

HG2052 Language and Technology
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Assignment 1

The Archive of Our Own: an analysis of the modes of communication on the internet's most prolific fanfiction website

Introduction

With the advent of the internet and the increasingly widespread availability of computers, computer mediated communication (CMC) has emerged. Defined by Herring (2011) as 'predominantly text-based human-human interaction mediated by networked computers or mobile telephony', CMC is a bountiful and intriguing field of study for linguists, who aim to classify and analyse it.

In this essay, I will be looking at the site Archive of Our Own (AO3), a website dedicated to hosting fan works (most prominently fanfiction), and studying how its users communicate on it and compare it to the seven features of communication as established by Crystal (2006).

What exactly is fanfiction? Mirmohamadi (2014) defines it as the 'unauthorised adaption and re-writing of media texts by fans'. Fanfiction is usually produced and consumed by fans; such fan communities are now termed as fandoms. Fanfiction and fandom surprisingly have long and dedicated histories, starting from Sherlock Holmes fan societies in the 1920s. However, modern fandom as we know it, traces its roots in the Star Trek and science fiction fan communities from the 1970s and 1980s. Prior to the Internet, fan communities in the 1970s and 1980s produced and published zines meant to be consumed by a limited number of people. These zines had a limited run and were passed from person to person through traditional means such as in-person fan meet ups or by post (Verba, 2003).

Moving into the age of the Internet, this sense of community was kept as fandoms moved gradually into online spaces. Fans moved online and created fansites in the 1990s hosted on GeoCities or Yahoo Groups; or kept a digital mailing list now sent through email. Through time, the sense of community stayed in fan culture, even as fandoms splintered in the age of LiveJournal in the 2000s (Busse and Helleckson, 2006). The Archive of Our Own was created in 2007 in response to copyright strikes and increasing hostility against fan work in general, upon which I will elaborate further in another section. In this essay, I will be looking at how the Archive allows for communication on its website, and evaluate its effects in fandom at large.

Relevant Literature

There has been some research on fanfiction and communication in general. Magnifico, Curwood, and Lammers (2015) argue that the act of creating fanfiction is an inherent social practice, 'similar to classroom common classroom writing practice of workshopping or sharing with peers.' In their article, Magnifico et al. (2015) looks at young fanfiction writers' literary practices on Fanfiction.net, Deviantart.com, and Figment.com, focusing on fanfiction reviews, as it is the most like classroom feedback sessions. They found that most reviewers did not leave constructive feedback on the author's writing, but instead preferred to comment on the content of the work or their own emotional experiences while reading the text. However, those who did choose to provide constructive feedback also justified their right to do so by emphasizing their fannishness. While this is a study focusing on possible pedagogical methods for use in literacy teaching, it still provides an important look into how readers and creators communicate with another through fanfiction reviews.

More interestingly, some scholars have pushed the stance that the fanfiction itself *is communication*. Turk (2014) first argues that fandom as a gift economy, 'based on giving, receiving, and reciprocating'. Fanfiction here is a gift, and often as a result of dialogue between fans. One fan might provide writing prompts, and a writer would reciprocate in kind with a complete story in turn. Or there might be writing challenges, one example of which are writers grouping together to each write one chapter of a multi chapter story. Turk's (2014) focuses on the relationship between the creation of fan works and labour, but the framing of fanfiction as dialogue is also an interesting reframing of communication in fannish spaces. This essay will also take fanfiction as a mode of communication, alongside more prototypical modes such as comments and reviews.

Insofar there has not been an extensive study of communication on the Archive, and this is possibly due to the Archive's relative newness on the internet. It became operational only 12 years ago, and there is still uncertainty in how to approach it in comparison to older fan sites such as Fanfiction.net.

What is Archive of Our Own?

Archive of our Own (AO3) is a non-commercial, and non-profit website, established in 2007 by the Organization of Transformative Works (OTW) (Organization of Transformative Works, n.d). The OTW is a non-profit organization that aims to advance studies and preservation of fan culture and work and provide legal advocacy for the rights of transformative works.

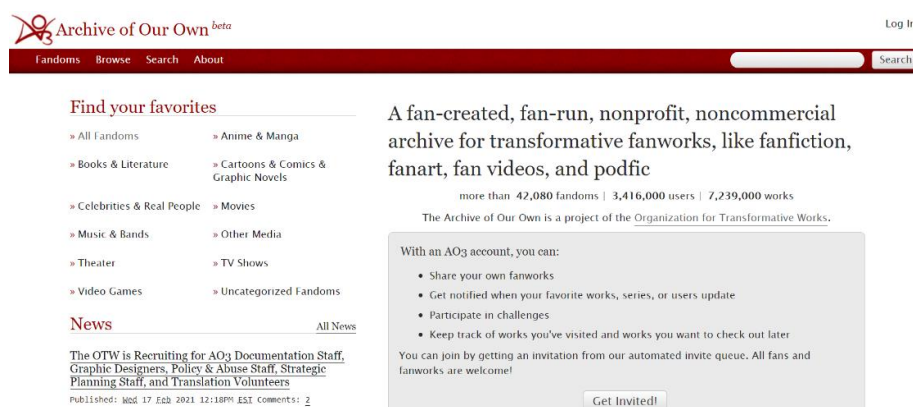
The Archive was created in response to increasingly hostile conditions for transformative works, the history of which I will be discussing in a later section. After a series of sitewide purges of fan communities on LiveJournal, FanLib.com was created to host and profit from fanfiction (Lothian,

2012). 3 million dollars of venture capital was invested in the company, and its main selling point was that it had established deals with various media companies who could in turn promote and advertise their content. The creation of FanLib was not well received. Many fans felt exploited, and the fact that FanLib was created by two men in a historically female and queer space was not lost on fan communities. In response, fanfiction writer astolat penned an essay titled 'An Archive of One's Own', drawing inspiration from Virginia Woolf's seminal feminist essay, and theorizing the possibility of a space created and owned for fans, by fans. Below is a quick excerpt from her post:

“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 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)

In October 2008, the site archiveofourown.org went live, and the first servers were bought in September 2009. Keeping in line with their mission statement of openness and transparency, the source code for archiveofourown.org is completely free to use, and is available for download on GitHub. Since then, both membership numbers and works have increased rapidly. In February 2014, the Archive achieved 1 million fan works uploaded. A short 6 years later, the number of works hosted on AO3 has surpassed 7 million in 2020, with membership numbers hitting 3 million users on 26th November 2020. In 2019, AO3 won for the category of Best Related Work in the Hugo Awards, a sign of acceptance of fan culture and transformative works in mainstream culture.

Functions of AO3



The screenshot shows the homepage of the Archive of Our Own (AO3). At the top, there is a dark red navigation bar with the AO3 logo and the text "Archive of Our Own beta". Below the navigation bar is a search bar with a "Search" button. The main content area is divided into several sections. On the left, there is a "Find your favorites" section with a grid of category links: All Fandoms, Anime & Manga, Books & Literature, Cartoons & Comics & Graphic Novels, Celebrities & Real People, Movies, Music & Bands, Other Media, Theater, TV Shows, Video Games, and Uncategorized Fandoms. Below this is a "News" section with a link to "All News" and a short article titled "The OTW is Recruiting for AO3 Documentation Staff, Graphic Designers, Policy & Abuse Staff, Strategic Planning Staff, and Translation Volunteers". On the right side, there is a large text block that reads: "A fan-created, fan-run, nonprofit, noncommercial archive for transformative fanworks, like fanfiction, fanart, fan videos, and podfic". Below this text are statistics: "more than 42,080 fandoms | 3,416,000 users | 7,239,000 works" and "The Archive of Our Own is a project of the Organization for Transformative Works." Below the statistics is a box titled "With an AO3 account, you can:" which lists several benefits: "Share your own fanworks", "Get notified when your favorite works, series, or users update", "Participate in challenges", and "Keep track of works you've visited and works you want to check out later". Below this list is a note: "You can join by getting an invitation from our automated invite queue. All fans and fanworks are welcome!" and a "Get Invited!" button.

The homepage of Archive of Our Own

As of March 2021, there are 42080 fandoms hosted on the Archive, with more than 7 million works. To be able to join the Archive as a member, you would have to receive an automated invite. While the Archive hosts a variety of content, such as fan art and podcast fanfiction, a great number of

content is still text-based fanfiction. While it is possible to read, comment, and leave kudos on fan works hosted on the Archive without being a member, membership is needed to post and bookmark works, as well as to subscribe to other creators.

Desert Rose by [Borealisblue](#)

15 Feb 2021

Star Trek: The Original Series

No Archive Warnings Apply, [James T. Kirk/Spock](#), [Montgomery "Scotty" Scott](#), [Nyota Uhura](#), [Amanda Grayson](#), [Sarek \(Star Trek\)](#), [James T. Kirk](#), [Spock \(Star Trek\)](#), [Alternate Universe](#), [Soul Bond](#), [soul mates](#), [Slow Build](#), [Slow Burn](#), [Bonding](#), [Alternate Universe - Different First Meeting](#), [Mutual Pining](#), [So much pining its practically a forest](#), [Vulcan](#), [Vulcan Culture](#), [Vulcan Kisses](#), [Vulcan Mind Melds](#), [First Kiss](#), [T'hy'la](#), [Spock never joined Starfleet but everything else is the same](#), [My artwork](#)

The Captain of the USS Enterprise is sent to Vulcan on behalf of the federation to assist in the discovery of some ancient ruins. The ruins very existence may be a threat to the Vulcan society, and before he and his select team are able to seek them out they must study up on the old culture in the ancient libraries in the heart of ShiKahr city with the supervision of a professor from the Vulcan Science Academy, a Mr. Spock.

Language: English Words: 24,534 Chapters: [5/?](#) Comments: [49](#) Kudos: [115](#) Bookmarks: [23](#) Hits: 1381

An example of fanfiction hosted on Archive of Our Own

Above is an average example of a work hosted on the Archive. A prominent feature of the Archive is its tagging system, which allows users to search or filter works (Archive of Our Own, n.d) according to their needs and preferences. The tags are all hyperlinked, and by clicking on one the user will be directed to all works with that specific tag. Within the work itself, Authors may choose to include an Author's Note either before or after the work proper to further communicate with their audience.

At the very end of each page of the work, there are options for interactivity with the creator. There is a clickable button to give kudos to show appreciation, which functions similarly to a 'like' on Facebook or Twitter. One could also choose to comment on the work itself, to which the author could reply to if they so wished. If the user is a registered member, they could bookmark the work, which will be reflected in their user page under the section 'Works Bookmarked', which serves the function of being a virtual bookshelf available for other users to browse.

Analysis of AO3 in the framework of Crystal (2006)

In His book 'Language and the Internet', Crystal (2006) lays out seven primary features of speech and textual communication.

Speech-like	Text-like
Time-bound	<i>Space-bound</i>
<i>Spontaneous</i>	<i>Contrived</i>





Face-to-face	<i>Visually decontextualized</i>
<i>Loosely Structured</i>	<i>Elaborately structured</i>
<i>Socially interactive</i>	<i>Factually communicative</i>
Immediately revisable	<i>Repeatedly revisable</i>
Prosodically rich	<i>Graphically rich</i>

Words in italics and emboldened in the above table are characteristic of communication on AO3. This comes as no surprise, as the Archive is mostly text-based. It is inherently space-bound, due to the fact that communications are hosted on a website that uses text as communication, regardless of it being in the form of a comment or an author's note.

Communication on the Archive can be both spontaneous and contrived. The process of writing fanfiction is a long process involving planning, proofreading, and formatting. However, some might choose to opt out of this process altogether, and instead of uploading a PDF file of the work, the author might choose to type a short story of less than 500 words into a plain text box before submitting. The Archive does not have any limitations on word length, which means that a work could be as long as the Iliad, or just contain a single word. Similarly, the process of commenting can be both simultaneous and contrived; the reader might immediately take to the comment box after reading to proclaim their love for the work, or they might choose to mull over the text to give a detailed and specific response. Communication on the Archive is firmly visually decontextualized. Users can only communicate by text. The comment function does not allow for uploading of pictures.

Communication is loosely factually communicative. Fanfiction can involve canonical plot points from the original work and feature canon characters, but transformative works are inherently deviational, and fanfiction writers frequently change the setting, plot, and even characters of the story by introducing new premises or characters. Instead, it is more socially communicative. As a social process, the author might choose to take suggestions from readers as for where the story might go next. Additionally, AO3 allows for statistics tracking. If an author enables statistics tracking and sees that their story is not faring as well as they had expected, they might choose to ass more relevant tags to render their work more discoverable.

The communication of the Archive is both loosely structured and elaborately structured. The pose of a fanfiction tends to be structured and formal in order to convey plot to readers. but there are exceptions too. Apart from traditional prose, authors might write looser, with poetry or experiment with abstract forms of writing to convey meaning. Some authors have also taken to leaving comments on their work in the tags itself. Comments too, might range from full, grammatical sentences to just a simple string of emojis to convey appreciation.

 **Cosmic Shift** by [What_of_All_Those_Wayward_Priests](#) 19 Feb 2021
 [Star Trek: Alternate Original Series \(Movies\)](#), [Star Trek](#)
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings, [James T. Kirk/Spock](#), [James T. Kirk](#), [Spock \(Star Trek\)](#), [Fluff](#), [Domestic Fluff](#), [Post-Five Year Mission](#), [Getting Together](#), [I love writing this kind of thing idek](#), [POV James T. Kirk](#), [Spock is too logical to mess around](#), [T'hy'la](#)
Unlike his counterpart, this Spock accepts his bond with Jim, and attempts to approach his Captain directly. It takes a couple of tries, but nobody runs away to Gol.
Language: English Words: 1,404 Chapters: 1/1 Comments: 2 Kudos: 40 Bookmarks: 5 Hits: 191

The author comments on their own work in the tags

Lastly, it is both repeatedly revisable and graphically rich. As an Archive, it allows authors to repeatedly edit and reupload their works as many times as they need. With the exception of podfics, narratives are only conveyed through the medium of either text or images.

Conclusion

Transformative works have always been somewhat like a conversation between the original media and the author. The creation of fan works elevates the process to a social and almost collaborative one, with the reader having a say in the creative process. The Archive elevates this experience by allowing more channels of communication between the creator and the audience; through comment thread and authors noted, and even the tagging system too. Above all, the legal advocacy the OTW provides ensures that transformative works are here to stay, safely hosted on the Archive of Our Own. More studies should be done on the communicative processes in fan works in general, but the Archive provides a new and interesting platform to analyze with its complicated tag system and bookmarking system

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