In Search of an Author: From Participatory Culture to Participatory Authorship

Rachel Elizabeth Meyers
Brigham Young University - Provo

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In Search of an Author: From Participatory Culture
to Participatory Authorship

Rachel Meyers

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Carl Sederholm, Chair
  Michael J. Call
  Dennis Perry

Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature

Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

In Search of an Author: From Participatory Culture to Participatory Authorship

Rachel Meyers
Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature, BYU
Master of Arts

The question of fidelity, which has long been at the center of adaptation studies, pertains to the problem of authorship. Who can be an author and adapt a text and who cannot? In order to understand the problem of fidelity, this thesis asks larger questions about the problems of authorship, examining how authorship is changing in new media. Audiences are taking an ever-increasing role in the creation and interpretation of the texts they receive: a phenomenon this thesis refers to as participatory authorship, or the active participation of audience members in the creation, expansion, and adaptation of another’s creative work. In order to understand how audiences are creating texts, first the place of the player within video games is addressed. Due to the nature of the medium, players must become active co-creators of a video game. Drawing a parallel between video game players and performance, it is argued that players must simultaneously perform and author a text, illustrating the complex and multilayered nature of authorship in video games. In the second chapter the role of the fan is examined within the context of the My Little Pony fandom, Bronies. Like players, fans take an active role in the creation of the text and destabilize the traditional notion of authorship by partially controlling of a text from the original author. By examining the place of the player and the fan the traditional notion of authorship is destabilized, and the more open and collaborative model of participatory authorship is proposed.

Keywords: adaptation, authorship, participatory culture, fans, video games
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To Adam, for your ceaseless editing and support.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Participatory Authorship........................................................................................................1

Chapter 1: The Player ........................................................................................................................................12

  The Player’s Creative Control .......................................................................................................................13

  The Player’s Interaction with the Designers .................................................................................................21

  Implications of Performance .......................................................................................................................25

Chapter 2: The Fan ........................................................................................................................................26

  Stealing Authorship: Derpy Hooves and Character Creation .....................................................................29

  Transmediality and the Pro/Am Divide: MLP’s Comic Universe .................................................................36

  Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................................40

Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................................43

Works Cited ..................................................................................................................................................46
LIST OF IMAGES

Mass Effect Dialogue Wheel .................................................................................................................. 19
Mass Effect Endings .............................................................................................................................. 20
Robinett Easter Egg from Adventure 1979 ............................................................................................. 23
Grand Theft Auto 3 Easter Egg ............................................................................................................. 23
Derpy Hooves ....................................................................................................................................... 30
Derpy Hooves Naming Thread ............................................................................................................... 33
Introduction: Participatory Authorship

Questions of fidelity have long been a part of adaptation studies as audiences and scholars have looked for and expected constancy in a story’s plot and ‘spirit’ across multiple retellings, as if stories were readymade things easily reproduced in any format. Even though several theorists have tried to abandon the fidelity debate (especially in the simplistic terms of determining how faithful adaptations are, in what ways it deviates from the source, and whether these deviations were ‘good’ choices), fidelity remains a challenging problem. Because of these difficulties connected to fidelity, theorists like Thomas Leitch and Brian McFarlane have fought tirelessly to remove it as a criterion of critical judgement. Leitch, for example, writes that fidelity is the “exception to the norm” in adaptations (Discontents 127) and further argues, “Fidelity to its source text—whether it is conceived as success in re-creating specific textual details or the effect of the whole—is a hopelessly fallacious measure of a given adaptation’s value because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense” (Leitch “Twelve Fallacies” 161). McFarlane marvels at the fact that fidelity, at least in current criticism, is still “not merely dismissed but discredited at length” (16). Thus adaptation studies no longer needs to focus on why fidelity isn’t a valid means of criticism, since that discussion has been thoroughly established. Yet the persistence of the fidelity debate shows that there is a deeper and more pressing question at the root of fidelity—authorship—which needs to be better understood in order for discussions of adaptation to become even more productive.

The persistence of fidelity reveals the deep connection between fidelity and more fundamental and complex questions of adaptation. As James Naremore articulates it:

Even when academic writing on [adaptation] is not directly concerned with a given film’s artistic adequacy or fidelity to a beloved source, it tends to be narrow
in range, inherently respectful of the ‘precursor text,’ and constitutive of a series of binary opposites . . . literature versus cinema, high culture versus mass culture, original versus copy (2)

As much as contemporary adaptation scholars have tried to avoid these simplistic dichotomies, fidelity is still difficult to abandon, because at its root, the question of fidelity is deeply connected to the larger question of authorship. Fidelity, after all, privileges the ‘intent’ of the original author and is therefore against any significant authorial changes in an adaptation. The anxiety at the root of fidelity is the implied fear of intrusion into the space of the original author by another (perhaps ‘unqualified’) author. The adaptations that provoke the most anxiety are those of very respected authors like Shakespeare, Austen, or the Brontës (though the principle often remains the same for classic and popular authors alike). Other adaptations, such as Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho provoke far less anxiety since the source text is little known and Hitchcock carries more clout as an author than Robert Bloch, the novel’s author. If the anxiety about an adaptation fluctuates based on whose text is being adapted by whom, then fidelity is very much about authorship. In order to understand the anxiety about authorship in fidelity, we must first raise some fundamental questions: Who has the right to adapt a text? What justifies an author in making an adaptation, that is, does the adapter need to have some sort of moral, aesthetic, or legal justification for making an adaptation? In what way does the value of an adaptation change based upon its author? In essence, who has the right to adapt and who does not?

In the age of new media, the right to adapt serves as a clear dividing line for many people between active authors (those who possess the right to speak) and the passive audience (those who do not). In A Theory of Adaptation Linda Hutcheon argues that while fans create, fans do not adapt, because “there is a difference between never wanting a story to end. . . and wanting to
retell the same story over and over in different ways” (9). In essence, Hutcheon does not consider fan fiction within the realm of adaptation because fan extensions derive from a different impulse than other adaptations.\(^1\) While Hutcheon was trying to impose reasonable limits on her study of adaptation and thus did not want to broach the messy question of fans in her study, her dismissal of fans is nevertheless connected to the more general tendency to label fan fiction as something derivative, a rip-off, uncreative, perhaps even a desecrations of an original source, which is representative of the language of fidelity. While, the logic of fidelity is used to dismiss all fan works from further consideration, the distinction between fan fiction and adaptation has become increasingly problematic in the era of the internet, video games, and other new media. This new condition raises important questions: What distinguishes the work of a professional author from that of a fan? Is there a standard of aesthetic quality that must be met? Must the adapter have some sort of relationship, legal or otherwise, with the original author to gain the moral right to adapt? Since we live in a more complex culture of adaptation, it is important to understand who does the adapting, why, and what value and rights are associated with adaptation. The rhetoric of fidelity in adaptation is so tied to our Romantic notion of authorship, notions which also directly inform current copyright law, to the point our culture has been ill-equipped to deal with non-individualistic adaptive authorship. As copyright scholar Benjamin Kaplan has argued, “If man has any ‘natural’ rights, not the least must be the right to imitate his fellow, and thus reap where he has not sown” (2). But as the following example will illustrate, not only is the right to adapt not legally protected in certain situations, but in the case of fan adaptations, a legal gray zone exists which leads to a power struggle between author, audience, and corporation.

\(^1\) Hutcheon does consider fans within her study of adaptation and this mention of fans is not significant to her study as a whole. However, the second edition of Hutcheon’s book includes an afterward, written by Siobhan O’Flynn, which substantially addresses the issue of fans in adaptation.
In 2011, a meme started circulating on message boards for adult male fans—commonly called Bronies—of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010). A Brony had made a meme of the main pony characters from *My Little Pony* brutally fighting each other in *Street Fighter*-esque style. As the meme circulated, three Bronies, who were also college students studying game design, decided to form the company Mane6 to make a game of the meme. Their game, originally called *MLP: Fighting Is Magic*, was a 2D fighting game carefully designed to allow each pony to fight ‘in character.’ The non-profit labor-of-love took two years to complete and meticulously stayed true to the personalities and physical attributes of the six main characters from *My Little Pony*. A week before release in 2013, Hasbro, the copyright owners, sent a cease-and-desist letter to Mane6. Like so many cease-and-desist letters, Hasbro’s was concerned about copyright infringement and protecting their brand image. While a cease-and-desist letter has marked the end of many fan creations, for Mane6 this moment proved to be an important turning point. Following the cease-and-desist, *My Little Pony*’s creator and former Hasbro employee, Lauren Faust, stepped in. Faust got the joke of the game and appreciated how faithful the creators had been to her work, so she offered to create all new characters for the game, allowing Mane6 to simply sidestep Hasbro’s claims of copyright infringement (Campbell). To add a level of irony to this struggle for authorial status, in the weeks following the cease-and-desist, some of Mane6’s concept art appeared on Hasbro’s official *My Little Pony* Facebook page, because at least one Hasbro employee couldn’t tell the difference between Mane6’s artwork and Hasbro’s (Owen).

*Fighting Is Magic* demonstrates one instance of the struggle for the right to adapt. Because *My Little Pony* is protected by copyright and Mane6 were audience members (not professional artists) *Fighting Is Magic* was easily categorized as copyright infringement. But this
categorization may not be as simple as it seems; had Mane6 possessed the financial means, *Fighting Is Magic* may well been proven a parody in court, a protected category of speech. Faust’s intervention to try to fix the problem makes the issue even more complicated. Prior to Faust’s help, Mane6’s position was very familiar, as corporations often use cease and desist letters to protect their content while simultaneously maintaining their position at the top of the media hierarchy (Jenkins *Spreadable* 32). When Faust sided with the fan authors, she problematized the role of the audience by validating their right to speak and adapt.

In the traditional conception of the audience, it is the corporation’s role to create the media, and the audience’s role to do no more than passively consume (Bruns 17). Yet increasingly, audience members like Mane6 are not staying put in the passive box assigned to them by media producers. Nor is the audience staying within the label of “amateur” as evidenced by the Mane6 art mix-up. But if the audience isn’t passive, and can (and often does) produce professional-quality material, what is the real difference between the media producer and fans? Discourses about copyright infringement, brand protection and piracy are all tools used by media producers to protect their financial interests. Notwithstanding, the line between author and audience is disappearing, and with it, the line between who may or may not adapt. As James Naremore has argued “The study of adaptation needs to be joined with the study of recycling, remaking, and every other form of retelling in the age of mechanical reproduction and electronic communication” (15). By studying the role of the audience in adaptation and questioning who is allowed to adapt and why, we will be able to connect adaptation to the central questions of media studies, or as Naremore continues, “adaptation will become part of the general theory of repetition, and adaptation study will move from the margins to the center of contemporary media studies” (15).
In 1992, Henry Jenkins started to question the basic notions about audiences with his book *Textual Poachers*, where he engages in the first critical study of fans and non-normative audience behavior. Jenkins delved into fans’ recording and sharing of TV episodes, writing fan fiction, circulating zines, and meeting in person to discuss beloved entertainment. Jenkins also paid considerable attention to audience demographics and consumption habits in order to destabilize market and theoretical research on audience behavior. Yet while Jenkins revealed unexamined aspects of the audience and coined the term ‘participatory culture,’ what he discussed was fringe behavior. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, only a small portion of the population recorded shows to rewatch and analyze or met in person to discuss particular shows. Thus there was a distinction between fans and the “normal” audience (Jenkins *Textual* 15).\(^2\) The average audience conformed to the broadcasters’ schedules and didn’t devote much mental energy to the television programs or movies they watched. This assumption, while perhaps true in 1992, has been at the base of fan and audience studies ever since, which discuss the ways particular groups behave and assign new meaning to texts. The rhetoric that fans assign new meaning carries with it the implicit assumption that there was an ‘original’ or ‘correct’ meaning of the text, which the normal audience accepts and only the abnormal fans question. In essence, even though the twentieth century interrogated and tried to abandon the idea of authorial intent, the audience became a way to reintroduce this intentionality by dubbing it ‘the correct interpretation.’ This assumption needs to be interrogated; fans and participatory audiences do not assign new meaning—they assign meaning, and commonly assert this meaning through remix

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\(^2\) Jenkins describes this distinction in the following way: “[T]he fan still constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary culture. . . whose interests are fundamentally alien to the realm of “normal” cultural experience and whose mentality is dangerously out of touch with reality.” (*Textual* 15)
and adaptation. To describe this phenomenon, Axel Bruns coined the term produser (a blend of producer and user), which he defines as follows:

In collaborative communities the creation of shared content takes place in a networked, participatory environment which breaks down the boundaries between producers and consumers and instead enables all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge—frequently in a hybrid role of produser where usage is necessarily also productive. Produsers engage not in traditional forms of content production, but are instead involved in produsage—the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement. (21)

In the age of the internet, social media, new media, and produsers we can no longer assign the audience a passive position at the end of a capitalistic supply chain. While scholars have been discussing the active role of the audience for the last two decades, the conversation is now focusing on how audiences are active. Building on of that conversation, we must now question what the active audience does to our notions of authorship, creation and adaptation.

Despite twentieth-century literary critics such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault’s dogged questioning of the power of the author and the stability of meaning, Western culture is still obsessed with the romantic author. As Derek Johnson notes in his 2013 volume on authorship, “The author is the node through which discourses of beauty, truth, meaning, and value must travel, while also being the node through which money, power, labor, and the control of culture must travel. . . No wonder academics and citizens alike are all endlessly fascinated by authors” (“Introduction” 4). To the Greeks, poets were associated with the muses and madness
In Wordsworth’s Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, he writes, “Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply” (291, emphasis mine). In this Romantic view of authorship, only those who possess this special level of sensibility and have exercised adequate thought qualify for the title of poet. Quite significantly, this exclusive category of the Romantic author has become the basis of modern copyright law and the more general discourse about authorship (Jaszi 38). Yet if the author is separate and higher, the audience must then be common and low; the boundary between author and audience cannot be crossed by just anyone. The consequence of this is that “[t]he author is thus imagined to stand at the gateway and threshold between creativity, innovation, wonder, and magic, and us—all of those experiencing and taking pleasure in media culture in the mundane spaces of everyday life.” (Johnson “Introduction” 3). This exclusivity of authorship ensures a linear line of control between the powerful author to powerless audience, or in capitalistic terms, active producer to passive consumer.

But this discourse on authorship is a discourse crafted by the authors themselves and does not reflect the profound changes taking place through new media. As Johnson has argued, “Authorship is. . . about control, power, and the management of meaning and of people as much as it is about creativity and innovation” (“Introduction” 4). As scholars like Benjamin Kaplan, Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi have demonstrated, copyright and trademark law are based on the romantic view of authorship and creativity, leading to the failure of the law to deal with the historical reality of authorship (Jaszi 29–31). As the relationship between the author and

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3 In the Ion for example, Socrates argues that poets receive their inspiration by being possessed of the gods. “[T]hese transcendent poems are not human as the work of men, but divine as coming from the God. Poets then are the interpreters of the divinities—each being possessed by some deity.” (7–8)
audience is reevaluated, we will be able to cut through the rhetoric of creativity and authorship to reveal the true problems of control and management of meaning that underlie authorship and the right to speak. As Jenkins explains:

Current copyright law simply doesn’t have a category for dealing with amateur creative expression. . . . Our current notion of fair use is an artifact of an era when few people had access to the marketplace of ideas, and those who did fell into certain professional classes. It surely demands close reconsideration as we develop technologies that broaden who may produce and circulate cultural materials. (Convergence 189)

In a similar vein, Jaszi has argued “the law is not so much systematically hostile to works that do not fit the individualistic model of Romantic ‘authorship’ as it is uncomprehending of them” (38). The implications of this lack of comprehension are massive as these marginalized works become “literally invisible within the prevailing ideological framework of discourse in copyright” (38). This invisibility leads to the continuation of the power discourse that assumes a passive audience who does not possess the right to adapt.

In light of Johnson’s assertion that authorship is about control, the amateur creative expressions that Jenkins discusses are not simply derivative creations – they are an assertion of authorship. Through these amateur (non-profit) creative works, audience members are asserting their right to expand, adapt, and control the meaning of a text. This new form of authorship, which I call participatory authorship, is defined as the active participation of audience members in the creation, expansion, and adaptation of another’s creative work. By framing fan activities within the discourse of authorship, we can free the audience from the hierarchical biases that lead
to the automatic dismissal of their right to speak, and better understand what fan activities are already doing to control and regulate meaning.

The full study of the breadth and implications of participatory authorship is beyond the scope of a single thesis, but here I hope to lay groundwork and create a jumping-off point for further study. To create this groundwork, I will examine the player and the fan as two specific manifestations of participatory authorship. These two examples were chosen as two distinct instances of participatory authorship, which offer a similar instance of the way audiences are interacting with and controlling a text, while also dealing with the disparity created by different mediums. The relationship between authors, corporations, and audiences has increasingly become one of give and take as each group seeks to bring the work under their control, and these two examples will serve as strong demonstrations of how this interaction is unfolding. Since authorship is the discourse that is used to control the proliferation of meaning in a text (Foucault 222), changes to the idea of authorship mean changes to how meaning is produced. Examining participatory authorship through these two examples will help us better understand how meaning is produced by audiences, how audiences can contest meaning with the original author, and the other mediating factors in the contestation of meaning.

In the first chapter, I will explore the role of the player in video games, a vital part of the audience/authorship discussion that has hitherto been underdeveloped in critical study. As will be explored in chapter 1, players, by their very nature, are participatory authors and co-creators of the games they play, and a game cannot even exist without their input. Video games close the divide between the author and audience, creating a medium that is inherently collaborative, and understanding this institutionalized author/audience collaboration will provide a lens for understanding the expectations that are changing more traditional mediums. Since authorship and
adaptation are closely linked in video games, video games provide the chance to see these two concepts enacted at the same time; while players play and author a video game playthrough they are also adapting what was made by the game’s designers. Authorship and adaptation become one for video game players. By examining video games it will also make clear the problems that the Romantic assumptions of authorship bring to new media, since video games do not easily fit into the Romantic mold. As Jaszi has argued, the romantic assumptions behind copyright law lead to the “reimagining [of new mediums] so as to suppress complicating details about their modes of production” (38). A further discussion of how authorship is constructed in video games, which considers the ‘complicating details’ is essential to understanding how meaning is produced in video games.

In the second chapter I will examine internet fandoms and fans claiming authorial status and becoming actual co-creators of a text. This includes discussing the inherent tensions between fans and creators, what defines something as ‘official’, and the inherent complications that arise when fans can create productions of the same production quality as the original text. I will focus on the Brony fandom for this section, first because the vast creative output of Bronies makes it easy to analyze creative trends, and second because their position as a relatively new fandom reveals contemporary fan behavior, making them a good lens for understanding how modern fans and authors view their relationship. This chapter will probe the implications participatory authorship has for the production of meaning as fans are able to both accept and reject aspects of the work of the original author and also introduce new texts and meaning that influence the original author’s further creations. In this way it will become clear that authorship is a title that can be claimed and does not simply rely on one’s status as either producer or audience member.
Chapter 1: The Player

The idea that audiences actively shape texts is hardly new. In the 1970s, Reader-response theorists problematized the formalist notion of a text ‘in and of itself’ which could be interpreted without appeal to the reader or historical context. By instead seeing the reader as an “actively mediating presence,” reader response theory opened the way for deeper discussion of individual readers as well as larger audiences (Fish 384). In this way, all audiences, regardless of the medium they are experiencing, must actively participate in order for the text to have meaning (Fish 389). While reader response theory is typically applied to literary text, the notion of the active audience becomes even more apparent in application to video games. Not only do video games require an active audience in order to give meaning to a game, they also require an active audience in order to construct the text itself. By their very nature, players pose challenge the idea that authors are in control of the creation of the text; video games by necessity cede a level of control to the player. Some scholars have even argued that the game does not even exist without a player. As T. L. Taylor argues, “[m]ost radically put, the very product of the game is not constructed simply by the designers or publisher, nor contained within the boxed product, but produced only in conjunction with the players” (Taylor 126; see also, Consalvo 415). Since video games are a mass of code, carrying various potential signifiers but not having a singular form until players begin making active gameplay choices, it becomes necessary to question the idea that players are merely audience members (Behrenshausen, 875). Instead it would be more accurate to view players as participatory authors of the text, holding legitimate claims of authorship and ownership of a video game text itself. Because of this, video games offer a unique view of participatory authorship, since this high level of creative control is an institutionalized part of the video game medium. A game then, becomes a porous site where designer and player
meet and interact in unpredicted ways. As defined by Celia Pearce, term *porous* describes the unclear boundary between real life and privileged play. Her idea that the player-as-real-person collides with the player-as-player is augmented when interactions are extended to not just player-to-player interaction in online games but also player-to-designer interaction in all types of games. Expanding the implications of the porousness of video games will demonstrate the constant flux in the power dynamic, which leads to no one figure being able to claim ‘authorial’ status.

**The Player’s Creative Control**

In light of video games being a site of contestation of control, with multiple creative voices, it may be useful to draw an analogy between video games and performance to help elucidate some of the complexities of the video game medium. Although this thesis is less concerned with performance than authorship, borrowing terminology from performance mediums may help shed light on the larger problem, including ways of exploring the interplay between creative voices that video games require as a collaborative medium. Video games rely heavily on collaboration (in both their creation and consumption), which is denied by literary models of authorship, which focus on a single individual creator. However, like any analogy, the one between video games and performance will break down at some points, showing that authorship in video games exists somewhere in between the individual authorship of literature and the collaborative authorship of performance.

In the analogy between video games and performance (which is briefly suggested by Tavinor 58) the player takes on the role of an actor or performer, while the game designers fill

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4 “In many performing arts, the artist produces a script or a score which is used by performers to produce an instance of the artwork, and that performance may involve a greater or lesser degree of input from the performer. It is tempting to see a relationship between a videogame and its playing in a similar light. The videogame might be a kind of algorithmic script from which the player extracts an object of appreciation through their playing.” (Tavinor 58)
the role of the playwright, director, and other creative designers. If we use a similar approach, then, each playthrough may be seen as an individual performance, thus allowing video games, like performances, to be considered as a multiplicity of texts, having no single form. This analogy between game and performance also makes clear that each playthrough of a game is a unique iterative performance, which adapts both the game and previous playthroughs. Just like a stage performance, the same game can be played many times, but it will never be exactly the same and is constantly adapting and reworking previous material. By emphasizing the performative aspect of games, we can expand the way we understand a video game text as having multiple authors.

Much has been said regarding the changes interactive mediums create in a text (for example, see Tavinor; Mateas; Jenkins “Game Design”), yet very little time has been spent discussing how interactivity brings new media into the realm of performance (Lopes is one example of such an attempt). Seeing the player as performer enmeshes the player into the creative process. In the realm of performance, the actor is an integral part of the play; casting a different actor in a role will create a different performance. The script written by the playwright and the choices made by the director will all frame and guide the actor’s performance, yet those decisions and directions are meaningless without an actor whose job it is to interpret and communicate those decisions through her own choices, made in the moment of the performance. The player occupies an equally important and volatile place within a video game. Additionally, viewing the player as a performer provides a platform for discussing the aesthetic place of the player within video games. Perhaps it is the capitalistic nature of media production and consumption today, but the player is rarely discussed as an integral aspect of the aesthetics of video games (in fact even acknowledging there are aesthetic aspects to video games has been
controversial; for example see Tavinor), instead the player is usually seen as a consumer, an end user. As Tavinor discusses, the term “immersion” is often used to describe the player’s aesthetic place within video games, thereby circumventing a more complex discussion of aesthetics or what “immersion” even is (Tavinor 52). As such, scholarship of the actual play of video games remains generalized, only discussing aspects of the story and game play that “are likely to be standard to a large range of playings, and not those specific to a single idiosyncratic playing” (Tavinor 59). But unlike with a film audience, we cannot assume all game players encounter the same material within a game, and this variation, this performative aspect, must be taken into account, just as the variations between performances is taken into consideration by performance critics.

Because there is no standard text to work from in video game studies, assessing the aesthetics of a game has long proved difficult. Much video game theory has simply imported terminology and values from other mediums, particularly literature, film, and more recently game and play theories (see Chaplin; LeBlanc; Juul). Since the game text is only created through the individual performance of a specific player, the various elements of the game cannot be seen in isolation from this performance. However, as video games have developed as a medium, developers, as well as critics and theorists, have struggled to understand what exactly video games are and how they do what they do. This has led to a great number of games not only being critiqued under the values of a different medium, but also being designed with those values in mind. This created the ludology versus narratology debate, but also to the “cut scene era” of video games, where many games relied very heavily on cut scenes (a particularly cinematic technique) to convey the plot. Yet as the medium develops, both designer and critics are beginning to understand video games as a unique medium with its reliance on the player, leading
to the emergence theories of game design which privilege the player’s choices in creating the space, aesthetics, and narrative of the game (for example, see Bogost).

When we understand the player in this context, the mechanics and genre of the game become more than just choices by the designers, but also ways to create and alter the aesthetics of the game based on an individual performance. As with theatrical performance, the role of the video game performer varies based upon the genre and scriptwriter of the game. Cut-scene heavy games like Xenosaga, and Final Fantasy X or XIII pull on the narrative techniques of literature and film, creating a continuous and relatively unchanging narrative. These games put very little emphasis on the player’s performance and instead guide the game to one very specific conclusion. These highly linear games control the player much in the way performing under stringent stage directions and copyright restrictions, such as in an Eugene O’Neil play, limits an actor’s performance. These restrictive choices by designers should not be seen as negative, but merely one way of creating a game, which can challenge the player and force him or her into new situations.

Much in the same way commedia dell’arte provides a ‘scene’ and then allows the actors control over the rest of the play, sandbox games provide the player with the initial plot setup followed by nearly total freedom to develop the game. Sandbox games like Skyrim or Grand Theft Auto provide the player with a setting and concept, along with various quests, but the game play is not dependent upon the player following any sort of linear path. Depending on player choice, Skyrim can become the story of a common thug establishing a criminal empire, or the story of a priest of the banned god Talos looking to end the civil wars that grip the land, or the story of a conflicted vampire, looking for redemption by fighting the vampires, demons, and dragons that would consume the less-powerful mortals. Sandbox games provide a massive
number of opportunities for exploration and thus provide almost infinite space for individual performance.

While sandbox games rely on the player to construct both the text and the meaning, other games may provide a very linear structure, but still totally rely on the player to construct meaning and purpose. The 2011 game *Loneliness* by Necessary Games is a simple flash game that lasts less than five minutes. In the game, the player controls a little black box with basic arrow key movements. The player may move the box in any direction, but ultimately must move the box up the scrolling screen to complete the game. Along this simple path are other black boxes, either alone or in groups. If the player attempts to move toward these other boxes, the boxes scatter, leaving the player constantly alone. The game ends as the player moves their box into total blackness. *Loneliness* is linear and provides the player with very little mechanical freedom, but also relies on the player to personify the boxes and explore and respond to the simulation of loneliness. Because of this, despite the controlled linearity of the game, each playthrough and player will produce a different text, only part of which is seen on the screen, the rest of which is embodied by the player. Depending on the player, *Loneliness* can become a text about the constant search for approval and acceptance, only to fail; it could also be a text about the attempt to avoid rejection and community, which ultimately lead to nothingness; or the player could refuse to personify the boxes or reject the emotional simulation and thereby subvert the initial intent of the game. Yet each of these texts is a unique performance of the game and provides a different aesthetic. By being so narrowly focused, *Loneliness* is able to explore and offer various perspectives on loneliness as an emotion and as an experience. The linearity of *Loneliness* allows for sustained engagement with an aesthetic question, whereas sandbox games

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5 *Loneliness* is available for free play online at [http://www.necessarygames.com/my-games/loneliness/flash](http://www.necessarygames.com/my-games/loneliness/flash)
provide so much freedom that the various aesthetics are couched within different plot choices. While the genre of the game changes the specific role of the player-performer, performance is a constant aspect of all games. Because of this, games exist in an infinite variety of playthroughs and depend on iterability in order to create meaning. While theatrical art may change from performance to performance, and especially from production to production, video games bring with them the unique potential of having complete reinterpretations of the material by the same player in each playthrough.

As the medium develops, some games are beginning to use the repeatability of games as a necessary part of their narrative techniques. The Mass Effect trilogy, and the controversies that surround it, provides a compelling view of iterability and performance, highlighting exactly how the player is a participatory author. Mass Effect is a trilogy of off-line science fiction role-playing games, and as such it provides a relatively linear, epic storyline following Commander Shepard and his or her mission to save the galaxy from the Reapers, a mechanical race seeking to destroy the universe. Commander Shepard is a player created character, which allows players to choose the gender, physical attributes, and personality traits of Shepard before the game begins. Within gameplay, Mass Effect, like many other games, allows the player to make multiple choices in response to a situation. But unlike many other games, player choice in Mass Effect has subtle and complex consequences for the rest of the game. Many other RPGs allow players two choices in response to a situation, with the ‘good’ choice and ‘bad’ choice being obvious; yet Mass Effect allows the player the ability to perform their Shepard through the dialogue wheel (pictured

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6 Fall Out uses a ‘karma’ system with obviously immoral choices such as stealing or killing innocents lowering your karma. In Fable good choices and bad choices literally changing your appearance (ranging from shining, glowing skin for good choices to darken pock-marked skin and baldness resulting from bad choices); Fable also offered binary choices so it was clear which choice represented which outcome.
right), which typically provides 3–6 options in response to each decision and dialogue responses within every conversation. This allows the player to choose not only between yes and no, but how that yes or no is said, whether that be snarky, antagonistic, respectful, etc. This ability to not only choose, but to perform Shepard’s personality increases players’ sense of ownership over their individual characters and also changes the course of the game. Depending on whether players have made Shepard into a noble solder, a xenophobic brute, a capitalistic maneuverer, or some other variation changes the player’s interpretation and response to *Mass Effect* as well as the actual choices that will be available later in the game. Because player choice factors so heavily into the game development, *Mass Effect* invites repeated play, in order to see and explore the consequences of different choices (performances). To escalate the importance of performance, *Mass Effect 2* built off of the save files from the original *Mass Effect*; each character file a player had saved on his or her console would become a starting point for the second game. This meant that players did not all start the second game on equal footing; previous performance choices would change quest and character interactions in the second game. Since BioWare, the studio that produces *Mass Effect*, did not provide details on what previous choices would make which future changes, players were encouraged to replay and experiment across the two games to discover the various possibilities (GameFront).

However, this heavy emphasis on player performance in each playthrough ultimately backfired on BioWare when *Mass Effect 3* was released. The emphasis on highly individualized performance within the game had led players to invest significant time in creating various
playthroughs and also engendered a strong sense of ownership. Leading up to the release of *Mass Effect 3* user forums were full of discussions of how ‘my Shepard’ behaved and speculation on how ‘my Shepard’s’ story would end in the final installment of the game (Buccura; FatDyke).

Yet the actual ending offered by *Mass Effect 3* led to outrage from many fans (Plunkett; Tankha). Despite promises of individualized choice and various endings, players viewed the ending as suspending their agency and presenting a very limited resolution. The game offered three different endings, which fans argued (and the picture below illustrates) was really the same ending in three different colors. After a three game epic of fighting the Reapers, Shepard was faced with three choices: to kill all the AI in the universe, take control of all the AI, or synthesize all life in the universe with the AI. Because these three endings all ended in the colored light pictured above and then quickly ended without epilogue, players felt these were all the same ending. Many players felt these three endings were not only homogenous, but also required them to violate the fundamental character their performance had crafted (Clarkson; Thier).

The significant part about this player outrage was the form the protests took. Players were not simply annoyed that BioWare had not written what they considered to be a thematically satisfying ending; they actually went to BioWare and demanded a new ending (Clarkson; Thier). This anger, rooted in the claim that player performance was not respected, highlights the ultimate struggle for authorial control the player-figure creates. Player demands for a new ending signify that the right to write the game lay not only with BioWare, but also with those who created the
actual texts (each playthrough) of the game. These player protests sparked hot debate in the video game world as many saw the fans as violating their traditionally passive position. Interestingly, much of this debate focused on artistic integrity: Do players have the right to say what the aesthetics of the game should be? Do designers lose artistic credibility if they listen to player demands? (Totilo; Chapple; Parker). Viewing themselves as co-authors, *Mass Effect 3* players revealed the complex position of the author in video games.

In the face of these protests, BioWare released additional content to “clarify” the original ending but refused to change it. This refusal to listen to player demands led one player to create the “*Mass Effect 3* Happy Ending Mod” in which he reworked the entire game to lead to a thematically satisfying ending (MrFob). Thus even though BioWare refused to change their game, the players claimed and exercised the right to control the text.

**The Player’s Interaction with the Designers**

Video games transgress the normal author/audience divide by not only inviting the player to help create the text but also by making the author beholden to the demands and desires of the player as seen with the *Mass Effect 3* endings. Within a video game, the designer must design for the player’s performance, anticipating and preparing for even the most erratic choices a player could make. Unlike many other mediums, the player’s behavior could literally break the game if the designer hasn’t carefully enough anticipated the player—not just to produce a different narrative than the designer had anticipated, but actually cause the code to malfunction, destroying whatever ‘text’ the playthrough had created. Thus unlike traditional mediums where the artist is not required to consider the audience while creating their text (although most do), video game designers must anticipate the audience reaction. This of course poses problems for video games being considered an art form from an author-centric point of view. The designers of
video games are not and cannot be the individualistic Romantic author (even if some try) because a certain level of control (and therefore aesthetic responsibility) must be ceded to the player. In this way, the power dynamic between designer and player is constantly in flux.

Because of this fluid power dynamic, the player does not assume the same type of aesthetic responsibility as an actor. An actor, at least within traditional performance, performs for the benefit of a more passive audience, and as such has motivation to ‘stick to the script’ and the director’s interpretation. The actor has also been complicit in the production process and is not simply handed a near-finished product to perform. Yet, in video games where the players are performing for themselves, and not an external audience, the motivation for players is to make each playthrough a unique performance (Lopes 80). In this way, the player acts as both the director and the actor by determining both the objective and execution of the performance. A player may seek the objective as quickly as possible, or may take her time. She may treat the world as a coherent whole and act as she feels she is expected to act, or she may randomly jump on other character’s heads, just to see if the programmers anticipated that action and programmed in an appropriate response. In this way, a video game is not a single text but becomes something akin to a dialogue carried out between the player and game designer, with the game itself the vehicle of communication.

This dialogue is best exemplified in the idea of Easter eggs and modding. An Easter egg is a term referring to the designer creating hidden content that only advanced or persistent players will find. This is content that may never be seen, and which usually does not contribute to the game’s narrative. Yet Easter eggs are fairly common and they are the manifest interaction between designer and player outside of the narrative, simply for the sake of interacting. The very first Easter egg was a designer’s name, suggesting that Easter eggs are intimately connected to
notions of creative control. In the 1979 Atari game *Adventure*, the creator, Warren Robinett, was not allowed any official credit for the work he did. Thus Robinett created what would come to be known as the first Easter egg: one little pixel, which if carried to the right location would lead to a room with Robinett’s name. In another notable example, the makers of *Grand Theft Auto 3* found a glitch in the programming that would allow persistent players to reach a part of the game not intended for gameplay. Fixing the problem would have proved time-consuming, so rather than delay production the designers simply left a message for the players: “You weren’t supposed to be able to get here you know”.

These Easter eggs allow players and designers to communicate on a more personal level, outside the strictures of the corporatized video game industry. Only a very small number of indie games are created by a single individual, which means that all other games are created by creative teams, sometimes including hundreds of people. The studio name is often used in place of an author’s name in discussions of video games, with major studios being known for particular styles or quality of games. Easter eggs then become a way of direct communication between the two creative parties (designers and players) and it is important at this point that the uniform corporate identity of the designers can break down. Easter eggs can provide identification of individual designers, the opportunity for inside jokes, or simply a way to show a designer’s personality.
The line between designers and players becomes even more complicated when modding (game modification) is considered. Players have long possessed the ability to access the code of the game and change what the designer created. The changes created by mods vary from minor changes such as “re-skinning” the appearance of the game to total overhauls leading to an entirely new game. The most famous example of this is the popular game series *Half Life*, which has spawned multiple mods that became entirely new games, including *Portal*, *Counter-Strike*, *Dear Esther*, and *The Stanley Parable*. This process of modding brings up some very real and complex questions when it comes to authorship and ownership. The commercially successful *Counter-Strike* was originally developed by two players of *Half Life*, Minh Le and Jess Cliffe. During the game’s fourth round of beta-testing, Valve (the corporation that owns *Half Life*) began assisting the two modders and then offered them both jobs at Valve, allowing Valve to acquire all the legal rights to *Counter-Strike*. Yet other mods like *Dear Esther* and *The Stanley Parable* have resisted Valve’s assistance and buy-out offers, requiring the designers to rework the base code to avoid copyright infringements before the game could be sold commercially. In light of modding, the author position becomes fraught as a player can become an author, and yet not escape the grasp of the original author.

Due to the inevitability of player mods, some games even come with their own modding kits, which allows the player easy and sanctioned access to the code, thus lowering the level of technological skill to create a mod, while also creating a deterrent to harmful or overly invasive mods. This practice can also be extended to corporations actively outsourcing further game content to player created mods, which often happens in *The Sims*. The practice of modding makes it clear that the separation between designer and player is far from firm. Players can become designers and use their experiences as a player to enhance and recreate the game. The
practice of modding is somewhat analogous to fan-fiction, where fans change the original product to fit their own desires and then circulate it among other fans. Both fan-fiction and modding carry with them the implicit assumption that a text cannot be owned by a single individual or corporation, but is always subject to adaptation and re-creation. The implication and problems of this sort of fan adaptation will be more fully developed in the next chapter.

**Implications of Performance**

The purpose of discussing the author/audience divide (or lack thereof) in video games is meant to clarify the problems of our current rhetoric in relation to players as ‘end users.’ The distinction between a player and a game designer is not neat or firm. Players are an integral part of producing the text of a video game and players also have the ability to become designers themselves. As we separate players out from the passive rhetoric of capitalistic consumers and more properly place them within the active rhetoric of production and creativity, it becomes clear that video games have destroyed the easy dichotomy between producers and consumers. Video games offer an institutionalization and dependency on this form of participatory author. By creating the analogy between players and performance, this chapter sought to firmly establish players within the realm of creativity while also creating room for further study of the player as performer. Acknowledging the active role of the player also explains the conflicts that can occur when players feel a sense of ownership over a text which is then not respected by the producers, as was seen in the *Mass Effect 3* controversy. This battle for authorial control is one that is currently occurring in other forms of new media and which will be explored in the next chapter.
Chapter 2: The Fan

The previous chapter discussed institutionalized participatory authorship through the medium of video games. While this is a profound change in our understanding of authorship, it could be argued that since collaboration is an inherent aspect of video games, the concept is therefore limited only to such participatory mediums. However, as this chapter will explore, fans are beginning to both demand and receive an almost player-like level of influence in the media they consume. While fans themselves are not a new concept, the communicative power provided by the internet has allowed fans to organize into coherent fandoms and communities, using their collective voice to take ownership of the object of their fandom, even when no institutionalized means of collaboration exists. Thus, while the player may provide the clearest lens for understanding participatory authorship, the fan provides an understanding of just how far-reaching this concept has spread.

*Fighting Is Magic* reveals that fans have the capacity to make texts of equal production quality as the original authors, and are increasingly asserting a moral claim for the right to do so. Since *Fighting Is Magic* is a video game it creates a nice parallel between the activities of players and the activities of fans. In the process of creating *Fighting Is Magic*, Mane6 gamified *My Little Pony*, turning it into a world where fans could enter as players and exert control over the characters. In much the same way, all fan activities bear this level of player control as fans take the original text and adapt, extend, or manipulate it in some way to make the text their own. A fan fiction story represents a single iteration of the story world; in much the same way a playthrough is a single iteration of a game—one possibility among many. Yet the outcome of the *Fighting Is Magic* game demonstrates the difficulty that this form of adaptation faces. Because fan adaptations are not a sanctioned use of control, but rather a seizure of control from
the original author the place of fan adaptations are on much more uncertain ground than the adaptations created by players. The right of a player to create a unique playthrough of a video game is not questioned—that is, in fact, the entire point of the medium. But the right of a fan to create an adaptation is questioned both legally and culturally, since fans often seek control over ‘finished’ texts. Faust’s decision to help the creators of Fighting Is Magic reveals yet another level of complexity that fans face; fans are subject to various reactions from authors, corporations, and the media. Some fans activities will be viewed as benign, while others will not. This fraught place of the fan complicates the study of fans because fan activities are not treated the same in various situations, leading to erratic legal action and various relationships between fans and creators from antagonistic, to ambivalent, to collaborative.

Legally, fans are on shaky ground; not that fans have no legal right for their activities, but that copyright laws and case history simply don’t consider amateur productions, leading to a legal void when it comes to fan rights and productions (Jenkins Convergence 189). Because there is no category to protect amateur (non-profit) fan productions, corporations can threaten fans with legal action designed for piracy (stealing protected materials for profit) despite the fact that fan activities are usually benign (or even beneficial). As Bruns has discussed, the increasing production of fan products (and the increasing value of those products) poses “a notable threat to the established media industries, especially where they understand themselves principally as copyright industries, that is, industries based on the principle of protecting and enforcing their intellectual property rights” (256). This ideological stance of most media companies has led to very aggressive interactions between fan and producer, and sometimes even a split between author and copyright holder, as highlighted in the Fighting is Magic example. Each of these groups can put forward a moral claim for the right to control an intellectual property (IP).
Legally the copyright holder has purchased the right to control the IP and therefore maintains all rights to it, yet from an artistic perspective the author holds the more genuine claim to control the IP, since intellectually and artistically the IP belongs to him or her. But from another and even more complicated perspective, fans can claim a right to the IP as they have substantially invested in it personally, led to its commercial success, and contributed their own creativity to the IP. As the moral claim to a work becomes more and more complex, copyright holders have resorted to legal aggression to maintain control over the work. As Jenkins has explained “Cease-and-desist orders have become an all-too-familiar means of correspondence between brands and their audiences in an era when prohibitionist corporate attitudes have collided with the collaborative nature of online social networks” (Spreadable 32). At the heart of this conflict between fan and producer is the hierarchy of media production. Media producers have been able to maintain the romantic ideal where the author is separated from the audience by virtue of artistic merit, yet this is often used as a smokescreen for the more mundane and capitalistic tendencies of money and control. Drawing on the analogy of ‘poaching’ from De Certeau, Jenkins describes the relationship between fans and creators as characterized by “an ongoing struggle for possession of the text and for control over its meanings” (24). As Jenkins goes on to explain “what is often missed, [is that] de Certeau’s concept of ‘poaching’ promises no easy victory for either party. Fans must actively struggle with and against the meanings imposed upon them by their borrowed materials; fans must confront media representations on an unequal terrain” (33). When Jenkins wrote this in 1992, fans were not recognized for their creative offerings, being labeled instead as a fringe phenomenon. Yet during the shift in technological possibilities and cultural attitudes in the last two decades the fan has gained ground. In order to understand how fans are currently influencing media, I will focus on the My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic (2010) fandom
known as Bronies (from bro-ponies). Because the Brony movement started in 2010 and is almost entirely internet-based it offers a unique and relatively complete picture of the power and control contemporary fandoms can possess.

Bronies are the adult male fans of *My Little Pony*. The fan movement began in 2010 following the release of the television show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, the “fourth generation” reboot of the franchise. The *My Little Pony* franchise, owned by Hasbro Corporation, has existed since the early 1980s and over the years has gone through several different incarnations of television shows and toy lines. The target audience of *My Little Pony* has always been pre-pubescent girls; thus when the notorious internet forum site 4chan exploded with ponies in late 2010 following the release of the new television show, everyone was taken by surprise. Bronies are perhaps the most unlikely fan movement to ever exist. The fandom rapidly spread and developed due to its fans’ genuine love for the show, as opposed to any social or sexual deviance or desire to be ironic, as is often claimed (Edwards). Rather than disavow these unexpected fans, Hasbro has chosen to be supportive and encouraging of anyone who loves its show. Because of this support, Bronies, from the very first season of the show, have had more sustained creative engagement with the show’s creators than most fandoms can achieve, which allows for a clearer look at creativity and collaboration between fans and authors.

**Stealing Authorship: Derpy Hooves and Character Creation**

Fans are capable of notably expanding and contributing to the story world of their fandom. The following example will illustrate the power that fans possess to adapt, influence, and confront the story world created by the original authors. The collective creativity of fans and their attempts to influence the source texts serve to complicate traditional notions of authorship. In the very first episode of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* a grey pony with yellow hair
appeared in the background of the episode. This pony stood out because her eyes were crossed (depending on who you ask this was either a joke by the animators or an accident [“Derpy”]). The show’s creator, Lauren Faust, had already named this pony Ditzy Doo and created a backstory for her for future episodes, but in the first episode she only appeared in the background. Bronies latched onto this grey pony and her crossed eyes and the ideas and fan fiction started rolling. Collectively, the Brony community named this pony Derpy Hooves and created a backstory for her. The term “derp” was made popular in the late 1990s and like similar words “duh” or “dur” is meant to denote a stupid action. On the internet the term was frequently used with memes where “the subject is typically portrayed with eyes that are pointed to each side and a caption that reads ‘DERP’” (“Derp”). Because of this usage, the term also carried with it the connotation of mental retardation. Derpy Hooves is a mail carrier pony, who loves muffins, is extremely klutzy, and has a goofy but loving personality. As the fan fiction developed, Derpy became Doctor Whooves’ companion (the pony Dr. Who), with Derpy’s crossed-eyes being possibly explained by the Doctor crashing his T.A.R.D.I.S. into her when she was a filly. Derpy is one of the most beloved characters in the Brony fandom and for many has come to symbolize Bronies.

It is, of course, not uncommon for a fan community to create characters or to name and establish backstories for background characters (such as the Star Wars fan following surrounding the originally minor character of Boba Fett). What is quite unique to Derpy is the response from MLP’s creators. Lauren Faust, the show’s creator, and Jayson Thiessen, the show’s director, have both been aware and supportive of Derpy since her very early days. Upon
learning about the fan creation, Thiessen even ordered that Derpy’s eyes be crossed on any episodes that had not yet been sent to Hasbro (“Derpy”). This led to a Where’s Waldo-esque era of MLP with Derpy randomly popping up in the background of episodes, appearing in nineteen of the twenty-one episodes in season one. The fans and creators alike both enjoyed the inside joke and Hasbro seemed to have remained totally unaware of Derpy and her eyes at this point.

In the season two episode “The Last Roundup,” which aired on January 21, 2012, in what was supposed to be a nod to the fans, Derpy appeared as a speaking character. In an opening scene, Derpy jumps on top of a thunder cloud, shooting out lighting and causing serious damage to a building while Rainbow Dash (a main character) asks Derpy (by name) to be more careful.

This characterization of Derpy seems to be an unfortunate collision between the fan persona and Faust’s original idea for Ditzy Doo, a “feather-brained” pony (“Derpy”). While fans were generally ecstatic that their creation had made such a prominent appearance in the show, some fans critiqued the episode as not being very true to Derpy’s character. Fan characterizations of Derpy do not make Derpy the butt of the joke as she was in this episode and for many, this portrayal carried with it the implication of mental retardation (something which had not been part of the fan characterization). Because of the disability overtones, the bigger and more problematic reaction came from the non-Brony community. Outrage came from bloggers and news sources for the offensive, “ableist” episode, decrying the name Derpy as derogatory slang for the mentally retarded and claiming Derpy’s appearance was one big mockery of all disabled people. The writer of the episode, Amy Kesting Rogers, side-stepped the issue by claiming she didn’t know the meaning of the word ‘derpy’ and placed all blame squarely on the fans. Hasbro apologized for the ableist message and pulled the episode from iTunes until the scene could be altered to remove Derpy’s name and make her voice less “retarded” sounding. WeLoveFine, a
Hasbro affiliate which sells fan-created merchandise, pulled all Derpy products from their store (“Derpy”).

The fan response to this debacle was strong and quick revealing the complex and loving nature of the fan community. With the distance and perspective the media backlash caused, more fans were open to critiquing the episode’s characterization, while still making clear that Derpy was not the problem and must not be changed. Websites like savederpy.com as well as a host of YouTube videos and blog posts articulated the Brony frustration at the negative response to Derpy. The YouTube video “Save Derpy” by Alligator Tub Productions went straight for emotional appeal with a video that depicts Derpy’s response to the situation as Derpy cries and apologizes that her problems offended people, expresses the desire to simply be loved for who she is, but promises to try to fix her shortcomings so as to be less offensive. Other fan reactions tried to cut through the political rhetoric and directly accuse those offended by Derpy of being the ones who are ableist by wishing to suppress non-idealized depictions of disability. The fan voice of Derpy posted a YouTube video expressing his frustration at the attempt to censor Derpy coming specifically from his point of view as a “special ed” teenager. The fan reaction highlighted the Brony principle of love and toleration, showing a full acceptance of Derpy regardless of what problems she does or does not have. Yet despite a large effort on the part of fans, political correctness triumphed and Derpy was censored.

The removal of Derpy seemed to prove the official end of Derpy and all she stood for as a fan-created character. Yet the rapport between Bronies and some of the show’s creators is quite strong and season four of MLP has brought an attempt to reintroduce and rebrand Derpy. Derpy again began appearing prominently as a nameless background character and in episode ten, “Rainbow Falls,” she becomes an alternate for the Equestria Games (the pony Olympics),
although she remained resolutely unnamed and unspeaking. Since that episode, Derpy has appeared in a handful of other season four episodes as a background character, marking a return to the Where’s Waldo-esque era of Derpy.

Derpy’s creation, inclusion, rejection, and reintroduction illustrates some very important points about the role and creative capacity of fans. For many, Derpy has been easily written off as a symbol of fan prejudices, often providing a platform for showing the writers’ non-ableist position. Yet dismissing Derpy this quickly and easily ignores the creative import of Derpy’s existence. First, Derpy is a very clear illustration of the power of collective creativity. Derpy was not created by any one individual or even by a small creative team; she is the product of the collective creative capacity of the fan community. This sort of collective creativity is a new phenomenon that the internet has allowed for. The congregation of fans into one place and the rapid-fire discussion style created by forums allows fans to create and collaborate in ways that would have been impossible prior to the internet. To the right is a screenshot of the thread in which Derpy was initially named where images, text, and internet tropes converge, leading to the spontaneous, collective naming of Derpy. This thread showcases the type of collective intelligence that both Jenkins and Bruns discuss as central to participatory culture. In Convergence
Culture, Jenkins spends considerable time discussing how the internet creates knowledge communities where each user is free (and responsible) to contribute to the collective knowledge of the community, thus producing knowledge greater than any one individual can possess.

“Consumption has become a collective process. . . . None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills. Collective intelligence can be seen as an alternative source of media power” (Convergence 4). In the creation of Derpy, fans used the knowledge community for a creative purpose, pushing the boundaries of creative authorship. Both Bruns and Jenkins discuss the importance of knowledge communities in relation to more fact-based pursuits, such as Wikipedia or Survivor spoiling. Bronies have taken these knowledge communities one step further by utilizing not only group knowledge, but group creativity. Bruns and Jenkins both aspire for the day when the knowledge communities of the internet are utilized for serious social pursuits, and while the creation of Derpy is certainly not utilizing the internet to solve social issues, it is challenging the basis of copyright law and therefore has major social implications. Copyright law is based on the assumption that creative works have a single author (usually seen as a single individual, but also extending out to a single legal entity). Derpy defies this notion by being born out of the collective collaboration of the Brony community. Following the thread pictured above, the idea of Derpy spread rapidly through the Brony community, so that those not involved in the initial naming were still important in the development of her backstory and personality. By pushing the boundaries of both authorship and the capacity of knowledge communities, Bronies are implementing creativity in a way not previously seen and not accommodated for within the copyright system. Thus the implications of this new form of creativity are far reaching.
The inclusion of Derpy into the show reveals an important give and take between fans and creators while also complicating the status of ‘official’ products. It is very significant that the creators have attempted to use Derpy per the fan vision, and have not simply borrowed the general concept. The deference to the particulars is what has made this relationship more innovative and complex than situations where creators have developed shows in order to cater to fan favorites. When creators like Lauren Faust and Jayson Thiessen acknowledge and include fan creations, the power relationship between fans and creators becomes more complex than the traditional powerful producer/powerless audience. The different behaviors of fans and authors have been described as follows: “The differences between the limited offerings from producers compared to the rich offerings by fans prompted Örnebring to conclude their respective actions ‘could be viewed as part of an ongoing contestation of narrative’” (Dena 182). It is quite significant that Faust and Thiessen respect the fan canon and attempt to include Derpy per the fan vision. The fan voice and backstory for Derpy carry more authority than anything the show’s official creators can create, and the “Last Round Up” debacle illustrates some of the dangers of departing from the fan vision. Defining what is an official product and what is not becomes more difficult in this light. The fan version of Derpy is the official version, while her speaking appearance in the show is not given that level of importance. Yet the direct acknowledgement of Derpy created by her speaking role made the character much more official than she had been. In fact, this inclusion has led to Derpy being a character available in certain official Hasbro products, although she is resolutely unnamed. In this sense, what is “official” is no longer determined simply based on what the author does, but is a collaborative and tense relationship between fans, artistic value, and capitalistic interests. Jenkins has discussed the very difficult
place that fans hold in this power relationship, always subject to the decisions of the media producers:

While fans display a particularly strong attachment to popular narratives, act upon them in ways which make them their own property in some senses, they are also acutely and painfully aware that those fictions do not belong to them and that someone else has the power to do things to those characters that are in direct contradiction to the fans’ own cultural interest. Sometimes fans respond to the situation with a worshipful deference to media producers, yet, often they respond with hostility and anger against those who have the power to “retool” their narratives into something radically different from that which the audience desires.

(Textual 24)

As fan communities become larger and more organized, the anger elicited by ‘retooled’ narratives has become a dangerous force for media producers to confront. As can be seen by the strength of the fan reaction to the censoring of Derpy and the season four attempt to re-brand Derpy per the fan vision, it is clear that producers are no longer in total control of their texts; at least some producers recognize the importance of honoring fan creativity in the creation of official products.

**Transmediality and the Pro/Am Divide: MLP’s Comic Universe**

The Brony decentralization of the ‘author’ can also be seen in the transmedial expansions for the show. Like most franchises, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* engages in a large number of cross-media products; there are movies, games, toys, and comic books all tying into the main television show. As Claire Parody defines it, this type of franchising consists of “narrative, characters, and settings that can be used both to generate and give identity to vast
quantities of interlinked media products and merchandise, resulting in a prolonged, multitextual, multimedia fictional experience” (211). While most of these properties are light on story and are mainly aimed at providing further entertainment for (and profit from) the pre-pubescent girl target audience, the MLP:FiM comic books fruitfully engage in extending the world of MLP for an older audience. The comic book adaptations of the MLP world “allow media producers to meet consumers’ dual demands for personalized and novel media” (Moore 183). As Parody argues, this type of adaptation is also useful for normalizing and neutralizing the practice of adaptation within a broader cultural context (216). The MLP comic books are licensed products, meaning that the right to create the comic books has been sold by Hasbro to another company, IDW Publishing. Thus the creators of the comics are not the creators of the show and only receive generalized guidance from MLP’s creators and producers. In a 2013 Cincinnati Comic Con panel, two of the comic book creators explained Hasbro’s level of guidance for the content of comic books as “it sells well, do whatever you want” with the further qualifier that they are only prevented from doing something if it will interfere with future plans for the television show (Trek). These licensed creators (which are becoming an increasingly large group in the current era of transmedia franchises) exist somewhere in between fan and creator. The comic books are “official” MLP products because the comic book creators obtained a license and Hasbro approves the content before publication. The gray zone created by licensed product can be seen “as part of an ongoing contestation of narratives, where producers, consumers and producer/consumers apply different narrative models, structures and strategies in order to maintain control over the text and the (economic and cultural) capital it represents.’ (Örnebring 2006, 16, my emphasis)” (qtd, in Dena 182-83). The contestation of narratives is part of the larger struggle for control created by the now nonexistent gap between professionals and
amateurs. While the licensees are given a high level of control and do not need to fight for control (since they’ve paid for the right of authorship) their freedom only highlights the inconsistent standard that is applied to fans. Since fans often feel and claim a right to authorship, but are denied it because they are not the original authors, the existence of licensed creators only highlights the fans’ struggle and diminishes the corporation’s claims for control. Previously, the quality of the production was a signifier used to grant producers and their licensees superior cultural and economic capital. But as fans continue to show their ability to create professional grade products (such as Fighting is Magic) there is increasingly no difference between licensed content creators and fans except for hierarchical status. In essence, the licensed creators’ right to write in the MLP franchise universe isn’t moral or artistic, it is strictly financial. Perhaps in the world of mega-corporations this conclusion is not very shocking, yet this realization is very problematic for the discourse of authorship, which is founded on artistic and moral claims. However, the empowered position of the audience does not mean a disempowerment of the producers. Rather this creates a dialogue of power that is complex and will never be fully resolved. Buckingham explains:

Debates about media and their audiences are often implicitly perceived as a zero sum equation. Despite all the talk of complexity and contradiction, we often seem to be faced with either/or choices: either the media are powerful, or audiences are. Most significantly, such debates often seem to presume that structure and agency are fundamentally opposed. Asserting the power of agency necessarily means denying the power of structures. Proclaiming that audiences are active necessarily means assuming that the media are powerless to influence them; and asserting the power of the media necessarily seems to involve a view of audiences as passive
dupes of ideology. This is, we would argue, a fundamentally fallacious opposition. (23)

Örnebring’s term ‘contestation of narrative’ aptly describes the relations between creators and producers. As Buckingham points out, the relationship between fans and producers is inherently one of give and take. The existence of a third group, licensed creators, reveals that the gap between producers and fans, professionals and amateurs, is not as deep as the cultural narrative would suggest. The separation between licensed creators and fans is simply a question of who has a right to adapt a story.

Transmedia inherently brings up the problems and questions of adaptation (Parody 217). As Linda Hutcheon defines it, adaptation is “repetition without replication”; indeed, this repetition is at the root of all transmediality, which demonstrates the desire of producers to extend opportunities for profit combined with the consumer’s desire to extend engagement and enjoyment. While Hutcheon attempts to argue that fan fiction is not adaptation by distinguishing between “never wanting a story to end” and “wanting to retell the same story over and over,” her argument becomes very tenuous in the face of transmediality. Transmediality has caused some scholars to revisit the entire notion of adaption and rather than holding to strict notions of adaptation being only the movement of the same plot from one telling to another to more expansive world- and story-based transposition. David Boardwell has argued that “the whole area of what we now call adaptation is a matter of stories passed among media,” while Henry Jenkins responds to Boardwell by adding that “the core aesthetic impulse” behind this adaptation and transmediality is “world building and seriality” (“The Aesthetics”). Because of this, O’Flynn’s epilogue to the second edition of Hutcheon’s book moves beyond Hutcheon’s
dismissal of fan products as she explores the many variety of fan adaptations available.\(^7\) The *MLP* comics illustrate the middle ground between O’Flynn’s fan adaptations and Hutcheon’s author adaptations. Wherever possible, the *MLP* comics utilize fan-created concepts and characters, mixing these with the “official” canon of the show and then receiving Hasbro’s stamp of approval on these fan ideas and characters.\(^8\) For example, the very first comic features Derpy and her love of muffins, while the eighth issue includes Doctor Whooves (in both his Tom Baker and David Tennant incarnations). In a way, these licensed products are a means of giving even further legitimacy to the fan creations by surreptitiously including them in “official” products.

**Conclusion**

Fans hold ever-increasing power in today’s world of new media, knowledge communities, and audience/producer interaction. While the old models of viewing fans as an aberrant part of the larger audience have persisted, fandoms themselves have become increasingly normalized. As this chapter has argued, fans now have the ability to influence the creation of texts and hold a certain level of power over producers. As one fan of the *Mad Men* television show put it: “Fan fiction. Brand hijacking. Copyright misuse. Sheer devotion. Call it what you will, but we call it the blurred line between content creators and content consumers, and it’s not going away” (Caddell 5). The increasing creation of fan products and their increasing value as well as the prevalence of licensed products makes it clear that authorship is not a

\(^7\) O’Flynn discusses a wide variety of fan adaptations, moving beyond the traditional notions of adaptation to consider as adaptations fan activities such as assuming character personas on Twitter, creating physical merchandize for a book or show (such as Harry Potter Chocolate Frogs), or iPad apps. O’Flynn’s discussion also draws little distinction between these transmedial activities by fans and the same behavior from corporations.

\(^8\) It ought to be noted that the comic book creators only draw on fan ideas that were created collaboratively and are acknowledged by the entire fan community (such as Derpy and Doctor Whooves). They do not include the characters or ideas that can be traced to a particular fan, fan fiction, or video.
category neatly reserved for the original creator. The right to be an author can be bought and sold or simply appropriated. As Jenkins has argued, "Fandom recognizes no clear-cut line between artists and consumers; all fans are potential writers whose talents need to be discovered, nurtured, and promoted and who may be able to make a contribution, however modest, to the cultural wealth of the larger community" (Textual 280). Fan-authored creations are certainly not new, but the full realization of the power of fans (by fans, creators, and society generally) has made it so that fan-authorship is no longer fringe behavior, but wide-spread participatory authorship, which aims to not only extend enjoyment, but also to reciprocally engage the original work in some way.

Less clear is exactly how producers will change their behavior to incorporate this changing paradigm. It is quite possible that corporations will continue to use copyright laws in an attempt to block or control participation, but it is equally possible that collaborative creation between all interested parties will become the norm, especially for established franchises that already come with their own fan bases. Bruns concluded his book on produsers⁹ with the following observation:

Each of these industries will need to determine for itself where its core business will lie in the future, and how it intends to engage with its customers; what is already evident, at any rate, is that old approaches on the basis of mere improvements to producer/consumer relations will no longer be sufficient: the solution of working with customers who have become users and even produsers of media content and of the means of media distribution can never be to reduce them again to being mere audience members. (254, emphasis mine)

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⁹ A term coined by Bruns to describe the producer and user merged into one individual (see page 6).
The poor interactions that currently exist between media producers and fans are proof of how critical it is that copyright law be revised to accommodate amateur production and group creativity. Whether companies treat fan appropriation as intellectual piracy or, as with Bronies, treat them as co-collaborators, fan input and control over media is not the exception, but rather the rule. As fans continue to find new and stronger ways to adapt, expand, and celebrate their favorite media, they will continue to prove old producer/consumer relations to not only be outdated, but actually harmful to the creative landscape of modern media. While the precise form of future fan and producer interactions remains to be seen, what is clear is that fans are taking ever more active roles in the media they consume, destabilizing the notion of singular, privileged authorship and instead engaging in the egalitarian practice of participatory authorship.
Conclusion

This thesis began with the question of the persistence of fidelity criticism in adaptation studies—a question that is inextricably connected to authorship. There is a great deal of anxiety in relation to adaptation; anxiety about who is changing a beloved text, how it is being changed, and why (questions all addressed by Hutcheon’s encompassing theory of adaptation). Yet all this anxiety about adaptation is anxiety about authorship. An appeal to the who of adaptation is also used to answer the how and the why. Thus in order to move forward the discussion of adaptation, this thesis has turned to the question and problem of authorship to more directly address the fear at the root of fidelity. Who adapts a text is a concept that has drastically expanded over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, even the notion of what a ‘text’ is has undergone reevaluation because of new media. What these changes have introduced is an expanded notion of authorship, which has also increased the frequency and complexity of adaptation. The concept of adaptation, which is also fundamental to video game playthroughs and fan creations is the idea of reiteration, or one version among many. This frequency and complexity of adaptation is part of Johnson’s justification for his study of authorship. He argues, “with the likes of Facebook, Twitter, Final Cut Pro, blogs, YouTube, and Pinterest making collaborative, fused, remixed authorship all the more obvious and normative, it now strikes us as a particularly opportune time to stop and take stock of exactly what an author is and how authorship works” (5). The concept of normativity is incredibly important to the changes in authorship and adaptation. Parody continues this idea in a similar vein arguing that franchise adaptation “may to a degree neutralize, displace, or differently prioritize the anxieties that other types of adaptation often provoke” (216). When we see playthroughs, fan creations, franchises, and expansion texts as adaptations, adaptation then becomes a principle of repetition—one
among many—instead of narrowly defining adaptation as the repetition of plot only (rather than the repetition of character, world, or concept). Adaptation and authorship have both become more complex in new media, diminishing the ability of an author to control the meaning or circulation of his or her text.

As was explored in the first chapter, the players of video games challenge the form of authorship by creating a collaborative co-authorship, with producer and consumer equally dependent upon one another for the creation of a text. Iteration becomes the vehicle by which meaning is created and personalized through the player’s choices, making each playthrough a distinct performance, and therefore a distinct variation on the game presented.

In the second chapter, we explored how this idea of collaborative authorship can not only shape, but also completely appropriate another text, expanding it and explicating it with or without the original creator’s authorization. Often, the only difference between a fan expansion and an ‘official’ one is only a matter of who has paid for the rights, as moral and aesthetic arguments cannot hold sway when fan creations can rival or even exceed the quality of the recognized authors.

Foucault argued that the author is “a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction” (221). The author is a limiting idea designed to stop the “proliferation of meaning” (222). Foucault predicts the disappearance of the author at some future date in society (ibid.). While the author has by no means disappeared in our society, the definition of an author has been challenged and changed. Due to the corporatization of media, the author is not necessarily who is speaking, but who owns the rights to that speech. While authorship is alienable in a legal sense, it has also become
alienable in a moral sense. Authorship can be claimed and appropriated by those who participate in the text. As Foucault argued, “[I]t does not seem necessary that the author function remain constant in form, complexity, and even existence” (222). New media has allowed for a change in the form and complexity of authorship.

Yet corporations have held firm to the traditional notions of authorship and the control of meaning. This means that those who claim a place in this new collaborative form of authorship are labeled as deviant, as pirates, as whiny, as demanding, as entitled. But these labels are means of maintaining and controlling the hierarchy of power. As Jenkins explains in *Spreadable Media*, piracy is often the result of media not being reasonably available to those who wish to consume it, and often the illegal circulation of media proves profitable for both fans and media producers (15–16). The remixed and reformed authorship of fan fiction, videos, or merchandize, as well as the sense of ownership created by the extended engagement of participatory culture, are often not harmful in the way the discourses of piracy and copyright infringement suggest. Rather, participatory authorship is an opportunity to extend and enhance engagement with a text and should therefore be viewed as beneficial to the original text. As Caddell explains on behalf of fans, “We’re your biggest fans, your die-hard proponents, and when your show gets cancelled we’ll be among the first to pass around the petition. Talk to us. Befriend us. Engage us. But please, don’t treat us like criminals” (5). Participatory culture and social media means that media producers are now dependent on fans to share, discuss, and promote their work. By acknowledging the importance of participatory authorship and creating a more constructive relationship between audience and producers new media can become a means of redefining authorship in a post-romantic world.
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