

Folklore in 10,000 Pixels: Icon Use by Fanfic Writers on LiveJournal

Claudia Rebaza
Doctoral Student
Graduate School of Library and Information Science
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
May 13, 2006

Introduction

Cultural/media studies have for some decades examined creative fan communities as a form of “audience response” to media texts; that is, the television shows, movies, books and entertainment forms that permeate western culture, and influence the way in which individuals and the population at large perceive themselves. Fan audiences differ from the more casual consumer of popular entertainment by their level of interest, immersion in, and knowledge of their object of interest. Any individual could be a fan of anything – a sport, an activity, a person. In general the object of interest is only the beginning. Part of the enjoyment of being a fan comes from the ability to share knowledge and activities with others who share the same passion, whether it is for model railroad building, or the works of Shakespeare. Such a group will be defined here as a fandom.

Participating in a fandom is an inherently social activity. In many cases the individual is introduced to the fandom by another individual -- a family member, friend, or co-worker. In other cases the individual encounters a fandom group by chance -- “I thought I was the only one!” being a common cry. There is a joy in finding other like-spirited individuals who share emotion and knowledge, and can debate, imagine, and detail the common interest. Friendships are made, reunions are planned, and conversations are carried on ad infinitum as people immerse themselves in newfound social circles. In some cases the friendships and social networks may outlast the mutual interest that first drew them together. At other times people may find themselves moving from one fandom to another, sometimes with the same friends, sometimes making new ones. Groups may form, fall apart and reform in cycles, and the gossip surrounding other members of the group may at some point take up almost as much time as discussion of the fandom object. Squabbles, rivalries, clique warfare, and political divisions may occur, on the surface or behind the scenes. To be a member of a fandom is generally to be part of a larger social world of fandom, and it can be as large a part of personal identity as being a worker in an economic system, a member of a family group, or a resident in a geographic community.

Folklore is concerned with the presence or absence of lore and how it demonstrates the boundaries and existence of community. Folklore’s “one stipulation is that human beings must congregate and interact,” (Dorson, 1983, p.86). By these definitions there can be little doubt that the Internet as a site of mass congregation and interaction must also host communities. The folklore definition also provides some understanding of what a community must consist of. Lore is expressed through behaviors, discussion, objects or combinations thereof. The Internet, and indeed any technology, does not create

communities, it can only facilitate or inhibit their interaction. But the use of a technology can create certain practices or modify existing lore among groups who use it.

Fan fiction, stories written using the elements of a media text or figures, has been in production and distribution since either the mid-20th century or since the beginning of storytelling, depending on your definition. Examples could include a teenager writing his/her own story about Harry Potter, a professional author hired to write new adventures of a popular franchise (say, Sherlock Holmes), or a medieval troubador spinning new variations on a tale of myth and legend. Scholars or fans might argue definitions on the basis of commercialism, professionalism, or quality, but such arguments must take into account the existence of professional authors writing both fan fiction and commercial works simultaneously, the varying skills of different authors (both professional and amateur), and the personal aesthetic of the individual being asked for a distinction.

It is this last issue, the question of aesthetics, which is one of the most interesting to explore when it comes to both fan fiction and fandoms. While fandoms in general share certain attributes and practices, such as enthusiastic participation, discussion that focuses on very specific issues of the central text/object, and a desire to accumulate knowledge or representations of the central text/object, fandoms are also often deeply divided on matters of taste, values, and the role the central text or fandom plays in their lives. These issues of dispute manifest themselves in practices, social groupings, vocabulary, and even disagreement on what the central text or object *is*. Not surprisingly these issues of dispute mirror larger disagreements over taste and values in society, since each member of a fandom carries with them a perspective shaped by the social worlds of family, profession, region, or national culture. Multiple views can come into conflict in the social environment of a fandom which transverses demographic characteristics, national boundaries, and disparate cultural worlds. Conflicts are almost inevitable when the central text/object is itself explicitly imbued with certain philosophies or cultural values.

An exploration of the functions, disputes and values in fandoms could begin anywhere, but here it will focus on the practice of icon use by a specific group of fan fiction authors and artists who use a particular technology, the LiveJournal blog. This essay will include quotations and images recorded during a continuing ethnographic study of fan fiction writers and readers on the LiveJournal site. All quotations have been anonymized to preserve the individuals' privacy. A look at icons will reveal the need for both individuals and groups to manage social introductions, to find an audience or build a membership, to demonstrate connections to other individuals, to practice values such as assigning credit and providing feedback, to demonstrate community knowledge and participation, to reveal core arguments in the community and the status of its members, and to reflect the passion that brings these individuals together.

LiveJournal and Icons

Although fan art has accompanied the production and distribution of fan fiction since its inception, either as illustration to written works or as individual statements, the medium of the World Wide Web has provided new opportunities. Rapid creation and distribution

of anything from web page banners, wallpapers, and personalized layouts to the use of personal icons allow visual representations of a fan's interests and affiliations. While fandoms were quick to adopt early text-based Internet mediums to communicate and hold group discussions, anything beyond text-art and the one-on-one exchange of 2-D artwork had to wait for the introduction of graphically capable browser software. Yet most web pages are static locales, infrequently updated and hosting a lone voice compared to the frequent and varied interaction in chat rooms, posting boards or newsgroups. This is now changing with the widespread use of blogs, a form of online diary.

Created in 1999 one particular website, LiveJournal (or "LJ"), has attracted a significant number of fan fiction writers who have adopted its blogging software for both personal and group uses. There are various reasons fans have chosen to add blogs to their existing use of web pages, or their involvement in fandom discussion groups. Certainly among them is the level of personalization and interaction offered by this software medium. LJ features include the use of visual customization. Users can choose their own journal backgrounds and layouts, as well as embedding graphics (all a staple of web pages) in their posts. With each post they can also utilize a "mood set," which are graphic packages visually reflecting over 50 moods such as anxious or satisfied, and can also specify in text what music they are listening to at the time of posting. However these options have limitations for some users. LiveJournal, an open source software site, offers both free and paid accounts. Paid accounts allow greater storage and display options not available to free account users, including the use of customized mood sets, and a greater number of personal icons.

(Illustration 1: LJ screen capture)

User pictures (the LJ term), which are referred to as icons by the fan fiction writers, are digital images, often photographs, 100 x 100 pixels or fewer. These icons optionally accompany each user's posting on either their own journal, or in responsive commentary posts on other users' journals. Icons follow the user around the LiveJournal site, appearing in their posts. Icons are linked from a user's journal account, and if the icons are deleted from the account or changed, these changes will spread through all previous posts and comments that used those icons. Comments made years ago can suddenly reflect a user's change in icon preference. An icon's appearance can thus create either a constant sense of presence or demonstrate a jarring contrast to interests and opinions gone by.

Users must locate or create icons, and then upload them to their LJ account. This expenditure of time and effort is one indicator of the value placed upon icons by members of fan fiction (and many other) LiveJournal user groups, since icons are almost invariably used in every post.

Because LJ is primarily a site for individual blogs, at least some of which are designated as unavailable to the general public (locked journals), there is no "town square" any more than one exists on the web among millions of personal web pages. Viewing an individual journal is akin to stepping into someone's living room. But links do exist on a very

individual (rather than “global” website) level. For example, each visitor who makes a comment to someone’s journal entry has their username displayed as a link back to their own journal. So a reader could easily follow a visitor back to their own journal, and from that journal to the journals of either that visitor’s visitors and so on, hopscotching across a social network person by person. Although this method could provide an idea of what social networks exist -- who knows whom, who reads whom, who has been officially designated a friend or information source by whom -- it does not always provide a clear picture of what community(ies) of interest a person belongs to. For that, one must often look at their icons. One can also check their user information page, but people often list dozens of interests or characteristics there and looking at this list provides no certainty as to what communities that individual is actually *invested* in. As was said in the Introduction, investment is a central feature of fans and fandoms.

The Fandom and its Creative Community

Although many fandoms and their creative communities exist on LiveJournal, I will focus primarily on one, the Buffyverse fandom, which focuses on the television shows “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” and its spinoff, “Angel.” For the purposes of this study, a major attraction of the Buffyverse is its prolific and widespread fan fiction community. The rapid sharing and cross-pollination across fandoms allowed by Internet communication, as well as the multiple memberships of some individuals, has made what is true for this group often true for other communities of fan artists. In the end, though, each fandom group has distinct practices and characteristics, and specifics can shift over time. For that reason, this discussion of icon use will focus on broader activities rather than specific cases.

What do Icons Say?

The short answer is that icons speak to the fact that users are individuals, that they are participating in a given fandom’s fan fiction community, and that they use Internet technology, specifically the LJ blog. In other words, icons reflect the person, their friendships, their community, their interests, and their location and means of interaction. Rather a lot for a tiny picture. But how do they say all that? Let’s step into the shoes of a new writer and take a look around the Buffyverse fan fiction community.

{Illustration 2: AIM convo}

First of all, to look at LJ is to see icons everywhere. If you have an LJ account and are logged in, your default icon shows up in the top of the web page at all times. So in a sense, the icon represents your status in LJ. You are not just online, you are a member of this group of users. It’s also a reminder that you see everything on the LJ site through your own prism, in some cases, quite literally. LJ allows you to see the layout and patterns of other people’s journals as a mirror of the one you yourself use if you enable a certain feature, so you can literally see them the way you see yourself.

Your default icon will also show up in every post you make to your own journal, or every comment you make in someone else's journal or forum, although you can always change it to one of the other icons in your account. If you aren't an LJ user (or logged in) you have no access to icons. Theoretically any visitor to an LJ journal can post a comment, but in practice some people block anonymous posting. So one easy way to spot non-LJ users or new users in an LJ blog is to scan an entry's comments section for a lack of icons.

"Hey, does anyone out there want to make/give me an icon? I don't really have the time/knowledge to do it myself, but I feel kind of naked without one. :0" - LJ user 1

Most LJ users will upload some icons relatively soon after creating an account. You have a choice of three to one hundred icons to use (depending on how much you pay for your account) so you don't always have to use the same icon. As a result people vary them frequently depending on whom they are talking to, where they are talking, and what the conversation entails.

Advertising and Relationships

"mending time!! woot! AND you used my icon!! hee. :) – LJ user 2
thank you so much, and of course i used your icon! i love it!" – LJ user 1

In the example above, LJ User 2 is happily commenting on the arrival of a certain plot point in the writer's story ("mending time") as well as the writer's use of the icon LJ User 2 created to advertise that story. LJ User 1 acknowledges the gift as well as the story comment.

This instance exemplifies two uses of an icon. The first is for advertising purposes, in this case, advertising a story. As mentioned earlier, there is no central point for meeting everyone in LJ. Since the primary purpose of being on LJ for most fanfic writers is to share their work or to discuss stories and writing with others, being able to get one's story read is an issue of major importance. One way in which this is done is by promoting your work (or that of others) in conversation -- that is, in posts or comments you make. A less obvious way of doing it is by letting your icon do the talking for you. It's not that most people mind having fanfic recommended to them, in fact, some forums exist for only that purpose. However when it is your own work, recommending it to someone else can create awkwardness. You both may not know each other well, so this can be a less than spontaneous discussion; your work may not match that individual's preferences so they may not be very interested in reading it, creating an unwanted obligation; or they may not think your writing is very good and be unsure how to say so in a way that won't offend you. If you are using your handy story icon however, it usually tells the other person much of what they need to know while avoiding awkwardness. First, it tells them that you, too, are a writer and the name of your work. If they are interested, they can click on your username to get to your journal and find it, and the icon usually features

pictures of the story's protagonists and some sense of the story type – comedic, lighthearted, angst-ridden, horror-oriented, romantic, etc.

Example:

slight mention of S/B but not in a mushy lovely way, it's purely for set up reasons, I promise.

Check the icon. :: points to icon :: - LJ User 3

In addition if those who see your icon hate your writing you need never know they looked it over. If they love it, they'll probably comment in your journal accordingly. If they love it a lot they may start using your icon too (with your permission), to help promote your work. Or, as in LJ User 2's case, they may create an icon for your story as a gift.

Advertising is not limited to stories. Icons can also advertise forums. LJ users can easily create these forums (which LJ calls communities) for both individual and group purposes. I will list three examples. First, some forums are utilized for creative or temporary projects users wish to keep separate from their more private and personally oriented journal. An example might be an ongoing story an author is writing that is posted irregularly. In these forums the creator is the only one with posting privileges. A second use is to hold private conversations or private projects. LJ allows users to "lock" individual journal entries, or entire journals. Only people who sign up and are approved by the owner ("friends") can have access. This is also true of forums. So a single user could have a private journal and a public forum, or vice-versa

Third, and most significantly, forums are created in an effort to organize and centralize a community in what is a very individualized and haphazard virtual space. Therefore forums exist for posting fiction, icons, artwork, or announcing video creations. These forums can have very distinct reputations – for being friendly, critical, impersonal, up-to-date, active, or having materials of certain quality. They function much like bulletin boards or discussion lists that have been staples of the Internet for decades. If you are a writer looking to connect with other writers or to advertise your work, joining some forums is a good idea. One way to discover which forums exist and what they focus on (since it isn't always clear from the name) is to see people using forum-advertising icons. It is not unusual to see the creator of a new forum issue a call for icons right off the bat as part of the organization effort.

Aside from advertising stories and forums, icons are also advertising for you, the individual. These icons can be very direct, such as a photo of you with your username. However most people in the LJ fandoms prefer to retain some privacy and distance between their online and offline identities, all the more so given the sometimes personal nature of posts in their journals. One middle-of-the-road approach to personally identifying (ID) icons is the use of avatar creators, where you are represented by a drawing you assemble from different elements such as hair, facial shape, and features. But in most cases the ID icons have a neutral scene or fandom characters who represent the user's interests. The user's account name may also appear in text somewhere in the icon. It's possible friends or admirers may gift you with an ID icon. Your use of it, as

we saw earlier with LJ User 2, thus acknowledges the gift and the relationship that may have prompted it.

Which brings us to the second use of icons in the LJ User 2 example, which is the explicit acknowledgment and demonstration of a social connection. All posts and comments are visible to anyone who wants to stop by, assuming the journal or post is not locked. To explicitly acknowledge the creation and use of an icon is also to demonstrate that there is a connection between poster and visitor. Just as is the case offline, the reason for such an acknowledgment may range from the innocuous to the Machiavellian. But it is safe to say that noting a connection between writer and reader demonstrates a level of validation. Given that production (whether of art, text, or even feedback) is the coin of the LJ realm, having someone make a connection to you is a sign that what you produce has some value.

Icons can also help you *make* connections. Although for the most part they exist as a form of back-channel rather than foreground communication, they can suddenly become the topic of conversation if someone else likes something about your icon and decides to comment on it.

Oh, and I love your icon, what a cutie!! – LJ User 4

Thanks, it's my dog. Her name's Lucy...This one's my baby kitty, Hermione. - LJ User 5

“Love love love your icon.” – LJ User 6

“Your icon! so cool! Did you do it?” – LJ User 7

“Hey, if you are talking about my icon, I got it here [site deleted]. Lots of great stuff.” – LJ User 8

As seen above, if the icon is your creation a simple thanks of acknowledgment is sufficient. Otherwise you should credit whoever did create it with a link to their journal or the website where it is posted. An exception is when the icon was created specifically for you in which case you should still mention the creator but add that, alas, the icon is not shareable. Crediting others is an important value in fandom, as will be discussed again later. Situations like the ones above can occur when you are commenting on someone else's post and that person or another visitor notes your icon and decides to break the ice by saying something nice about your outfit, er, that is, your icon. Which leads to another use of icons, as a form of apparel in a world where you can not be seen.

Who Am I? Acknowledge Me

As with clothing and other body decoration, icons are an emotional apparel. They express a certain attitude, and certain personal characteristics.

Hee! You make me want to make myself a "doofus" icon. 'Cause it would be frequently useful. :) – LJ User 9

Maybe you consider yourself hip, a vixen, a homebody, a geek, a nature lover, or an outgoing friendly person. Your icon can embody this by use of color, images, and text. It is assumed that icons say something about you, who you are and what you like. But where can you find icons if someone hasn't been nice enough to make you some?

Although making an icon is as simple as reducing a photo to the required size (100 x 100 pixels) if you decide to add effects, colors, washes, text, and animation it gets a little more complicated. Many LJ users will make a few icons from time to time for their own use. Some people specialize in photo artwork and post icons frequently for use by others. Certain forums exist for the sole purpose of sharing icons. Generally the artist asks that people taking the icons leave a comment specifying which are being taken, and credit the artist in icon keywords. When icons are uploaded into your LJ account a box exists next to each one in which you can type a description. These do not show up on the icon itself. Instead they may appear when you pass your computer's cursor over them, or when you visit that person's user picture page in their journal. In this way you can discover who created someone's icon.

Giving proper credit is considered very important in creative communities. Writers credit other writers or beta readers (volunteer editors) for inspiration or assistance. Sometimes the inspiration is someone's artwork or icon:

Author note: Inspired by a beautiful LJ icon [name deleted] made for me. Luv you darling!!! – LJ User 10

AN: the nightmare sequence was inspired by [name deleted]'s incredible manip [term for artwork created in a program such as Photoshop] found here – LJ User 11

Icon creators credit the makers of screencaps (video stills from the fandom show or film), brushes used in their computer-art, or authors of the text they use.

"Love the icon - by you? - LJ User 12

Yep, it's a [name deleted] original, the line is from a song called Slow Hands by Interpol
Oh and the smoking Jesus Spike one is based on an Incubus song called *gaspshock* Make Yourself. – LJ User 13

Giving credit is not only a practice, it can have its *own* practices. All fanfic writers post a disclaimer in the headers of their stories, crediting ownership and creation of the characters being used to their copyright holders. This act is sometimes used as a way of praising the creators or writers of the fandom's text, but it is such a pro forma device (for legal purposes) that it is even more typical to use this line to make humorous statements about how the fanfic writer wishes the characters were theirs, how they would have treated them differently than the authorized owner did, or how unprofitable it would be for a copyright holder to sue them.

Traditions and Common Knowledge

{Illustration 3: Feedback not found}

The standard header for fanfic pieces is one of many traditions begun online in posting groups and websites which has migrated to the LJ community. A reminder of its origins resides in the section about feedback. It is almost expected that writers posting on LJ want feedback on their entries. One of the prime purposes of blogs is to allow easy interaction between writers and readers, and to create multi-user conversations rather than dyadic dialogues. But the feedback header entry originated when writers posted to their websites or to discussion groups, and a clear way (or the propriety) of responding was not known. So authors would often post their e-mail addresses in this field or give instructions on how to provide feedback. On LJ, this line is, again, often used in a humorous fashion because such instructions are not actually necessary.

Icons are another way of commenting on fan fiction practices as well as current issues in the fandom. Icons may include vocabulary terms specific to a fandom or fanfic, reference something about LJ use, or serve as a notification about new information or events.

“Next time you use that icon you must put out a drool warning. Gah!” – LJ User 14

“I've already had someone email me to ask me where I got the picture from, and I'm quite puzzled, because I'm sure I just got it at [site deleted] and that it's one of the new publicity shots of JM, which will probably be posted on his official website soon. I am definite that I haven't stolen anyone's con photo, but now feel all doubtful as to where I got the piccie from if other people haven't seen it. Weird!” - LJ User 15

The fact that the icon photo is seen as something new by LJ User 14 automatically leads LJ User 15 to assume that the photo may not have been put out for public use, because other fans are often familiar with publicity photos in circulation. When new photos are released, they are often quickly made into icons for general use.

“Oh! I have a question for you. I've been checking out your icon (both here and elsewhere, though I can't remember where ... maybe [user deleted]'s journal?), and I haven't been reading any fic lately, so I'm completely clueless. Who's the dreadlocked guy? Whoever he is, he's incredibly hot!” – LJ User 16

Here again the user assumes that if a photo is circulating in use as an icon, that others in the community will automatically recognize its content and significance. The fact that LJ User 16 does not recognize it makes her aware that she has been away and may have

missed some novel discussion or issue as represented by the icon. A demonstration of community knowledge can be expressed by explicit recognition (or lack thereof) of an icon's content. Below is another example.

"OMG I love your Icon! Eddie Izzard plus Giles.. I'm rolling here hun!" – LJ User 16

"HA! Yeah, I just love how excited he looks to be getting cake. Hee. And Spike looking very grumpy at the end of FfL was just perfect for the icon. Thanks. I really need to take the time and do a webpage for all my icons." – LJ User 17

Here LJ User 16 recognizes the origin of the icon's text (Eddie Izzard), and how it has been combined with characters from the show. LJ User 17 cites the episode where one of the icon's photos came from (abbreviating it "Ffl"). The two share a moment of bonding in understanding the icon's joint references. In the following quote there is a shared *lack* of knowledge over the specifics of the icon's photo origin but at least both individuals recognize it as representing their fandom's television show.

"random question, what episode is your icon from? Tankies." – LJ User 18

"Sorry but I have no idea but it was made a month or two ago by [name deleted]. It's purdy though, isn't it?" – LJ User 19

I'm One Of...

Although broad or deep knowledge of a fandom's central text is part of what defines one as a fan, recognizing what part of the fandom you belong to is also important if you're to participate enjoyably and make connections. While you might assume that someone participates in a fandom centered around a TV show because they are a fan of the *show*, you might well be wrong. And even if you were right, all those people who claim to be a fan may disagree completely as to why they are fans or what it is about the central text that's important or has special value.

While icons have a lot of value as pretty pictures, ways to identify yourself or as an introduction to places and stories around LJ, the hardest icons to understand are those which reveal deep disagreements about the central text, its characters, and the fandom's practices and characteristics. That's because to understand these icons you have to know where you yourself stand, and for whom those icons are meant.

Just as people become involved in fandom for various reasons, people also enjoy fan fiction (or not) for various reasons. Some simply want more of the show's fictional universe with or without the characters they've come to love. Some don't care about the stories so much as the characters themselves. Some don't even care that much about either they just really like a given actor. And some just like certain genres of stories, and as long as they get the payoff they expect in the end, they're happy to keep reading.

If you're a writer, you're probably writing for one of those reasons above, and if you don't gauge your audience properly, you may end up without one. So who are the different audiences? The first discussed in the quote below, are gen ficcers. They like general fiction, that is stories that approximate what one sees on the show pretty closely. They probably like the show because there is something about its fictional universe, its writing style, and its plots that they find satisfying and they want more of it. You would think that this would be true for the majority of fanfic readers, but as can be seen from the quotes below, that's not always the case.

What is the Gen Fic Revolution? I've seen icons and I'm curious. – LJ User 20

That place looks interesting... quite a few familiar names there, too. Names I know from [website], as a matter of fact. But does that mean that there has been some sort of exodus from [website] lately that I'm not aware of? :((I don't post much on the [website] boards these days, so I wouldn't know...) – LJ User 21

Nope. It's more of an LJ thing that [name deleted] started from discussions on our various journals. We're all still around the [website], too. – LJ User 22

Thanks, that's good to know. Genfic-ers ought to stick together. :) We're so few! *g* - LJ User 20

The reason for gen ficcers feeling they're few? Shippers. These are writers and readers who gravitate towards a particular romantic pairing within a central text. This pairing may have actually existed in canon (the show, film, or book the fandom revolves around). Or it may be a pairing people *wished* had existed, and the fact that it was never seen is one of the reasons they're writing and reading. Writers and readers may actually enjoy a variety of romantic pairings, either because they like a character and will read anything about them, or because they like the dynamics of the various different relationships.

Love your icon, btw. *g* I've seen it before, but sometimes these things strike the eye afresh. Ahem. – LJ User 23

Hee. One day you too will have a shipper icon! – LJ User 24

Readers or writers who share an interest in a particular pairing can connect over that demonstration of shared interest as LJ User 23 and 24 do. Sometimes they connect over their broader interest in "het" versus "slash."

I really need a buffy icon here to announce my het background :D – LJ User 25

“Slash” is a term coined in the 1970s to denote fan fiction that centers around a male homosexual romantic pairing. At the time it was coined the term automatically meant that any such stories did not fit into the fandom's canon. No television show and hardly any books or films included such characters. It also meant (in practice if not by definition) that the stories were written and read by women, usually heterosexual ones. This is not because men could not be slash authors but because the types of stories produced reflected a uniquely feminine viewpoint. In fact, the whole issue of authenticity in slash is an argument that has taken on importance in the genre as gay men and women have become an increasingly visible and vocal part of Western societies (see various essays in Harris & Alexander, 1998).

Within fan fiction communities the acceptability of slash has mirrored that of gay issues in the wider society. Most fan fiction readers are at least aware of slash, and may either be enthusiastic readers, occasional readers, readers of only a certain pairing, or simply decide it's not for them. But just as fan fiction writers are themselves sometimes considered an undesirable part of a fandom, slash writers and readers are often considered an undesirable part of fan fiction. In both cases the status issues are connected to concerns about canon – what is authentic, how close it is to being authentic, and whether or not anything inauthentic is permissible.

{Illustration 4: Fanfic Reader}

The issue of authenticity is key because it is the organizing principle of a fandom. Anything that comes from the mouths of producers, writers, and actors (in that order) has a certain authenticity for fans. That is because these people have varying levels of power to create or influence the central text. Since the central text is the reason fans gather together into a fandom, anything that threatens the quality, existence, continuity, or uniqueness of the central text is both suspect and troubling. Such threats could appear in the form of interfering co-owners (the studios), a non-supportive host (the television network), a new production team (with a possibly different vision), or rival shows (either competitors or an attempt to duplicate success with poorly thought out spinoffs).

Fan fiction writers also constitute such a threat in the view of some fans. Although disagreements about storylines, character development, believability and internal consistency in the canonical text are a staple of fan discussions, fan fiction writers take things a step further. They not only disagree, they act. Sometimes they write to correct storylines they feel went in the wrong direction. They may write to give more attention to an overlooked character, or one who has to share screen time with a large ensemble. Or they may simply be impatient and give story form to the general speculation of where a storyline may go. To some fans this seems to overstep the bounds between fan and creator. This concern with boundaries gets expressed in various ways, such as concerns about legality or disapproval from the canon creators. Still other disagreements become more personal, with the content of fan fiction being ridiculed in terms of quality and value. Although the disagreement no longer tends to be couched in explicitly sexist terms, the fact that fan fiction writers and readers are overwhelmingly female, and have often written to see their interests and concerns expressed in media texts, can not help but

be a part of this territoriality (Jenkins, 1992, Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995, Clerc, 1996, Harris & Alexander, 1998).

{Illustration 5: Canon}

The disagreements about slash fiction within the fan fiction community are rarely couched in homophobic terms either. This does not, however, mean that such feelings do not play a part in the fact that slash has been seen, both by its participants and its detractors, as a subversive sort of activity. Yet subversiveness may be in the eye of the beholder. A current study has shown that within the Buffyverse fandom the popularity of pairings has more to do with the centrality and popularity of individual characters than whether or not the pairing is het (heterosexual) or slash. The two most popular pairings appeared in canon and also involved the show leads (55% of respondents). However the next two most popular pairings involved (1) the two male leads, and (2) one male lead and another male character (18%). By comparison the next two most popular het couples amounted to only 9% of the survey (Diaz, forthcoming).

A story type that 20% of the community reads and writes constitutes a significant part of its creative production. Yet it is still in the minority and icon usage often reflects this. Some readers are relatively uninterested in the fandom's central text but are only interested in the slash stories derived from those texts. Their icons may express slash terms, references to slash history, or the existence of slash as a stand-alone interest. Fans who are fans of the text *and* its slash stories may use icons making arguments for the validity of their slash pairings, highlighting subtextual elements within the show, and making interpretative arguments for slash. By comparison, icons that highlight het couples or storylines tend to highlight characteristics of the characters or their relationship, not their status as het romances.

Disagreements over genre extend to story styles as well. Some people revel in dark, horror-ridden stories (darkfic), while others prefer anguished, doomed romances (angst), and still others cozy, domestic tales that end happily (fluff). It is not unusual to see stories coded for their "schmoop" or smut factor, specific "kinks" expressed, level of show knowledge needed (to avoid spoiling storylines for recent viewers), or warnings (any details that may put readers off and prompt complaints). Some readers may look at the headers carefully before reading to ensure the story will satisfy their preferences. Others need see no more than the author's name or the main characters involved to dig right in. However, if the type of story tends to be derided by other fanfic writers or readers, or if the author feels insecure about posting it, both the story headers and their icon may signal a certain defensiveness.

Example:

Not a single thing wrong with silly and fluffy. *snuggles* This was just what we all needed, thank you. Also, I've been horrible about fb [feedback] lately - just know I've been reading and loving every bit of it. – LJ User 26

I use my [Fluff] icon with pride. – LJ User 27

Another requirement on most any story posting is the rating factor. Fanfic authors often borrow from movie conventions in rating their stories from G to NC-17. This is both a warning to those who don't want to be unpleasantly shocked by explicit writing as well as marketing for those who want it to be as explicit as possible. Icons also have varying levels of explicitness and many users consider the appropriateness of the location where they utilize their racy pics.

PS, this is another of my... 'odd holiday icons'. This one is reserved for NC17 posts, for obvious reasons. :P – LJ User 28

Because They're There

While the value of icons varies from one individual to the next, the one certainty is that they do matter, given not only their frequent usage but by what LJ users say about them.

BIG THANK YOU goes to [name deleted] for getting me two months of paid LJ time!!!! I can use more icons now...yay!!! - LJ User 29

Before SDW I didn't even know that vidding existed! So thank you for enriching my life! ...Not to mention all your gorgeous icons... (icons was a BIG reason for getting an LJ!) – LJ User 30

runs around screaming I'm loosing my extra icons in 10 days!!!! I'm cramped as it is with only 50, I can't go down!!!!... *cries and flails about* NOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!! – LJ User 31

This essay demonstrated that icons are used for various purposes: as advertising; as current events statements; as icebreakers; to express mood, a reaction, or emphasis; to express identity and membership; to declare tastes or opinions; or to demonstrate relationships and shared knowledge. All of these uses are generated by needs, such as a need to communicate in a non-physical space using specific technology; a need to create identity and connections in a community with very specific practices; and a need to develop and express relationships with those who share one's interests and tastes. Icons express these needs and conflicts even while other conversations or creative exchanges take place in the foreground. It is significant that LiveJournal uses the term "user pictures" to describe these 10,000 pixel images, while it is fanfic writers themselves that term this emotional apparel "icons." Mingling in their disembodied space where emotional investment is the common thread of community, icons embody passions, conflicts and commonalities at a single glance.

WORKS CITED

- Baym, Nancy. *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2000.
- Clerc, Susan. "Estrogen Brigades and "Big Tits" Threads: Media Fandoms Online and Off." In *The Cybercultures Reader*, edited by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, 216-229. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Diaz, Mary Kirby. *The Fandom Project*, Sociology-Anthropology Department, Farmingdale State University, 16 July 2004, (1 December 2004). <<http://www.livejournal.com/users/makd/2850.html>>
- Dorson, Richard M., ed. *Handbook of American Folklore*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983.
- Glassie, Henry. "Folk Art." In *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. edited by Richard M. Dorson, 253-280, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- Harris, Cheryl, Alison Alexander, eds. *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity*. Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, Inc., 1998.
- Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Live Journal* (20 October 2004). <<http://www.livejournal.com>>
- Toelken, Barry. *The Dynamics of Folklore*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.
- Tulloch, John and Henry Jenkins. *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek*. New York: Routledge, 1995.