

## Freestyle, Flow, and Fanculture: Mapping the Technical Mediation of Fan Communities

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Fandom: Multiple, K/S, A/O, Sassy, B/F

Rated: PG

**AN: I would have liked to have gotten this into a better, more multimedia form, as I'm working on a Flash animation version of this paper, to better illustrate the mapping aspects. However, because of time constraints, I'm just presenting a paper version here.**

<p><b>Links</b></p> <p>Fanfiction.net aka The Pit, the largest archive of fanfiction on the net. <a href="http://www.fanfiction.net">http://www.fanfiction.net</a></p> <p>Passion and Perfection, the femslash archive. <a href="http://www.ralst.com/">http://www.ralst.com/</a></p> <p>Television Without Pity/TWoP, recaps, forums, and snark. Motto: 'Spare the snark, Spoil the networks' <a href="http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/">http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/</a></p> <p>Yahoo Groups, host to many fandom communities <a href="http://groups.yahoo.com/">http://groups.yahoo.com/</a></p> <p>LiveJournal/LJ is host to fanfiction, discussion, and commentary, including Slash This, a rec site and Slash Writers, a metacommentary community on the nature of slash. <a href="http://www.livejournal.com/">http://www.livejournal.com/</a></p>	<p><b>A brief history of fanculture</b></p> <p>"There is no better critic than a fan." —Constance Penley</p> <p>Fanculture, the cultures that arise out of the work of fans in their associated fandoms, encompasses a variety of fan activities in response to popular culture, from discussing episodes on user forums to creating fanfiction, fanart, and fanvideo to creating database archives of fan activity. In the late 1980s, Constance Penley brought the study of fanculture to academic attention through a study of the K/S (Kirk/Spock) slash fandom, a group of heterosexual women who wrote homosexual pornographic stories based on characters from the <i>Star Trek</i> series. She identified particular characteristics of fanculture, including fan's productive use of consumptive media, the use of technology to support production, and work-like nature of their involvement.</p> <p>Penley describes the nature of the group of K/S slashers as "their solidarity as a group also rests on their pride in having created both a unique hybridized genre that ingeniously blends romance, pornography, and utopian science fiction and a comfortable yet stimulating social space in which</p>
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## Fandom Icons



woman can manipulate the products of mass-produced culture to stage a popular debate around issues of technology, fantasy, and everyday life. This, of course, is my version of it. The fans would say they are just having fun” (137).

This fun, however, has many work-like aspects to it, as she explains:

“The K/S fans... are not just reading, viewing, or consuming in tactical ways that offer fleeting moments of resistance or pleasure while watching TV, scanning the tabloids, or selecting from the supermarket shelves... they are producing not just intermittent, cobbled together acts, but real products (albeit ones taking off from already-existing heterogenous elements)—zines, novels, artwork, videos—that (admirably) mimic and mock those of the industry they are ‘borrowing’ from while offering pleasures found lacking in the original products” (139).

These, she argues, show how consumption is itself a form of production.

Penley characterizes this as a mini-industry, with it's own apparatuses of advertising and publishing, juried prizes, stars, music videos (fanvids), and elements of a critical apparatus (139-40). The appropriate levels of technology that Penley locates in zine publishing in the 80s has, of course, moved to the internet with its many different ways to create and disseminate information quickly and cheaply.

### **A personal history**

I was a participant before I was a researcher. When I was in middle and junior high school, I had two passions: reading, particularly fantasy and graphic novels, and role-playing.

Growing up in a small Ohio town meant that there were few D&D role-playing groups, and none that would allow a girl to play. I had the AD&D books, and I would set out adventures and play the games out myself, using the books and maps as prompts for my imagination, an imagination trained to look to popular culture from early in my childhood, as I played with *Star Wars* and *Six Million Dollar Man* action figures throughout. At the time, I also read—religiously—the graphic novels of *Elfquest*, saving my allowance for months to order books through the mail.

This imaginative play reached its height when I took an English class that required extensive creative writing. I had never done well in my English classes prior; while I read and wrote well, I rarely spent much time on my writing, finding it a poor substitute and time-consuming translation of the imaginative workings that went on in my head. But when pushed to produce a large portfolio of writing, I ended up writing fanfiction. I transported the characters from *Elfquest*, since that narrative was played out in my books, into the worlds of AD&D and wrote stories based on these further adventures of the characters. It seemed easier, somehow, to have the props already there and to reanimate them in these different ways. For the first time, I wrote prolifically and with passion, and when I finished that class, my teacher put me into an the advanced placement English for my first year of junior high. When I asked her why, she replied, simply, “You write good stories.”

At the time, I didn’t know there was a parallel movement happening with women writing stories about Star Trek, or that it had a name and distribution network. Quite on my own, I created my own version of fanfiction. I wonder if I was the first fanfiction writer in the *Elfquest* fandom. Currently, on

fanfiction.net, there are 236 stories archived.

### **Consumption, production, and fanculture**

What is interesting about this phenomenon, which is now embodied in various fandom communities organized around almost any media text is how seriously and how much time, effort, and energy devoted to this supposed 'play' activity. Editorial boards, elaborate methods of distribution (pre-Internet), and engaged, sustained commentary on the nature of fandom and the 'ship (relationship) all rose up around this seemingly innocuous and private story-telling these women were engaged in. Now, in the age of the Internet, the fan culture and the associated productive activities associated with it (writing, video production, picture manipulation, and web design and hosting, just to name a few) has spread to all kinds of fandoms around the world. On, fanfiction.net, the largest fanfiction archive, fiction is collected into genres like anime, books, cartoons, comics, games, movies, and television shows, with around 500 books or shows listed under each genre. The largest community, *Harry Potter*, has approximately 200,000 fictions archived, and the number grows every day. The developers and administrators of fanfiction.net have developed a suite of on-line tools to allow users to manage their fiction and review activities as well as advanced search features for readers. The point I would like to make here is that this play activity, for there's nothing more playful than re-writing popular culture, is productive in that writers and readers are creating texts, artifacts, and communities and that this production is supported and mediated by computer technologies. Further, these productive activities and the computer systems used to support them are very much like the systems created for communication and text sharing in industry.

In writing about CSCW (Computer-Supported Collaborative Work), Sandy Stone explains, “Part of the informing philosophy of this discipline is the idea that all human activity can be usefully interpreted a kind of work, and that work is the quintessential defining human capacity” (9). Examining the history of computer technology and theoretical approaches that focus on useful technology, Stone creates a distinction between work and play and contrasts the work ethic to a play ethic. She asserts “a significant part of the time that humans spend in developing interactional skills is devoted not to work but to what by common understanding would be called play” (Stone 9).

However, I think to characterize the industrious nature of some pleasureable pursuits as simply play misses an important possibility of paying serious attention to serious investments of time, money, and engagement that these fans put into productive enterprises. A false distinction is created when we think that work is the serious stuff we do in places of employment for a paycheck, and play is the stuff we do when we just want to have fun. What this distinction obscures is the fact that we can be very serious and work-oriented in our play, and that our playtime passions and interests can be a part of our money-earning pursuits. So I advance the concept of “serious play” as a way to focus critical attention to the productive pursuits we do in a variety of contexts, not all of which are workplaces.

“The method becomes ‘actionary’ rather than ‘re-actionary’—you end up with a culture that is healthier and more dynamic. What Kammerer would call a series, someone like Henry Louis Gates would call ‘signifyin’’. It’s all about how we play with perception of events, and this is

the link that I make between DJ culture, techno-science, and the art of everyday creativity in a digital environment. A rhythm scientist begins as an archivist of sound, text, and image.”

“The same track? The same beat? Day after day, night after night... it would be like some kind of living death if that were to happen in DJ culture. Unfortunately, that’s how much of the culture works. But there are those—from Jamaican dub artists to Silicon Valley engineers—who want to count this entropy. They propagate what Amiri Baraka called ‘the changing same’: offering iterations of versions and versions of everything, all change all the time.”

—DJ Spooky aka Paul D. Miller

Fanculture operates in much the same way DJ Spooky asserts DJ culture does: as a creative, dynamic response to a cultural landscape littered with artifacts of consumption rather than production. It’s ‘the changing same’: the mining of a limited number of artifacts to create a vast cultural response, in the form of stories, images, videos, commentary, and communities. Thus, we can see the consumptive and productive practices of fanculture are tightly tied, and, further, are a form of literacy, of readin’ and writin’ the culture, that is tied to particular discourse subcultures within each fan universe or fandom. Miller writes that “Saying that people are literate means that they have read widely enough to reference texts, to put them in a conceptual framework. They are capable of creating an overview.” His comments occur in the context of the idea of DJ mixing and sampling as dual

consumptive and productive stances available as subject-positions in a world of media texts. In his view, people move through the world as semantic web, borrowing, sampling, and ultimately remixing texts for their own expressive or productive ends.

This dynamic which Miller highlights in the freestyle world of hip-hop can be seen as the structuring dynamic of literacy as well: in a research writing assignment, for example, students sample academic texts and remix or repurpose them in pursuit of their own expressive or argumentative goals. However, the position of consumer is an easily-assumed place in the modern media culture, while the position of producer is seen to be a special providence of only those marked by the difference of genius or expertise: the artist, the author, or the professor. Fanculture is one of the responses to popular culture artifacts that doesn't take these consumer and producer subject-positions as a given; it's actually a very early response to take response into the realm of production through close reading and data-mining of the original product. Canon becomes fanon, an expanded universe that reminds us that products have a life of their own once they are created.

It is almost too simple to say that computer and media technologies mediate the 'work' of these communities, but this simplicity masks a complex phenomenon, a vast web of technologies, practices, discourses, and community interactions. For example, the website [fanfiction.net](http://fanfiction.net) is a primary tool for many fanculture writers to archive, read, and review fanfiction, and in and of itself hosts a huge archive of stories and offers readers and writers many features for interaction beyond posting and reading stories. However, the technological mediation of fanculture extends well beyond this

single site and into a multitude of sites and interactive technologies, including Television Without Pity, Livejournal, YouTube, Yahoo Groups, SendSpace, and AIM.

This presentation traces and maps the ways in which interactive technologies create and sustain the unofficial cultures that reproduce and renarrate cultural artifacts. This mapping is a social mapping of the diffuse activities and discourses of fanculture across virtual landscapes with the goal of highlighting how different communities negotiate differing views, standards, and orientations toward the same set of cultural products. To this end, I will present a case, or rather, a map, of the *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* fandom, and specifically the ways in which conflict and creativity plays out over several mediations. This textual (for now) map will illustrate how the proliferation of technologies creates a dynamic environment for the various literate activities of fanculture, including consumption, production, and commentary.

**Case Study: *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit***

This paper presents an initial discussion of a research project I'm conducting on how people within a fanculture use technology, and today I will be discussing the *L&O: SVU* Alex/Olivia (A/O) fandom in particular. A bit about my involvement in the communities and my research: I came to A/O fandom through my research on CSI femslash and through a particular tv metacommentary site, TWoP (Television Without Pity). TWoP is a humorous yet critical voice in TV fandoms, with recaps and user forums. I started TWoP through reading the Alias recaps, and then branched into the CSI and then SVU forums. The SVU forum, a key epicenter for a group of mostly sophisticated and mostly A/O fans, consolidates a small subgroup of SVU fans who discuss

and, in keeping with the TWoP creed, harshly critique the object of their passion, L&O SVU. Further, the most lively and fun thread of the forum, "The good, the bad, and brain-scorching fanfic," takes this critical apparatus to the productions of fan writers. Good writers and stories are lauded, new updates to the best stories and fanfic archives, like the Passion and Perfection femslash archive hosted and moderated by Ralst, and most importantly, bad fanfiction writing and writers are taken to task. On this thread, ff.net is commonly referred to as "The Pit," a place where the horrors of bad writing are inflicted upon all those who venture in by the worst of the worst of fanfiction writers, the tweeners. The plots, the grammar, the way even the most horrid of writing generates positive, yet often badly written, reviews (in tweenspeak, no less, "OMG, this is so good. U gotta rite more soon") are panned daily and even hourly on the thread, mercifully skewering the badness and generating an endless supply of laughable slang for the in-group, like the beret story and Make Them Make Out. Much of this slang and in-group speak is collected on a site called 'baby lurches,' a companion piece to the forum which helps newbies understand what is being said on the forum.

Posters to the TWoP fanfiction thread take fanfiction.net to task often as they comment and police the good, the bad, and the brain-scorching fiction to be found in the SVU fan universe. Sample conversation after someone has posted a link to a fic:

**Y:** Ya know **X,** I was looking at this gem yesterday and was really sad that there are currently so few fics of this calibre at The Pit. I think the spelling of attack (attach) is my favourite. I too have been worried about Olivia being attached.

**Z:** Ok, my head hurts from just the first few lines of *The Secret's*, mostly from the POV changes. Is it too much to ask for a minimally literate individual to keep to one perspective for more than 10 sentences?

Oh, it is? I figured.

OR

**A:** A new [Ficover](#) at The Pit. The summary sounds very promising.

"Olivia is rapped what will the svu squid do when Olivia is about to die?"

I'm sorry about Olivia getting rapped (is that wrapped?), but I am so excited to hear about the squid. I've been wondering when they were going to get a mascot. Though they probably could have thought about an animal that was kind of cuddly, rather than a marine animal that jets out deadly poison. I'm looking forward to reading this fic, it seems as though rather than acting as a mascot, the squid has joined the team as a detective... I guess it's pretty obvious that if you have someone wrapped, then the more arms available to unwrap the better. Maybe she is being wrapped by another squid? Maybe a CI squid? Hopefully there'll be more to the story than the summary gives away. I'll post when I read the actual fic, and we'll see how close I was.

*ETA: mmm, it appears it was just a case of some bad spelling... but it has inspired me to write some squid fic.*

Most of the better A/O writers check into this site regularly, and even craft some satiric stories on the Red Thread, but while TWP forms one center for this fandom, the productive work of the fandom is distributed across many different sites and technologies. For example, new SVU eps air regularly on Tuesday nights at 10, and soon after the show airs, a thread is begun in the forum to discuss the show. Most fans find the show much decreased in quality from its heyday of the 2-4 seasons, and pan it for recurring problems in the storylines. However, while most people check into TWP after the show, there are other technical mediations that come into the Tuesday night rituals, including a weekly drinking game hosted on a core group of fans LJs, where the drinking game rules are posted before the show, watchers post comments during the show, and then adjourn to the lockers (AIM) after the show to discuss just how craptastic this particular show happened to be. So just in viewing the show, fans may be watching TV, logged onto their computer and keeping a running commentary on certain aspects of the show on LJ, and posting to the TWP forums afterwards while logged into AIM.

Other technical mediations involved in the productive aspects of fanfiction writing include basic word processing, web publishing, suites of tools on sites like ff.net or SVUfiction, and/or posting to a listserv or community LJ. Yahoo groups hosts the most prolific A/O writing forum, with daily updates from the longest-running A/O fanfic ever, It's Gotta Be Love, now with over 1800 installments. The best archive for

specifically femslash fanfiction and fanvids is P&P, and LJ communities often host different challenges and/or hosting and recommendation features (Slashthis recs most of the best femslash in many different fandoms, including SVU but also BSG (Battlestar Galatica), Grey's Anatomy, etc.).

Like most users of technology, the fans of these fandoms manipulate a variety of technological affordances and constraints, spread across a variety of platforms and mediations, to perform their work of watching, critiquing, and creating. These different avenues provide different support structures, some inherently user-centered, like the posting features of ff.net, which an elaborate and routinely updated set of user tools to create, post, review, and manage fanfiction stories. Other technologies, like AIM and LJ, are adapted to suit the particular needs of the communities without fan productive activities written into the support structures. Like so many adaptive uses of technology, users create innovations and idiosyncratic ways of manipulating the technology to suit their own ends.

In many ways, the matrix of technologies employed mirrors the kinds of workplace applications of information systems that CSCW is trying to map. An information system, rather than an information technology, is a computer system that supports the work of an organization through supplying a variety of technologies to aid in the production and dissemination of documents and information. Spinuzzi, in *Tracing Genres through Organizations*, argues that information systems designers need to learn from the idiosyncratic user innovations that allow them to adapt information technologies and systems to fit their work-in-context; similarly, in looking at the practices of users in serious play activities, we might begin to learn about the

different pleasures and motivations that undergird these productive play activities and begin to question the creation of work-oriented computer systems and learning structures. In the design of such work-oriented systems, we tend to focus on efficiency and effectiveness, the two buzzwords of usability studies, but in looking beyond how quickly one can successfully create a macro in MS Word, we should begin to assess the values that users bring to their productive practices, be it ‘leaving work at 5 pm’ or ‘not being isolated from co-workers.’ Learning from serious play, particularly in terms of technology use, is one avenue of research to help us inscribe human values into information systems design.

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