Canon vs. Fanon: Folksonomies of Fan Culture[1]

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I. Introduction

There is a symbiotic relationship between creators and owners of mass media works and the fan communities inspired by their work. The nature of participatory fan communities makes it possible for both authors and fans to be active agents in collectively determining the validity of the "official" storyline. The interaction between creators and fans illustrates John Fiske's idea of a "semiotic democracy," the power of media in enabling audiences to become involved in the creative process of constructing cultural symbols rather than serving merely as passive consumers.[2]

This paper will explore the concepts of pop culture canon and "fanon." "Canon," from a pop culture standpoint, is defined as the official storylines and back stories invented by the creators of television shows, movies, and books. "Fanon" is the ideas and concepts that fan communities have collectively decided are part of an accepted storyline or character interpretation. We propose the idea that the concept of fanon is best illustrated as an example of folksonomy, a user-generated classification used in Internet social communities; or as a "tag" – an aggregation of content emerging through bottom-up consensus by the public, or in this case, fan communities. We will also discuss the impact of fanon folksonomy on the future of participatory fandom and popular culture.

In his book *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins uses *The Velveteen Rabbit* -– with toys becoming real only when they are part of a child's imagination – as a metaphor for the participatory nature of fan culture, explaining that meaning is only derived from items through their use.[3] This metaphor is expanded by Jonathan Lethem, where

> "The Rabbit is fearful, recognizing that consumer goods don't become "real" without being actively reworked [but] "It doesn't happen all at once …. It takes a long time … Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby." Seen from the perspective of the toymaker, the Velveteen Rabbit's loose joints and missing eyes represent vandalism, signs of misuse and rough treatment; for others, these are marks of its loving use."[4]

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[1] To comment and to get updates see our blog, No Attention, http://noattention.blogspot.com/
[2] John Fiske, Television Culture, 236, 239 (1997)
[3] Henry Jenkins, Textual Poachers 50-51 (1992)
[4] Jonathan Lethem, *The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism*, Harper's Magazine 59 (January 2007)

The gradual process of debating and establishing canon and creating fanon is the equivalent of the Velveteen Rabbit for pop culture fans, giving life to a static, fictional world and making it "real."

What are the limits of authority that owners and creators of mass media set when they are faced with fans that push back, creating their own limits of "realness" that directly or indirectly challenge the work's ownership or authenticity? According to legal scholar Susan Scafidi in her book, *Who Owns Culture?*,

> "Reverse cultural appropriation [the use of cultural items by the public] is treated as potential infringement by laws that seldom recognize the contribution of the public to ... iconic intellectual properties."[5]

For example, Scafidi states that

> "Although the public is invited to purchase and consume *Star Trek* and other commercial creations to internalize or identify with them and become fans, and even join together in social groups that share a common bond of appreciation for a television show, sports team, or entertainer, this use is typically expected to be passive and not active or transformative."[6]

Why is this important?

Ten years ago, Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* stated that "Contemporary stories, in high and low culture, keep ... inviting us to second guess the choices [the storyteller] has made [and] can be experienced as an invitation to join in the creative process."[7] She posits that media creators invite fans to play with canon in non-canon settings, "assum[ing] a sophistication on the part of the audience, an eagerness to transpose and reassemble the separate elements of a story and an ability to keep in mind multiple alternative versions of the same fictional world."[8] According to Will Brooker, the "wealth of fan-based material, rich in detail and imagination, is left to fill in the gaps of these official plots, to suggest new directions, flesh out secondary characters and build on or knock down the framework imposed from 'above'."[9]

In the past ten years, the evolution of online social communities has transformed the way that mass media fans interact with each other and the creators of the media works they consume. Websites, blogs, and online message boards deliver entertainment news and industry at a rapid pace and allow for a previously unseen level of media transparency.

At the same time, the collaborative nature of online communities creates a social environment in which media content may be labeled and classified by users to be better understood and used by all.

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[5] Susan Scafidi, <u>Who Owns Culture?</u> 134 (2005)
[6] Susan Scafidi, <u>Who Owns Culture?</u> 128 (2005)
[7] Janet Murray, <u>Hamlet on the Holodeck</u> 38 (1997)
[8] Janet Murray, <u>Hamlet on the Holodeck</u> 40 (1997)
[9] Will Brooker, *Internet Fandom and the Continuing Narratives of Star Wars, Blade Runner, and Alien*, in <u>Alien Zone II</u> 50, 50 (1999)

This ongoing direct interaction between media producers and fans moves beyond the previously discussed ways of understanding media as presented by Fiske – the semiotic resistant readings of texts can become the majority opinion and can even influence owners and creators. We believe this interaction represents a sea change in how the United States most lucrative and influential commodities – entertainment media – is consumed and used worldwide. Observing the converging process and social environments by which media producers, owners, and fans interact will lend a greater insight into how U.S. pop culture will be produced and marketed in the future.

II. Definitions of Pop Culture Canon and Fanon

A. Origins of Pop Culture Canon

In many fan communities, it is common to hear the phrase "canon" used by fans in reference to a TV show, movie franchise, or book series ("That plot development does not follow canon," This character's parentage does not work with canon, etc.") But rather than a discussion about pop culture's place in literature or high art, the "canon" that many fan communities refer to is connected to storyline and character consistency. As fans of popular media become more invested in particular characters, fictional worlds and storylines, many of them do seek a certain level of consistency and fluidity within the story. "Pop culture canon" is usually defined as a body of work that establishes its own internal storylines and/or character history, deemed to be "official" by either the creator or publisher.

This concept of a pop culture canon is derived from literary canon, where particular works are chosen – usually by a small group of experts – to be representative of a particular genre. Literary canon is constantly argued, updated and changed by this contained community; the focus is not on the internal content of the works themselves, but if the work as a whole has outstanding, lasting merit and relevance as a work of art. The list itself is largely subjective – and by nature, created by communality.

The creation of both literary and pop culture canon rests upon the input of a large, yet specialized community. However, pop culture canon differs from literary canon in a number of ways: one in that the "canon" in question deals with the internal content of the work. Additionally, a small group of people (or many times, one individual author) establishes, creates, and contradicts the canon; consumers of the work can argue the validity of the canon, but cannot individually adapt or change it. Or can they?

We suggest a framework to understand how alternative forms of pop culture canon, specifically regarding character traits and plotlines, are often created and sustained by the fans that support it. Specifically, we refer to the concept of a fan-established pop culture canon, commonly known as "fanon."

> "Canon [is] the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting, and characters, and fanon [is] the events created by the fan community in

a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fantext. Fanon often creates particular details or character readings even though canon does not fully support it–or at times, outright contradicts it." [10]

Fanon is commonly described in fan communities as an alternate universe where – either through inference in the original text, or wishful thinking on the part of the fans – elements of the story are pulled into the "official story."[11]

We illustrate this process by using a new method of applying taxonomic structure to the layman: **folksonomy**. Folksomies, such as tagging and metadata for the web, are open-ended forms of user classification, allowing the public to collectively and collaboratively create meaning through a "many-to-many" model of understanding and organizing information, through labeling. Information architect Thomas Vander Wal created the term "folksonomy" by to describe the bottom-up process of determining meaning through collective intelligence.[12]

It is important to note that we are using the "folksonomy" concept as a metaphor, using the tangible process of tagging to describe the largely abstract process used by fans to classify and organize media texts. Fans do not literally "tag" media texts with descriptive data as "canon" as they would tag a photograph in Flickr with "empire state building" or "summer 2006." Instead, they make decisions, both collaboratively and individually about the content of the media texts (including event timelines, character back stories, etc.) and then share these determinations with others, more commonly online, but sometimes through other fan social environments, such as 'zines or fan conventions.

Most often, the medium by which this fandom folksonomy takes place is through fan fiction. The shared conventions of character traits, physical descriptions, alternate storylines, or plot gaps filled in by fan-fiction writers become the individual fan "tags" that are shared, discussed and used as the folksnomony of fan culture.

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[10] Kristina Busse & Karen Hellekson, *Introduction*, in Fan Fiction And Fan Communities In The Age Of The Internet: New Essays 5, 7 (Karen Hellekson & Kristina Busse eds., 2006). Pugh describes canon as "the source material accepted as authentic and, within the fandom, known by all readers in the same way that myth and folktale were once commonly known … This knowledge can be increased and honed by re-reading, in the case of a book canon, or re-viewing in the case of a film or TV canon." Sheenagh Pugh, The Democratic Genre 26 (2005)

[11] Fanon is seen by many fans as less valuable than canon – and in some cases as laughable – due to its wish fulfillment elements. However, some see fanon as just as valuable as canon. "Canon is the agreed framework through which writers/ readers' experiences are translated for other members of the community. Canon, which connects the diverse backgrounds and locations of community members, names a common ground, by every claim about canon nevertheless raises the specter of its opposite. Fanon is a false image of canon, a wish-fulfillment fantasy ... Fanon is not an inferior interpretation of canon ..., but a fantasy based on the needs of individual writers rather than the reality established by shared source text." Catherine Driscoll, *One True Pairing*, in Fan Fiction And Fan Communities In The Age Of The Internet: New Essays 79, 88 (Karen Hellekson & Kristina Busse eds., 2006)

[12] See Thomas Vandel Wal, Understanding Folksonomy (Tagging that Works) (2006), http://s3.amazonaws.com/2006presentations/dconstruct/TagginginRW.pdf.

In the Harry Potter fandom, there was a major fan uprising relating to a minor character, Blaise Zabini. Before J.K. Rowling fully described the character in the sixth book, when only a name was known, Blaise was usually described in fanfic as a ghostly pale white male. The fanon version is thought to be based on a description of Blaise in the popular "Draco Trilogy" fanfiction series written by Cassandra Claire. Book six included J. K. Rowling's canon version of Blaise as a British boy of African descent. Many fans were upset that their view of Blaise was not used officially, and some continue to use "goth Blaise" in their fanfic.[13] While "white" and "goth" were the fanon tags, the new canon tags could not completely replace fanon for some fans.[14]

Fandom folksnomomy takes place within both newer media works (such as the television show *Lost*) and those with a long and established history (such as the *Star Trek* franchise). Abigail Derecho describes fan-fiction as part of a long history of "archontic literature," works created by those in subordinate cultures to analyze and respond to a text, often based on dissatisfaction with the text, and therefore incorporating elements that can conflict directly with the main text.[15]

Fanon is usually established and perpetuated within the context of fan-fiction, which is primarily a reaction to television or movies, and based within a desire to change through reflecting fans' own wants and desires. Henry Jenkins writes, "fans relate to favorite texts with a mixture of fascination and frustration, attracted to them because they offer the best resources for exploring certain issues, frustrated because these fictions never fully conform to audience desires."[16] The process of creating fanon, especially on the internet, mirrors that of other online folksonomies, such as del.icio.us, which are established as ways for like- minded users to classify the information and topics of discourse that are important to them.

According to Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*,
> "active reading is far from passive. We construct alternative narratives as we go along, we cast actors or people into the roles of the characters, we perform the voices of the characters in our heads, we adjust the emphasis of the story to suit our interests, and we assemble the story into the "cognitive schemata" that make up our own systems of knowledge and belief."[17]

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[13] See http://www.mugglenet.com/editorials/madampuddifoot/edit-squirke01.shtml

[14] We personally don't understand why some fans felt that the "new canon" version of Blaise could not continue to be gothy while being African-British, and therefore believe that there are two possibilities –that these fans are however slightly racist, or that by being Black, he no longer fits into fans' "tag" of Goth identity.

[15] Examples include feminist reinterpretations of classic works, such as the Wind Done Gone (reworking Gone with the Wind) and Wide Sargasso Sea (reworking Jane Eyre). The term archonic literature was created and developed in Abigail Derecho, *Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction*, in Fan Fiction And Fan Communities In The Age Of The Internet: New Essays 61, 66-72 (Karen Hellekson & Kristina Busse eds., 2006)

[16] Henry Jenkins, *Reception theory and audience research: the mystery of the vampire's kiss*, in Reinventing Film Studies (Christine Gledhill & Linda Williams, eds., 2000), found at http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/henry3/vampkiss.html

[17] Janet Murray, Hamlet on the Holodeck 101 (1997)

Fanon is a collective version of this process by which the fans determine their official story through the use of folksonomy "tags." – both individually and as a group. Fans blur the boundary between cultural producers and cultural readers, creating a continual feedback loop of narrative discussion and creation.

According to Jane Gaines in *Contested Culture*, in discussing the canon of both James Bond and Superman, each "may be seen as one long intertext made up of all of the narratives, reviews, and biographies laid end to end [with] ancillary products [such as merchandise and other tie-ins] become 'textual meteorites' shooting off of the intertextual chain."[18]

However, who is allowed to author canon, an ostensibly simple determination, is often a contentious issue, based on issues of authorship and ownership. However, fans are constantly adding tags to the "intertextual chain" of the canon text and their own fanworks, leading to fanon production.

B. Why does "Fanon" exist?

Fanon is described as an alternate universe or retelling of a media text by fans. Elements or extrapolations of the fan-created story may be pulled into the "canon" even though, what is considered to be canon itself can remain subjective within fandom.

The process of canon and fanon creation is the process of mediating between the poles of continuity and contradiction, but with fanon left to the fans. According to Petra Kuppers, in referring to fans of *Babylon 5*, though it could apply to other fandoms: fans "prove their metanarrational ability to puncture holes in *B5*'s narrative fabric."[19] Many works with accompanying fanon are "serial, in progress, and constantly changing, as are the fan stories in these universes. Fans' understanding of the characters and the universes the characters inhabit changes."[20]

Fanon exists for several sometimes overlapping reasons: to fill in narrative gaps, to correct flaws, to create origin stories, and the flipside, to develop what happens after the story is over. Fans have issues with the inability of the canonical story to answer these issues.

Fanon fills in narrative gaps because any work has gaps –not everything is covered – not every back story, conversation, side plot, or characterization can be in the canon version.[21] Early movies attempted to cover for this flaw by showing every door closure walking to outside, every small detail. Fans like trying to figure out a reasonable way of

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[18] Jane Gaines, Contested Culture 215 (1991)

[19] Petra Kuppers, *Quality Science Fiction: Babylon 5's Metatextual Universe*, in Cult Television 46 (Sarah Gwenllian-Jones & Roberta Pearson, eds., 2004)

[20] Kristina Busse & Karen Hellekson, *Introduction*, in Fan Fiction And Fan Communities In The Age Of The Internet: New Essays 5, 7 (Karen Hellekson & Kristina Busse eds., 2006)

[21] See *TV Tropes: Fanon*, http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main.Fanon

filling in those gaps and when there is a coalescence of belief through the "tagging" process – fanon has been created.

Fanon is also developed to "correct" perceived flaws in the original story. Fanon also works as a means to erase or "rewrite" elements of canon that fans do not like, elements that fans consider to be too odd, out of character, or weird to be part of canon – discontinuity.[22] This discontinuity disturbs fans and they wish to erase it – or explain it away. One example is the Marvel comic *Archie Meets the Punisher*, where the all-American kiddie comic teenager meets the renegade vengeful killer, simply because both characters share a corporate owner.

The third reason why fanon is established is to create origin stories and background details shared by fans. "Origin stories" are a natural part of the storytelling/folk process, whether through books or TV shows. Often the fanon version of the origin story exists until a canon version is created by the official storyteller. However, even this can be controversial. For example, within the *Star Wars* universe, fans inferred from a novelization of the original trilogy, and several printed sources from the series "expanded universe" that Luke Skywalker's "Uncle" Owen Lars was the brother of Obi-Wan Kenobi. This fact persisted as acknowledged fan lore for many years until the prequel film *Attack of the Clones* disproved it, revealing Owen as Anakin Skywalker's (Luke's father) step-brother. Still, some fans accept the original trilogy as the "official" source for this fact.[23]

Online social communities within fandoms have expanded the previously controlled limits of a pop culture canon to because of the interactivity that allows a cross-pollination of ideas and inspiration between authors of media texts and fans; as well as the collaborative nature of many internet-based fan works.

Fanon emerges through two separate, but overlapping forces – the top-down process of the creator/author establishing an official storyline/characters and the bottom-up process of individual fans and groups of fans who push back to get the product they want, whether in a direct way, such as fan letters and campaigns, or in indirect ways, such as fan-fiction, fan videos and other fanworks. Where they interact, fanon creation occurs through folksonomy "tagging".

However, all examples of fanon are conceived individually, with fans playing "what if" in their heads. Though simultaneous creation is possible, similar to multiple discovery/invention in science – some ideas are just ready -- or the canon suggests it. Driscoll suggests how fanon is created, "only by characterization, setting, and plot can a [fan fiction] story enter the web of [fanon] and become part of the community that will circulate it."[24]

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[22] See *TV Tropes: Discontinuity*, http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main.DisContinuity

[23] See *Wookiepedia: Owen Lars*, http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Owen_Lars

[24] Catherine Driscoll, *One True Pairing*, in Fan Fiction And Fan Communities In The Age Of The Internet: New Essays 79, 91 (Karen Hellekson & Kristina Busse eds., 2006)

Pugh describes the process of a story element becoming fanon as when a fan author or other fan's "addition to canon seems so appositive [precisely descriptive,] to other [fans] in that universe that it becomes "fanon" – i.e. although it was never part of the canon it is generally accepted and used by other writers" and fans.[25] For fans, but especially for those that construct fantexts, according to Pugh, there are limits to the changes made by fanon – "the unforgivable sin in any fan fiction universe is getting the facts wrong, departing from the canon not deliberately but accidentally, by giving someone an accent, appearance or opinions that the canon plainly states didn't belong to him [or her]."[26]

Throughout the creation of media texts and their supporting and supplemental materials (such as media interviews, or "behind the scenes" DVD commentary), authors and creators directly and indirectly "tag" what elements of a work are or should be considered to be canonical. Of course, sometimes they "remove" these tags, by adding in contradictory materials. This somewhat controlled taxonomy – often with an internal structure (for example, "information revealed on the show counts, but Christmas episodes don't, and flashbacks count more than back story revealed in the pilot") is often challenged by fans, who creating their own "tags," creating the folksonomy of fanon.

It is also important to remember that unlike traditional taxanomic or new folksonomic structures, where the language or "tags" can frequently be used universally, each work's fanon and canon tags are unique. For example, just because the comic book version of Buffy is considered canon does not stop Star Wars comics from being fanon or"extended universe."

III. Pop Culture Canon/Fanon and Notions of Media Authorship

A. Origins of the Authorship Debate

There are multiple complicating factors that can blur the line between canon and fanon – issues within the work itself, issues with control of ownership, and larger policy issues. Issues with works include internal contradictions and differences in canonical status due to format. Issues with control include establishing "real authorship" and conflicts between the owner and creator. Larger policy and philosophical issues include copyright and public domain status and who has the ultimate power to establish canon from a copyright standpoint.

An overarching policy issue for canon – and fanon is who has the ultimate power to establish canon, known in fandom circles as the "word of god"?[27] Is it the creator, the owner, the fans? Moreover, who should it be? Everyone involved has an investment in the answer.

The traditional notions of authorship are based on romantic ideals, such as the lone poet alone in his garret. Others have extensively delved into this area from literary studies,

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[25] Sheenagh Pugh, The Democratic Genre 41 (2005)

[26] Sheenagh Pugh, The Democratic Genre 40 (2005)

[27] See *TV Tropes: Word of God*, http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main.WordOfGod

cultural studies, and legal perspectives, including Barthes, Foucault, and others, so we will not cover historical or philosophical viewpoints of authorship here.[28]

B. Ways of Viewing Pop Culture Authorship

Instead, we will be discussing five present ways of viewing pop culture authorship:

single author,
single creator/multiple co-authors,
multiple authors,
corporate authorship, and
collaborative authorship.

These types of authorship can overlap, creating different levels of authorship and ownership in media texts. The **single author** is the most traditional and culturally romanticized idea of authorship. A popular example of this is J.K. Rowling, whose story of writing the *Harry Potter* books on her own at a coffee shop is widely repeated and referenced. Because single author-works rely on one person to establish all of the story and character conventions, the boundaries of canon are clearly set by his type of author.

The **single creator/multiple co-authors** type usually occurs within the context of the movie or television or comics industry, where a product is usually described as the "vision" of one individual, usually a head writer or executive producer. (Examples of this include television producers Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, and *Angel* or JJ Abrams, executive producer of *Lost* and *Alias*.) All of these shows rely on a stable of writers to write scripts and develop the storyline. Within the context of fan culture, this type of authorship can lead to many debates about what particular episodes or seasons "count" and whether official products appropriately fit into the vision of the original creator.[29]

The next type is **multiple creator/authors**, known in certain fandom circles as "shared universe" where there are multiple authors, all of whom have a creative interest or some level of ownership in an "officially licensed" work, happens primarily in fantasy, science fiction, comic books and role-playing scenarios. This differs from the single creator/multiple author type in that the authors may be working in different media simultaneously, and there is often no single authoritative voice to establish the boundaries of canon. One example would include the UK-based *Doctor Who* franchise, with multiple

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[28] See the works of Martha Woodmansee, including The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics (1994) and Martha Woodmansee & Peter Jaszi, Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature (1994)

[29] In a recent cross-cultural example, the new French version of the American television show Law and Order: Criminal Intent, "Paris Enquetes Criminelles" was given a 1,000 page "bible" by Law and Order creator, Dick Wolf, requiring conformance to requirements for the "ca-ching" noise, " character outlines (the lead detective is 'an American Sherlock Holmes but should be culturally adapted') to set-dressing tips ('remember -- cops are very busy and have lots of paperwork so the squad room should be active and a bit unkempt.')" Brooks Barnes, *New Accent: NBC Faces Trials Bringing 'Law & Order' to France*, Wall Street Journal, March 1, 2007, at A1.

authors simultaneously creating often conflicting storylines through novelizations, audio dramas, comic books, and a classic and ongoing television program (which may or may not be a continuation of the classic version).[30]

Another type of authorship that frequently overlaps with other types is **corporate authorship**, such as Universal or other companies. A corporate author, who is also the owner of the product, can do what it wants; corporate "perversion" of original intent is allowed (such as the use of Hanna-Barbera characters in the Cartoon Network parody *Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law*) yet completely authorized.

The final example is **collaborative authorship** -- a growing phenomenon within the context of Role Playing Games (RPG's) and Internet fan fiction. Collaborative authorship usually starts from a work created by another, but then taken in a new direction by a group of people. Examples of this include fandom and role-playing games, such as World of Warcraft. Some of these works are open-ended, such as the communities that write continuation stories for works in the public domain, such as Sherlock Holmes and Jane Austen, where all of the possible limitations are created by the collaborative community. Other types of collaborative authorship have set limits by the original creator or owner, such as World of Warcraft and Second Life, but those limits can be quite broad.

C. Media Ownership vs. Media Authorship and its effect on 'canon vs. fanon'

There is an important distinction between media creators and media owners – a distinction that often places limitations on what the creator(s) can do with his/her/their creative output. While the romantic idea of the author lends to the viewpoint that authors are able to have complete control over what happens to their works, the practicalities of authorship often contradict this belief. Works of authorship are often limited through several means: creation within the scope of employment, creation as a work-for-hire, or rights later limited by contract. When fans consider a work they often make a distinction between the corporate owners and the creators. For example, *Star Trek* is owned by Universal, yet is seen as the creative vision of Gene Roddenberry, as with *Babylon 5* and its series creator, J.M. Straczynski.[31]

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[30] Another example is an anime television series known in the US as Robotech, was originally three separate and completely unrelated television shows in Japan, Super Dimensional Fortress Macross, Southern Cross and Mospeada. The shows were purchased in 1982 by U.S. animation company Harmony Gold, edited and unifying storyline was written for the three series by producer Carl Macek. The "Robotech" storyline was continued through a series of books, and a short-lived television series (animated in Japan, but written by U.S. writers) called The Sentinels. Meanwhile, the Macross storyline was continued in Japan, completely unrelated to the storyline of Robotech.

[31] Petra Kuppers, *Quality Science Fiction: Babylon 5's Metatextual Universe*, in <u>Cult Television</u> 46 (Sarah Gwenllian-Jones & Roberta Pearson, eds., 2004). Kuppers says: "A large part of the fan culture surrounding this cult TV phenomenon centers around JMS as authorial figure, with Warner Bros., the producing studio, seen as secondary to the series' origin ... As with the ur-cult series *Star Trek* and its auteur-creator Gene Roddenberry, fans identify *B5* not with the ingenuity, creativity, and stubbornness of one man."

According to Cornel Sandvoss in *Fans*, "within the realm of the production of popular culture we find conflicts of interest between financiers, producers, and performers. Hence it is increasingly difficult to identify 'dominant' and 'oppositional' readings."[32]

However, creators are more likely to presume "shared ownership" of their work with the public than corporate owners that have creative control. An additional complicating factor occurs when an author is perceived by the public to own a media text, when certain elements of said media text are owned by a media company. Though J.K. Rowling goes to fan websites when she forgets details about her stories, Warner Bros., the owners of the Harry Potter movies, tried to close down the same websites Rowling had no problem with. *Vampire Chronicles* author Anne Rice can claim that she is the only true author who may write in the voice of her vampire characters, but her "voice" is no longer exclusive; Warner Bros. owns the movie rights to her stories, and outside screenwriters interpreted her work for the screen.[33]

Sometimes, fans occasionally "tag" officially produced works as "unofficial" because they do not fit comfortably within the already-established canon. One such example of fans rejecting officially produced work in favor of fanon occurred with the US television show Beauty and the Beast. After "Beauty" was killed during the show, according to Cornel Sandvoss' account of Henry Jenkins' case study,

> "Feeling disappointed and betrayed, many female fans rejected the third series as fan text. ... Cancellation of the show [was] seen as a blessing by many fans whose fandom had become irreconcilable with the text it was built upon"[34]

Another complication can occur when the corporate owner of a work of media has a conflict with the creator, or an individual deemed by the public to be the "true" author. This situation can cause serious limitations on what is able to be added to the "canon tagged" classification of the work. An example of this is the Daleks, the villainous alien characters created by science-fiction writer Terry Nation for the *Doctor Who* series. Before the show's return in 2005, the BBC, owner of *Doctor Who*, and the Nation estate were engaged in a lengthy (and at times contentious) negotiation process to bring the characters back to the new show. However, due to the Daleks' popularity among fans and their role as pivotal fixtures in *Doctor Who* canon, it can be reasonably assumed that fans would have "tagged" the Daleks' continued existence within the *Doctor Who* universe as probable, whether or not the characters made a return to the revived series. [35] Therefore, while the romantic ideal of authorship places no limitations on the scope of expression,

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[32] Cornell Sandvoss, <u>Fans: The Mirror of Consumption</u> 14 (2005)

[33] Sometimes the owners and creators disclaim their own officially produced work – stating that it is not canon. For works that are commissioned sequels or related materials, these works are problematic for fans who are concerned about canon because of the uncertainty of how the author would feel about these additions to his/her story. However, for many fans "staying true" to the story, characters and themes is what matters most for determining whether these works fit into canon – such as the difference in perception of the cartoon and live-action versions of the children's book, <u>How the Grinch Stole Christmas</u>.

[34] Cornell Sandvoss, <u>Fans: The Mirror of Consumption</u> 22 (2005)

[35] *Daleks back to fight Doctor Who*, <u>BBC News Online</u> (August 4, 2004), found at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3535588.stm

leading to canon being whatever the author wants, the real world of copyright and ownership can limit canon creation.

D. Policy issues

Presently U.S. copyright law has a considerable lag until one can be certain that works are in the public domain. However, many works both under copyright protection and not are being added to.[36] Are these non-original author additions part of the original work's canon?[37] What happens when the work is still under copyright protection depending on where one physically is?[38]

IV. Folksonomy and Fan Culture: Expanding the Pop Culture Canon

A. 'Open canon' versus 'closed canon'

In *The Democratic Genre*, Sheenagh Pugh identifies pop culture canon as having two general states: Open canon, or canon capable of being expanded by the author, or closed, where the author or producer has essentially closed off the official story from being added to any further.[39]

Will Brooker discusses how with works with an open canon "the ongoing narrative ... is constructed mainly of secondary texts [works that are not in the same format as the primary text, yet are still made by the "authorial voice,"] widely regarded as open to debate and negotiation: the spaces for fandom to enter, to create, argue and suggest, are therefore much wider [than works with closed canon]"[40]

The universe of fan understanding of a work, includes the officially created works and the

> "fantext, the entirety of stories and critical commentary written in a fandom (or even in a pairing or genre), offers an ever-growing, ever-expanding version of the characters. These multitudes of interpretations of characters and canon scenes are often contradictory yet complementary to one another, and the source text. Nevertheless, working with and against one another, this multitude of stories creates a larger whole of understanding a given universe. This canvas of variations is a work in progress insofar as it remains open and is constantly

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[36] For an excellent introduction to the legal ramifications of fan additions to fanon, through fanfiction, see Rebecca Tushnet, *Legal Fictions: Copyright, Fan Fiction, and a New Common Law*, 17 Loy. L.A. Ent. L.J. 651 (1997), found at http://www.tushnet.com/law/fanficarticle.html

[37] Examples of this difficult line to draw are the Wicked books and musicals (potentially part of the Wizard of Oz canon) and "unauthorized" Zorro works (some of the first Zorro short stories are no longer copyright protected, but many are as are the movies).

[38] Several Peter Pan sequels have been commissioned by Disney and independent authors; however, these books cannot be sold in the U.K. where a special law keeps Peter Pan protected. Does this mean that these new Peter Pan books could potentially be canon in the U.S. and Canada, but not in the U.K.? Physical location being a determination of canon seems especially bizarre in a wired world.

[39] Sheenagh Pugh, The Democratic Genre 26 (2005)

[40] Will Brooker, *Internet Fandom and the Continuing Narratives of Star Wars, Blade Runner, and Alien*, in Alien Zone II 50, 52 (1999)

increasing; every new addition changes the entirety of interpretations. By looking at the combined fantext, it becomes obvious how fans' understanding of the source is always always filtered through the interpretations and characterizations existing in the fantext. In other words, the community of fans creates a communal (albeit contentious and contradictory) interpretation in which a large number of potential meanings, directions, and outcomes co-reside."[41]

B. Fans: Powerless or powerful?

For many media texts, who holds the power to close and open canon remains unclear, due to the struggle for power between the the media creator and the corporate owner of the content. There are times when the original author, for whatever reason, decides to give up their remaining control or ownership of their creation, or control of their work is wrested away from them.

Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* discusses the process of determining canon, acknowledging that it often blurs the line with fan response and interpretation. He states that

> "Constructing the program canon: the selection of a particular television series is simply the first stage in a larger evaluative process. Not every series episode equally satisfies the interests that initially drew fans to the program"[42]

Alan McKee describes Jenkins' view of canon construction as the "relatively weak tool of the 'powerless elite' of fans" and that "canonicity is simply about the choosing from an already existing text those elements that are to be validated"[43]

However, McKee states that "in studying *Doctor Who* fandom, it becomes apparent that the text – the program itself with which the fans have to work is not as simple [] and industry-determined as this reading might suggest." [44] According to Alan McKee, "canonicity – aura, reality – is not distributed in a binary manner according to modes of production," with official works clearly as canon, and fan works as outsiders.[45]

C. Contradictions and Complications

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[41] Kristina Busse & Karen Hellekson, *Introduction*, in <u>Fan Fiction And Fan Communities In The Age Of The Internet: New Essays</u> 5, 7 (Karen Hellekson & Kristina Busse eds., 2006)

[42] Henry Jenkins, <u>Textual Poachers</u> 92 (1992)

[43] Alan McKee, *How to tell the difference between production and consumption: a case study in Doctor Who Fandom*, in <u>Cult Television</u> 167, 177-78 (Sarah Gwenllian-Jones & Roberta Pearson, eds., 2004)

[44] Alan McKee, *How to tell the difference between production and consumption: a case study in Doctor Who Fandom*, in <u>Cult Television</u> 167, 178 (Sarah Gwenllian-Jones & Roberta Pearson, eds., 2004)

[45] Alan McKee, *How to tell the difference between production and consumption: a case study in Doctor Who Fandom*, in <u>Cult Television</u> 167, 176 (Sarah Gwenllian-Jones & Roberta Pearson, eds., 2004). Another presentation at this conference is directly addressing this issue within the context of Doctor Who, describing the process how Russell T. Davies can be a fan, yet a creator. Derek Kompare, *Fan/Producer: Cult Television Authorship*

Any work, but especially one with multiple authors or one written over a lengthy amount of time, has multiple internal contradictions. Often these contradictions do not allow for any possibility of all options being correct, such as when an only child suddenly has siblings. For example, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the existence of Buffy's previously unknown younger sister Dawn in the show's fifth season was explained by a mutual brainwashing.

When there are contradictions, both individual fans and the fan community has "to decide which truth to accept – though some get a lot of fun trying to reconcile the impossibilities."[46] This process of deciding between contradictions involves analyzing and placing events within the folksonomy created by the fan community, with individual fans "tagging" events, until the community as a whole reaches a consensus.

In his discussion of *Doctor Who* fandom and canonical status, McKee states that

> "Debates about what texts should be accorded this sense of ratification, of being real or authentic texts – canonical texts" led to the creation of a even-pre-the-latest-restart list of "thirty-nine different categories of possibly canonical Doctor Who text" demonstrating "not only a lack of agreement on what constitutes a canonical-real, authentic–part of *Doctor Who*, but also a sense of uncertainty in individual[s]."[47]

In discussing the fan debates about the limitations of canon, using an example of the BBC UK television show *Blake's 7*, Pugh states that there was serious fan debate about the possible canonical status of radio plays, and brings up the point that she "can't help but suspecting...that some fans would be readier to accept them as canon had they not been by common consent pretty awful."[48]

Busse and Hellekson describe the difficulty in creating a "tag" that successfully only includes canon or fanon:

> "Complete agreement on what comprises canon is rarely possible, even with repeated viewings of the primary source, because of the range of individual interpretation. Furthermore, what comprises canon can be called into question: for *Lord of the Rings*, for example, the canon may include any combination of the books (including or excluding Tolkien's supplementary work such as *The Silmarillion*), the animated movie directed by Ralph Bakshi released in 1978, and the 2001-2003 blockbuster Peter Jackson films."[49]

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[46] Sheenagh Pugh, The Democratic Genre 32 (2005)

[47] Alan McKee, *How to tell the difference between production and consumption: a case study in Doctor Who Fandom*, in Cult Television 167, 179 (Sarah Gwenllian-Jones & Roberta Pearson, eds., 2004). Note that these multiple layers predate the recent relaunch of Doctor Who, there would likely be many more levels of canon to fanon at this point.

[48] Sheenagh Pugh, The Democratic Genre 31 (2005)

[49] Kristina Busse & Karen Hellekson, *Introduction*, in Fan Fiction And Fan Communities In The Age Of The Internet: New Essays 5, 7 (Karen Hellekson & Kristina Busse eds., 2006)

According to Alan McKee,

> "the difference between fan production and industry production is not the mode of production, but the 'realness' that is accorded those texts as part of the [work's] canon, then those decisions on the part of the fans become intensely important."[50] He continues, stating that the process of individual fans making different interpretations of what is canon or not "is precisely the point--the status of being canonical ... is not industrially determined--it is produced discursively, within the fan community, and it is always provisional."[51]

McKee argues that "Entry to the canon is discursively managed, and it is this, finally, which enables it more accurately to account for the difference in status of various texts. Modes of production cannot be relied on to determine the importance of or to understand the circulation of texts."[52]

Format often makes a difference in canon-versus-fanon status, even for officially produced works. For example, in a large fictional universe, generally the original text's format and all works in that format "outrank" elements of the universe in other formats. For example, the *Star Trek* movies and television "outrank" books, while the *Harry Potter* books are more canonical than the movies.[53]

Another issue that complicates canon status is the continuing depreciatory view of all fan-based contributions to fandom among some fan purists who view fanon elements and facts as a bastardization of what is considered the "true" story.

However, there are some elements of canon that are not up for re-interpretation and "re-tagging" once established. According to Pugh, the "one aspect of canon that is not usually up for alteration is the nature of the characters," and that fans "have a firm idea of what those characters are like and won't stand for interpretations that are wildly off-beam."[54]

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[50] Alan McKee, *How to tell the difference between production and consumption: a case study in Doctor Who Fandom*, in Cult Television 167, 181 (Sarah Gwenllian-Jones & Roberta Pearson, eds., 2004)

[51] Alan McKee, *How to tell the difference between production and consumption: a case study in Doctor Who Fandom*, in Cult Television 167, 181-82 (Sarah Gwenllian-Jones & Roberta Pearson, eds., 2004)

[52] Alan McKee, *How to tell the difference between production and consumption: a case study in Doctor Who Fandom*, in Cult Television 167, 183 (Sarah Gwenllian-Jones & Roberta Pearson, eds., 2004)

[53] One example of the flexibility between fanon and canon is Star Trek -- Sulu's first name Hikaru, first used in an authorized, but non-canonical source, the novel The Entropy Effect, became his real canonical name in Star Trek VI. (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hikaru_Sulu). Also, to many fans, the storyline of the movie Star Trek V doesn't count, though its canonical status isn't challenged, even the creator, Gene Roddenberry, may have considered the events as "apocryphal at best."
There are other means of changing canon, including the slow change that occurs over time during the development of the series. For example, the implied corollary human ethnicity of Klingons changed over time from Russian or Asian to Black. Peter Chvany, *"Do we look like Ferengi Capitalists to You?: Star Trek's ethnics as emergent virtual American ethnics*, in Hop on Pop: the politics and pleasures of pop culture, 105-121 (Jane M. Shattuc, Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, eds., 2002).
How should one determine whether the new fanfilms based on the original Star Trek series, including Sulu as himself are canon or fanon? Danny Hakim, *'Star Trek' Fans, Deprived of a Show, Recreate the Franchise on Digital Video*, N.Y. Times, June 18, 2006, found at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/18/arts/television/18trek.html?ex=1308283200&en=29b75c960d6d099d&ei=5088

[54] Sheenagh Pugh, The Democratic Genre 65, 66 (2005)

VI. Conclusion

Pop culture canon texts are ultimately under the control of the creator/owner, though it is always under debate and subject to change by the creator, fan response, corporate owners, etc. The limits of fanon, in contrast, remain solely under the control of the fan community; fanon proves how strong the fan community can be in terms on influencing canon.

Use of the internet facilitates and speeds up the process by which canon is created, often due to the influence of fanon, and the creation of fan-created tropes and clichés. While at one time, fan response and interaction was limited by time and place, now media creators and writers can (if they choose) pursue "real-time" interaction with and feedback from fans.[55]

Fans may discuss and deconstruct pop culture as soon as it is released, or sometimes before it is released. Since creators and consumers can interact on this more immediate and personal level, and because consumers now have the ability to create and distribute their own work, it makes it more likely that elements of fanon may influence or become integrated into canon. While not exactly democratic, this process is more collaborative. In the same way, that folksonomy is a rejection or a way to take back the standards by which search engines rank and classify information, fanon is a way for fans to take back and/or reject the media creator/owners decisions on how to rank or classify their own work

The romantic ideal of one lone author creating and having complete interpretive control over his/her own work has been rendered obsolete, if it ever truly existed in the first place. The idea of a closed canon assumes a piece of work is created in a vacuum, excluding issues of public domain, ghostwriters, corporations being able to revive pop culture franchise, the Internet, and of course, fans. With this in mind, pop culture canon is never truly closed; the door is always cracked open. McKee states that:

> "canon is never absolute. Its definition is achieved by consensus within various groups, but it is never stable. It is always open to challenge, is different for different groups – and can, of course, change over time. And it is the fans, finally, who make those decisions. It is they who are ultimately the powerful ones."[56]

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[55] For example, the Grey's Anatomy blog "Grey Matter" (http://www.greyswriters.com/) is a platform for the staff writers of the television show to describe the writing/production process and to answer questions from fans.

[56] Alan McKee, *How to tell the difference between production and consumption: a case study in Doctor Who Fandom*, in <u>Cult Television</u> 167, 183 (Sarah Gwenllian-Jones & Roberta Pearson, eds., 2004)