Fan fiction online: Engagement, critical response and affective play through writing

■

Angela Thomas

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

This article provides a brief overview of the nature of online fan fiction communities. In doing so, it demonstrates the range of writing practices (and other media practices) that fans negotiate together to role-play scenes of engagement with canonical texts. Members involved in a 400 participant fan fiction world (Middle Earth Insanity) were studied to determine their general literacy practices within forums, chatting, role-playing and the discussions strands of the community. The interactivity of some particular members of the study who volunteered to engage in interviews and posts about their discursive and social experiences within their community allowed a clear understanding of these practices to emerge, and provided the opportunity to interrogate and critically analyse the context in which these practices occurred. The ways in which the young girls responded to both their texts and their role-playing experiences offered them the opportunity to also engage in self-reflexive critical practice about their reading, their choices, and their identities in their different forms. The article concludes by bringing the various experiences together and offering what was and could be learned through fan fiction online communities.

Introduction: Understanding fan fiction

The origins of fan fiction can be traced back to the 1930s pulp magazine *Fanzines,* and it enjoyed a surge in the late 1960s with the popularity of *Star Trek* (Jenkins, 1992). Since then, according to Black (2004), it is 'an element of popular culture that is ever growing in popularity as new technologies enable native and non-native speaking fans from all over the globe to meet online to share, critique, and build upon each other's fictions' (Black, 2004, p. 1). Borrowing settings, plots, characters and ideas from all forms of media and popular culture, fans weave together new tales, sometimes within the accepted canon (the real works from which they are borrowing), sometimes blending several ideas from different sources (e.g., *Star Wars* meets *Middle Earth*) together in a type of fiction called 'Crossovers', and sometimes imagining new possibilities for additional characters, different histories or different settings to build on existing stories, called 'Alternative Universe' fiction.

With the flourishing of fan sites online, the number of fan fiction sites has become prolific with thousands of sites dedicated to the writing of fan fiction

borrowing from such diverse sources as *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997), *Anime* cartoons (e.g. Takahashi, 2000) and *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1955), to name just a few. Academic attention is now being focused on fan fiction, with Henry Jenkins (1992, 2004) leading some of the foremost debate about its value for the development of children's writing. His observation that 'not everything that kids learn from popular culture is bad for them: some of the best writing instruction takes place outside the classroom' (Jenkins, 2004, online), sparked a furor in the US and spread quickly across the internet. Jenkins observed that through posting fan fiction online and receiving critical feedback from peers, many young people, particularly female adolescents, were gaining considerable insight into the writing process.

Another of Jenkins's claims was that the fans should be considered active designers and transformers of content, whereby they draw upon the canon, or literate texts that are available, and then manipulate them and integrate them with their own resources, knowledge, backgrounds and identities to construct something new. In further explicating some of the literacy skills developed by 'fanfic' writers, Lewis (2004) discusses the value of pop culture in providing a rich scaffold for children's writing. She claims,

> What fan fiction offers to these young writers is a great, existing storyline; interesting, three-dimensional characters that have already been developed; and a wealth of back-story to both pull from and write about. The inexperienced author doesn't have to spend all his or her time developing something original, but instead can focus on the actual skill of writing. It allows young authors to practice their craft without expending huge amounts of time and energy developing something 'original'. As they build their 'writing muscles', their writing improves and they tend to stray farther and farther from the source material. (Lewis, 2004, p. 3)

If we accept these two ideas, we are able to re-conceptualise an image of young fanfic writers *without* the stigma associated with Jenkins's use of de Certeau's term 'poacher' (Jenkins, 1992). Instead writers of fan fiction can be described as active manipulators and designers of original texts, using given cultural artifacts as a scaffold and launching point from which to develop considerable and worthwhile originality. This paper focuses on fan fiction created in online spaces, with an emphasis on the social and discursive literacy practices in which young people are immersed.

Social practices of fan fiction

In exploring the social practices of fan fiction I am drawing upon research I conducted with one online community, *Middle Earth Insanity*, and in particular two adolescent girls who ran the community, Tiana and Jandalf. Tiana and Jandalf originally met through the online fan fiction community fanfiction.net. Fanfiction.net is a site where people upload their own writing based on one of several fan categories: anime, book, cartoon, comic, game, movie,

television show or other. Members of the fan fiction community are able to read each other's stories, write reviews of each other's stories and seek assistance with aspects of their writing such as plot, characterisation, grammar, paragraphing and so on through the help of a 'beta writer' – somebody who has been deemed a proficient writer by the community. Tiana and Jandalf met when Jandalf wrote a review of Tiana's story. The girls decided to create their own adjunct community for three main reasons: 1) as young people they wanted more control over the community; 2) they wanted to write particular styles of fan fiction called 'crossover fan fiction' (where the worlds of Middle Earth and *Star Wars* were intertwined) and 'alternate universe fan fiction' (where they invented their own worlds), which were not encouraged by fanfiction.net; and 3) they wanted to write collaboratively, which was not so easy on fanfiction.net. Accordingly, *Middle Earth Insanity* was created, with the support of Tiana's mother.

Middle Earth Insanity is a web-based forum and as such is mostly 'asynchronous', in that the members are not necessarily all online simultaneously. There are currently 200 members in the community, ranging from age 13 to age 70 (Jandalf's grandfather is a character in the community!). The forum is divided into six sections:

- **General:** for contests, quizzes, fan art, questions, favourite quotes, links, personal journal writing and in-character diaries (some of the members, such as Tiana and Jandalf, also keep separate character journals on different sites – they have a character blog and a character livejournal for example).
- **Fanfiction:** for publishing fan fiction in all its forms: narratives, poetry, song lyric fiction and ideas for possible stories; also for writing reviews of each other's fan fiction.
- **Discussion:** for talking about books, the worlds of Middle Earth and *Star Wars*, other fan shows such as *Narnia* and *The Matrix*, and even topics unrelated to the fan fiction but important to the real worlds of the members, such as religion, the environment and politics.
- **Role-playing Games:** this is where groups of members engage in online dramatic role-play, through adopting characters based on the fictional worlds and taking turns to post their contributions to the emerging narrative.
- **Random 'insane stuff':** for discussing the meanings of 'the dark side' in *Star Wars*, fun groups such as 'the near sighted elves', a training forum for Jedi masters and padawans, a society for Canadians (which is where both Tiana and Jandalf are from) and so on.
- **Moderators and Site Comments:** this is where the administrators of the community get together to discuss any problems with members and how to deal with them, or any problems, changes and/or additions to the site.

The range of practices within the community is quite astonishing: collaborative writing of fan fiction, the teaching of each other about the intricate details and specialised knowledge of the field (the worlds of *Star Wars* and Middle Earth), and dealing with management issues related to a 200-member community. For a group of predominantly 13–17 year olds, the level of writing, discussion and negotiation involved in these practices is remarkably sophisticated.

Writing fan fiction in the classroom was once considered inappropriate (and possibly still is). In my own teacher education courses of the mid-1980s, for example, we were taught to value the fostering of children's imaginations, and as far as writing lessons were considered, we went to great lengths to talk about the ways we should stimulate children's imaginations to create their own original characters and stories. The idea of children using existing characters in their fiction writing was definitely considered bad practice and against teaching philosophies of the time. With a more inclusive philosophy that incorporates the social and cultural dimensions of children's learning, teachers are recognising the importance of including the texts of popular culture into the English curriculum as valid and significant texts for study. Fan fiction provides another means of studying and responding to these texts.

When I spoke to Tiana about the ways people (including teachers) have traditionally dismissed fan fiction as trivial or shallow, she responded:

> True! Because people feel that we're lazy, not creating our own worlds and characters (which I've done BOTH in fanfic). They regard us, sometimes, as bad writers because we don't use our own canons, when, in fact, some people's fanfics are much more enjoyable than novels. Like Obona's *The Water's Edge*. Darn, that's one good fanfic!! (Tiana, online interview, 2004)

Tiana is quick to defend fan fiction as a valid writing process, and is able to name an example of a fan fiction that she considers equally enjoyable to read as the original. One way of enjoying a favourite text is not just to read about it, but to think about all aspects of the plot, the characters, and 'what would happen if' scenarios.

At one of the popular Harry Potter fan fiction sites, *The Leaky Cauldron* (http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org), it was reported that one of the members of the community, Heidi, when interviewed about her fan fiction, argued strongly against fan fiction being nothing more than 'a lazy way to make the story come out the way you want.' Instead, she talked about fan fiction as a way of enjoying and exploring the multiple storylines and puzzles created by J.K Rowling in her narrative:

> I wanted to be able to enjoy reading the books surrounded by other people, even virtually. But *Goblet of Fire* [the series' fourth book, published in 2000] extended the universe and gave us so many puzzles to think about. And as we waited and waited and waited for book five, fan fiction became an interesting way to

explore the story. (Heidi, The Leaky Cauldron, http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org/MTarchives/004753.html, 2003).

Heidi's comments reflect those of Tiana, Jandalf and the *Middle Earth Insanity* (http://ennaani.proboards3.com/) community. Fan fiction for these young people is a way of responding to the texts they love, and a way of exploring alternative possibilities for their favourite fictional characters. Additionally, the community itself is a place for talking about the text and engaging in a range of discursive practices beyond individual narrative writing. One of the most interesting practices is that of collaborative writing through role-playing, and I will explore this further below.

Fictional role-playing and collaborative writing

There are several ways in which members of the community collaborate to write fan fiction. In the 'role-playing game' section of the forum, members group together to role-play various story threads. Some are turned into a final piece of fan fiction, which is then submitted to fanfiction.net for further review, but many stay simply in their role-playing format. Tiana and Jandalf have paired up many times to both role-play their narrative and to transform the role-play into a standard narrative form. Some of their role-playing has been in progress for over a year and several pieces of fiction and sequels have been written. Both girls love the process of writing together collaboratively as they feel their own individual writing has benefited enormously from the process. In speaking of the benefits of co-writing, Jandalf stated:

Oh … where do I start … (grins) Tiana and I, while being eerily similar in many ways, definitely have our differing strengths. It's such a joy to me to put them together into one big piece because, in this way, we're able to contribute so much more than we could alone. She's good at looking into people's heads, and I love the dialogue and interaction parts, and you know what they say about two heads being four times as good as one...

Tiana responded similarly, stating:

By working together in conjunction with someone who writes three times better than I do when it comes to dialogue – though I am probably better at view points – we balance each other out, and contract our individual skills. My spelling, for one thing, has improved, as has my grammar. A lot. I mean, a few months ago I would've spelt grammar as grammer and not known it was wrong ... heh. But we contrast with our writing skills, and by that, make each other stronger. By focusing on strengthening another's weak points, you begin to allow yourself to write deeper in on your own weaknesses, and strengthen yourself in those points. But allowing yourself to see your weaknesses through another's eyes can strengthen your stronger points. I'll always prefer co-authoring fanficions now.

Although many teachers in schools allow young people to write collaboratively, there is still a very strong emphasis on individuality and individual

writing. Based on Tiana's and Jandalf's responses, it seems that learning about narrative writing from each other has been invaluable. The processes of reviewing each other's individual work, recognising each other's strengths and then using each other's strengths has given them the opportunity to produce writing that truly excites them and motivates them to write further. As they write together and work to produce the best piece of writing possible, they have developed a relationship of trust and provide each other with open and honest critique. They have also invested considerable energy and emotion into their characters, who have actually become fused with their own identities. Sometimes the issues dealt with in the narrative through the role-playing also reflect the issues faced by the girls in their everyday adolescent lives (Thomas, 2005).

Transforming texts

Tiana and Jandalf engage in a range of literacy practices in the process of creating a piece of fan fiction, and they reported to me that some of their best pieces of fiction are the ones which they have role-played in the synchronous chat program, Yahoo Instant Messenger (http://messenger.yahoo.com). To describe this process, Tiana outlined the following:

> The process we work through to create our fan fiction, is to first role-play the narrative out using Yahoo Instant Messenger. We go on Yahoo, sometimes spend about 5 minutes talking about where the plot is going, and then just write. If there's any confusion, the narrators step in, or we use OOC (out of character) chatter to help out. But we rarely think about what we're doing, we just write like heck, and get as much done as we can in a short time. When we get big [plots], sometimes we email each other about them though. Usually though we just improvise ... yeah ... that's about it. We write so much better when we don't think about what's going on.
> The fanfiction is then written out by me. I save all the RPG [Role Playing Game] chats, and rewrite them from their script format into a fan fiction that is more like standard narrative form.

This process intrigued me. I have observed role-playing communities, and fanfiction communities, but had never seen any young people who were crossing over from one practice into another. Tiana and Jandalf seemed to be pushing the limits and blurring the boundaries in a number of ways, including blurring understandings about narrative as a distinct form, blurring the boundaries of reality and fantasy and challenging all notions of what it might mean to be literate in the digital age.

In Instant Messenger, it is possible to log transcripts of chat, and this is what Tiana uses as the source for creating the fan fiction. Remaining faithful to the dialogue, she inserts the contextual cues, setting, and paralinguistic cues of character behaviour to transform the role-play into narrative form. In the process of transforming role-playing texts to fan fiction narratives, Tiana adds the narrative voice to the dialogue, which alerts the reader to the char-

acter's thoughts and struggles. I asked Tiana to explain this to me, and she responded at great length to help me understand, writing:

> It's an easy process to basically do it – I open up two windows in notepad, and make them half the size of the screen. One I open the archive into, and the other I use to transcribe. Then it's fairly simple – I recopy the dialogue and narrator-script over, but in proper formatting. (Which is why I complain when Jandalf never does any narrator comments, or character emotions in brackets, and why I always do them. Well, a lot of the time.)
>
> Once I get the basic scene down, I go back over it, and edit it, adding in detail, editing a bit of the dialogue – sometimes I remove whole pieces that don't make any sense or add anything to the plotline. Jandalf actually asked me to add in a line once or twice.
>
> It's similar to the RPing in that I don't think once I'm into the process. Sometimes I'll pull back, and think over it. *Okay, would so and so ever even think of saying that, considering what happened in a later scene?! Of COURSE NOT, GIRL! Okay, edit away...*
>
> I force myself to learn to write relatively in character merely for the sake of god-modding some scenes to fit in later on. I … go through a scene as each [of the] characters … to learn how the other's mind's work. When transcribing the dialogue, you sort of have to, because I have to write thoughts, actions, and describe all of the little things of those likes. It's rather annoying … Jandalf comments that I pay attention to all the details that seem unimportant, but for my half of this, I HAVE TO!
>
> When I transcribe over, I sort of become two people – Tiana and a narrator. I make myself see things from the third person POV, while still writing as my characters, in a sense. … That's how I do it, anyhow. See the characters as I see my own world. Heck, it IS my own world.

The intensity of emotion that Tiana speaks of when discussing her role-playing reveals the depth of investment she has in her writing. She feels and identifies so much with her character that her body experiences genuine pain over the tragedies that are written into the plot.

The 'godmodding' Tiana referred to is, as I mentioned previously, a critical act on her part to maintain consistency – she edits illogical lines that are not coherent with the plot, and inserts other lines to foreshadow what she knows will later become important to the narrative. Similarly, Tiana's comments reveal the meta-fictive awareness that she has during the role-playing stage, indicating that she always inserts narrator comments, or character emotions in brackets because she knows they will play an important role in helping her with the transformation of the role-play transcript into the fan fiction text.

The description of the process used by Tiana and Jandalf above in their joint constructions of fan fiction is clearly a playful manipulation of everything they have learned about the fantasy genre, coupled with their exploitations of the affordances of technology. Furthermore, they have mastered a range of literary techniques in their writing, drawing upon intertextual ref-

erences from literature, media and personal experiences to create their intricately woven narratives.

In examining the range of discursive practices in which Tiana and Jandalf are engaged, I would suggest that they all work synergistically to form the narrative. The role-playing, the out of character discussions occurring synchronously within the role-playing, the character journals, the artwork, the careful plotting out of storylines, the forum discussions, the descriptions of worlds and cultures, the invention of language, the playful spoofing, the in-role poetry, the meta-textual allusions to sound effects, movie techniques and so on, all contribute to the narrative fantasy world they have created, and indeed in which they themselves exist.

One important point made by Abbott (2002) that is helpful here is the distinction between story and discourse. Abbott claims that:

> we never see the story directly, but instead we always pick it up through the narrative discourse. The story is always mediated – by a voice, a style of writing, camera angles, actor's interpretations – so that what we call the story is really something that we construct. We put it together from what we read or see, often by influence. (Abbott, 2002, p.17)

The story, then, emerges from our reading of the corpus of texts created by Tiana and Jandalf, and our understanding is mediated through the variety of voices, styles and actions of each of them. Because they keep separate character journals, we hear their separate voices, and the story can be seen through the eyes of both characters. We gain insight into the thoughts, feelings, histories, hopes and dreams of each character through their internal monologue, and we understand their individual interactions outside of the central plot through the recounts of events, conversations and descriptions that are entered into their online journals.

In the forums and role-playing we see the central plot as a dramatic unfolding of events, and it is here we see a richness and intricacy of narrative form, as Tiana and Jandalf weave together elements from their plotting, their diaries, the back stories, the images and descriptions they have created about the culture of their worlds, as well as a host of intertextual references from books, movies, and from their own personal identities.

Reading and viewing the range of narrative discourses allows the reader to construct the story, a story steeped in mythology, fantasy, mystery, romance, tragedy and intrigue. The familiarity experienced when reading it is in small part attributed to the use of *Star Wars* and *Middle Earth* as launching points for the narrative, but it is also related to our recognition of narrative form. Furthermore, our understanding is constructed through our recognition of Tiana and Jandalf's adolescent angst, echoing the experiences of young people as we see them mediated through popular culture teen movies or even possibly reflecting elements of our own youth.

I mentioned earlier that Tiana and Jandalf appeared to be pushing limits and blurring boundaries in many ways. I want to return to this notion now in thinking about the limits of narrative. Abbott argues that role-playing games are *not* narrative in fact, because their form is 'like life itself' (Abbott, 2002, p. 32), with events that unfold on their own, as a collaborative enterprise which could not otherwise exist. He claims that life, theatre improvisation and role-playing games are all alike in this respect, as they exist *in the moment*, rather than in true narrative form, as a representation to convey story. Ludologists (writers about computer game theory) have been debating the differences between ludology and narratology for some years (as is evidenced on the web forum www.ludology.org). While I agree that role-playing and a piece of fiction are distinctly different, and support Abbott's argument that these forms are not narrative, rather they are 'the seed-ground of stories' (Abbott, 2002, p. 33), as I have noted, Tiana and Jandalf don't just role-play, nor do they just write fan fiction narratives, they engage in all of those other literary practices outlined. And when they are engaged in the role-play, they are not entirely living and improvising in the moment. Instead they have the initial think-out time, and are subsequently still talking, planning, reflecting and musing in *out of character* chatter. They are also inevitably drawing upon what they have learned – from reading each other's online journal, from re-reading their already uploaded previous chapters, and from discussions by the fan fiction community about the storyline to date. The intent too is different – the role-play is not performed and left in that instance: it is intended as a vehicle for the fan fiction.

Fan fiction as a means for critical response to texts

One of the features of most fan fiction is that fans of the text can take it and write in characters and plots that are relevant to their own identities and lives, giving them a voice in a text in which they might otherwise be marginalised. The online fan fiction community of *Middle Earth Insanity* (http://ennaani.proboards3.com/) has 200 members, mostly young adolescents, and mostly females. One of the most exciting aspects about the fan fiction pieces written by Tiana and Jandalf and the community in general is the way in which they challenge the canon of the original books and movies. In *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), for example, only males are represented as Jedi masters and padawans (trainee Jedites). In the fan fiction, Tiana and Jandalf can create their own strong and fully developed female characters that take on the hero role as Jedi knights.

In contemporary pop culture we have seen the rise of young 'action chicks' (Inness, 2004) in television, films, computer games and comic books. Icons such as Buffy (Whedon, 1997), Lara Croft (Gard, 1996), and Princess Fiona from *Shrek* (Adamson and Jenson, 2001) are examples of the new female hero of fictional texts. Additionally, real female icons of female power

such as Brittney Spears, Paris Hilton and 'girl power' groups (Harris, 2004) that began with the phenomenon of the Spice Girls have contributed to new versions of the new female hero. Young girls growing up with strong female symbols in popular media texts are well placed to critique texts that position women as marginalised or silent figures. In their fan fiction, they are able to counter this marginalisation by creating the action chicks they expect to see, reflections of both themselves and their female icons.

One of the recurring difficulties experienced by the girls in the community of Middle Earth Insanity is that science fiction texts as a genre tend to have traditionally been male-dominated texts. The forum gave a place to many young girls who wanted a space to explore their fandom of science fiction without that feeling of marginalisation. Tiana revealed in an interview with me, for example:

> I've known girls who complain about the gender-specifics of a fandom, the same girls who enjoy my site because we're MOSTLY girls. A lot of the time, males tend to assume that we females won't enjoy stuff like LotR, and discriminate for it. Online on Star Wars.com, in their forums there was a thread a few months ago – 'Is there any other female *Star Wars* fans on here?' The reply was outstanding – it had over 30 pages going on it. The female population of SW and LotR fans is extensive – but a lot of people don't realise that girls like those movies for more than just the fangirl reasons. I had a girl on my site who was IMPRESSED to be able to join and not be knocked because she was female and enjoyed the battles and such. (Tiana, blog interview, 2004)

The online spaces devoted to fan fiction provide more than spaces for writing; they provide a supportive community for many young people (in this instance, many adolescent girls) to express themselves and play with the texts they enjoy without fear of negativity or exclusion because of issues such as gender.

Another way that the girls in this community (and girls in general in other fan fiction communities) are critically responding to texts is by adopting male characters and role-playing them in ways that explore what it might mean to be masculine. Writing about this phenomenon, Scodari (2005) argued:

> By inhabiting otherwise unoccupied subject positions vis-à-vis male characters (or actors), such fans often conflict with others counter-hegemonically inclined to identify with strong fictional heroines. (Scodari, 2005, p. 118)

To date there have been no reported examples of conflict in *Middle Earth Insanity* related to the behaviour of any of the characters. It is possible, though, that the girls are writing male characters that represent their idealised versions of masculinity. One of Jandalf's characters plays a romantic interest for one of Tiana's characters, and, perhaps naively, Tiana stated:

well any of the basic stuff Tiana's done counts as things I wish could become reality. But. *red faced* I suppose the whole romance with Jether counts best. I only wish I could end up with a boyfriend as considerate as Jandalf writes him to be.

Nevertheless, the exploration of masculine roles is a way for the girls to place themselves in unknown subject positions, and to explore alternative ways of being.

A final way that fan fiction has provided some young people with ways of challenging hegemonies is through the phenomenon of 'slash fiction'. Slash fiction is a term given to fan fiction in which same-sex relationships are explored. Although some of this is written by adults and given an 'adult' rating, other examples are written by younger writers and are not in fact explicitly sexual, but explore the complexities of romance and relationships that are not heterosexual. For young people curious about issues related to their sexuality, the fan fiction provides a medium for exploring these issues and for seeing themselves reflected in texts which might otherwise marginalise them.

Fan fiction as identity play

In addition to fan fiction providing spaces for critical responses to texts through writing, these spaces also serve an important role for exploring issues of identity and empowerment. In speaking about one of the Harry Potter fan fiction sites, Jenkins (2004) states:

> Harry Potter fan fiction yields countless narratives of youth empowerment as characters fight back against the injustices their writers encounter every day at school. Jenkins, 2004, p. 2)

What we might conclude from this is that young people are critically responding to the texts which story their lives through weaving these stories, and ways of dealing with the complications in them, into their fan fiction characters and plots.

Matt Hills (2002) uses psychoanalytical theory to explore the dimensions of pleasure, emotion, desire and power experienced by fans writing fan fiction. He talks about the engagement in the fan text as being a third space somewhere between the inner self and the outer surface of the text, where the creative play with the text is at the same time internal (i.e., something experienced and lived through) and external (i.e., the text that is the subject of the fan fiction). He claims that pleasure is gained through the activities that allow individuals to challenge the boundaries between internal and external realities: that is, affective play. Affective play, he argues, is that space where the fan fiction writers can experience, feel and live in a playful way within the texts that are the subjects of their fandom.

In this affective play, Tiana and Jandalf are both infusing aspects of their

real identities into their characters. Their fictional characters are also a means for the girls to fashion new and emerging identities for themselves as they develop into adulthood. The characters allow the girls a freedom and power to author an identity (Bakhtin, 1998) that plays out their fantasies and desires: of their physical bodies, their hopes and dreams for the future, and their ideas of romance. Their characters are a rehearsal of who they want to become, and in role-playing that ideal self, they can grow closer to becoming that ideal.

Conclusion

Many young people in the online fan fiction communities are writing collaborative texts, reflecting a new way of thinking about writing that challenges the traditional notion of the single, individual author. Also challenged is the notion of writing from a single perspective or with a stable identity. The members of the community role-play multiple characters and write together with multiple voices. Some keep long individual character diaries that reveal layers and layers of back story, which is read by all members and woven into the role-playing and collaborative fan fiction narratives. Each character is well developed and the writers are able to explore many facets of their character's identity – strengths, weaknesses, courageous moments, fear, sorrow, and an intricacy and depth of emotion that is revealed over time. The serialised nature of role-playing in the community and the multiple storylines that exist at any one time offer both continuity and diversity of individual and group engagement. Feedback, reviews and support offer opportunities for both praise and supportive critique from their many peers. More experienced writers help emerging writers. The role-playing offers less experienced writers a safe framework for learning how to contribute meaningfully and in character to a storyline (sometimes one sentence at a time). Poetry, song lyrics, art, and music are equally valued.

Education scholars such as Cope and Kalantzis (2000), Luke (1997), Lankshear, Snyder and Green (2000), Lankshear, Peters and Knobel (1996), Snyder (2002), and Kress (2003), have suggested that online literacies form new hybrid textualities and possibly even new genres worthy of further analysis and discussion. Luke (1997), for example, argues that e-literacies have created new forms of literary practice, and states, 'blended vocabularies and reading – writing practices require new multi-modal and multi-media literacies … new textual forms of conversational turn-taking … [and] new writing and communication strategies' (Luke, 1997, p. 25). I have shown in this chapter that fan fiction writing online, more specifically the practices in one fan fiction community, *Middle Earth Insanity*, provides a site of new hybrid textualities where writing is a response to reading, an exploration and critique of texts, an assemblage of new ideas about texts, and an active collaborative process of understanding, creating and imagining. Beyond

writing, the fan fiction communities provide spaces for exploring, discovering and celebrating the strengths of individuals as they play together to create a culture that ultimately values writing, narrative and story.

References

Abbott, H.P. (2002). *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Adamson, A. & Jenson, V. (Directors) (2001). *Shrek*. [Motion Picture]. United States: Dreamworks SKG.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1998). *The Dialogic Imagination.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Black, R.W. (2004). Access and affiliation: The New Literacy practices of English language learners in an online animé-based fanfiction community. Paper presented at 2004 *National Conference of Teachers of English Assembly for Research,* Berkely, CA.

Cope, B. & Kalantzis, M. (Eds.) (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. South Yarra, Victoria: Macmillan.

Gard, T. (Game Designer) (1996). *Tomb Raider*. [Video Game]. United States: Eidos Interactive.

Giroux, H., Lankshear, C., McLaren,P. & Peters, M. (Eds.) (1996). *Counternarratives: Cultural Studies and Critical Pedagogies in Postmodern Spaces*. New York: Routledge.

Harris, A. (Ed.) (2004). *All About the Girl*. New York: Routledge.

Hills, M. (2002). *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge.

Inness, S. (Ed.) (2004). *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, H. (2004). Why Heather Can Write. *MIT Technology Review.* Retrieved July 2, 2006, from

http://technologyreview.com/articles/04/02/wo_jenkins020604.asp?p=1

Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the New Media Age*. Routledge: New York.

Lankshear, C., Peters, M. & Knobel, M. (1996). Critical pedagogy and cyberspace. In H. Giroux, C. Lankshear, P. McLaren & M. Peters (Eds.) *Counternarratives: Cultural Studies and Critical Pedagogies in Postmodern Spaces*. New York: Routledge, 149–88.

Lankshear, C., Snyder, I. & Green, B. (2000). *Teachers and Techno-literacy: Managing Literacy, Technology and Learning in Schools.* St Leonards: Allen & Unwin.

Lewis, D. (2004). Understanding the power of fan Fiction for young authors. *Kliatt,* March.

Lucas, G. (Writer and Director) (1977). *Star Wars* [Motion Picture]. United States: Lucasfilm Ltd. Production Company.

Luke, C. (1997). *Technological Literacy.* Adult Literacy Research Network Melbourne: Language Australia Limited.

Rowling, J.K. (1997). *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.* London: Bloomsbury.

Scodari, C. (2005). You're sixteen, you're dutiful, you're online. In S.R. Mazzarella (Ed.), *Girl Wide Web: Girls, the Internet, and the Negotiation of Identity.* New York: Peter Lang.

Snyder, I. (Ed.) (2002). *Silicon Literacies: Communication, Innovation and Education in the Electronic Age*. London/New York: Routledge.

Takahashi, R. (Creator) (2000). *InuYasha, A Feudal FairyTale* [Television series]. Japan: Nippon Television Network.

Thomas, A. (2005, May). *Blog fiction and the narrative identities of adolescent girls*. BlogTalk DownUnder Proceedings. Sydney.

Tolkien, J.R.R. (1955). *The Return of the King: Being the Third Part of the Lord of the Rings.* London: George Allen and Unwin.

Whedon, J. (Creator) (1997). *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. [Television Series]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox.