

# UPDATE SOON! HOW READERS SHAPE ONLINE FANFICTION

Ellen Barth

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

*I'm liking this story so far [...] Can't wait to see more!*

*Intriguing if a tad too fast paced. [...] Please continue this story.*

*I love your story and can[']t wait to see what happens next, please update soon!'*

Comments such as the ones above are typical of reader reviews left on digitally published fanfiction stories. Beyond their encouraging sentiments, reader comments such as these have the ability to do much more than support and give feedback to a fan author. These, and other forms of online reader interaction, have the power to influence and change the text of a story—before, during, and after publishing.

The Internet and digital technologies have influenced reading in myriad ways. In addition to the classic role of “construing texts and making sense of life”,<sup>2</sup> readers now have digital tools that allow them to interact with authors and influence texts.<sup>3</sup> According to John B. Thompson, digital technologies bring

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<sup>1</sup> FanFiction.net, “Reviews for ‘a Will for Miracles’”, <<https://www.fanfiction.net/r/6598965/>> (2 January 2019).

<sup>2</sup> R. Darnton, “First Steps Towards a History of Reading”, *Australian Journal of French Studies* 23, no. 1 (1986), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Skains gives the example of how digital tools allow readers to have contact with authors, by which he means traditionally published authors, through author blogs and websites. R.L. Skains, “The Shifting Author-Reader Dynamic: Online Novel Communities as a Bridge from Print to Digital Literature”, *Convergence* 16, no. 1 (2010), p. 96.

with them potential digital added values to book and textual communication.<sup>4</sup> He speculates that there are at least nine—and likely more—ways digital technology potentially adds value to texts, including through updatability and intertextuality.<sup>5</sup> These added values are used to varying degrees by different communities. Academics have, for example, benefited from the searchability of digital content; however, readers of e-books may find that ease-of-access and flexibility, two more of Thompson’s added values, have not been fully embraced by e-book publishers. Indeed, for some communities, these added “values” may not be seen as values at all, but rather as being detrimental to established business and cultural practices. The online fanfiction community, however, is one group that has taken clear advantage of these added values, making this community a particularly interesting case for observing the changes that can potentially be wrought by digital technology.

Fanfiction is a type of derivative fiction based on previously established mass media worlds and characters. It has existed since the 1960s, originating with passionate *Star Trek* fans. But despite its early origins, fanfiction did not achieve massive popularity until the rise of the Internet as a communications platform. Online, fans who would otherwise have been highly limited in their contact due to geographical and economic factors were able to connect and share stories quickly, cheaply, and easily. Since the 1960s, fanfiction has branched out to include diverse media inspirations (fandoms), be they television shows, films, bands, books, video games, or anime. Today, millions of amateur and unauthorized fanfiction stories have been pub-

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<sup>4</sup> J.B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Plume, 2012), pp. 339–343.

<sup>5</sup> The others are: ease of access, scale, searchability, portability, flexibility, affordability, and multimedia. Thompson, *Merchants*, pp. 339–340.

lished online on dedicated platforms and blogs,<sup>6</sup> and the number continues to grow.<sup>7</sup>

Part of what has made online fanfiction so popular is the community's continual innovation and dynamism. This is true not only for their storytelling—which can involve alternative universes, bizarre crossovers, and original characters dropped into well-known media worlds—but the community is also nimble and flexible in regard to digital technologies. Fans readily adopt digital features like tags, linking, digital gifts, and digital art. As a group, they have utilized the resources available to them as few other online communities have, combining social media and easy-to-use Web interfaces, often referred to as Web 2.0, with the early Internet ethos of “giving it away.”<sup>8</sup>

A result of this technological and creative openness is a more participatory role for fanfiction readers. At various stages in the publishing process and through the use of voluntary labor, updatability, and hyperlinking, readers have the ability to influence and help shape the stories they read, giving evidence to the shifting role of the reader in the digital age.

### **Beta Wanted**

The online fanfiction community is one of free expression, exchange, and, more often than not, support. One of the earliest and most common ways readers support authors and influence

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<sup>6</sup> To give some idea as to how much fanfiction is published online, in 2015, more than forty fandoms each produced over 2,500 stories on FanFiction.net, with the top three fandoms alone producing over 80,000 individual works. Tumblr, “2015: A (Statistical) Year in Fandom”, <<http://toastystats.tumblr.com/post/137252531603>> (16 January 2019).

<sup>7</sup> For example, between the period of 1 January through 9 January 2019, over 6,000 works were published on Archive of Our Own.

<sup>8</sup> One early reference to this tendency appeared in a 1994 issue of *MacWorld Magazine*: “The Internet is one gigantic well-stocked fridge ready for raiding; for some reason, people go up there and just give stuff away.” D. Pogue. “Mega ‘Zines: Electronic Mac Mags Make Modems Meaningful”, *MacWorld Magazine* (May 1995), p. 144.

fanfiction stories is through editing and proofreading before publishing.

Fanfiction writers are not required to put their stories through an editing process before publishing, but those who desire to do so work with so-called “beta readers” to improve the quality of their texts. A beta reader is, simply, an amateur fanfiction editor or proofreader, and they are themselves ordinary fans and members of the community. The “beta” in the beta reader’s title is a reference to beta testing, a computer programming practice of trying out a program or website in order to find and fix problems, “bugs”, before a public launch. Equally, beta readers look for “bugs” in a story and make suggestions to the writer about how to correct them.<sup>9</sup> They “rea[d] a work of fiction with a critical eye, with the aim of improving grammar, spelling, characterization, and general style of a story prior to its release to the general public.”<sup>10</sup>

A beta reader is tasked with revealing errors in the story as well as giving encouraging and supportive feedback.<sup>11</sup> When beta readers find errors in a text, it is customary for them to communicate this to the writer in a gentle fashion, an idea that is encapsulated by the fanfiction term “concrit”, short for constructive criticism. Rather than concerning themselves with making the text as error-free as possible, beta readers provide fan writers with a safe environment for exploring their creativity while at the same time improving their writing skills.<sup>12</sup>

In this way, beta readers are in a position to shape texts

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<sup>9</sup> H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 179.

<sup>10</sup> FanFiction.net, “Beta Readers”, <<https://www.fanfiction.net/betareaders/>>, (15 January 2019).

<sup>11</sup> H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, p. 180.

<sup>12</sup> R.W. Black, “Access and Affiliation: The Literacy and Composition Practices of English-Language Learners in an Online Fanfiction Community”, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 49, no. 2 (2005), p. 125.

before they are published through their correction, criticism, and encouragement. Their ideas and suggestions influence the writer and, following that, influence the text.

Beta readers work voluntarily. In fact, most everything about the fanfiction publishing process is voluntary and part of an online gift culture. Sharing stories, a common initial gift, starts a process of reciprocal giving, a “feedback loop”<sup>13</sup> in which gifts of labor, time, and attention are voluntarily exchanged in the online space between community members. In exchange for their labor, beta readers are given name credit and / or thanked before the start of a fanfiction story. These notes of thanks give beta readers prestige within the community as well as draw attention to their own talent and labor.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, unlike an editor or proofreader in traditional publishing, who performs a similar function but is rarely credited in the final work, a beta reader’s name credit associates them closely with the text. On this, Angelina I. Karpovich states:

[T]he writer is the person ultimately responsible for the story, because she is the person whose name will be most directly associated with the story once it is made publicly available online, [however] any beta readers involved with a given story are conventionally also named by the story’s writer, and thus are also seen by the rest of the community as in some way accountable for the quality of the finished story.<sup>15</sup>

Through name credit, beta readers have their role of textual

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<sup>13</sup> K. Hellekson, “A Fannish Field of Value”, *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009), pp. 115–116.

<sup>14</sup> A.I. Karpovich, “The Audience as Editor”, in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, eds. K. Hellekson & K. Busse (Jefferson/London: McFarland Company, Inc., 2006), p. 181.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

influencer recognized within the community, understood as being less than writer but more than reader. This is perhaps the earliest way the author / reader barrier is bridged during fanfiction publishing, but not the last.

### **Update Soon**

Beta reading provides a way for fan readers to correct errors and influence stories before publishing; however, fanfiction writers also look to their general readers to be unofficial editors and proofreaders who can help improve the quality of a story. General readers are able to make authors aware of errors through reader feedback, given in comments or reviews at the end of stories or story chapters. And as digital content can be updated “quickly, frequently and cheaply,”<sup>16</sup> errors can quickly be corrected after publishing, prompting some amateur content creators to describe the situation as “not wrong for long.”<sup>17</sup>

Fan writers are, in part, motivated to share their stories for free online because, as part of a gift culture, they can expect the voluntary but reciprocal gift of positive and encouraging feedback in return. Writers invite this type of reader feedback through their author’s notes prior to the story and through tags, with prompts including “read and review” (R&R) or “constructive criticism welcome”. After a writer has received reader feedback, the updatability of online content allows them to engage in “a recursive process of revising and reposting.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, although fan writers consider stories to be complete when they have reached their narrative conclusion, this does not mean that the content therein will remain fixed, as it would with printed material.

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<sup>16</sup> J.B. Thompson, *Merchants*, p. 340.

<sup>17</sup> J. Macnamara, *The 21st Century Media (R)evolution: Emergent Communication Practices* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> R.W. Black, *Adolescents and Online Fanfiction* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), p. 55.

And as fanfiction is often published in a piecemeal fashion over an extended period of time—generally chapter by chapter—reader feedback can affect the course of a text during publishing, as well. Feedback is varied but generally includes suggestions for future plot developments, emotional reactions the story elicited in the reader, and requests to “update soon”. Reader feedback and requests for updates encourage fan writers to keep writing and posting their stories as it “creates a strong sense of an audience that is eagerly waiting for the story to continue and provides impetus for the author to carry on writing.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, reader reactions and suggestions for future plot developments can alter a narrative while it is in the process of being written and/or published.

In these ways, online fanfiction stories are an excellent example of Gary Hall’s concept of liquid books: stories and texts that can be “continually and collaboratively written, edited, annotated, critiqued, updated, shared, supplemented, revised, re-ordered, reiterated and reimagined”,<sup>20</sup> which is made possible through digital technology. Through these “epitextual conversations”<sup>21</sup> in the form of feedback and reviews, as well as through online updatability, fanfiction readers have the ability to shape fanfiction stories after they are published and while they are being written, further blurring the edges of the writer / reader distinction. In giving feedback as reciprocal gifts, fan readers not only assist in improving the quality of the texts they read, but they also become part of the creative process itself.

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<sup>19</sup> R.W. Black, “Access and Affiliation”, p. 128.

<sup>20</sup> G. Hall, “The Unbound Book: Academic Publishing in the Age of the Infinite Archive”, *Journal of Visual Culture* 12, no. 3 (2013), p. 497.

<sup>21</sup> M. Lindgren Leavenworth, “The Paratext of Fan Fiction”, *Narrative* 23, no. 1 (2015), p. 41.

### Read & Respond

To understand a fanfiction story, it is necessary to be familiar with the given fandom; for this reason, fan writers always mention the fandom of which their work is a part. Online, this reference is made in story “headers”, the area preceding a fanfiction story, and is often a hyperlink. In addition to listing the fandom, linked metadata in headers often include information about pairings, characters present in the story, warnings, ratings, and other story descriptions. With the click of a button, these pieces of linked metadata lead the reader to similar texts within the same media world or involving the same characters.

Thompson lists this under the digital added value of intertextuality, saying:

[A] feature of the online environment is that it is able to give a dynamic character to what we could describe as the referential function of texts. In the traditional medium of the printed text, the capacity to refer to other material is realized through conventional literary devices such as references, footnotes and bibliographies: these are mechanisms for referring the reader on to other texts upon which the author has drawn or which the author regards as important, interesting and / or worthwhile. In the online environment, the referential function of the text can be made much more dynamic[.]<sup>22</sup>

In online fanfiction, intertextuality provided by hyperlinks connects massive amounts of fan works to a single mass media inspiration—and thus to each other—creating a network of related content.

As members of a derivative storytelling community, it is per-

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<sup>22</sup> J.B. Thompson, *Merchants*, p. 343.

haps unsurprising that fans also take inspiration from existing *fanfiction* stories. Although not the most common practice in fan circles, fans can and do look to each other's stories for inspiration. Readers may use pre-existing fanfiction stories as a jumping off point for their own works, such as by writing a sequel to a fan text or retelling a story from another character's point-of-view. Hyperlinks play a valuable role in organizing the levels of storytelling and in crediting authors whose works served as inspiration. Hyperlinks added to the derivative story guide the reader to the overarching fandom as well as the "original" fanfiction story, providing the proper contextualization needed. Links also give the "original" fan author name credit, which is, as previously shown, an important form of "payment" in the fanfiction gift culture. Name credit acknowledges their role in the creative process, and the link attached to the author's name brings attention—and readers—to their stories.

Readers of fanfiction, therefore, can affect a fanfiction story after it has been published. In posting their own "new" piece of derivative fiction in response to a previously published fanfiction story and digitally linking it to the original, these fan reader-writers change the "old" story: they continue the narrative and connect it to another text and author, extending its textual boundaries.

The genre of fanfiction could be viewed as a collective body of reader response. That these stories are derivative and base themselves on the worlds, characters, and imaginings of others provides tantalizing glimpses into the mind of the reader/writer/re-imaginer. Fanfiction stories allow for continued readings of and engagement with a source material, and, supported by digital intertextuality, fan readers become part of a linked creative process of reading and responding through creative narrative expression.

## **Conclusion**

In the digital age, readers' voices are traveling farther than ever. Readers—especially readers of fiction—have various online platforms at their disposal for sharing their bookshelves, book reviews, and comments. However, within the fanfiction community, readers' voices do more than travel to other readers or researchers; they can travel into the text itself.

Through the use of digital added values and voluntary gift culture, readers have helped shape the stories they read. Beta readers wield considerable influence over online fanfiction stories before they are published. General readers influence texts through their comments and feedback, which, in combination with easy updatability of online texts, can shape the story during or after publishing. Fan readers can take their creative inspiration from mass media or other fanfiction works, connecting these stories through intricate hyperlinks and creating a rich intertextuality.

Online fans are not the only group to embrace digital added values, yet the online fanfiction community stands out for its size and commitment to these practices in fiction. Their texts give evidence to Hall's liquid books—changing, updatable, and collaborative—and their community practices expand the role of the reader. In their hyphenated existence as reader-editor — reader-reviewer—reader-writer, fanfiction readers shape stories and extend the boundaries of what readership in the digital age means.

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