighted characters being portrayed in such a farcical manner with such bizarre and often inappropriate content.

The purpose of crack fics in general is to make the reader laugh. These fics aren’t usually written with the aim of garnering a large audience in the way that professional fiction tries to market itself so as to maximize profits. In fact, crack fics are usually written for a smaller, more specific audience than the already niche audience of fandom. They’re sometimes just written for a particular, personal gathering of fans and friends. They aren’t written to be taken seriously, and usually contain content that would horrify rather than interest corporations. They can be highly sexual and bizarre, and they are often borderline nonsensical outside of their very specific fannish and contemporary settings (sometimes including recent Internet memes, or referencing current events in fandom). These fics can cross into so many fictional universes that the rights could never be acquired by one publisher and like a Venn diagram, crossovers become interesting usually only to those who have an interest in all or most of the referenced fictional worlds, thus decreasing the work’s audience size and marketability.

But, these fics serve their purpose in their fannish setting: they amuse the community and spark some conversations as well as laughter. Their function as gifts works to cement social ties, and their humorous nature makes them especially adept at this task. Crack fics are a distinctive form of creative work, easily crossing over into other universes and allowing for outrageous creativity as boundaries of taste and convention are stretched. By fandom and fan gift culture standards, crack works are often resounding successes, because they effectively tie the community or group of friends together. By commercial standards, however, crack fic and the like is a disaster, often not generating many views, and appealing only to a very small and often incredibly specific audience. Thus, many of the elements that make fic great for the community and as an art form make it bad for marketing.

#### iv. Conclusion

Fanfiction’s ability to make use of an entire community’s collaborative creativity, update quickly and efficiently, and push the sociocultural envelope, are all important, definitive aspects of the genre. These elements also mean that when fanfiction is forced into the corporate mold, it tends to lose a lot of what makes it special as a category of creative work. Thus, defining fic’s quality by using the standards of “professional” published writing is a mistake to begin with. Within the fannish gift culture, the wild, tangential, crossover crack fic can have equal value to the novel-length, intellectual, allegory-filled work of seemingly more “literary” value.

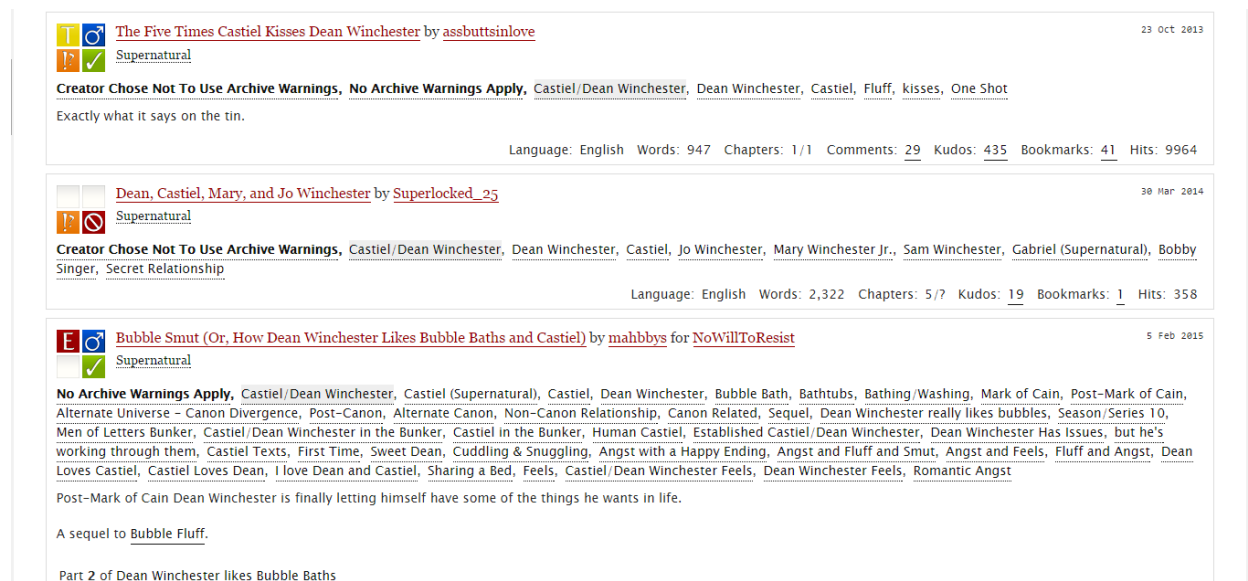
To understand how AO3 structurally reflects fannish history and traditions, including the gendered nature of the community and the continuing prevalence of the gift culture, we will embark on an analysis of the functioning of AO3, beginning with an examination of an AO3 fic header.

### III.A.5. Analysis of an AO3 Fic Header

This section provides a roadmap of browsing for and selecting an average piece of fanfiction posted to AO3, with special emphasis on analyzing an AO3 fic header. I will move through this process following the path of a “typical” (I use quotes to emphasize that there is no truly typical reader, every reader of fanfic will use the site differently, depending on their level of interest, age, personal/technological/fannish history, etc.) user of AO3. I will use the terms “user”, “fan”, and “reader” interchangeably to refer to this person using the site. Throughout my analysis of the symbols used to indicate key info about the fic, the items before the fic header, the header itself, and the items that follow the header, I will incorporate a discussion of the three distinguishing elements of fandom that I identified earlier: gender, community, and most importantly, the gift culture.

#### i. Symbols at a Glance

Figure #1 shows the search results for works matching the terms “Castiel/Dean Winchester,” a slash ship from the very popular *Supernatural* fandom, and one of the most written about pairings on AO3 (with some close seconds being the *Sherlock* fandom’s Sherlock Holmes/John Watson and *Teen Wolf*’s Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski.)



The screenshot displays three search results for the query 'Castiel/Dean Winchester' on Archive of Our Own (AO3). Each result includes a title, author, date, and a set of four square symbols (a 'T' in a blue square, a 'C' in a blue square, a 'P' in a green square, and a 'V' in a green square) indicating the work's status regarding archive warnings. The first result is 'The Five Times Castiel Kisses Dean Winchester' by assbuttsinlove, dated 23 Oct 2013, with 9964 hits. The second is 'Dean, Castiel, Mary, and Jo Winchester' by Superlocked\_25, dated 30 Mar 2014, with 358 hits. The third is 'Bubble Smut (Or, How Dean Winchester Likes Bubble Baths and Castiel)' by mahbys, dated 5 Feb 2015, with 358 hits. The third result also includes a detailed list of tags and a note that it is a sequel to 'Bubble Fluff'.

#### Search results

([http://archiveofourown.org/works/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&work\\_search%5Bquery%5D=castiel%2Fdean+winchester](http://archiveofourown.org/works/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&work_search%5Bquery%5D=castiel%2Fdean+winchester))

When searching for or browsing through fic, each work has a set of four square symbols next to the fic’s title and author.








## The Five Times Castiel Kisses Dean Winchester by assbuttsinlove Supernatural

These symbols convey key information about each fic. This information is also found in the fic header (discussed next) in text rather than symbols. These four symbols indicate the Content Rating, Content Warning(s), Relationships, and Completed/Not.

### *a. Content Rating*

The five Content Ratings are:

#### **Content rating**

	General Audiences
	Teen And Up Audiences
	Mature
	Explicit: only suitable for adults
	The work was not given any rating


(archiveofourown.org)


These ratings are analogous to movie or TV ratings, from G to NC-17, approximately. AO3 also offers the author the choice to not give the work a rating. This offering of ratings relates to two fannish ideals that the creators of AO3 worked to include in its functioning: safety and control. The inclusion of content ratings makes this a safe fannish space where, with some reasonable caution, fans of all ages and tastes can browse in relative comfort. But, having the option to not include a rating means that creative control still rests in the hands of the fan writer and insures that AO3 remains an environment free of censorship. Similar choices were made for the inclusion of content warnings, discussed next.


### *b. Content Warnings*


There are four types of Content Warnings:

## Content warnings

 The author chose not to warn for content, or Archive Warnings *could* apply, but the author has chosen not to specify them.

 At least one of these warnings applies: graphic depictions of violence, major character death, rape/non-con, underage sex. The specific warnings are shown in the Archive Warnings tags.

 The work was not marked with any Archive Warnings. Please note that an author may have included other information about their work in the Additional Tags (Genre, Warnings, Other Information) section.

 This is an external work; please consult the work itself for warnings.

(archiveofourown.org)

This careful inclusion of content warnings and ratings but distinct avoidance of censorship is purposeful on the part of AO3. It respects the fanfiction tradition of advising fans about the work's content, a tradition which relates to gender and caring for social ties in the community, while not violating fandom's creative license.

Gift cultures have a history of being gendered female, because their purpose tends not to be monetary gain, but rather the fostering of community and relationships, as well as the increase of social status. Thus, a fan places warnings on her works as a sign of respect and care for the wishes of her fellow fans. AO3 takes some of the most commonly sensitive issues that come up in fanfic, like graphic depictions of violence and major character death, and makes them into overarching content warnings, so that a reader can avoid these fics at a glance. It is important to note, however, in the spirit of AO3's open, anti-censorship nature, that fic authors aren't *forced* to note which of the archive warnings may apply. If they want it to remain a secret, perhaps for the sake of the plot, they can choose to not warn for content. A common example is choosing not to specifically warn readers about major character death, since that could ruin the drama of the story. Thus, the reader is fairly warned that "Archive Warnings *could* apply" and so there may be triggering or otherwise unpleasant content in the fic, but creative freedom is still left in the hands of the authors.

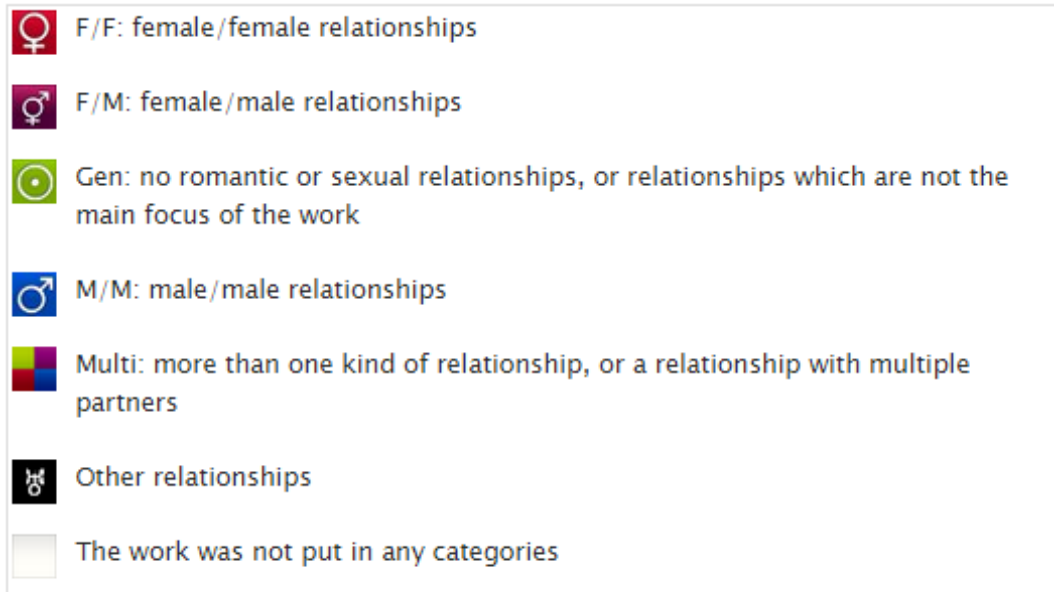
The fact that AO3 doesn't censor but warns about content allows them to maintain a site that balances the safety of the community with creative freedom. Other sites such as FanFiction.net have moved to censor certain types of content, like adult stories – not a popular move among many in the fanfiction community. These sites' censorship perpetuates a sense of fan-shame about the content of fan writing. AO3's distinct lack of censorship works to alleviate fan-shame and help fans see their fanfic as creative works deserving of respect, not disgrace. Thus, this creative freedom also relates to AO3's mission to

advocate for the legitimacy of fanworks, because fandom must perceive its works as legitimate (not shameful) in order for mainstream and legal communities to see them as such.

c. *Relationships, pairings, orientations*

The third symbol of the four informs the reader about the relationships, pairings, and/or orientations that the fic contains.

### Relationships, pairings, orientations



A legend for relationship symbols on AO3. It consists of seven entries, each with a colored square icon containing a symbol and a text description to its right. The entries are: 1. A red square with a white female symbol (♀) for 'F/F: female/female relationships'. 2. A purple square with a white female symbol (♀) and a white male symbol (♂) for 'F/M: female/male relationships'. 3. A green square with a white circle and a dot in the center for 'Gen: no romantic or sexual relationships, or relationships which are not the main focus of the work'. 4. A blue square with a white male symbol (♂) for 'M/M: male/male relationships'. 5. A square divided into four colored quadrants (green, red, blue, yellow) for 'Multi: more than one kind of relationship, or a relationship with multiple partners'. 6. A black square with a white symbol that looks like a combination of male and female symbols for 'Other relationships'. 7. A white square for 'The work was not put in any categories'.

(archiveofourown.org)

The most common relationship type on AO3 is overwhelmingly M/M (*destinationtoast* 2013). According to one fan-statistician’s findings in 2013, 42.6% of the relationships listed in AO3 works were M/M, with Gen coming in second at 21.3%, then F/M at 15.4%, with No relationship at 3.8%, beating out F/F with a mere 3.5%. Slash is such an influential majority that when one uses the word “fanfiction” in fannish circles, it is often assumed to be in reference to slash fic in particular (*porluciernagas* 2013).

Scholars have posed a variety of theories to explain the popularity of slash fiction (Hellekson & Busse 2014; De Kosnik 2015). In the end, different fans read and write slash for different reasons. Studies have shown that women write slash because it allows them to escape the trappings of femininity, work against the patriarchy and the mainstream, and imagine a world without the oppressive power structures that exist inherently in heterosexual romantic relationships. However, there are those who offer less generous hypotheses about the prevalence of slash in fanfiction. Prokopetz, a fan, blogged about how many “analyses propose that the overwhelming predominance of male/male ships over female/female and female/male ships in fandom reflects an unhealthy fetishisation of male homosexuality and a deep-seated self-hatred on the part of women in fandom. While it’s true that many

fandoms certainly have issues gender-wise, that sort of analysis willfully overlooks a rather more obvious culprit” (Prokopetz 2015).




That culprit is the significant gender imbalance in popular media. Smith (2012) notes that “[f]emale characters are still sidelined, stereotyped and sexualized in popular entertainment content...Females are not only missing from popular media, when they are on screen, they seem to be there merely for decoration...” Thus, the fact the fans choose to slash male characters is, in part, merely a logical statistical outcome. Since the majority of characters are male, specifically, the majority of speaking, interesting, well-explored, fleshed-out, characters worthy of further interest are male, then it makes sense that a majority of ships are about male characters.

Fan Prokopetz makes a fascinating point about the negativity female shippers of male/male ships face from both in and outside the fan fiction community: “we have to ask ourselves: are we criticising women in fandom - and let’s be honest here, this type of criticism is almost exclusively directed at women - for **creating** a representation problem, or are we merely criticising them for failing to correct an existing one?” (Prokopetz 2015).

#### *d. Completed/Not*

The last of the four symbols answers the question:

#### **Is the work finished or the prompt fulfilled?**

	This is a work in progress or is incomplete/unfulfilled.
	This work is completed!/This prompt is filled!
	This work's status is unknown.

(archiveofourown.org)

Since fic is posted freely, there is always the possibility that it may be left unfinished, if not forever than certainly for a while. Thus, noting prominently the state of a fic’s completion can spare the readers from the common fan-pain of reading the beginning of a wonderful fic only to then see that it was posted two years ago and hasn’t been updated since.

This is a key difference between professional and fan fiction: while many professional writers keep writing in order to make a living, fan writers have no monetary incentive to keep writing. So, there are a significant number of abandoned fics, the end of which no one will ever know. But, there are also an abundance of fics that authors continue to update for non-commercial purposes: a need to “fix” the canon (i.e. as a cathartic practice to reduce annoyance with the way the plot/characterization etc. was



dealt with in the canon), to please the fans of their fan-writing or out of a sense of obligation to those fans, to feel they are contributing to fandom's economy, and/or to fulfill a personal creative need (DeKosnik 2012; Hellekson 2009; Morehouse 2013, *relucant* 2014). Many fans consider this to be one of the great strengths of the genre: it's written out of love, not economic imperative. In fact, fans spend a great deal of time on the creation of fanworks, time that theoretically could have been spent earning money.

Fans don't see this lack of monetary incentives as a handicap to creativity (DeKosnik 2012). Fans often feel that fanworks even surpass the quality of the source material (whether that be fanfic that outshines a TV script, or a fanvideo that far exceeds the creativity of a corporately-produced movie trailer), in part because of the fact that many fans don't write fic at the whim of a schedule of corporate demand, but when they're inspired to do so (*ifeelbetterer*, 2013). Further, there being no time limit, they can post the work when they feel they have edited it to the point they want. And even then, the work isn't truly "finished." It can still grow and evolve with the feedback of the community, and the author can choose to edit the work after posting as much as she desires. Thus, the differences between the nature of professional and fan fiction are significant and numerous. (As discussed in AO3 vs. Traditional Publishing.)

One last note on this section is the reference to "prompts" in AO3's explanation of the fourth symbol. Prompts generally involve a situation in which a reader/fellow fan suggests a situation to the writer for her to explore. It could be an "ask" (a message to the fans' Tumblr inbox, or another form of direct messaging) in which a fan simply asks the author if they could write such-and-such a story; it could be part of a prompt list (lists found on the Internet full of ideas and inspiration, sometimes used when an author is struggling with ideas); or it could be part of a gift exchange or Big Bang or prompt challenge, all fan events involving a collective outpouring of fic following agreed upon guidelines. This relates to the communal aspect of the creation of fanfiction. From the start, fanfiction's inspiration often comes from a friend or the fan community, and is written as a gift to then please that friend or the community at large.

## ii. Warning

Once the reader has perused whatever search terms fit their fancy and found a fic that seems interesting, the next element she may encounter is a warning before fics that either chose not to use or have Archive warnings:

This work could have adult content. If you proceed you have agreed that you are willing to see such content.

If you accept cookies from our site and you choose "Proceed", you will not be asked again during this session (that is, until you close your browser). If you log in you can store your preference and never be asked again.

Warning (archiveofourown.org)

She can click proceed or go back, or, if she's signed into an AO3 account, then she can opt to ignore this warning permanently, and it will no longer show up before fics containing adult content.

The inclusion of this warning was among *astolat*'s list of "necessary" features, and it has proven to be useful as part of AO3's strategy to avoid censoring fanworks, while still recognizing people's desire to avoid certain things, and maintain a safe environment for fans.

### iii. Header

This figure is of a fairly typical fic "header" on an AO3 work.

The screenshot shows the AO3 interface for a work titled "The Student Prince" by FayJay. At the top, there is a navigation bar with "Fandoms", "Browse", "Search", and "About" links, and a search box. Below the navigation bar, there are several buttons: "Entire Work", "Next Chapter →", "Chapter Index ↓", "Comments", "Share", and "Download ↓". The main content area is a table with the following information:

Rating:	Mature
<b>Archive Warning:</b>	<b>Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</b>
Category:	Multi
Fandom:	Merlin - Fandom
Relationships:	Arthur/Merlin, Various Others - Relationship
Characters:	Arthur Pendragon, Merlin Emrys, Gwen (Guinevere), Lancelot du Lac, Morgana, Morgause, Gaius
Additional Tags:	modern AU, AU, Slash
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of the <a href="#">The student prince series</a> »
Stats:	Published: 2010-06-03 Completed: 2010-07-10 Words: 145222 Chapters: 35/35 Comments: 1377 Kudos: 7187 Bookmarks: 2855 Hits: 384139

Below the table, the title "The Student Prince" is displayed in a large font, followed by the author's name "FayJay" in a smaller font.

Fic Header (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/91885/chapters/125138>)

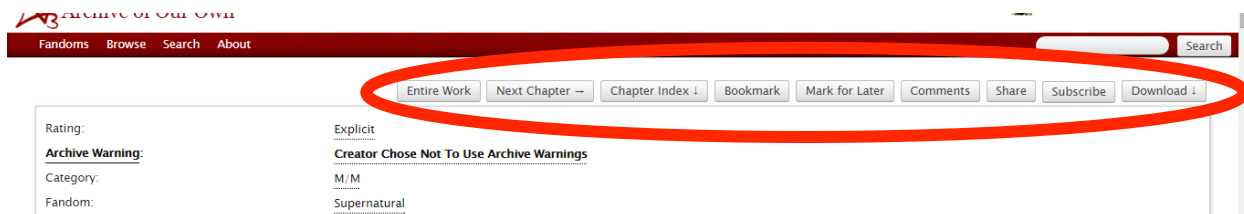
The inclusion and formatting of a header such as this for each fanwork speaks to the larger community and history of fic and fic writers. Headers of this type have been used to describe and advertise fic to fellow fans for years. AO3 fic headers have a system of understandable, universal content ratings and warnings in place that serve as specific and accurate descriptions of the content (as discussed in the last section) and they also incorporate all the important information that fic headers have traditionally held, like a summary, warnings, pairings, and tags for tropes, alternate universes, etc.

The formatting of the work reflects long-held fan practices and elements of fan culture, including gender and the centrality of community and the gift culture. As previously stated, the care taken to warn and protect readers from triggering or unpleasant content shows the importance of maintaining social ties, something that is integral to gendered gift cultures such as the fan community.

I will analyze the meaning, use, and significance of each aspect of the header, and especially its implications regarding gender, community, and the gift culture, in the following sections.

#### *a. Before the Header*

Before the reader encounters the header proper, she will find a row of some or all of the following options: "Entire Work; Next Chapter →; Chapter Index ↓; Bookmark; Mark for Later; Comments; Share; Subscribe; Download ↓"



Most of these options revolve around the idea of ease of access to fanworks for fans, and exist to increase the website's usefulness.

"Entire Work", "Next Chapter", and "Chapter Index" offer different ways of navigating the fic, so readers can peruse the work as they wish. For example, for some readers it may be easier to load the whole work on one page and read through it, while others want to take it chapter by chapter. And, if it is a returning reader, then she can use the Chapter Index to easily pick up where she left off, or find a favorite passage. This type of functionality is part of what was missing from sites like LiveJournal, where the fic was mixed in with personal posts, and thus, was difficult to navigate.

(See later section for discussion of bookmarks and comments.)

The "Mark for Later" button provides the very useful option to save a fic so a user can return to a fic later, if she wants to read it but don't have time at the moment. This option as well as bookmarking requires that the user sign into an AO3 account to use it. However, most other features, including comments and kudos, can be used as a guest on the site.

"Share" gives a user a code to link back to the work, as well as Twitter and Tumblr direct links so she can share the work to other social media with ease. The choice of built-in social media share options is telling. Tumblr especially is known as a fannish site, and fic authors have found communities on Twitter. These two types of social media also share the characteristic that they need not be linked to a fan's real life; she can use them through an anonymous Internet persona and username. The lack of a Facebook share button is significant for similar reasons: fans often don't want the "real life" friends and family found on that particular form of social media to know of their fannish activities.

The "Subscribe" option allows the user to subscribe to a work and/or an author. If she subscribes to a work, then she will be notified by email when a new chapter is posted to it. So, if the work in question is still in progress, she can easily stay up to speed with the progress of the plot. If she subscribes to an author, then she gets notified when that author posts a new work. A reader may subscribe to an author if she likes the author's take on a particular universe or pairing, or if she writes a more specific type of fic. For example, a fic author may gather a base of followers for her "tooth-rottingly-sweet fluff" or for her "Porn without Plot." Thus, authors who reliably post the "good stuff," whether that's adult work, "fluff" (primarily positive-themed works, generally very sweet and with a happy ending), or "angst," (a genre usually involving the central pairing's characters and relationship suffering dramatically) can increase their status.

Both of these options provide an ease to staying updated that didn't exist before, in the long-ago days of zines sent through the mail or in the not-so-long-ago days of Internet chat rooms and mailing lists. Fans

had to check back periodically to see if updates had been made to works they were following, or if an author they enjoyed had posted anything new (though some authors made use of mailing lists or other systems of notification.) Authors in the past had to work much harder to advertise their works, and keep their audience up to date. Now, all subscribed readers to a fic or an author are notified at once, allowing the community to respond and reciprocate with their gift of reaction effectively, while authors can receive comments, reviews, bookmarks, etc. with ease.

AO3 also offers the option to download fic. Anyone can download as much fic as she wishes, for whatever reason. A user can download AO3 works in MOBI, EPUB, PDF, and HTML formats, whichever works best with her devices. AO3 doesn't limit downloads generally, but they do leave some element of control in the hands of the author, in that they can limit downloads of their work to registered users of the archive if they wish ("Archive FAQ: Downloading Fanworks"). This is part of AO3's efforts at openness and accessibility for the readers of fanworks: since AO3 was created by fans for fans, and is supported solely by the efforts of fans, AO3 believes those fans shouldn't be restricted in their use of the site.

This plethora of useful features is part of what makes AO3 so special not just in the fanfiction landscape, but as a website in general: it's incredibly helpful and well-organized (if complex). If one uses it properly, the Archive can do in one place/site what fans used to do with a combination of rec lists and mailing lists, discussion boards and fanzines. It is the product of years of fan wishes and years of volunteer work to create a site to meet a specific fannish need, and it has now become the central market of the fannish gift economy.

### b. The Header

Now, let us move to examine the fic header proper.

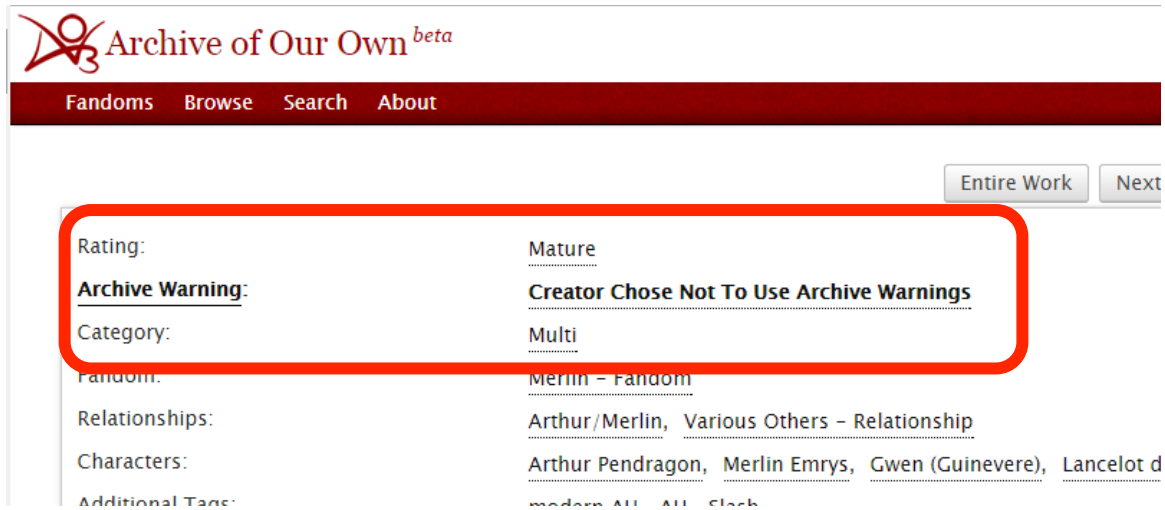
The screenshot shows the AO3 website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the AO3 logo and the text "Archive of Our Own beta". Below this is a dark red header with navigation links: "Fandoms", "Browse", "Search", and "About". A search box is located on the right side of this header. Below the navigation bar, there is a row of buttons: "Entire Work", "Next Chapter -", "Chapter Index !", "Comments", "Share", and "Download !". The main content area is a white box with a border, containing the following information:

Rating:	Mature
<b>Archive Warning:</b>	<b>Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</b>
Category:	Multi
Fandom:	Merlin - Fandom
Relationships:	Arthur/Merlin, Various Others - Relationship
Characters:	Arthur Pendragon, Merlin Emrys, Gwen (Guinevere), Lancelot du Lac, Morgana, Morgause, Gaius
Additional Tags:	modern AU, AU, Slash
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of the <a href="#">The student prince series</a> »
Stats:	Published: 2010-06-03 Completed: 2010-07-10 Words: 145222 Chapters: 35/35 Comments: 1377 Kudos: 7187 Bookmarks: 2855 Hits: 384139

Below the white box, the title "The Student Prince" is displayed in a large, serif font, followed by the author's name "FayJay" in a smaller, sans-serif font.

Fic Header (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/91885/chapters/125138>)

The first three listings in the fic header are the rating, archive warnings, and category, which correspond to the previously discussed symbols indicating content rating, content warning, and relationships/pairings/orientations, respectively.



Archive of Our Own <sup>beta</sup>

Fandoms Browse Search About

Entire Work Next

Rating:	<u>Mature</u>
<b>Archive Warning:</b>	<b><u>Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</u></b>
Category:	<u>Multi</u>
Fandom:	<u>Merlin - Fandom</u>
Relationships:	<u>Arthur/Merlin</u> , <u>Various Others - Relationship</u>
Characters:	<u>Arthur Pendragon</u> , <u>Merlin Emrys</u> , <u>Gwen (Guinevere)</u> , <u>Lancelot d</u>
Additional Tags:	<u>modern AU</u> , <u>All Clock</u>

The next pieces of information in the header are discussed in the following paragraphs:

1. Fandom:



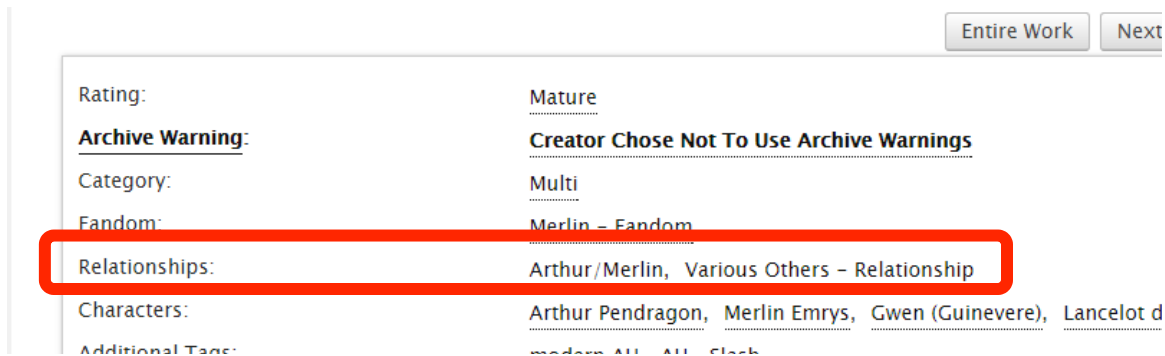
Entire Work Next

Rating:	<u>Mature</u>
<b>Archive Warning:</b>	<b><u>Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</u></b>
Category:	<u>Multi</u>
<b>Fandom:</b>	<b><u>Merlin - Fandom</u></b>
Relationships:	<u>Arthur/Merlin</u> , <u>Various Others - Relationship</u>
Characters:	<u>Arthur Pendragon</u> , <u>Merlin Emrys</u> , <u>Gwen (Guinevere)</u> , <u>Lancelot d</u>
Additional Tags:	<u>modern AU</u> , <u>All Clock</u>

This says the fandom(s) the work belongs to. Sometimes this is simple and obvious, for example, a fic about TV characters Sam and Dean Winchester fits neatly into the *Supernatural* fandom. However, some fics may cross over into multiple fictional worlds, for example, if Sam Winchester decides to join the FBI and work for Peter Burke of the *White Collar* universe, then the author can tag that fic as being part of both the *Supernatural* and *White Collar* fandoms (Deastar 2014.) The notation of fandom can also specify important differences between fandoms that are similar or related in theme or title, but distinct in content. For example, the fandom notation will inform the reader whether the fic takes place in the Marvel Cinematic Universe or in the universe of Marvel comics, in the world of the BBC *Sherlock* TV show or the American *Sherlock Holmes* movies, in the canon of *Star Trek: The Original Series* or the 2009 movie reboot.

The prominent placement of this piece of information is related obviously to the importance of denoting what fictional universe a fic takes place in so that the fan community can find the fic. Though most fanfic readers would easily recognize the universe a fic takes place in from perusing the first paragraph, this also acts as an explicit notation of the source material, thereby honoring the fannish tradition of giving credit where credit is due, and acknowledging the contributions of whatever canon inspired that piece of fanfic. So, this can serve not just the purposes of organization and searchability, but, in a very subtle sense, of moral responsibility as well.

## 2. Relationships:



The screenshot shows a fanfiction header form with the following fields and values:

Rating:	Mature
<b>Archive Warning:</b>	<b>Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</b>
Category:	Multi
Fandom:	Merlin - Fandom
<b>Relationships:</b>	<b>Arthur/Merlin, Various Others - Relationship</b>
Characters:	Arthur Pendragon, Merlin Emrys, Gwen (Guinevere), Lancelot d
Additional Tags:	modern AU, AU, Clock

Buttons for "Entire Work" and "Next" are visible at the top right of the form.

This is the place where the author lists the relationship(s) depicted within the story. Since a fic's pairing or lack thereof is fundamental to the story, it is integral to the fic header. Although a fandom usually forms around a show or movie in general, fic communities tend to form around a particular pairing, called a "ship," short for relationship.

For example, two popular relationships are "Castiel/Dean Winchester" and "Sam Winchester & Dean Winchester." The use of a slash versus an ampersand usually indicates the type of relationship, with the slash (the alphabetical symbol being the root of the fannish use of the word "slash" to indicate a male/male ship) indicating the relationship is romantic and/or sexual, while the ampersand usually means the character's bond is primarily of friendship or family. The relationship tags can also have parentheses indicating if the relationship is "non-explicit" or "background," if it is included in the fic but not the main focus of the story.

The idea of and communities around "shipping", the practice of enjoying the thought or reality of two characters being in a relationship, are complex. Communities often form around a shared "OTP", short for "One True Pairing," a pairing that a fan loves a great deal. Communities can also form around shipping characters platonically, sometimes indicated by the moniker of "BrOTP", indicating that it's a "broship," in which the characters love each other in a familial rather than romantic or sexual sense. Communities can even form around a NOTP, the opposite of an OTP, a pairing that a fan truly hates. Huge parts of fandom, fan communities, and fanworks revolve around shipping characters: discussing ships, defending ships, fighting over ships, creating fanworks about ships, etc. Thus, listing the ship a fic centers around is perhaps the most practically important piece of information included in the fic header.

### 3. Characters:

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
<b><u>Archive Warning:</u></b>	<b><u>Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</u></b>
Category:	<a href="#">Multi</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Merlin – Fandom</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Arthur/Merlin</a> , <a href="#">Various Others – Relationship</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Arthur Pendragon</a> , <a href="#">Merlin Emrys</a> , <a href="#">Gwen (Guinevere)</a> , <a href="#">Lancelot du Lac</a> , <a href="#">Morgana</a> , <a href="#">Morgause</a> , <a href="#">Gaius</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">modern AU</a> , <a href="#">AU</a> , <a href="#">Slash</a>
Language:	<a href="#">English</a>

This is where all the characters in the story are listed, including characters from the canon as well as “OC”s: original characters.

### 4. Additional Tags:

<b><u>Archive Warning:</u></b>	<b><u>Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</u></b>
Category:	<a href="#">Multi</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Merlin – Fandom</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Arthur/Merlin</a> , <a href="#">Various Others – Relationship</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Arthur Pendragon</a> , <a href="#">Merlin Emrys</a> , <a href="#">Gwen (Guinevere)</a> , <a href="#">Lancelot du Lac</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">modern AU</a> , <a href="#">AU</a> , <a href="#">Slash</a>
Language:	<a href="#">English</a>
Series:	<a href="#">Part 1 of the The student prince series »</a>

This is a place where the author can put other relevant tags that don’t fall into the category of fandoms, relationships, or characters.

This portion can be a bit of a free for all, used sparingly or in great depth depending on the author’s habits. The author can use them to indicate the level/type of sexual content (i.e. First Time, “Porn Without Plot,” Dom/Sub), the pace or nature or absence of romance (slow burn, established relationship, pre-relationship, etc.), the premise of the story (coffee shop AU – a common “alternate universe” trope), the placement of the story with in the canon (pre-canon, canon-divergent, canon-compliant, AU, etc.), or anything else she may think is important for the reader to know.

For example, trigger warnings have recently been adopted in fannish circles, and are often placed in fic tags. Although trigger warnings are a fairly modern invention, fans have always had a tradition of tagging their content so that fans can avoid material that they simply don’t like, or aren’t interested in. For example, many fans dislike certain fic tropes or storylines, like BDSM or Omega/Alpha or MPreg<sup>11</sup>,

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<sup>11</sup> All types of usually very sexually explicit fic. BDSM: fic involving Bondage and Discipline, Sadism and Masochism. Omega/Alpha: a dominant/submissive fic genre. MPreg: male pregnancy, a fic in which a male character gets pregnant.

and so it is considered respectful to properly tag one's fic so readers don't unknowingly stumble onto them. These tags can also serve as an advertisement for works that *are* what the reader wants to consume. Fans looking for stories with more or less emotional depth, higher or lower levels of sexual content, or certain favorite tropes or AUs can find them more readily by glancing at or searching the tags.

This can also be the place where the author engages in a bit of creative dialogue about the piece with the reader, often using fan or Internet jargon, like: "happy ending I promise", "Everyone's Poly Because Reasons", "Blasphemy Like Whoa", "Crack Treated Seriously", "Not Safe for Anyone" (*kanoitrace*, *sadrobots*, *shiphitsthefan*, & *viscouslover* 2015.)

The inclusion of tags warning about the content reflects, like the content warnings discussed earlier, a feminine tradition of care for others. Tags, both in the sense of warning and advertising, are a part of the fannish tradition, and AO3's inclusion of them reflects this as well as AO3's respect for and desire to preserve fan history. Finally, the informal, often conversational tone of many tags indicate the way fannish language has adopted Internet slang and methods of speaking. (See section III.B.2 on communication to fans for more on this topic.)

5. Language:	
Relationships:	Arthur/Merlin, Various
Characters:	Arthur Pendragon, Merlin
Additional Tags:	modern AU, AU, Slash
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of the <u>The student</u>
Stats:	Published: 2010-06-0 Bookmarks: <u>2855</u> Hi

This notes what language the fic is written in. There are actually quite a few languages used on AO3, from Chinese to Norwegian to Russian, though English is the most common. AO3 works to translate their FAQ and updates into other languages (including Arabic, German, Spanish, French, Korean, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Chinese, among others) so as to make the site friendly to fans from all over the world. Fan authors will often include links to translations of their works into other languages by other fans in the notes of a piece.

This multilingual ethic comes from the recent expansion, largely a result of the Internet, of the fan community into all parts of the world. Fans are diversifying, coming from various countries and from different racial and ethnic origins as well as different classes, and possessing of different sexual and gender orientations. Diverse groups of fans, who would otherwise have never been able to communicate, can now easily share their works and opinions with each other (Karpovich 2006, 186). Thus, the inclusion of different languages and action on the part of AO3 to make their platform



accessible to all indicates once again how a major goal of the fannish gift culture is to foster ties among the members of its community.

#### 6. Series:

Characters:	<a href="#">Arthur Pendragon</a> , <a href="#">Merlin Emrys</a> , <a href="#">Gwen (G)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">modern AU</a> , <a href="#">AU</a> , <a href="#">Slash</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of the <a href="#">The student prince series</a> »
Stats:	Published: 2010-06-03 Completed: 2010-07-10 Bookmarks: <a href="#">2855</a> Hits: 384139

AO3 has the option to relate pieces of fic in a series, so an author can write a whole saga of stories, perhaps continuing the same plot, or perhaps united by a common theme. So even if a fic is marked complete, the writer can always edit it, add an epilogue, or even add a sequel as the next piece in the series. As discussed in the section on AO3 as an archive, the inclusion of the “series” option relates to the idea that fanfiction is always more than a single work, that each work of fanfiction expands the archive and the fanon, and affects the context in which other fanworks are interpreted.

#### 7. Stats:

Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of the <a href="#">The student prince series</a> »
Stats:	Published: 2010-06-03 Completed: 2010-07-10 Words: 145222 Chapters: 35/35 Comments: 1377 Kudos: 7187 Bookmarks: 2855 Hits: 384139

Statistics inform the reader about the state of the fic’s completion, as well as other numerical data.

The statistics let a fan know when the fic was published, and when it was last updated or completed (this is related to the “Completed/Not” warning.) These dates communicate a great deal of useful information to fans. For example, if a *Doctor Who* fic was published several years ago, then the reader knows that it won’t contain spoilers for the most recent season of the show, and can safely read it even if she’s not caught up with the canon.

The stats also inform the reader if the fic is complete or not. Many fans prefer to read completed fics since they know that it has an ending, and won’t leave them hanging. If a fic is a WIP (work in progress), but the stats show it was updated recently, then a fan may be more likely to devote time to reading it, if it appears that it’s being consistently updated and won’t be abandoned. If, however, the fic hasn’t been updated in a long time, then the reader may avoid it, choosing not to invest in a story that may never come to fruition.

Thus, these statistics can serve as a form of subtle fannish communication. An author who updates frequently and reliably displays a care and devotion to her craft, may gain a better reputation within the fan community. This is part of the fannish gift culture, in which gifts (fanworks) are given in part to increase the giver's social status. Fan authors with better reputations will gain more readers, and more readers will lead to more feedback (reciprocation) in thanks for the gifts they've received, which then circles back to the author being motivated to give more gifts.

Also included in the stats are the number of words, chapters, hits, comments, bookmarks and kudos (these last three of which earn their own section, III.B.1., following this one.)

*i. Words:*

)-07-10 **Words: 145222** Chapter

The number of words in the fic - fics can range from a 100 word drabble to a hundreds of thousands of words long gothic thriller. The word count of a fic is often one of the first things a fan looks at when browsing works in a fandom or pairing. Readers may be looking specifically for a novel-length work to really sink their teeth into, or the opposite, a short sweet fluff story to enjoy when they have a spot of spare time.

*ii. Chapters:*

5222 **Chapters: 35/35** Comr

The number of chapters in a fic, denoted as #/#. For example, 3/3 means that the fic is three chapters long, and all three chapters are posted; 2/3 means there will be three chapters, but only two have been posted; and 1/? means that there is one chapter posted, and the author hasn't yet declared how many chapters there will be.

Like the statistics and "completed/not" status, the status of chapters can inform a reader about significant aspects of the fic. If a fic has 12/13 chapters posted, that shows that it is nearly complete and so it's probably safe for a reader to begin it without being overly worried that it won't be finished. If a fic has 86/? chapters, then the reader may be more hesitant to begin it.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the chapter-system is the author's ability to post chapter by chapter. Many authors choose to post chapter by chapter, often on an informal schedule aiming to

update biweekly, weekly, or even daily. Doing this makes reading the fic a sort of serial experience, like waiting for a new TV show episode to come out every week, or harkening back to stories like those published by Charles Dickens piece by piece in magazines (Brattin “Dickens & Serial Fiction”). But, unlike television, the consumer of the work can leave direct comments on each chapter of the fic that may be responded to by the author, or otherwise influence the creation of the fic as well as other fans’ reading of it. The serial nature of some fic shows clearly the give-receive-reciprocate cycle of the fannish gift economy. The author gives the readers the gift of a new chapter. Each new chapter the reader receives offers her an opportunity to interact with the author and add to the creation of the work in progress. The readers reciprocate in the form of feedback (comments, bookmarks, recs, etc.) and the cycle (though the process is not strictly circular, as the various parties can affect each other and the creative product almost constantly) begins again as the author posts a new chapter.

This chapter-by-chapter process is part of what makes the creation of fic a communal experience, and differentiates it from professional fiction. Unlike when reading a published novel (which is, by definition, a complete story, if perhaps part of an ongoing series) the fic reader is often in the same place in the story as the author is. The author and reader move through the story together, influencing and communicating with each other, whether directly through comments, or indirectly through subtler forms of communication (like the information implicit in a fic’s statistics, or in the action of a fan bookmarking a fic as I will discuss later.) Thus, fanfiction is fundamentally different from professional fiction. It is a continual work in progress, and an entirely different experience; founded in community, rather than just individual consumption.

The number of comments on, kudos for, and bookmarks of the fic are listed in the header. Comments can be found at the bottom of the fic, where readers and fans leave feedback and discuss the fic. Kudos are comparable to a Facebook “like,” and are left by readers on fics they enjoyed. Registered users of the Archive have the option to “bookmark” a fic if they liked it, so they can find it again. The number of comments, kudos, and bookmarks on a fic can serve as indicators of the fic’s popularity and quality (Comments, Kudos, and Bookmarks are discussed in depth, later on.)

*iii. Hits:*

Created: 2010-06-03 Completed: 2010-  
Bookmarks: 2855 Hits: 384139

The number of hits indicates how many people have looked at the fic, however briefly. Like Kudos and Bookmarks, this is related somewhat to popularity and thus theoretically to quality. However, this is perhaps the most unreliable monitor of quality, since a hit is registered every time a fic’s page is viewed. This could happen many times if a reader’s Internet browser crashes causing it to refresh multiple times,

or readers may click on the link accidentally, or a reader may peruse the first sentence and leave seconds later if they don't like it. So, while the number of hits does indicate the trend in views, it is a fairly skewed statistic.

### c. After the Header



The Lawyer All the Wickedness  
poisonivory

---

Summary:  
Matt Murdock is the Kingpin's right-hand man and a stain on New York City's legal system. Whatever he wants from Foggy, it can't be anything good.

So why can't Foggy stay away?

---

Notes:  
For those of you coming over from showverse fandom, you can totally read this! All you have to know about the *Spider-Gwen* universe is that Gwen Stacy is Spider-Woman and Matt Murdock is evil. And a redhead. :) But you should read *Spider-Gwen* anyway, it is a *delight*.

Title comes from a quote by Schopenhauer: "The doctor sees all the weakness of mankind; the lawyer all the wickedness; the theologian all the stupidity."

Matt Murdock is the devil.

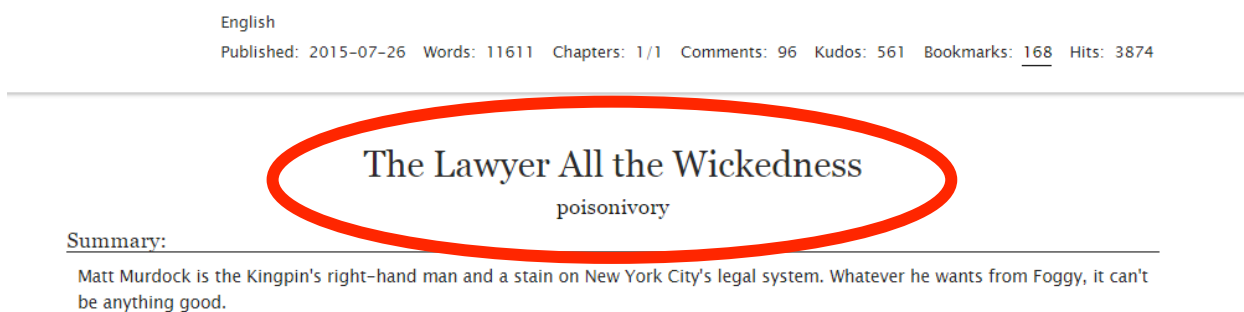
Foggy glowers at him as the jury files back in. Murdock doesn't even look *worried*, and why should he? Even before they've read the verdict, it's obvious he's won.

No, he's coolly sipping a glass of water, elegant and sharp in a suit that probably cost a month's worth of Foggy's salary. Not a hair on that flaming-red head out of place; eyes hidden away behind crimson glasses. His client sits beside him, an oil slick of a man in a cheap suit, and *he* has the courtesy to look nervous, but Murdock doesn't bother to calm him. He just puts the glass down, tilts his head slightly – and then turns his head

Fic title, author, summary, and notes (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/4425287>)

#### 1. Title, Author, Summary

After the header section proper is the title of the work, with the author's username underneath.



English  
Published: 2015-07-26 Words: 11611 Chapters: 1/1 Comments: 96 Kudos: 561 Bookmarks: 168 Hits: 3874

---

The Lawyer All the Wickedness  
poisonivory

---

Summary:  
Matt Murdock is the Kingpin's right-hand man and a stain on New York City's legal system. Whatever he wants from Foggy, it can't be anything good.

The username is linked, so if a user clicks on it, it will take her to the author's AO3 page.

The screenshot shows the AO3 profile for 'poisonivory'. On the left is a navigation menu with links for Dashboard, Profile, Works (45), Series (1), Bookmarks (0), Collections (0), and Gifts (1). The main content area features a profile picture of a blonde woman in a superhero costume, an 'Unsubscribe' button, and a 'Fandoms' section listing DCU (Comics) (18), DCU (18), Justice League International (Comics) (15), Daredevil (TV) (11), and Big Time Rush (7). Below this is a 'Recent works' section with a featured story titled 'Knock Three Times (On the Ceiling If You Want Me)' by poisonivory, dated 4 Oct 2015. The story is set in the Daredevil (TV) fandom and includes a warning: 'No Archive Warnings Apply'. The synopsis reads: 'Matt's downstairs neighbor sings showtunes (badly) at all hours, eats weird-smelling food, and never stops talking. Matt falls in love long before they actually meet.'

Author page (<http://archiveofourown.org/users/poisonivory/pseuds/poisonivory>)

The author's page shows the user that author's recent works, a list of fandoms she has written in, and links to all of her works, series, bookmarks and collections, and her personal profile. So, this page includes author's creative works as well as a social aspect, but unlike the confusing mishmash of the two on sites like LiveJournal, AO3 separates them into neat categories.

The screenshot shows a LiveJournal profile for 'ROXYMISSROSE'. The header includes navigation links for 'FIND MORE', 'SHOP', 'HELP', 'LOGIN', 'JOIN', and 'ENGLISH (EN)'. The profile name 'ROXYMISSROSE' is displayed. Below the name is the entry title 'Bob, is that you?' with an RSS icon. Navigation links for 'Recent Entries', 'Friends', 'Archive', and 'Profile' are visible. A cartoon illustration of two penguins is shown. The main content area features a post titled 'My Masterlist of Completed Stories' with a green dinosaur icon and the text: '( The good guys are always stalwart and true. The bad guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns or black hats, and, uh, we always defeat them and save the day. No one ever dies and... everybody lives happily ever after.. .Giles, Lie To Me, BTVS )'. The post is tagged 'fic list' and has a 'Leave a comment' button. Below the post is a 'Family :)' section with a note dated 'On Fri, Oct 9, 2015 roxy wrote:' and a quote from 'Leyla'. To the right of the post is a calendar for October 2015 and a 'Page Summary' box listing the post and its 10 comments.

Example of a LiveJournal page (<http://roxymissrose.livejournal.com/>)

This serves an archival function, in that it is another form of efficient organization, preserving content complete with the context of the author's other writing and fan endeavors. It is also another illustration of AO3's usefulness to the fan community; it provides a simple, accessible way to both organize one's own fanworks all in one place, as well as peruse all of another author's works at a glance.

Below the title and author is the summary.

## The Lawyer All the Wickedness

poisonivory

### Summary:

---

Matt Murdock is the Kingpin's right-hand man and a stain on New York City's legal system. Whatever he wants from Foggy, it can't be anything good.

So why can't Foggy stay away?

### Notes:

---

For those of you coming over from showverse fandom, you can totally read this! All you have to know about the *Spider-Gwen*

The author writes her own summary to her own tastes, so sometimes it's just a few words, sometime it's the first lines of the work, and sometimes it's longer and more comprehensive. The summary usually gives the reader the feel of the story (if the tags didn't already) before they get invested.

## 2. Notes

The last thing a user will encounter before the fic itself is the "notes" section.

can't be anything good.

So why can't Foggy stay away?

### Notes:

---

For those of you coming over from showverse fandom, you can totally read this! All you have to know about the *Spider-Gwen* universe is that Gwen Stacy is Spider-Woman and Matt Murdock is evil. And a redhead. :) But you should read *Spider-Gwen* anyway, it is a *delight*.

Title comes from a quote by Schopenhauer: "The doctor sees all the weakness of mankind; the lawyer all the wickedness; the theologian all the stupidity."

Matt Murdock is the devil.

Foggy glowers at him as the jury files back in. Murdock doesn't even look *worried*, and why should he? Even before they've read the verdict, it's obvious he's won.

The notes section will include information like, if the fic is inspired by another work, or a gift for someone. The notes are also often the place for the author's informal conversation with the reader. The author may tell the reader that she wasn't sure whether some element of the story worked or not, or say that this is her first fic or her first time writing for a certain fandom or pairing. The author will often place gushing praise of her beta in this section, as well as any other thanks to those people or communities who helped in the creation of the fic. She can share with the reader little pieces of trivia about the work, like what inspired it, or where the title of the work came from. (Like in the above example, the work in question's title was inspired by a quote from Arthur Schopenhauer.) Also, this is a place where an author can put specific chapter warnings – so, if most of the fic is safe but this chapter includes a reference to blood or rape or another common trigger, then the author can leave a note to warn readers.

The inclusion of these notes is a part of the communal, theatrical nature of the creation and reception of fics. As discussed in the literature review, fanfic can be understood as part of a theatrical or dramatic tradition, in the way that it is based in pleasure and community, and often bodies instead of words. While fanfiction *can* be read as an isolated work of writing, it is best understood as an on-going conversation with the community of fans. Part of this conversation involves the author giving the audience an idea of what they are about to devote their time to consuming. Like a theatrical performance which lays out a summary of the play before it begins, and in which audiences often have an idea of the plot beforehand, fic's purpose is to give the reader all the tools and information she needs to fully understand and enjoy the story.

#### iv. Conclusion

AO3's form is not merely coincidental, or a matter of the simplest way to computer-code the material, or just a choice for organizational clarity. The form of AO3, from its search function to its warnings and ratings, to its fic header, serves a purpose: it reflects and encourages fannish tradition, specifically in terms of gender, community, and gift economy. The symbols at a glance and the warning provide the typically gendered fan tradition of caring/protection. Similarly, they support fandom as a safe space for the community to gather. AO3 avoids censorship and so upholds the creative freedom of the authors, which speaks to the importance not just of individual sovereignty, but of community standards of freedom and respect for fellow authors and fans. The inclusion of a fic header in the first place speaks to AO3's respect for the fan community and fannish tradition, as this approximate formation of information as a fic header is something fans have been doing for years. The individual options AO3 provides (download, mark for later, subscribe, etc.) offer increased functionality (as compared to other, older sites and forms of fic distribution), accessibility, and safety in anonymity through the use of usernames. The fic header shows AO3's connection to fannish as well as Internet culture and tradition through its use of multiple languages (making its works widely accessible), its inclusion of option to comment on, bookmark, and download fic, and its username-based system. Finally, the formatting of the fic header relates to AO3's ties to the fannish gift culture. AO3 allows totally free usage and downloads of fanworks, because accessibility and sharing are at the heart of the gift economy, not profit. Its setup. The ability of authors to post chapter by chapter makes explicit the common fannish gift relationship between author and reader: the author gives a new chapter, the reader receives it and reciprocates, and the author gives the next chapter.

The gift economy aspect of AO3, particularly in terms of reciprocation, will be the focus of the next section.

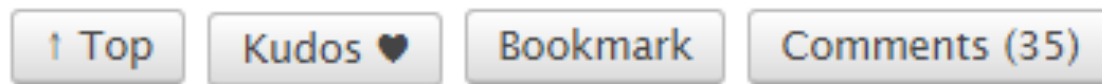
### III.A. Fannish Reader/Author Interaction

#### III.A.6. Reciprocation: Comments, Kudos, and Bookmarks

In the last section's analysis of a fic header, I alluded briefly to the options to leave kudos or comments, or make a bookmark. I've chosen to have a separate discussion of those elements here, because of their importance to the reciprocation aspect of the fannish gift economy.

The main elements of a gift economy are to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. Fans give their work by posting it to AO3, the previous analysis of a fic header described how fans receive those gifts, and this section will describe how fans use comments, kudos, and bookmarks as some of the primary methods of reciprocation for fannish gifts given (in the context of AO3 fic.)

The options to leave a comment or kudos or make a bookmark are all found at the bottom of the fic, offering built-in options for fannish reciprocation for the gift the reader has just received.



Fan *dirtybookshelves* wrote a post reminding fanfic readers that, “Feedback is fandom currency basically” and goes on to say “as a fanfic writer myself, I can tell you even a simple ‘I really liked this, thank your (sic) for sharing/writing’ goes a long way to make me smile and keep me writing” (2013). She also provides a list of things to do when reading and responding to fanfic:

“Put authors’ names on your recs. ALWAYS...

Leave kudos if you like something, even a little.

Leave comments.

Leave feedback and encouragement whenever you can.

no excuses.”

Comments, feedback, and encouragement are considered by some as “the reader’s role in the gift economy” (*destinationtoast* 2014). And so, “Some folks will try to guilt/harangue others into leaving more feedback”. However, other fans may become angry if “fandom treats leaving feedback like an obligation.” There is no real agreement in fandom on whether feedback is an obligation, a gift, or simply good manners. As part of the gift economy, comments, kudos, and bookmarks are a form of reciprocation, which can sometimes be understood as an obligation, expected by one’s fellows in society in response to a gift. Social anxiety and Internet etiquette intersect with the ideals of the gift economy to produce varied responses to understandings of these forms of reciprocation.



## i. Comments

Of the various forms of fannish reciprocation, comments (especially whether to or how to go about commenting) tend to lead to a number of clashes among fans. *destinationtoast* notes from her informal analysis of responses to questions about comments on AO3 that, “Some commenters get anxiety about leaving comments or don’t have anything to say and love the kudos button.” *dirtybookshelves* sharply addresses that “excuse” for not commenting on a fic with “Who cares if I feel a bit shy or self-conscious or uncomfortable? AM I REALLY THAT SELFISH? It’s a little moment of discomfort for me, compared to encouragement and support to an author/artist.”

Other fans have, in response to this anxiety surrounding publicly commenting on a fic where some fans feel “they don’t have the authority to voice an opinion,” created guides on “how to comment on fic” (*sekritomg* 2015). The following paragraphs summarize several of these guides, consolidating some of the key points, and discussing the place of constructive criticism in commenting, as well as the effects of the anonymity offered by the Internet.

### *a. How To Comment: Dos and Don’ts*

There is no one agreed-upon formula for how to comment. Different authors want or expect different things from commenters, and many fans don’t know what they would say even if they did comment (and some fans simply *don’t* comment –because of social anxiety, a lack of know-how, or just laziness, among other reasons). There is no consensus on these issues, but one thing fans tend to agree on is that as a class of reciprocation, comments *are* appreciated by authors (type of comment notwithstanding, and not necessarily any more than kudos, or bookmarks.) Fan *tigerine* says to fanfic readers, “the ao3 hit counter going up is nice but if you don’t leave a comment (or even a kudos) how do we know you liked it and didn’t just back out and go ‘nope’” (*tigerine* 2015).

One guide on how to comment on fic offers the following advice: “Any length is fine,” “There is no right frequency for commenting,” and “There is no right format for commenting” (*sekritomg* 2015). The guide goes on to describe how one can work up towards learning how to comment comprehensively, starting with a basic “I liked this fic,” and adding on elements like the reasons why the reader liked it, a description of the fic and the parts that struck her, questions she may have about how the author was inspired, notes on the way the fic worked in the context of the canon and/or fanon, personal reflections, and criticism.

The fact that there is no easy formula for commenting on a fic (reciprocating for a gift) relates to the nature of gift economies. One of their defining characteristics is a lack of rigid terms of exchange; the giving of gifts is bound by certain norms of practice and has social consequences, but it is not laid out with rules and determinations of value, like in a monetary exchange. So, agreeing to operate in a gift economy means agreeing to operate in shades of grey, where gifts are given, not exchanged or bartered, and thus the rules of interaction are blurry. In an economy based on maintaining social ties, an accidental misstep leads not to financial trouble, but interpersonal issues. When fans mistakenly break the unspoken, fluctuating rules of fandom, fanfic, and reciprocation (like neglecting to leave kudos and

comments) they may anger their fellow fans, like *dirtybookshelves'* irritated remarks insisting fans have a responsibility to comment on fics.

### 1. Concrit

Since fanworks are offered as gifts, the old adage “don’t look a gift horse in the mouth” gains traction. Gift economy etiquette creates a situation fraught with social pitfalls in the leaving of comments containing criticism. Constructive criticism, often referred to as “concrit” in fandom, holds a precarious place in fanfiction circles. Many fic authors happily ask for it, quite aware that those who point out the plot holes and character inconsistencies in one’s work are invaluable, and yet, because of fan gift culture, the practice of leaving constructive criticism is a relatively uncommon and sometimes unwanted one (Karpovich 2006; Sabotini 1999).

Fan *waldorph* tags a post declaring on behalf of fanfic authors, “Unless we say ‘Concrit welcome!’, assume it’s not” with the tag: “first rule of fandom: DON’T BE A DICK” (*waldorph* 2015). This sums up the ideas expressed in *sekritomg’s* lengthy guide to how to leave concrit in a useful, respectful way, reminding the reader that she shouldn’t “be mean,” and she should first “Ask if the author wants some concrit,” and then “Offer a positive for every negative...Make sure you’re clear that it’s your opinion...Make a suggestion.” *waldorph* further notes that “Fannish culture has shifted towards authors being so considerate of readers, the transition towards using warnings and tagging for triggers is evidence of that. Maybe readers could pause and return a little of that consideration. Unless an author asks for concrit, don’t leave it” (*waldorph* 2015).

Part of this dislike of concrit on the part of fan authors, even those who consider themselves to be “serious” authors who want to improve their writing, comes from the intensely emotional process of writing fiction in general. Fiction authors both fan and pro would most likely agree that writing is a labor of love, and their stories are very close to their hearts. With fan writing especially, given that fan writers at this point in time generally don’t write for profit, it’s a deeply personal and emotional endeavor, and receiving criticism from virtual strangers on the Internet can be wounding to a writer’s confidence (*waldorph* 2015).

Issues with leaving concrit on fanfic also are related to status in the fan community, an important aspect of the gift culture. Fanworks can be seen as part of a “potlatch” for status within the fan community, in which different fans offer up fic, art, etc., and the quality and quantity of these fanworks helps determine their fan status. Thus, the close ties between fanworks and fan status mean that critique of a work can be understood as critique of the author and her fan status, making concrit seem like a personal attack. Consequently, fan Sabotini argues that “critique is relegated to the lowest rungs of the gift-status ladder. (While at the same time critique is highly valued by the authors who are interested in pursuing the craft of writing.)” (Sabotini 1999). Concrit’s uneasy place in fandom can make authors insecure, as they feel personally offended by criticism of their work, as well as making readers insecure, in that they don’t know how or if they should be contributing to the creative, communal process of fanfiction writing with constructive criticism.

And so, it seems that leaving concrit is a very risky endeavor, especially to a new or uninitiated fan. This is part of the reason for many fic authors' use of "betas." Betas serve as editors, muses, and friends to fanfic writers during the writing process. As constructive criticism is integral to performing the role of an editor, giving concrit is less socially hazardous for betas, and so, much of a fic's concrit tends to come from betas, not the "public" fandom domain. However, betas and betaing are also related to fan status, and so they come with their own social and interpersonal minefield. Many fic authors heap praise on their betas, as the saviors of their works and an integral part of their fic's creation. However if a fan is too well known, it can make finding a good beta difficult, since the beta may feel uncomfortable criticizing the work of such a well-known fan writer (Sabotini 1999). Fans on the opposite end of the spectrum, those who are virtually unknown, are faced with the problem of not knowing where to find a beta (especially if they're new or uninitiated to fandom) or with finding a *good* beta, since the fan doesn't yet have the notoriety to attract better betas.

## 2. Anons and the Internet

One aspect where Internet etiquette and fan practices intersect and clash is the tone of interactions in online fannish spaces.

The Internet has a long, dark history of nasty "anons" (anonymous contributors to sites or conversations) and even though the worst of these anons tend to be associated with more male-oriented sites like Reddit, they still make their way into more female-dominated places of Internet fandom. Internet media fandom, as a female-oriented gift economy, is largely focused on community, and maintaining social ties (Hellekson 2009). As a result, one might assume that such vitriolic negativity as found in some Internet spaces, born of the intoxicating high of anonymity and unaccountability, would seem to be less common in fannish circles. This is difficult to assess, since there are so many smaller communities within larger fan communities, all with their own rules of engagement. Some explicitly state that there is no room for anything but positivity in their conversation. For example, the side-bar description on the blog sammy-samulet.tumblr.com, "this blog is ship-free, hate-free, spn [Supernatural] positive..." is in explicit opposition to any fan-hate for the show, or any of the anger spawned by "ship wars" (when fans disagree over which characters should be paired with who.) Conversely, others are built on violently and often rudely dissecting fandom and its practices and quirks, like the somewhat infamous and now offline site "Fandom Wank" ("Fandom Wank"). However, the fanfiction writing community on AO3 was born in part from older, traditional fan writing circles, and tends to value the (often gendered female) ideals of community and harmony. Thus, AO3 works to discourage the nastiness sometimes encouraged by Internet forms of communication.

Both the author(s) of a fic and the readers can comment on the fic, and reply directly to particular comments. If a reader is signed into AO3, then her comments will automatically be attributed to her, showing her icon and username, which links back to her AO3 profile and any works she posted or public bookmarks she made. So, for many AO3 users, commenting is automatically *not* anonymous, thus discouraging the kind of excessive harshness sometimes born of unaccountability. AO3 doesn't require fans to have an account to comment on a fic, but they must provide an email to do so. Thus, even a user who doesn't have or isn't signed into her AO3 account is at least tangentially accountable for her words.

The AO3 commenting system has been carefully set up, based on the wisdom and foresight of long-time fans such as *astolat*, to provide a balance between free speech and a safe environment for fans. As noted in the section on *astolat*'s features for AO3, the ability of authors to delete comments they don't want allows for the keeping of a friendly online environment, while the author's inability to change the content of the comments protects the integrity of the conversation. Thus, AO3 has set up its commenting system to reflect and work with the fan/gift culture.

## ii. Kudos

While comments are (arguably) considered to be the most meaningful form of reciprocation, leaving kudos is the most common. Leaving kudos on a fic is similar to a "Like" on Facebook. Anyone can see who liked (gave kudos to) the fic. If the reader is signed into an AO3 account, then her username will appear at the bottom of the work along with the others who gave it kudos. If they aren't signed into an account, then the kudos will be left as a "guest," the number of which is also listed at the bottom.

↑ Top Kudos ♥ Bookmark Comments (35)



[boopinbabbit](#), [bonesmcc0y](#), [Notoyax17](#), [RyuLevone](#), [weny1717](#), [intheinterim](#), [Imbrstv](#), [karasuhimechan](#), [Yuurei](#), [framed\\_lightning](#), [beaches\\_at\\_treasure\\_island](#), [Shabby Abby \(KJPearl\)](#), [MiraMac](#), [AceofWands](#), [saribel192](#), [pez304](#), [CrysaniaFay](#), [crystallive](#), [Rainbowrites](#), [smaller](#), [weekend\\_conspiracy\\_theorist](#), [Jane Average \(JaneAverage\)](#), [inmyriadbits](#), [nightwalker](#), [warmfuzzydyke](#), [bookwormsb56](#), [TrickyVicky3](#), [MilesMentis](#), [yarngeek](#), [Kalliste](#), [TheCatLurker \(Naidalldri\)](#), [trogy](#), [missmollyetc](#), [CalciferCai](#), [ant3ka](#), [mairede](#), [tuesdayafternoon](#), [lauranaut](#), [Surroundingshadows](#), [thesheriff](#), [deerharthowlikeyouthis](#), [ElizabethVinyamar](#), [queerpadfoot](#), [musicjunky129](#), [Normalcat](#), [Hello\\_everyone](#), [Erisah\\_Mae](#), [amida](#), [decembuary](#), [PrincessMariana](#), and 73 more users as well as 84 guests left kudos on this work!

(<http://archiveofourown.org/works/4722410>)

In the same way some readers might look to a list of best-selling books to find reading material, a fic reader can sort works in a fandom or pairing by kudos: descending, and read the most popular (by number of kudos) fics. The same can be done by searching by number of hits, bookmarks, or comments, and give somewhat similar results.

Sort and Filter

Sort by

- Kudos
- Author
- Title
- Date Posted
- Date Updated
- Word Count
- Hits
- Kudos**
- Comments
- Bookmarks
- Relationships
- Additional Tags

Other Tags ?

Search within results ?

Fandoms Browse Search About

1 - 20 of 37952 Works in Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski

Works

– Previous 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 ... 1897 1898 Next –

**DILE** by [twentysomething](#) 16 Aug 2012  
 Teen Wolf (TV)  
 Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings, Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski, Derek Hale, Stiles Stilinski, Sheriff Stilinski, Scott McCall, Jackson Whittemore, Danny Mahealani, Alternate Universe - Human, Alternate Universe - Kindergarten, Pre-school, Kid Fic  
 "Today is Scott's first day of kindergarten and Derek is terrified."  
 Language: English Words: 30,871 Chapters: 1/1 Comments: 93 Kudos: 16677 Bookmarks: 6680 Hits: 467965

**Lock All The Doors Behind You** by [entanglednow](#) 27 Sep 2012  
 Teen Wolf (TV)  
 No Archive Warnings Apply, Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski, Derek Hale, Stiles Stilinski, Scott McCall, Erica Reyes, Isaac Lahey, Jackson Whittemore, Feral Behavior, Violence, Aftermath of Torture, Protectiveness, Hurt/Comfort  
 He has no idea what you're supposed to say when you find one of your...werewolf acquaintances, completely out of their mind, growling like they're about to see what your insides taste like. There's no handbook for this. Stiles is thinking that if he survives he might win one.  
 Language: English Words: 25,960 Chapters: 1/1 Comments: 89 Kudos: 16207 Bookmarks: 5326 Hits: 324726

**Prince Among Wolves** by [tylerfucklin \(zimothy\)](#) 25 Apr 2013  
 Teen Wolf (TV)  
 Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings, Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski, Stiles Stilinski, Derek Hale, Family, Single Parents, Babysitting, Learning to

Sorting Derek/Stiles fic by kudos: descending.  
 (http://archiveofourown.org/tags/Derek%20Hale\*s\*Stiles%20Stilinski/works)

The number of kudos is shown in the fic header, and so serves to some as an (only sometimes reliable) indicator of the quality of the fic. As previously discussed, the offering of fanworks can be understood as a sort of potlatch, involving a drive towards achieving high status. If a fan does achieve high status and become a BNF<sup>12</sup>, then their works will usually get more attention and praise than that of other, less well-known authors, sometimes despite the fic’s inherent quality, or lack thereof. So, like any artifact of culture, a fic can become well-known even if it’s not generally a “quality” work, and consequently get a high number of kudos just from the increased traffic, while a no-name fan with an excellent work may receive only a few kudos.

Like that of giving comments, the etiquette surrounding when to give or not give kudos can also be tricky. Fan *dirtybookshelves*’ guide to reciprocation for fic asks fanfic readers to “Leave kudos if you like something, even a little” (*dirtybookshelves* 2013). *destinationtoast* notes that this idea, like most in fandom, is not universally agreed upon. The two ideas of kudos use that emerged in her analysis were: 1) “Some readers bestow kudos very liberally, on most things they read and don’t actively dislike” and 2) “Some readers only want to leave kudos or comments (sic) works that they find particularly outstanding... Some of them seem to feel their kudos is an endorsement with a lot of weight, and that they don’t want to water it down/make it less special by giving feedback on things they don’t really love.” So, when a fan leaves kudos, it could mean anything from “I liked this fic well enough to read to the bottom, so here’s a kudos” to “this fic is incredible, and absolutely worthy of a kudos,” and kudos received can be interpreted in equally subjective ways by the author.

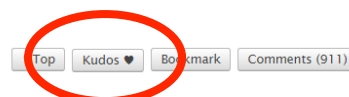
Kudos function in the gift economy as a prominent form of reader reciprocation for the author’s gift of fic. Giving kudos signals to the author that the reader received her gift, and that she appreciates it, in some amount or another. The kudos button is located relatively prominently at the bottom of the page of AO3 fics (the filled-in heart shape standing out from the other buttons), thus subtly reinforcing the idea that now that the fan has read the work (received this gift) she should now reciprocate with the gift of response.


Stiles is ambivalent about 'cellos, actually.

He thinks he can feel Derek's fingers in his hair as he falls asleep.

Derek's watching over him. A Derek that smiles and *laughs*. A Derek that loves him.

Maybe time travel doesn't *completely* suck, after all.



 Il\_fao, Vasil\_Cho, NeoCortex, coupletattoo, QueenOfMayhem, w ormormo, savagedmess, Lydia\_Nicole, dakhipuf, hello06november, Strength1993, joanc24, thinkistobealive, Sharp1e, keax, Dragons\_Willow, Clankit, hyperunge7, AgentHarvey31, U\_can\_tell\_he\_is\_evil\_by\_the\_backwards\_A, Faerie, firellium, FreeFlyingPhoenix, ayambik, piktul, nightlight9, Aliasxandi, Silver13, Rhavaniel, Bonesofglass, Isisrielle, CasisMyPie, Crowley\_stole\_my\_pie, heyLucy, RedLibrarian, ainuut, hrududil, mistressofthorlien (mistressofthorlien), magsgemuniverse93, curvyjaded, Zucheeenee, Zucheeenee, YingHua, angiewan601, EverGreyskies, Alba55, lockthewho, thestreetisbigenough, OrianneBlue, Benaya, and 5649 more users as well as 4789 guests left kudos on this work!

<sup>12</sup> “BNF” is short for “Big Name Fan,” indicating a fan who has become famous within fandom. A typical BNF is someone who has shown particular skill at her craft, whether that’s writing fic, editing video, or making fanart, and consequently become very well known in fannish circles.

### iii. Bookmarks

AO3 also offers the option to bookmark a fic. While bookmarking, the fan can write a note about the fic to remind herself about the content or what she liked about it, as well as tag it. She can make this bookmark private or public, and/or make it a “rec” (short for “recommendation.”) Like kudos, the number of bookmarks can serve as a marker of quality, as well as a way to show appreciation to the author.

When a user bookmarks a fic, it will then appear in a tab on her AO3 profile so she can find it again. This shows how AO3 was built to serve the fan community: previous to the comprehensive, organized archive that AO3 has become, for a reader to find fic she read in the past would have been a very difficult endeavor. In the earlier days of the Internet, it would have required a fan to painstakingly save the urls of the fic posting or even just copy the text itself. Way back in the years of fanzines, it would have meant having a system of organization for printed fanfic. Now, with AO3 bookmarks, fans can search through their own list of bookmarked works, using the author’s tags and their own to find specific works, as well as browse through the notes they left and rediscover old favorites.

Another interesting and useful feature of AO3’s bookmarking system is this: a user can bookmark external works. So, if a fan finds something on another site like Tumblr or LiveJournal, she can bookmark it through AO3, and find it again with ease. This option is one of the organizational features that makes AO3 function so well as a fan site and as part of the fan culture: it built into its functioning many of the things, like rec lists and bookmarks, that fans would previously have had to do separately and externally to the place where they posted their works.

#### *a. Reciprocation*

The bookmarking option is another facet of AO3’s built-in system of feedback/reciprocation for the authors. Whereas before, an author might not know that someone loved her fic enough to come back and read it a second time, with bookmarks, a fan implicitly tells the authors that their work was quality enough that she wants to come back and enjoy it again. And if a reader doesn’t merely bookmark but “rec”s a work (making the work appear with a little heart in that user’s list of bookmarks, thus indicating she recommends it), then the author knows that the fan liked the work enough to recommend it to others.

(<http://archiveofourown.org/users/prettybirdy979/pseuds/prettybirdy979/bookmarks>)

If the bookmark is public, then the author, as well as anyone else viewing that fan’s AO3 profile, can see the notes she left on it. So, other than the implicit feedback given by the act of bookmarking a fic, it can also provide a more direct method of communication.

(see Fanfic and Intermediaries for further discussion of rec lists)

#### *b. Public/Private & Fan Shame*

Bookmarks can be made public or private. Thus, a fan can safely bookmark works that she liked, but might not feel comfortable with other fans knowing she liked. For example, a fan may choose to privately bookmark works of RPS<sup>13</sup> or controversial ships like Wincest<sup>14</sup>. This brings to light the problem of fan shame, a problem that even AO3’s fan-positive attitude can’t erase. As fan Yana says in a Tumblr post, “there are fanfics you will recommend to your friends with enthusiasm and then there are fanfics that *no-one can ever know you have read*” (Yana 2015).

AO3’s system of username registration, involving very little “real” information outside an email address, shows that AO3 does still protect the culture of usernames and anonymity that fans have long held, and that the move to the Internet has perpetuated and encouraged. Many fans join fandom as a form of escape from their “real” lives. Fandom can be a place where fans are able to explore themselves and their identity safely, with a supportive community, and removed from the threat of real world consequences. For example, fans who are interested in exploring socially touchy issues like their gender identity and sexual orientation don’t have to fear repercussions from family and friends, as long as their fannish activities remain safely anonymous on the Internet.

<sup>13</sup> See glossary – real person slash fic is controversial because it depicts real people (usually celebrities like actors or singers) rather than fictional characters, so some people feel that it is just plain creepy, or even ethically questionable, to write. The fan shame surrounding RPS is significant, since many see it as an invasion of the celebrity in question’s privacy. However, RPS supporters have pointed out that a lot of anti-RPS arguments usually boil down to “‘You could get sued!’ or ‘You make fandom look bad!’ or ‘I just don’t like it’” (*queenofhell* 2005). Thus, the debate over RPS’s moral and creative legitimacy rages on in fandom.

<sup>14</sup> The ship of brothers Sam and Dean from the TV show *Supernatural* – a very popular, but also very controversial ship, because of its incestuous nature.



However, AO3, while a distinctly fannish endeavor, firmly believes that it is time for fandom to get out of the shadows and be accepted by wider society as a valid enterprise (Coppa 2013). AO3 explicitly states that they don't want fandom to be homogenized or hijacked, but they *do* want fandom to become acceptable, not something that women have to hide ("Annual Report 2014"). At the heart of it, AO3 wants to try and get out from the weight of fan-shame, from both inside and outside the community. While this is a noble ideal, it brings with it not just the possibility of acceptance through visibility, but the dangers of exposure. The more public fandom and sites like AO3 are, the more afraid fans are that people who aren't aware of their Internet identities will see what they do online. This fear of exposure and visibility is part of fan's attachment to their gift culture. The belief that if no money changes hands fannish activities can continue to fly safely below the mainstream's radar is certainly integral to many fan's insistence on remaining part of a gift economy.

#### iv. Conclusion

AO3's culture of reciprocation is an active battle against the weakening in recent years of the norm in fanfiction communities of leaving feedback as a form of reciprocation for fannish. Stanfill (2013) theorizes that this may be occurring because of the expansion in the size of fandoms with the rise of the Internet and the mainstream popularity of fannish texts like *Harry Potter*. However, for the gift culture to survive, the cycle of give-receive-reciprocate must continue. Therefore, to encourage the feedback culture is to protect the gift culture. AO3's active structuring of their site to encourage feedback (for example, placing the comment, kudos, and bookmark buttons at the end of fanworks) shows that they are combating this trend of decreasing feedback, and so, helping to protect the fannish gift culture.

### III.A.7. Associations

This final section on the structure and function of AO3 discusses the “gifting” and “inspired by” functions of AO3.

#### i. Gifting

When an author posts a new fic, there is a page full of optional and required information for her to fill out about the fic, from the title to the pairings to the tags to the text of the work itself. One section of information is titled “associations” and it includes the options to post the work to a collection or challenge, gift the work to someone, and/or note if the work was inspired by another work.

Associations

Post to Collections / Challenges

Gift this work to

This work is a remix, a translation, a podfic, or was inspired by another work

This work is part of a series

This work has multiple chapters

Set a different publication date

(<http://archiveofourown.org/works/new>)

This “gift” function is perhaps the most explicit way AO3 acts as part of the fannish gift economy. The gift function allows the poster to enter the name (or username, if applicable) of one or more people, and then that (user)name will appear in the notes section of the fic as “For (the recipient)”. Thus, a fan can unambiguously make a gift of her work to her fellow fan(s). The author may gift a fic to a friend for her birthday, or as a pick-me-up for a friend who was feeling down, or she might gift a work to a user who gave her a prompt, or asked for her to write something special.

The existence of the “gift” option illustrates AO3’s commitment to maintaining the gift culture. It also once again shows the way that the functioning of AO3 is the result of years of fans’ searching for a home for their community and works, and how AO3 was created entirely to fit that desire. The site fulfills fans’ need for an archive, need for a reliable system of feedback, and need to continue giving gifts to their fellow fans.

#### ii. Inspired By

Another option in the “associations” section is to say if the work was inspired by another. If the author checks this box, she’s given the option to fill in a title, author, and language. Or, if the work that inspired the current one is in the Archive, then the new poster can simply copy and paste the URL of the inspiring work in the given box, and a link to that work will be in the notes of the new work under “Inspired by.”

This consideration of the inspirations for the fanworks posted to AO3 is another reflection of fan culture and community.

To steal another fan's work is highly taboo in fandom, though it inevitably happens. Fans on sites like Tumblr are quick to attack those who repost fanworks without an attribution. Tales of people stealing fan's writing, posted for free on sites like AO3, and then selling that fic for money as if it were their own, through methods like self-publishing e-book companies have been met with outrage (*Besina* 2015; *GetInTheRobotShinji* 2015). Fans have jumped on these issues, urging site owners to take down the fic, and the original authors to take action against the thieves.

What this action would be, however, is unclear. To take some form of legal action would be a risky endeavor considering the shaky legal ground fanfic is already on. Since the mere posting of fanfic to the Internet is "not permitted" by most of the corporate owners of fanfic's source material, to bring the legal eye around to try and punish these fanfic "thieves" would also inadvertently shine a light on the rest of the "legitimate" fanfic on the Internet, thus possibly bringing the technically legally questionable practice of posting fanfic under fire ("Frequently Asked Questions: Can I create Doctor Who fanfiction?" 2015). The other form of action fans could take, and the one that they generally do, is a sort of social shaming of this theft. However, this which is only effective as far as fellow fans go – those who are part of fannish circles feel pressure not to steal others fanworks, but those outside these circles feel no such pressure. So, the problem of fic theft, from fandom outsiders especially, continues. However, in the fanfic community, to steal a gift that is freely given to then sell it for one's own profit goes completely against the informal rules of the gift culture.

This show of respect can be somewhat hypocritical, in some respects. Tushnet notes that "[f]ans need to credit ... other fans' work, whereas they feel free to mine the outside world for raw material, as long as the resulting works stay noncommercial" (quoted in Stanfill 2015). Thus, the respect fans give to other fanworks often doesn't appear to extend to professionally-produced creative works. However, I would argue that even though fans don't often employ explicit methods of acknowledgement of the source work, within fannish circles knowledge of the source material as inspiration is implicitly understood, and thus, explicit credit-giving seems unnecessary to fan writers. The creators of the source material already have been given the stamp of legitimacy by society when they were professionally published (whether produced as a movie, TV show, novel, etc.) and a public acknowledgement of the creativity and quality of their works by the size and fervor of their fanbase. The creation of the fanwork itself is often interpreted on the part of fan creators as a form of giving credit to the source creators: to write a fanwork is to implicitly state that the source text was interesting enough to merit further investigation.

So, through the "gift" option, AO3 explicitly acknowledges the social role of fanfic as a gift given from fans to fans, and through the "inspired by" option, AO3 reflects the fan community's moral grounding in crediting other creators, and acknowledging the interconnectedness of creative works.

### **III.A.8. Conclusion**

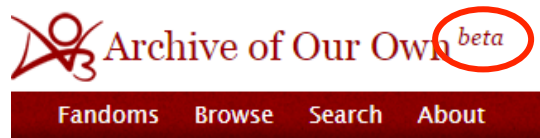
And so concludes this section on the structure and function of AO3. I began with a discussion of the origins of AO3 in the minds of a group of motivated, Internet-savvy fangirls, and moved into an analysis of the name “Archive of Our Own,” discussing its meaning in terms of community and space, as well its implications for profit and legitimacy in terms of fanworks. I laid out how AO3 functions as an archive in terms of preservation of materials and context, and then how its structure was fan-created, and so, tailor-made for the unique process of fanfic creation, distribution, and preservation, serving as an fannish, gift culture alternative to mainstream commercial fiction publishing. I then analyzed in-depth the formatting of AO3, in terms of how AO3’s structure shapes how a fan finds, investigates, and reads fic on the site. Finally, I focused on how AO3’s structure embodies the gift culture, through its gift and inspired by functions, but especially through its built-in options for fannish reciprocation (comments, kudos, and bookmarks) for the gift of fanfic.

This next section moves to focus more into how fans interact with the site, through a discussion of betas and AO3’s beta mode, the way the site communicates with fans, fan-made apps for the site, and the idea of fanfic and intermediaries.

### III.B. AO3/User Interaction

This section investigates the way the AO3 site and users interact with one another. In this section, the word “user” applies generally to any user of the site, but particularly in her role as a reader of fic. I will discuss in this section how AO3 reflects fannish practices, like exclusion and beta-ing, it makes use of fannish and Internet-inspired language to communicate to its users through automatic messages and its tagging system, and it reflects the fannish tradition of creation and addition through its proud inclusion of fan-made apps and bookmarklets which increase the site’s usability. Finally, I will discuss the way fic is intermediated, by fans and by the AO3 site, through the historical practice of “rec lists,” and through the site’s own bookmarking/rec list system and search system.

#### III.B.1. Betas and Beta Testing



On November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009, AO3 entered “Open Beta,” in which the Archive moved from being used by a smaller group of select volunteers, to being open to fandom at large (“One Year On – Celebrating the Anniversary of Open Beta!”). In Open Beta, the site does require an invitation to join as a registered user and to post works, but anyone can now visit the site and read, give kudos to, and comment on fics.

##### i. Exclusion

Invitations to join AO3 are, at this point in time, not difficult to get. A fan can sign up by giving her email to the site and then waiting a day or two for an invitation to arrive in her inbox; it doesn’t actually require a person-to-person invite. However, the need for an invitation relates to the types of exclusionary practices that often help create a community (Lothian 2013, 548). Communities, fan ones included, can be defined by who *isn’t* in them as well as who is. For AO3, this modicum of extra effort required to join and post to the site may have contributed to its reputation for quality fic. Since the fic writers who’ve posted on the site would have to have gone to the trouble of signing up and then waiting patiently to be invited in, it could be assumed that they are relatively serious about their art. AO3’s “exclusive” nature can also serve as part of the process of initiation into fandom. A reader may begin as an “anon” or “lurker<sup>15</sup>,” leaving kudos on fics as a guest, but as she becomes more involved with fandom, she may eventually sign up with AO3 and get her own username.

##### ii. Betas, Betaing, and Beta Mode

AO3 is in Beta mode, meaning that despite appearing largely functional almost all of the time, it offers warnings that there may be bugs which users should report to the site-runners. This is the usual,

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<sup>15</sup> A fannish term for someone who peruses Internet sites anonymously, soaking up the content but not participating, leaving no obvious sign of their presence behind.

software-related idea of “beta.” What is so interesting about AO3’s use of the software idea of “beta” testing is that this terminology inspired the term for the fannish idea of “beta” readers of fic at least a decade ago.

Just like beta testers check software for bugs or mistakes, beta readers read fic author’s work to check for grammatical errors, mischaracterizations, plot holes, etc. Betas function similarly to editors, but in a very different social capacity. For example, Beta readers are voluntary, usually emotionally and personally invested in the story and characters, and generally receive explicit appreciation and acknowledgement for their participation in the creation of the work. Professional editors are paid and commercial, not necessarily particularly invested in the story or characters, and often receive little or no explicit credit in the work for their efforts. While a commercial editor can expect virtually no credit in the printed pages of a published novel, a beta reader can expect lavish praise and appreciation for her efforts in the notes of the fic she helped to create.

The idea of AO3 choosing to be “beta-ed” before posting its final work relates to the long held fannish practice of beta-ing a fic before one posts it. In the same way that fanworks need a whole community to create them and give them context and meaning, AO3 requires the fan community to bring the site through beta testing to its complete potential. As fanworks are the continual work in progress of the author and the community, so is the AO3 site.

There has been a trend in fandom over the past years of younger users who weren’t initiated into older ideals of fandom being unaware of the culture of betas. So, these users (who often favor Wattpad and other sites with a younger demographic) often won’t make use of betas, thus possibly leading to an overall lower quality of fic in these communities (Stanfill 2013). AO3 explicitly includes the idea of “beta,” in the software sense, but calling to mind the fannish sense, in its site. So, although the practice of betaing work before posting it has been on the decline, AO3 subtly encourages it, while building a reputation of hosting quality, well-written fic. Thus, in its terminology describing itself, AO3 encourages a culture of care when it comes to posting work.

The meaning beta testing gave to beta reading has come full circle. AO3 is in beta mode, and thus is still being “beta-ed,” in the fannish sense, before it posts its “final work” of the full website. Thus, this use of the word “beta,” displayed prominently in the upper right hand corner of the AO3 homepage, solidifies the connection between modern fandom and its roots on the Internet.

### III.B.2. Communication to Fans

Further connections between the Internet, fannish tradition, and AO3 can be found in the site's usage of fannish language, from the casual, friendly phrasing of its automatic messages to describing tags as "canonical" or not. These instances of fannish language use can serve as part of the process of initiation into fandom and the fan community.

#### i. Automatic Messages

Modern fan culture has been heavily impacted by the Internet. Much of fannish activities, including the use of language and slang, has roots in larger Internet culture, as illustrated by the previous beta testing/beta reading example. Thus, the informality of much communication on the Internet is represented in AO3's communications.

Informal, Internet-speak and humor abound on AO3, especially in the automatic messages a fan may encounter when using the site. For example, if a user hits the kudos button on a work she's already left kudos on, a message will pop up "You have already left kudos here :)". If she hits the "comment" button without writing anything in the comment box, a little note will pop up saying "brevity is the soul of wit, but we need your comment to have text in it."

These instances also illustrate how AO3 was built by fans for fans, and values community. The site is not trying to remain aloof and professional; the site was made by fellow fans and friends and communicates with a tone to match. The tone of these messages, while snarky, is also friendly. One of the primary functions of female-gendered gift economies like the one AO3 operates in is to create and maintain the bonds of friendship within the community. The smiley face attached to the "kudos" message makes it a friendly reminder, giving it the quality of one fan saying to another "yes, I understand you love this fic, but I'm afraid you can only give kudos once." The "we" in the second message reminds the user that the site isn't a faceless technological or corporate behemoth, but part of a community of like-minded people. Thus, the friendly, communal tone of messages like these contributes to the function within the gift economy of maintaining community.

#### ii. Canonical Tags

AO3's use of the word "canonical" to describe part of their tagging system is particularly interesting given fanfiction's relation to a fandom's canon and fanon. AO3 uses the term "canonical" to describe the tags that appear in their search filters, the sort of "official" version of a tag. As the AO3 FAQ explains: "For example, **Once Upon a Time (TV)** is a canonical tag. **Once Upon a Time (ABC)**, **Fandom: Once Upon a Time**, and **ouat - Fandom** are all synonyms of that canonical tag, and searching for **Once Upon a Time (TV)** will find works tagged with any of these other Fandom tags as well" ("Archive FAQ: Tags"). AO3's "tag wranglers" work behind the scenes to connect these disparate tags to their one canonical tag. This use of the word "canonical" is significant, in a very similar way as the use of "beta" mode is. The idea of a "canon" is much older than fandom, but it was co-opted by fandom to become shorthand for fanworks' source material, the fictional universe and its rules. Now that usage has gained a complimentary meaning in the context of AO3 tags, to indicate that the canonical tag is, while not being the "right" or

only possible tag for that fanwork, the tag that will fairly arbitrarily be used for clarity of meaning. This is significant in relation to the fannish nature of the site, and how it lives up to its motto of being “by fans for fans.” An understanding of the word “canon” is somewhat assumed in the users of the site, since most fanfic fans would be fairly versed in such fannish language. And for those who are too new to fandom to know this language, than AO3’s use of it can serve as part of the initiation process.

### iii. Initiation

AO3 is a well-organized, but complex site. For a fandom outsider, it may even be a bit overwhelming, but for a new fan, its complexity can serve as a form of initiation. Through AO3, a fan can master the use of the fannish vocabulary on and about the site, and gain entry into and an understanding of a fandom. Community is in part created by the new fan’s attempts to understand purposefully obfuscated “exclusionary” language (Hellekson & Busse 2006, 12). Fan *angelmojo* on Tumblr notes the existence of a fanfic language that is only decipherable to the initiated, for example, “36k wip destiel hs au on ao3” (West 2015). Translated to non-fan speak, this is a truncated way of saying: 36,000 word piece of fanfiction that is a work in progress, it’s a Destiel (the slash pairing of the characters Dean and Castiel from the TV show *Supernatural*) high school alternate universe (meaning that the characters from the show are placed in a setting or “universe” different from that of the show, in this case, a high school) and that the fic is located on Archive of Our Own. Other fans commented on that post marveling that they understand the sentence even though it only contains one “real” word. Whereas in the past, new fans would have had to find older fans to mentor them into the ways of paper zines and comic conventions, modern fans can enter a continuation of this fan community and tradition through the Archive. Thus, AO3 can function as a gateway to the previously more shuttered fanfiction community.



### III.B.3. Apps and Bookmarklets

AO3 can serve as a place of initiation for new fans just discovering fanfic, and it can also function as a place where older fans can stretch their creative and technological wings, and create apps and bookmarklets that make the experience of using AO3 easier for users of all skill levels.

The success of AO3 has inspired other intelligent and software-savvy fans to create apps and bookmarklets that can be used to enhance and ease a fan's AO3 experience, and do things that one otherwise can't do (yet). AO3 lists in their FAQ under "Cool Stuff" the useful tools fans have created. These include add-ons, extensions, plug-ins, etc. that can adjust and enhance how a user browses and searches the archive, posts and manages her own works, and displays and downloads AO3 works. For example, fans have created a tool that allows authors to download the stats on their works in easy to use formats, and a bookmarklet that allows a fan to post works directly from AO3 to her Pinboard, Dreamwidth, or Tumblr<sup>16</sup> with simple, clean formatting.

Fandom has a history of being populated by women who were "better educated than most, heavy readers, and scientifically literate" (Coppa 2006). So, given this history, as well as a tradition of being highly productive, it's no surprise that they would want to chip in to help improve a ground-breaking fannish site such as AO3. In the early days of the Internet, fans regularly created and maintained websites for the use of their fellow fans, despite what a spectacularly time-consuming endeavor that used to be. Now, fans continue this tradition by assisting with the functioning of AO3, something that AO3 appreciates and encourages.

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<sup>16</sup> These three being other somewhat fannish sites whose users regularly crossover with AO3 users.

### III.B.4. Fic and Intermediaries

Fanfiction has always been something that is part of a larger community – fans beta each other’s work, they create slang to communicate among themselves, and they come together to create new things and add to existing ones (from making apps for AO3, to maintaining websites, to making fanart for a favorite fic.) In this sense, the act of being a fan is not an individual one, and so it follows that fanfiction (its creation and its reception) is not a lonely one either. In particular, when a fan decides to delve into the world of fic, perhaps because she happened upon an interesting story or had a friend suggest it to her, it is nearly always a process with some sort of (technological or personal) intermediary.

The Internet has been heralded by some as a sort of Utopian even-playing field, since there are so many fewer gatekeepers to access, and of quality. Because of this, some say the Internet will lead to a world without intermediaries. But, others say that the Internet’s free-for-all nature and incomprehensible masses of content mean that intermediaries are, if anything, even *more* important. This has already been seen in the popularity of blogs and news aggregators: people don’t want to sift through piles of meaningless content to find a few gold nuggets, not when other people are willing to do that for them (Farchy 2011).

The immediacy of access to fanfiction through the Internet sometimes means that there don’t always appear to be any intermediaries in that realm, certainly not ones like the publicists and advertisers employed by professional authors. However, even though people can ostensibly find the fanfiction they’re interested in reading on their own, it is almost always found with the help of an intermediary of one sort or another, whether more directly through fan rec lists, or through the mediation of the fanfiction’s host website itself.

#### i. Rec Lists

Many fans find at least a starting point for reading fic from a recommendation list, called a “rec list.” This is a list of fics of a particular fandom, pairing, or more specific subset of fic. For example, a fan could compile a huge rec list of all her favorite Destiel stories, regardless of length or content. Or it could be more precise, like a rec list of Destiel fics under or over a certain word count, or focusing on a particular type or trope, like a list of the fan’s favorite Destiel Serial Killer AUs<sup>17</sup>. The bigger the fandom, the more likely a fan is to be able to find a rec list that suits her fancy.

Part of a fan’s contribution to the gift culture can be in the form of compiling a rec list. Many fans who don’t want to write fic, or otherwise directly produce creative works, play an equally important role: that of curating said works. Fans who make rec lists, write meta, and analyze scenes contribute to the community and the formation of the fanon, which then helps the creation of fic.

AO3 builds rec lists into its site: when a user bookmarks a fic, she can choose to make it a “rec.” Then, she, or other users, can sort her bookmarks to see this automatic “rec list.” While not the most precise manner of curating a rec list, it is easy and simple, and this option may yet evolve since the site is still in

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<sup>17</sup> A fairly popular alternate universe setting in which one or more of the characters are re-imagined as serial killers.

beta. The idea of incorporating this fan practice directly into the website is an interesting one, and shows the dedication of the site's creators towards reflecting the fan communities' traditions into its functioning.

## ii. Site and Searching

Fans' search for fanfiction is also mediated by the site that they use. For example, if a fan goes to Wattpad looking for 1-Direction RPS (slash of the members of the band 1-Direction) she will have far more success than if she searched the site for slash from an older fandom like *Smallville*. This would be reversed if she searched on AO3, which caters to a slightly older audience, more deeply entrenched in traditional forms of fandom (like slashing TV characters as opposed to musicians.)

AO3 has advanced searching techniques, allowing fans to search works, people, bookmarks, and tags. Thus, a fan can look for specific works or authors, she can find a work she bookmarked previously, or she can search through tags. The most useful of these is perhaps the works search function. This allows a user to search by the works' info like title, author, or word count; work tags like fandom, rating, warnings, and relationships; and work stats like hits, kudos, comments and bookmarks. These can be used for a variety of purposes; from finding a specific fic the user read once and wants to read again, to browsing a fandom or pairing for the most quality works, to looking for a new, very specific type of fic to read. For example, if a fan were in the mood for a Dean/Castiel Coffee Shop AU that has more than 100 kudos but less than 10000 words, she can search for and find exactly that.

AO3's excellence as an intermediary for fans looking for fanfiction is one of the reasons it is so successful. It provides a valuable service to the community, and in turn, the community supports it.

Thus, interaction is a primary facet of fandom, fanfiction, and the experience of fanfiction on AO3 in particular. Readers and fans interact with each other through the practice of beta-ing, and with the website through its use of fannish language, and by creating apps and bookmarklets to increase the site's usability. The process of finding fic is intermediated by other fans and by the AO3 site, further showing that community is a key element of fandom as we know it today.

#### IV. Conclusion

“[T]he archive is never closed. It opens out of the future.”

- Derrida, *Archive Fever*

Archive of Our Own is a fast growing and incredibly popular fannish archive and, for many, the ideal fannish future. AO3, just a fannish dream about a decade ago, has now become a reality, and a mainstay for the modern fan. AO3 serves its function as an archive, protecting fannish works and preserving their content and context as best it can. AO3 and the OTW work to not just preserve fannish works but to actively protect them and work towards a legal and social legitimacy for all transformative works. Created by fans for fans, the archive reflects (positively) the gendered nature of the fan community, serves as a hub of that community, and reflects the community’s highly valued gift culture.

The gender, community, and gift culture of media fandom are reflected and incorporated into AO3’s form and function. The gift culture and its components (to give, receive, and reciprocate) are built into the site’s structure and function, through options like comments, kudos, and bookmarks. The site’s archival nature and respect for tradition indicate the importance the site places on community. And, the OTW’s mission statement declares that they value the gendered nature of fanfic fandom, with this statement supported by the female-majority running the site, and the OTW’s support of the female-gendered gift economy. AO3 reflects fan values, and so is valued by fans. It provides a safe space for the fan community. It provides a valid alternative to male-oriented commercial options of publishing, and protects and respects fan traditions and histories.

AO3 and the strong community of intelligent, educated, tech-savvy women it has gathered shows that fans can and will organize to affect positive change in their community, and that they don’t need the support of mainstream publishing or advertisers to succeed. AO3 is the product of pure fannish creation, allowing for the free distribution of fanworks unfettered by censorship or the constraints of advertisers, and it has been a resounding success within the fan community. AO3 is proof that a group of motivated women can, with the power of their community behind them, succeed in creating something powerful and beautiful, outside of male capitalist structures.

In terms of larger academic significance, exploration of fandom’s creative, technological, and social successes can give significant insight into the workings of a female-dominated community. Exploration of fandom’s gift economy in particular gives insight into the functioning of a modern gift economy embedded in the US’s capitalist narrative. It shows the advantages and disadvantages of being separate from corporate and commercial functioning, while still existing within the capitalist paradigm. Its mere existence is proof that alternate methods of exchange and production can exist in the modern commercial world, but its struggles show how hostile that world is. Further exploration of the way the fannish gift economy adapts to, or is subsumed by, future legal and societal change can provide a case study of a gendered community that tries to remain separate from the mainstream, while still functioning in larger society.

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