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Craptacular Science and the Worst Audience Ever:

Memetic Proliferation and Fan Participation in *The Simpsons*

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD Film Studies

in the University of Hull

by

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Abstract (Thesis Summary)

The objective of this thesis is to establish meme theory as an analytical paradigm within the fields of screen and fan studies. Meme theory is an emerging framework founded upon the broad concept of a "meme", a unit of culture that, if successful, proliferates among a given group of people. Created as a cultural analogue to genetics, memetics has developed into a cultural theory and, as the concept of memes is increasingly applied to online behaviours and activities, its relevance to the area of media studies materialises.

The landscapes of media production and spectatorship are in constant fluctuation in response to rapid technological progress. The internet provides global citizens with unprecedented access to media texts (and their producers), information, and other individuals and collectives who share similar knowledge and interests. The unprecedented speed with (and extent to) which information and media content spread among individuals and communities warrants the consideration of a modern analytical paradigm that can accommodate and keep up with developments. Meme theory fills this gap as it is compatible with existing frameworks and offers researchers a new perspective on the factors driving the popularity and spread (or lack of popular engagement with) a given media text and its audience.

Following overviews of meme theory and fan studies, this thesis synthesises methods from both fields to analyse one of this generation's most notable televisual fan-texts, *The Simpsons*, and its fandom. The memetic analysis thereof, integrated with the works of fan theorists including John Fiske and Henry Jenkins, reveals the implications of the fan-text's memetic content in the economic, cultural and social capital interests of its creators, distributors, and fans. The revelations credited to the memetic aspect of the analysis support the conjecture that it is a suitable analytical framework for the fields of fan and screen studies.

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This work belongs to you.

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Introduction

With tremendous leaps forward in the development and accessibility of technology in the last few decades, it is little wonder that the turn of the 21st century is known colloquially as the "digital era". A global shift has taken place in which internet-connected personal devices have all but replaced more traditional methods of communication—and, increasingly, of broadcast. With this shift, changes in the ways audiences interact with one another and with various media have emerged; while people are occupying and interacting in virtual space on a global scale, the physical media spaces they occupy have become increasingly individual and user-determined. This is not to suggest that people are no longer gathering in physical spaces (such as cinemas) to consume media; the statement here is that the increasing autonomy and engagement among users that is afforded by the internet has prompted new considerations in the existing paradigms of media studies and analysis. The means by which media audiences access and engage with content, one another and media producers has been forever altered, and has also begun to affect the very production of media itself. Such profound modifications to existing structures of media consumption and production introduce new areas of necessary inquiry for those who study media and audiences, and the investigators must be equipped with sufficiently modern tools for these subjects.

In this thesis, I will establish meme theory as a key one of these tools; it is an ideal paradigm for media analysis, and particularly for screen and fan studies, in the 21st century. I identify several key areas in which meme theory usefully enhances and, in some circumstances, replaces existing paradigms used for analysis in both screen and fan studies. The evaluation and demonstration of meme theory as an appropriate and necessary additional analytical model to these disciplines is my unique contribution to the discourse. My aim is to help to elevate the perception of memetics from the often

underestimated, titular "craptacular science" to the robust theoretical paradigm it could be. I will accomplish this first by engaging on a deep level with meme theory, then moving into an overview of fan studies and how theories therein are both related to meme theory and applied methodologically to this thesis. Finally, I will apply both methods (i.e. meme theory and fan studies) to a case study: *The Simpsons* and its audience.

As an enormous hit television series that co-emerged with the internet, *The Simpsons*, coupled with its devoted, and long-lived online fandom, provides the ideal case study through which to demonstrate my notion that meme theory can be usefully applied to analyses within the fields of screen and fan studies. Memes (units of culture) that emerge from the series and into the fandom are reproduced, reworked and proliferated throughout the web by fans, whose communities are constructed around shared and individual knowledge of the fan-text; *Simpsons* memes are the language through which fans communicate with one another, and the memes act not only as a method of self-expression, but also as a currency on whose accumulation fans can establish their places within the hierarchy of their community. Fans also communicate online with the creators of their fan-text; they voice their criticisms (and devotion) to the series' creative producers through their discussion forums. The series' creatives access these forums and read the criticisms, responding in turn not through the fans' channels, but instead through content in the series, which then becomes memetic.

However, this memetic dialogue is frequently interrupted: Fox Television's interest in fans' use of series content goes far beyond the social capital memes provide. The series has proven to be a highly-rewarding investment for the network, and the series' emergent, popular memes translate directly into economic capital for its broadcaster. As a result, Fox has been consistently (and, in one particular case, mercilessly) litigious in circumstances of unlicensed and unauthorised use of Simpsons content, especially videos and images. As each group involved in the creation, distribution and consumption of *The Simpsons* has unique memetic forces at play, the

analysis in the case study is performed in three parts: the first is of the owner-distributor Fox Television (Fox), the second is of the online fans, and the third is of the creative producers (the creatives).

Memes are at the centre of that which is at stake for fans, creative producers and the broadcasting network alike. Memetics, therefore, is the primary methodology by which the analysis in this thesis is performed. A brief background into the concept of memes (and the surrounding field of memetics) begins below.

Background: Meme Theory and Fan Studies

Like the developing field of fan studies—and, to a lesser degree, the ever-evolving terrain of screen studies (which currently focuses primarily on film and television)—memetics is a relatively young discipline. Its inception was an accidental one, as the concept of the meme (a unit of culture that proliferates via the vehicle of human behaviour) was created and intended only to provide a more comprehensible analogy for the processes central to genetics. However, once scholars working in the areas of cultural studies and philosophy considered the concept's potential, memetics began to coalesce as a promising model through which to examine cultural phenomena. (Throughout this thesis, the terms "meme theory" and "memetics" are used interchangeably within the context of the concept as a field of enquiry and as an analytical framework.)

The earliest applications and studies of memetics were very broad; Susan Blackmore, Daniel Dennett and Robert Aunger apply the theory to all human action and interaction. With the exception of such instinctual inclinations as hunger or exhaustion, for these authors, memes explain all human thought (and, thus, everything that follows from thought, including all forms and means of expression). While this is an intriguing consideration to which the broad concept of the meme certainly lends itself, it is not difficult to comprehend why such an overarching theory would invite criticism from

scholars in several disciplines. Henry Jenkins, who is a central academic in contemporary fan and media studies and whose work informs this thesis throughout, dislikes the concept; understandably, as a scholar who champions the concept of participatory culture in modern media engagement, he takes particular exception to the lack of human agency implied in the earliest memetic studies.

Limor Shifman is a modern memeticist whose work on memes in the age of the internet makes significant contributions to my working definition of memes and memetics. Shifman adapts and shapes the output of the early memeticists to elucidate modern online practices, which is crucial to my proposal that screen and fan studies in the 21st century require a theoretical framework modern enough to take multiple new factors into account (such as means of accessing media content as well as producers, and methods of communication). In early 2014, Jenkins interviewed Shifman on the specific subject of memes. Shifman concurs with Jenkins that the lack of human agency in the early forms of meme theory is one of its most problematic areas, suggesting that the time has come for researchers to excise the unnecessary impedimenta that the concept has accumulated throughout its development and to reintroduce human participation to the proliferation of memes. For Shifman, this updated practice serves to demystify the method of memetic proliferation itself, exposing the very active role played by humans in selecting and spreading content, information, and culture. For me, this updated practice precisely explains several aspects of fan behaviour; in particular, it illuminates the online practices of fans' interaction with *The Simpsons*, its producers, and—importantly—with one another.

This last statement provides an entry point into a brief discussion of the current field of fan studies and its applications to this thesis. While only a handful of key scholars' work is engaged directly in this thesis, the theory informing the discussions on fandom is rooted in works that at this stage are, in a sense, taken for granted. It is impossible to discuss all works by all theorists in a given field, but it is difficult to ignore the indirect contributions made by reception scholars such as Stuart Hall, whose media

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communication model directly informs John Fiske's own assumptions surrounding audience participation. While Fiske's work is also heavily influenced by (and is, in a sense, a re-working of) Bourdieu's model of cultural production, Fiske also relies on the notions put forth by Hall, who was among the first reception theorists to recognise the viewer's active participation (through meaning-making) in the process of media consumption and engagement.

These seminal propositions, that audience members are more than mere passive spectators and consumers of media, not only make space for the progressive theorisation of an active, participatory audience, they demand it. However, while Hall, Bourdieu and Fiske are discussing meaning-making among spectators and general audience reception, theorists like Henry Jenkins, Matt Hills, Cornel Sandvoss, and Derek Johnson examine the types of highly active and vocal participation of fans that characterise online *Simpsons* fandom. This thesis provides countless examples demonstrating that for these last audience members, memes from the series allow them to form common bonds, at times acting as ciphers for self-expression (such as moods, reactions, or political opinions), at others being used to contextualise private-life and public events.

Meme Theory and Semiotics: Bridges and Gaps

Memes-as-ciphers is a highly relevant concept with respect to its application to screen and fan studies. This notion also presents another area in which the field of memetics comes into criticism: its many parallels with the field of semiotics. As a linguistics-rooted analytical paradigm for the study of communication, semiotics has been usefully and successfully applied to screen studies for several decades. The similarities between memetics and semiotics are apparent even upon the initial engagement with the most basic units upon which each system of analysis is built: the semiotic sign and the memetic meme. Both signs and memes behave as units of culture, but the systems

do diverge early on in close comparative analysis, which is performed in detail in the thesis.

Screen theorist Christian Metz worked to break down cinematic language into its semiotic parts, demonstrating the codes employed by filmmakers to convey ideas, ideologies, and other identifying factors. While he is not the first theorist to consider the concept of a cinematic language, Metz's analyses explored whether filmmakers were communicating using a relatively universal set of grammatical tendencies (or series of signs) in order to convey meaning. Umberto Eco, like fellow screen and audience semiotician John Fiske, expanded this notion by acknowledging the codes that the audience members bring to spectatorship and textual meaning-making (as Metz considers the language of cinema to be non-dialogic or non-reciprocal; the spectator in Metz's view is reduced to roles of voyeur, fetishist, or sympathiser). Julia Kristeva also contributed significantly to the consideration of the spectator as an active participant in meaning-making when she introduced her notion of intertextuality to the discourse.

With respect to screen studies, Eco, Fiske and Kristeva's steps toward the integration of the participatory audience member was synchronous with a movement within the field to reject structuralist models of analysis (such as the Marxist, psycholanalytic and semiotic approaches), which saw the rise of the cognitivist model. As is suggested by its name, the cognitivist school also extends the capacity (and focus) for meaning-making to the spectator, which is a deeply necessary action with respect to fan studies. It is relatively easy to discount the audience's role in meaning-making when active spectatorship is taking place quietly within an individual; nevertheless, they are the subject of study by screen theorists. Thus, when individuals gather in forums (whether concrete or virtual) and make their spectatorial engagement and activities known to one another and to the world at large, often catching the attention of the producers of the text(s) with which they are engaging, those individuals and their activities must be acknowledged.

Fanatic spectatorship is by no means limited to screen texts; sports and stage

performance and performers knew passionate, loyal and vocal engagement long before

the emergence of screen media. But fanatic (i.e. fan) engagement with screen media—

particularly in the digital age—is a unique and significant phenomenon that requires a

nuanced system of analysis. Fiske's "semiotic democracy" is the most verbally explicit

extension of semiotic meaning-making to the audience, but it is limited in its

applications to the wide variety fan activity taking place online. Scholar William W.

Fisher is able to take the concept of semiotic democracy as far as fans reworking of

screen texts and posting them on the internet, but he maintains that the concentration

of semiotic power remains squarely with the creative producers of popular texts.

This may well be the case, but more importantly, the conclusion itself

demonstrates the limitation of semiotics with respect to fandom of screen texts.

Semiotics provides a relatively narrow frame within which the audience can interact

with the text. Fisher assumes that only those fan-derived texts that are unlicensed

reworkings of the originals and that have seen wide distribution can make any kind of

sustained impact (whether that impact is on the original text or its fandom, producers,

and/or distributors). It is at this point that meme theory overtakes semiotics: memetics

accounts for everything that semiotics has with respect to meaning-making on both the

productive and consumptive sides, but meme theory does not enforce valuation on a

given fan activity. A textual meme proliferated by fans does not have to take a specific

form in order to be successful (i.e. in order to have a wide reach and thus a wide

distribution).

With respect to the potential of semiotic democracy, Fisher concludes, "In the

future, sharing could encompass more creativity. The circulation of artifacts would

include their modification, improvement, or adaptation. To some degree, at least, such

habits could help ameliorate the oft-lamented disease of modern culture: anomie,

isolation, hyper-individualism. Collective creativity could help us become more

collective beings."[1] If one merely shifts one's paradigm from semiotics to memetics, one can see that this is already being accomplished. Given that Fisher's work was published in 2004, one could surmise that the semiotic democracy has advanced enough in the ensuing years so as to see this work accomplished; a shift to a memetic paradigm would not be necessary to observe the emergence and triumph of the collective.

It is here that the case study of *The Simpsons* is particularly useful in establishing the need for meme theory. If one looks at the series and its fans through the lens of meme theory, one can observe that the triumph of the *Simpsons* fan collective came early in its establishment, and is ongoing. The significance of the fan collective to the creative producers and its subsequent impact on the text itself is observable in a concrete form in the 1990s. Those early online fans, who first emerged on the pre-World Wide Web newsgroup site *alt.tv.simpsons* in 1990, were vocal, critical, and meticulous in their textual engagement. Their adulation, their obsessiveness, and their criticism inspired the development of the Comic Book Guy character, whose physique, comportment, speech, and motivations are composed of memes taken directly from these fans. His most famous catchphrase, "Worst episode ever", is taken verbatim from a 1992 review by an *alt.tv.simpsons* fan-critic; it is a meme that emerged from the fandom, was received and reinterpreted by the series' creatives, was subsequently reproduced in the text (first appearing in a 1997 episode), and was then received and widely proliferated among the fans (and beyond). Meme theory thus allows the analyst to observe that which is excluded from the semiotic democracy; a significant share of power and influence over the text has been claimed by the creative collective of online fandom through its members' abilities to create meaning of their own beyond direct interaction with the text.

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[1] William W. Fisher, *Promises to Keep: Technology, Law and the Future of Entertainment* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), print, 31.

As suggested above, there is no disagreement *per se* with Fisher's assertion that the semiotic power ultimately rests with the creators and distributors of the fan-text. Indeed, the producers of the text have near-total control over access to the series; this is another key area of contention between *Simpsons* distributors and its fans (and its creatives, who tend to be critical of the limited access imposed by Fox). But the creative collective of online *Simpsons* fandom has an observable memetic power—one that affects Fox, the series' creative producers, other fans, and the text itself. Another example of fans' memetic power is tied into the notion of semiotic power—especially that which is located in textual access and the media of distribution.

Online *Simpsons* Fandom

The *Simpsons* fan sites are crucial to this thesis in four specific ways. The first is that they enable fans to engage with one another about the series and about their own fandom, thus providing much revealing material on these topics, authored by the fans themselves. The second is that these sites enabled the fans to establish and maintain an unprecedented contact with *Simpsons* creatives—a dialogue that continues today. Third, these sites provide(d) Fox with an understanding of the ways in which memes emergent from the series were being used and proliferated by series fans. They also gave Fox insight into the ways in which fans were watching the series (i.e the media they were using to access the series), and provided Fox with material that the network could use against fans in their efforts to regain complete control over all of their intellectual property. Finally, these sites provide a (relatively) permanent record of fan interaction; they document the tones, trends, memes, and methods of online fan activity from its inception.

Thus, in *Craptacular Science*, I will establish that an enormously important aspect of audience reception is found on the internet; from the series's first season to the present, *Simpsons* fans have turned to online sources to voice their many

varied opinions, and this led Simpsons writers to create the character Jeff Albertson, initially (and most commonly) known as "Comic Book Guy".   (Both names will be used throughout this thesis.) At first a satirical caricature of the average vocal, internet-savvy fan, Jeff Albertson has gradually also developed into the unofficial fan representative in the series, and a key mouthpiece for the creatives in their on-going dialogue with fans.

While Albertson is well-known for demonstrating the self-awareness in *The Simpsons* by voicing insightful criticisms of the series from within the series, he addressed fans directly in the 23rd season's premiere, while surrounded by *Simpsons* memorabilia, to raise the topic of (but not yet announce) the results of an official online fan poll determining whether the characters Edna Krabappel and Ned Flanders would remain in a relationship. Fans were invited by Homer and Marge in the final episode of Season 22 to log on to *Simpsons.com* and vote "Yea" or "Nay" on the continuation of the so-called "Nedna" relationship; the majority vote would determine the actual outcome in the series. During the end credits of Season 23's premiere, a small vignette shows Ned and Edna addressing the fans directly to thank them. In text at the bottom of the screen is written "What our fans have joined together, let no writer rip asunder." This appearance—and the outcome of the "Nedna" relationship—is discussed in detail in **Chapter 3. The *Simpsons* Creatives vs. Fox and Fans**.

True to their promise, once the fans' decision had officially been acknowledged formally, the creatives attached permanence to the coupling in later episodes. The fans' decision proved firmly final when it was revealed in the 21st episode of Season 23 that Ned and Edna had married in secret, and that Ned's sons Rod and Todd were adjusting well to and embracing their new family.[2]

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[2] "Ned 'n' Edna's Blend", *The Simpsons*, season 23, episode 21, directed by Chuck Sheetz, aired 13 May 2012 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2012).

It is important to declare at this point that all contributions by online fans quoted within this thesis will be quoted exactly as they appear in the original post; any spelling, grammatical and punctuation errors or oversights that are present in the original will be included in the quote. Though leaving errors and anomalies can, in some cases, cause the reader a momentary distraction from the intended meaning within the post, the frequent appearance of "[*sic*]" in a single quote proved to be even more disruptive (and aesthetically challenging). The alternative—to rewrite each quote to adhere to grammatical rules—would be to do a disservice to the original author, and to present an ethical predicament to the present author. As fans are a central focus of this thesis, it stands to reason that their voices—however they are presented—should be reproduced in this work as they were intended to be heard. Only where absolutely necessary for the basic comprehensibility of a given post, square brackets will be employed to fill in gaps left in the original text.

The Simpsons

With technological televisual advancements in home entertainment, the viewer is increasingly autonomous with respect to accessing content. The wide accessibility of home recording equipment (such as VCRs) began to enable viewers to steer away from appointment-based viewing and toward a self-determined viewing model. While equipment still had to be set up to attend the precise airing time of a given series, the viewer did not. This also allowed the viewer to access the content as often as s/he liked, and gave viewers access to an important audio-visual playback tool: the freeze-frame. Early in the series' production, it became apparent in *alt.tv.simpsons* fans' discussions—which were accessed frequently by series creatives—that fans were obsessing over and discussing small details in the animation, in addition to the quoted exchanges of their favourite jokes from the series. This encouraged the creatives increasingly to include so-called "Easter eggs" (hidden jokes or messages) in the mise-

en-scène, to the extent that the "Who Shot Mr. Burns" episodes bridging the sixth and seventh seasons were constructed around and relied upon Easter eggs to convey the full plot to the audience. Fans' enthusiasm for identifying and sharing memetic content from the series (along with their use of recording equipment to watch, re-watch, pause, and scrutinise each episode) drove the creatives to produce more of it.

Studios were also quick to capitalise (in an economic sense) on the advancement of home media by packaging and selling videocassettes and DVDs, and Fox was no exception with respect to *The Simpsons*. In a compromise that allowed Fox to earn money in home entertainment while affording viewers some relief from appointment-based viewing, entire seasons of *The Simpsons* were sold in box set collections. In addition to the presentation of each episode as it appeared in its first broadcast, the DVD box sets included extra material for the most engaged fans; a few examples of these include deleted scenes, animation showcases and, importantly, commentaries for each episode provided by series creatives. In ensuring that these DVDs satisfied the desires among their fans to watch the same episodes over and over, to seek out minute details and to discover new material and new information about the fan-text, the creatives and the network have both managed to capitalise (both culturally and economically) on the insatiable appetite for *Simpsons* memes demonstrated by their audience.

However, Fox's evolution lagged when the shift in televisual media and home entertainment progressed to the internet. The studio had never shown a strong interest in exploiting the potential of the internet as a site of engagement with viewers. In fact, the studio has demonstrated a distinct apprehension—and even contentiousness—in its overall approach to the web. The studio had an official site for *The Simpsons*, though it was bereft of content and demonstrated more neglect by its creators than engagement. The written content was rarely updated, and the site featured little with respect to video, images, or interactivity, and offered nothing by way of engaging fans with series producers or with one another. Disappointed online fans had little recourse

but to carry on building their own *Simpsons*-dedicated sites—a practice that spread quickly in the first years of the 21st century as the internet matured, only to be subjected to swift and, in some cases, brutal litigation by Fox. While the creative producers of the series were engaging with their online fans and were relatively appreciative of the practice, Fox saw it as little more than potential fiduciary loss to the studio (and fiduciary gain to those hosting the unauthorised content). The studio also failed to recognise that they could increase traffic to (and thus the profitability of) their own website by filling the gap they were attempting to create and offering the same memetic content in an official capacity. They could have drawn fans to the official site and provided access to even limited memetic material and a forum on which fans could engage with one another and the creatives, in exchange for a great deal of visibility to advertisers.

Nevertheless, to date, Fox has continued to pursue unlicensed online use of *Simpsons* content. On 24 December 2015, the administrators of the "*The Simpsons* Best Moments" *Facebook* page announced that they were closing the page down in compliance with Fox after having received threats of legal action from the network. "*The Simpsons* Best Moments" selected and shared short clips from the series among its 482,178 members, some of whom subsequently shared the clips on their own *Facebook* timelines, which could then be shared by their *Facebook* friends, and so on. This group was brazen in its unauthorised distribution of *Simpsons* content, and given Fox's history of legal action against such breaches of copyright, Fox's discovery and disapproval of their activity should certainly not have come as a surprise to its administrators.

While the network remains cemented firmly in its position on the unauthorised distribution of *Simpsons* content online, it has begun to acknowledge the potential of the internet as a space for exhibition and distribution. While the series' largely net-savvy fans have long clamoured for legitimate streaming access to *The Simpsons*

(indicating that they would happily pay for it if only such an option were available), the first sign of Fox's realisation of the internet's potential came in the form of their vigorous litigation against Nick Hernandez, the administrator of a website that provided unauthorised streaming links to *The Simpsons*. (Fox was also suing Hernandez for running another website providing links to stream another successful Fox animated series: *Family Guy*.) Hernandez's site was far from the only one providing links to unauthorised uploads of the series, but his was one of the most well-known, high-traffic and audaciously-named *Simpsons*-dedicated site: *wtso.com*, which stands for "Watch *The Simpsons* Online". Fox had issued Cease-and-Desist letters to Hernandez on several occasions prior to their lawsuit, ultimately taking the administrator to court when he ignored their warnings. There is no question that Fox was making an example of Hernandez and his unauthorised use of their intellectual property. However, there was another motivating factor at play: now more than at any other time in the series' history, Fox had a very particular, very profitable interest in ensuring that unauthorised online copies of one its greatest assets, *The Simpsons*, were rendered inaccessible.

Once the series' contractual 20-year moratorium on American cable- and satellite-channel syndication rights expired in 2013, the subsidiary Fox Entertainment Group-owned cable and satellite channel, "FXX" (which is a separate entity from the Fox broadcast network) acquired the American cable/satellite syndication rights to the entire *Simpsons* catalogue. As part of their deal (cemented in 2013), FXX also acquired the rights to entire series available to stream online, but only to American-resident FXX subscribers. Given the value of the deal, it is clear that the potential profitability of an online streaming service of *The Simpsons* is finally understood. However, the many limitations imposed on its accessibility demonstrate that its full potential is still obscure to the series' distributors. For example, despite the fact that online access is available only to a very small percentage of their *Simpsons* audience, Fox has ceased production of DVD box sets (with ten seasons [and counting] to remain undistributed on DVD), and has made the official *Simpsons* website available only to

those based in the United States. This has irritated fans enough that an online petition has been started, urging Fox Home Entertainment to resume production and distribution of the DVD box sets. At the very beginning of 2016, the petition has just shy of 1,500 signatures.

In essence, Fox sees potential losses for the network in the unauthorised use of its memes, but seems unable to recognise the potential gains for the studio if they were to offer use of its memes on its own terms. Additionally, instead of recognising the economic potential in (and capitalising upon the spread of) memetic *Simpsons* content on the internet, Fox has repeated the same errors they made early in *Simpsons* merchandise licensing by strictly limiting distribution in the belief that this would generate interest and streamline profits to the company. These steps have all been taken in spite of the vocal disapproval both of its audience and its creative producers. These proliferators of memetic content from the series are not doing so only for the accumulation of economic capital; they are also driven by both the resonance of the content with their worldviews, and the desire to accumulate cultural capital among fan peers.

Clearly, there is a great deal at stake for all who are involved in the production, distribution and consumption of *The Simpsons*; a memetic reading of these phases and their players illuminates precisely what the stakes are and how they come about. At the same time, *The Simpsons* provides an ideal case study demonstrating the effectiveness and efficiency of meme theory as a paradigm for screen and fan studies.

Making the Case for Memes

As stated at the outset, my primary purpose is to establish meme theory as a useful and beneficial analytical model in screen and fan studies. This section of the introduction will provide a detailed chronological breakdown of the thesis into its primary chapters and sections, highlighting the research upon which these this work is

constructed, the methods employed throughout the thesis to establish and support the inclusion of meme theory in screen and fan analysis, and the manifold case study of *The Simpsons* through which the very type of memetic analysis is performed.

Part 1

In **Theoretical Engagement 1: Memes, Semiotics and Humour** I establish the primary methodology at the centre of the thesis: meme theory. First, I delve into the origin of the meme, which leads into a discussion of the early development and explorations of meme theory as a paradigmatic tool in cultural studies. Despite the enthusiasm of its early supporters (and the continued support the theory has drawn into the present day), meme theory is the subject of much scrutiny and criticism; I examine and respond to some of the most common criticisms of the theory. The role of human agency is an important one, as this is the one that has evolved the most since the earliest days of memetics; human agency was initially excluded almost entirely from the concept of memetic proliferation, but this position is increasingly contentious and discounted in the current discourse. It is also one that distinguishes Limor Shifman, a key modern scholar in the area, from her antecedents, and which ultimately enables Henry Jenkins to reconsider his staunchly antithetical position relative to memetics.

The most salient (and useful, with respect to this thesis) criticism put forth is that of meme theory's similarity to semiotics. I stress that this is not entirely detrimental to the potential of meme theory; as semiotics is an established, respected and useful analytical tool within both screen and fan studies, the fact that it shares key characteristics with meme theory suggests that the latter could also be a beneficial analytical tool for both fields. Furthermore, I argue here (and have argued in the brief examination of Fisher's work above) that several of the points at which the two schools of thought diverge form the very gaps left by semiotics that can be filled by meme theory. These gaps have widened with the development of spectatorship technology,

and they demand a paradigm that can accommodate (or even thrive upon) rapid progress, as meme theory can.

This is followed by a brief foray into the semiotic practices of fan theorists and the key concepts that bridge meme theory and fan theory, important examples of which are the notions of convergence culture and collective intelligence. This is followed by a section that further explores Limor Shifman's modern applications of a memetic paradigm to digital culture, and the distinctions between memetic and viral content, particularly as it relates to *The Simpsons.* The popularity of the series (and the ease speed with which the series' memetic content spreads) is framed through a detailed engagement with Edward Fink's humour theory analysis of *The Simpsons*; this initiates an important thread that is woven picked up in Part 2, section **2.2 – A *Simpsons* Meme for Better: [:joke:]**. **Theoretical Engagement 1** ends with a look at memes as bearers of economical and cultural capital for those who create, own and spread them.

An exploration of the concepts of economic and cultural capital open **Theoretical Engagement 2: Fan Studies**, which engages the most relevant fan scholars to this thesis in what is close to a chronological order. At the root of fan theory as it pertains to this thesis is Bourdieu's cultural shadow economy, which is driven by three fundamental presentations of capital: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital. I am quick to identify the manifestations of Bourdieu's forms of capital among the parties associated with *The Simpsons* (i.e. the creatives, the network and the fans), beginning with the ways the hierarchies on fan sites (*NoHomers.net* in particular), which provides a seamless entry into the discussion on John Fiske's development of Bourdieu's cultural economy. Fiske expands fan activity, acknowledging the textual productivity they contribute to the discourse. Fiske's modes of discrimination are also introduced here, which make an important contribution to the later discussion on disgruntled fans. I highlight the associations of both Fiske and Bourdieu's presentations of the cultural economy surrounding fan-texts and Fiske's notion of textual productivity with memes, demonstrating the intersections of both paradigms,

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and using Fiske and Bourdieu's work to establish the stakes manifest in *Simpsons* memetic content.

Following this, Henry Jenkins's significance to the ideas in this thesis is illuminated once again. The crucial concepts of transmedia storytelling, participatory culture and spreadable media undergo a detailed examination in this section, and the sites of their further application in this thesis are also introduced and signposted here. The elements of Jenkins's work that are investigated here are particularly relevant to the analysis of the Fox network (and, in particular, its successes and failures in engaging *Simpsons* fans) that takes place in Part 2, **Chapter 1. The Fox that Released the Hounds**. A brief discussion on Matt Hills's work ensues; Hills adapts Fiske and Bourdieu's work to include online fandom, including a new emphasis on fan social capital to include not just their network of fan-peers, but also their access to the producers and professionals associated directly with the fan text. This is an important bridge that owes its establishment to the digital age, and which affords a new vehicle by which memetic content can be exchanged between producers and fans.

Next is a section on Cornel Sandvoss, a fan theorist who considers himself part of a second-wave (i.e. post-Fiske) of fan studies scholars. He introduces the three-fold notion of textual boundaries, which helps to describe several phenomena in online *Simpsons* fandom, including the development of the Classic Era, Scully Years and Jean Era distinctions (around which several fan-factions have identified themselves). He also introduces the term "fan-text" (hyphen mine), which refers to the text that is the object of fandom. In the case of this thesis, the fan-text is *The Simpsons*. Though a simple one, it is an invaluable addition to the fan studies lexicon.

Finally, Derek Johnson's analysis of hegemonic fan activity (including his important distinction between anti-fans and disgruntled fan factions) incorporates several of the ideas discussed above, while centring his discussion on fan hierarchies and the very types of vocal *Simpsons* fan-critics and fan factions who stake claims to discursive and productive authority, argue with newer members on *NoHomers.net* over

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the quality of a given season of the series, and author manifestos and entire monographs on *Dead Homer Society* deriding the series after season 8.

This chapter (and, by association, **Part 1** of the thesis) concludes with a brief recapitulation of each theorist's position, the relationships among the theorists' works, and the association each shares with memes. These theoretical connections are credited with illuminating the tangible relationships among the creative producers, and the fans and the network of *The Simpsons*, and the conversation turns to focus on the last group: the network. Within the context of the unique and remarkable text that is *The Simpsons*, the network is credited for its creation and its role in the show's prosperity. Likewise, the show has done the same for the network; the network's position as an established American broadcaster would not have been possible without a *bona fide* hit series that attracted a vast, varied and modern audience.

Part 2

With the theoretical and methodological mechanisms firmly in grasp, I proceed with the application of the theories to the analytical case study of *The Simpsons.* In Part 2 I will plot the progress of the series from its nascence to its varied current franchised incarnations, highlighting turning points in each which are not only meaningful to fans, but are actually forged, at least in part, by memetic fan engagement. I will also explore the authors' openness to fan participation, and to what degrees such participation does—and is allowed to—occur.

I establish the *Simpsons* franchise's emergent memes as the primary forces driving the desires and actions of (and relationships among) the instrumental parties in *The Simpsons*'s production, broadcast and reception. The value of the memes from the series varies depending upon who is using them; for Fox, memes are economically valuable, for the fans they are culturally valuable, and for the creative producers, memes are both. The case study reveal the inherent power in these memes, and to examine those who seek to control them, by what methods they exercise this control,

and for what gain or objective. The audience's contribution to the proliferation of *Simpsons* memes is examined by illuminating the impact the fans have upon the texts and their authors by spreading the authors' memes, by communicating directly and indirectly with the authors, by communicating with one another using the authors' memes, by appropriating and manipulating the content of the texts (whether sanctioned or unsanctioned), and by the way they consume—and, at times, resist consumption of—the texts.

The series has evolved and expanded in many directions since its inception, and while the network is slow and hesitant to embrace new distribution media (and with them, new audiences), the creative producers behind *The Simpsons* are eager to take advantage of and proliferate their memes through these new channels, ensuring that *The Simpsons* fan experience is paramount. Audience retention is a high priority in these late seasons of the series, and the creative producers are keenly aware that the series' survival depends on reaching and pleasing fans old and new.

As it holds several unique positions in the historical, aesthetic and productive television and online landscapes, *The Simpsons* provides an ideal case study to support my hypothesis that meme theory can be usefully applied in analyses of cultural phenomena, whether independently of or alongside other disciplines, which is strongly suggestive of both its flexibility and its pan-disciplinary potential.

Part 2 opens with section **Chapter 1. The Fox that Released the Hounds**, which is an expository chapter exploring Fox's history, its co-evolution with the series, and its relationship with *Simpsons* fans. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the network's nascence, followed by the creation of *The Simpsons*. The show's profitability is highlighted here, as it is crucial to establish the value of the show to the network (particularly in its early days and in the sale of its licensing and distribution rights).

The value of the series to Fox is neither sentimental nor cultural; it is purely a money-making machine that the network has threatened to axe several times in

recent years based on its cost – earning ratio. In 2011, the *Simpsons*' principal cast even famously agreed to a reduction in their salaries to keep the series in production. The conversation thus turns intuitively to the show's most valuable source of economic capital: merchandising. It is in the sale of *Simpsons* merchandise that the economic value of its memes is most easily observed. Fans exchange money for the privilege of demonstrating their loyalty to the *Simpsons* franchise to the world (and to one another). This practice was at its height during the 1990 – 1992 period of so-called "Simpsonmania", when it was more difficult to identify a consumer product of which a *Simpsons*-themed version did not exist than one of which it did.

In this process, fans are relegated to the antiquated role of passive consumer. They were spoiled for choice with respect to the types of merchandise available, but they did not have any input into the types of merchandise that were being produced – that is until bootleggers introduced custom, bespoke and original versions of Bart Simpson T-shirts (the legitimate versions of which during Simpsonmania were among the bestselling items of merchandise). While Fox was swift to crack down on counterfeiters who were passing knock-offs as official merchandise to be sold in retail stores, they were less aggressive with seeking and eliminating street-vending bootleggers. Perhaps they were too numerous and relatively unthreatening compared to their wholesaling counterparts, but history shows that street bootleggers were spared the full extent of Fox's legal arsenal.

Thus, for a short while, fans were free to explore the Bart meme interpreting, reinterpreting, and personalising the character and his image to suit their politics— while the meme was still imbued with politics of its own. This led to an abundance of unique and diverse Bart Simpson T-shirts. Fox did eventually come down on one bootlegger who was attempting to turn Bart into an icon of the American neo-Nazi movement, but left less audacious bootleggers to sport and sell their very own versions of Bart.

This environment and the memetic practice of bootlegging Bart led to the development of a niche and robust memetic bootlegging phenomenon known most simply as "Black Bart". It transpired that Bart's character resonated with some members of the African-American community, inspiring the creation and proliferation of many variations on a black version of Bart Simpson. These shirts sold well (and openly) in major American cities throughout the Simpsonmania era, and the Black Bart phenomenon provides an excellent example of a meme that emerged from the series and was adapted and proliferated by fans everywhere.   Bart T-shirts also form perhaps the only example of a *Simpsons* meme that held measurable and widespread economic capital for Fox, creatives, and fans alike.

Fox's *laissez-faire* attitude with respect to fans' unauthorised use of *Simpsons* content was isolated to the Bootleg Bart phenomenon. As toward the end of the 20th century the internet had evolved (temporarily but almost exclusively) into a place of commercial exchange, the Fox network clearly became concerned about more potential counterfeiting. As non-commercial fan sites began to emerge on the internet, Fox became increasingly rigid in their position on any use of memetic content. Cease-and-Desist letters were distributed with persistence to fans whose sites bore images or clips from the series, and those early online fans who were left with little recourse were forced to close their sites down. Despite the fact that *alt.tv.simpsons* had already made measurably beneficial contributions to the show, Fox had no interest in engaging online fans—unless that engagement came in the form of legal action against copyright infringement.

Most fans were not trying to capitalise economically from their use of memetic content (this has changed only slightly in the modern digital age, as any site can now sell space to advertisers); their capital interests were social and cultural. They were also interested simply in accessing and sharing memetic *Simpsons* content, which is a significant gap that Fox had every opportunity to fill with a rich and user-friendly official site. Today, only the most successful fan sites

have survived, and they are still often the targets of Cease-and-Desist letters. Most learned in the most difficult way that compliance with Fox is the easiest route to take. One need only look at the Hernandez case (touched upon above) to see how unlikely fans are to emerge the victors when they choose the path of non-compliance.

In typical fashion, *Simpsons* creatives had made their positions on piracy known through an episode of the series. While it does not condone the practice of piracy outright, it certainly levels a direct accusation at Fox for its overreaction and disproportionate aggression in the face of perceived or actual piracy. It also concludes with Lisa watching a film in an otherwise empty theatre, which is an overt criticism of Fox's unwillingness to abandon archaic distribution practices and embrace (or, at least, exploit) the potential of the new ones.

The chapter concludes with Fox's gradual acceptance of the new methods, which it nevertheless manages to accomplish with a series of failures in its wake. The network has finally embraced the possibilities of the internet by transforming the hitherto lacklustre official *Simpsons* website into a content-rich fan hub on which fans can discuss and exchange *Simpsons* memes—but it is only available in the United States. Some of the content is limited even further, being made available only to those with cable subscriptions that include the FXX station.

Chapter 2. Worst Audience Ever opens with an introduction to memetic online fan practices, which are then usefully elucidated by a case-study-within-the-case-study that involves a specific joke from the series that has been adapted and reinterpreted to suit a need peculiar to the *NoHomers* online fan forum. Following from this, the ways in which fans carve out and interact with the urtext (Henry Jenkins's term for the central text at the heart of the cross- or transmedia franchise; in this case, the urtext is *The Simpsons* series) as per Sandvoss and Johnson's notions of textual boundaries is established with an investigation of the Scully Era.

This discussion comes to incorporate Bourdieu, Fiske, Hills, and Jenkins as the discussion turns toward the hegemonic power structures within online *Simpsons* fandom, some of which are constructed directly on the fan-meme premise of the Scully Era and its associated decline in quality. Another important (and increasingly memetic) fan-concept, that of "Zombie *Simpsons*", emerges directly from the discussion on the Scully Era, as Zombie *Simpsons* is a sort of radicalised version of the Scully Era. Zombie *Simpsons* encompasses the Scully Era and the subsequent Jean Era, covering the seasons from 13 – 27 (and counting) during which long-time *Simpsons* writer and executive producer has also been showrunner (a position akin to head writer). The discussion then centres on the creators of the term, "Charlie Sweatpants" and his fellow authors on the blog *Dead Homer Society*.

These authors are determined to persuade other fans to embrace their perspective on the series, and the discussion in the thesis employs several examples of memetic content from the series that the *Dead Homer Society* writers employ to appeal to their audience (i.e. big *Simpsons* fans), to establish their own authority within the knowledge community, and to demonstrate that, despite their manifesto's calls for the show's cancellation, they are huge fans of the series. The discussion on Zombie *Simpsons* concludes with a tongue-in-cheek example of meta-memetics from *NoHomers* in which they turn the *Dead Homer Society*'s own memetic codes against them.

A brief discussion follows in which *Simpsons* creatives (including Al Jean) address and respond to the popular notion that the show has consistently declined in quality beginning with Mike Scully's tenure as showrunner. The showrunners' perspectives (and Al Jean's optimism) lead Chapter 2 to a close, opening the creative-centred conversation in **Chapter 3. *The Simpsons* Creatives vs. Fox and Fans**.

The creatives have never been particularly coy about their relationship with Fox network executives. As they did with Comic Book Guy to represent their fans,

the creatives have often chosen to create memes that depict Fox network executives unfavourably on the series, often portraying them as deserving murder victims. In one circumstance, a Fox censor is hacked to death by a rating icon come to life. Another pair of network executives are locked in a room with an explosive device, only to be exposed as impossible-to-kill cyborgs (inspired both visually and in comportment by Robert Patrick's relentless T-1000 in James Cameron's 1991 *Terminator 2*) who, after being blown up and reconstituting themselves into a single executive unit, announce that they still "have notes" to share with in-story creatives.

This section includes other animated examples of the creatives' opinions of the Fox network and its executives, as well as several explicit statements from the creatives themselves about many confrontations that have arisen out of disputes with Fox (confrontations whose roots can always ultimately be traced back to the network's concern for its economic interests). While the Fox network will almost always have the last word where conflicts arise, the creatives have sole control over the memetic content of the series. These are the vehicles into which they funnel their frustration with the network, which then becomes spreadable content in the hands of the fans—who can certainly relate to being on the losing end of Fox's power plays.

But the series creatives do not always find themselves on the same side as their fans, and nothing demonstrates this more effectively than Comic Book Guy, one of the most insufferable characters in Springfield (which is saying a lot). However, Comic Book Guy embodies so much more than a mere outlet through which creatives can vent their grievances toward their fans. Comic Book Guy was conceived as a response to a fan's criticism—whose direct quote became a *Simpsons* meme and an oft-quoted line, even by non-*Simpsons* fans who are unaware of the source, let alone its origins. Comic Book Guy starts in the second

season as a representation of fans, but by the middle of the 27th season has evolved into so much more.

The chapter moves into a discussion on creatives' direct (and less-direct) interactions with fans through means other than the series itself (e.g. participation in online forums, question-and-answer sessions, DVD commentaries) as well as in the series. The "Who Shot Mr. Burns" episodes and the later so-called "Nedna" poll serve as examples of the creatives trying to engage directly with online fans, even extending to them some textual and productive authority, while simultaneously trying (unsuccessfully) to encourage Fox to facilitate more interactions like these.

I then steer the discussion toward other (future) initiatives within the *Simpsons* franchise with a great potential for interaction with fans, and chief among these is the interactive mobile game *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* (*TSTO*). The game embodies many elements that indicate the continued success of the *Simpsons* franchise even beyond the series itself: it incorporates and allows the proliferation of memes from the series, it involves creatives from the series to ensure a close relationship and continuity (continuity and canon are additional considerations in this chapter) with the show, and it affords each fan-user with her or his own unique Springfieldian experience (and near-total control over that unique experience). Importantly, *TSTO* is also the first product from the *Simpsons* franchise with the potential to turn the franchise into a genuine transmedia outfit.

The chapter concludes with the creatives' perspective on the future of the series, which is closely tied with the future of the medium. The creatives are optimistic that the transition of the series to an online medium will enable them finally to put the fan at the centre of the franchise in a meaningful way, as well as tracking fans' use of the site and the content thereupon, enabling creatives (and the network) to measure which memetic content is the most successful in the fandom and which is less so, and how fans are using the content. Given that this is the first time in more than 20 years that such activity can take place in a sanctioned

environment with authorised content, the results are impossible to predict. This intriguing prospect is the last considered in the *Simpsons* case study.

The closing of the thesis consists of the **Conclusion**, the **Appendix**, and the **Works Cited** sections. The conclusion provides an evaluation of the effectiveness of the analysis in the *Simpsons* case study in demonstrating a place for meme theory in screen and fan studies. It will also explore the limitations of the analysis, and of meme theory as an analytical paradigm. Finally, the conclusion will propose additional areas of study that can be performed in the field.

The sole **Appendix** of the thesis is a detailed overview of important academic and non-academic sources used in this thesis. The fan sites and forums are some of the most important tools I employ in my close analysis of *Simpsons* fandom, and are indispensible in revealing fan practices. These are sites on which textually active *Simpsons* fans post opinions, images, information, and other *Simpsons*-related content. It is on these sites that the relatively unmediated (but not entirely unmoderated) nature of fan interaction could be observed. This section examines each of the key fan sites in great (and somewhat chronological) detail, providing insight into that which each site uniquely contributes to the fan discourse, as well as the ways in which the users of those sites interact with the text and its memetic content; any memetic content emerging from each sites is also highlighted. Online sources that are not fan sites, such as the *BootlegBart* blog or the official *Simpsons* site are also included here with a brief overview of their roles in the analysis.

Following the **Online Sources** section is a **Written Sources** section outlining some of the non-web resources that contribute to the thesis. It must be clarified that newspaper and magazine articles that are found online are included in this section rather than the previous as their presence on the internet is incidental. Many were articles in tangible newspaper form before being scanned and uploaded for the sake of preservation and access, so these are not online resources in the

same way that *NoHomers* or the *Simpsons*-fan-generated Wiki sites are. This section also contextualises the use of a few key academic sources that are not focused on fan, meme, or semiotic theory. Other non-academic sources touched upon here include John Ortved's indispensible biography of the series, in which compiled and original interviews with those involved with the series (and fan sites) provide the reader with a rich, authoritative and comprehensive account of the series from its inception to the present day.

The **Appendix** is followed by the **Works Cited** section, in which the sources are organised by type for ease of access to the reader. There is also a small bibliographical section which includes works that were not cited directly in the thesis but which provided key background knowledge to its creation.

Conclusion

Above I have made clear my intentions with this thesis, and below I shall perform the analysis necessary to realise these intentions. It is my firm belief that meme theory could be a tremendously beneficial analytical paradigm in the fields of screen and fan studies, and my every effort will be to persuade my readers to share this perspective. Meme theory would be a useful tool to add to the existing analytical toolbox, especially as technological advancements in alter the landscape of spectatorship drastically and rapidly. Thus, I will embark upon the first task of demonstrating the methods, functions, benefits, and applications of meme theory to screen and fan studies.

Part 1

Theoretical Engagement 1: Memes, Semiotics and Humour

1.1 – Screen Analysis, Fan Studies, and the Establishment of a Place for Meme Theory

Craptacular Science and the Worst Audience Ever will explore two divergent areas of modern American animation through a synthesis both of the academic and mainstream understandings of the meme, and of the paradigms of memetics (a term used interchangeably with "meme theory") and fan studies. These areas of study provide particular insight into the phenomena of audience spectatorship, interaction, participation, and reiteration—particularly those fans who are internet-based—with which this thesis is largely concerned.

This section is written with the intent of elucidating how meme theory functions, how it is useful in the fields of screen studies and fan studies, its similarities to and distinctions from the field of semiotics, where its main weaknesses lie, and what its direct application and contributions are to this thesis.

1.2 – The Origins of the Meme

When Richard Dawkins first formulated the word "meme" in his 1974 book *The Selfish Gene* (which he did in order to develop a detailed analogy to emphasize the role of the replicator in the evolution of the gene), he did not anticipate its development by scientists, philosophers and cultural theorists as "a proper hypothesis of the human mind".[1] Nevertheless, the notion that much human thought—and, more significantly, behaviour—is determined not by the free will of

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[1] Richard Dawkins, "Foreword" (*The Meme Machine*, Susan Blackmore, Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1999, print.

the individual but by replicators that proliferate themselves through human imitation is both controversial and elusive. This work will attempt to clarify and establish the concept as it will be applied to the larger thesis, relying upon both noted early memeticists' work on the topic and the concept's colloquial and modern interpretations.

Meme theory, or memetics, provides a perspective of human thinking and behaviour centred on a force external to the individual. Susan Blackmore emerged as one of the leading proponents of the theory (who is endorsed candidly by the Father of Memes, Dawkins himself). Relying upon Dawkins's seminal works and those of a host of other scholars, Blackmore endeavours in her 1999 book *The Meme Machine* to delineate the concept through countless examples and to explore its applications in everyday human action and interaction.

In essence, memes are replicators of cultural information that use humans to spread themselves. As Dawkins was in his discussion on genes, Blackmore is careful (as are other memeticists) to emphasize that the meme does not have any consciousness, awareness or self-awareness, and it is not a being in and of itself. (The very idea that cultural information could be contained in self-propagating units at all gives rise to both the criticisms of and the controversy surrounding meme theory; these criticisms arise both within and without the realm of memetics, and will be described in detail shortly.) Like the gene, the meme simply carries a code and proliferates as extensively as possible through variation, selection and retention. Together (and only together), these last three concepts formulate Dawkins's criteria for replicators (biological or non-biological), and Blackmore concurs that the meme is propagated by precisely these means.

Variation occurs when a meme is imperfectly copied and passed on. One example of this to which Blackmore returns several times is that of a specific urban legend, that of the tale about the woman who, ignorant about her recently acquired technology, attempts to dry her small dog after a bath by placing the animal in the

microwave oven. Naturally, the animal dies, usually by exploding in the machine.
Blackmore notes that this legend has countless variations; for example, the dog
might be a poodle, a chihuahua, a pomeranian, or might even be a cat or other
small animal, and the episode may have occurred in Britain, or Australia, or Japan,
or anywhere on the planet. As the basic story (or the 'gist') is retained and spread
all over the globe, the meme demonstrates sufficient variation to succeed.[2]

In the meme's selection phase, humans act as the selective environment.
Just as the success of a given organism's proliferation depends upon the conditions
of their surroundings, so, too, does a meme's proliferation need to pass the
selective criteria of its human hosts. As Blackmore points out, among the vast
numbers of thoughts that cross the average human mind on a daily basis, few of
them will be expressed to another. If it is not expressed, a potential meme dies. A
successful meme must be one enticing enough for its host to pass it on to another
(or other) host(s). One must be cautious not to equate the enticing nature of a
meme with its usefulness to its host; a meme might be useful, neutral, or could even
be harmful to its host. It became popular, for example, to emulate the extremely
risky stunts performed on the series *Jackass* during its television run on MTV in the
early turn of the 21st century, despite the clear warning issued at the beginning of
each episode against doing so. Such stunts put their performers in extreme peril of
bodily harm, but some imitators proceeded anyway. This could be because they
found the stunts entertaining and/or thrilling, or perhaps self-harm was the objective.
In any case, it serves to demonstrate the idea that what the meme itself is or why its
host selects it is irrelevant; all that matters is that it is selected.

The retention aspect describes the part of the meme that stays intact during
transmission from one host to the next. To return to the poodle-microwave legend,
it is the general structure of the story (that a human placed an animal in the

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[2] Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), print.

microwave, turned the machine on and the animal died as a result) that is passed

from host to host; the host's memory plays a key factor in the transmission, and

details may also be added, omitted or changed to suit the speaker and/or their

audience. As long as the story's essence is recognisable, the meme has

successfully met the retention criterion.

The question of exactly what a meme is composed of is one that showcases

the elusiveness of meme theory: nearly anything that can be copied from human to

human can be considered a meme. That is also to say that a meme is necessarily

something that can be copied. Richard Dawkins defines a meme thusly: "A *meme*

is a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that more

copies of itself get created in other minds."[3] An instinctual inclination (hunger, for

example) is not copied and is therefore not a meme. Blackmore and Dawkins both

provide lists of examples whose comprehensiveness demonstrates the enormity of

the scope of memetics. They include trends, rites and rituals, and technologies (all

of which are proliferated through imitation). Blackmore offers more specific

illustrations, citing:

> Everything that is passed from person to person [by imitation] is a meme.
>
> This includes all the words in your vocabulary, the stories you know, the
>
> skills and habits you have picked up from others and the games you like
>
> to play. It includes the songs you sing and the rules you obey. So, for
>
> example, when you drive on the left (or the right!), eat curry with lager or
>
> pizza and coke, whistle the theme tune from *Neighbours* or even shake
>
> hands, you are dealing in memes. […] [E]ach of them is using your
>
> behaviour to get itself copied.

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[3] Richard Dawkins, quoted in *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme* (Richard Brodie, London: Hay House, 1996), print, 11.

In a similar vein, but perhaps to an even greater extreme, Richard Brodie simply states "all your behaviour is dictated by a combination of the instructions in your DNA and the mental programming you acquired as you grew up: your genes and your memes."[4] In the same chapter, Brodie reveals that he considers all distinctions made by humans to be memes. This includes any boundaries established by the human mind, from political borders to musical genres to the concept of the self as a unique entity, separate from one's surroundings. These examples fall into the first of Brodie's three meme types: *distinctions*. The other two he identifies are *strategies* (cause-and-effect beliefs) and *associations*, which he broadly defines as "attitudes about everything in life."

Robert Aunger makes a strong case for the meme as a neurological phenomenon, establishing the connections between the unit of culture and the physical event as it is internalized, interpreted, stored, and expressed by the human brain.[5] These positions will be revisited and contextualised again in the following subsection, "**Some Criticisms of Meme Theory**".

Again, the wide range of possibilities regarding information which might be considered memetic and that which might not invites many questions. One might wonder how large and complex the information can be and still be considered a single meme. For example, when exploring memes, the question of whether Homer Simpson is himself a meme, or whether he is the sum of many memes might be raised. Is his famous silhouette a meme? Is the outfit he wears day in and day out a meme? Is his voice a meme? (I once heard a woman do a startlingly accurate impression of him. In Susan Blackmore's estimation, the impersonator would be acting as the replicating vehicle for his voice and turns of phrase

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[4] Richard Brodie, *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 1996), Kindle edition, Chapter 2.
[5] Robert Aunger, *The Electric Meme* (New York: The Free Press, 2002), print.

through imitation, after all, to a room full of other humans.) Blackmore raises the issue of meme distinction using religion as an example; one might wonder whether Christianity is a meme, or whether Roman Catholicism is a meme, or the sacrament of Communion, and so on. Her response, in short, is that Christianity would be considered a web of interconnected memes—a "meme complex", or, more simply, a "memeplex".[6]

1.3 – Some Criticisms of Meme Theory

The idea of a memeplex provides a departure point from which a discussion on the criticisms of meme theory can be launched, and it will begin within the realm of Blackmore's memetics with the author's own "Three Problems with Memes".[7] The first problem she proposes is that there is no specific unit of a meme. This renders the foundation of the theory even less stable than it may already appear in that there exists no demonstrable and universal method by which to identify a meme. The notion of a memeplex certainly gives rise to questions of meme identification that would be helped by the introduction of such a unifying unit; Christianity may well be a memeplex compositing many smaller memes, and this concept is easier to recognise and accept when building up toward the memeplex through its comprising memes. However, the issue of meme-unit becomes less manageable when working in the opposite direction. One might, for example, be tempted to ascribe the role of a Christianity builder-meme to the Bible. This would be a fair and logical

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[6] Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, Chapter 15. In this same chapter, the author proposes that the Bible is an example of a meme with a high probability of success as it contains a substantial amount of conflicting information which allows for a wide variety of arguments to be justified using its contents. She notes that it also contains instructions for its own replication, which increases its chances of proliferation.

[7] Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, Chapter 5.

action, but given the complexity of the Bible, it could be argued that it is itself a memeplex composed of such memes as written words, language, rules of social order, gender binaries, hero tales, and so on. Each of these memes can be broken down into smaller meme units as well. Blackmore argues that the universal unit of a meme is irrelevant—or, rather, that the desire for a universal unit of a meme is irrelevant. The unit of a meme is specific to each individual meme; the unit of each individual meme is determined by the amount of information it must contain in order successfully to replicate itself. For some memes, such as a famous sonnet, this may be a few simple syllables. For others, such as the Dogme 95 film movement, this means the replication of a much larger set of philosophies, ideas and requirements (such as lighting and recording medium), all of which are necessarily included in order to copy and reproduce the Dogme 95 style effectively.

Blackmore thus not only advocates for the lack of necessity for a meme unit to be established, but also emphasises the impossibility of the task; unique memes must be measured in unique ways. The lack of a unit nevertheless renders the theory ethereal, which presents problems particularly for those who criticise meme theory's potential inclusion within the sciences and who thus wish to subject it to the same rigorous scientific testing as the theories proposed within the natural scientific fields (such as physics and biology). As Luis Benítez-Bribiesca argues, "memes, if they exist at all, cannot in any way be subjected to rigorous investigation and experimentation. […] It follows that the existence of a cultural replicator could not be scientifically demonstrated if its essential niche and nature are so elusive."[8] Such criticisms are invited and addressed by those scholars within the field of memetics who wish to establish memetics as a legitimate

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[8] Luis Benítez-Bribiesca, "Memetics: A Dangerous Idea" (*Interciecia* 26: 29 – 31), print, 30.

scientific model, such as Robert Aunger, who seeks to map the actual neurological events involving meme replication within the human brain.

This issue of physical replication leads directly to Blackmore's second problem with memes: "[w]e do not know the mechanism for copying and storing memes."[9] Blackmore is optimistic that memeticists (Robert Aunger among them, perhaps) will manage to pinpoint these precise mechanisms within the human brain, but a revelation of such concrete evidence continues to elude meme theorists. Because this particular aspect of meme theory is scientifically pertinent, Benítez-Bribiesca's criticism that it is at this point that the gene-meme analogy begins to decay appears sound; he argues that the copying mechanism in meme replication cannot be as precise (nor as precisely identified) as the biological coding process of DNA replication.[10] However, Blackmore argues that the copying mechanism within the human brain is accurate enough to retain certain memes in near-perfect detail (and those that it cannot are simply less successful than those that can be retained so faithfully). Both Blackmore and Aunger also argue that critics who contend that the copying mechanism within genetics is exactable are ignoring the (at least once-) elusive nature of the gene; Aunger notes that the materiality of the gene was not confirmed until the 1950s.[11] Blackmore even contends that the identification of the precise relationship between gene, genotype (the genetic information) and phenotype (the physical expression of the genetic information) remains difficult, and the precise unit of the gene is still uncertain.[12]

[9] Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, 56.
[10] Luis Benítez-Bribiesca, "Memetics: A Dangerous Idea", 30.
[11] Robert Aunger, *The Electric Meme*, 323.
[12] Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, 54.

Both Aunger and Blackmore are steadfast in the conclusion that the processing of memes occurs in the human brain despite their not knowing the precise mechanisms involved. Both are optimistic that the precise mechanisms exist and can be revealed through continued scientific research into memetics.[13] It could simply be argued then that, as is the case with many neurological processes, the one(s) responsible for memes simply have yet to be established, and that the lack of such a discovery to date does not necessarily indicate its lack of existence.

1.4 – The Question of Agency and the Role of the Human Brain

The fact that the human brain is involved at all is another considerable point of contention for critics of meme theory and for memeticists alike; both the perceived subjectivity of the person and the consciousness of the meme in the meme replication process are arguably the most divergent points of the gene-meme analogy. Blackmore identifies this problem as the Lamarckian nature of meme evolution (this refers to the early evolutionary theorist Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck, among whose numerous fallacious perceptions of evolution was the conviction that acquired traits could be passed on genetically).[14] While this has been firmly established by modern studies of genetic evolution to be false, it remains an active facet of memetic evolution. A meme can be—and often is—altered within one individual's brain after reception (a process which is analogous to the acquired trait), and is passed forward in its new state, forming a dramatic alteration in a single generation.

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[13] Adam McNamara makes a promising argument for just such a neurological event in his article "Can we measure memes?" (*Frontiers in Evolutionary Neuroscience*. 3:1. doi: 10.3389/fnevo.2011.00001, 03 March 2013), print.
[14] Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, 59.

Once again, Luis Benítez-Bribiesca provides a summary of this criticism:

> [I]n memes messages are encoded in continuously varying analogous symbols that might rapidly decay into noise as they are transmitted from individual to individual. Genes require that messages be replicated with a high degree of accuracy, something that cannot occur with memes. [...] Proponents of the "memetic hypothesis" point out that memes mutate from "brain to brain" and in a very short time. How could this high mutation rate, lack of a code script, and memetic instability account for the emergence and progressive evolution of the human mind and culture?[15]

Blackmore argues that the notion of exact genetic replication (and thus the inability to inherit acquired traits) applies only to sexually reproductive biological organisms and is exclusive of those organisms that reproduce by other means.[16] Therefore, not only is the acquired-trait-inheritance argument irrelevant to some areas of genetic evolution, it is inapplicable to the theory of memetic evolution. She also states that not every alteration in the transmission of the meme from one person to another is maintained, and that this process does at least in part rely upon the method of transmission; through the example of a recipe, Blackmore asserts that if she adds too much salt to a recipe whose instructions are written, this mistake will not necessarily be transmitted to an observer, and will almost certainly not be transmitted if she were to mail the recipe as it was written to another individual.[17] It is often the case that a meme may acquire a trait that is not transmitted.

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[15] Luis Benítez-Bribiesca, "Memetics: A Dangerous Idea", *Intercieca*, 30.
[16] Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, 60.
[17] Ibid., 61.

Nick Rose also addresses the role of consciousness in meme selection, which is a particularly contentious point to scientists as one of the chief tenets of genetic evolution is that natural selection is blind, determined only by the environment in which the organism exists and replicates. Rose examines this phenomenon as "directed mutation; a paradoxical position whereby mutation that occurs is not random, but somehow directed towards some goal."[18] Rose argues that while people do have some choice in which memes they will propagate (but not with any intention of attaining some ultimate goal other than in the short term), they are also in part constructs of memes. He argues both that to propagate a meme with a specific goal in mind would require a level of foresight to which humans do not measurably have access, and that such a decision would be attributable to the memes already internalised by the individual. Thus, Rose sees no purpose in forcing the mechanics of sexually-reproductive evolutionary theory on memetics.[19]

1.5 – Unnatural Selection

There is also a considerable amount of discomfort with the notion that we are merely a product of our memetic make-up; the highly-valued concepts of free will, choice and prerogative are imperilled by the idea that human minds are merely vehicles for meme propagation. As memeticist Daniel C. Dennett phrases it: "I don't know about you, but I am not initially attracted by the idea of my brain as a sort of dung-heap in which the larvae of other people's ideas renew themselves, before sending out copies of themselves in an informational diaspora. It seems at first to rob my mind of its importance as an author and a critic."[20]

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[18] Nick Rose, "Controversies in Meme Theory" (*Journal of Memetics – Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission,* 1998, 2:1), print, 43 – 57
[19] Nick Rose, "Controversies in Meme Therory" *Journal of Memetics*.
[20] Daniel C Dennett, "Memes and the Exploitation of Imagination" (*The Journal or Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol.48, No. 2, Spring 1990, 127 – 135) print, 128.

Both Dawkins and Dennett do make some (albeit small) effort to reinstate the power of choice in transcending our memes (in that—though even our inner fundamental values are memetically-derived—we can override this programming and behave in ways that defy these memes), but the basic tenets of meme theory themselves do provide some respite from the notion that we are nought but our memes. If the environment selecting for memes is the human brain, replete with cognitive processes that are too often ignored in the study of memes (with the notable exception Aunger), then of course the individual plays a role in selecting for memes. For example, if Individual A posts a viral video to Individual B's social network page and Individual B does not perceive it to be funny, or even perceives it to be offensive, Individual B will not propagate the video. Individual B may even remove the post from his or her page, thus limiting the visibility of the meme to his or her social network contacts. Thus, though meme theory may at first glance appear to remove individual (or even—perhaps especially—collective) autonomy from the equation, it by its very definition accounts for an active mental role in this process.

Importantly, Henry Jenkins offers further criticism of the lack of human agency in memetic proliferation. Introducing his 17 February 2014 interview with media scholar and memeticist Limor Shifman, Jenkins states, "Sorry, Mr. Dawkins, but I don't buy the concept of culture as 'self-replicating': such a concept feels far too deterministic to me, stripping aside the role of agency at a time when the public is exerting much greater control of the content which spreads across the culture than ever before."[21] His observations on the matter, and Limor Shifman's responses to his concerns, will be discussed at length in the later sections of this

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[21] Henry Jenkins, "A Meme is a Terrible Thing to Waste: An Interview with Limor Shifman (Part One)" (*HenryJenkins.org*, 17 February 2014), accessed 22 May 2014: http://henryjenkins.org/2014/02/a-meme-is-a-terrible-thing-to-waste-an-interview-with-limor-shifman-part-one.html

chapter in "Memes on the Internet". Their dialogue is particularly intrinsic to the

application of meme theory to *Simpsons* fan engagement within this thesis, as

Shifman's work relates specifically to internet memes, and Jenkins's relates to fan

engagement with (and their spreading of) media.

Another controversial aspect of the role of human consciousness in

memetics is that if consciousness of any kind is made part of the selection process,

then the process of meme selection is no longer analogous to that of gene

selection; with the introduction of awareness and choice, meme selection would

now include an evaluative process (whereas natural selection is perceived to be

blind). While this is a valid comparison, and true in its fundament that memes and

genes are generally subject to different environmental selection processes, there is,

in fact, nothing that dictates that natural selection has to be blind. If a gene's

phenotypes make it particularly well suited to a given environment, then it will be

selected for and it will proliferate: genetic selection can be defined as "[t]he favoring

of particular combinations of genes in a given environment".[22]

While this is a very simplified summary of genetic selection, it does

demonstrate that consciousness does not play a role in the process—either in its

inclusion or its exclusion. The concept of "environment" must also be unpacked; it

is a very general term that is applied to all things surrounding the gene (or meme)

under scrutiny. Humans—and thus human minds—are (an often significant)

element of nearly any given Earthly environment. However, in the scientific

community, selection, when performed consciously and deliberately by humans, is

distinguished from that which occurs in any other circumstances; it is described in

the process known in genetics studies as *artificial selection*, "humans, not nature,

select the individuals that are to survive and reproduce."[23] (Examples of this

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[22] Peter J Russell, *Genetics* (San Francisco: Pearson Education, ed. Benjamin Cummings, 2002), print, 742.
[23] Peter Russell, *Genetics*, 696.

concept of artificial selection might include horse breeding and certain agricultural practices.)

It is not clear in the above definition when, how or why "humans" and "nature" became mutually exclusive groups; this excerpt exposes the fallacy in the perception that humans do not form part of the selective natural environment. Humans are easily as much a part of the natural environment as birds, trees, and any other aspect or force of "nature"; so-called artificial selection *is* natural selection.

In "Memes: Myths, Misunderstandings, and Misgivings", Daniel Dennett addresses this problem, and posits that the notion of artificial selection as unnatural selection is rooted in a misunderstanding of Charles Darwin's seminal studies in genetics:

> While it is true that Darwin wished to contrast the utter lack of foresight or intention in natural selection with the deliberate goal-seeking of the artificial selectors, in order to show how the natural process could in principle proceed without any mentality at all, he did not thereby establish (as many seem to have supposed) that deliberate, goal-oriented, intentional selection is not a sub variety of natural selection! The short legs of dachsunds, and the huge udders of Holsteins are just as much products of natural selection as the wings of an eagle; they just evolved in an environment that included a particularly well-focused selective pressure consisting of human agents.[24]

One more issue that is raised with meme theory, and it is one that is crucial to this thesis, is that of authorship: if humans are simply internalising and regurgitating units of culture that they have absorbed from the environment around them, how are originality, invention and creativity accounted for? The idea of a lack

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[24] Daniel C. Dennett, "Memes: Myths, Misunderstandings and Misgivings (Draft)" (*A Memetics Compendium*, compiled by Robert Finkelstein, Adelphi, MD: University of Maryland University College, 2008), print, 433.

of an origin point for any particular meme is an uncomfortable one, but it is one that has been addressed by a number of writers of meme theory.

Dennett is among these writers, but his attempts to address this issue are, admittedly, somewhat dissatisfying. In "The Evolution of Culture", Dennett explains that the composer Johann Sebastian Bach was not creating *per se*, but rather simply combining or "breeding" existing memes with one another in order to produce work that had not yet been heard. Dennett follows this assessment with another question: "Was Bach, in virtue of his highly sophisticated approach to the design of replicable musical memes, not just a *meme-breeder* but a *memetic engineer*?"[25] Dennett does remind the reader here that both meme-breeders and memetic engineers (however he defines the latter term) will always aim for successful memes; they must be preoccupied with the transmission of their not-quite-creations among the public.

Susan Blackmore is equally elusive about the concept of invention; her (dictionary-style) definition of memetic engineering is closer to Dennett's meme-breeding than to invention: "memetic engineering n. manipulating memes, as in psychotherapy, advertising or education."[26] TJ Olney concurs through his similar definition of memetic engineering in his study on memes and consumerism; he calls for further study in order to uncover "empirical evidence as to which characteristics of memes do the most to facilitate transmission of memes."[27] These assessments make perfect sense given that these authors do consider every aspect of cultural transmission to be memetic; for example, a western songwriter with a hit pop song could not have created the song without the meme of language for the lyrics, the memetic familiarity with a memetic twelve-tone musical system, and the memetic

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[25] Daniel C Dennet, "The Evolution of Culture", *A Memetics Compendium*. Emphasis in the original.
[26] Susan Blackmore, "The Forget-Meme-Not Theory", *A Memetics Compendium*, 184.
[27] TJ Olney, "An Alternative Approach to Gender and Consumer Behavior: Memetics", *A Memetics Compendium*, 1234.

knowledge of a memetically-produced musical instrument with which to compose and/or demonstrate the piece.

Overt support for the concept of a memetic engineer who actually creates a meme can be found in the non-academic *Complete Idiot's Guide to Memes*, co-authored by Dr. John Gunders, an academic in media and cultural studies, and Damon Brown. They define the memetic engineer as "the creator of the meme itself."[28] They note that the creation of the meme may not be an intentional one, and that memes can be engineered by non-human actors.

The issue of meme authorship has also arisen in internet forums; the site *KnowYourMeme.com*, which will be discussed in further detail in a later section of this chapter, offers a feature to users to "claim authorship" on any memetic image that has been uploaded to their site by clicking a button and following a few simple steps. A user can do so if they "are the original creator of an image hosted on Know Your Meme or have credible information regarding its authorship".[29]

The subject of internet meme engineering was also raised in 2010 by users of the Yale Law & Technology site, who were at that time involved with the "Intellectual Property in the Digital Age" course at Yale University.[30] The discussion is centred around the concept of the fine legal, artistic, and moral lines drawn between "borrowing" and plagiarism in a globally-networked world:

In the recent pre-digital past, the standard was that some defined person or group created a work and was considered the author of the work. Even if an object was cobbled together from many different sources, there was

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[28] John Gunders and Damon Brown, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Memes*, Kindle Edition, Chapter 2.
[29] User name "Brad: Le Editor", "New Feature: 'Claim Authorship' Button in KYM Image Uploads" (*KnowYourMeme.com*, 12 May 2012), accessed 24 September 2013: http://knowyourmeme.com/forums/announcements/topics/15739-new-feature-claim-authorship-button-in-kym-image-uploads
[30] Paul Ramirez, "Traditional Remix vs Digital Remix: A Transforming Conception of Authorship" (*Yale Law and Technology*, 16 February 2010), accessed online 24 September 2013: http://www.yalelawtech.org/ip-in-the-digital-age/traditional-remix-vs-digital-remix-a-transforming-conception-of-authorship/

always some identifiable creator recognized as source. [...] In the pre-

digital age, it would have been absurd to say that T.S. Elliott [*sic*] created

nothing original because he took from other sources, and part of the reason

is that the concept of authorship was so enshrined.[31]

The argument here is that authorship has little value among internet

communities. This hypothesis is supported by the work of doctoral candidate Alex

Leavitt, whose work on social networks such as *Reddit.com* has led him to conclude

that "identifiable authorship is secondary".[32] This article appears to take the same

position that Dennett, Blackmore and Olney maintain: there is no meme authorship,

just levels of "borrowing" that never reach that of plagiarism—at least online. As

suggested by the title, Ramirez does consider the legal, artistic and moral lines of

authorship to be drawn more boldly: "the book […] has a long tradition of valuing

authorship. In our age, books are understood as the formal expression of a person

or group of persons and it is hard to escape that."[33] Online content, however, is

subject to "cultural attitudes", which deem original authorship of internet memes

"irrelevant."[34]

While a provocative series of points that lead to the conclusion that the

medium of memetic creation dictates the significance of its authorship, Ramirez

(and Leavitt)'s observations do not apply to all users of online-generated content.

As evidenced in the earlier *KnowYourMeme.com* efforts to credit originators (if for

no other reason than archival posterity), authorship does matter to some in the

digital age. Episodes of *The Simpsons* are written by rooms full of people, but only

one or two are ever credited, and a specific show runner (an executive producer

role similar to that of a head writer) of a given season is often held responsible by

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[31] Paul Ramirez "Traditional Remix", *Yale Law and Technology.*
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

Simpsons fans for any and all content when they are not happy with a given change or situation in the series.[35] The series' creatives are using memetic tools such as language and forms of humour, but the resulting combination is something entirely new to its fans, who adopt and propagate the fruits of the authors' efforts. In their combination of image, sound, and style, the source of *Simpsons* memes is unmistakable.

What can be concluded in the sense of meme authorship is that—whether in the nineteenth century, pre-digital times, or in the modern era—it is a fluid concept that is at least somewhat co-written by the countless memes that have accumulated in the author, been interbred in that author's mind, and reintroduced in the author's subsequent creations, which will themselves be consumed, interbred and reintroduced by others.

Criticisms of memetics are thus not limited to the scientific side; there are also philosophical aspects at stake, and a thorough exploration of these aspects is crucial to the application of the memetic analyses of screen, audience, and intelligence communities that shape this thesis. A starting point for this discussion can be found in an exploration of the similarities between the emerging science of memetics and the established sociological and linguistic science of semiotics. This parallelism has been observed by several writers (e.g. Derek Gatherer, Erkki Kilpinen, Dan Sperber).[36] In Kilpinen's case, these similarities are a source of criticism and conflict that at best render the study of memetics inferior to semiotics,

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[35] This tension is described in greater detail later in the thesis.

[36] Derek Gatherer, "Macromemetics: Towards a Framework for the Re-Unification of Philosophy" (*A Memetics Compendium*, compiled by Robert Finkelstein, Adelphi, MD: University of Maryland University College, 2008. pp. 655 – 672), print.

Erkki Kilpinen, "Memes Versus Signs: On the Use of Meaning Concepts about Nature and Culture" (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2007), accessed 12 January 2013: http://www.helsinki.fi/science/commens/papers/memetics.pdf>

Dan Sperber, "An objection to the memetic approach to culture (*Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science*, ed. Robert Aunger, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 163–173), print.

and at worst render memetics entirely redundant (and unnecessary) by semiotics. Before examining his position and the close but contentious relationship between the two schools of thought further, it will be prudent to provide a brief overview of the semiotic paradigm and its application to screen and audience studies.

1.6 – Memes and Semiotics – Cousins by Chance, Friends by Choice?

This thesis is largely concerned with the development of *The Simpsons* as a significant cultural institution; such a development has arisen through this work's generation of and resonance with a loyal, committed and vocal fan base. The analysis in this thesis of the methods by which the members of this fan base interact with the text, with its producers and among one another is performed through combining the paradigms of meme theory and fan studies, the details of whose application in this work are the focus of this chapter (and, in the case of fans studies, the next). However, many of the authors of the most significant references supporting the various approaches to the topics in this thesis (for example, John Fiske's studies of television culture and Henry Jenkins's work on transmedia storytelling and fan engagement [which draws from Pierre Lévy's work]) apply a semiotic theoretical framework to their studies. This schema has been usefully applied to screen studies for more than half a century, and its suitability to film, television and audience studies is undeniable.

 This section will explore the sites of convergence and divergence between the fields of semiotics and memetics with a view to establishing the applicability of memetics as a model for the analysis of popular motion picture texts and their audiences. As noted above, similarities between semiotics and memetics have been observed by a number of scholars from different disciplines, whose perspectives will contribute to the discussion below. This similitude, along with the long-accepted validity of semiotic approaches to film, television, and audience/fan

studies, will help to establish the suitability of memetics alongside semiotics as an analytical tool in these areas of study. This section will then draw attention to the sites of difference between the two paradigms and demonstrate ways in which memetics merits its own place in the analytical discourse, particularly within the analysis of the audience-text-producer relationship.

1.7 – Semiotics – An Overview

Semiotics provides a (notoriously complex) theoretical paradigm through which to analyse modes of human communication and exchanges of meaning. This field of studies emerged within the linguistic, cultural and anthropological discourses around and following the turn of the twentieth century, with logician Charles Sanders Peirce and linguist Ferdinand de Saussure producing seminal works on semiotics whose (at times conflicting) distinctions and definitions of the terms and concepts of the field remain firmly entrenched in the discourse. This piece will refrain from retelling the history of the field, as this has been executed more efficiently by the contemporary semioticians and screen theorists whose works will contribute directly to this chapter. The intention in this chapter is instead to provide a brief survey of the key ideas as they are applied to the relevant topics to this thesis, outlined above.

As a field focused on means and modes of communication, semiotics has a wide applicability; it transcends its initial linguistic applications and moves into almost any field of human-interaction study. Semiotics is rooted in the concept of *signs* (which are explored in depth shortly), the sites on which the locus of meaning-exchange is formed. Such a concept is tremendously useful in the examination of the methods by which a given motion picture audience interprets meaning from (and applies meaning to) texts, the process by which texts are formed and communicated, and the ways in which audiences use the signs from the texts to

communicate both with one another and with the producers of the texts. The meanings themselves—those which are encoded in the sign, from the perspectives of both the communicator and the recipient—are encoded entirely and inextricably within their cultural context. This is the structuralist (or social constructionist) approach that is intrinsically intertwined with the semiotic analytical tool; a sign itself has no inherent meaning, and any given meaning that one can express or interpret is relative to all other meanings—its very existence relies entirely upon its differences from all other meanings.[37]

These same structuralist semiotic conditions form the basis of Julia Kristeva's notions of intertextuality, in which a given text necessarily (consciously or unconsciously) draws upon other texts in its formation. (Intertextuality is a key aspect of Jonathan Gray's work *Watching with The Simpsons*, a monograph which contributes significantly to the discourse surrounding *The Simpsons* in its investigation of audience engagement with the series. While *Watching with The Simpsons* does not contribute directly to this thesis, Gray's writing on the series and on fandom has helped both to shape the existing discourse on the show and illuminate the gaps that remain to be filled.)

These conditions—and intertextuality itself—are also key elements of meme theory; as revealed in the previous section, memes originate as the result of a synthesis of one or more other memes. One excellent example of a collaborative *Simpsons* meme is Homer's famous utterance of annoyance or defeat: "D'oh!" The word was invented by Dan Castellaneta when the show was still a simple series of shorts on *The Tracey Ullman Show* (1987 – 1990). It was scripted as "annoyed grunt", and Castellaneta, inspired by James Finlayson's characters' in the *Laurel and Hardy* films of the 1920s-1930s, shortened the comedian's well-known

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[37] Ellen Seiter, "Semiotics, Structuralism, and Television" (*Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism, 2nd Ed.* Robert C. Allen, Ed. London: Routledge, 1992), print, 32.

alternative utterance for "damn" to Homer's now well-known "D'oh!"[38] Thanks to the show's enormous popularity and sustainability, the utterance spread with such voracity through the English-speaking population that it was included for the first time in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* in 1998.[39]

The meme itself ("D'oh!") was an invention by Castellaneta, but was derived from the memes existing already in his brain—in particular, its origins lay in an earlier successful meme. Its own success, which can be credited both to its heavy repetition on the widely accessible medium of television and its short, simple, easily imitable, widely applicable characteristics, is such that it has become part of everyday English usage. It demonstrates variation (Castellaneta's adaptation of Finlayson's existing, well-known utterance, along with the variations on the word's spelling), selection (it was catchy, easy to remember, and associated with and repeated on a widely-appealing series), and retention (its monosyllabic nature makes it difficult to lose its essence)—it meets the three criteria required to view it as a (successful) replicator.[40] It is by such methods that memes emerging from and being absorbed and reinterpreted by *The Simpsons* will be examined in the thesis. These works have attained demonstrable cultural significance, and the application of meme theory will help to establish the ways in which this phenomenon is manifest.

A meme does not have any kind of inherent value; even harmful memes can be good memes as long as they are effective replicators, and innocuous memes can be bad memes if they do not appeal to a wide enough group. And, of course,

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[38] Dan Castellaneta, interview with Jenni Matz, *Archive of American Television* (*EmmyTVLegends.org*, 20 July 2010), first accessed 11 December 2011: http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/dan-castellaneta
[39] Blair Shewchuk, "Doh! A Dictionary Update" (*CBC News Online*, 17 July 2001), accessed 12 October 2011: http://www.cbc.ca/news/indepth/words/doh_oed.html
[40] While the Oxford English Dictionary employs the spelling "Doh", this essay and the thesis itself will employ the alternate "D'oh!", favoured by the authors and publishers of the official *The Simpsons* literature.

the more culturally relevant a meme is, the better it will stand out in the meme pool, and the better its odds of successful replication.

It would appear, then, that some of the fundamental rules of semiotics and the related structuralist perspective not only apply to meme theory, but are in fact essential to the latter field. This revelation serves as an appropriate departure point from which to launch the deeper discussion on the relationship between these two schools of thought, beginning with the fundamental unit of semiotics that is analogous to that of memetics (the meme): the sign.

1.8 – Signs

The identification of the essential elements of the *sign* is the point at which Saussure and Peirce first diverge. While most semioticians included in this chapter consider and incorporate both Peircean and Saussurean semiotics when forming their arguments (sometimes Saussurean semiotics is distinguished as "semiology" as this was the author's initial term for his school of thought), all lean closer to one approach than the other; Peirce views the sign as a three-fold process and Saussure identifies only one type of sign with two basic elements—a significant enough difference to inspire each semiotician to consider both possibilities but align his or her perspective primarily with only one position.[41] A closer look at the sign will elucidate these distinctions and their relationship to modern semiotics and meme theory.

Both memetics and semiotics are concerned with units of culture and meaning. As the previous chapter on memetics reveals, the meme is most easily defined as a unit of culture that propagates through human imitation. It is considered the smallest, most basic unit of description within the memetic paradigm, and acts as the most fundamental building block, which can flourish if resonant—

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[41] Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2002) print, 6.

and, when combined with one or more discrete memes, has the potential to factor into memeplexes. Cultural institutions like *The Simpsons* would be regarded as memeplexes, as they are composed of countless memes; the characters and their characteristics, the linguistic systems employed in its production, reception and analysis (written, verbal, visual), and the unique colour palette are all examples of the smaller memes (and memeplexes) comprising the series as it is known.

Memeplexes are analogous to Saussure's semiotic *system of signs*, in which cultural meanings (signifieds) are expressed through specific signifiers to form a dynamic set of related signs.[42] These systems are shaped and used by members of the culture collectively (and only collectively) responsible for their creation and continued implementation. Before exploring systems of signs further, however, it is crucial first to define the terms that comprise them.

Saussure would contend that the sign, the most basic unit of meaning in the field of semiotics, in its very essence includes a signifier (its own physical expression) and the signified (that which it represents). The appearance of the signifier is arbitrary in this system; it does not in any outward aspect represent the sign in a physical way. A simple (albeit not strictly linguistic, which is the field of study to which Saussure specifically applies his analyses) example of a Saussurean sign would be the superscripted expression of exponents in mathematics. The meaning and process of exponents cannot be intuited based on appearance alone; the relationship between the expression and its meaning must be learned.

Peirce developed a model that proposes three elements to each sign: the representamen (analogous to Saussure's signifier), the interpretant (analogous to the signified; it is the sense or understanding made from the representamen), and the object (the concept to which the representamen and interpretant refer).[43] He

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[42] Ferdinand de Saussure, quoted in Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1979), print, 14. Emphasis added.
[43] Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics*, 32 – 33.

also presented three types of sign: the symbol, the index, and the icon.[44] The type of sign Saussure describes is only one possibility: the symbolic sign (though Daniel Chandler observes Saussure's avoidance of the use of the term "symbol").[45] The iconic sign features a signifier that formally resembles its signifier but does not require a physical connection to or presence of that which it represents. For example, a police sketch artist can render a likeness of a suspect without ever having him- or herself seen the individual. The indexical sign features a requirement of a physical connection to the signified: a specific thumbprint can only have been left by an individual with the unique thumb that made it. The thumbprint is an indexical sign of an identifiable individual's interaction with a particular object. The presence of the signifier in this case necessarily represents the presence of the signified, which is not the case for either the symbolic or iconic signs.

Contemporary semiotician Umberto Eco opposes the tendency he observes in semiotics to pit one approach against another.[46] It is, however, observable that Peirce's model has a wider applicability than Saussure's. Chandler notes that in his inclusion of the interpretant, Peirce's triadic model implies the role of at least one interpreter, which renders the Peircean model more applicable than Saussure's to fields beyond linguistics.[47] In fact, Chandler observes that it is this feature that makes the model particularly appealing to those involved in the study of media and communication "who stress the importance of the active process of interpretation, and thus reject the equation of 'content' and meaning."[48] This active process of interpretation forms the foundation of several of the audience studies acting as primary texts for this thesis.

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[44] Ellen Seiter, "Semiotics, Structuralism, and Television", *Channels of Discourse Reassembled*, 35.
[45] Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics*, 20.
[46] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 8.
[47] Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics*, 34 – 35.
[48] Ibid., 35.

Chandler also recognises that Peirce's inclusion of the object that is referred to in the expression of the representamen and the sense made thereof in the interpretant, Peirce allows for the concept of an 'objective reality'; for Saussure, the abstract nature of the formation of signifiers essentially disallows the notion of an objective reality.[49] With its more broad applicability, Peirce's model dominates semiotic analyses in the social sciences; while it may not be "pitted against" Saussure's model as Eco observed, the two models do feature some level of incompatibility that prevent them from being applied simultaneously; Erkki Kilpinen goes as far as to dub Perice's triadic model as "general semiotics".[50]

From Kilpinen's perspective, those responsible for early developments in meme theory ignored (or were unaware of or unfamiliar with) the extensive field of semiotics. Kilpinen claims the work they were doing with meme theory was already being done in Thomas Sebeok's efforts to use semiotics to bridge the discursive gap between studies of human culture and those of human nature.[51] In fact, the inaugural study undertaken by Sebeok (et al) and cited here by Kilpinen post-dates Dawkins's creation of the notion of memes by approximately ten years, but does pre-date the bulk of the seminal works serving to establish a science of memetics (which is largely credited to Daniel C. Dennett and Susan Blackmore).

Kilpinen's primary issue in his article "Memes Versus Signs: On the Use of Meaning Concepts About Nature and Culture" is that despite the undeniable similarities between semiotics and memetics, few memeticists have acknowledged the older, more firmly established approach. His hypothesis is that if Peirce was available for comment, he would consider the meme to be a reiterative reduction of his approach to the sign. For Kilpinen, that reiteration is missing the component in

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[49] Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics*, 34, 60, 27.
[50] Erkki Kilpinen, "Memes Versus Signs", 11.
[51] Ibid., 5.

which the sign shares a relationship with its object (though he acknowledges that it does account for the interpretant, which Saussurean semiotics does not).[52]

1.9 – Semiotics and Screen Studies

If the Peircean model does tend to emerge more commonly in studies of culture, screen and audience (particularly regarding the last, as the process of meaning-making is key in examinations of active spectatorship), it was in fact the Saussurean model was perhaps most famously applied to film studies by the scholar Christian Metz.[53] In "Le cinema: langue ou langage?" Metz explores the concept of film language through semiotic and aesthetic approaches. He is occupied by finding film's place along the linguistic spectrum between "langue" (a structured tongue like French or English) and "langage" (a much broader term which, paraphrasing Saussure, Metz describes as the "sum of language and speech"; this concept could be described as a larger and more incorporative communication system).[54] Returning repeatedly to the example of the distinction between Soviet Montage and classical editing styles (among many topics), and putting film's linguistic properties through a rigorous semiological analysis, Metz reaches the conclusion that because there is no single, rigid language of film (narrative) with a consistent and universal set of rules that can be followed to communicate specific meanings, film cannot be considered a "langue".[55] Thus, for Metz, film is a "langage"—still a Saussurean sign system that communicates meaning between producer and spectator, and one that

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[52] Ibid., 7.
[53] Christian Metz, "Le cinéma: langue ou langage?" (*Communications*. Volume 4, Issue 4, 1964), print, 52 – 90.
[54] Ibid., 58; translations mine.
[55] While it can be argued that Hollywood continuity style (HCS) does dominate some aspects of film language, there are many films that can and do convey meaning to spectators without following HCS standards.

features structured aspects and elements, but not one that possesses an overarching solid and universally recognised structure, as natural language does.[56]

Following from Metz's seminal work, semiotics evolved along this branch and ultimately became as conventional an approach to film studies as psychoanalysis. However, in the 1980s, a new branch of film theory known as cognitivism emerged in the works of several noted film scholars—David Bordwell among them.[57] The adherers to this school of thought reject the most common structuralist contemporary approaches to film theory (Marxism, psychoanalysis and semiotics) and return to a somewhat humanist perspective, focusing on spectator meaning-making through the spectator's internal mental processes, "such as recognition, comprehension, inference-making, interpretation, judgment, memory, and imagination. […] [W]e must postulate such entities as perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, desires, intentions, plans, skills, and feelings."[58]

In the foundations laid by the European cognitivists (whose approach he distinguishes from Bordwell's North American school through the Europeans' engagement with and restructuring of early film semiotics), film semiotician Warren Buckland observes an opportunity to bridge the gaps between semiotic film theory and cognitivist film theory.[59] He applies both Metz's early work on film semiotics and his later, more developed model of a film system from *Language and Cinema* to formulate the "specificity" of cinema, whose establishment Buckland cites is necessary to semiotic theorisation of film.[60] He goes on to acknowledge that David

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[56] Metz adheres firmly to the idea that because producers select the images that the audience will see (and thus that film audiences cannot choose their images the way readers of literature can), the denotative aspects of film's "*langage*" take precedent over connotative ones. Thus, Metz would be more likely to see the formation of meaning as being made at the producer's discretion, and would perhaps not acknowledge the audience's active role as the parent sentence to this note might imply.

[57] David Bordwell, "A Case for Cognitivism" (*Iris.* No.9, Spring 1999), print, 11-40.

[58] Ibid., 13.

[59] Warren S. Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), print, 2 - 4.

[60] Ibid., 6.
   Metz devised two models of cinematic language, the first of which proposes a finite set of eight possibilities for cinematic sequences which filmmakers access to convey meaning to

Bordwell and his cognitivist colleagues are justified in their charge that film semioticians tend to assign the spectator role as a passive one that is acted upon but not acted in, and this creates a space of dialogue in which the "need to maintain a balance between cultural constraints, such as language and other semiotic systems of human culture, and broader ecological constraints" can be met.[61] A spectator's cognitive activities do not take place in a cultural vacuum; nor do a film's meaningful, highly-structured combination of images and sounds reach an audience composed of completely passive automatons.

It is worth mentioning here that Buckland is (justifiably, given Metz's role in establishing screen semiotics) using Metz's perspective to establish the position of semiotic film theory on the position of the spectator. Metz's neglect of the spectator's active role is understandable given that he applied a Saussurean framework, which, as established earlier in this piece, does not account specifically for the process of interpretation. Perhaps the application of a Peircean approach to forming a paradigm of cinematic language would offer cognitivists a more palatable semiotic film theory. In any case, if a tendency to reduce the observer's participation in his or her own experience of film spectatorship to nearly nil is a hallmark of semiotic film theory, then this is another element that semiotics and meme theory are perceived to have in common; as discussed above, the lack of autonomy perceived in memetics is a prominent source of doubt and criticism of the theory.

Buckland's work is particularly useful in exposing the void in semiotic film theory in which the active role of the viewer falls; it is one that meme theory can begin to fill while continuing to account for the other elements present in a semiotic

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the spectator ("*la grande syntagmatique*"). In the latter, Metz outlines five traits which—only when all are present—form the underlying system of film language. (Buckland 8) Buckland argues that *la grande syntagmatique* model, which Metz developed after he wrote "Le Cinéma: Langue ou langage?", Metz erroneously equates narrative with the specificity of cinema. (Warren S. Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, 13).

[61] Ibid., 15.

framework. If Metz's cinematic language (or cinematic language system, or cinematic memeplex) is founded upon specific, imitable traits that are common to every film, then this, like all other language systems, is developed and learned through a form of cultural heredity.[62] While Metz's cinematic language developed in order to explain how filmmakers conveyed textual meaning to the audience (often following a given filmmaking technique or custom), it did not account for the ways in which the audience might communicate about the text with one another—or, in the case of *The Simpsons*, with the producers of the texts themselves.

The question of the active role of the spectator in textual interpretation as it relates to the modern screen is perhaps most explicitly posed—and most significantly answered—by cultural and media scholar John Fiske (and, later, in conjunction with his colleague and collaborator John Hartley). His contributions to the discussions in this thesis are considerable in both volume and value, particularly as he approaches the issue from a semiological perspective, and his innovative notion of the "semiotic democracy" in which spectators engage inspired a shift in the ways audiences are perceived.[63] While the idea of active spectatorship had long since been initiated in the media studies discourse, Fiske was among the first to acknowledge and explore in depth the spectator's active role in contextual meaning-making upon his or her exposure to a given text, and to examine what makes some texts more significant to some spectators.

1.10 – Audience Analysis: Means, Memes, and Meaning

One of John Fiske's most prominent champions today is media scholar Henry Jenkins, whose *oeuvre*, to reiterate, is also integral to this thesis. Jenkins's perspectives on fan engagement, spreadable media and network involvement

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[62] Susan Blackmore, "Imitation and the Definition of a Meme". *A Memetics Compendium* 177 – 178.
[63] John Fiske, *Television Culture*, London: Routledge, 1987, print, 83.

observably bear Fiske's influence; Jenkins has taken Fiske's assertion of audience agency and participation in media consumption and has expanded it to encompass an entire participatory culture constructed around media texts.

Jenkins has written two versions of a piece called "Why Fiske Still Matters": one that appeared in the online journal of television and media studies, *Flow*, and another that appeared as a type of foreword in the 2011 (second) edition of Fiske's *Reading the Popular*.[64] The former is a rebuttal of Aniko Bodroghkozy's own *Flow* piece from the previous issue of the journal, titled "Media Studies for the Hell of It?: Second Thoughts on McChesney and Fiske".[65] In her piece, Bodroghkozy reconsiders her philosophical (and political, in the context of the climate she describes at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Department of Communication Arts at the beginning of the 1990s) allegiance to John Fiske—in particular to his (and, as a result, her) academic primacy of bottom-up audience resistance tactics in the dominant-subordinate relationship of media production and media consumption. She looks instead to media academic, media reformist and former Wisconsin-Madison scholar Robert McChesney's call to activism, conceding that "regardless of what we do in our scholarship, if we consider ourselves students and teachers of media and television but are not on some level involved in media reform, we're doing media studies 'for the hell of it.'"[66]

Jenkins's first version of "Why Fiske Still Matters" was published on *FlowTV.org* on 10 June 2005. He staunchly defends Fiske's relevance in media studies, particularly now that "all of those resistant subcultures, textual poachers, and active audiences […] [are] out in full force on the web. The internet has made visible the invisible work of audiences. Consumers have become key participants in

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[64] Henry Jenkins, "Why Fiske Still Matters" (*Reading the Popular*, John Fiske, 1989, New York: Routledge, 2011), print, xii – xxxviii.
[65] Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Media Studies for the Hell of It?: Second Thoughts on McChesney and Fiske" (*Flow* 2 no. 6, 2005), accessed 4 June 2014: http://flowtv.org/2005/05/media-studies-for-the-hell-of-it-second-thoughts-on-mcchesney-and-fiske/
[66] Ibid.

media culture; the debate now centres on the terms of their participation, not whether spectatorship is active or passive."[67] Jenkins does not see McChesney and Fiske's respective perspectives as being in conflict with one another, but rather as illuminating different aspects of the power struggle between media producers and their audiences: "McChesney might have provided a clearer picture of what we were fighting against (that's debatable), but Fiske always gave us a much more potent vision of what we were fighting for."[68]

Jenkins has continues this fight for grassroots engagement in the works *Textual Poachers* and the later *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*; these texts have made enormous impacts on and shaped the contemporary field of audience—and, most pertinently, fan—cultural study. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (co-authored with Sam Ford and Joshua Green) provides insight to the influence of new technology (highlighting online platforms) on the media producer/media consumer dynamic. Jenkins has not only continued to see value in engaged media fandom, but he also sees the knowledge communities these fans form as the vehicles through which fans' greatest power and agency emerge.

Jenkins's work, which contributes much to this thesis and which is discussed in explicit detail throughout this chapter, the next, and the thesis as a whole, draws from a number of different authors and approaches in his methods of audience analysis. Notably, the concept of "knowledge communities" (along with the "collective intelligence" and "collective knowledge" that empower them) that helps to form the basis of Jenkins's modern fan stems from work by academic philosopher Pierre Lévy.

Lévy himself approaches his subject, online knowledge communities, from a semiotic perspective, distinguishing the spaces of human interaction (Earth,

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[67] Henry Jenkins, "Why Fiske Still Matters" (*Flow* 2 no. 6, 2005), accessed 04 June 2014: http://flowtv.org/2005/06/why-fiske-still-matters/
[68] Ibid.

Territory, Market or Commodity, and Knowledge) through the signs that drive them and the identities bred therein. While the common trappings of one's societal position are determined by the former three spaces (one's name, one's hierarchical position and geographic location, one's income, etc.), the fourth, Knowledge, is a transcendent sphere of interaction in which individuals can connect with one another free of their socially-determined, physical existences. This utopian space is made much more attainable by the emergence of the internet, through which dynamic social bonds are forged based on knowledge alone; these are formed around the acts of sharing and exchanging knowledge and ideas.[69]

However, some traces of the other spaces do enter into online knowledge communities. Territory (as in "turf"), for instance, does influence the largest and most well-known existing *Simpsons* fan knowledge community *NoHomers.net*; the site's administrators can and do ban individual users when they are in breach of the site's rules. The rules are in place to ensure the least-offensive experience to most users, but the phrasing of part of the message board's first rule is an inarguably territorial one: "And this isn't a place for 'free speech'-- you can say what you want to an extent that is allowed by the owner of this privately-owned message board."[70]

This phrase is not included in this thesis with the intention of shaming the administrators of *NoHomers*; as the largest *Simpsons* knowledge community online, the administrators are obviously offering their community members a positive experience. Also, this type of rule is common for large knowledge-sharing forums, especially fan forums that must abide by copyright laws; *NoHomers* owner Eric Wirtanen's original *Simpsons* fansite, *Evergreen Terrace*, was shut down by 20th Century Fox in 2002. Just before he lost the site permanently, Wirtanen collaborated with Tino Persico and Jonah Flynn to establish the *No Homers Club*

[69] Pierre Lévy, trans. Robert Bononno, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 1997), print.
[70] No author, "The Rules of the Board (follow them, okay?)" (*NoHomers.net*, The No Homers Club, last updated November 2013), last accessed 21 September 2015: http://www.nohomers.net/faq.php?faq=nhc

forum in 2001. The new site is now co-owned by Wirtanen and another developer

named Jacob Burch, and they are slowly allowing the reintroduction of

downloadable *Simpsons* content, although they are much more encouraging of fan

impressions of *Simpsons* content.[71] A discussion of their highly selective range of

Simpsons-related imagery (in the context of their direct availability to the members

of *NoHomers*) follows in the "**A *Simpsons* Meme for Better: [:joke:]**" at the outset

of **Chapter 2**" section of Chapter 2.

1.11 – The Popular Evolution of the "Meme" Meme

Being a successful meme itself (i.e. one which has demonstrated the variation-

selection-retention process throughout its successful propagation), the notion of

memes has taken great hold on the internet. While the theory described throughout

this section hitherto is a matter of great interest, individual, popular, largely internet-

based memes are the ones that received the most widespread attention in 2015.

Author and scholar Limor Shifman has done considerable academic work in this

area, and her work assists this thesis in drawing meme theory from its early

development into the modern day. As her work focuses specifically on internet

memes, it is particularly relevant to the parts of this thesis that examine how

urtextual content becomes memetic, and in determining how fans are culling, co-

authoring and propagating *Simpsons*-related content using the World Wide Web.

A quick look at internet memes will be necessary in order to differentiate

them as a distinct type of meme; online *Simpsons* memes exchanged among fans

sometimes (but not always) follow the common models of other internet memes.

These are videos or video clips, images (often "image macros", in which an author

has applied text on a still digital image), communication snippets, activities, and

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[71] No author, "Information – About This Website," (*NoHomers.net*, The No Homers Club,
n.d), last accessed 17 August 2012: http://www.nohomers.net/content/info/website/

concepts that spread through an array of net-based social media and social

networks, some of which are themselves devoted almost entirely to internet culture.

One such social network is *4chan.org*, which is officially an imageboard (a

site for posting and sharing images) but which is also largely a text-based forum.

The roots of the internet's most popular memes are frequently found on the "/b/" (or

"Random") page of this site. One hugely successful example, "Rickrolling", involves

a link to what is presented under pretence as a video or web page relevant to a

given topic described by a forum or social network poster (or sender of an email,

social network message or instant message). When the unsuspecting reader or

recipient clicks the link, he or she is actually taken to the completely unrelated video

of Rick Astley's 1987 single "Never Gonna Give You Up". This prank originated on

a *4Chan* thread in May 2007 and spread quickly through other social media.[72]

Eventually, Rickrolling left the confines of the internet and was practised in live

settings and through other media, such as local radio and, eventually, the famed

Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.[73]

This is but one example of an internet meme. There are countless

examples of others which are well documented by sites devoted entirely to the

archival of internet memes (*KnowYourMeme.com* and *Memebase.com* are notable

examples. The former includes in-depth analyses of the origins, spread and

popular lifespan of each meme documented, as well as providing comprehensive

lists of related memes, while the latter performs some of the same duties while also

providing users with the tools to generate new content for familiar templates). New

memes emerge and older memes die very quickly, but some are so successful that

websites dedicated exclusively to those memes emerge; *FailBlog.org* and

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[72] User name "Jamie Dubs", "Rickroll" (*KnowYourMeme.com*, c. 2009), first accessed 14 July 2011: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rickroll
[73] Christopher Poole, "The Case for Anonymity Online" (*TED Talks.* February 2010 [filmed], June 2010 [posted]), first accessed 10 April 2011: http://www.ted.com/talks/christopher_m00t_poole_the_case_for_anonymity_online.html>
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iCanHasCheezburger.com (the latter is also known as "Lolcats") are excellent examples of this variety of meme.

The context and understanding of meme theory most relevant to the thesis lies at the intersection of the academic interpretation of memes and the popular interpretation that reigns on the internet. The devoted academic meme theorists, who hope to establish meme theory's scientific legitimacy, tend to focus their analytical efforts upon the process of meme-spreading while internet users are preoccupied almost entirely with the content (and, for some, the origins) of the memes themselves. Because the case study presented in this thesis is a work that is enormously popular, critically celebrated and has a strong memetic presence online, both the academic and popular perspectives must be employed in order to establish a complete understanding of the relationships among creators, audience and production. The case study of *The Simpsons* is centred in part upon the reciprocal nature of the relationship between audience and creator, which is established both in the creatives' finished work and in the feedback from the audience (which may come directly or indirectly).

Simpsons-specific memes originate in the writing room, are expressed through the show itself, and are absorbed by the audience. If they are to be successful, these memes will then need to be propagated by the audience and perceived by a new set of brains in order to proliferate. (The process contributing to this phenomenon—i.e. why audience members "choose" particular memes, and how they use and proliferate them—will be examined in the section **Memes, Virality, Humour, and *The Simpsons*** below.)

Limor Shifman distinguishes internet memes from the broader cultural, non-web-based memes discussed above. In a 2014 interview with Henry Jenkins, Shifman states that her definition of internet memes

departs from Dawkins' conception in at least one fundamental way: instead

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of depicting the meme as a single cultural unit that has propagated well, I treat memes as groups of content units. My shift from a singular to a plural account of memes derives from the new ways in which they are experienced in the digital age. […] [M]emes are now present in the public sphere not as sporadic entities but as enormous groups of texts and images.[74]

This particular definition and application of memes is expressed as a response not only to traditional academic meme theorists who examine the idea and phenomenon of the meme, but also directly to Jenkins's own vocal opposition to the value of memetics as a hypothesis of human behaviour—and to his rejection of the memetic paradigm due to its lack of accounting for human agency. It seems perfectly obvious that human agency has much more to do with meme propagation than some traditional meme theorists are willing to concede.

In *Memes in Digital Culture*, Shifman notes, when it comes to analysing internet memes, a revision of memetics is necessary in order to accommodate several new phenomena and the "new environment" associated therewith.[75] She observes that with the introduction of what is known colloquially as "Web 2.0", those operating in the new online environment (i.e. the collaborative, user-driven internet marked by the development of social networks, blog sites, video streaming sites with user-generated content; it marks the internet's evolution from the turn-of-the-century commercially-focused web) are doing so using a "hypermemetic logic" in which they are aware of the presence and the magnitude of the "meme-scape" that surrounds them. She also observes and acknowledges the role of the meme creator or author, as with internet memes, the author is him- or herself (at times overtly) central to the content of that meme. While in this latter case she is referring almost exclusively to original content uploaded by users (e.g. the "Numa Numa"

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[74] Henry Jenkins, "A Meme is a Terrible Thing to Waste: An Interview with Limor Shifman (Part One)."
[75] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), print, 22.

dancing boy), this point does hold some validity in upcoming discussions on
Simpsons-related memes proliferated by fans.

Devoting the fourth chapter of *Memes in Digital Culture* to a re-examination
of memetics to account for the digital boom, Shifman offers alternative methods to
the memetics presented by the "mentalist- and behaviour-driven schools" and the
"inclusive memetic approach", categories by which she classifies the meme theories
that are explored earlier in this chapter.[76] She includes authors like Dawkins and
Dennett among the proponents of a mentalist-driven memetics, in which memes are
complex ideas that proliferate via meme vehicles (what semioticians might call
'signifiers'. Or, in the genetics analogy, the meme is the gene, and the meme
vehicle is the phenotype, or its palpable manifestation). According to Shifman,
behaviour-driven memetics differs in that its proponents do not differentiate between
the meme and the meme vehicle; the expression of the meme and the meme itself
form a single unit: "the meme has no existence outside the events, practices, and
texts in which it appears."[77]

The last category Shifman proposes, the inclusive memetic approach, is one
into which much of the above exploration of memetics would fall; Shifman places
Susan Blackmore firmly in this category. The inclusive memetic approach is the
one that posits that any information that can be proliferated through imitation should
be considered a meme. Shifman feels that a model that allows any imitable
information to be deemed a meme "may lack analytical power, as it assembles very
different elements [i.e. ideas *or* practices] under its large conceptual tent."[78] She
proposes instead, when identifying memes, that the analysis be made using criteria
including "memetic dimensions. Shifman argues that there are three aspects that
are imitable: content, form, and stance), and, as above, a perceptual shift away
from single-unit memes and toward the embracing of memes as "*groups of content*

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[76] Ibid., 37 – 39.
[77] Ibid., 38.
[78] Ibid., 39.

units with common characteristics."[79] These exercises provide observers with the precision tools required to distinguish and examine online memes, and they provide a space in which studies of the special case of online memetics can be undertaken in earnest.

The second criterion (groups of content units with common characteristics) is fairly self-explanatory, but the first one, in which Shifman introduces her "memetic dimensions", requires some unpacking. Content, of course, covers the actual idea or information contained within the meme, and the form is its palpable manifestation. The most complex of these dimensions, stance, indicates the relationship an individual has to the content and form of the meme being authored and/or propagated. Shifman divides stance into three subdimensions: *participation structures*, upon which participation eligibility and engagement methods are determined; *keying*, through which the spirit and style of the communication are established; and *communicative functions*.[80] The last is itself a complex amalgamation of "six fundamental functions of human communication" derived by linguist and literary scholar Roman Jakobson.[81] These are: *referential communication*, which is rooted in the contextual environment; the self-explanatory *emotive*, centred on the speaker; *conative*, centred on the receiver (such as commands); *phatic*, which determines the enactment and duration of the exchange; *metalingual*, which serves to form unanimous codes of communication; and *poetic*, which focuses on the structural aesthetics of the communication.[82] (Jakobson's functions are not subjected to further analysis in this thesis, but they elucidate some of the motivating, facilitating and interactive factors of meme proliferation.)

While content and form are the most obviously memetic components of any given internet meme (they constitute much of that which is recognisable or retained

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[79] Ibid., 39 – 40, emphasis in the original.
[80] Ibid., 40 – 41.
[81] Ibid., 41.
[82] Ibid.

in the propagation process), Shifman contends that stance can also be memetic. An excellent example of the memesis of stance can be found in the subsection "**A *Simpsons* Meme for Better: [:joke:]**" at the outset of **Chapter 2**.

First, however, the element of Shifman's work that is perhaps most crucial to this thesis must be revisited. Her definition of memes provided in the Jenkins interview excerpt quoted above provides a general framework for this discussion and a context for her overall approach to online memetics, but a more nuanced definition is necessary in order to establish her approach as the most suitable one through which this thesis will perform memetic analysis. In light of—and in combination with—her three-dimensional deconstruction, Shifman has put forward a definition of internet memes that (as she implies in the definition above) inverts Richard Dawkins's original definition of memes as a single units and instead views them as groups of content items:

I define an internet meme as:

(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users.[83]

This definition makes space in the memetic discourse not only for different types of internet memes (videos, still-image photographs and image macros, text-based memes, linguistic memes, and gif images, to name just a few), but it also acknowledges the inherently aggregate nature of internet memes, even when they are inspired by or extracted from static, existing texts like clips or still images from episodes of *The Simpsons*. Shifman's definition has, therefore, filled a significant gap between traditional academic meme theory and its more popular interpretation

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[83] Ibid.

and application; memetic analysis within this thesis originates at this very intersection. Now that the 'what' and the 'how' of memetic proliferation have been established, and brief encounters with the 'who' promise even more thorough upcoming engagement, it is time to turn to the 'why' aspect of memetic proliferation among online fans of *The Simpsons*. This will serve also to expose key contributing factors driving the proliferation of memetic content online generally, with particular applicability to fans of popular productions for the screen.

1.12 – Memes, Virality, Humour, and The Simpsons

In addition to its effectiveness as a paradigmatic tool for textual analysis, memetics also provides an apparatus with which compelling audience/spectatorship analysis can be achieved—particularly in the examination of audience members' online interaction, both with one another and with the text(s). Memetics will be especially useful in addressing precisely how and why the central urtext analysed in this thesis (i.e. *The Simpsons* series) has been able to maintain such a salient cultural presence within their fans' communities (and, in the case of *The Simpsons*, with a vast and loyal international audience). Equally, *The Simpsons* will serve as a powerful example of the suitability of meme theory to the fields of screen and fan studies, demonstrating the high social and economic stakes that memes can represent to producers and audiences alike.

   The Simpsons has inspired its fans to proliferate the content of the works themselves, to generate and share their own textual and visual content based on various elements of the works, and to discuss the works in depth—discussions into which visual or textual elements of the works are customarily incorporated in order to enhance the speaker's point. The forums in which these exchanges typically take place—*alt.tv.simpsons* and *NoHomers.net* for *Simpsons* fans—are subject to thorough analysis throughout this thesis. This section will focus on the memetic

processes driving the fandom of the series, and the subsequent proliferation of *Simpsons* content that continues to emerge and to be shared online.

To begin with a statement of the obvious, *The Simpsons* is popular because it is funny. However, this is not yet a sufficient or thorough enough explanation as to why this particular show has such a large, diverse, actively engaged, and vocal audience. For an animated series to remain profitable for its producers for twenty-five years, it must be providing its audience with something that its short-lived contemporaries did not. Edward J. Fink takes on the enormous task of rooting out the basis of this far-reaching appeal in his 2013 article "Writing *The Simpsons*: A Case Study of Comic Theory". He examines the constitutional elements of the series in order to discover exactly what has contributed to its popularity and longevity among fans. He hypothesises that it is the humour in the writing—manifested in its effective satire, well-structured visual and textual gags, and inside jokes, to name a few—that has kept audiences engaged throughout its twenty-four-year run (at the time of his writing), and he provides a thorough analysis of the series through the paradigm(s) of comic theory. Fink states, "the show's writers incorporate every element of comedy in one way or another in every episode", recognising that some of these incorporations may even be performed subconsciously.[84]

It is important at this point to acknowledge that Fink is approaching his analysis from an Anglophonic perspective, and that the subject of his analysis is the original, English-language version of the series. Chiara Ferrari's meticulously researched article "Dubbing *The Simpsons*: Or How Groundskeeper Willie Lost His Kilt in Sardinia" explores the many visual and auditory ways in which the series is adapted in order to appeal to other cultures (and in non-English languages)—and the ways in which the series' inherent or unchangeable aspects have inspired

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[84] Edward J. Fink, "Writing *The Simpsons*: A Case Study of Comic Theory" (*Journal of Film and Video* 65. 1-2. Spring/Summer [2013]: pp. 43 – 55), print, 43 – 44.

phlegmatic responses in new markets. Drawing on work by Duncan Stewart Beard,

Ferrari establishes that, while the series is rooted largely in satirising American

culture, it "is popular at home for its local satiric elements and successful abroad for

the global themes and stereotypes it presents."[85] However, Ferrari adds that part of

this global appeal is also a result of the show's adaptability with respect to local and

international markets; the series lends itself well (and its American creators are

typically involved in developing) the "adaptations that have 'indigenized' the text for

international audiences."[86]

Ferrari employs the example of *I Simpson*, the Italian-language version of

the series which, while Springfield is still located in America, engages the use of

regional Italian accents (simultaneously exploiting the use of indigenous

stereotypes) to convey the personalities of the characters—particularly the

secondary characters). Ferrari challenges the notion that American cultural

products prevail on a global scale because of a worldwide American cultural

hegemony, positing instead that the regional adaptations (and adaptability) of these

products are what enable them to succeed internationally; the hard work of those re-

tooling *The Simpsons* for consumption in non-American cultures rewards producers

and audiences alike. Thus, Fink's analysis is most usefully contextualised within the

Anglophone, American version of the show, as this theory of humour (though

partially derived from Austrian/Swiss psychoanalysis) would not necessarily apply to

international markets. Because this thesis also approaches its subjects (largely *The

Simpsons*, its most prominent fansites, and its most prolific memes) from an

Anglophone- and American-based perspective, Fink's work contributes much insight

hereto.

Fink performs the first part of his investigation by analysing a single

Simpsons episode through the multiple types of humour that comic theory

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[85] Chiara Ferrari, "Dubbing *The Simpsons*: Or How Groundskeeper Willie Lost His Kilt in Sardinia" (*Journal of Film and Video*, 61.2 [2009], pp. 19 – 21), 20.
[86] Ibid.*,* 21.

comprises. These types of humour, according to Fink's analysis, include **high and low comedy**, followed by the prevailing "three broad theories" of comedy: **superiority theory** (which includes meta-textual, contextual, dialogic, aggressive and violent, and action elements), **psychoanalytic or relief theory** (which includes elements of guilt, discomfort, no lasting harm, and happy ending), and **incongruity theory** (which comprises fish-out-of-water, unexpected-surprise, self-reflexive, illogical, absurd, exaggeration, logically-extreme, and stereotyping elements).[87]

Fink also points to the structural elements of comedy as a paradigm to which *Simpsons* writers adhere consistently in each episode. The structure of comedy can comprise such elements as setup and payoff, three-act structural, dialogic, rule-of-threes, running gag, action, double-whammy, innuendo and double-entendre, one-liner and put-down, and sight-gag aspects, in varying combinations.[88] In his assiduous dissection of a single *Simpsons* episode (Season 16's "There's Something About Marrying"), Fink presents a compelling case that the series not only follows the lines of every one of the dominant modes of comic theory as above, but that the series is also meticulously constructed to meet all the codes of comic structure. It is clear from Fink's breakdown of the prevailing theories that it is not necessary for each and every aspect of either comic structure or comic theory to be reflected or presented in a given text; with the presence of a mere one or some of the elements, a text will have enough appeal to the sense(s) of humour of at least one given demographic.

Given that no above-named comic element is in conflict with another (and that none relies on the presence or absence of another in order to be understood or perceived as funny), it is thus theoretically possible that a given text could adhere to or incorporate all of them—exactly as Fink observes in *The Simpsons*. It is in precisely this characteristic that *The Simpsons*'s mass appeal lies; the series is not

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[87] Edward J. Fink, "Writing *The Simpsons*", *Journal of Film and Video*, 45 – 51.
[88] Ibid., 51 – 53.

only funny to some—for instance, those to whom high-brow comedy appeals, or those to whom low-brow comedy appeals. By incorporating every element from every type of comedy, and in its flawless comedic structural composition, *The Simpsons* can—both theoretically and practically—appeal to everyone.

Fink's research and analysis helps to establish precisely how and why humour is the key characteristic that allowed *The Simpsons* to achieve and maintain enormous global popularity as a series, but the question of how this translates to and manifests as online fandom and urtextual meme-sharing remains.

1.13 – Humour and Memes

As has been outlined in the **Introduction** and is explored further in this thesis, *The Simpsons* and online knowledge communities emerged simultaneously at the end of the 1980s; *The Simpsons* quickly gained a dedicated and sizeable online knowledge community of its own in *alt.tv.simpsons*. It thus stands to reason that this and similar fan communities would engage with the texts—and, importantly, with one another—because they could; the internet was simply a new (and, for some, convenient) method by which fans could express criticism, profess loyalty, pick arguments, share images (eventually), and register disappointment about the objects of their fandom.

In essence, the fact that the internet did and continues to provide an available (and now an easily accessible) platform on which to exchange *Simpsons* content only contributes a partial explanation for that very exchange; it explains the means, but it does not explain the memes.

As noted above, in *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman examines the elements that make content memetic, particularly on the internet, and, even more specifically, in internet-based video content. While *Simpsons*-related content shared by users on sites such as *NoHomers* tends to be text-based and still-image

rather than video, users on YouTube and other user-generated video streaming

sites upload well-known and popular clips.[89] To establish the boundary that

distinguishes viral content and practice from memetic content and practice, Shifman

borrows from communication and culture theorist James Carey, citing the important

conceptual distinction in communication forms: communication as transmission, and

communication as ritual.[90] Shifman characterises the former as being concerned

with the conveyance of information; communication as transmission is focused

entirely on spreading the content itself. This is the form of communication that

propels viral practice, as such content is spread in order to distribute precisely the

information contained within the video, image, article, or given medium. For

example, at the end of 2015 a video of people recording their cats' terrified reactions

to cucumbers, which had been placed in the cats' vicinities undetected, went viral.

The images of the cats reacting to the cucumbers constitute the entirety of the

information that each propagator wished to convey to her or his recipients.

Conversely, communication as ritual is defined

not as the act of imparting information but as the construction and

representation of shared beliefs. It highlights the sharedness of values,

symbols, and cultural sensibilities that embody what people see as their

communities. According to this view, the 'message' in communication is not

a unit whose reach and effect are easily traceable, but an ongoing process in

which identities and senses of belonging are continually constructed.[91]

Shifman points out that the fledgling field of modern meme theory places memetic

practice within the realm of communication as ritual. Much of what is illustrated in

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[89] Such uploads tend to be short-lived; Fox is quick to arrange the removal of unsanctioned *Simpsons* content when it is uploaded to sites such as *YouTube*.
[90] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 60.
[91] Ibid., 60 – 61.

the above quote does accurately describe the driving forces behind the memetic

practices of online *Simpsons* fandom. However, it must be noted that the

information in the content of *Simpsons* memes is quite an important aspect; there is

a reason a fan has chosen to post a given meme within a conversation, on social

media, or in any given context. In 27 seasons, the series has produced enough

content that a *Simpsons* analogy exists for nearly every real-life situation, mood,

emotion, event, etc. Though Shifman advises that the two forms of communication

are distinct, the memetic practices among *Simpsons* fans demonstrate that there

are areas in which the boundaries between the two forms blur.

When looking at areas for future internet meme research, Shifman suggests

the study of "[i]nternet memes as language."[92] She observes the potential for

memes to speak for the speaker entirely, as a sort of proxy:

> Because memes constitute shared spheres of cultural knowledge, they allow
>
> us to convey complex ideas within a short phrase or image. Thus, instead of
>
> saying, "I had a bad date and I feel miserable and lonely," one can simply
>
> paste the "Forever Alone" character. This influx of shared symbols has led to
>
> the evolution of memes into a secondary layer of language, often
>
> complementing and sometimes replacing its standard uses.[93]

This even more accurately describes *Simpsons* fans, who use memes from the

series (whether text, a combination of text and image, a gif, a video clip with sound,

etc.) to communicate their current moods, their positions within a conversation (or to

initiate one), or their reaction to other content. Fans consistently use *Simpsons*

memes in place of verbal communication; they do so on *NoHomers*, but also on

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[92] Ibid., 173.
[93] Ibid. The "Forever Alone" character is one of what are known as "rage comic" characters; they are crudely drawn characters who convey specific emotions, and they are adapted into comics by users to convey an emotion or event to others. They first appeared on *4chan* and were also spread on *Reddit*.

Simpsons-related posts on other sites. The very active members of the group "WOO-HOO!: CLASSIC SIMPSONS TRIVIA" on *Facebook* communicate almost exclusively through *Simpsons* content—most of which, as the name suggests, is mined from seasons 2 through 8 of the series.[94] The Part 2 section **2.2.2 – A** ***Simpsons* Meme for Better: [:joke:]** will employ several notable examples of online *Simpsons* fan memetic practice in which *Simpsons* content is implemented as a surrogate voice for the fan speaker.

A final, important point of meme theory that must be engaged before weaving into the area of fan studies is found in a crucial distinction that Shifman makes between viral and memetic propagation. In Chapter 6 of *Memes in Digital Culture*, Shifman suggests that viral content tends to be distributed with its original contents intact. This is in keeping with the distinctions above in that the factor driving the spread of the content is the very information retained therein; for users to alter the contents of the information they wish to spread defeats the very purpose of spreading that content. Conversely, memetic content tends to inspire users to respond creatively and adapt the content to suit their own specific message. Examples of this practice can be found in nearly all *Simpsons* memes: each user has decided which frame from the series to grab, exactly which part of which scene's dialogue to quote in text, or where to make the incisions in a clip extraction.

This chapter has explored meme theory from its inception in cultural theory and philosophy, through its applicability as a paradigm of analysis in screen and fan studies, to its modern day application to internet culture. As the following chapter

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[94] "WOO-HOO!: CLASSIC SIMPSONS TRIVIA" (*Facebook*, n.d.), first accessed 22 October 2015. The group is divided into ten city-specific subgroups, though some sub-groups are open to anyone to join. These groups were initially created for hosts to communicate with regular patrons of the monthly *Simpsons* trivia nights for which the group is named—and, as the name suggests, the trivia only covers what fans call the "classic era" of the series. This season-specificity employs the common, but contentious memetic fan practice of drawing a boundary of quality at the dawn of the so-called Scully Era, which is discussed throughout **Chapters 2** and **3** below. Incidentally, one of the administrators of the Brooklyn-based group is Dan Mulhall, who co-hosts the podcast *Worst Episode Ever*, and who also co-hosts the Brooklyn trivia nights—and who is also a vocal proponent of the "Zombie Simpsons" position.

on fan theory will reveal, memes are more than just linguistic surrogates for self-expression among fans; Pierre Bourdieu and John Fiske's economic analogies within the fields of audience studies will reveal that there is much more at stake in the memetic practices of *Simpsons* content distribution. For fans, these memes amount to cultural capital that establishes and maintains their positions within the hierarchy of their communities, and for the Fox network and for *Simpsons* creatives, these memes are assets of their intellectual property that have measurable monetary value. Thus begins the hegemonic three-way battle over the control of and access to *Simpsons* content online.

Theoretical Engagement 2: Fan Studies

1.14 – The Role of Fan Studies

This section will introduce the key contributions from the academics working in and shaping the fields of audience and fan studies to the analyses of fans and fandom in this thesis. The scope of the analysis in this thesis is narrow in comparison to the broad and varied perspectives emergent from these ever-expanding and swiftly-evolving fields of study. Therefore, this section will provide an overview of each of the key contributors both within the field of fan studies and of the ways in which their insights will be applied to the thesis. Each overview will include a brief examination of the sites of intersection and those of tension with other theorists, an investigation of the relationships each approach has with meme theory and, where applicable, the limitations in the models presented for fan analysis within this thesis.

1.15 – Pierre Bourdieu

John Fiske, a key theorist in this thesis whose contributions are discussed in a dedicated subsection below, builds his notions of the development of a hierarchy among fans through the accumulation of cultural capital upon the ideas presented in Pierre Bourdieu's foundational work, "The Forms of Capital".[1] While Bourdieu's piece focuses largely on education as varying forms of capital, Bourdieu's thoughts on cultural capital are broadly applicable—and are crucial both to Fiske's interpretation of fan culture and to this thesis.

Bourdieu observes three fundamental presentations of capital: economic capital (e.g. money, material wealth, and property), cultural capital (e.g. education,

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[1] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital", (*Education: Culture, Economy, and Society*, eds. A. H Halsey et al, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), print, 46-58.

or similar non-material acquisitions that can in some cases be converted into economic capital), and social capital (e.g. social "connections", which can also in some cases be converted into economic capital).[2] It is the concept of cultural capital that is most relevant to this thesis, though economic capital also plays its own significant role.

According to Bourdieu, cultural capital can be observed in three states: the embodied state (i.e. the individual's internalised acquisition of cultural capital, such as a person's education), the objectified state (i.e. material cultural goods, such as books, paintings, writings, etc.), and the institutionalised state (e.g. an individual's educational qualifications themselves). The embodied state and the objectified state are the two states of cultural capital most relevant to this thesis.

The *Simpsons* fans who are most active on the largest *Simpsons*-dedicated forum (*NoHomers*) are anxious to establish their individual embodied states of cultural capital; as is expanded upon in **Chapter 2: Worst Audience Ever** with the help of John Fiske, the greater the accumulation of *Simpsons* knowledge that they can show they've embodied, the higher the hierarchical position these fans can occupy within the fandom. The most effective way to establish the embodiment of cultural capital is through its objectification; if these fans can produce material evidence of their acquired knowledge, then their acquired knowledge is incontrovertible and recognisable by their peers, which then endows these fans with social capital to enhance their cultural capital. Once a fan has sufficient amounts of both cultural and social capital, they will have accumulated "symbolic capital", which is a concept that will be discussed in further detail in the Matt Hills overview below.

The objectified cultural capital that these fans use and produce is twofold: the first is that they create discussion threads (and write posts on other discussion threads). Their chosen topics of discussion and the replies they post on discussion threads demonstrate in written form each fan's accumulation of cultural capital (i.e.

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[2] Ibid.*,* 47.

their embodied capital). *NoHomers* employs a ranking system for its users, in which stars and a title are bestowed upon users who post new content to the site; the more posts a user makes, the greater the title and the number of stars bestowed upon them. The titles are, of course, themselves memes from the series; the ranking for titles is as follows:

0 - 24 posts: Newbie

25 - 249: Junior Camper

250 - 999: Pin Pal

1,000 - 4,499 [*sic*]: Stonecutter

5,000 - 9,999: SuperFriend

10,000 - 19,999: Hired Goon

20,000 - 29,999: Executive Vice President

30,000 & beyond: The Chosen One [3]

The *NoHomers* star system is very similar (there are nine star ranking levels and eight title ranking levels), though the gaps between star levels are narrower at the outset than the gaps between title levels; users need only make ten posts before they acquire a second star, and they will acquire a third star on their 50th post. Both the title and the star rankings appear under a member's "user name" on each post that member makes, as well as on each member's own dedicated page on the site, the latter of which is automatically afforded to each member upon registration (and on which users can choose to share their favourite episodes and characters, list the *Simpsons* memorabilia they own, and even share with other users when they started watching the series). Each activity (and official recognition thereof) helps to objectify each user's embodied cultural capital. Individuals who have been fans of

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[3] No author, "FAQ - How do I change my custom title/avatar/signature/username? ", (*NoHomers.net*, last updated November 2013), accessed 2 August 2015: http://www.nohomers.net/faq.php?faq=nhc#faq_stars

the series for a long time but are only just entering the realm of online fandom will feel particularly pressured to rack up their objectified capital in order to establish what they would perceive as an accurate reflection of their embodied *Simpsons* capital. A fan of the series might have more embodied *Simpsons* capital than the highest-ranking *NoHomers* user, but if he or she is only just joining the site, then he or she is classified as a single-starred Newbie and must build toward a higher ranking through material contributions.

Clearly, in establishing these two ranking systems, the site's administrators are actively encouraging users to subscribe to this hierarchical model and to share as much knowledge as they can in order to invest their cultural capital in the acquisition of social capital—and this exercise will work to the administrators' advantage. As the forum has advertising for external bodies on every page, the site is earning an income from these advertisers (a fact which is confirmed on their Privacy Policy page).[4] The higher the traffic on the site (which is most concretely measured and established through forum posts, though both the site and the third party vendor, Google, count visitor traffic and record all visitor activity, as well), the more keen companies will be to pay for the increased exposure of their products and services.[5] Through both the use a rankings system to incentivise users to create content, and the use of that activity and the content it produces as a way to encourage and record website traffic, users' objectified cultural capital is converted directly into the administrators' economic capital.

The second method of the objectification of cultural capital on *NoHomers* (and the central one on the WOO-HOO!: CLASSIC SIMPSONS TRIVIA group) is users' sharing of *Simpsons* memes, which most often appear as images, quotes, and paraphrasings of dialogue, and which fans use to demonstrate to one another their abilities to identify, reproduce and apply the best gags from the series to a

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[4] No author, "Privacy Policy – Third Party Advertising" (*NoHomers.net*, n.d), accessed 2 August 2015: http://www.nohomers.net/content/privacy.shtml
[5] No author, "Privacy Policy", *NoHomers.net*.

given topic. These memes are an easily transmissible and material way to establish one's embodied cultural capital, and to validate among one's peers the extent to which one's acquisition of *Simpsons* knowledge has been internalised. Obviously, these memes are not an original objectification of cultural capital in the same way that a *NoHomer* member's own authored post might be; the memes emerged from the collaborations among *Simpsons* creatives, and, importantly, they are the legal intellectual property of 20th Century Fox (Fox).

As will be discussed in greater detail in **Chapter 1. The Fox That Released the Hounds**, Fox has been active and outspoken in its protection of its intellectual property, and many online *Simpsons* fans have been issued Cease-and-Desist letters for their use of images from the series on their websites and forums. The Fox network and some members of the *Simpsons* creative team, including Matt Groening, James L. Brooks and Sam Simon have each accumulated an enormous wealth from both the direct merchandising and the licensing of *Simpsons* images.[6] Their wide distribution of Cease-and-Desist letters to fans for any use of images from the series suggests that they perceive a loss of revenue when these images are used outside of a legal agreement, which tend to involve an exchange of money – and if Fox's target demographic for *Simpsons* merchandise can access the images they want for free, who would buy the products?[7]

Clearly, the memes-as-objectified cultural capital has been converted directly into economic capital for Fox. As per the forthcoming chapter **The Fox That Released the Hounds**, such capital has also subsequently been converted directly into economic cultural capital for those fans who lost their sites—and those who have gone bankrupt due to successful litigation by Fox.

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[6] John Ortved, *The Simpsons: An Uncensored, Unauthorized History* (New York: Faber and Faber Inc., 2009), 124.
[7] Please see **Chapter 1: The Fox That Released the Hounds** for a detailed discussion on the methods and lucre of *Simpsons* merchandising for 20th Century Fox. See also John Ortved, *The Simpsons: An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, p. 123 – 125, for a summary.

1.16 – John Fiske

John Fiske plays a significant role in current fan discourse, especially in his contributions to the development of fan and audience studies as disciplines. Fiske is credited by some as having transformed the ways in which audiences—and, in particular, audiences of popular texts—are perceived and analysed, and is even further credited with forging the legitimisation of the academic study of popular pursuits in way that did not denigrate these pursuits or those participating in them.[8] According to Fiske, as he was writing in 1987, "[t]elevision is so often treated as an inferior cultural medium with inferior textual characteristics because our culture is one that validates the literary, or rather the literate, and consequently devalues the oral."[9] The perception of television in the media-academic discourse has shifted since Fiske wrote these words, due in part to Fiske's development of these ideas throughout his career.

Speaking on Fiske's contribution to the field of media studies, Kevin Glynn states, "I dare suggest that [the] broadening of acceptance of popular culture, and especially television, as 'legitimate' objects of study alongside cinema in [the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, formerly the Society for Cinema Studies] would likely not have happened were it not for the influence of John Fiske."[10] That this thesis is constructed around the activities of, roles performed and contributions made by online *Simpsons* fans—both within their communities and within the textual production of their object of fandom—is entirely reliant on the widespread acceptance of fan studies in general; it is presented for scrutiny within the field whose legitimisation is the result of Fiske and his colleagues' labour.

While Pam Wilson acknowledges that the examples Fiske uses in his work "are progressively more dated, his ideas are so lively and fresh that they encourage

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[8] Kevin Glynn et al., "Reading Fiske and Understanding the Popular", "Introduction", *Reading the Popular* 2nd Edition (John Fiske), (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), xlvii – xlix; Henry Jenkins, "Why Fiske Still Matters",
[9] John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987), print, 104.
[10] Pam Wilson, "Reading Fiske", *Reading the Popular*, xlix.

me to find new examples and to search for ways to use Fiske's deep theoretical insights to understand contemporary cultural politics and the texts and processes created today—which are far more complex than those of the world in which Fiske was writing, but whose complexity his work prefigured."[11] This is usefully descriptive of the very practice in this thesis: Fiske's ideas are directly applicable to the unprecedented online fandom of *The Simpsons*, despite the fact that he was writing before and during the emergence of the pre-World Wide Web internet.

"The Cultural Economy of Fandom", Fiske's chapter in Lisa A. Lewis's seminal 1992 edited work *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, provides several key structural points in the paradigm by which fan analysis is performed in this thesis. Through a dialogue with Bourdieu's model of cultural economy (which establishes the ways in which both "cultural tastes can be mapped onto economic status within the social space" and the economic and cultural capital is distributed among them), Fiske develops a method of fan analysis that places a "shadow cultural economy" alongside Bourdieu's own.[12]

This method highlights the significance of "[unofficial] cultural capital" to fans of popular texts which is acquired through their textual knowledge and appreciation, and which brings self-esteem along with esteem among the peer (fan) group.[13] John Fiske explains this further, stating, "[s]uch popular capital, unlike official cultural capital, is not typically convertible into economic capital […] Acquiring it will not enhance one's career, nor will it produce upward class mobility as its investment payoffs. Its dividends lie in the pleasures and esteem of one's peers in a community of taste rather than those of one's social peers."[14] (While in the Bourdieu overview it is suggested that objectified forms of fans' cultural capital can

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[11] Pam Wilson, "Reading Fiske", *Reading the Popular*, li.
[12] John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom", *The Adoring Audience*, Lisa A. Lewis (ed.) (London: Routledge, 1992), 31.
[13] Ibid., 33.
[14] Ibid., 34.

indeed be converted into economic capital, it is clearly in neither case for the direct benefit of the fans.)

While 'official' capital cultural is possessed generally by those who command the most wealth and are the most highly-educated (i.e. the highest classes) among a given society, its lack is compensated among lower classes in their appreciation of popular texts rather than high-brow (and thus more legitimised) cultural texts. Though such hierarchical distinctions within the peer group (i.e. distinctions made between those who possess more popular cultural capital and those who possess less) are established alongside those of official cultural capital (whose distributions are typically made in accordance with the strata of class), John Fiske observes that popular culture is often embraced and upheld in resistance to the official culture of those higher classes. He notes, "[f]andom, then, is a peculiar mix of cultural determinations. On the one hand, it is an intensification of popular culture which is formed outside and often against official culture, on the other it expropriates and reworks certain values and characteristics of that official culture to which it is opposed."[15] In Fiske's older examples, fans of television programs implemented the dialect of official culture when defending their devalued objects of fandom; "[t]hey frequently used official cultural criteria such as 'complexity' or 'subtlety' to argue that their preferred texts were as 'good' as the canonised ones."[16]

While Bourdieu's work thoroughly examines and maps the tension that exists between high and low culture, Fiske develops it first by providing the in-depth analysis of popular (low) culture that he felt Bourdieu had overlooked, and second by exposing the same types of discrimination operating on a small scale within the popular cultural economy that are observed on a large scale within the overarching cultural economic system as a whole.

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 36.

Rather than distinctions by class as in the overarching cultural economy, hierarchies among fan groups are developed along other lines of discrimination. As Fiske observes,

> [f]ans discriminate fiercely: the boundaries between what falls within their fandom and what does not are sharply drawn. And this discrimination in the cultural sphere is mapped into distinctions in the social – the boundaries between the community of fans and the rest of the world are just as strongly marked and patrolled. […] On the other side of the line, fans may argue about what characteristics allow someone to cross it and become a true fan, but they are clearly agreed on the existence of the line. Textual and social discrimination are part and parcel of the same cultural activity.[17]

Fan discrimination takes place in three key areas: among texts, between fans and non-fans, and among fans. The textual discrimination performed by fans is relatively self-evident in some aspects; clearly, fans of a given text will venerate the object of their fandom and place it above other cultural texts. However, fandoms will also discriminate between texts of their object of fandom. Fiske draws from an unpublished work by then-student Amy Kiste, whose paper on comic book fans "shows how accurately they can discriminate between various artists and storylines, and how important it is to be able to rank them in a hierarchy – particularly to 'canonize' some and exclude others."[18] This type of discrimination is tremendously common among fandoms of popular texts; Fiske borrows a 1983 example from Tulloch and Alvarado, looking at some *Dr Who* fans'

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[17] Ibid., 34 – 35.
[18] Ibid., 36.

distinction between the early series and the later ('more widely popular') episodes of the series.[19] These fans view the early episodes as 'canon,' and dismiss the later episodes as lacking in authenticity. Fiske notes another parallel to the discriminatory practices of official capital: "[a]uthenticity, particularly when validated as the production of an artistic individual (writer, painter, performer), is a criterion of discrimination normally used to accumulate official cultural capital but which is readily appropriated by fans in their moonlighting cultural economy."[20]

A parallel phenomenon to the *Dr. Who* example above emerged— and now exists as a key point of contention—among online *Simpsons* fans. "The Scully Era" (also known as "The Scully Years", a fan-coined term to describe Seasons 9 – 12 of *The Simpsons*, during which writer Mike Scully was showrunner—a position that encompasses both the roles of head writer and producer) has divided *Simpsons* fans to the extent that a faction of particularly passionate Scully-dissenters has broken off from the most popular fan forum (*NoHomers*) and formed their own fan site (*DeadHomerSociety.com*). Now, not only is the Scully Era often a topic of debate for fans on *NoHomers*, but the *Dead Homer Society* is as well.

In his explorations and analyses of the popular, Fiske also transformed the perception of television spectatorship from a passive experience to an active one, insisting that the role of the viewer in the process of meaning-making; no longer could meaning only be located in the text itself (and thus in the intention of that text's producer[s]). As a scholar working within a semiotic paradigm, Fiske aptly named this process a "semiotic democracy", highlighting the necessity of audience participation to engage any work as a text.[21]

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[19] Ibid., 36.
[20] Ibid., 36.
[21] John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 95.

Not only is Fiske's audience actively engaged with the texts produced by cultural industries (such as the television, film, and music industries), but the audience also actually produces popular culture through its interaction with the texts. Fiske emphasises that this production must be the focus of audience studies, rather than the much more passive concept of reception. In his analysis, Fiske divides this productivity by the members of the audience into three categories: semiotic productivity (the internal process of making meaning from cultural texts), enunciative productivity (the meanings are spoken aloud or otherwise overtly expressed; Fiske also calls this "fan talk", and he clarifies that enunciative productivity is ephemeral and can be observed only at the present moment at which it occurs), and textual productivity (the tangible, material texts produced by fans in response to the cultural text that is the object of their fandom).[22]

According to Fiske, this last category includes fan art, fan fiction and other creative works inspired by the object(s) of their fandom, but also takes into account the direct influence fans have on the original text, narrowing the gap between the artist and the audience.[23] Through this awareness of their own participation in the production of popular culture, fans begin to perceive the cultural object they love as belonging in some (or in many) ways to them. "The reverence, even adoration, fans feel for their object of fandom sits surprisingly easily with the contradictory feeling that they also 'possess' that object, that it is *their* popular cultural capital."[24]

Here begins Fiske's adaptation of Bourdieu's model of cultural shadow economy, with a brief look at the accumulation of its forms of cultural, social and economic capital. (Fiske's own tripartite model—that of semiotic, enunciative and textual productivity—is revisited in the overview of Matt Hills below.) In discussing cultural capital, Fiske gives credit to the producers of the original cultural text with respect to their acknowledgment of their fandom:

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[22] John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom", *The Adoring Audience*, 40.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.; emphasis in the original text.

In fandom as in the official culture, the accumulation of knowledge is fundamental to the accumulation of cultural capital. The cultural industries have, of course, recognised this and produce an enormous range of material designed to give the fan access to information about the object of fandom. […] This commercially produced and distributed information is supported, and sometimes subverted, by that produced by and circulated among the fans themselves. […] [Fan knowledge] also serves to distinguish within the fan community. The experts—those who have accumulated the most knowledge—gain prestige within the group and act as opinion leaders. Knowledge, like money, is always a source of power.[25]

This last notion of fan knowledge as power and of hierarchisation among online *Simpsons* fandom is the foundation of the discussion in **Chapter 2. Worst Audience Ever**. The assertion before this, that the producers of the original text invest much in providing sources of further knowledge based on their awareness of its importance to fans, is particularly relevant to this thesis. The producers of *The Simpsons* have worked to provide other modes by which fans can engage with and consume the *Simpsons* product; there is a successful comic book series, there are novelty books (both one-off publications and series), there are video games, there is an online touch-screen game, there are DVDs of some seasons (featuring commentaries by those who are creatively involved with the series), and, finally, there is an app available for American fans who, with a paid subscription, can access all episodes of the series.

However, most of these products do not provide their users with knowledge about *The Simpsons*. With the exception of the DVDs (whose commentaries and other extra features provide new insights to the series), most of the products named

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[25] Ibid., 42-43.

above do not hold any narrative influence over the series; they are extra-canonical. They do not contribute any new, sustained information about Springfield to the collective intelligence to which Jenkins refers (via Pierre Lévy). While the *Simpsons Ultimate Episode Guide* series (ultimately compiled into one large volume titled *Simpsons World*, in celebration of the series' 20th season) provides significant levels of detail about each episode and character in the series, none of this information constitutes a novel contribution to the story world.

One possible exception to this is the mobile game *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* (henceforth *TSTO*, released in 2012 for iOS devices, and 2013 for Android), which is explored in detail in **Chapter 3**. Like the series, the game is still evolving, so its precise relationship to the urtext has not been fully established. Creatives from the series are also involved in the game's development (especially members of the writing team), thus, among the many auxiliary texts, *TSTO* has a particular potential to become the first of these texts to turn *The Simpsons* into a genuine transmedia franchise.

1.17 – Henry Jenkins

A discussion on Jenkins's contributions to *Craptacular Science* was opened in **Theoretical Engagement 1: Memes, Semiotics and Humour**, and will continue briefly here. His role in the theoretical approaches to this thesis must be underscored: many of the central concepts (except, notably, that of meme theory, about which Jenkins is apprehensive) to this thesis come from Jenkins's work. Jenkins's concept of "participatory culture" is succinctly summarised by Mark Duffett as "the idea that the distinction between active producers and passive consumers has been reduced or erased because both are now actively engaged as players in

the flow of media culture. Fan creativity is not simply derivative here, but part of a two-way traffic with the media industries instead."[26]

The notion of participatory culture builds upon Fiske's work to alter the perception of the passive viewer to an active, engaged, meaning-making viewer, with Jenkins pulling the focus to those viewers who are devoted to and exceedingly engaged with particular texts (i.e. fans). Jenkins works to illuminate the contributions that fans make to the media landscape, observing that their interpretive and celebratory practices not only build popular culture around the fan-texts, but also shape those fan-texts themselves. Participatory culture is a key element of convergence, another Jenkins-coined concept that describes the phenomena by which media producers and consumers are no longer perceived to occupy mutually exclusive spheres of the landscape.[27]

Jenkins's concept of transmedia storytelling is another key element of convergence, and it is also intrinsic to this thesis, as the concept describes a franchise whose creatives are attuned not only to the possibility of spreading content across multiple platforms to engage their audiences, but also to the possibility of fan engagement beyond the urtext. Auxiliary texts that do not exploit this aspect of fan desires exist only to earn the franchise money; while they give the fans the opportunity to immerse themselves in the franchise's story world or to demonstrate their brand loyalty or knowledge to others, non-transmedia auxiliary texts do not offer the fan new insights into the story world. It is a missed opportunity in many ways; auxiliary texts that offer something new to—and, importantly, pertinent to and permanent in—the franchise's canon will still earn the franchise money. In fact, transmedia methods could exploit the most ardent fans' desires to

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[26] Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), print, 251.
[27] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), print, 3.

acquire as much knowledge as possible about the story world.[28] If meeting such an objective requires that the fan purchase additional items or accesses, it is a safe assumption that at least some fans will do so. Provided a given auxiliary text can be made to appeal to both ardent and casual fans, the franchise can only benefit from its development.

As suggested at the end of the John Fiske section above, with *TSTO*, *The Simpsons* is poised to become a transmedia franchise, but has not yet realised this potential in full. It will be established in **Chapter 1. The Fox That Released the Hounds** that this is largely due both to Fox's attempts to create demand by withholding its assets from those wishing to develop large-scale endeavours, and to Fox's tendencies to fear the unknown and—crucially—to misconstrue the internet as an enemy construct whose users only want to steal and illicitly earn money from Fox's intellectual property. In focusing on prosecuting those who were deemed to be prominent members of the latter group, Fox failed to see the potential in the internet as a new platform for exhibition—and beyond.

Such errors are not unique to Fox. In the third chapter of *Spreadable Media*, titled "The Value of Media Engagement", Jenkins and his coauthors establish exactly that. Through the example of the delivery and ultimate failure of the NBC Universal series *Heroes*, Jenkins et al demonstrate how NBC utterly failed to take internet-connected fandom into account in two ways. The first was in their failure to provide viewers with a coeval viewing platform alternative to television. As many of their viewers were from parts of the world that might receive an episode of the series hours, days, weeks or months after its initial United States airdate and time, they were inclined to view the programme by other (illegal) means before any

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[28] Ibid., 129.

information could be prematurely revealed within their online knowledge communities or other social media.[29]

The network's other error was not to develop a means by which to measure at least the illegal viewership online to get an accurate sense of the series' audience. As is very often the case with *The Simpsons* creatives and Fox, *Heroes*'s creative producers did not share the network's perspective; executive producer Tim Kring was more than aware that the internet was the primary source of the show's most ardent followers. "The general attitude of the networks towards this massive audience that's out there has been to stand on the sideline and heckle these people when, in fact, these are the people that actively sought these shows out. They went some place and actively pirated the show. These are fans that should be embraced, and, somehow, figured out how to monetize."[30]

Jenkins et al make the important point that internet piracy is not necessarily motivated by greed or an unwillingness to pay; it is often motivated by issues surrounding access. The authors observe an evolution in the television industry from an appointment-based model to an engagement-based model (concepts that are discussed in further detail in **Chapter 1**), evidenced both in networks' gradual embrace of fan textual productivity and their increasing flexibility around media properties.[31] Another hallmark of this evolution is networks' gradual acceptance that old methods of measuring audiences and the concept of demographics are not the indispensible tools they were once thought to be.

While *Spreadable Media* is focused largely on the methods by which fans engage with texts, the authors also reveal the ways in which networks and producers influence, affect, prevent, and enable fan engagement. As the producers and financiers of the objects of fandom, the networks have ultimate say over who

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[29] Henry Jenkins et al., *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), print, 114.
[30] Tim Kring, quoted in Jenkins et al., *Spreadable Media*, 114.
[31] Henry Jenkins et al., *Spreadable Media*, 152.

can engage and how. Jenkins et al offer a caveat: "companies must be careful not to define too narrowly who can participate (leaving out potentially crucial surplus audiences) or how to participate (valuing some types of audience engagement while ignoring, disrespecting, or even attempting to litigate the valuable contributions of others."[32] Fox has failed to avoid each of these pitfalls, except the last; Fox did not *attempt* to litigate the contributions of some fans. Fox *successfully litigated* the contributions of some fans. Several examples of this—and their outcomes and implications—are explored at length in **Chapter 1**.

Jenkins et al conclude their work with an example of conflict arising between producers and fans of the *Twilight* film franchise over raw footage from the final film that was leaked online before its release. The network hired a detective to find the source of the leak while the producers pleaded with their fan base not to proliferate the footage.[33] When the detectives discovered the source, the producers identified the individual by name and made public their intention to sue the fan. The authors acknowledge that their readers might feel conflicted about the situation; some may agree with the producers' actions, while others will consider it too harsh, supporting fans' rights to distribute the material of their beloved texts. "Others […] may be outraged by the producers' decision to publicly identify the responsible fan, feeling that it is an inappropriate response to someone who was almost certainly motivated by a desire to support rather than damage the film franchise."[34]

The idea that piracy could be an act of love rather than greed is one that offers a novel perspective on internet fandom. It is certainly not one that Fox is willing to entertain, as evidenced by the Hernandez case in **Chapter 1**. The networks have a significant amount of control over their texts—and, it would seem, over the fans who love those texts. Fox has successfully instilled a perpetual sense of fear among its online fans with respect even to the mere mention of piracy, as

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 302.
[34] Ibid., 303.

well as the use of multimedia from the series. Fox's methods of controlling its fans through Cease-and-Desist letters, threats of litigation, and lawsuits, have been profoundly effective, and—as is demonstrated throughout **Chapter 1**, have affected fans' inclinations toward self-determination.

Writing in 2008, Jenkins calls attention to the imbalance of power between studios and fans when disputes over the use of intellectual property arose.[35] Looking specifically at fan fiction (which could directly influence other fair-use fan productivity), Jenkins points to a lack of case law that could help to delineate what— if any—protection fans could expect; such a lack exists despite the long history of legal disputes regarding the fair use of media. Jenkins also problematises the tight control studios have exercised over the ways in which fans can interact with their franchises:

> Marketers have turned our children into walking, talking billboards who wear logos on their T-shirts, sew patches on their backpacks, plaster stickers on their lockers, hang posters on their walls, but they must not, under penalty of law, post them on their home pages. Somehow, once consumers choose when and where to display those images, their active participation in the circulation of brands suddenly becomes a moral outrage and a threat to the industry's economic well-being.[36]

Fans are welcomed by studios to spread the memes of the studios' intellectual property until fans reach the boundary of the internet; that this is the case with Fox is central to this thesis. As is examined in detail in **Chapter 1**, and has been touched upon above, Fox has always treated the internet as an entity to be feared and scrutinised—and, like the studios Jenkins describes, Fox uses the

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[35] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 142.
[36] Ibid.

internet as a boundary beyond which no Fox-owned image shall cross unless such a move is expressly sanctioned by the network.

Jenkins acknowledges such gaps in the collective knowledge of fan studies, and goes even further to suggest that it is far from a finished science; despite being recognised as one of the leading scholars in his field, Jenkins told Matt Hills, "now I get people quoting my words as if they were biblical and as if they had this enormous authority and certainty behind them, as if things that I tentatively put forward were well-established and proven once and for all."[37] Fan studies form a relatively young and evolving field of enquiry. While Jenkins might have expressed some misgivings about the amount of credence given his work, it is easy to see how his thorough, well-thought-out scholarship forms a substantial foundation from which the discussions in this thesis flourish.

1.18 – Matt Hills

A thorough overview of fan studies can be found in Matt Hills's 2002 monograph *Fan Cultures*; he has done much work to bring (some of) the leading authors in the academic field of fan study into one large dialogue. Others have emerged since, of course, and newer works by those leading the field at the time of Hills's writing have developed and broadened the discourse (such as Henry Jenkins's 2007 work *Convergence Culture* and his 2013 collaboration *Spreadable Media* with Sam Ford and Joshua Green, Cornel Sandvoss's 2005 monograph *Fans*, and the collaborative 2007 book *Fandom*, edited by *Watching with the Simpsons* author Jonathan Gray, along with Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington. Matt Hills contributed to the last, studying the intersection of academia and fandom—a topic first explored by Henry Jenkins). However, Hills's book provides a great deal of insight to the discourse up

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[37] Henry Jenkins, quoted in Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom*, 69.

to 2002, and will be explored here in order to extract those elements most relevant to the study of online *Simpsons* fandom.

Hills's second chapter, "Fan cultures between community and hierarchy" in particular examines some of the key concepts applied to this thesis. According to Hills, Bourdieu's model of cultural shadow economics is a metaphorical, class-based distinction between dominating and dominated fractions of fandom, in which the dominant fractions make the primary aesthetic and economic evaluations of worthy works of art, and the less-knowledgeable dominated fractions nevertheless recognise the value in those works of art and sometimes take a different or oppositional approach in their own evaluations thereof in order to delineate and solidify their identities. Hills finds the model useful in its development of the notion of hierarchy into the discourse on fandom, but sees it as limited in its focus on the economic aspects of culture. Hills's primary concern here is that social and cultural capital are presumed to be the primary preoccupations of fans, and that it focuses only on one potential relationship (one of competitiveness) among fans.

In Hills's view, John Fiske's reworking of Bourdieu's model (in which social discriminations other than class are considered and a more thorough exploration of the culture of the dominated class is proposed) is also insufficient. Fiske advocates for the replacement of Bourdieu's 'dominated habitus' with a more inclusive 'popular habitus', in which fans participate in (rather than discriminate between) texts, and in which fans "'see through' the text to production information, while the dominant habitus 'uses information about the artist to enhance or enrich the appreciation of the work.'"[38] The posts and discussion threads on *NoHomers* suggest that *Simpsons* fans actually participate in a great deal of both; production information and information about the artist(s) are frequent topics of discussion on the forum.[39]

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[38] Matt Hills (with a quote from John Fiske), *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, e-book edition, 2005), 25.
[39] For one of many examples, see the forum discussion thread "Does Matt Groening get too much credit for *The Simpsons*?", in which replies on the thread demonstrate fans'

Usefully, from his analysis of Fiske's work Hills highlights three concepts that pertain closely to online *Simpsons* fans: "[f]ollowing Fiske's coinage of 'fan cultural capital' (the knowledge that a fan has about their object of fandom), I would suggest that 'fan social capital' (the network of fan friends and acquaintances that a fan possesses, *as well as* their access to media producers and professional personnel linked with the object of fandom) must also be closely investigated in future analyses."[40] Fan cultural capital and fan social capital are crucial to fan interaction on *NoHomers.net*, and in their synthesis Hills highlights another form of capital emergent from Bourdieu's concept: that of "fan symbolic capital". Bourdieu's "symbolic capital" is "both a form of recognition (fame, accumulated prestige) and the specific 'legitimation' of other conjunctions of capitals which are themselves 'known and recognised as self-evident'."[41]

Hills suggests that earlier fan studies have overemphasised the concept of cultural capital and underemphasised social, symbolic, and other forms of capital. The notion of economic capital is crucial to this thesis, as its prioritisation both by Fox and by the largest fan site's administrators has had a profound impact on online *Simpsons* fan culture.

The third chapter of *Fan Cultures*, titled "Fan cultures between 'knowledge' and 'justification'", also touches upon some of the ideas and methods used in this thesis, including the important methodological concept of fan ethnography. This is perhaps the point at which *Fan Cultures* becomes more problematic to—and simultaneously less relevant to—this thesis in particular. Hills argues that

knowledge about Matt Groening personally, and about his role within the production of the series (both historical and contemporary).
(http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?101849-Does-Matt-Groening-get-too-much-credit-for-the-Simpsons). Other examples include "Matt Groening, James L. Brooks, & Sam Simon: The Flintstones Era of the Show"
(http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?108005-Matt-Groening-James-L-Brooks-amp-Sam-Simon-The-Flintstones-Era-of-the-Show), and "The super-amazing thread about season 1" (http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?99619-The-super-amazing-thread-about-season-1).
[40] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 30.
[41] Ibid. (with Bourdieu quoted).

ethnographic methodology cannot be adequately applied to fan studies because fans have so far been unable to report effectively upon their own fandom and the meaning thereof—*when asked.*[42] Here Hills is specifically discussing the process of "asking the audience", and these methods are no longer necessary when the sharing of knowledge among fans (the "collective intelligence") can be observed by an invisible researcher. The fans no longer report or respond to a researcher; the fandom can be observed without interference. However, the fans will still only report or share that which they choose to share with and disclose to their peers. While the observational methods applied in this thesis were not possible at the time of Hills's writing in 2002, they are still far from unmediated (or unaffected by the fan's willingness or ability to articulate elements of his or her fandom). Fans are still choosing what they will say and how they will say it, but they are doing so voluntarily and in an act of self-expression that was not prompted by an external (i.e. non-contextual) force.

However, Hills's work and its relationship to this thesis do not end here. Being a contemporary scholar, Hills has done a great deal of work in the area of fan studies throughout the emergence and evolution of the World Wide Web. In one article in particular, Hills's 2013 piece "Fiske's 'textual productivity' and digital fandom: Web 2.0 democratization versus fan distinction?" the author picks up his work with Fiske and Bourdieu's models and tests their application to fandom in the post-web 2.0 world. More specifically, Hills seeks to determine whether Fiske's work on semiotic productivity, enunciative productivity, and textual productivity is still relevant (or can be adapted to) studies of digital (i.e. online) fandom.

Clearly, in its application of Fiske's work to online *Simpsons* fandom, the argument in this thesis is that Fiske's work need not even be adapted; it is as relevant to online fandom as it was to (what might then be called) analogue or pre-internet fandom. Thus it must be determined exactly what Hills is problematising as

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[42] Ibid., 37 – 40.

a practice or practices too modern for Fiske's model. Where Hills sees the problem is in the textual productivity by fans—and he is arguing only against those scholars who would conflate fan-fiction production with the "official" production of the objects of their fandom, and against those critics who would, conversely, revile fan production in comparison to "official" production.

Hills is also seeking to expand Fiske's pre-web 2.0 concept of textual productivity (which Hills narrows down to "fan fiction, fan art, *filk* songs and fan videos"), examining several scholars' suggestions for what this might include. [43] Most scholars Hills reviews observe a blending of two or more of Fiske's forms of fan productivity; most applicable to this thesis is Suzanne Scott's proposal that Fiske's definition of enunciative productivity be reworked to "incorporate the online forum/message board, and accordingly consider how enunciative productivity by fans is increasingly serving a widespread economic/promotional function".[44] Hills highlights Scott's insistence that these types of work are still enunciative rather than textual, and Hills reminds his reader that Fiske warned in his writing that his categories were more fluid than rigid.[45]

Hills proceeds to call for the first two types of productivity (semiotic and enunciative) to be combined into textual productivity, which would then be expanded into a "differentiated variety of fan textual productivity".[46] Based on some of the scholarly works in his study, Hills is also "calling for subsets of textual productivity to be theorized, e.g. natively-digital/remediated analogue; mimetic/transformative; informal/formal; explicit/implicit.[47]"

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[43] Matt Hills, "Fiske's 'textual productivity' and digital fandom: Web 2.0 democratization versus fan distinction?" (*Participations* 10:1 (May 2013), 130-153), print, 133, emphasis mine. Please note that "filk songs" is not a typo; "filk" is a type of music produced specifically by and among the fandom of science fiction and fantasy cultural texts, in which popular tunes are performed with alternate lyrics, changed to reflect the performers' interest in their fan-text. See also: Mark Durkett, *Understanding Fandom*, 187.
[44] Quoted in Matt Hills, "Fiske's 'textual productivity'" 136.
[45] Ibid., 136.
[46] Ibid., 139.
[47] Ibid., 150.

In short, Hills proposes that only textual productivity from Fiske's tripartite model can or should be salvaged in the digital age, and that there is a wide spectrum of the types of productions that can be included therein. It is a reasonable assertion within the context of his arguments, and certainly one that would fit this thesis well. According to Fiske, enunciative productivity can only be observed at the time that it occurs. While Scott argues that online conversations (that bear some permanence, like the fan forums forming the focus of this thesis) should be included in the definition of enunciative productivity, it would be Hills's position—and that of the present author—that the enunciative productivity of these fans would be one and the same activity as their textual productivity. The reason the enunciative would be absorbed into the textual and not the other way around in the context of online *Simpsons* fandom is that the two occur simultaneously in these fan interactions, and the textual is established as the abiding, tangible and measurable form of productivity.

Because a substantial analysis and application of Hills's proposed revision to Fiske's model has yet to be performed, and because Hills calls for further study into the number of possible binaries within the sphere of textual productivity that he himself identifies in this article, the result of this article is the skeleton of an incompletely updated theoretical model. Hills's work nevertheless remains sufficient for application to this study of online *Simpsons* fandom; though the three elements of the tripartite model could be collapsed into one and still be applied to this analysis, Fiske's reminder that his categories are fluid supports Hills's work, and both models reinforce the blurred boundaries among the semiotic, enunciative and textual productivity performed by the users of the *NoHomers* forum.

1.19 – Cornel Sandvoss

In his monograph *Fans*, which Sandvoss offers as a "second-wave" (read: post-Fiske) study of fandom, the author provides an intriguing analysis of textual boundaries. Having suggested earlier in his book that fans subconsciously view their objects of fandom as extensions of themselves (a suggestion that is itself quite relevant to *Simpsons* fandom in general, and online *Simpsons* fandom in particular), Sandvoss examines how fans negotiate the boundaries between themselves and the texts they adore. He reveals that this negotiation is a highly subjective process:

> not all that is associated with the object of fandom is recognized by the individual fan as part of their fan text [Sandvoss's alternate term for the textual object of fandom. In the case of this thesis, the "fan text" would be *The Simpsons* series]. The object of fandom thus always consists of a textual hybrid, a meta- or super-text composed of many textual episodes whose boundaries are defined by the fan him- or herself. The reader, then, does not […] beat the text into a shape which will serve his or her own purposes […] but cuts his or her own text out of all available signs and information like a figure out of a seemingly endless piece of paper.[48]

Online *Simpsons* fans do just this; as has been suggested above, online fans have created and implemented an entire lexicon to describe the ways in which they have carved up the series—which, in its 27th season in 2016, presents a vast text for fans to customise. In the cases of the *Dead Homer Society* and the podcast *Worst Episode Ever*, fans' entire textual identities, as well as their textual productivity, are constructed specifically along the lines they created to divide the series according to their perceptions of quality (classic *Simpsons*, the Scully Years, the Jean Era, Jerkass Homer, etc.). These terms are also memetic; they were

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[48] Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, print, 133.

created by fans to engage in dialogue with other fans, and they have been adopted by and incorporated into the discourses of each major fan hub.

The *Worst Episode Ever* podcast hosts (Dan and Jack) identify their show as "a podcast by people who love *The Simpsons*, for people who love *The Simpsons*, about how much we hate *The Simpsons*."[49] They trawl Jean-Era seasons exclusively to uncover what they, their guests, and their listeners will ultimately determine is the worst *Simpsons* episode ever produced; they very specifically state that they are focusing only on the "post-classic *Simpsons* episode[s], meaning Season 11 through today, (though we have done at least one Season 9 episode and may do other 'classic' episodes too."[50] Their objective is philosophically similar to *The Dead Homer Society* authors' own; the podcast hosts frequently refer to their shared desire to see the series cancelled soon. Like *The Dead Homer Society*, Dan and Jack use memes from the Classic Era of the series in a number of places, from the name of the blog itself, to the countless quotes they exchange in each podcast they deliver.

Sandvoss also looks at textual distance, in whose analysis he determines that fans' experience of intimacy with the object of their fandom—even when they engage with the object in a "mediated quasi-interaction"—results in a non-reciprocal intimacy: "While the fan interacts intensely with a particular text, the text does not talk back."[51] This is a provocative aspect of Sandvoss's analysis when it is applied to online *Simpsons* fandom, as, beginning with *alt.tv.simpsons*, these fans established early, intimate and reciprocal interaction with the producers of the texts. This interaction—which resulted on the producers' side in the creation of a recurring character to represent fans in the series—has continued for the entire duration of the series to date; the text has spoken back. The unprecedented access the fans

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[49] No author, "Who Are We?" (*Worst Episode Ever [A Simpsons Podcast]*, n.d.), accessed 12 April 2014: http://www.weepodcast.com/about/
[50] No author, "How Does *Worst Episode Ever* Work?" (*Worst Episode Ever [A Simpsons Podcast]*, n.d.), accessed 12 April 2014: http://www.weepodcast.com/about/
[51] Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans*, 137.

have had to the producers (established and maintained almost exclusively through web-based means) has instilled a sense of entitlement among fans, and, as evidenced in elements of fan discourse analysed at length in later chapters of this thesis, has inspired fans to take elements of the text very personally. Likewise, the creative producers are aware of the fans' perceptions of them and their work (Mike Scully in particular, as is explored in **Chapters 2** and **3**).

Sandvoss proposes that the distance that normally exists between fans and the objects of their fandom lends the relationship a greater capacity for textual interpretation—and, perhaps, lends the fan-text a wider audience, as the further the audience is from the textual environment, the more they can adapt and relate the text's content to their own environments and experiences. Sandvoss uses Hills's work as a springboard in developing this notion: "The basis of the emotional involvement with the object of fandom is therefore not hindered, but aided, by the distance between fan and object of fandom. It is not the distance between text and reader that has disappeared, as Hills (2002) suggests, but the distance between reader and meaning."[52]

What is interesting is that even though online *Simpsons* fans have an established dialogic exchange with *Simpsons* creatives, fan interaction with the text remains indirect. The textual object of fandom is an animated series; the series is only a sum of its parts, it bears no specific tangible element with which to make contact. *The Simpsons* is essentially an illusion produced by a collective, so by this definition, the distance between text and reader can never be closed, regardless of how intimate the relationships between the producers and their fans might be (or become).

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[52] Ibid., 138.

1.20 – Derek Johnson

Derek Johnson's piece "Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom" provides perspectives on phenomena relating directly to *Simpsons* fandom online: the dynamics within an established, dialogic relationship with the creative producer(s) of the text, and the dynamics among a divided fan base. "Instead of conceiving of antagonism as momentary aberration within unified consensus, I propose that ongoing struggles for discursive dominance constitute fandom as a hegemonic struggle over interpretation and evaluation through which relationships among fan, text and producer are continually articulated, disarticulated, and rearticulated."[53]

Johnson's study focuses on fans of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Twentieth Century Fox and WB Network, USA, 1997 – 2003), and many of the fan behaviours he observes are also prominent among *Simpsons* fans. One considerable similarity is the tendency of *Buffy* fans to divide themselves along aesthetic lines, specifically regarding the series' 6th season. This is analogous to the divisions discussed above, whereby many fans on *NoHomers* debate the aesthetic value of any *Simpsons* season after its 8th—and the *Dead Homer Society* and the *Worst Episode Ever* podcast hosts identify strictly along this argument. Like *The Simpsons* fan factions, *Buffy*'s most passionate fans' tendency to engage in endless debate over aesthetic opinions. Like *Buffy* fans, *Simpsons* fans can be very derisive of one another in these debates, as will be analysed in detail in **Chapter 2**. Hereto applies another contribution by Matt Hills: that of the concept of the 'textual conservationist'. Hills defines the textual conservationist as "Fans [who] expect adherence to established tenets, characterisations, and narrative 'back-stories,'

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[53] Derek Johnson, "Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom" (*Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, Eds. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, New York: New York University Press, 2007), print, 286.

which production teams thus revise at their peril, disrupting the trust which is placed in the continuity of a detailed narrative world."[54]

Johnson's study provides a thought-provoking explanation for contention arising both among fans and between fans and producers. Johnson borrows Hills's term "'hyperdiegesis' to denote the consistent continuity that makes cult narratives like *Buffy* cohere overall as ontologically secure worlds. Hyperdiegesis provides audiences with constant, trustworthy, supportive environments for productive practices like discussion, speculation, and fan fiction."[55] Hyperdiegesis is distinct from Jenkins's "meta-text" in that the former is sourced from the primary text, while the latter comes from the fans themselves. Of course, meta-text is rooted in hyperdiegesis, but meta-texts can develop quite differently from one another, and this can lead to conflict within the fan base.[56] There is some collectiveness within fan meta-text; as mentioned above, online *Simpsons* fans have themselves determined what to consider "canon". They tend simply to exclude any episodes that they feel breach the understood continuity of Springfield and its inhabitants.

Johnson also chalks aesthetic contention among fans (such as that between *Dead Homer Society* and those who disagree with its post-season-8 "zombie *Simpsons*" rhetoric) up to meta-textual conflict. "Discursive attempts to retrospectively define golden ages and all-time lows aggravate [the] fragmentation of antagonistic fan communities. In constructing aesthetic histories [i.e. fans' own meta-texts], different factions foreground elements from the hyperdiegetic past that most strongly support their meta-textual interests, contrasting them with unsavoury elements that do not—knowledge claims that, if reiterated, produce norms to either invalidate the series' status quo or legitimate it within a tradition of quality."[57]

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[54] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 4.
[55] Derek Johnson, "Fan-tagonism", *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, 286.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid., 289.

Knowledge, which is the only genuine source of capital within fan communities, exclusive only of those who run monetised fan sites, is, of course, the primary element at stake. This is the hegemonic struggle Johnson describes above. Perhaps this explains why these debates rage on without ever being resolved, aside from fans agreeing to disagree and continuing to define themselves along the Scully Era faultline. In order for such debates to cease, one faction would need to concede to the other—but this would involve an implicit admission that the conceding side's knowledge was inferior. As there is no urgent need for the debates themselves to be resolved, and as the debates provide forums in which fans can have their extensive knowledge validated by other fans, it is a relatively harmless (if perpetually contentious) condition in which online *Simpsons* fandom exists.

Another behaviour Johnson observes among *Buffy* fans that is also prevalent among online *Simpsons* fans is the vilification of the producer(s) of the beloved text.[58] Johnson notes that fans "can challenge corporate producers by constructing interpretive consensuses that delegitimize institutional authority over the hyperdiegetic text."[59] *Simpsons* fandom's examples of this phenomenon (i.e. rejecting the seasons of the series produced after season 9, naming and blaming specific showrunners for the failures of these seasons, creating and adhering to their own canon), while different to those from the *Buffy* fan community (who also widely agree upon the vilification of a particular producer), appear to have similar motivations and outcomes to the latter. Johnson observes a particular vehemence for creatives who fans feel are "breaking continuity and, thus, harming the narrative's hyperdiegetic coherence."[60] Fan reactions to such breaches "suggest a struggle for discursive and productive authority between fans and producer[s]."[61] A

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[58] Ibid., 291.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 293.
[61] Ibid.

fan's claim to productive authority might at first seem outrageous, but the debate around ownership of significant cultural texts is a nuanced one. The prospect is discussed in detail in **Chapter 3**.

Johnson looks to a term conceived by Jonathan Gray, who himself has written extensively on *Simpsons* audiences: the "anti-fan". As can be deduced from the term itself, anti-fans are those audience members who approach the text from a negative, disinterested, or irritated perspective.[62] However, Johnson warns that

> anti-fans who hate a program (without necessarily viewing it) must be differentiated from disgruntled fan factions who hate episodes, eras, or producers because they perceive a violation of the larger text they still love. Fans may follow programs closely, even when the eta-text and hyperdiegesis have become so divergent that one would rather see the series end than continue on its displeasing current course.[63]

Producers might respond directly to fans who criticise them (as the *Simpsons* creatives have through DVD commentaries and online posts), but Johnson observes a greater likelihood that producers will respond through "corporate counterdiscourses [that] discipline and reorient the relationship of fans to textual production".[64] With respect to Fox, this is a familiar issue for online *Simpsons* fans; this method of response is the focus of **Chapter 1** in this thesis.

According to Johnson, Fox used similar draconian measures in dealing with *Buffy* fans who were perceived to have overstepped their bounds as the ones they used to control online *Simpsons* fans. However, there are two key differences between Johnson's narrative of Fox's response to *Buffy* fans and Fox's response to *Simpsons* fans. One difference is that *Buffy* had a distinct, official online presence

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[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid., 293 – 294.
[64] Ibid., 294.

to which fans, having been displaced from their own sites (through legal action by Fox), could migrate, whereas *The Simpsons* site has consistently failed fans in this regard. The other difference is that *Simpsons* creatives have, at least outwardly, frequently spoken out against Fox's actions against their fans (see **Chapter 1** for concrete examples and discussion). They, too, are critical of Fox's obsession with money and ownership. They may not always take the fans' side, but they do not typically drive the network's pursuit of fans.

What *Simpsons* producers tend to prefer—and what Johnson also observes in *Buffy* producer responses to fan criticism—is the in-text ribbing (or, at times, reviling) of fans through the textual narrative. Like *Simpsons* creatives, *Buffy* producers created characters that overtly represent their fans—and they are frequently portrayed in a negative light. Like Comic Book Guy in *The Simpsons* (whose characterisation is a primary focus of **Chapter 1**), the *Buffy* characters who form "the Trio" are infantilised and ineffectual.[65] Like Comic Book Guy, they are made to know that their input is unwelcome—it is actively rejected by the people who surround them, so they live their lonely lives immersed in the texts with which they are obsessed. In essence, they are characters "whose inability to form relationships outside of cult media articulates fandom to immaturity [and] instability."[66] Again, like Comic Book Guy, members of the Trio are redeemed and ultimately awarded the ability to form relationships, but not until after they have been sufficiently silenced. Johnson observes similar treatments of fans in fellow Fox series *The X-Files* and later *Star Trek* series *The Next Generation* and *Voyager*.[67]

In summary, Johnson's observation of a two-fronted battle for hegemony in the *Buffy* fan community illuminates these very struggles within (and without, in the case of contentions with Fox and *Simpsons* creatives) the *Simpsons* online fan community. Johnson's work reinforces that knowledge is king among *Simpsons*

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[65] Ibid., 296.
[66] Ibid..
[67] Ibid., 298.

fans, which they wield against one another and against *Simpsons* creatives in their efforts to balance their consumption of their text with their role in its production. Antagonism is a common—if not inevitable—element of cult fandom; as this antagonism lies at the centre of this thesis, Johnson's insights are crucial to the analyses throughout.

The Simpsons is clearly an unprecedented phenomenon in a multitude of ways—it is like no animated series or sitcom that came before it, and its online fandom is equally unique. It is thus impossible to apply only one fan theorist's model when analysing the series' fan-base; each author above provides key theoretical contributions to a thorough analysis. Fiske and Bourdieu reveal the key motivating and sustaining factors in the brand of obsessive fandom that characterises *The Simpsons*' online fans. Henry Jenkins introduces several concepts crucial to this thesis, and also draws out the important ways in which networks can affect and manipulate fandom. Matt Hills reinterprets Bourdieu and Fiske's works, and adapts them to suit fandom in the internet era, which *Simpsons* fandom defines (and by which *Simpsons* fandom is defined). Cornel Sandvoss explores the space and relationships between fan and text, and the resulting study offers a perspective on the tremendous appeal to the fans of the series that expands beyond its mere hilarity. Derek Johnson synthesises all of the above perspectives and applies them to an analogous modern and online fandom; he also articulates the hegemonic struggles in which online *Simpsons* fans are eternally engaged, both among each other and with both the creative and the network producers.

The preceding and current chapters have established the methodological and theoretical contexts and intentions of this thesis, as well as the historical contexts and current states of the fields of meme theory and fan studies. The first chapter provides a clear concept of meme theory and its suitability to screen studies, while the second focused on the intersections where meme theory and fan

studies connect. What is required now is a detailed engagement with a case study to demonstrate the effectiveness of the memetic paradigm. *The Simpsons* makes an excellent case study for the application of meme theory to fan and screen studies, as it is one of the most popular television series in history, and its online fan base is one of the oldest and best-known.

The following chapter opens both Part 2 of the thesis and its case study with a chronological examination of Fox; the Fox network is entirely responsible for the creation, broadcast, and continued production of *The Simpsons.* It is often said that the show created the network, as Fox was a very young television entity attempting to add a lasting fourth network to the triumvirate of American broadcasters. Without a hit as strong, popular and attractive as *The Simpsons*, the network might not have survived. At the same time, were it not for the studio's bravery and progressiveness with respect to the types of programming it sought to air, *The Simpsons* would never have surfaced. Without the fan, the series would not have survived.

Of course, a fine balance among the network, the creative producers, and the fans of the series needs to be struck in order for a show to succeed as *The Simpsons* has. Following an outline of the studio and the series' concurrent developments, the following chapter will examine Fox's successes and failures in its approaches to fan engagement, relationships with the creative producers, and the memetic content that flows both into and out from the series.

Part 2

2.1 – Chapter 1. The Fox that Released the Hounds

2.1.1 – Introduction

This chapter will explore the ways in which Twentieth Century Fox (henceforth Fox), in the interest of preserving total control over its intellectual property (i.e. *The Simpsons* franchise, its satellite works, and any still or motion picture image thereof), has nurtured a contentious—and, at times outwardly hostile—relationship with online fans and communities. Reporting on a lawsuit against Fox by an actor claiming to have inspired a recurring character on the series in October 2014, Australia's ABC News quotes the lawsuit's statement that the "Simpsons franchise, including the TV series, movie, video game, and associated merchandising, has made over $13.7 billion to date."[1] This chapter will thus examine the gravity with which Fox treats the memes that emerge from one of its most valuable and lucrative assets, and the severity with which the network dispenses with any activity perceived as threatening to or encroaching upon the income associated with that asset.

As this chapter will reveal, Fox's notorious litigiousness has encapsulated and shaped the series from its conception; the Simpson family itself was created as a means by which to circumvent potential licensing and ownership disputes in a hypothetical future. The chapter then follows Fox's efforts (and lack thereof) to negotiate the emergence of its asset as a sensation and its evolution as a cultural institution. Finally, the chapter will explore Fox's fledgling steps—after years of

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[1] No author, "Goodfellas actor Frank Sivero sues Fox Television for $285 million over Simpsons mafia character" (*ABC.net.au*, 23 October 2014), accessed 13 November 2015: http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-23/goodfellas-actor-sues-over-simpsons-mafia-character/5836052

hostility and paranoia with respect to the internet—toward the possibility of convergence—an effort that, for many fans, is far too little, far too late.

2.1.2 – A Very Brief History of Fox

In the mid-1980s, a group called Metromedia Producers Corporation were desperately trying to achieve the impossible: they were trying to establish a "fourth network" in the United States.[2] This means fourth, of course, to the "Big Three" broadcasting networks active at the time: the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), and CBS Broadcasting, Inc. (formerly the Columbia Broadcasting System, which was shortened to "CBS"). Such an exercise was considered an impossible task; others, such as Dumont despite having clout (e.g. programs like Monday Night Boxing, stars such as Jackie Gleason in the mid-1950s, a partnership with Paramount Pictures), had failed to convince enough independent stations to join the network and give it traction in its push against the Big Three for a share of the ratings.[3] Three decades later, media mogul Rupert Murdoch and his latest investment Twentieth Century Fox (whose operations were being overseen by Barry Diller), would buy Metromedia, along with the independent stations it had acquired, and reincorporate the studio's film and television operations under "Fox, Inc."[4]

In order to compete with the major networks, the new Fox Broadcasting Company wooed and assembled an excellent team of business experts, programmers and producers (most of whom had been poached from other networks), among them James L. Brooks, who would lend the new network both "product and credibility," starting with *The Tracey Ullman Show*.[5] With that series as

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[2] Daniel M. Kimmel, *The Fourth Network: How Fox Broke the Rules and Reinvented Television* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 2004), eBook, 18 – 19.
[3] Ibid., 16.
[4] Ibid., 26.
[5] Ibid., 42.

one of its key primetime programs, the Fox Broadcasting Company network

launched in 1987 (under the moniker "Fox" rather than "FBC" as originally

planned).[6] Despite reasonably good ratings on some of its series, the network's first

year was shaky, netting losses for its investors and putting the entire operation at

some risk.[7]

2.1.3 – The Ace in the (Fox) Hole

Harris Katleman, who ran Fox Television in 1989, was overseeing the production of

quality series for all of the major networks; Fox Television does not have any

exclusivity deal with Fox Broadcasting—a salient element of Fox's *Simpsons* story

right up to major developments taking place in 2014, which are explored further

below. Katleman was one of several producers who saw tremendous potential in

the animated bumpers that had been produced for *The Tracey Ullman Show* as a

series in their own right; he showed the bumpers strung together in one seven-

minute reel to the president of ABC, who offered to buy it (and produce it as a

series) on the spot.[8] Katleman cited a moral obligation to offer it to Fox

Broadcasting in order to delay a deal with ABC (although Barry Diller had already

seen it and was hesitant to make the investment), and used ABC's interest to force

Diller to commit to producing 13 episodes—which was the minimum that James L.

Brooks demanded.[9]

   The Simpsons was a tremendously risky investment; the fact that no

primetime animated series had seen measurable success since *The Flintstones*

ended its original run in 1966 was oft cited among executives at Fox in the lead-up

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[6] Ibid., 50.
[7] Ibid., 69.
[8] John Ortved, <u>The Simpsons: An Uncensored, Unauthorized History</u> (New York: Faber and Faber, 2009), print, 70-71.
[9] Ibid., 71-74.

to the decision to green-light the series.[10] Cost was the primary consideration—and primary point of hesitation—for the executives; although Murdoch acknowledges that the investment of "hundreds of thousands per episode" was not hugely significant in retrospect (and in light of the returns on that investment), for a studio that was losing money, *The Simpsons* was a gamble.[11]

While Brooks is credited with securing the writers with plenty of freedom from network interference, Sam Simon is the one who assembled the legendary original writing team.[12] Simon, who had experience in animation, also played a significant role in redesigning the main characters and designing many of the secondary and tertiary Springfieldians, gradually shaping the *Simpsons* look from the crude version (based on Groening's original drawings) as seen on *The Tracey Ullman Show* bumpers to the more rounded, cuter appearance that has remained its trademark for twenty-four seasons.[13] The writing team and the show's appearance (whose legendary colour scheme was initially determined by animator Gabor Csupo and colour designer Gyorgyi Peluce; the bumpers were initially to be produced in black and white) play enormous roles in the series' memetic appeal, and in its meme-ability.

The collaborative nature of the series, from its very inception as minute-long bumpers for a comparatively short-lived series, is at the core of its success; without key contributions by figures from among the executives, the writers, the animators, the producers, and the performers, the series would be missing crucial memetic elements of its tremendous appeal. Despite the fact that Matt Groening gets the most press and the most attention as a creator, the show is strictly collaborative; it has no one author. Alluding to Barthes and to semiotics in his analysis, John

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[10] Ibid., 71.
[11] Ibid., 76.
[12] Ibid., 88.
[13] Ibid., 59.

Ortved offers a brief evaluation of the concept of authorship and its meaning to the series:

> When it comes to a work as collaborative and postmodern as *The Simpsons*, it may not be possible to distribute credit to one, a few, or many individuals. The literary critic Roland Barthes argued that this conception of authorship is practically irrelevant, that the words are already so loaded with meaning and cultural context that he who puts them on the page barely matters. […] *The Simpsons*' "author" is all the works that contributed to the language, signs, and symbols that make up the show, including the infrastructure in which it was created. Seen this way, Rupert Murdoch, Barry Diller, *MAD* magazine, *Saturday Night Live*, Fox, and Bill Cosby all had a hand in making *The Simpsons*, as did all the crappy sitcoms it was responding to, as well as the conservative culture that produced them.[14]

In a relatively short space, Ortved asks and answers two of the questions that rest at the heart of this investigation: what is the nature of authorship both in the series, and specifically with respect to memes? Ortved offers the Barthesian position that authorship is irrelevant both because all creative endeavours are simply remixes of established signs and symbols—or, more accurately for this thesis, all creative endeavours are simply repackagings of familiar memes. He points out that more authors are involved than just those whose names appear in the series' credits, citing earlier influences, Fox network executives, and even the series' most formidable ratings competitor as co-authors. Recalling Edward J. Fink's analysis of humour in the series, and considering other analyses of the series such as Matthew A. Henry's conclusion that the series is an important and clever satire of American culture, and Jonathan Gray's conclusion that through its parody

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[14] Ibid., 67.

the series has contributed enormously to the media literacy of its viewers, along with the obvious success the series has had both in terms of its longevity and its popularity, it can be safely concluded that the series has an unprecedentedly wide appeal.

James L. Brooks, Harris Katleman—and thus, by extension, Barry Diller—knew what potential the series held for ratings. However, once it had been performed, animated and returned to the studio for first viewing, the first episode needed such extensive work that Diller's faith in the series wavered, and the series premiere date was pushed back. Katleman's straightforward summary of the period immediately following that first viewing was that he "had to have brass balls to tough this out because management was really after me, and after Jim [Brooks] and Matt [Groening], because everybody felt that this thing was a train wreck."[15]

Fortunately for all invested, the Christmas episode ("Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire") came back in much better condition. This was the episode the network chose for the series' introduction to viewers on 17 December 1989, and it premiered to a warm reception.[16] It performed well in its Sunday-night time slot for the remaining 12 episodes of the season, with media speculating early on that *The Simpsons* could take down the number one series in the United States, NBC's *The Cosby Show*.[17] Fox decided to test the theory by shifting the series from its Sunday night time-slot to compete directly with NBC's biggest show on NBC's biggest night on Thursday nights at 8p.m.[18] According to Ortved, "The Fox execs knew what they wanted […] This was about taking on the Big Three, moving up to five nights of programming, and becoming a real player in the network game."[19]

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[15] Ibid., 106.
[16] Ibid., 107.
[17] Ibid., 113.
[18] Daniel Cerone, "*Simpsons* and *Cosby* Both Claim Victory—Television: Fox says Bart brought viewers to its new Thursday-night lineup. But NBC's Huxtables remain in the Top 5 Nielsen shows" (*Los Angeles Times*, 7 May 1991), accessed 12 July 2014: http://articles.latimes.com/1991-05-07/entertainment/ca-1558_1_cosby-show
[19] John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 114.

Sam Simon was so incensed with the new arrangement and its inherent risk to the series that he was inspired to create the Dr. Julius Hibbert character—whose sweaters, appearance and profession situate him as an obvious parody of Bill Cosby's character Cliff Huxtable.[20] The sweaters can be highlighted as an excellent example of the types of memes that *The Simpsons* would adapt and make their own; viewers and contemporaries of both series would associate such sweaters with both characters. However, with *The Simpsons* far outperforming *The Cosby Show* in ratings and—crucially—in longevity, viewers and contemporaries only of *The Simpsons* might only associate the sweaters with Dr. Hibbert's character.

The Simpsons began its second season in a strong position against the number-one shows in the same Thursday-night time slots, giving its network a new ratings position: "[w]hen the Big Three began their fall seasons in mid-September, Fox refused to quietly return to fourth place. Of course NBC's hits *The Cosby Show* and *Cheers* won their Thursday-night time slots, but the number two shows in those time periods were not on CBS or ABC. They were Fox's *The Simpsons* and *Beverly Hills 90210.*"[21] Andy Fessel, Fox's then-senior vice president for research (whose demographic research was instrumental in convincing Barry Diller to back *The Simpsons*), had a clear understanding of the demographic making up the audience share that his network had managed to wrangle; the other networks did not consider Fox to be a threat, to the point where one network didn't include Fox's programming on their scheduling board for comparison.[22] However, Fessel knew that Fox's appeal to the 18 – 25 and 18 – 34 demographics—who in 1991 were known as generation X—was the asset on which to capitalise, especially as he knew that CBS's strategy was to focus their programming on the ageing demographic and older viewers.[23]

[20] Ibid., 115.
[21] Daniel M. Kimmel, *The Fourth Network*, 129.
[22] Ibid., 92, 129.
[23] Ibid., 130.

By the end of its second season *The Simpsons* had crippled *The Cosby Show* in the ratings, cementing Fox as a significant contender in the competition for ratings with the major networks; *The Simpsons* had managed to wrangle a significant audience share—about 5.5 million young viewers—from the Huxtables.[24] This led to a decision by NBC to renew *The Cosby Show* for an eighth season following its battle with *The Simpsons*, but for 20% less than it had paid for the previous season ($50 million instead of $62 million).[25] At that time, *The Cosby Show* was the most profitable show in television history, having earned $730 million through reruns.[26] In 2010, a *New York Post* article declared this distinction as belonging to NBC's *Seinfeld*, which had earned $2.7 billion in reruns between its end of production in 1998 and the publication of the article in 2010.[27] Syracuse University Television and Popular Culture professor Robert Thompson is quoted as predicting, "[w]hen the end of world history comes, *The Simpsons* will be the most-rerun show of all time and make the most money."[28]

Fox leveraged its gamble in increasing from three to five nights of programming per week in the 1990 – 1991 season on the first-season success of *The Simpsons*. Additional broadcast hours were necessary to cement the Fox as a genuine contender with the Big Three networks. Despite its performance against *The Cosby Show*, however, Joel Segal (then-executive vice president of the advertising agency McCann-Erickson) did not credit *The Simpsons* for increasing Fox's overall viewership: "'*The Simpsons* really killed *Cosby*, particularly among younger viewers. […] But if you ask: Did *The Simpsons* provide a great flow of audience for Fox? Well, no, not really. Because Fox's audience share dropped

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[24] Daniel Cerone, "*Simpsons* and *Cosby* Both Claim Victory", *The L.A. Times*.
[25] John Lippman, "NBC Renews *Cosby Show* at Lower Fee" (*Los Angeles Times*, 3 May 1991), accessed 11 July 2014: http://articles.latimes.com/1991-05-03/business/fi-1066_1_cosby-show
[26] Ibid.
[27] David K. Li, "$einfeld rakes in 2.7 bil" (*New York Post*, 7 June 2010), accessed 11 July 2014: http://nypost.com/2010/06/07/einfeld-rakes-in-2-7-bil/
[28] Robert Thompson, quoted in David K. Li, "$einfeld rakes in 2.7 bil", *New York Post*.

from 21% at 8 p.m. [*The Simpsons*'s time slot] to 12% at 8:30 p.m. In other words, *Babes* and *Beverly Hills [90210]* have not been able to hold anything near *The Simpsons*'s audience.'"[29]

Arnold Becker, vice president of research at CBS, offered a different insight with respect to the possible implications of *The Simpsons*'s success for Fox: "'They hurt NBC. […] And from an ego point of view they demonstrated it was possible to hurt NBC. […] If they had dreams of building a Thursday night, they didn't do it. […] But in terms of helping Fox in some kind of propagandistic way, to establish themselves as a player, they did do that. . . . They were spoilers, if you will.'"[30]

Former *Simpsons* writer Donick Cary sees a clear connection between *The Simpsons*'s success and that of Fox: "[the series] invented a network. In a lot of ways, the Fox network wouldn't exist without the longevity and the amount of viewers that *The Simpsons* has consistently brought.[31] Harris Katleman does not remember these events in quite the same way: "[the series] didn't save Fox. Rupert [Murdoch]'s got deep pockets and he was determined to make Fox Broadcasting work. Did *The Simpsons* get us noticed? Absolutely. *The Simpsons* made the other networks say, 'Wow. Look out. This is a network waiting to happen.'"[32]

2.1.4 – Merchandising's Economic Capital in the Simpsons World

Whether or not the network executives agree that *The Simpsons* established the Fox network, it is clear that they were aware of the value of their asset. And one aspect beyond ratings that made this clear is the tremendous profitability of the merchandise. "The revenues from the first year of merchandising were estimated at

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[29] Joel Segal, quoted in Daniel Cerone, "*Simpsons* and *Cosby* Both Claim Victory", *The L.A. Times.*
[30] Arnold Becker, quoted in Daniel Cerone, "*Simpsons* and *Cosby* Both Claim Victory", *The L.A. Times.*
[31] John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 115.
[32] Ibid., 116.

$750 million."[33] Ortved describes the smorgasbord of merchandise available to

Simpsons fans, which included "Bart bubblegum, snow boots, notebooks,

underwear, and posters, a Bart air freshener, Simpsons pasta. Burger King sold

Simpson figurines with their burgers; Butterfinger had the Simpsons as their

spokespeople; Bart eventually even did a commercial for Japan Air Lines. At one

point, Bart T-shirts were selling at the rate of one million per day in North

America."[34]

A 19 April 1991 *Los Angeles Times* article observes, "Fox's earnings from

the sale of *Simpsons* products in 1990 are estimated to be about $50.9 million."[35]

An estimate for the initial revenue generated by *Simpsons* merchandise provided by

Nick Griffiths in *The Times Magazine* is staggering: "*Simpsons* merchandise

generated $2 billion worldwide in its first 14 months alone. That includes the usual

clothing, bedding, and alarm clocks, but also Australian Bart, Homer and Lisa

asthma-inhaler covers, car mats, cheque-book holders, condiment sets, bandages,

and sunscreen with moisturisers."[36] During this height of the popularity of *Simpsons*

merchandise, those who stood to gain the most from the official commercial use

(and to lose the most from the non-official commercial use) of *Simpsons* memes

were concerned and were eager to defend their stake—or to gain one.

In light of the series' success, Tracey Ullman sued Fox for breaching the

contract she had signed with Gracie Films: "[t]hat contract provided that she would

get 7.5% of the adjusted gross receipts from her series, including residuals and

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[33] Ibid., 124. See also Dennis McDougal and Daniel Cerone, "Ullman Has a Cow over *Simpsons*: Lawsuit Alleges She Was Cut Out of Millions in Merchandising Profits" (*Los Angeles Times*, 19 April 1991), accessed 19 January 2015: http://articles.latimes.com/1991-04-19/entertainment/ca-419_1_tracey-ullman-show.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Dennis McDougal and Daniel Cerone, "Ullman Has a Cow over *Simpsons*", *The L.A. Times*, 1.
[36] Nick Griffiths, "America's First Family" (*The Times Magazine*, Vol. 5, Issue 16, pp. 25, 27-28, 15 April 2000; reproduced on *NoHomers.net*, transcription by Bruce Gomes), accessed 20 January 2015: http://www.nohomers.net/content/info/articles/17.shtml

spinoff payments."[37] The contract also stated that she should "receive 5% to 10% of

net receipts from "series characters" created for the show other than those she

played."[38] Ullman's three fellow executive producers (Ken Estin, Heide Perlman,

and Jerry Bolson) of *The Tracey Ullman Show*—which had, at the time, recently

been cancelled—also had the same 7.5% contractual requirement. Of the three,

only Estin filed a legal suit against Fox.[39]

McDougal and Cerone speculate that although Ullman's contract was

officially with Gracie Films, Ullman did not name Gracie in the suit in order to avoid

damaging her professional relationship with James L. Brooks, with whom she was

making a film at the time.[40] According to John Ortved, Fox was in control of the

division of the shares of merchandise revenue.[41] It was determined that even

though Gracie Films was not named in the suit, if the suit was successful, any

money that would be awarded to Tracey Ullman and her fellow (former) producers

would come out of Gracie's share. Ortved speculates that because this money

would otherwise belong to James L. Brooks, he opted to testify against Ullman in

court.[42] (Brooks's testimony was that Matt Groening was the sole creator of the

characters, and that Ullman had not been involved.[43]) Ullman ultimately lost the

suit, which—had she won—would have been worth more than $2.25 million.[44] The

jury's decision to reject her claim was based on their interpretation of the contract,

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[37] Dennis McDougal and Daniel Cerone, "Ullman Has a Cow over *Simpsons*", *The L.A. Times*, 1.

[38] Associated Press, "Ullman loses *Simpsons* suit" (*Variety*, 22 October 1992), accessed 19 January 2015: http://variety.com/1992/biz/news/ullman-loses-simpsons-suit-101001/

[39] Associated Press, "Ullman loses *Simpsons* suit", *Variety*. See also John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 132 – 133.

[40] "Dennis McDougal and Daniel Cerone, "Ullman Has a Cow over *Simpsons*", *The L.A. Times*, 1. See also Ortved, 132 and Associated Press, "Ullman loses *Simpsons* suit", *Variety*.

[41] John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 132.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Associated Press, "Ullman loses *Simpsons* suit", *Variety*.

[44] Ibid.

which they concluded did not refer to characters created by people other than Ullman.[45]

Eventually, the four executive producers settled with Fox individually. Ullman kept her original, small stake in *The Simpsons*, while Ken Estin felt swindled by Fox's representatives when he settled for $225,000.[46] Heide Perlman dropped her claim in order to maintain a healthy working relationship with Brooks—they subsequently did two television shows together, both of which failed.[47] The fourth producer, Jerry Belson, was a personal friend of Brooks's in addition to being a colleague.[48] He chose to refrain from any legal action for as long as he could. An anonymous witness to the events stated that Brooks had received a substantial cheque for his merchandise stake, and Brooks had promised an anxious Belson that he was negotiating on Belson's behalf for his own rightful share. However, the ill and financially restrained Belson never received any of this money. He could little afford to take the wealthy network to court, so he settled for $100,000—for a stake that was worth at least 10 times that.[49] He never spoke to Brooks again.

While Brooks had given Belson the impression throughout their conflict that Fox was the obstinate party in the matter, the witness claims that it was Brooks himself who was holding out "'[b]ecause that's who Jim is. […] He'll tell you whatever you want to hear, but it's not the truth. He's a businessman. There's never enough for Jim. It's a sickness.'"[50] Ortved recalls a story that spread at Gracie Films that Brooks had accosted an African American man who was selling bootleg Bart T-shirts. Brooks reportedly shouted at the vendor, "You're taking food out of the mouths of my children!"[51]

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[45] Ken Estin, quoted in John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 132.
[46] John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 133.
[47] Ibid., 134.
[48] Ibid., 134 – 135.
[49] Ibid., 135.
[50] Anonymous witness, quoted in John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 135.
[51] John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 129.

Whether or not the witnesses' version of these events is accurate, Brooks, Groening and Simon made vast sums of money from merchandising. Agent and producer Gavin Polone recalls, "'Matt, Sam and Jim (having seen profit take and things like that) collected well over $600 million . . . My recollection was that of the total pie, they had 50 percent."[52] *The Tracey Ullman Show* producer Ken Estin recalls that naïve negotiators at Fox had given Groening a "'much bigger piece [of the merchandising revenues] than anyone will ever get again 'cause they had no idea.'"[53] According to Estin, prior to *The Simpsons*, the only other sitcom for which merchandise had been produced was *M*A*S*H*, and those revenues were negligible. "[Fox] were just playing hardball with Matt wanting to merchandise the characters because that's what they do. They screw everybody they can. What they did is give him a much bigger piece than they thought would ever matter [by giving Matt a bigger share of future merchandising, they could pay him less for his cartoons appearing on the show]."[54]

It does seem strange that Fox would allow themselves to repeat (if only in part) the same mistake they made with George Lucas; in 1975, Lucas negotiated an initial pay cut for directing *Star Wars* in exchange for all of the merchandising rights, the rights to all of the characters, and his retention of sequel rights.[55] Fox agreed because it struck them as a good deal at the time. Their egregious error was their underestimation of the value of merchandising; in an article for *The Telegraph*, Chris Taylor notes that the Star Wars franchise "has brought more than $32 billion in merchandising sales alone, and that number […] is increasing by at least $1.5 billion

[52] Gavin Polone, quoted in John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 124.
[53] Ken Estin, quoted in John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 50.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Marla Matzer, "By George, He Can Thank His Lucky 'Stars'" (*Los Angeles Times*, 6 February 1997), accessed 30 October 2015: http://articles.latimes.com/1997-02-06/business/fi-25849_1_star-wars

per year."[56] According to Tom Pollock, who was George Lucas's attorney and the individual who negotiated the legendary deal, "Nobody will admit to being the person at Fox who let this deal happen."[57]

Nevertheless, ten years later, Fox made almost exactly the same deal with Matt Groening. In return for an initial pay-cut, Groening made off with a hefty share of the merchandising and final say on each article of official *Simpsons* merchandise before it can go on sale.[58] In fact, the Simpson family characters were created so Fox could circumvent the prospect of paying heavy royalties to Groening and his publisher for using Groening's *Life in Hell* characters on television.[59] According to former Fox President of Entertainment Garth Ancier and former Film Roman president Phil Roman, Groening hastily sketched the Simpson family upon Gracie Films producer Richard Sakai's request for "new characters that we don't have to pay the publisher for?"[60]

It is objectively clear that, particularly at the height of Simpsonmania in 1990 – 1991, those in the circle of valuable stakeholders in *Simpsons* merchandise benefitted enormously not just from the stakes themselves, but also from keeping the circle to as few members as possible. The revenues from the merchandise were of an obviously high value, and much of this came from the licensing agreements that enabled manufacturers legally to create and distribute *Simpsons* merchandise.[61] Despite receiving up to 100 licensing requests per day, Fox decided to limit licensing to about 75 official licensees; this ultimately ill-advised decision was taken to establish a demand for *Simpsons* merchandise, but instead

[56] Chris Taylor, "'Look at the size of that thing!': How Star Wars makes its billions" (*The Telegraph*, 29 May 2015), accessed 30 October 2015: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/star-wars-the-force-awakens/george-lucas-box-office-disney/
[57] Tom Pollock, quoted in Marla Matzer, "By George, He Can Thank His Lucky 'Stars'", *The L.A. Times.*
[58] John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 50.
[59] Ken Estin, quoted in John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 48.
[60] Garth Ancier, quoted in John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 48.
[61] "Ullman Has a Cow over *Simpsons*", 1.

established a healthy market for bootlegs.[62] This last point is a very important one, as it establishes both the value and revenue contained within intellectual property and its associated memes, and the cultural value these memes have to the fans who consume them.

2.1.5 – Merchandising's Economic Capital Meets Its Cultural Capital:

Variations on the Bootleg Bart Shirt

Of the many available examples of memetic merchandise, Bart T-shirts are perhaps the best. Bart's urtextual appearance alone is a highly recognisable—and relatively easily-reproduced—meme. As Bart was the then-star of the series (the focus shifted to Homer throughout the second, third and fourth seasons and has remained there ever since), Bart's urtextual catchphrases are just as crucial a memetic tool to his image for the proliferation of clothing bearing his likeness. These catchphrases included "Don't have a cow, man!", "Ay caramba!", "Underachiever and proud of it!", and, of course, "I'm Bart Simpson. Who the hell are you?" Though Ortved acknowledges the brevity of the shirts' popularity between 1990 and 1991, the rate and volume at which they were being consumed is both a testament to the success of the Bart meme, and evidence of the value of those memes—to Fox in their profitability, and to fans as cultural evidence of their fandom.[63]

In addition to its obvious cultural significance (which will be revisited shortly in the following sub-section), individuals who were otherwise unrelated to the series or to the network were drawn by the potential levels of exposure and income that the inclusion of the urtextual Bart meme could bring.[64] Former *Simpsons* writer Conan O'Brien recalls Matt Groening's reports on the plethora of bootlegged Bart Simpson t-shirts that surfaced during and following the series' first season "Friends

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[62] "Ullman Has a Cow over *Simpsons*", 1.
[63] John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 129.
[64] Ibid, 120 – 121; 129.

of Matt's would be traveling and they would find bootlegged *Simpsons* merchandise. Sometimes they were funny and sometimes they were disturbing. Like […] T-shirts that were made from some country—recently liberated from the Iron Curtain—that had Bart saying weird phrases that were mildly threatening or racist."[65]

Fox was swiftly litigious with those who used their unlicensed intellectual property. On 11 May 1990 it was reported that Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp. (Fox Broadcasting Co.'s parent corporation) was suing 22 stores in Philadelphia alone for selling counterfeit *Simpsons* merchandise.[66] Fox attorney Zachary T. Wobensmith III makes Fox's position on unlicensed use of *Simpsons* imagery very clear: "The only thing I can tell you is that Twentieth Century Fox is going to enforce its copyrights and prosecute anyone who is selling, distributing or manufacturing unlicensed Simpsons items."[67] Wobensmith confirmed that similar lawsuits had concurrently been filed in Washington and Dallas, and that Fox was seeking $50,000 in compensatory damages, $1 million or more in punitive damages, injunctions against the stores to stop sales of the merchandise, and the seizure of the unlicensed merchandise.[68]

Despite Wobensmith's caveat, the bootlegging of *Simpsons* merchandise continued well into the following year. In 1991, Fox acted on information they received from the Anti-Defamation League that "a skinhead group, the White Aryan Resistance, began selling T-shirts featuring a *sieg-heiling* Bart saying, 'Total Nazi, Dude.'"[69] Fox's Licensing and Merchandising Corp. filed a lawsuit against white supremacist Tom Metzger, leader of the White Aryan Resistance group in Los

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[65] Ibid., 128.
[66] Julia C. Martinez, "Fox Sues 22 Philadelphia Stores Over *Simpsons* Sales" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 May 1990), accessed 07 February 2015: http://articles.philly.com/1990-05-11/business/25889170_1_simpsons-t-shirts-counterfeit-items-simpsons-merchandise
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 128; emphasis in the original.

Angeles on 8 May 1991.[70] Representatives of the Anti-Defamation League had

alerted Fox in January 1991 when members saw advertisements for "Nazi Bart T-

shirts" in the White Aryan Resistance group's newsletter; the group also "advertised

the T-shirts over its 'Aryan Update' hotline."[71]

According to the longer of two 9 May *Los Angeles Times* articles, the T-

shirts depicted Bart with a swastika band on his arm, giving the Nazi salute, and

featured the message "Pure Nazi-Dude."[72] This description of the shirt differs

slightly from Ortved's; it is unclear whether there was more than one design in

distribution. The Anti-Defamation League discovered the advertisements as part of

a campaign targeting cartoonists and their syndicates about the unlicensed use of

their images to promote racism and hatred.[73]

Both 9 May 1991 *L.A. Times* articles reveal that Metzger had already

stopped using Bart's likeness to sell his T-shirts. In the longer article, Metzger told

his interviewer, "'They [Fox] sent me a letter a couple of weeks ago, sort of cease

and desist, and I said OK. […] I guess Bart was under 18 and he couldn't join the

Nazi party. That's sort of a problem. […] If they want to go to court, OK. It'll

probably cost more money than it's worth."[74] Though the letters Metzger alleges to

have received from Fox are not reproduced in the article (Metzger's interview was

given by telephone), it is safe to conclude that Bart's age is not even a factor in—let

alone the primary reason for—Fox's insistence that Metzger stop using Bart's image

to spread his bigotry. In addition to the alleged letters, Fox's legal action taken

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[70] No author, "Group Sued for Portrayal of Bart Simpson as Nazi" (*Los Angeles Times*, 9 May 1991), accessed 02 February 2015: http://articles.latimes.com/1991-05-09/local/me-1916_1_bart-simpson-character. See also Ortved, 128.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Associated Press, "Bart Not a 'Nazi-Dude,' Fox Tells Metzger" (*Los Angeles Times*, 9 May 1991), accessed 02 February 2015: http://articles.latimes.com/1991-05-09/local/me-1777_1_bart-character "Bart Not a 'Nazi-Dude'".

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid. Metzger's wish to avoid the courts is hardly surprising given the extensive legal action already taken against him; the article reveals that, through various channels of propaganda, Metzger (along with his son and his group) was found to have incited two skinheads to murder an Ethiopian immigrant. This resulted in a $12.5 million judgment against him.

against Metzger includes a complaint of copyright infringement, a request for a temporary restraining order, and a request for the imposition of an injunction against Metzger.

On 5 June 1991, a third *Los Angeles Times* article reveals the outcome of the litigation against Metzger: Metzger agreed to stop using the images in advertisements in his newsletters (according to him, this was "the main thing [Twentieth Century Fox] wanted").[75] Though Metzger claimed to have complied with Fox's wishes through written correspondence several weeks before, Fox clearly had an interest in seeing the case through to an official judgment. Though Fox made no official comments on the matter, it does appear as though the network wished to make an example of Metzger to ensure that their intellectual property was not used in this way again.

While the prospect of legal action might successfully deter some would-be bootleggers, Metzger reveals an outcome that would be detrimental to Fox's efforts: "Actually we had only sold about 16 or 17 shirts, but, when the story hit the press, I could have sold a thousand of them. I had people calling from all over."[76] Even though the case was not widely reported, the little coverage received by Fox's litigation against Metzger did create substantially more interest in Metzger's product than had existed before. Metzger demonstrated an understanding of the wide appeal Bart's image had at the time, especially on T-shirts: "'We like to use humour and satire like anyone else does. […] I didn't create this particular [Nazi Bart] character. The shirts were sent to me by someone else. We always like to use things that we think are funny."[77]

As has been established in the earlier analysis of Fink's work and the significance of humour to mass appeal earlier, humour can contribute immensely to

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[75] Associated Press, "Metzger Agrees to Stop Portraying Bart as Nazi" (*Los Angeles Times*, 5 June 1991), accessed 2 February 2015: http://articles.latimes.com/1991-06-05/local/me-128_1_metzger-nazi-bart
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.

the appeal and proliferation of memes. While the comic value of a Nazi Bart

Simpson is clearly subjective, it is interesting that Metzger does not acknowledge

(or, perhaps, consider) the appeal of Bart Simpson as a political figure: Bart is an

unapologetically rebellious and subversive personality. Even more interesting is

that the exact blend of comedy and politics that Bart embodies is what made him

appeal to another set of bootleggers—a much more prolific and successful set of

bootleggers who also happened (in some ways) to be Metzger's political opposites.

2.1.6 – Black Bart

In June 1990, it was reported that Bart-T-shirt-hawking street vendors (like the one

reportedly accosted by James L. Brooks) were doing a booming business with a

specific variation on the Bart Simpson meme: "In New York, Chicago and Los

Angeles, business is thriving for street vendors of T-shirts that picture Bart Simpson

as an [*sic*] boy of color. One typical shirt, bought for $5 last week in New York,

pictures Bart with lines shaved in his hair."[78] By the summer of 1990, Black Bart

had become an enormous and well-reported phenomenon, and, as is suggested in

the preceding quote, the adaptation is not simply accomplished with a change in

Bart's skin tone from the urtextual yellow to brown. In fact, Black Bart's skin might

not be brown at all (see below). Bart's image was adapted to one embodying

African American culture through the addition of other memes that were popular

among and expressive of those who practised the culture.

A *Washington Post* article, which reports that "Young black folks across the

country have adopted the wise-cracking lad from *The Simpsons*—that wildly popular

TV cartoon satire of white middle-class family life—as one of their own," also

elaborates upon the types of imagery often seen on the bootlegged shirts. "At

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[78] No author, "Rainbow Bart" (*The News-Journal*, 27 June 1990; scanned and posted on
BootlegBart.com, 27 June 2015), accessed 30 October 2015:
http://www.bootlegbart.com/blog/daytona-beach-the-news-journal-june-27th-1990

sidewalk stands everywhere, there is Bart wearing Nikes and sweat pants, Bart with

a thick gold chain around his neck, Bart dancing to a beat box, Bart with cool 'tracks'

shaved across the side of his head. And whether his skin is a naturalistic brown or

a phosphorescent green, he's often uttering lines from hit rap songs."[79] In his

Chicago Tribune article on the Black Bart phenomenon, Michel Marriott observes,

"[w]earing a gold tooth, matching gold chains and an attitude, or sporting the colours

of the African National Congress, Bart has appeared in the personae of Malcolm X,

Michael Jordan ('Air Bart'), Bob Marley (Rasta Bart) and dozens of other black

personages."[80]

The above-named are people and memes that hold meaning within African-

American culture of the early 1990s, covering celebrities and political leaders, along

with manners of dress, hairstyles, jewellery, and lyrics from popular music. (The

named celebrities and leaders all have appearances with memetic associations:

Malcolm X's glasses, Bob Marley's dreadlocks, Michael Jordan's trademark slam

dunks and his Chicago Bulls uniform). Combined with the familiar memes of Bart's

urtextual image and personality, bootleggers formed a new meme all their own, and

in so doing, birthed a new spokesperson for young black Americans. A *Milwaukee

Journal* reprint of the *Washington Post* article features an accompanying photo

showing a young African American man posing with a basketball and wearing a

hairstyle popular among black men at the time and known as a "high-top fade", and

a Black Bart T-shirt. The T-shirt's image is of a brown-skinned Bart, also posed with

a basketball, wearing a basketball uniform (emblazoned with a large "0") and hi-top

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[79] David Mills, "Bootleg Black Bart Simpson, The Hip-Hop T-Shirt Star" (*The Washington Post*, 28 June 1990), accessed 30 October 2015: https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1990/06/28/bootleg-black-bart-simpson-the-hip-hop-t-shirt-star/11b3b65d-4033-41da-a5f7-e13ea56ce498/
[80] Michel Marriott, "That's Racial Dude: Black Youths Adopt 'Black Bart' Simpsons As One of Their Own" (*Chicago Tribune*, 21 November 1990), 28 October 2015: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1990-11-21/entertainment/9004070126_1_bart-simpson-black-man-black-bart

sneakers, sporting an angular African American hairstyle, and uttering a variation on his familiar epithet: "I'm Bart Benson. Who the hell are you?"[81]

The name adjustment from Simpson to Benson could be an allusion to the ABC series *Benson*, which had spun off the series *Soap* and which focused on the character Benson DuBois, played by Robert Guillaume. The series ran from 1979 – 1986, and though African-American Benson started as a butler/head-of-household for a wealthy white family, he had by the end of the series become a lieutenant governor, running for governor. It was a successful series focused on and starring a prominent—and personally and politically successful—African American character.

Matt Groening gave a telephone interview for the *Washington Post* article, joking that Bart's specific appeal to members of the African American community might owe to the fact that the character is, in truth, black. While Groening could not otherwise seriously explain this particular phenomenon, he acknowledges a few things Bart might have in common with his black fans. However, this quickly turns into what appears to be a plug for the first *Simpsons* album, "The Simpsons Sing the Blues," due to be released that fall. Though Groening confirmed that he found the response to Bart "flattering" and that "the creativity of the way people respond to the show is fantastic," he was conflicted: "You have to have mixed feelings when you're getting ripped off. […] I don't like these smokestack factories belching out bootleg Simpsons T-shirts. It's a huge business. 20th Century Fox takes this matter extremely seriously. There have been busts all over the country."[82]

Though philosophically supportive of the fans' enthusiasm for Bart's image and personality, and of Bart's appropriation as a representative of a culture other than the one in which he was conceived, Groening focuses on the bottom line. His

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[81] David Mills, "Bootleg Black Bart Simpson", *The Washington Post*, reprinted as No author, "Bart wins over fans among blacks: Bootleg T-shirts selling all over the country" (*The Milwaukee Journal*, 29 July 1990; scanned and posted on *BootlegBart.com*, 3 March 2015), accessed 30 October 2015: http://www.bootlegbart.com/blog/the-milwaukee-journal-july-29th-1990

[82] David Mills, "Bootleg Black Bart Simpson", *The Washington Post*.

only negative issue with the phenomenon of Black Bart is that someone else is making money from his memes (more on Groening's relationship to bootlegs will follow). The monetary value of memes is evidenced strongly in Groening's position, and, once again, meme authorship becomes a crucial aspect of consideration. The earnings per bootleg vendor per day are not particularly staggering; Mills's interview with a New York City vendor (who wished to remain anonymous) revealed that in a day, he would sell perhaps 25 T-shirts total (though most were Bart-related) for $6 – $8 each. Of course, given the number of street vendors operating each day in major American cities, this number increases exponentially, and would certainly be a point of contention for Fox. David Rambeau, the director of Project BAIT (Black Awareness in Television), was sure that financial gain was the primary impetus driving bootleggers to hawk Black Bart.[83] Though their *Simpsons* merchandise revenues are humble compared to those with stakes in the licensed products, the vendors were more than aware of the monetary value of the memes they were integrating.

The cultural value of the mixed memes was also clear to sellers, buyers and observers alike; the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* featured an article whose headline exclaims, "Black Bart is everywhere."[84] Black Bart T-shirt vendors had made their way to a freedom rally held in Atlanta in June 1990 for famed anti-apartheid activist, revolutionary, African National Congress Deputy President, and future South African president Nelson Mandela. According to David Mills in the *Washington Post* article, Mandela himself was featured on a very popular bootleg in New York City. He describes the imagery on the shirt: "South African leader Nelson Mandela is standing over Bart, who's saying, 'He's my hero.'"[85]

[83] David Rambeau, quoted in Michel Marriott, "That's Racial Dude", *Chicago Tribune*, 1.
[84] Steve Murray, "Black Bart is everywhere" (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 4 July 1990; scanned and posted on *BootlegBart.com*, 4 July 2015), accessed 30 October 2015: http://www.bootlegbart.com/blog/1
[85] David Mills, "Bootleg Black Bart Simpson", *The Washington Post*.

One of the vendors at Mandela's Atlanta event, whose bootleg Black Bart T-shirts were reportedly made locally (and not in a smokestack factory, as Groening feared), was asked what Bart's cross-racial appeal was. She replied, "Bart is reality. Bart is life."[86] An Atlanta-based media psychologist was also asked to provide an opinion on the basis of the phenomenon: "When you witness all of the aggressive popular comedy today, it suggests this is a country that on some level understands we're angry with what's going on here. […] This notion of George Bush [Sr.]'s kinder, gentler nation is experiencing a counterreaction."[87] Harry Allen, a music writer associated with the rap group Public Enemy, and who is also credited as a "hip-hop activist", describes Bart's appeal—both to himself and to the black community: "[Watching *The Simpsons* is] the most attention I give to white people during the course of a week. [… The show's] lack of pretension just resonates in general with the way black people view the world."[88]

Bart is not the first character to undergo such a transformation; David Mills reminds his reader of a similar phenomenon, this time with Disney trademarks Mickey and Minnie Mouse being "Afro-Americanized [… on] T-shirts a few years ago."[89] However, the author notes that this fad was mostly overlooked, especially in comparison to Bart's popularity. Michel Marriott recalls similar treatments of Betty Boop and, in 1989, of Batman undergoing attempted "Black Man" modifications. The major element that caused these memes' failure to proliferate where Bart's succeeded is that Betty, Batman, Mickey, and Minnie didn't demonstrated the subversive, sassy, anti-authority deportment that characterised Bart Simpson from his inception—Groening famously named him "Bart" as an anagram of the word

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[86] Jessica Charter, quoted in Steve Murray, "Black Bart is everywhere", *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.*
[87] Dr. David Turkat, quoted in Steve Murray, "Black Bart is everywhere", *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.*
[88] Harry Allen, quoted in David Mills, "Bootleg Black Bart Simpson", *The Washington Post.*
[89] David Mills, "Bootleg Black Bart Simpson", *The Washington Post..*

"brat".[90] Given Allen's conjectures on why Bart appealed so strongly to the black community, it is easy to see why a Black Mickey and Minnie meme failed to proliferate like Black Bart; it wasn't enough to subvert a character that was otherwise immaculate. The character had inherently to embody at least some of the subversive characteristics with which the community identified. Allen hesitated to say that Bart was "kind of black. I don't mean that. He's just got some very unusual characteristics, from his haircut to his use of the word 'homeboy' infrequently, to even his general sassiness."[91]

One of the artists behind the shirts, who produced a unique image on each shirt by hand, summed Bart's widespread appeal to the character's flexibility: "almost anyone can relate to him."[92] This sentiment is echoed by 23-year-old New York native Derrick Saunders, who balked at the prospect of a black George Jetson, Fred Flintstone, or other popular protagonist of prime-time animation; Saunders simply felt that there was "something about Bart" that he found appealing.[93]

Not everyone in the black community agreed that Black Bart was a positive phenomenon.   While some applauded their children's rejection of what is essentially a white character until more of their children's own perspectives and cultural elements were incorporated, others identified that very incorporation as one that proliferated negative stereotypes about the black community in an era when positive media and popular representations were rare.[94] Bart's original slogans, unaltered and coupled with an applied African American appearance, could indeed promote negative stereotypes about the behaviour of black American children. Oba-Ta-Iye, a Harlem-based street vendor of T-shirts, was firm in his decision not to sell anything featuring images of Black Bart, regardless of any increased revenue

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[90] Nathan Rabin, "Matt Groening" (*The A.V. Club*, "T.V. Club", 26 April 2006), accessed 4 June 2012: http://www.avclub.com/article/matt-groening-13984
[91] Harry Allen, quoted in David Mills, "Bootleg Black Bart Simpson", *The Washington Post.*.
[92] Tony Jackson, quoted in Michel Marriott, "That's Racial Dude", *Chicago Tribune*, 1.
[93] Derrick Saunders, quoted in Michel Marriott, "That's Racial Dude", *Chicago Tribune*, 2.
[94] Michel Marriott, "That's Racial Dude", *Chicago Tribune*, 1.

they could bring to his stand. He took particular exception to Bart's language and attitude: "This is a disgrace, that our people buy this stuff. It's messing up black kids."[95]

Black Bart would gradually lose his appeal even to his biggest fans; Simpsonmania died down and took Black Bart with it. There are many who have not forgotten the significance of the composite character, and chief among them is a UK-based man known only as "Leo". Though Leo has an enthusiasm for bootleg Bart T-shirts of all persuasions, he is particularly interested in Black Bart. He keeps a blog on his website on which he posts clippings from old newspaper articles focused on Black Bart (and on other Bart bootlegs), as well as links to other Bart bootleg enthusiasts and vintage vendors. His *modus operandi* is laid out succinctly in Dave Schilling's October 2014 Leo-centred *VICE Magazine* article: "His goal is to preserve as many Bootleg Bart shirts as he possibly can, while also educating people on the numerous ethnic and racial issues that come from making Bart Simpson black."[96]

The interviewer points out some Black Bart T-shirt designs with particularly problematic racial imagery, reminiscent of hurtful caricatures of the early- to mid-20th century. Leo, who posts images of the more controversial-looking bootlegs along with the others, and who has received abuse for doing so, defends the importance of the exposure of those pieces along with the more acceptable or positive ones.[97] He is in the process of compiling a book and exhibit of his collection, which he feels will provide readers and spectators with a sense of context and of the political panorama of the time. Leo also focuses on Gulf War-related bootlegs, which often

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[95] Oba-Ta-Iye, quoted in Michel Marriott, "That's Racial Dude", *Chicago Tribune*,, 2.
[96] Dave Schilling, "We Met the World's Leading Authority on Bootleg Bart Simpson T-Shirts" (*VICE Magazine*, 1 October 2014), accessed 30 October 2015: http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/how-bart-simpson-became-a-hip-hop-icon-930
[97] Ibid.

feature a fatigue-clad Bart as an American soldier, engaging in military action or abusing an Iraqi citizen (often former dictator Saddam Hussein).[98]

Leo's objective—to maintain an online (end eventual printed) museum of the political landscape as told through the varied narratives of Bootleg Bart—is a testament to the cultural significance of *The Simpsons* from its inception as an independent series. Although her focus is on digital memes, Limor Shifman offers some insight into the political use of memes; she notes that the digital era has led those studying politics to acknowledge that there exist more than the easily-measurable methods of political participation. She observes that young people—those who are the least likely to or are too young to participate more directly in politics—tend to exploit the opportunities offered by social media to express their political views. Black Bart (and other iterations of Bootleg Bart) are a means by which youths could express their own opinions on the world around them. Shifman asserts that political memes tend to serve three interlinked objectives: "Memes as forms of persuasion or political advocacy. […] Memes as grassroots action. […] Memes as modes of expression and public discussion."[99]

Black Bart fulfils each criterion of a political meme, as do some forms of Bootleg Bart (including Metzger's despicable and short-lived "Total Nazi-Dude" version). These memes' political function draws a clear distinction between these rip-offs and Groening's "smokestack factory" versions. According to Leo, Fox did not really pursue any vendors or producers of the Black and Bootleg Bart shirts; they were more interested in stopping the counterfeiters: "the shirts that were trying to pass as official merchandise."[100]

Thus, while Fox pursued some of the bootleggers (such as Metzger, for obvious reasons other than mere financial ones), their disputes were primarily with

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[98] Ibid.
[99] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014, pp. 122 – 123), print.
[100] Dave Schilling, "We Met the World's Leading Authority" *VICE*.

those counterfeiters who were trying to emulate the real thing—and steal pieces of

the merchandising pie—with their bogus products. Thus, in this case, their

litigations were not aimed directly at their fans; their lawsuits were aimed at those

who sought to make a significant profit from Fox's intellectual property. Neither

Simpsons creatives nor Fox's attorneys appeared to be particularly concerned with

the use of their memes for bespoke political purposes (Metzger's version excepted);

Matt Groening even collects bootlegged *Simpsons* merchandise for his own interest

and amusement.[101] However, with the dawn of the internet era, this amnesty toward

fans was about to disappear.

2.1.7 – Fox v. Fans

TheSimpsonsArchive.com[102] (*The Simpsons Archive*) was founded by members of

alt.tv.simpsons, a pre-World Wide Web newsgroup formed during the first season of

The Simpsons.[103] Much of the material on the site came from painstaking

information repositories assembled by fans of the series on *alt.tv.simpsons*-

associated newsgroups. *The Simpsons Archive* also has an excellent record of

online *Simpsons* fandom, including a timeline of online fan persecution by the Fox

legal department that was created by *NoHomers.net* founder and long-time

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[101] Matt Groening, quoted in Nathan Rabin, "Matt Groening" (*A.V. Club*, "T.V. Club", 26 April 2006), accessed 4 June 2012: http://www.avclub.com/article/matt-groening-13984. See also Jon Blistein, "Matt Groening Blasts Fred Armisen's Bootleg *Simpsons* Shirt on *Portlandia*" (*Rolling Stone*, 12 February 2015), accessed 30 October 2015: http://www.rollingstone.com/tv/videos/matt-groening-blasts-fred-armisens-bootleg-simpsons-shirt-on-portlandia-20150212
The latter piece covers Matt Groening's appearance in a *Portlandia* sketch in which Groening takes an obnoxious bicycle messenger to court for the Bootleg Bart shirt the messenger wore. The shirt features Bart crudely drawn as a ska punk (he is depicted doing the simple dance known as "skanking"), and is emblazoned with the dubious pun "Bart Ska-mpson". Bart's speech bubble reads, "I'm A Rudeboy" ("rudeboy" is a term borrowed from the reggae scene to describe a ska music enthusiast). Blistein describes the climax of the scene: "Groening steps in to note he has no problem with bootleg *Simpsons* merch, but this shirt is so terrible, he cannot abide. 'Your Honor, there are no damages really, I would just like this to stop.'"
[102] *TheSimpsonsArchive.com* was formerly *SNPP.com* for "Springfield Nuclear Power Plant"—a reference to Homer's place of work. The site no longer operates on the old URL, but has advised users to update their links to reflect the change.
[103] No author, "About the Archive" (*The Simpsons Archive*, n.d), accessed 14 August 2014: http://simpsonsarchive.com/about.html (formerly http://www.snpp.com/about.html).

administrator Eric Wirtanen. Such action against online fans is well-known to *The Simpsons Archive*; even in the "About" section, the site features the following disclaimer under its "Submission Guidelines" heading: "Twentieth Century Fox ruthlessly defends its copyrighted work by issuing Cease & Desist orders to fan sites housing said content. While we sympathize with those who have fallen victim to Fox, we prefer to avoid legal entanglements by steering clear of multimedia."[104]

Wirtanen and Wolf list 59 incidents between March 1997 and March 2004 in which *Simpsons* fan sites received Cease-and-Desist letters from Fox.[105] Some sites received more than one during the prescribed period; Wirtanen's sites received at least three. Wirtanen created his first *Simpsons* fan site on Geocities.com in February 1998, then moved it a few months later to SimpleNet.com (on the URL http://zenith.simplenet.com/simpsons/); he called it *Evergreen Terrace*, after the Springfield street on which the Simpson family resides.[106] *Evergreen Terrace* had a short life; Eric Wirtanen received his first Cease-and-Desist letter from Fox's attorneys on 7 September 1999.[107] The primary issue for Fox was the site's downloadable *Simpsons* content, which included "screen grabs, sound bytes, wallpaper".[108] Wirtanen emailed Fox to reassure them that he would comply, and closed the SimpleNet site to make it appear as though he had.[109] However, shortly

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[104] Ibid.

[105] Eric Wirtanen and Adam Wolf, "Guide to *The Simpsons* on the Net", (*The Simpsons Archive*, n.d), first accessed 12 October 2011 on the domain snpp.com, now located at: http://www.simpsonsarchive.com/guides/net.html

[106] No author, "Information: About This Website – The Evergreen Terrace Era" (*NoHomers.net*, n.d.), accessed 16 January 2012: http://www.nohomers.net/content/info/website/

[107] Eric Wirtanen and Adam Wolf, "Guide to *The Simpsons* on the Net", *The Simpsons Archive*.

[108] Eric Wirtanen, quoted in John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 242. See also: No author, "Information: About This Website – The Evergreen Terrace Era", *NoHomers.net*.

[109] Eric Wirtanen and Adam Wolf, "Guide to *The Simpsons* on the Net – Pushed to Extinction", *The Simpsons Archive*. See also: No author, "Information: About This Website – The Evergreen Terrace Era", *NoHomers.net*.

after this he added the same content that had troubled Fox on a new website at the URL: http://www.milpool.com.[110]

Fox's attorneys were watching the fan sites closely during this period; Wirtanen was swiftly discovered in his new online home and received a second Cease-and-Desist letter from Fox on 8 December 1999.[111] Later that month, he contacted Fox attorney Dennis Wilson by telephone to discuss the terms of that month's Cease-and-Desist letter:

> [Wilson] reiterated that all copyright infringements would need to be removed ASAP or Fox would take legal action. The dumb thing was that during the conversation he seemed to be making up things as he went along. Eric says, "*He asked me what Winamp skins were, and after a short pause he stated "They'll have to go." I personally have no idea what Fox considers to be a violation anymore. It seems they simply don't want anything related to The Simpsons to be on your computer. It's ridiculous.*"[112]

Nick Laws, who ran his own *Simpsons* fan site called *The Simpsons Showcase*, also spoke over the telephone with Dennis Wilson.[113] Unlike Wirtanen's impression that Wilson was creating the rules—and doing so spontaneously, Laws left his conversation with Wilson feeling that the latter was merely a mouthpiece for a much larger network contingent.[114] Laws understood that Wilson was given a list of sites by other staff at the network (who may have come across the sites through their own searches, or through tips from parents of users), along with a detailed list

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[110] Ibid. See also: No author, "Information: About This Website – The Evergreen Terrace Era", *NoHomers.net*.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Eric Wirtanen and Adam Wolf, "Guide to *The Simpsons* on the Net – Here We Go Again", *The Simpsons Archive*, italics in the original.
[113] Nick Laws, quoted in Eric Wirtanen and Adam Wolf, "Guide to *The Simpsons* on the Net – A New Era", *The Simpsons Archive*". Please note that Laws's telephone conversation with Wilson took place two years after Eric Wirtanen's.
[114] Ibid.

of unacceptable content.[115] "Fox [would] give him a list of content. Fox are very vigilant about protecting their work and break everything down into categories for Wilson to sift through all the site, marking down what's there and pasting it into the C&D letter."[116] Although Laws's own site never recovered from the reconstruction required by Fox, Laws still held Wilson in esteem. He speaks favourably of Fox's attorney, stating that the man had been understanding, open and helpful through the process.[117]

Despite his own misgivings about the legitimacy of Fox's complaints, after his conversation with Wilson, Wirtanen knew that he was under considerable scrutiny. In a more sincere attempt to comply with Fox's demands, Wirtanen removed the content that Fox cited in the letter (on which Dennis Wilson provided further specification), and shifted the site's focus to something of a *Simpsons* news site.[118] He updated it daily with news stories about the series.[119] It was during this reconstructive phase that Wirtanen made a fateful decision to incorporate a message board his site; he called it the "No Homers Club" and launched it on 27 August 2001.[120] He managed to keep his site running for nearly one more year, but he ultimately shut down completely on 2 August 2002; despite his efforts to remove offending content, Fox had continued to pursue him.[121] Wirtanen estimates that between his first letter in 1998 and his website's final day in 2002, he received a total of seven Cease-and-Desist letters.[122] Wirtanen recalls, "[g]radually I removed everything, bowing to [Fox's] wishes, but they just kept going after me until I couldn't take it anymore. They forced me to remove the advertisements I had on the page,

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[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.
[118] No author, "Information: About This Website – The Evergreen Terrace Era", *NoHomers.net*.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Eric Wirtanen, quoted in John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 242. See also: No author, "Information: About This Website – The Evergreen Terrace Era", *NoHomers.net*.
[122] Ibid., 241.

which kept it afloat. I wasn't making any money; I had no other way to pay for the site. I did not want to be involved in a lawsuit, being a poor college student. I had no choice but to take it down.[123]

It is Wirtanen's last point that cements Fox's familiar point of contention; the network's priority was to ensure that no other parties would earn money through the exhibition or distribution of Fox's intellectual property. It is implicit in Wirtanen's account that he did not earn more from these advertisements than the cost of maintaining the website; he does not allude to having made any profits, and refers to having been a "poor college student" with "no other way to pay for the site."[124] Wirtanen stayed committed to his desire to provide a place for discussion of all things *Simpsons*, so he focused on keeping only *The No Homers Club* message board open.[125] Once he'd closed *Evergreen Terrace*, he moved the message board around a few URLs until settling the site on its current *NoHomers.net* URL in October 2002. There it remained a simple message board until Wirtanen and his new partner, Jacob Burch, created a portal site around it in early 2005.[126]

Fox began to ease its pursuit of fan sites starting in late 2002.[127] According to *The Simpsons Archive* administrator Jouni Pakkinen, "[e]ventually, instead of banning everything, Fox laid out some ground rules and the sites that have followed them have lately been left in peace."[128] *No Homers* has since come to thrive as the largest *Simpsons* fan site, and have hardly had any run-ins with Fox. In fact, *No Homers* features quite a lot of paid advertising on the site, and includes a link directly to Fox's own official *Simpsons* site. The website even has a "No Homers Club Store", which provides links to *Simpsons* items for sale on the retail site *Amazon.com* (all of which appears to be legitimate, authorised and official

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[123] Ibid., 242.
[124] Ibid.
[125] No author, "Information: About This Website – No Homers Club History", *NoHomers.net*.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Wirtanen and Wolf, "Guide to *The Simpsons* on the Net – Life After Fox". See also: John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 242.
[128] Jouni Pakkinen, quoted in John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 242.

Simpsons merchandise).[129] According to John Ortved, *No Homers* have had only

one letter from Fox attorneys since he created the current site, and this was

because the network representatives found threads on which fans were punctuating

their comments with screen captures from the series.[130] The site's administrators

wasted no time ensuring that the offending images were removed and the behaviour

corrected, hence Wirtanen's caveat quoted in the first paragraph of this section.

While Fox may have relaxed its pursuit of fan sites, fan site users and

administrators have equally been conditioned not to give Fox any reason to pursue

them. In dismantling some sites and exhausting the administrators of others, Fox

has successfully established an atmosphere of fear among those who love the

network's intellectual property enough to build online homage to it. Even in

discussions fans remind one another that they will be banned for utterances and

use of verboten content; one fine example can be found in a discussion on the

demise of *WatchTheSimpsonsOnline.com*, whose story is the focus of the following

section.

What has not yet been covered in this section is online fans' engagement

with an official online *Simpsons* presence. This is because there has hardly ever

been an official online *Simpsons* presence. The official *Simpsons* website

(www.thesimpsons.com) had always been woefully bereft of information on or

content from the series. It was neglected, often showing content that was months—

and, toward the end, years—out of date. It could easily be argued that the lack of

an official online presence bred the abundance of unofficial sites. Speaking on the

initial development of fan sites, Cecilia Ogbu observes, "[f]ans created these

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[129] No author, "*No Homers Club* – Home Page" (*NoHomers.net*, n.d.), accessed 18 September 2011: http://www.nohomers.net/index.shtml

[130] John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 242.

websites for a variety of reasons, including a desire to celebrate television shows and movies they loved or to fill a void left by an unsatisfying official site."[131]

Fox fell behind in exploiting the burgeoning multimedia possibilities of the internet, as well. With the developments now collectively known as Web 2.0 (which brought with it increased accessibility and simplicity of internet browsing, as well as crucial new offerings, such as streaming video), Fox failed to explore the possibilities of expansion early on. While John Ortved notes that Fox began to allow recent episodes of *The Simpsons* to air on *Fox.com* around 2008 – 2009 (which required watchers to be resident in the United States and to have a subscription through a television provider), Fox did not allow any online access to older content—even short clips from the series that were uploaded by and on unofficial sources were swiftly removed.[132] "Like most television, film, and music executives, Fox failed to catch on to how they could use the Internet to their advantage. They saw it only as a new way for people to infringe on their copyright, pursuing the smallest fan sites for using sounds or images from the show. […] Fox still aggressively prohibits YouTube and other video-sharing services from showing even *Simpsons* clips, never mind entire episodes."[133]

The term "other video-sharing services" cited above covers a swath of online content. While some will be legitimate sites, such as *Vimeo* or *Hulu*, others are (intentionally) obscure sites featuring content that would breach most copyrights. Some of the "video-sharing services" involve actual filesharing between users, from which users obtain a permanent file of the content (for example, an episode of a television show). These sites might be torrent sites, or they might be the old newsgroups (like today's *alt.tv.simpsons*). Others offer links to sites to which files of media (e.g. films or television episodes) have been uploaded for streaming. These

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[131] Cecilia Ogbu, "The Intersection of Fan Sites, Internet Culture, and Copyright Owners" (*Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* Vol. 12 [2002 – 2003], pp. 279 – 317; 287), print.
[132] John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 241.
[133] ibid.

sites are often on or redirected to servers based in countries where copyright law is not aggressively enforced. Streaming video this way requires that users visit two websites: the first is the one on which the user can search for the content they wish to stream. Once this content is located, the user will find a series of links. Sometimes, the links found might all be authorised hosts of the content and require log-ins to view the content. Other times there may be links to unauthorised hosts—and, on some sites, these links will be cleverly obscured. The unauthorised hosts often do not have any search function; by forcing users to use two sites to find the content, administrators are able to circumvent programs that would automatically locate the content. Essentially, these links must be located manually. The search-sites change their names and URLs often; once they become well known, content owners can watch for links, follow them, and demand the immediate removal of their content from the streaming sites.

These demands still come in the form of Cease-and-Desist letters, and, as the early online fans know, it is unwise to ignore them. Below is a case that demonstrates that Fox eventually learned from the mistakes it made with its own content online—and they decided to teach online fans a lesson about the value of intellectual property.

2.1.8 – Watch the Simpsons Online – If You Dare

On 3 December 2013 at the Federal Court of Canada in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, the Honourable Mr. Justice Douglas R. Campbell found that 23-year-old *Watch The Simpsons Online* (*WTSO*) and *Watch Family Guy Online* (*WFGO*) website creator and administrator Nicholas Hernandez had

> infringed Twentieth Century Fox's copyright in The Simpsons Programs
> and Family Guy Programs by: i) copying The Simpsons Programs and
> Family Guy Programs from television broadcasts or other media; ii)

copying The Simpsons Programs and Family Guy Programs onto a computer system; iii) uploading the unauthorized copies of The Simpsons Programs and Family Guy Programs to computer file servers; iv) creating links to the computer file servers that contain the unauthorized copies of The Simpsons Programs and Family Guy Programs to the public in Canada and elsewhere by telecommunication; and vi) enabling the public by means of the Internet and through the *WFGO* and *WTSO* websites, to infringe copyright in The Simpsons Programs and Family Programs by downloading, streaming and/or copying the content of the unauthorized copies of The Simpsons Programs and Family Guy Programs, through Internet-enabled devices.[134]

The court also adjudged that "[s]tatutory damages, elected by Twentieth Century Fox in this case, would be insufficient to achieve the goal of punishment and deterrence of the offense of copyright infringement in this case. Hernandez's repeated, unauthorized, blatant, high-handed and intentional misconduct, and his callous disregard for the Plaintiff's copyright rights, is deserving of the penalty of punitive damages."[135] The value of those punitive damages was $500,000.00; this was added to the $10,000,000.00 Hernandez was ordered to pay to Fox as statutory damages, the $78,573.25 in indemnity costs, the 1.3% prejudgment interest (on the $10.5M), and the 3% post-judgment interest on the full amount.[136]

In a brief interview with Patrick McGuire of *VICE Canada* (republished in the American *VICE*'s online technology-focused channel *Motherboard*), Hernandez reveals that the judgment bankrupted him.[137] While he admits that he did make

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[134] *Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation v. Nicholas Hernandez et al.*, Federal Court of Canada T-1618-13, 2 (c) (2013), accessed 22 July 2014: http://www.ippractice.ca/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Fox-v.-Hernandez.pdf

[135] *Ibid*, 3 (e).

[136] *Ibid*., 5 – 6 (a – e).

[137] Patrick McGuire, "Fox Bankrupted a 23-Year-Old Canadian Pirate for Streaming 'The Simpsons' (*VICE Canada*. 15 January 2014), accessed 24 July 2014:

some money from his *WFGO* and *WTSO* endeavours, it wasn't enough to live on, and now, as part of its "unneeded vendetta" against Hernandez, Fox is "getting every penny from [his] house sale and that's all [he] really [has] for them."[138] In the *VICE* interview, Hernandez admits that he was surprised by Fox's aggression in the case; however, the domains he was using had been threatened repeatedly—and *WatchTheSimpsonsOnline.com* was ultimately seized—by Fox in March 2009.

According to an article on *TorrentFreak.com* (a site that focuses on publishing news relating to copyright, privacy and other issues related to filesharing), Hernandez's *Simpson*-streaming site (*WTSO*) returned under a different domain (*WTSO.tv*) in 2010. On 9 October 2013 "lawyers from Fox turned up at [Hernandez]'s home in Canada, taking away all of his electronic equipment and handing over documents detailing a $10.5 million lawsuit."[139] Two Fox lawyers, along with "two court-appointed lawyers, two IT professionals and a forensics specialist" appeared at Hernandez's home with a Federal Court of Canada order granting them the right—without issuing any prior warning—to search Hernandez's house and seize evidence (Hernandez's electronic devices, among other related evidence).[140] The article states that shortly following the search and seizure, Hernandez "was given an opportunity to settle the case for a cool $1 million, an 'impossible amount' according to our sources."[141]

The fear that online fans had long had of Fox had finally been realised in the Hernandez case. This was the first time Fox had followed through on a lawsuit against an online fan for copyright infringement, and they were unforgiving. On 20 October 2013, long before the Hernandez case was decided—and before

http://www.vice.com/en_ca/read/fox-bankrupted-a-23-year-old-canadian-pirate-for-streaming-the-simpsons
[138] Ibid.
[139] User name "Andy", "Fox Lawyers Doorstep Alleged Simpsons Pirate with $10.5M Lawsuit" (*TorrentFreak.com*, 31 October 2013), accessed 24 July 2014, https://torrentfreak.com/fox-lawyers-doorstep-alleged-simpsons-pirate-with-10-5m-lawsuit-131031/
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.

NoHomers users knew the full extent of it—a low- to mid-ranking member ("Buntain Simpson") posted a thread, titled, "wtso.tv permanently shut down". He opened the thread with "http://wtso.tv/ man, what a bummer. where to watch now?[142]

The first reply on the thread is one of commiseration, pointing out that it will be difficult to access the later seasons (precisely this problem among fans will be discussed shortly). The second reply suggests that later seasons are not worth watching, and that any seasons of value are available on DVD. Crucially, this second user ("zach") adds a caveat: "plus you're not supposed to talk about illegal streaming site on nohomers."[143]   Buntain Simpson replies, "sue me baby," to which zach immediately responds, "more like ban."[144] A third, higher-ranked user, "Insomnia," weighs in on the exchange, siding with Buntain Simpson and arguing with zach about the finer details of the *NoHomers* link-posting rules. Eventually, a moderator enters the conversation, citing the specific rule that bans the posting of illegal information and confirming that he "will infract anyone who disregards this."[145]

Fascinatingly, a discussion on a fan's page being shut down by Fox for copyright infringement becomes an exchange regarding the users' own potential infringement of copyright—and of the punishments that will be levelled if they have. Essentially, it has become a meta-discussion whereby the act of speaking about a site that may have infringed on copyrights might itself infringe copyrights, and the fans are uncomfortable with the possibility. Fox may allow *NoHomers.net* to operate, and even to thrive, but its legacy—that of instilling fear of litigation against anyone whose use of their intellectual property is deemed intrusive—endures. At this point, it must be emphasised once more that this part of the discussion took place weeks before the Hernandez judgment was made.

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[142] User name "Buntain Simpson", "WTSO.tv permanently shut down" (*NoHomers.net*, 20 October 2013), accessed 25 July 2015: http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?102718-wtso-tv-permanently-shut-down-(update)
[143] User name "zach", "WTSO.tv permanently shut down", *NoHomers.net*.
[144] User names Buntain Simpson and zach, "WTSO.tv permanently shut down", *NoHomers.net*.
[145] User name "steamed_hamms", "WTSO.tv permanently shut down", *NoHomers.net*.

The thread is picked up again in the days following the Hernandez decision, and the main question troubling contributors is why Hernandez ignored Fox's Cease-and-Desist letters. High-ranking user and frequent contributor "Patches O'houlihan" (who is cited several times throughout this thesis) simply asks, "Did this guy think distributing Fox property wasn't eventually going to get him in deep shit?"[146] Very high-ranking user "turkey gobbler" would side entirely with Fox were it not for the network's unwillingness to provide access to the show: "for any other show, i'd applaud then for taking down the site as it would encourage people to catch it in syndication or on DVD, but since simpsons DVDs are impossible to find in stores nowadays, isn't available for streaming, and isn't in syndication, i'm like, man, if you didn't want this to happen, you should've done those long ago." Several other users on the thread share turkey gobbler's sentiments; if Fox does not make the series accessible, how else are fans supposed to engage the content that they love? Greed is far from the sole driving force behind online piracy.

While Hernandez's distribution of links to copyrighted content may have earned him a very small amount of money, profit could clearly not have been Hernandez's primary motivation for hosting these sites. Given his prior legal issues with these and other hosting sites—and despite the fact that he told *VICE* he was surprised that Fox pursued him so rapaciously, and that he didn't even consider his actions to be illegal—he must have had some awareness that he was taking a significant risk in hosting WTSO.

Hernandez attributes his motivation to start these sites to fandom: "I loved *The Simpsons* and so did many of my friends, but you couldn't buy the seasons of DVDs other than [up to] Season 10 […] and there was nothing on the web to help anyone out at the time—so I filled the gap. I was hoping FOX would eventually create their own service that I could link to or use in some way."[147] It would be too

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[146] User "Patches O'houlihan", "WTSO.tv permanently shut down", *NoHomers.net.*
[147] Patrick McGuire, "Fox Bankrupted a 23-Year-Old Canadian Pirate", *VICE Canada.*

simplistic to credit Hernandez's fandom as the sole motivating factor; *VICE* does

reveal that one of Hernandez's prior legal issues had surrounded a non-*Simpsons*-

related links-hosting site called watchxonline.com.   However, given that his two

dedicated sites were for two very specific Fox cartoons, it is clear that Hernandez

championed these series in particular, and is well-informed of their specific

limitations when it comes to accessing the content. Thus, his *Simpsons* fandom is

clearly an element of the impetus to keep these sites running, but more importantly,

he invokes a common and prominent issue for fans of a wide range of television

content: accessibility.

2.1.9 – "Steal This Episode" – Simpsons Creatives Speak Up

Patrick McGuire opens his *VICE* article on Hernandez's situation by pointing out the

irony in the 5 January 2014 airing of the 9th episode of *The Simpsons*'s 25th season,

titled "Steal this Episode."[148] In the episode, Homer is exasperated by the constant

spoiling in casual conversations of a film he hasn't seen. When he becomes

agitated by his expensive, gimmick-laden, advertisement-heavy cinematic

experience in which other audience members annoy him, Homer is thrown out of

the cinema and unable to see the film. Bart later teaches Homer how to use "The

Bootleg Bay" (a parody of the real-life torrent-sharing site The Pirate Bay) to

download the film.

When Bart is about to show Homer the simple method for downloading a bit

torrent, there is a gag in which an old Fox station ID suddenly fills the frame with a

warning that Fox refuses to air a demonstration of piracy methods. The scene is

then replaced by a minute or so of old NASCAR footage, which then cuts back to

the Simpsons' living room where Bart has just finished his lesson. Homer swiftly

embraces this new method of spectatorship, eventually screening films for his

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[148] Ibid.

friends and neighbours in the backyard. Overcome with guilt when she discovers the films they have watched were pirated, Marge sends a confession to the Hollywood studio that produced the work and sends a cheque with her letter to cover the ticket she would have purchased. The executive who receives the missive uses the cheque to snort cocaine, and upon reading about the piracy, immediately contacts the FBI to alert them of Homer's misdeed.

This is where the overreaction from the legal perspective of piracy comes most overtly into play. When the FBI agent receives the piracy alert, she runs through a corridor in the headquarters, past four plain doors, all with simple handles and no apparent locks, respectively marked "Law Enforcement", "Hostage Rescue", "Joint Terrorism Task Force", and "Drug Enforcement". She stops at large red double doors, marked "Movie Piracy" and outfitted with two security cameras and a complex, card-access security lock. When the agent swipes her card, the doors open to an enormous, high-tech environment housing a large staff, some of whose members are monitoring detection systems, and fifteen of whose other members stand uniformed, armed and combat-ready as an elite anti-piracy squad. Their commander, Deputy Director Gratman, gives them a briefing of their mission to arrest Homer Simpson, pausing only to mock an agent who complains that he'd wanted to catch serial killers [when he joined the FBI], rather than go after movie pirates.

The FBI eventually catch and arrest Homer who, after successfully escaping from them and fleeing with the family to the Swedish consulate to seek asylum, turns himself in upon hearing Marge's confession that she betrayed him to the authorities. She regains his trust at the end of his trial, when she convinces him to speak before sentencing. His speech so affects the Hollywood elite (who are present at his trial to condemn him) that they drop all the charges against him and compete with one another to make a film of Homer's experience. Once his film has been produced, Homer reverses his views on piracy and chastises his backyard

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cinema audience for illegally obtaining his film for the special screening they had arranged for him. The final scene during the credits shows Lisa and Bart watching Homer's film in an otherwise abandoned 'legitimate' cinema. They discuss who might actually be considered to be the 'good guys' in the story: the Hollywood producers who charge too much for low-quality cinema, or the spectators who feel entitled to obtain the films for free. When Lisa is about to reveal who she thinks is the real pirate, the scene quickly cuts to more NASCAR footage (which implies that she was about to name Fox as the biggest culprits). It is worth noting that the emptiness of the cinema in this final scene relates directly both to Bart and Lisa's discussion and to the theme of the episode as a whole: it is unclear (or undisclosed) whether the cinema is abandoned because the film is terrible, or because the audience is no longer willing to pay for the cinematic experience.

Throughout the episode, both sides of the piracy debate are presented, and the hypocrisy that accompanies both positions is cleverly highlighted.   Overall, the creatives behind the episode clearly delineate their position on the aggressive, reactionary prosecution of piracy. While they acknowledge that the intellectual property that people work hard to produce should be valued and protected, they also draw attention to the fact that the severity of the pursuit, criminalisation and sentencing of media piracy is often disproportionate to the relative levity of the crime. When Marge criticises Homer's actions in a veiled attempt to alleviate her guilt at turning him in, Bart and Lisa defend him. Bart points out that not only is Homer's movie piracy far from the worst thing Homer has done, "it's not even the worst kind of pirate Dad's been." Lisa observes that Homer's actions weren't motivated by simple selfishness or greed; he had initiated and hosted an uplifting cultural experience for the people of Springfield to enjoy, for which he expected nothing in return.

The timing of the episode could not have been more appropriate with respect to the *Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation v. Hernandez et al.* case.

While the studio is charged with protecting the intellectual property produced on its behalf by the creative staff it employs, it also profits heavily from this work, inviting one to question whether the enormous pay-outs in suits like the one against Hernandez are warranted.

According to Joanna Vatavu of the Canadian law firm McMillan, the statutory damages are determined taking a number of factors into account: "[w]here the infringements are carried out for a commercial purpose, the [Canadian Copyright] Act provides for a maximum award of $20,000 in respect of all infringements relating to each individual work involved in the proceedings."[149] Later in the article, Vatavu works out that the $10M statutory damages award amounts to about $14,200 per infringing work (or each episode, some of which were *Family Guy* episodes rather than *Simpsons* ones). She acknowledges that there is "a continuing trend in awarding significant statutory damages against copyright infringers, including website operators who illegally upload and share copyrighted works."[150] The factors considered in awarding statutory damages include "the good faith or bad faith of the defendant, the conduct of the parties before and during the proceedings, and the need to deter other infringements of the copyright in question."[151]

The judge certainly found that Hernandez was acting in bad faith, but it would seem obvious, especially given Fox's established precedence in pursuing any and all perceived copyright infringements (however innocent those infringements may have seemed to the fans who posted and/or viewed them), that the last of the aforementioned factors would be the most pressing for the studio.[152] $10,500,000.00 is an extraordinary sum for a single person to have to pay, but

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[149] Joanna Vatavu, "D'oh! – Fox Teaches Infringer a Costly Lesson", *McMillan Intellectual Property Bulletin.* (Toronto: McMillan LLP, March 2014), 1.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.
[152] *Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation v. Nicholas Hernandez et al.*, 3 (d).

given the cost of production of a single *Simpsons* episode, this amount—which is clearly unlikely ever to be paid in full—is relatively negligible to Fox.[153]

2.1.10 – Watch The Simpsons Online – If You Can: Fox Crawls into the Twenty-first Century

There was another factor motivating Fox's pursuit of Hernandez. In Hernandez's case, this was because Fox was finally ready to present an online *Simpsons* presence, and they needed to eradicate all competition for their audience—and the money that audience would bring. From Fox's perspective, like Metzger before him, Hernandez needed both to be shut down permanently, and to be exploited as an example to those who would dare to follow him. Once again, Fox's intellectual property was poised to make them a remarkable amount of money—and, unprecedentedly, it would be revenue brought in specifically by the series' fans.

Fox's newly developed online presence would be realised in *SimpsonsWorld.com*, which is a streaming service operated by FXX.[154] The service is only available to United-States-based cable subscribers who opt for the "FX Bundle" (which includes Fox cable affiliates FX, FXX, and FXM, as well as access to the mobile application FXNow); at the end of 2015, global fans have no legal access to on-demand *Simpsons* episodes.[155] The *Simpsons World* deal is "one of the biggest syndication deals in recent history—FXX bought the rights to the entirety of the show, which just concluded its 25th season." Until this deal was struck, *The*

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[153] Alex Ben Block, "*The Simpsons* Renewed for Two More Seasons" (*The Hollywood Reporter*, 7 October 2011), accessed 23 July 2014: http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/simpsons-renewed-two-more-seasons-245748. It is revealed in this article that the series' principal voice actors (Dan Castellaneta, Julie Kavner, Nancy Cartwright, Yeardley Smith, Hank Azaria, and Harry Shearer) would each take a 30% pay-cut from the $440,000 they were earning before then. Even at the new rate, the voice talent alone for each episode could cost up to $1.8 million.
[154] Sonia Saraiya, "FXX's *Simpsons World* will just hook it to your veins" (*The A.V. Club*, 21 July 2014), accessed 21 July 2014: http://www.avclub.com/article/fxxs-simpsons-world-will-just-hook-it-your-veins-207163?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=SocialMarketing&utm_campaign=LinkPreview:1:Default
[155] Ibid.

Simpsons was not allowed to air in syndication on cable in the United States; this is because in 1993 the series entered into an exclusivity contract with its local affiliates barring the series from cable as long as it was still in production with Fox (a broadcast network).[156]

When it was revealed that FXX had agreed to what *Variety* magazine's Managing Editor for Television Cynthia Littleton speculates is approximately $750 million for the entirety of the contract (around ten years), it became clear what Fox stood to lose if it allowed individuals like Hernandez to offer free (if risky) access for viewers across the globe.[157] Though some of the episodes were slowly released into video-on-demand (VOD) services (a very limited number of episodes were separately made available on Hulu and for purchase on iTunes), the FXX deal marked the first time the entire canon would be available for viewers. However, like Hulu, the streaming service would only be available to American subscribers. And with the vast sum they paid for the privilege of offering the entire *Simpsons* oeuvre on VOD, FXX secured exclusive rights to do so for the foreseeable future: "FXX has taken *The Simpsons* off the subscription VOD market: [i]t's unlikely the show will be popping up on your Netflix or Hulu queue anytime this decade."[158]

It is clearly no accident that Fox's legal action against Hernandez was scaled up in mid- to late-2013; it was at the end of July 2013 that *TV Guide* announced (based on Twentieth Century Fox insiders' accounts) that Twentieth Television, which is responsible for the syndication of Fox-produced series, was gearing up to

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[156] Sean O'Neal, "*The Simpsons* are going to cable (next year)" (*The A.V. Club*, 29 July 2013), accessed 30 July 2013: http://www.avclub.com/article/emthe-simpsonsem-are-going-to-cable-next-year-100903. See also the following entry.
[157] Cynthia Littleton, "*The Simspons* Lands $750 Mil Cable Syndication, VOD Pact with FXX" (*Variety*, 19 November 2013), accessed 22 November 2013: http://variety.com/2013/tv/news/the-simpsons-lands-750-mil-cable-vod-syndication-pact-with-fxx-1200837036/
[158] Josef Adalian, "*The Simpsons* Will Finally Be Available to Stream" (*Vulture*, 15 November 2013), accessed 17 November 2013: http://www.vulture.com/2013/11/simpsons-will-finally-be-available-to-stream.html

take bids on the series.[159] Contrary to what struck some authors as inevitable,

despite its being a News Corp company, FXX was not necessarily guaranteed the

deal; Michael Schneider suggests that Twentieth Television may have been inclined

"to bring in fresh cash from outside the company, rather than recycle its own money.

Twentieth is also no doubt cognizant of the fact that *The Simpsons*' profit

participants, like executive producers Matt Groening and James L. Brooks, will be

watching closely to make sure the company signs the most lucrative deal."[160]

Thus, the Fox network managed to exploit its greatest resource for the

greatest amount of money while still being able to retain almost complete control

over its use. One could say that this is a tremendously successful, all-in first foray

into the world of convergence, however late it may have been in coming, as far as

the fans were concerned.

In *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*,

Henry Jenkins makes a strong case for the fallibility of traditional methods of

drawing, holding on to, and measuring televisual audiences. Jenkins classifies the

traditional method of offering television content (i.e. at a specific time on a specific

channel) as "the appointment-based model," while the emerging method by which

viewers were connecting with both the content and one another online is called the

"engagement-based model."[161] Jenkins's co-author Jason Mittell observes a clear

connection between enthusiastic fans and the engagement-based model: "a dense

text encourages its fans to become foragers for information, […] which they then

bring back together as they construct online reference sites to guide others'

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[159] Michael Schneider, "Exclusive: *The Simpsons* Draws Up Plans for Cable" (*TV Guide*, 29 July 2013), accessed 5 August 2013: http://www.tvguide.com/news/simpsons-repeats-cable-1068377/?rss=breakingnews
[160] Michael Schneider, "*The Simpsons* Draws Up Plans for Cable", *TV Guide*. See also Josef Adalian, "*The Simpsons* Will Finally Be Available to Stream", *Vulture*; Myles McNutt, "How *The Simpsons* Should Exist on the Web" (*Slate*, 15 November 2013), accessed 22 November 2013:
http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/11/15/simpsons_streaming_on_fxx_soon_time_for_the_simpsons_clip_database.html. Schneider proposes a few companies that may have vied for the prize, including Turner, Viacom, CBS Corp., and Lionsgate.
[161] Henry Jenkins et al., *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York: New York University Press, 2013. Print. 116.

experiences of the much-loved series. These narrative and promotional strategies

tap into the social dynamics among fans, moving beyond the solitary viewer

imagined under older forms of audience measurement."[162]

Given the volume of fan sites and the clear extent of fans' dedication, even

in the face of threats from the network (discussed in detail both above and in the

following chapter), fans clearly fit the engagement-based model. They even support

Fox's annihilation of one of their own (i.e. Hernandez), despite the fact that he was

providing them with free, unlimited access to the series. They are vocal about their

willingness to pay for a streaming service, if only Fox would offer one. Lucky for

those posting at that time (early 2014), as long as they were based in America, as

well as able and willing to subscribe to the FX package, Fox had heeded their calls.

What was so problematic until that time—and what remains problematic for

non-American *Simpsons* fans—is Fox's reluctance to establish a strong online

presence for the series. In fact, since the establishment of *Simpsons World*, *The

Simpsons*'s online presence has diminished even further—to almost nothing. Until

mid-November 2015, *TheSimpsons.com* was Fox's official site for the series.

Although the content was lacking and not updated very frequently, the site still

offered some information, images, and a few clips. However, in November 2015,

TheSimpsons.com was made permanently to redirect to *www.SimpsonsWorld.com*.

Those fans who are not based in the United States are met with a single screen:

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[162] Ibid., 136.

Thank you for your interest in FX Networks.
The content you are trying to access is not available in your region.

Not only does it appear unfair to Fox to pursue fans relentlessly for using intellectual property for their *Simpsons*-devoted website content while not offering any official content at all, it appears unwise. In 2015, a strong web presence is necessary for almost any business to engage with potential consumers. It is outrageous that Fox's most beloved series' web presence is only available to less than 5% of their potential global audience. Even for those based in the United States, with the exception of a few clips that either play automatically on the *Simpsons World* home page or can be selected from a limited list, there is little content available to non-subscribers.

A discussion on the internet forum Reddit between would-be FX NOW and *Simpsons World* users upon its release reveals one of the major issues with Fox's method of evolution to an online platform (each user is quoted using his or her user name):

Simify: "Select your participating TV provider to access full length episodes." Are you fucking kidding me? Their online streaming website REQUIRES YOU SIGN IN WITH A TV PROVIDER? I don't

have a TV provider. That's why I would like to stream the simpsons.

So I guess it's back to illegal streams like watchcartoononline, then?

[Account since deleted]: I don't know why people downvote you. I think it

sucks too. I don't pay for cable either, but I'm able to use someone

else's login who doesn't care. These companies are tackling

streaming TV wrong IMO. They're just trying to apply an antiquated

business model to something completely different and it doesnt

work.[163]

As the second user points out, Fox's shift to an online platform is not the strong

indication of evolution past the outmoded appointment-based model that it might

initially seem. As both users illustrate, the actual audience for *Simpsons World*

would be likely to be composed largely of people who cannot watch it on television.

In allowing no one other than American television viewers to able to access the

content legally online, Fox is simply imposing the old, television-based model on to

the new medium, and, as such, are significantly limiting (and failing completely to

exploit) the potential of the internet platform. Also, by failing to secure the licensing

required to make this service available to viewers without an American IP address in

a timely manner, Fox is discounting and alienating a vast potential audience.

Once again, the network is erring significantly on the side of caution. Just as

they tried to create demand through the severe limitation of official licensing, so, too,

are they trying to create demand by exercising extreme control over who can

engage with their content, when, and by what means. It is also a means by which

both Fox and the *Simpsons* creatives can measure aspects of their online audience

(i.e how many people are watching, which episodes are the most popular, etc. This

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[163] User names "Simify" and "[Account deleted]", "Simpsons World….in a nutshell" (*Reddit*, thread created by user "johnolesen", 24 October 2014), accessed 11 January 2015: https://www.reddit.com/r/TheSimpsons/comments/2k5nuc/simpsons_worldin_a_nutshell/

latter figures are even made available in real time to *Simpsons World* users.)[164] It would seem that 100% of a small audience is more appealing to the network than a lower percentage of a vastly larger audience. The network is the party most responsible for stalling the series' success with the engagement-based model; as is explored in **Chapter 3**, the series' creative producers have made strides in connecting the franchise through transmedia storytelling, and the fans have made every indication of their willingness to engage with whatever content they can find—for better or for worse.

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[164] Jesse David Fox, "3 *Simpsons* Showrunners Reflect on New Fans and the 'Classic Era' Myth" (*Vulture.com*, 23 September 2014), accessed 24 September 2014: http://www.vulture.com/2014/09/simpsons-showrunners-on-the-classic-era-myth.html

2.2 – Chapter 2. Worst Audience Ever

2.2.1 – Introduction

Throughout this thesis, *The Simpsons* and its fans are identified and cited as an excellent case study for the application of meme theory to screen and fan studies. The preceding chapter points to the importance of *Simpsons* content to fans and their (often contentious use of it) on their sites, so it is necessary to begin this fan-focused chapter with an in-depth investigation into this fan practice in order to illuminate the mechanisms driving fans' desires to propagate *Simpsons* memes. This study will also demonstrate a few of the many manifestations of those *Simpsons* memes in fan practice, revealing and analysing the ways in which fans employ memes from the series to convey simultaneously the intended sentiment and the fan's own knowledge to other fans.

This study will introduce the larger conversation surrounding the types of memetic textual productivity performed by fans, the cultural rewards associated with that productivity, and the ways in which that productivity is facilitated by fan site administrators. This will anchor the reader within memetic online *Simpsons* fan culture (in that fans both proliferate and generate textual memes). The chapter also examines fan reception of the urtext, and introduces the investigation into *Simpsons* creatives' reception of fan criticism and feedback, and the ways in which they respond through the deployment of memes as ciphers urtext content.

2.2.2 – A Simpsons Meme for Better: [:joke:]

At the end of **Theoretical Engagement 1** in Part 1 above, Limor Shifman's approach to distinguishing memes from viral content is elucidated: while viral content tends to be proliferated in its whole, original form (as the content itself is the

purpose of its dissemination), memetic content tends to inspire those who spread it to interact with it creatively, often adapting it to correspond to that user's own intendment. *Simpsons* fandom is replete with examples of this distinct memetic practice; in fact, incidents of viral *Simpsons* content are few because online fans have almost always manipulated the content before proliferating it. Such manipulation includes the selection of specific images or framegrabs, specific lines of dialogue from an exchange, or making the cuts and splices around a clip or selection of clips from the *Simpsons* opus.

There is an excellent example of the use of such a clip from *The Simpsons*. In the season 5 episode "Homer Goes to College", the moment he arrives on campus as a new student at Springfield University, Homer yells "Nerd!" at someone he perceives to be studious in an effort to resume his high-school persona as a "jock" (someone whose role, as Homer understands, is to bully "nerds").[1] On 2 May 2010, *YouTube* user "calmaccer" uploaded just that clip from the episode, totalling five seconds of play time—and since it was uploaded, at the end of 2015, has had 3,656,881 views.[2]

The purpose of this clip, clearly, is for users to share and propagate it; it is perfectly tailored for use as a comment on a forum or social network. This intention is acknowledged quite succinctly in the Top Comment on the link; user "AnselmoFanZero" writes, "2 million people not only watched the video, but copyNpasted it to tell some other guy NEEEEEERD!!! XD". There are two replies to this comment; in the first, user "Jimi Fro" agrees: "HAHAHAHAH! Fuck,I just did that!" In the second, user "theendofit" admits his or her use was self-deprecating:

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[1] "Homer Goes to College". *The Simpsons Complete Fifth Season*. Writ. Conan O'Brien. Dir. Jim Reardon. Fox, 2006. DVD.
[2] User name "calmaccer", "NERRRRRDDDDDD" (*YouTube.com*, 2 May 2010), first accessed 3 September 2015: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRsPheErBj8. When it was first accessed, the clip had 2,910,098 views.

"nah I copy pasted it as a response to my own post correcting someone on their harry potter spell."[3]

By extracting a very specific few seconds of an episode, removing it from its context, and posting it for a specific purpose online, "calmaccer" has culled, co-authored, and propagated a meme from *The Simpsons*. Subsequently, this meme, with over three million views (many of which, as AnselmoFanSero noted, can be assumed to have been shares on other social networks), has gone viral.

As suggested earlier, however, clips such as this are far from the only (or even from the most popular) types of memes emerging from *The Simpsons*. When it comes to animated motion pictures like this, the visual and writing styles are unique and are so recognisable that reproductions and adaptations can transcend the original medium (i.e. well beyond episodes or even clips of the original text) and still be understood, with their original contexts retained in the collective and individual memories of those members of their devoted knowledge communities.

An example of such a meme has its origins in the season 6 *Simpsons* episode "A Star is Burns". In the episode, the Simpson family watches as Rainier Wolfcastle (the Austrian Arnold Schwarzenegger parody who most famously plays the show-within-the-show action hero McBain) presents a clip of his new film, "McBain: Let's Get Silly" as a guest on film critic Jay Sherman's television show "Coming Attractions". The clip reveals Wolfcastle spotlighted in front of a brick wall and behind a microphone stand (audience members of a certain age will recognise this as a parody of the set of the stand-up comedy series *An Evening at the Improv*), as he begins the joke: "Did you ever notice how men always leave the toilet seat up?" He pauses ever so briefly, and, as the audience is completely silent, he states, "That's the joke."

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[3] User name "AnselmoFanZero", "NERRRRRDDDDDD", *YouTube*, comment thread. This was the top comment on 3 September 2014, but at the end of 2015, its place of honour has been usurped by other, newer comments.

This objective of this scene is to establish that Wolfcastle is as terrible a joke author as he is a joke-teller. All that is required for the *Simpsons* audience to take away is the context that Wolfcastle is so bad at telling a joke that he needs to prompt a reaction from the audience when he has finished telling it, and thus he has no business making what turns out to have been a very expensive, hour-and-a-half-long "action *und* comedy" film. This clip has little bearing on the plot of the episode, except that Sherman is so horrified by Wolfcastle's unwarranted success that he snipes at—and incurs the wrath of—the star. In a bid to leave New York in order to avoid confronting Wolfcastle for a while, Sherman accepts Marge Simpson's offer to serve on a jury at the Springfield Film Festival (which is itself the focus of the episode). Nevertheless, Wolfcastle's memorable turn as a comic resonated with *Simpsons* fans, spawning a memorable meme.

There are five very short (three-second) clips of Wolfcastle saying only "That's the joke" uploaded to *YouTube* at the end of 2015; all others either have Wolfcastle telling the entire "joke", or include the audience's subsequent reaction, or the entire clip that Wolfcastle shares on Sherman's show. The short ones take the very punchline to which Wolfcastle is referring out of the equation, thus changing the context of the original meme. They do so with the specific intention of allowing users to apply the "That's the joke" meme to any content on the internet.

Of the five shortest versions of the clip available on YouTube, the one with the most views, posted by user "DovidDovidson's channel", boasts 1,556,819 views in July 2014 (it is worth mentioning that the Fox-sanctioned, full-length, official version of the clip posted by Hulu had received only 882,290 views, and was sometime between September 2014 and December 2015 removed from *YouTube*). Another three-second version was shared by user "FunnyReplyChannel" and has accumulated 13,520 views, and a third was posted by user "In Case of Important

Negotiations" with 15,896 views up to December 2015.[4] One very interesting point about these is that the latter two users' entire YouTube channels are dedicated to precisely the exercise described above; all of the videos they have posted are very short clips from popular films, television shows and games. As is clearly communicated by both users' names, they have posted these clips for the express purpose of sharing them as comments on social networking sites and other internet forums. Additionally, not only are the videos these users post recognisable memes that they have selected and propagated for internet-specific purposes, but a number of the videos convey memes that are themselves internet-specific.

For example, of the seven videos uploaded on the "In Case of Important Negotiations" channel, two are dedicated to the expression "facepalm". This is an internet-derived term indicating a gesture (to bury one's face in one's hand, or to cover one's face with one's hand, sometimes in a smacking motion) that is commonly used to express a negative reaction to an adverse, exasperating, frustrating, or ridiculous circumstance or revelation. The gesture is memetic; *TVTropes.org* has an entry on it that includes a long list of its uses in live-action and animated film and television, as well as in games, comics, literature, and even real-life examples captured on various media. The term "facepalm" is well known and often used in commentary by frequent users of social networking sites and internet forums, and the fact that the *YouTube* user included internet-specific (i.e. appealing-to-the-internet-savvy) memes in his or her pantheon further indicates that the sole purpose of this channel is to propagate memes among those in the know.

A final point about the three "That's the joke" clips is that on the most popular one (that on "DovidDovidson's channel") *YouTube* users who are also *Simpsons* fans are engaging with the "That's the joke" meme in a way that demonstrates their statuses as members of *Simpsons* knowledge communities; one of the top ten most recent direct comments posted on the video is "You suck,

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[4] The view figures for these clips were 2,207 and 605, respectively, in September 2014.

McBain!"[5] Those who know the series (or, at least, the episode) well will recognise that this is the next line in the original clip, shouted by an off-camera audience member (voiced unmistakably by Dan Castellaneta), and it prompts McBain to open fire on his spectators.

Video clips are not the only means by which this meme has proliferated; still images of Wolfcastle-as-McBain, framed by the familiar Simpson family's television, standing between his microphone stand and the brick wall with the (incorrectly-punctuated) white text "THATS THE JOKE" superimposed below (Figure 1.1), are a fairly common sight on forums—and *NoHomers* is no exception. (Figure 1.2) Here, NoHomers member "Orange Harrison" has quoted another member ("Miss Diko", who expressed doubt as to whether s/he had correctly understood a pun in an episode of the series) and responded with the meme in order to confirm that s/he had likely overcomplicated her or his understanding of the pun.

Figure 1.1

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[5] These are variations in spelling and punctuation only; the actual wording does not stray from that in the original source.
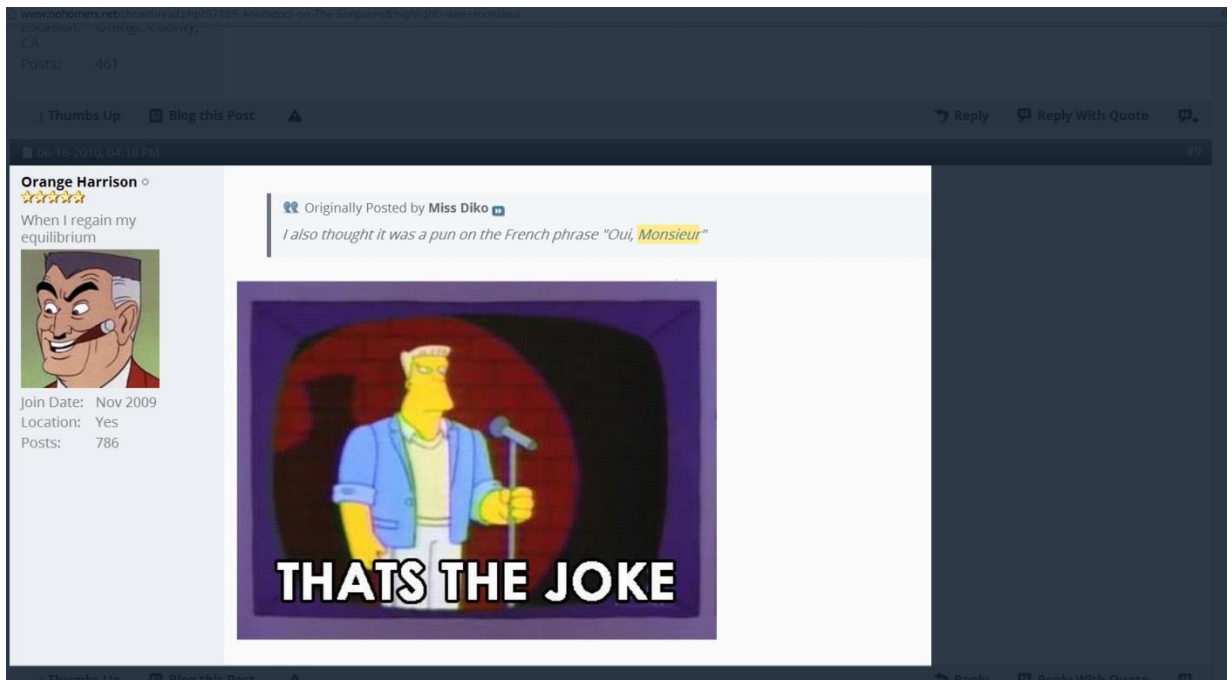
However, the use of the "That's the joke" reaction on *NoHomers* is not

limited to this familiar memetic form; the proliferation of this image among the site's

forums became so common that the *NoHomers* administrators have authored their

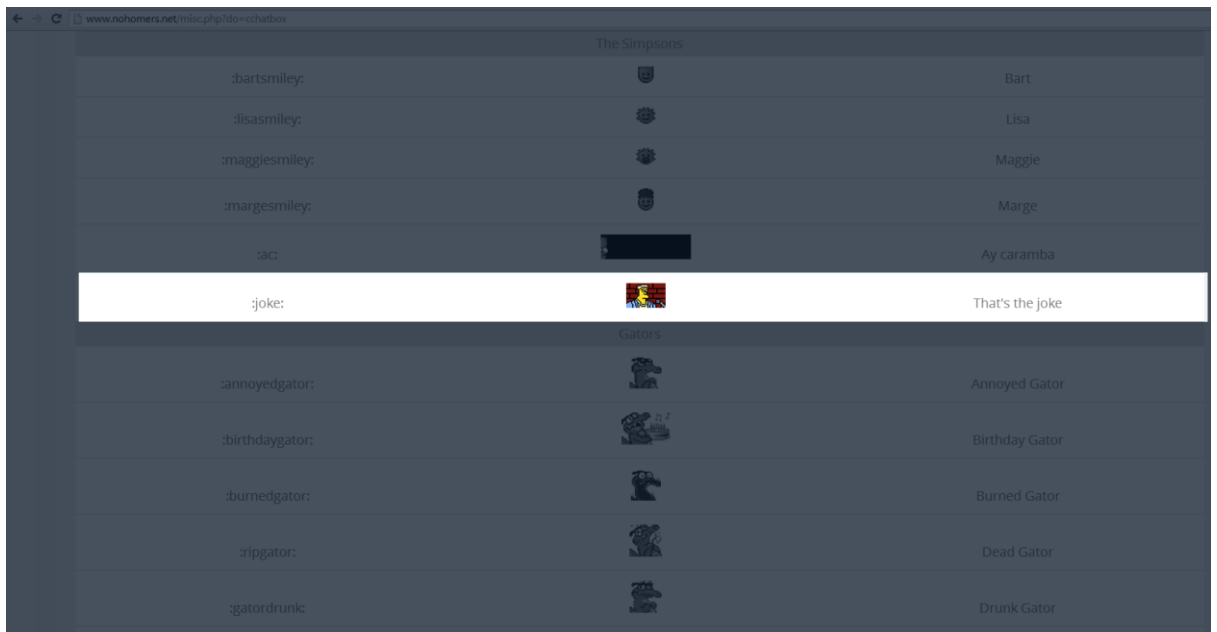own emoticon version to be used on the chat feature (Figure 1.3).

Simply by typing " :joke: " somewhere in their post, *NoHomers* members can easily conjure this image during real-time conversations with other *Simpsons* fans. While there are many emoticons available for use on the site (190, to be precise), only six are specifically *Simpsons*-related (they are all pictured in Figure 1.3, above and including the highlighted section). These are Bart, Lisa, Maggie, and Marge smileys; a motion-based one of Bart's smiling face sliding into frame and the words "Ay caramba!" (one of Bart's urtextual catchphrases), and the "That's the joke" one. This is such a persistent meme from the series—and such a salient one within this most popular online *Simpsons* knowledge community—that it has been given a very exclusive place of honour on the emoticon board. Homer (and his own tremendously famous catchphrase) are noticeably absent as emoticon subjects; the decision to exclude him could be a subtle play on the site's own name. Nevertheless, "That's the joke" has clearly made a profound memetic impact on *Simpsons* audiences and fans, having been adjusted from its originally context to suit a new one. At the end of 2015, Fox has not successfully interfered with the presence of the clips on *YouTube*, nor has it required the removal of the images from *NoHomers*. It is one of the few images from the series that fans feel comfortable sharing and posting on the forum, and its emergence into mainstream social media use has only reinforced confidence in its resilience.

2.2.3 – What About Fans vs. Fox?

The above section provides an effective demonstration of online *Simpsons* fans' memetic practices. This provides insight into the relatively harmless uses fans make of memetic content from the series, even altering original meanings of the content to suit particular situations arising within fan discourse. It is difficult to reconcile the actual memetic practices with the drastic measures Fox tends to take against fans for such infractions. While the preceding chapter focused on Fox's

antagonism toward fans, it did also include some of fans' most decisive moments of resistance toward network interference with their activities.

Such acts of defiance, however, were short-lived and ineffective; they were easily suppressed by the powerful, wealthy and well-represented Fox. Fans learned to work within the boundaries set out by the network, and to keep quiet or quell any behaviours that might be construed as an infringement on Fox's copyrights. Fox failed to provide fans with any official online platform with which to interact. Only toward the end of 2013, in conjunction with the development of *SimpsonsWorld.com*, did Fox even begin posting sanctioned *Simpsons* clips to *YouTube* and sharing those links via the official *Simpsons Facebook* Page. In early 2016, fans are still not able to post any material to the *Simpsons* page themselves; the content on that page only flows in one direction.

What is most interesting about this failure is that online fans' textual productivity remains entirely their own; fan-generated content is posted to and remains on fan sites and within online fan communities. Jenkins et al note that as part of the gradual embrace of transmedia and cross-platform storytelling by the industry, networks and creatives are developing methods to exploit the potential of fan textual productivity.[6] However, Fox has always held its online *Simpsons* fans—and, thus, their textual productivity—at arms' length, essentially regarding and handling them as a nuisance. As such, the network has failed to exploit and capitalise on the potential visibility and surplus audience members such (costless) fan productivity can draw.

Thus, it would seem that the power struggle between fans and Fox had come to a swift and humbling end for fans (despite their small and indirect victory in Fox's failure to realise the value of their textual productivity). However, like Derek Johnson's *Buffy* fans, online *Simpsons* fandom remains forever engaged in two

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[6] Henry Jenkins et al., *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), print, 152.

hegemonic battles. One is the battle with the series' creatives; online fans have voiced their (at times) pedantic criticism from the inceptions both of the series and of the internet. This immediately engaged the creatives in a decades-long dialogue that has taken place on several platforms, and that has evolved through different forms of representation and textual productivity as the series, the internet and the relationship developed.

While not always contentious, this relationship is, at times, fraught with conflict that also converges and diverges with the other battle fans wage: an aesthetic battle that carries on among fans, some of whom feel that a distinct decline in quality can be detected following the series' 8th or 9th season (the precise guilty season varies depending upon the critic, and this is a major intersection at which antagonism erupts between fans and between fans and creatives). Several factions have been formed by the fans who feel strongly enough to construct their textual productivity and identities around the first and most well-established boundary, known in the fan vernacular as "The Scully Era". Bearing as its name one of *Simpsons* fans' many memetic colloquial terms (joined by other such concepts as "Jerkass Homer"), "The Scully Era" is the most divisive point within online *Simpsons* fans' hegemonic discourse.

2.2.4 – The Scully Era

In March 2009, *NoHomers* user "Monty_Burns" initiated the thread "Al Jean is delusional" by posting the following quote, attributed to the long-time *Simpsons* writer and showrunner from seasons 3, 4, and 13 - 25: "Well, it's possible that we've declined. But honestly, I've been here the whole time and I do remember in season two people saying, 'It's gone downhill.'"[7] This quote is cited from a 2010 interview with journalist Benji Wilson, but a thorough search has not produced any actual

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[7] User name "Monty_Burns", "Al Jean is delusional" (*NoHomers.net*, 6 March 2014), accessed 9 May 2014: http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?104030

record of this interview. Nevertheless, *No Homers*, *The Dead Homer Society* and

other online fans, along with authors writing on *The Simpsons* (Chris Turner and

John Ortved among them), have remarked upon and discussed at length the

alleged creative decline of the series following the eighth season.[8]

John Ortved makes an observation that echoes Robert Sloane's (discussed

in detail in **Chapter 3**) when he notes, "*The Simpsons* presaged its own downturn"

in Lisa's explanation of the audience's lack of engagement with the show-within-the-

show, "The Itchy & Scratchy Show".[9] He continues:

> [W]hile *The Simpsons'* writers were parodying the notion of a beloved series
>
> jumping the shark, "The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show" came at a time
>
> when their own series was doing just that. Mike Scully's turn as showrunner,
>
> and the beginning of the end, were just around the corner. The show's
>
> quality certainly declined under Mike Scully's four-year stewardship, and
>
> things went from bad to worse when Al Jean took over in Season 13, though
>
> he didn't seem to think so.[10]

Here Ortved is making his own aesthetic evaluation of the declining quality of the

show from Seasons 9 through to the end of Season 21 (as Ortved's work was

published in 2009)—but it is an assessment that is shared by a number of fans,

despite the fact that, in the series' 27th season at the start of 2016, the "end" has

lasted twice as long as the beginning.

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[8] New threads on quality appear almost daily on *NoHomers*. For example, User name "santa's elf", "What is the first abysmal episode?" (*NoHomers.net*, 27 October 2015), accessed 27 October 2015: http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?109424-What-is-the-first-abysmal-episode&highlight=decline. See also Charlie Sweatpants, "season 10: jerkass homer gets a job" (*DeadHomerSociety.com*, 25 May 2012), accessed 13 July 2014: http://deadhomersociety.com/zombiesimpsons/zs10/
[9] John Ortved, *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, 262.
[10] Ibid., 262.

Seasons 3 through 8—though exact boundaries are still debated—are commonly considered by *NoHomers* fans to be the "classic era" of the series.[11] Seasons 9 – 12, during which Mike Scully was the showrunner, are referred to as "The Scully Era" (occasionally called "The Scully Years"), and Seasons 13 – 27 are known as "The Jean Era"; Seasons 9 – 27 are sometimes collectively referred to as the "modern era". To categorise and reference *Simpsons* episodes in the "[showrunner's name] + Era" form is a memetic practice commonly employed by online fans; some even apply the formula to the "classic era", categorising these episodes by their showrunners as well.[12] While it is most commonly practised by users on the fan forum *NoHomers*, the bloggers on *Dead Homer Society* (as it is a useful distinction in the types of discussions that appear on those sites), and the hosts of the *Worst Episode Ever* podcast, the contributors to *The Simpsons Archive* and *Simpsons.Wikia.com* have acknowledged and do occasionally employ this organisational form (notably in the DVD reviews on *The Simpsons Archive*).

The Scully Era has long been notorious among fans as a period in which some of the worst episodes of the series were produced—and Scully has been vilified and held personally and directly responsible for the perceived discrepancy in calibre from the preceding seasons. Well aware of his reputation on fan forums, Mike Scully jokes on the DVD commentary for the Season 10 episode "When You Dish Upon a Star" that he is the "idol of *NoHomers.net*".[13]

One particularly passionate fan reply regarding Mike Scully (posted on an *OfficialFan.proboards.com* thread titled "So what exactly happened to 'The Simpsons'?") opens with "I'm pretty sure I can tell you exactly what happened to the

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[11] User name "Ryan", "The Classic Era: Elevated by the Post-Classic?" (*NoHomers.net*, 19 March 2008, accessed 14 July 2014: http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?68494-The-Classic-Era-Elevated-by-the-Post-Classic&highlight=classic+era. See also User name "Wee Turtles!!", "Last episode you associate with the 'classic era'" (*NoHomers.net*, 22 September 2009), accessed 14 July 2014: http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?81487-Last-episode-you-associate-with-the-quot-classic-era-quot&highlight=classic+era

[12] See "David Mirkin's Takeover" (*NoHomers.net*, 20 January 2014), accessed 7 August 2014: http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?103633-David-Mirkin-s-Takeover

[13] Mike Scully, "DVD Commentary, 'When You Dish Upon a Star'", *The Simpsons*, Season 10, Episode 5, directed by Pete Michels, (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2007), DVD.

show. Two words: Mike. Scully."[14] This is followed by a lengthy, thorough,

articulate, thoughtful, and scathing analysis of the quality of the series (by

showrunner eras), which concludes with the following:

> Mike Scully killed The Simpsons, and the airless, heartless, bland, blunt
>
> episodes churned out by The Simpsons factory, episodes that even the
>
> actors don't care about and that Harry Shearer has publicly condemned for
>
> being wretched, are merely air escaping from the corpse. I really hope
>
> someone reads this post because I put a shitload of effort into writing that.[15]

The last sentence usefully highlights the considerable effort fans will put into

the discourse surrounding the urtexts to which they have been loyal and faithful—

even when they perceive their faith to have been shaken or betrayed by the authors

of those urtexts. Unfavourable assessments such as this one are still the output of

valuable cultural labour, as they elevate the status and prominence of the text,

keeping it relevant. No direct reward for this textual productivity is expected,

other—as the author expresses above—than that others will read what has been

produced.

Thus, having an audience—particularly one that recognises one's authority

and vocalises their approval of the message—is the primary reward for textual

productivity. Among online *Simpsons* fans, one's position on the Scully Era

illuminates how one identifies oneself within the fandom, as well as one's familiarity

with and knowledge of the fan-text. Also, as the concept of the Scully Era is a fan-

derived meme, if one can competently discuss its merits and shortfalls, one also

demonstrates one's position as an authoritative fan.

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[14] User name "gizzarkhenry likes this", "So what exactly happened to 'The Simpsons'?", *Official.proboards.com*, 3 September 2011, accessed 20 August 2014, http://officialfan.proboards.com/thread/412750?page=2

[15] User name "gizzarkhenry likes this", "So what exactly happened to 'The Simpsons'?", *Official.proboards.com*.

In 2009, the prolific, long-term *NoHomers* member and contributor "Financial Panther" decided to poll his or her peers on the question, "Is Mike Scully criticized too much?"[16] 125 users voted, with seventy responding "Yes" and fifty-five responding "No" (thus a slim majority of fifty-six percent voting "Yes" to forty-four voting "No").[17] Some either additionally or only responded verbally, opening a debate between those who support (or, at least, don't vilify) Scully and those who do. In his first reply to this thread, another prolific, long-time user "Patches O'houlihan" (who impugns Scully in a number of posts on threads covering the topic of modern-era *Simpsons*) proposes an interesting difference of fan perspective that is rooted in generational divide: "Scully dumbed the show down to get kids and unfortunately he succeeded. Now all of the kids who started watching during his tenure have become his biggest apologists. […] Scullys fans feel we are attacking their childhood."[18]

Here, Patches O'houlihan subtly invokes the hierarchical nature of online fandom in his commentary on the trends he observes in the discourse. On every single post a *NoHomers* user contributes to the site, that user's "Join Date" and "Posts" (the latter expressed numerically in its cumulative sum) are visible for all other users to see (among other pieces of information). The earlier the "Join Date" and the higher the number of "Posts" a user displays, the more of an authority that user appears to be; these form the evidence of what John Fiske calls the fan's accumulation of popular cultural capital.[19] Patches O'houlihan has a very early "Join Date" of October 2001, and has contributed 14,076 posts to the site; in conjunction with the language he tends to employ in his posts (as above), it is clear

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[16] User name "Financial Panther", "Is Mike Scully criticized too much?" (*NoHomers.net*, 25 July 2009), accessed 20 August 2014: http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?79882.
[17] These figures were accurate on 20 August 2014. By 30 November 2015, 144 people (total) had voted, with 87 respondents voting "Yes" and 57 responding "No" (60.42% "Yes" versus 39.58% "No". Thus, perhaps in light of newer seasons, fans' retrospection sheds a more forgiving and nostalgic perspective of Scully-Era episodes.
[18] User "Patches O'houlihan", "Is Mike Scully criticized too much?", *NoHomers.net*.
[19] John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom", *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, Lisa A. Lewis, ed., (London: Routledge, 1992), 34.

that he holds himself (and is held) in a relatively privileged position within the site's hierarchy.

In his argument that generational difference is the primary factor that inspires fans either to dismiss or revere Scully-era (and modern-era) *Simpsons* episodes, Patches O'houlihan makes the subtle assertion that those who admire Scully's episodes are relative newcomers to the series (and an even subtler assertion that they are 'dumb'). In a setting in which complete knowledge of the series is capital, O'houlihan's dismissal of Scully fans as newbies might discourage long-term fans from voicing their support of the showrunner and of the modern-era episodes for fear of being stigmatised. O'houlihan wields his site-sanctioned credibility to silence his opponents, and uses the same term as the site's official title ranking system gives to the newest, least experienced members to put his opponents in their places.

In addition to the display of their statistics, *NoHomers* users are also afforded space for a signature to appear on each of their posts, and for this specific post on this particular occasion, Patches O'houlihan chose to include two pieces of wisdom in his. The first reads: "Well, ya'know if you stay positive and forget about trivial things like 'proper characterization,' 'Satire,' and 'emotional depth' watching new Simpsons episodes can be a seemingly enjoyable lie." The second is a quote attributed to Jerry Seinfeld in which the actor-comedian states that he called his own hit series to an early close because he wanted the series to be remembered well in future years. In addition to his overt self-identification as a textual conservationist, Patches O'houlihan (incidentally, one of the few contributors whose user name is not modelled on a *Simpsons* meme) is clearly invested in convincing other fans to align with his perspective on the modern-era *Simpsons*—or he might be invested simply in convincing them that those who do not align with his perspective are lesser fans than he. One does not need to engage directly with O'houlihan in order to learn his position on the Scully years (and everything that implies) and to benefit

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from his wisdom. O'houlihan effectively uses every tool available to him to establish his rank within the fan hierarchy.

Hierarchies are an oft-observed feature among fan cultures, and these hierarchies are part of a larger inclination toward discrimination that occurs among fan communities; in his seminal work *Reading Television* (co-authored with John Hartley), Fiske observes early on that "television – along with most other commercial enterprises – exploits the competitive fragmentation among people who belong to what is objectively the same, subordinate, class."[20] Fiske sees in television spectatorship—whose members belong to the same (low or popular) class—a subjective, microcosmic version of the tension in the class distinction that exists between audiences of high culture and those of low culture.

It must be made clear that the classes being discussed within the context of fandom are not fixed as they are in some societies; as Fiske clarifies in *Understanding Popular Culture*, "popular allegiances are elusive, difficult to generalize […] because they are made from within, they are made by the people in specific contexts at specific times. They are context- and time-based, not structurally produced; they are a matter of practice, not a matter of structure."[21] Nevertheless, audience members of the same objective class—even members of the same family—might either implicitly or explicitly denigrate the tastes of the other members. In Fiske's example (which follows from studies performed by Tulloch and Moran in the mid-1980s) in *Television Culture*, "men denigrate women's tastes in television […] women's mode of watching […], and women's talk about it, which men call 'gossip' in opposition to their own talk about their programs which they typically refer to as 'discussion'.[22]

While this example is based on patriarchal ideological coding, a parallel can be observed between that which takes place in this example (i.e. the dismissal of

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[20] John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Routledge, 2003), print, 79.
[21] John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 24 – 25.
[22] John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987), print, 75.

the textual objects of women's fandom, the ways in which they engage with the texts, and the ways in which they engage with one another regarding the texts), and Patches O'houlihan's dismissal of the Scully Era-supportive fans—who O'houlihan assumes (based on what he perceives to be their poor taste) must be younger, newer and, therefore, subordinate viewers of *The Simpsons.* Indeed, age is a relatively common factor of discrimination within fandoms, and it is associated with gendered valuations of texts; younger, female fans tend to be (or have their opinions) subordinated by older, male fans.[23]

In the patriarchal example, the tastes of the male, who is the dominant figure, are "translated into the 'natural' superiority of those genres […] the programs he prefers are innately 'better.'"[24] For Patches O'houlihan, it is not only aesthetically obvious that the Scully Era episodes of *The Simpsons* are lower quality than the classic era episodes he admires, but it is also memetically commuted and accepted knowledge among the fandom that this is the case. From O'houlihan's perspective, until Financial Panther's *volte-face* on the topic, it was understood that all true fans felt the same way.

It is worth reiterating here that, as noted above, this hierarchisation among fans is assisted—if not encouraged—by the site's practice of displaying each fan's statistics on every reply s/he posts or threads s/he initiates. While from an objective stance *NoHomers* users are collectively considered to be the most elite class of *Simpsons* fans, within the group exist strata of fandom, some of whose markers are built into the very structure of communication.

While this practice serves to encourage hierarchisation, it may also prove useful to site users to distinguish the most from the least reliable information. A fan's statistics are a form of proof that s/he takes *The Simpsons* seriously enough that s/he is likely to possess a wealth of knowledge and information about the

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[23] John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom", *The Adoring Audience*, 36.
[24] Ibid.

series. The statistics are also a way for the site's administrators (who are quick to ban users who resort to unfriendly interactions) to vouch for the individual users; if a user is prolific and long-term, it means s/he has been cordial enough not to be excommunicated. However, it also gives users the impression that the opinions expressed by the fans possessing more impressive statistics are more valid or authentic than those expressed by fans who post less frequently or joined the site later. Those who most vocally rail against the Scully Era tend to be long-term, prolific users, which could influence the opinions of younger or newer fans who wish to be considered among the elite. However, now that some of the most elite users (such as Financial Panther) are reviewing their stances on the Scully Era, the opinions that have always been supportive of these *Simpsons* episodes may be reinstated as legitimate.

As any current search on *NoHomers* of either "Mike Scully" or "Al Jean" will reveal, Scully's episodes have recently enjoyed a positive reassessment by many *NoHomers* fans, particularly in comparison to those produced under Al Jean's tenure. A recent *NoHomers* thread devoted to the topic (started by user Elliot74 and aptly named "The Scully Years") opens with the following: "I've changed my mind about this era, I find it funny with just as memorable moments/plots as the classic era. The negatives are pretty large with the fact that the morals are stupid, the characterisations are awful and it's just not as well done but still, entertaining. […] so for the 100th time, let's discuss the Scully era."[25] It remained a popular thread for several weeks after it was established, with 152 replies posted to the discussion.

"Fans discriminate fiercely: the boundaries between what falls within their fandom and what does not are sharply drawn," observes Fiske.[26] The fans discriminate among one another based upon the ways in which they discriminate

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[25] User name "Elliot74", "The Scully Years" (*NoHomers.net*, 22 August 2014), last accessed 14 September 2014, http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?105511-The-Scully-Era
[26] John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom", *The Adoring Audience*, 34.

among *Simpsons* episodes. *Simpsons* fans are determined to draw distinctions between what they view as good *Simpsons* and bad *Simpsons*, which, as has been established, leads to distinctions being made between greater fans and lesser fans. But the textual discrimination is even more divisive than fan-level discrimination: for some textual determinists, not only are the Scully Era (and succeeding) episodes not acceptable, they are offensive.

2.2.5 – Zombie Simpsons: Quality, Discrimination, and Memes

Modern-era *Simpsons* is a divisive topic for *NoHomers* users, and it has generated other unique activities among online *Simpsons* fans in other communities. Some fans have taken to referring to *The Simpsons*'s modern era as "Zombie Simpsons," the implication being that the series should have ended at the end of Season 8, and that any subsequent episodes are devoid of life. The notion of Zombie Simpsons, which is developing into something of a meme among the online fan community at large, is the sole inspiration for the creation of the *Dead Homer Society* blog.

 The blog site (which, in its Google search result, rather tellingly appears as "Dead Homer Society| Zombie Simpsons Must Die") was begun in January 2009, and is dedicated to the disavowal of modern-era ("Zombie") *Simpsons*; the administrators actively discourage debate on the topic on their site. In an effort both to pay tribute to the object of their fandom and to establish themselves as fans knowledgeable of obscure facts, the authors have also adopted (or co-opted) and applied several early *Simpsons* memes to describe normal options and operations used on blogs. Knowing that their views are extreme, and that their position discounts more than two-thirds of a fan-text they claim to love, the *Dead Homer Society* must establish their authority among fans if they wish to persuade other fans to adopt their perspective. The most effective way to ratify their credibility is to demonstrate their fluency in *Simpsons* memetic language of the fan base. Merely

speaking the language is insufficient; to show their mastery of the language, they must compose poetry.

For example, the link on each post that enables readers to share the blog's content on their own social media sites is called "Tell Aaronson and Zykowski". This is a direct reference to a scene in the episode "And Maggie Makes Three": an ellipsis trope is cleverly subverted when Patty and Selma (Marge's sisters), intent on ruining Homer's life, decide intentionally to spread the news of Marge's third pregnancy around Springfield before Marge has told Homer.[27] Having emphatically promised Marge that they wouldn't tell Homer, once home, the pair open the Springfield telephone directory and dial the first name on the first page, A. Aaronson, to whom Patty delivers the news over the telephone. A brief cross-dissolve paired with a harp-and-strings sound bridge carries the scene to a second shot of the telephone directory, now open on the last page, over which a weary-looking Patty leans, ending another telephone call: "I just thought you'd like to know, Mr. Zykowski." The implication here, of course, is that Patty and Selma have called every listed resident of Springfield to share Marge's news, with the intention that Homer will certainly find out about—and be devastated by—the pregnancy. However, the expectation is subverted when, upon ending the call with Mr. Zykowski, Patty lets out a sigh of satisfaction and says, "Ah, there. Aaronson and Zykowski are the two biggest gossips in town. In an hour, everyone will know."

This is the only mention of Aaronson or Zykowski within (at least) the first twenty seasons of the series. The cleverness of the subversion makes it memorable, and the gag incorporates several modes of humour from Fink's analysis, particularly those that compose incongruity theory: a few of those elements present are unexpected-surprise, self-reflexive, exaggeration, and stereotyping elements. It also incorporates combined elements of comedic

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[27] "And Maggie Makes Three", *The Simpsons*, season 6, episode 13, directed by Swinton O. Scott III, aired 22 January 1995 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2005), DVD.

structure, including setup-and-payoff, sight-gag and double-whammy aspects. In combination these characteristics make this particular joke an excellent candidate for memetic use—and, when such wit is coupled with relative obscurity, jokes like these are appealing to fans who wish to earn the admiration and respect of their peers in an accumulation cultural capital. The *Dead Homer Society* authors are clearly aware of the prestige that the careful, humorous and appropriate repurposing of this obscure and clever meme can afford them as fans, as well as the subsequent authority and validation it will lend their position.

Other examples of the memes used by the *Dead Homer Society* authors in order to earn credibility among their peer fans are titular; regular blog post titles are all listed in the same format: "reading digest: [post title] edition." "Reading Digest" is, of course, a parody of the publication *Reader's Digest*, and it premiered in the Season 3 episode "Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington."[28] Like the Aaronson and Zykowski joke, it is obscure in its singularity (only having been mentioned in a single episode), but is a well-known joke to fans who are exceedingly familiar with the earlier episodes—especially the textual conservationists among the fandom.

Another example of the titular memes is far more widely known as a memetic *Simpsons* neologism that has found its way into the popular vernacular; the title of a list of links to websites that are associated with or respected by the *Dead Homer Society* authors is "cromulent websites". "Cromulent", a word invented by former staff writer David X. Cohen to mean "legitimate" or "acceptable", was also only uttered once in *The Simpsons*. The Season 7 episode "Lisa the Iconoclast" opens with the staff and students at Springfield Elementary watching a dated biopic of the town's founder, Jebediah Springfield.[29] In a pivotal scene, Springfield declares his famous motto: "A noble spirit embiggens the smallest man," which is

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[28] "Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington", *The Simpsons*, season 3, episode 2, directed by Wes Archer, aired 26 September 1991 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2003), DVD.
[29] "Lisa the Iconoclast", *The Simpsons*, season 7, episode 16, directed by Mike B. Anderson, aired 18 February 1996 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2006), DVD.

met with an enormous cheer from the students. When the line is uttered, fourth-grade teacher Mrs. Krabappel says to second-grade teacher Miss Hoover, "'Embiggens'? Hm. I never heard that word before I came to Springfield." Miss Hoover replies, "I don't know why. It's a perfectly cromulent word."

Of course, this indicates that the people of Springfield have their own dialect—and to speak the *Simpsons*-generated and Springfield-specific dialect would normally denote an elite fan. However, among the neologisms that have emerged from the series, "embiggens" and "cromulent" are some of—if not the—most well-known; both have come into common memetic use among fans.[30] Nevertheless, the *Dead Homer Society* authors have used this entirely Simpsonian word in a perfectly cromulent way—although noticeably absent from this list of related sites, which includes *The Simpsons Archive*, is *NoHomers.net*.

A final—and particularly meaningful—example of *Simpsons* memes employed as titles on the *Dead Homer Society* site is the list of the site's authors and contributors. They are called the "Loyal Stonecutters"—and, incidentally, this is the only title on the entire blog upon which capital letters are bestowed (all other titles are entirely in lower-case letters, although proper grammar and punctuation are observed in the posts themselves), suggesting that this list is tendered with special care. It is also named for one of the most memorable and revered collectives ever featured in the series, introduced in season 6: the Stonecutters.

The Stonecutters are an elite secret society of Springfieldians (although branches apparently exist all over the world) who operate in a similar way to (and are a parody of) the Freemasons—or, at least, as the Freemasons are rumoured to operate. In the episode "Homer the Great," once he discovers the organisation,

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[30] In the DVD commentary for "Lisa the Iconoclast," Bill Oakley states that on the internet—which he immediately clarifies encompasses "not just *Simpsons* fans" in this context—"embiggens has actually become a real word. […] And I know you can buy t-shirts with 'cromulent' on them."

Homer is desperate to join, but is rebuffed in his initial attempts.[31] The rejection

rouses painful memories of Homer's exclusion as a child; in a flashback, a young

Homer is denied access to a treehouse into which all his companions are climbing.

When Homer questions his refusal, the boy guarding the entry to the treehouse

points to a sign, which reads "No Homers Club". Young Homer protests, "But you

let in Homer Glumplich," who pokes his objectionable head out of the window and

emits a "hyuck hyuck!" laugh. The boy applies sound reason to his response as he

emphasises the plural: "It says 'No Homer*s*'. We're allowed to have one."

By virtue of a technicality, Homer finally gains access to the Stonecutters,

and, upon his near-banishment due to his ungainly behaviour at the 1500th

anniversary dinner, he is revealed to be The Chosen One. When he finds both the

resulting (constant) sycophantism from the other members and the hedonism

afforded by his new position tiresome and unfulfilling, Lisa inspires Homer to lead

the Stonecutters to contribute to the community. Though they are opposed to being

put to work and declined their usual leisure activities, the members of

Stonecutters—yearning for their former *modus operandi*—decline to follow the

Stonecutter World Council members' advice to kill Homer. They opt instead to

leave the Stonecutters and revive "the ancient mystic society of No Homers" (of

which an adult Homer Glumplich is a member, indicating that the old rules have

been retained).

The significance behind the *Dead Homer Society* authors' use of "Loyal

Stonecutters" is three-fold: the first aspect is quite self-explanatory, as the

invocation of the imagery of the Stonecutters transmits to the site's visitors that

these are the elite members of and contributors to the site. The second is subtle:

since the Stonecutters abandoned the 1500-year-old society to reinstate the No

Homers Club, in using its name, the *Dead Homer Society* simultaneously

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[31] "Homer the Great", *The Simpsons*, season 6, episode 12, directed by Jim Reardon, aired
8 January 1995 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2005), DVD.

acknowledges its fellow elite fan site (*NoHomers.net*), and declares both its similarities to and differences from that group. This sends a message that the sites are related, they are equally exclusive, but they are fundamentally different. Finally, it references a very obscure, funny joke, thus creating or employing something of a metameme that lends the authors' expertise significant credibility; the phrase "loyal Stonecutters" is invoked just once in the episode when Homer, having been rejected for the second time in his life from the No Homers Club, returns to the old Stonecutter meeting hall. Homer stands on a stage and commands, "Loyal Stonecutters, let us begin our re-enactment of the Battle of Gettysburg." A camera-perspective track-out reveals that Homer is addressing a group of feral globus monkeys wearing American Civil War-era uniforms. The *Dead Homer Society*'s clever use of the term both subverts and upholds the contributors' elite statuses, and invites other fans with the same level of knowledge to share in the joke (that the "Loyal Stonecutters" are actually just a group of monkeys). Such an obscure joke—one that will not be identified easily even by loyal fans—is a tremendously effective tool in announcing in an indirect way (and in a way that only the most elite fans will understand) that the *Dead Homer Society* contributors possess an exhaustive knowledge of their text. While the contributors' knowledge about and identifications with the elite Stonecutters (and other more widely-recognisable memes) on the first two levels might impress more modest fans, it is this extra level that offers communication—and, it is surely intended, confidence—between elite fans.

These meme-titles are visible at all times on the site; this bolsters their position among their peers and lends legitimacy to their conclusions, as these memes serve as a form of by-proxy evidence that the authors have accumulated enough cultural capital (i.e. knowledge) to comment as authorities on their object of fandom. Convincing other fans that their conclusions (i.e. that *The Simpsons* has decreased so far in quality as to hold no resemblance to the show it once was, and

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that its production should cease) is the entire objective of the site and of its authors related publications.

One of the titles always visible on the *Dead Homer Society* page is a link to its brief manifesto outlining the main tenets of the site:

Most Simpsons discussion boards and websites suffer from a never ending tension between people who defend the current incarnation of the show and people who cannot stand it. The former group's arguments often boil down to saying it's still funnier than 95% of television shows and that if you disagree you're just being a killjoy.

Fuck that.

The program that bills itself as "The Simpsons" bears only the faintest resemblance to our favourite television show of all time. Today it is a hollow shell, over animated, under thought out, and thoroughly mediocre. The sooner it ends the better off we'll all be.

Dead Homer Society was formed for two reasons:

1) To create an on-line home for Simpsons fans who outright despise most, if not all, of the double-digit seasons but revere the old ones the way religious types do their stupid books.

2) To create a central place for people who want to see the show finally taken off the air.

Here's the basic outline:

Seasons 1 – 6 – The Simpsons

Season 7 – One Bad Episode ["Marge Be Not Proud"]

Seasons 8 – 11 – Mayday, Mayday, we're going down!

Season 12+ -- Zombie Simpsons. It has no pulse and no intelligence but it just won't fucking die.

Plenty of people will quibble with the above (some like to separate out

Season 1 and/or 2 for example), but in the main it's what we think. If you

seriously disagree then this is not the site for you.

If, on the other hand, you think the show fell off in the late nineties and is

now basically unwatchable – not only are you correct – but you're also

amongst friends.[32]

This manifesto makes clear several lines of discrimination operating on the

site. While the authors of the site (chief among them is Charlie Sweatpants, a name

that its user employs in published and unpublished written works, including his

contributions to the unrelated publication *The Ann Arbor Review of Books*) do not

consider the Scully-Era episodes to be the worst of the series, Scully is held

responsible for its degeneration. He was at the metaphorical helm when the

distress call was issued, and his final season as showrunner is the first of those

falling under the Zombie Simpsons designation proper.

In explicating the *Dead HomerSociety*'s modes of discrimination, it is prudent

to begin with the most obvious one: the textual. What is written here (and reiterated

in Charlie Sweatpants's 2012 monograph *Zombie Simpsons: How the Best Show

Ever Became the Broadcasting Undead*) is not the same (relatively) gentle, ever-

present controversy over whether the Scully Era's episodes are worthy of the same

accolades as the classic era that is observed on *NoHomers*. Charlie Sweatpants is

unrelenting in his criticism of the episodes that fall into what *NoHomers* users call

"modern era" *Simpsons*; he genuinely segregates classic and modern *Simpsons*

into two different shows.

In "Appendix A – A Note on the Term 'Zombie Simpsons" of *Zombie

Simpsons*, he discusses the process by which his distinctions came to be

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[32] Charlie Sweatpants, "dead homer society manifesto" (*DeadHomerSociety.com*, n.d), first
accessed 7 January 2013: http://deadhomersociety.com/manifesto/

articulated—and, perhaps more importantly, why they came to be articulated.

"When two of my friends and I were plotting the website that eventually became this mini-book, we knew we'd need a term. People sometimes refer to the dreary years of the show as 'modern' or 'new' Simpsons. Or they'll call the original seasons 'classic' or 'golden age' Simpsons. We needed something concrete to draw the line as clearly and brightly as possible."[33] Sweatpants is eager to see the term take hold among fans; he is determined to see it develop into a meme.

Writing on reactions to the *Simpsons* marathon that ran on FXX in celebration of its acquisition of the series, in an entry called "reading digest: weak defenses of zombie simpsons edition", Charlie Sweatpants quotes a *Gothamist* blogger: "'Despite our reservations, we have truly enjoyed this chance to catch up a bit on the so-called 'Zombie Simpsons' era, the not-so-affectionate term Simpsons aficionados for the show post-season 12.'"[34] Immediately after this quote, Sweatpants laments the fact that the author (Ben Yakas) did not provide a link to the *Dead Homer Society*, particularly because Yakas cites the same reasons Sweatpants does for the decline in the show's quality, "namely that [Zombie Simpsons] and *The Simpsons* aren't the same show."[35] After citing the passage of Yakas's blog post that supports this statement, Sweatpants reaches a conclusion: "But then it occurred to me that it's actually better that we're not linked because that means the term is catching! Everything is falling into place."[36]

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[33] Charlie Sweatpants, "Appendix A – A Note on the Term 'Zombie Simpsons'" (*Zombie Simpsons: How the Best Show Ever Became the Broadcasting Undead*, Amazon Digital Services, Inc., 2012), accessed 24 August 2014: http://deadhomersociety.com/zombiesimpsons/zs13/.

[34] Ben Yaykas, "Extend Your *Simpsons* Marathon Buzz with These Videos", *Gothamist.com*, 01 September 2014, accessed 06 September 2014: http://gothamist.com/2014/09/01/extend_your_simpsons_marathon_buzz.php. Quoted in Charlie Sweatpants, "reading digest: weak defenses of zombie simpsons edition", *DeadHomerSociety.com*, 05 September 2014, accessed 06 September 2014. http://deadhomersociety.com/2014/09/05/reading-digest-weak-defenses-of-zombie-simpsons-edition/

[35] Ben Yaykas, "Extend Your *Simpsons* Marathon Buzz with These Videos", *Gothamist.com*.

[36] Ibid.

Sweatpants has revealed a crucial aspect of memes here, both in their applications specific to online *Simpsons* fandom, and in their general applications: perhaps the notion of authorship is a difficult one to navigate because the attachment of authorship is potentially inhibitive to the spreadability of the meme. If the author of a term such as "Zombie Simpsons" is perpetually attached to the term itself, it may affect others' motivation to use it. However, Sweatpants has also eagerly revealed his hand with respect to his own agenda: he wishes for his own ideas, concepts and politics with respect to the series to become memes in their own right—even if that requires that it be accomplished with relative anonymyity.

In this specific example, *Dead Homer Society* is planted on an extreme end of the *Simpsons* online fandom spectrum; their views are quite radical (i.e. that the current series holds no value and should be cancelled) compared even with the highly vocal fan-critics on *NoHomers*. On *NoHomers*, the source of the term "Zombie Simpsons" is well known; it has extended into memetic territory there. It is also very easy for any internet user to locate the source of the term, as Charlie Sweatpants has devoted considerable effort to staking his claim as its creator. If a *NoHomers* fan is inclined to use the term because s/he feels it is an accurate description of the show's current state, but s/he does not otherwise agree with the strong sentiments put forth on *Dead Homer Society*, s/he might be discouraged from using it as s/he might not wish to be so closely associated or identified with that faction of fans. Thus, the removal (or exclusion, or omission) of specific authorship from this (or any) meme could be the catalyst its destigmatisation, and thus to its spreadability.

The very subject of other fans' willingness to use the term "Zombie Simpsons" came up on *NoHomers*; on 01 September 2014, the relatively new *NoHomers* user "ofhf" polled his or her fellow fans with the question "The phrase

'Zombie Simpsons' – yay or nay?"[37] On 27 September 2014, the closed polls show 46 votes all together, with 21 votes (38.89%) for "yay" and 33 votes (61.11%) for "nay". Many of the earliest replies to the thread appear supportive of the "yay" camp, although a substantial debate emerged among users before long. User "Dark Homer" (who is a forum moderator, shows a Join Date of October 2001, and has contributed 17,639 posts to the site's forums, lending this user a great deal of credibility and authority among his or her peers) cites the authorship problem proposed above as his or her main reason not to adopt the term: "I don't mind it when dead homer society uses it, it's their 'thing' and it works for them. it's catchy and succinct even though it reeks of tv tropes-level condescension. it feels weird and cult-y when someone who's not them uses it. 'post-classic' is equally smug though".[38]

The last sentence of the reply appears to be addressed to no one in particular; Dark Homer is the first in the forum to invoke the alternative "post-classic", although this is a term that has seen some use in older forums on the site (and support in later replies on this thread). Dark Homer's sentiments are echoed throughout the replies on the forum; users who agree on the decline in quality but who wish to distance themselves from the *Dead Homer Society* are struggling to develop a term that is adequately reflective of their more moderate position on the issue. Some users feel that "Zombie Simpsons" as a term denotes that all episodes from Season 12 on are terrible, and these users express their opposition to this position. Relatively new user "BuyMyCereal" offers one such criticism: "I believe this is my first time seeing this phrase because I don't remember anyone referring to Modern Simpsons as Zombie Simpsons. I haven't heard the term many times and I

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[37] User name "ofhf", "The phrase 'Zombie Simpsons' – yay or nay?" (*NoHomers.net*, 01 September 2014), accessed 02 September 2014.
http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?105618-The-phrase-quot-Zombie-Simpsons-quot-yay-or-nay
[38] User "Dark Homer", "The phrase 'Zombie Simpsons' – yay or nay?", *NoHomers.net*.

already don't like it. While I do acknowledge that the show isn't as good as it used to be, there are at least a few good episodes in each season."[39]

It is interesting, then, that even though the "nay" camp held the majority on this poll from its opening to its closure, the *Dead Homer Society* used this *NoHomers* thread as an example of the term's virality. In the *Dead Homer Society* post quoted above, the word "catching" in the sentence, "But then it occurred to me that it's actually better that we're not linked because that means the term is catching!" is a hyperlink to ofhf's poll on NoHomers. This seems like an odd choice when the majority of voters and a significant number of contributors have openly "nayed" the phrase. Perhaps the fact that the phrase is being debated with relative passion is sufficient evidence for Sweatpants that his term is "catching"; it does not need to be popular among the majority of fans, it just needs to be acknowledged by (and supported by some of) the elite fans. As is discussed in the "Origins of the Meme" section of the "Theoretical Engagement 1: Memes, Semiotics and Humour" chapter, memes do not have to be aesthetically pleasing or beneficial to the host in order to be spreadable; what defines a "good" meme is its ability to spread, even if the context in which it is spread is a negative one.

Through responses like Dark Homer's above, the discrimination among fans is again evident. While it has been established that the *Dead Homer Society* authors draw these textually conservative distinctions (that fans who agree with the notion that "the show fell off in the late nineties and is now basically unwatchable" are "correct"), it is now also evident that this discrimination works both ways. From Dark Homer's perspective, for a fan who is not among the *Dead Homer Society*'s "Loyal Stonecutters" to employ the term "Zombie Simpsons" is to enter the realm of "weird and cult-y"—a term which Dark Homer clearly does not associate with the passionate fan-users of *NoHomers*. Thus, for Dark Homer, the *Dead Homer*

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[39] User "BuyMyCereal", "The phrase 'Zombie Simpsons' – yay or nay?", *NoHomers.net*.

Society is a unique fandom segregated from the majority on *NoHomers*, and its bespoke vernacular has no place (or is, at least, out of place) on the latter site.

While discussions can take place in the comments section of the *Dead Homer Society* blog posts, fans who disagree with the authors are discouraged from engaging ("it's what we think. If you seriously disagree then this is not the site for you"). The *Dead Homer Society* is less a forum than a pulpit, and fans who do not agree with the basic tenets of the creed are not genuine members of the congregation, and are thus free to worship elsewhere.

Discrimination and memes among online *Simpsons* fandoms collide (or, perhaps, collude) in a provocative *NoHomers* thread posted on 04 March 2013 by user "Santa Shoz". Its title, "You think the 'Classic' *Dead Homer Society* is turning into a 'Modern' *Dead Homer Society*", is a clever play on the very language of the debate that inspired the *Dead Homer Society* to splinter from mainstream fandom. Santa Shoz further explains the reasoning that prompted her or him to open the discussion:

> I'm starting to wonder if Dead Homer Society is becoming a 'Modern' version of itself. I don't know when it started but around 2009, I heard the whole 'Dead Homer Society', as a 'Simpsons Fan Term', not a website, used more frequently and back then, I heard a lot of positive things about it being 'Pro-Classic', checked it out and saw that this was a 'Anti-Modern Simpsons' website. I didn't really [like] the Modern Simpsons as much compared to the beloved classics, but [Dead Homer Society] were pretty much hating on almost every modern episode from each season, and there were some good ones. Now on 2012… I've started to hear mixed opinion for the Dead Homer Society. That [they're] doing the same thing over and over again but what got people ticked off [is] that they were ignoring positive episodes with actual great humor and storyline, and

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searching for even the smallest aspects they can [find to] call it a bad episode. My response was… 'Wasn't that what got them popular with the Simpsons Community in the first place?'[40]

The very first reply on the thread, by user Hamm, catches on to the play on the vernacular, taking it to its next logical step: "So you're saying they've turned into a kinda Zombie Dead Homers Society?"[41] User Venomrabbit agrees with Santa Shoz's view that the *Dead Homer Society* has begun to define itself (or perhaps always defined itself) purely by its vitriolic—and, it seems to those who agree with Santa Shoz, indiscriminate—hatred rather than to thoughtful review and/or textual analysis. S/he responds to the thread: "Dead Homer Society did have a few neat character analysis pages but other than that it's basically the Westboro Baptist Church of the Simpsons 'fandom'. They harp on about hating one group of things so constantly and repetitively it starts sounding like denial."[42]

Venomrabbit has drawn a comparison to a small but vocal American religious group founded by Fred Phelps; the group has met renown through the homophobic protests they stage around the country, largely at high-profile funeral and memorial services. Today it is most famous for its "God hates [derogatory name for given target group]" rhetoric, which is often seen on protestors' placards; hate, in both word and concept, is quite patently a substantial part of WBC's image. While Venomrabbit's comparison is quite an extreme one, it puts into perspective how outside of the mainstream *Simpsons* online fan community some fans would place the *Dead Homer Society*—and how the group is perceived by these fans. Certainly, the creation and (active, prolific) maintenance of a website devoted to

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[40] User "Santa Shoz", "You think the 'Classic' Dead Homer Society is turning into a 'Modern' Dead Homer Society'" (*NoHomers.net*, 4 March 2013), first accessed 17 July 2014: http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?99769
[41] User "hamm", "You think the 'Classic' Dead Homer Society is turning into a 'Modern' Dead Homer Society'", *NoHomers.net*.
[42] User "Venomrabbit", "You think the 'Classic' Dead Homer Society is turning into a 'Modern' Dead Homer Society'", *NoHomers.net*.

one's manifest hatred for part of an otherwise beloved text seems an odd commitment for a fan to make. Self-publishing a book espousing the same beliefs (under a pseudonym) cements Charlie Sweatpants's commitment to his contempt even further, and lends credence to Venomrabbit's analogy; the *Dead Homer Society* is a small but vocal, passionate, convicted group that vocally protests their target with hate campaigns.

In his September 2014 *Vulture.com* interview with showrunner Al Jean, former showrunner David Mirkin, and writer Matt Selman, Jesse David Fox asks, "The show's been on for so long and had a cultural peak. Does it ever get frustrating, when you feel like you've done a really fantastic episode, that it can't be considered a 'classic' because 'classic' means 'old'?"[43] Al Jean's response suggests that the creatives pay little mind to the clear distinctions drawn among fans. He is dismissive of the fans' notion of a "classic" era in the series: "Well, I personally don't know what a 'classic' means. […] And by the way, whatever bar there is, it's moved so many times."[44]

Selman points out that the notion of "classic" depends on each fan's own personal experience and the point at which each fan came to be a regular viewer; he observes that this point tends to occur in the fifth grade. "[I]t seems that's when a lot of young people discover the show. And I am the coolest dad in the fifth-grade class right now. But they don't know what those 'classics' are."[45] Al Jean concurs with an anecdote: "My daughter's the same. Because we have the single DVDs, she watches them like she eats potato chips. And she doesn't go, 'Ooh season three, alright.'" David Mirkin jests, "'Well, what the hell happened after season eight?' That's what your daughter said to me." Al Jean responds with an aside to the

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[43] Jesse David Fox, "3 *Simpsons* Showrunners Reflect on New Fans and the 'Classic Era' Myth" (*Vulture.com*, 23 September 2014), accessed 24 September 2014: http://www.vulture.com/2014/09/simpsons-showrunners-on-the-classic-era-myth.html
[44] Al Jean, quoted in Jesse David Fox, "3 *Simpsons* Showrunners Reflect on New Fans and the 'Classic Era' Myth", *Vulture.com*.
[45] Matt Selman, quoted in Jesse David Fox, "3 *Simpsons* Showrunners Reflect on New Fans and the 'Classic Era' Myth", *Vulture.com*.

interviewer: "For all of this part of the interview, just put in parentheticals: 'Very defensive.'"[46]

Here Jean is able to poke fun at his reputation for being a vocal defender of the new seasons, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Jean has every motivation to take this position; having held the longest showrunner tenure of the series, and being the showrunner from the series' 13th season to the present (early 2016), the questions of quality are centred on his work. The "Jean Era" has taken criticism from former writers and even from core-cast voice actor Harry Shearer, whose conclusion as long ago as 2004 was that the series had run its course— naturally, Jean responded defensively, expressing outrage at Shearer's audacity.[47] Ortved describes the Jean Era as "toothless," even levelling an accusation that the episode "24 Minutes" is the result of collusion between Jean and Fox to plug another Fox hit, *24*.[48]

Naturally, from nowhere does the Jean Era receive more criticism than from the fans. Of course, as the Jean Era follows the Scully Era, the *Dead Homer Society* has always considered it Zombie Simpsons (thereby writing it off). Nevertheless, the site does provide a piece on Jean, which lists the showrunner's perceived mistakes that prevented him from rescuing the series in the wake of the Scully Era.[49] It is always a popular topic of conversation, with the term "Jean Era" appearing in at least one forum conversation almost daily. The *Worst Episode Ever* podcast hosts, Dan and Jack, are in the process of narrowing down what they feel is the worst episode of the series ever produced. It is a work in progress, so while the rankings are in flux, they have a living list from "Worst Worst Episodes" to "Best

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[46] Al Jean and David Mirkin quoted in Jesse David Fox, "3 *Simpsons* Showrunners Reflect on New Fans and the 'Classic Era' Myth", *Vulture.com*.
[47] John Ortved, *The Simpsons: An Uncensored, Unauthorized History* (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2009), print, 225 – 226.
[48] Ibid, 227. See also "24 Minutes", *The Simpsons*, season 18, episode 21, directed by Raymond Persi, aired 20 May 2007 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox).
[49] John Hugar, "where al jean went wrong: a closer look at the last 10 years of the simpsons' (*DeadHomerSociety.com*, 4 August 2011), accessed 17 August 2014: http://deadhomersociety.com/2011/08/04/where-al-jean-went-wrong-a-closer-look-at-the-last-10-years-of-the-simpsons/

Worst Episodes". While these rankings are not democratically derived, they are generally in keeping with opinions on *NoHomers*; of the 57 episodes to make the list so far, 48 of them were produced in the Jean Era.[50] As is mentioned above, however, *Worst Episode Ever*'s Dan and Jack are aligned with *Dead Homer Society*'s position that the series should have been cancelled after the Scully Era, so their rankings are likely to be weighted accordingly.

2.2.6 – Staggering Onward

While *Simpsons* creatives sometimes have their own issues with fan sites, these are typically incurred by the harsh criticism fans post about the series (and personal gripes about writers in particular). They are counterbalanced by both the (acknowledged and appreciated) positive cultural work the fans perform and the creatives' own direct and enthusiastic participation on fan sites and forums. The issues the Fox network has with the fan sites, on the other hand, are almost entirely based on copyright infringements, and these are not considered merely to be individual threats to network revenues.

As they did with "Steal This Episode" (which underwent detailed analysis in **Chapter 1: The Fox that Released the Hounds**), the creatives have demonstrated their position, which reflects their own hegemonic struggles; they stand between the network, whose executives wield power over the creatives wherever possible, and the fans, for whom they create the series, and with whom they struggle for control of the franchise (particularly in the franchise's critical reception). The following chapter examines the methods by which the creatives create and adapt their memetic material to negotiate their positions with both the network and their fans—both of whom ultimately hold the fate of the series.

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[50] No author, "The Official *Worst Episode Ever* Rankings" (*WEEPodcast.com*, n.d), first accessed 4 August 2015: http://www.weepodcast.com/rankings/

2.3 – Chapter 3. The Simpsons Creatives vs. Fox and Fans

2.3.1 – Introduction

This last chapter looks at *The Simpsons*, memes, fans, and Fox from the creatives' perspective. While the chapter title suggests that these relationships are universally and consistently contentious, several examples throughout this chapter also establish the creatives' ability and enthusiasm in inclusivity, especially where their fans are involved. The antagonistic aspects between creatives and the network and those between creatives and fans are covered in the first two sections. They are bridged by a brief investigation of the creatives' attempts (and struggles) to transform the *Simpsons* franchise into a truly transmedia one, which leads into a discussion on other forms of fan engagement that the creatives have performed within and without the series.

An important expansion on the Comic Book Guy character, his significance and his evolution within the series is provided here, which makes way for a conversation surrounding the creatives' historical and continued engagement with online fans through a variety of portals. This includes concrete examples from the series in which fans were called upon to respond to and impact the series directly. Here, the conversation shifts toward the future of the series, including a tremendously important, creative and promising new foray into transmedia storytelling that not only acknowledges but relies upon memetic communication with fans, and an optimistic, fan-focused showrunner who is certain that fans will stand by their beloved fan-text through the perceived decline in quality and the lack of online and DVD access to the series.

2.3.2 – Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation v. *The Simpsons* (and Vice Versa)

It is pertinent first to remark upon the relationship between Fox network executives and the creative team behind *The Simpsons*. The two bodies are often in conflict with one another, typically surrounding issues of censorship or finance.[1] Naturally, the executives will prioritise revenues, so retention of advertisers is the key motivation in decisions to censor the series; the two areas of conflict are therefore frequently linked. A brief exploration of the tensions between the two parties will assist in establishing both the differences in their approaches to (and perspectives on) fan sites, and the fact that when one party engages with fans in a given way, it by no means necessarily represents the other party.

The makers of *The Simpsons* are quite open about the often-contentious relationship they have with the studio (through which they are funded and on whose network they are broadcast). This comes across in interviews with individual members of the creative team, in roundtable discussions among members of the team, in DVD commentaries for individual episodes, in Reddit IamA question-and-answer sessions, and in the series itself. During a roundtable discussion with former *Simpsons* writer Conan O'Brien, who left the series to replace David Letterman as the host on NBC's *Late Night* when Letterman migrated to CBS, several of the participants shared personal stories of Fox network executives splitting proverbial financial hairs.

Former *Simpsons* writer Jay Kogen recalls:

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[1] There exist several examples of writers and other creatives discussing this. For an example of the issue of censorship by network executives, see David Mirkin, "DVD Commentary, 'Itchy and Scratchy Land'", season 6, episode 4, directed by Wes Archer, aired 2 October 1994 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2005), DVD.
In the same NPR interview cited below, Matt Groening recalls Fox network censors taking issue with an in-story public service announcement Homer watches which states that beer can cause rectal cancer (and to which Homer simply responds, "Mmmm… beer"). The problem for the network was that beer companies had investments in the series (and, of course, advertisements attached thereto). The writers were then forced to gather research in order to provide the network with solid evidence that beer could indeed cause this type of cancer; otherwise the gag would be pulled.

When the show was at its height—well, it's still at its height. But it was

making, you know, billions of dollars in t-shirt sales and billions of dollars in

every kind of ancillary thing you could possibly imagine, and the Head of

Production at Twentieth Century Fox said, 'You guys are having too many

pretzels.' Like, they came in and said, 'Cut down on the pretzels and the

soda.' And it's like, 'You made a billion dollars this year!'[2]

Conan O'Brien is inspired by Kogen's tale to share his own experience of

having to buy out the remaining six months of his staff-writing contract with *The*

Simpsons in order to take up his new post as the host of NBC's *Late Night* talk

show. According to both Al Jean and O'Brien, despite supportive protests from

members of The *Simpsons* team (including executive producer James L. Brooks),

Fox insisted that O'Brien pay his way out of his position with them.[3]

Former writer and showrunner (and current part-time producer and

consultant on the series) Mike Reiss interjects before O'Brien's story develops

further into his experience transitioning out of the series (and away from the topic of

financial disputes with Fox), saying "I got the worst story of any of those." He

proceeds to share a story from his time as a showrunner on the series—a role

marked by very long hours at the studio—when he went in to work despite being

very ill with pneumonia. He sent a production assistant to purchase cough drops for

him, valued at forty-five cents, the expense for which the production assistant billed

to the studio (as per company procedure). A few days later Reiss received a call

from the Fox line producer, who interrogated him about the expenditure. Knowing

at the time that the line producer in question was himself suffering from an

[2] Jay Kogen, "'The Simpsons' Writers Reunion" (*Serious Jibber Jabber with Conan O'Brien*, 25 April 2013), accessed 26 April 2013: http://teamcoco.com/video/simpsons-serious-jibber-jabber?playlist=x;eyJ0eXBlIjoiZXRhZyIsImlkIjozOTIwNH0
[3] Conan O'Brien, "'The Simpsons' Writers Reunion", *Serious Jibber Jabber with Conan O'Brien*.

undisclosed illness and had been given a poor prognosis of survival, Reiss says that he asked the man whether the call was "a good use of either of our time?"[4]

These incidents and the sentiments they conveyed (both by Fox at the time they occurred and by the creatives as they tell their stories) have clearly made considerable impact; the conversation around Fox's grappling with creatives over money takes up a substantial amount of a one-off, celebratory, 20th anniversary reunion among some of the series' most legendary contributors. Whether there exists any pre-planned structure to O'Brien's *Serious Jibber Jabber* discussions (and whether any such structure, if it exists, is shared with guests) is not clear from the information available. However, the official website does state that "[o]n *Serious Jibber Jabber*, Conan O'Brien has lengthy, uninterrupted conversations with interesting people on topics which fascinate him," which indicates that the discussion is not edited.

Most importantly, the stories provide considerable insight not just to the relationship between *Simpsons* creatives and the network, but they draw attention to the *definitive delineation* between *Simpsons* creatives and the network. Al Jean interrupts O'Brien's story to clarify that the "people" Conan cites as his supporters in the conflict over his contract with the network included "the people that ran *The Simpsons*. Like, Jim [L. Brooks]," which O'Brien is quick to confirm, saying, "Oh, Jim was great!" Clearly, and meaningfully, the creatives do not consider Fox network executives—even those with titles like "head of production" and "line producer"—to be people that run *The Simpsons*.

The creatives have poked fun at the broadcast network on countless occasions within the show throughout its twenty-five seasons. Regular *Simpsons* viewers recognise—and have even come to expect—jokes about the quality of the network, the lack of taste in its content, and the integrity of those in charge. The creatives' ability to take such liberties (and the fact that they do not count Fox

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[4] Mike Reiss, "'The Simpsons' Writers Reunion", *Serious Jibber Jabber with Conan O'Brien.*

authorities to be in charge of the series) stems from the fact that James L. Brooks, who held a considerable sway at Fox through his existing Gracie Films contract with the studio, had secured a contract with then-Fox CEO Barry Diller that promised Brooks full creative freedom with no bureaucratic interference or censorship for his television series.[5] According to core cast member Harry Shearer, the contract Brooks had signed provided that the network "could do censor notes, but there'd be no show notes."[6] In looking at a 1998 interview in which Matt Groening tells Ivor Davis of *E! Online* that writers who have left *The Simpsons* have found themselves limited by network interference in their new environments, scholar Robert Sloane concludes that in its hands-off relationship with Fox, *The Simpsons* is unique within network television history and must be analysed as such.[7]

The Simpsons Archive, easily the most exhaustively-researched and meticulously-maintained online *Simpsons* information source, lists no fewer than 87 overt "swipes The Simpsons have taken at the most swipeable network on this planet."[8] One well-known example is Marge's line in the season 6 episode "Lisa's Wedding": "You know, Fox turned into a hard-core sex channel so gradually, I didn't even notice."[9] Another is found at the opening of the season 9 episode "Treehouse of Horror VIII," when the (fictitious and animated) Fox censor is stabbed to death after stating that, thanks to his "prudent editing, tonight's Simpsons Halloween special has been rated TV-G! This means there will be no raunchy NBC-style sex,

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[5] James L. Brooks, quoted in Matthew A. Henry, *The Simpsons, Satire, and American Culture*, (New York: Palgrave Publishing, 2012), 28.

[6] Dean Kuipers, "3rd Degree: Harry Shearer", *Los Angeles City Beat*, 15 January 2004, accessed 08 August 2014. http://web.archive.org/web/20080308105912/http://www.lacitybeat.com/cms/story/detail/?id=568&IssueNum=32.

[7] Robert Sloane, "Who Wants Candy? Disenchantment in *The Simpsons*", *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*, John Alberti, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 140 – 141.

[8] Brian Petersen and Bruce Gomes, "Swipes at Fox on The Simpsons", (*The Simpsons Archive*, n.d), accessed 17 July 2014: http://www.simpsonsarchive.com/guides/foxswipe.html

[9] "Lisa's Wedding", *The Simpsons*, season 6, episode 19, directed by Jim Reardon, aired 19 March 1995 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2005), DVD.

or senseless CBS-style violence."[10] Executives are obviously not off-limits to the

writers—even Fox owner and media mogul Rupert Murdoch is fair game; he has

been lampooned in several episodes, including an instance at the end of the

episode "Missionary: Impossible" in which Bart calls to pledge $10,000 during a Fox

telethon to keep "crude, low-brow programming" on the air. Rupert Murdoch himself

takes the call, and tells Bart, "You saved my network!" Bart replies, "Wouldn't be the

first time."[11]

While these barbs tend to go to air unchecked (and, apparently, undisputed)

by network executives, in an interview with Terry Gross of the American station

National Public Radio (NPR) on 23 October 2003, Matt Groening reported that the

makers of *The Simpsons* had received a threat of legal action from the Fox News

Network:

> One of the great things we did last year was [that] we parodied the Fox
>
> News Channel, and we did the [news] crawl along the bottom of the screen.
>
> And Fox fought against it, and said that they would sue. [laughs] They
>
> would sue the show. And we just—we called their bluff, 'cause we didn't
>
> think Rupert Murdoch would pay for Fox to sue itself. So we got away with
>
> it, but now Fox has a new rule that we can't do those little fake news crawls
>
> on the bottom of the screen—in a cartoon—because it might confuse the
>
> viewers into thinking it's real news.[12]

Groening's revelation was enough to inspire articles about the incident in both *The

Guardian* and *The Independent*, the latter of which revealed that "Robert

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[10] "Treehouse of Horror VIII", *The Simpsons*, season 9, episode 4, directed by Mark
Kirkland, aired 26 October 1997 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2006), DVD.
[11] "Missionary: Impossible", *The Simpsons*, season 11, episode 15, directed by Steven Dean
Moore, aired 20 February 2000 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2008), DVD.
[12] Terry Gross, "'Simpsons' Creator Matt Groening", *National Public Radio*, 23 October 2003,
http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1476480

Zimmerman, a spokesman for Fox News Channel, denied that the news channel had ever threatened a law suit. 'We are scratching our heads over here,' he said. 'We liked the cartoon. We thought it was great.'"[13]

The *Independent* article might simply serve as an example of media sensationalism, evidenced perhaps by the headline employed despite the acknowledgment of Zimmerman's denial of any contention over the episode or the reference; *The Guardian*'s headline was less sensational, and its author also quoted Zimmerman's denial.[14] However, it is conceivable that the Fox News Network would take issue with the *Simpsons* creatives' satirical take not only on their reporting style, but also on their undeniable (but nevertheless often denied, particularly in their motto, "Fair and balanced") ideological bent. Both articles contextualise Fox News Network's alleged reaction within their (failed) 2003 legal action against the author (and now U.S. Senator) Al Franken, who used the news channel's motto in the subtitle of his book *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*. The book is overtly critical of several Fox News Network personalities and of the news channel itself, so it is difficult to ascertain whether the lawsuit Fox News Network levelled at the author was motivated more by his ideological opposition or by his use of their slogan, which is legally trademarked. As has already been established in this thesis, Twentieth Century Fox is fastidious in its protection of its intellectual property.

This is not to imply that Fox News Network's legal action—or alleged threats thereof, in Groening's case—could not be motivated by a combination of both

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[13] Robert Zimmerman, quoted in Andrew Buncombe, "Doh! Murdoch's Fox News in a spin over 'The Simpsons' lawsuit", (*The Independent*, Washington, 29 October 2003), first accessed 11 August 2014: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/doh-murdochs-fox-news-in-a-spin-over-the-simpsons-lawsuit-93571.html. See also Chris Turner, *Planet Simpson* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2004), print, 444. In his discussion of the same incident, the author quotes a Fox statement in a *Washington Post* article: "'Matt was being satirical and certainly there was never any issue between the show and Fox News. We regret any confusion.'" He also quotes a *Variety* report as making the proclamation, "'Insiders say Groening was clearly being satirical during the interview."
[14] Clar Byrne, "Simpsons parody upset Fox News, says Groening" (*The Guardian*, London, 29 October 2003), accessed 11 August 2014: http://www.theguardian.com/media/2003/oct/29/tvnews.internationalnews

factors. The *Simpsons* creatives took aim both at the integrity of the news channel and its perceived political skew not only in their news crawl, but also in the satirical Fox News interview under which the crawl appears. Krusty the Clown and his Democrat opponent for the congressional election are being interviewed, and the channel, introduced as "Fox News, your voice for evil," is blatantly mistreating the Democrat candidate by introducing him only as "this guy," superimposing devil horns on his head and a Soviet hammer and sickle flag behind him, and referring to him as "comrade".[15] In the next shot, his image is completely upside down. Krusty, on the other hand, is depicted in front of a waving American flag during his favourable introduction, is given a superimposed halo, and is referred to by the interviewer as "Congressman" despite the elections not yet having taken place. When "this guy" complains about this, the interviewer dismisses him, saying, "You make a very adulterous point. We will now conclude this debate with a Krusty campaign commercial."

Meanwhile, the news crawl underneath the action scrolls the following phrases:

POINTLESS NEWS CRAWLS UP 37 PERCENT… DO DEMOCRATS CAUSE CANCER? FIND OUT AT FOXNEWS.COM… RUPERT MURDOCH: TERRIFIC DANCER… DOW DOWN 5000 POINTS… STUDY: 92 PERCENT OF DEMOCRATS ARE GAY… JFK POSTHUMOUSLY JOINS REPUBLICAN PARTY… OIL SLICKS FOUND TO KEEP SEALS YOUNG, SUPPLE… DAN QUAYLE: AWESOME... (ASHCROFT DECLARES BREAST OF CHICKEN SANDWICH "OBSCENE"… HILLARY CLINTON EMBARRASSES SELF, NATION… BIBLE SAYS JESUS FAVOURED CAPITAL GAINS CUT … STAY TUNED FOR HANNITY AND

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[15] "Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington," *The Simpsons*, season 14, episode 14, directed by Lance Kramer, aired 9 March 2003 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2011), DVD.

IDIOT … ONLY DORKS WATCH CNN … JIMMY CARTER: OLD,

WRINKLY, USELESS … BRAD PITT + ALBERT EINSTEIN = DICK

CHENEY)[16]

As established above, this Season 14 parody is nowhere near the first swipe

Simpsons creatives had taken at Fox or Fox News. However, most of the earlier

examples involve one or two lines of dialogue, a brief visual or auditory gag, or a

combination of all three. This sustained example was unprecedented in its length at

34 seconds, and unrelenting in its criticism. Whether or not Groening and his team

did receive threats of legal action from the Fox News Network, it can be declared

with certainty that the series has not done another parody news crawl since season

14, perhaps in compliance with Fox's alleged "new rule" that these could no longer

be done. Although something of a retraction of Groening's claims (by series

representatives) was printed in the *Washington Post* on 31 October 2003, Groening

confirmed and retold the story in an 18 July 2007 interview with Jon Stewart on *The

Daily Show*.[17] He states, "We've gotten in trouble for attacking Fox News, for

instance." Stewart is surprised, asking, "Is that true?" Groening responds with a

swift and firm "Yes." After discussing the content of the satirical news crawl,

Groening emphatically reiterates: "We have been forbidden to do that again,

because the Fox viewer might confuse our cartoon with actual news."[18]

If an order to stop producing parody news crawls was indeed issued and

complied with, it has clearly had no effect on *Simpsons* creatives' overarching drive

to make fun of the network; in fact, in the above interviews, Groening has turned the

events into another opportunity to criticise the news network and its viewers—and,

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[16] Ibid. Those phrases in brackets appear in a separate news crawl over the end credits of the episode.
[17] Anne Schroeder, "Names and Faces" (*Washington Post*, 31 October 2003), quoted in Chris Turner, *Planet Simpson* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2004), 444.
[18] Matt Groening, interview by Jon Stewart, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Comedy Central, 18 July 2007.

perhaps, the news network's estimation of its own viewers. Poking fun at the Fox News Network (and its viewers) continues well into the late seasons; along with the 20th season HD upgrade of the opening credits has come the frequent appearance of the Fox News helicopter in the "fly-by" at the end of the credits. The helicopter pulls a banner, which in one instance reads: "We don't hate you, Fox News. We just love MSNBC, CNN, CBS, NBC, ABC, BBC, ESPN, and Al Jazeera more."[19] An in-episode appearance of the Fox News helicopter provides an even more overt jab directed at the viewers of Fox News; the helicopter flies into frame, bearing the slogan: "NOT RACIST, BUT #1 WITH RACISTS".[20]

While in calling for an end to parody news crawls the network makes an assumption that Fox News viewers might watch *The Simpsons*, creatives of the series are clearly making an assumption that their viewers do not watch Fox News—or, at least, that they do not consider it to be a credible news source. The creatives are no strangers to making fun of their own viewers, particularly through the Comic Book Guy (Jeff Albertson) character, but these instances lack quite the same degree of vitriol with which *Simpsons*-makers expose the perceived ignorance of the average Fox News viewer. For example, in an episode in which Channel 6 reporter Kent Brockman utters an expletive after Homer spills coffee on him and Brockman is subsequently fired from the station, Marge invites him to stay at the Simpson home. Homer takes issue with Brockman's presence, stating, "I'm sorry Marge, but I won't live under the same roof as a member of the liberal media."[21] Marge implores Brockman, "You'll have to excuse him. He's been watching a lot of Fox News." But Homer will not be stopped: "Did you know that every day, Mexican gays sneak into this country and unplug our brain-dead ladies?" Marge reminds

[19] "Ned 'n' Edna's Blend", *The Simpsons*, season 23, episode 21, directed by Chuck Sheetz, aired 13 May 2012 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2012).
[20] "The Fool Monty", *The Simpsons*, season 22, episode 6, directed by Steven Dean Moore, aired 21 November 2010 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2010).
[21] "You Kent Always Say What You Want", *The Simpsons*, season 18, episode 22, directed by Matthew Nastuk, aired 20 May 2005 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2005).

Homer, "We have to take in Mr, Brockman. He wouldn't be in this mess if you hadn't dumped coffee on his lap!" Homer is indignant: "Oh, sure, put down a simple guy like me who works hard and plays by the rules." Bart and Lisa counter his claim with reminders that he hardly goes to work and frequently breaks the law.

This brief exchange conveys a number of criticisms of Fox News audience members: they are represented as prejudiced, racist, homophobic, xenophobic, paranoid, ignorant, gullible, self-righteous, and deluded. Comparatively, *Simpsons* viewers are, at worst, represented as pedantic, obsessive, callous, lazy, and ungrateful. While other proxies sometimes perform the duty of representing *alt.tv.simpsons*-type fans—for example, those who form the crowd of fans attending the "Meet the Voices of 'Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie'" public appearance in the season 8 episode "The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show"—Comic Book Guy (a.k.a. Jeff Albertson) remains the chief fan-surrogate.

2.3.3 – The Creatives *v.* Fans: John R. Donald meets Jeff Albertson, and Resistance Gives Way to Convergence

Writing on his notion of convergence culture, Henry Jenkins defines the notion of transmedia storytelling as "[s]tories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the [story] world, a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products."[22]

Convergence culture is hallmarked in part by an integration of old and new media, and Jenkins underscores the fact that, while new technology enables the sharing of information and ideas among consumers of a given media product, the convergence "occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their

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[22] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (London: New York University Press, 2008), print, 334.

social interactions with others."[23] The notion of transmedia storytelling (as popularised by Henry Jenkins and Jason Mittell) is particularly relevant—even crucial—to the internet era, as media producers begin to recognize both the knowledge communities their consumers have formed online, and the potential offered by new online platforms through which their product can be delivered, and on which the products can be consumed.

The language in the preceding sentence might indicate a negative analytical perspective on the capitalist appropriation of the emerging transmedia phenomenon; on the contrary, this chapter will demonstrate the creative and mutually beneficial ways in which producers of *The Simpsons* have employed the technique of transmedia storytelling to engage fans beyond the urtext (i.e. beyond *The Simpsons* series alone and into games, videogames). Unlike the Fox network, which has long resisted convergence, *Simpsons* creatives have raised the convergence stakes by engaging their fans in a two-way interaction not only on fan sites, but also through the urtext.

Transmedia storytelling is an emerging form of consumer engagement, and is closely tied to the phenomenon of convergence culture. Henry Jenkins describes the latter as "both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process" in which the new consumer is active in deciding and defining the media content s/he wishes to consume; the consumer assumes a participatory role that was not previously open.[24] Compared to the old television consumer, who may have been an active viewer with respect to meaning-making, but who could exert little to no direct influence on the urtext or its ancillaries, Jenkins's new television consumer is empowered by his or her network nomadism and social/global engagement. Transmedia storytelling thus developed as a response by media producers to meet the demands of—and opportunities offered by—the new

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[23] Ibid., 3.
[24] Ibid., 18.

consumer, whose interests expand beyond the television or cinema screen (and into gaming, literature, comics, conventions, online fan forums, fan fiction, etc.). Jenkins notes that not all fan engagement is met with a positive response by media producers; producers will at times resist or dismiss fan participation, thus sending "mixed signals" to fans with respect to the levels of engagement open to them.[25] The negotiation of this particular aspect of the relationship between *Simpsons* producers and fans has long been a treacherous and contentious one, albeit one that has inspired unfettered creativity from both parties.

The Simpsons provides a particularly interesting example of adaptivity when analysed through the still-forming convergence and transmedia paradigms. In a talk before an audience at the 2011 Comic-Con in San Diego, Jenkins emphasised several important distinctions in his theoretical models—particularly those distinguishing transmedia storytelling from the more familiar cross-media franchises, in which brands are moved "across media channels, but not necessarily [in] an attempt to extend the story in ways which expanded its scope and meaning."[26] This contrasts with transmedia storytelling, in which the ancillary manifestations of the urtext are developed alongside the urtext itself, and/or deliver new, developmental information about the story world to the consumer. For example, an urtextual Bart T-shirt is not an aspect of transmedia storytelling because it does not serve to develop a deeper understanding of the character or the world in which he resides.

But *The Simpsons* has delved further than T-shirts and other similar merchandise. In its twenty-seven years (as of December 2015) playing to an international television and (until recently, clandestine) limited internet audience, *The Simpsons* has established an immense cross-media presence—with the exception, of course, of its official online presence. Shortly after the series

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[25] Ibid., 19.
[26] Jenkins, Henry, "Transmedia 202: Further Reflections" (*Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, 01 August 2011), accessed 28 August 2013: http://henryjenkins.org/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html

premiered in its stand-alone, twenty-two-minute episode form in December 1989, the producers created a quarterly magazine called *Simpsons Illustrated.* The magazine had features on *Simpsons*-related real-world news, interviews with cast and crewmembers, puzzles, comics, and competitions.   The magazine also typically included fictional advertisements for Springfield-based businesses, advice on school behaviour from Bart, opinion pieces from other characters, and, in the first issue, a copy of Springfield's newspaper, the *Springfield Shopper*.

While these last pieces provided an opportunity to learn more about the characters on the young series and the world they inhabit in the urtext, the information flow goes only one way; no information introduced in *Simpsons Illustrated* exercised any influence on the series itself, though it did serve to inform the reader about the town of Springfield and its inhabitants.   A *Simpsons* fan who encountered a (fictional) advertisement for Frosty Krusty Flakes as early on in the series as *Simpsons Illustrated #1* was premiered (April 1991) might better appreciate Krusty the Clown's voracious appetite for self-promotion and licensing fees than the fan who comes to know the character only through the urtext. However, while it reinforced the information in the series, *Simpsons Illustrated* did not influence the urtext in any way.

This logic follows from Henry Jenkins's chapter in *Convergence Culture* on *The Matrix*, an enormously successful endeavour which employed video games, comics, and its official website along with the films in the trilogy to build its story world.   Jenkins establishes the ways in which media producers employ a transmedia strategy to engage consumers with their product.   The original film (*The Matrix*) came first, but was quickly followed by Web comics, animated stories, and then a game released along with the first sequel.   The third film was followed by an MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game), and each media manifestation offered new information that served to develop the Wachowskis' *Matrix* world.   There were, of course, independent fan forums operating both within

and without the official sites on which information was shared, debated, and analysed. Jenkins describes *The Matrix* as "entertainment for the era of collective intelligence."[27] Borrowing from French scholar Pierre Lévy, who writes on collective intelligence in the age of the internet, Jenkins employs the term "cultural attractor" to contextualise the role of *The Matrix* among its fans. As a cultural attractor, *The Matrix* is "drawing together and creating common ground between diverse communities; we might also describe it as a cultural activator, setting into motion its decipherment, speculation, and elaboration."

    The Simpsons, whose fans have supported it toward becoming the longest-running scripted primetime series in American television history, easily fits the roles of both cultural attractor and cultural activator.[28] *alt.tv.simpsons* was developed in March 1990; here, fans were discussing and offering criticism on the series both before the first season concluded, and before there was much of an internet to speak of (there have since emerged numerous well-populated *Simpsons* fan websites on which discussions of countless aspects of the series take place, the largest of which include *NoHomers.net*, *Simpsons.Wikia.com*, and *The Simpsons Archive*, all of which count former and current *alt.tv.simpsons* contributors among their founders and participants). *The Simpsons* thus holds an interesting position within the history of television fandom, as the series emerged simultaneously to the fledging internet. *alt.tv.simpsons* is one of the earliest and largest examples of

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[27] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 97.
[28] No author, "About the Show". *The Simpsons Official Website*, n.d., accessed 10 August 2012: http://origin.thesimpsons.com – full URL no longer available.
    The actual quote from the site (apparently written some time during the summer of 2012) makes the statement that *The Simpsons* is the "longest-running scripted show in television history", but this is inaccurate. American daytime soap opera—the longest-running of which is ABC's *General Hospital*, which premiered in April 1963—are scripted television series; the longevity of several of these therefore trumps that of *The Simpsons* by a number years. Incidentally, *The Simpsons* also cannot claim the world record for the longest-running animated television series; on 5 September 2013, AnimeNewsNetwork.com announced that the Guinness World Records committee had awarded this honour to the Japanese series *Sazae-san*, an anime adaptation of a *manga* cartoon of the same name. The anime series premiered on the Japanese television station Fuji Television in October 1969 and has been airing weekly—on Sunday evenings, as *The Simpsons* has on Fox from 1994 to present—ever since.

online fan congregations, and this mode of fan engagement was unprecedented in the world of broadcast television. Given that the network producing the series was itself both young and vulnerable in 1990, this was an initiation by fire. *alt.tv.simpsons* is still active today, although primarily as a file-sharing site. Its archives can still be accessed for reading through Google Groups. In the modern internet era, web-based forums such as *NoHomers* and sites like *The Simpsons Archive* and *Simpsons.Wikia* are much more accessible and navigable to the average fan.

The content on these sites is controlled by fans; when writers and or producers of the series do contribute, their input is proverbially anchored in fan waters. The inception of *The Simpsons* occurred simultaneously with that of convergence culture, in an era before the impact of transmedia storytelling in the internet age could have been known or measured. *The Simpsons* was a franchise that recognised and attempted to address at least the most basic needs of its fans; *Simpsons Illustrated* showed very early signs of transmedia potential, but it would take time for that aspect of the show's full capacity to flourish. Unlike the urtext from which it was sprung, *Simpsons Illustrated* did not have an extremely long run. In 1993, the magazine evolved into the *Simpsons Comics* series, which itself spawned several comic sub-series (e.g. *Bart Simpson*, *Simpsons Classics*, *Simpsons Super Spectacular*) over the ensuing years.[29]

Several books have also been published to appeal to fans' desire to connect further with the narrative world of *The Simpsons*, notably *Another Are We There Yet? Book: Matt Groening's* The Simpsons *Guide to Springfield* in 1998, in which readers can explore Springfield's history, restaurants, nightlife, shopping, religious leanings, and more. One chapter in particular, "Swingin' Springfield: A Bachelor's Guide to My Favourite Town" (whose authorship is attributed to Kirk Van Houten, a

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[29] Bruce Gomes, "The *Simpsons Illustrated* Guide" (*The Simpsons Archive*, n.d, last updated 26 June 2013), first accessed 7 March 2012: http://www.simpsonsarchive.com/guides/simpsons.illustrated.html#SIV1N1US

secondary series character), upholds the series' continuity by reinforcing the

development that Kirk Van Houten's character was divorced from his wife in the

sixth episode of the eighth season.[30] Like their predecessor *Springfield Illustrated*,

these comics and books do not contribute to the series canon, but they do serve to

reinforce and further develop Springfield and the characters dwelling therein—this

establishes *The Simpsons* as a "dense text," which drives interest and loyalty

among fans.[31]

Another aspect of the co-emergence of *The Simpsons* series and

convergence culture is the direct impact the fans' reviews and opinions had upon

the series from the outset. While *The Simpsons* creatives had access to (and its

home network relied upon) Nielsen ratings and test audiences as other shows did,

David Mirkin and other writers (notably Bill Oakley and Josh Weinstein) have made

frequent references to spending plenty of time reading the discussions on

alt.tv.simpsons in the early days of the series' production.[32] Here the creative team

could get direct, unmediated and—importantly—unsolicited feedback on the shows

they were producing. This feedback, however, came from a very small and

demographically-specific group of people.   Henry Jenkins cautions the analyst of

today's active media consumer against an approach that focuses on access (rather

than one on participation), as it will lead to a focus on technology as the driving

force behind convergence culture (as opposed to one on the cultural conventions

and customs as such a catalyst). Jenkins is critical of the older forms of audience

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[30] Scott M. Gimple, *Another Are We There Yet? Book: Matt Groening's* The Simpsons
Guide to Springfield. London: Boxtree - MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 1998), print.
    Two things are worth noting on this publication: the first is that the series has come to
date the book again by reconciling Kirk Van Houten with his wife Luann in the third episode
of the seventeenth season of the series. The second is that from its very first page, the book
is replete with in-jokes for the fans of the series who, upon opening the book, will see that
the other books in the so-called *Are We There Yet?* series are fictitious travel guides to
seventeen other locations (themselves fictitious or otherwise) mentioned or visited within the
series up to the date of the book's publication, such as Springfield's rival town Shelbyville,
the resort town of Little Pwagmattasquarmsettport, and New York City.
[31] Henry Jenkins et al., *Spreadable Media*, 136.
[32] David Mirkin, "DVD Commentary, 'Who Shot Mr. Burns, Part One'" (*The Simpsons*,
    season 6, episode 22, aired 21 May 1995. Los Angeles, 20th Century Fox, 2005), DVD.

measurement, as the Nielsen system ignores the scores of online audience members.[33] Even those accessing *The Simpsons* illegally could be counted and considered in the network's major decisions regarding the series, although Jenkins acknowledges that advertisers play a crucial role in both the complexity of and necessity for a new system of measurement.[34]

The FXX acquisition and, in particular, the subsequent development of *Simpsons World*, have had a profound positive impact on the series' creatives. In their 2014 *Vulture* interview, Al Jean, David Mirkin and Matt Selman admit that the inaugural marathon of the entire series on FXX was a very emotional event. Jean and several other writers were live-Tweeting the marathon, sharing memories with fans and with one another, and engaging directly with fan-viewers through Twitter.[35] David Mirkin was new to Twitter when the marathon aired: "it was interesting to connect with the fans that way when my episodes were on and to see the reactions. They're much more aware of the details of the show than we [creatives] can ever remember."[36]

The *Simpsons* legends also discuss the *Simpsons World* site and app, which they feel brings fans even closer into the series. Matt Selman reveals, "[t]he app is going to be really interesting because we'll be able to connect to the fans in a new was and see more directly which episodes they like, and what clips they're sending, and what episode they're fave-ing, and which they're streaming. It's going to be really cool."[37] Al Jean agrees with Selman's assessment of the increased opportunity to connect with fans: "It's going to be fan-driven. We read people wanted the ability to take the clip of 'The bee bit my bottom, and now my bottom's

[33] Henry Jenkins et al., *Spreadable Media*, 118 – 122.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Jesse David Fox, "3 *Simpsons* Showrunners Reflect on New Fans and the 'Classic Era' Myth", *Vulture.com*.
[36] David Mirkin, quoted in Jesse David Fox, "3 *Simpsons* Showrunners Reflect on New Fans and the 'Classic Era' Myth", *Vulture.com*.
[37] Matt Selman, quoted in Jesse David Fox, "3 *Simpsons* Showrunners Reflect on New Fans and the 'Classic Era' Myth", *Vulture.com*.

big!' and send it to their friends. That's what they said they wanted to be able to do."[38]

That Al Jean cites a meme from the series as one of the primary driving forces behind the user interface design of the website is telling; access to memetic content remains a top priority for fans. And, crucially, contrary to the Fox network's long-held approach, the *Simpsons* creatives are eager not only to share this memetic content with their internet-based fans, but to give their fans the tools to spread the memes to their friends. Such access is increasingly important as Fox will no longer produce DVDs of the series (season 17 was the last to be put on disc); Jean states in this *Vulture* interview that "[t]hey're still going to be selling the DVDs."[39]

However, eight months later (8 April 2015), he tweeted the following: "I personally am v sorry to see DVDs discontinued We did love them purely for the love of hearing ourselves talk."[40] In response to a fan's query, Jean continued, "We will do commentaries for all downloads and possibly a master DVD when (if) show ever goes off air."[41] Jean is clearly concerned about fans' limited access to the content, as in the *Vulture* interview he also laments the lack of access to *Simpsons*

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[38] Al Jean, quoted in Jesse David Fox, "3 *Simpsons* Showrunners Reflect on New Fans and the 'Classic Era' Myth", *Vulture.com.* The clip he cites is from "Homer Goes to College", *The Simpsons*, season 5, episode 3, directed by Jim Reardon, aired 14 October 1993. Having been lured into the basement of the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant with two of his fellow less-intellctually-gifted employees in order to hide their incompetence from visiting inspectors, Homer has taken up his new role of "Head Bee Guy," a sham role assigned to him by Burns's right-hand man Waylon Smithers. The role involves watching to ensure that a bee remains trapped inside a large jar. However, Homer accidentally knocks the jar off its crate, shattering the glass and freeing the bee. Homer chases after the bee, and the scene cuts to Smithers and Mr. Burns, who are outside the plant, lying to the plant inspectors about Homer's whereabouts (they claim he is chairing a conference on nuclear fission). The inspectors are about to leave when Homer bursts forth from a manhole near where the group is standing. This is when he makes the famous complaint cited in Al Jean's quote.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Al Jean (@AlJean), Twitter post, 8 April 2015, 4:12 p.m.: https://twitter.com/AlJean/status/585822651651727361?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw
[41] Al Jean (@AlJean), Twitter post, 8 April 2015, 4:21 p.m.: https://twitter.com/AlJean/status/585822651651727361?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

World outside of the U.S., stating that he hopes this situation changes. Matt Selman concurs: "Yeah, it's not even in Canada."[42]

It is clear that these writers are writing for an audience; the greater the audience, the better. They wish for their fans to be able to access and spread the content by whatever means they prefer, and they are distraught when fans are stripped of these means of access, especially when no alternatives are in place. These authors are engaged with their fans and are eager to see the memes they created proliferate beyond their audience. However, while the fandom remains active and engaged, the actual audience is becoming increasingly limited to an elite few who hold subscriptions to television (and would, therefore, logically have a less urgent need for online access).

It is almost a return to the early days of internet-based *Simpsons* fandom; it is worth emphasising once again that the pre-World-Wide-Web internet was itself accessible only to an elite few. Jenkins refers to this demographic as "early adopters. In [the United States] they are disproportionately white, male, middle class, and college educated. These are people who have the greatest access to new media technologies and have mastered the skills needed to fully participate in these new knowledge cultures."[43]

The *Simpsons* writers were nearly as quick to dissect and criticise this demographic on *alt.tv.simpsons* as the users were to set the newsgroup up, and they did this nowhere more effectively than through the character of Comic Book Guy, known as "CBG" to the fan content creators of *The Simpsons Archive*, and less commonly as Jeff Albertson (which is revealed to be his real name in the eighth episode of the sixteenth season, "Homer and Ned's Hail Mary Pass"). As advised above, throughout this thesis "Comic Book Guy", "Albertson" and "Jeff Albertson" will all be employed to refer to the character.

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[42] Al Jean and Matt Selman, quoted in Jesse David Fox, "3 *Simpsons* Showrunners Reflect on New Fans and the 'Classic Era' Myth", *Vulture.com*.
[43] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 23.

Albertson first appears in the penultimate (21st) episode of the second season, "Three Men and a Comic Book", and he clearly manifests *Simpsons* creatives' representation of *alt.tv.simpsons* fans; in his appearance, attitude, and most notably in his catchphrase, Jeff Albertson is a memetic composite assembled to represent the typical online fan. Like the demographic he embodies, he is Caucasian (*Simpson*-yellow), male, middle-class, and college educated, holding a degree in chemical engineering[44] and a master's degree in Mythology and Folklore[45].

Albertson's portly physique, goatee and ponytail are his most recognisable visual physical traits, but it is his catchphrase, "Worst episode ever", that has cemented his status both as a fan favourite and a fan representation; *Simpsons* writers lifted the phrase directly from a 1992 review of the ninth episode of the second season ("Itchy & Scratchy & Marge") by *alt.tv.simpsons* user John R. Donald. Responding to another user's favourable review in which the user described the episode as "intense", Donald opens his lengthy criticism with "Intense? I thought this was easily the worst episode ever. Simply not funny." He concludes the piece with: "I repeat, this was by far the worst episode ever."[46]

The line is first and most famously uttered by the fictional Albertson in the 167th episode of the series ("The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show", which is the fourteenth episode of the eighth season); scholar Robert Sloane draws attention to the episode's unique and significant position as the episode which saw *The Simpsons* overtake *The Flintstones* as the longest-running primetime animated

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[44] "Married to the Blob", *The Simpsons*, season 25, episode 10, directed by Chris Clements, aired 12 January 2014 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2014).

[45] "Three Men and a Comic Book", *The Simpsons*, season 2, episode 22, directed by Wes M. Archer, aired 9 May 1991 (20th Century Fox, 2002), DVD.

[46] Donald, John R. "Untitled Reply to User Content". *Alt.tv.simpsons*. 03 November 1992. Web. 07 February 2012.

It is worth noting here that the full quote extracted by Donald from the other user (Alan J. Rosenthal)'s review reads: "Wow, what an intense episode. … I didn't know it was going to be so cool so I didn't take notes. Anyway……". It is difficult to know whether Rosenthal was being facetious in his post as regards his habitual note-taking, but given that *alt.tv.simpsons* fans are famed for their scrutiny and attention to detail, it would not be remiss to consider the possibility that he is being truthful.

series.[47] Sloane directs the reader to analyse the episode's content through the lens of this information, as the episode's theme centres on redundancy and longevity in serial television.[48] The episode shows two distinct methods by which fans share their feedback on the show-within-the-show ("Itchy and Scratchy"), and these scenes also function to provide *Simpsons* creatives with a platform from which to offer critique of their network's practices, their own show and its fans.

The first is shown through a traditional test-audience screening performed by "Itchy and Scratchy" producers, and the second is through an informal discussion between two fans. Sloane emphasises the significance of a particular moment in the test-audience screening; Lisa, responding to a frustrated producer on the other side of a two-way mirror (thus speaking to her own reflection), explains that, while there is nothing specifically wrong with the show, the characters' impact will lessen over time. The second is an oft-quoted exchange that takes place between Bart Simpson and Albertson; the dialogue is considered significant by a number of authors (Sloane among them) because, through Bart, the *Simpsons* writers overtly criticise fan reaction to the series (Albertson's inaugural invocation of John R. Donald's infamous ATS critique):

Albertson: Last night's "Itchy and Scratchy" was, without a doubt,
the worst episode ever.   Rest assured that I was on the
internet within minutes, registering my disgust throughout the
world.

Bart: Hey, I know it wasn't great, but what right do you have to
complain?

Albertson: As a loyal viewer, I feel they owe me.

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[47] Robert Sloane, "Who Wants Candy? Disenchantment in *The Simpsons*" (*Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), print, 143.
[48] Ibid., 145.

Bart: What? They're giving you thousands of hours of entertainment

for free.   What could they possibly owe you? If anything, you

owe them.

Albertson: [emphatically] Worst episode ever.[49]

Sloane provides a succinct analysis of the exchange: "Clearly, the creators of *The Simpsons* feel hurt that 'loyal viewers' dismiss the product of their hard work so readily, and yet many posts on [*alt.tv.simpsons*] do just that."[50]

Writing on *alt.tv.simpsons* in 2007, Canadian journalist Ivor Tossell concurs with Sloane's reading of Jeff Albertson's exchange with Bart in "The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show". He contends that Albertson's character—and this dialogue in particular—is not an archaic representation by resentful *Simpsons* staff of a long-gone elite internet fan base. Rather, it is a perpetually relevant representation—an "apt caricature" of a consistently critical, active, and vocal fanbase that increases along with growing internet access:

Now that more or less everyone's online, surely [Comic Book Guy]'s an

anachronism? I think not.   In fact, I'd argue that just the opposite has

occurred.   Instead of fading into irrelevance, the Comic Book Guy

metastasized. Online, obsessive collecting and pedant browbeating is the

rule. If you can think of a topic, it's almost a given that there's an online

community dedicated to obsessing and browbeating in its name. You don't

need to watch *Star Trek* to be a nerd. This is the great lesson of the

Internet.[51]

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[49] "The Itchy and Scratchy and Poochie Show", *The Simpsons*, season 8, episode 14, directed by Steven Dean Moore, aired 9 February 1997 (Los Angeles, 20th Century Fox, 2007), DVD.
[50] Robert Sloane, "Who Wants Candy?", *Leaving Springfield*, 147.
[51] Ivor Tossell, "Worst. Column. Ever." (*The Globe and Mail*, 02 August 2007), accessed 3 March 2012: http://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/worst-column-ever/article20399597/

For Tossell, this is the audience in the age of convergence culture; fandom has moved beyond those "cult" texts and has spread into the mainstream. Internet-savvy *Simpsons* fans have multiplied and migrated from the Usenet group into sophisticated, user-friendly wiki sites and forums. *Simpsons.Wikia.com* even boasts an extensive page that lists those episodes and cross-media texts that "are considered" to be non-canon—"considered", ostensibly, by the fan content creators who maintain the site, though similar conclusions have been reached informally by users on *NoHomers.net*.[52]

In fact, the latter site features a discussion thread, created October 2007, in which the user/generator "blue_pants" poses the query, "Who decides what is canon?" blue_pants elaborates on the question by adding that it was prompted by author J.K. Rowling's revelation that a character in her *Harry Potter* series is gay—a revelation that surprised many of that series' fans. The user wonders whether fans would simply accept canonical changes made by the series' creator Matt Groening, or whether "the fan will ignore him and maintain the standard traditions of what is and is not canon?"[53] In response, another user, "banana plantation", offers an opinion that provides some insight into a *Simpsons* fan's perception of the fan collective and its value to the series:

Don't think strictly Simpsons, rather, the larger concept. I'd say that, sadly, the decision lays more with the fans. At the end of the day, they just flat out hold more sway then a sole creator, or even group of people who drive the creative process. Overall, i think it may be for the best, as the fans typically

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[52] No author, "Simpsons Wiki: Non-canon" (*Simpsons.Wikia.com*, 5 March 2010), accessed 18 May 2013: http://simpsons.wikia.com/wiki/Simpsons_Wiki:Non-Canon. See also: User name "Patches O'houlihan", "Rate and Review: 'That 90's [*sic*] Show'" (*NoHomers.net*, 28 January 2008), accessed 22 June 2013: http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?67433-Rate-and-Review-quot-That-90-s-Show-quot

[53] "Who decides what is canon?" *NoHomers.net*. 29 October 2010. Web. 22 June 2013.

have a better idea of what they want, so perhaps they should be given more control.[54]

While banana plantation may at first glance seem presumptuous in his or her assessment, when a text—or, in this case, an urtext—becomes as significant and successful a cultural attractor and activator as *The Simpsons*, the boundaries that typically delineate ownership (with respect to the creator of the artefact and the artefact's consumers) are blurred, erased and redrawn in a hegemonic battle. This contention between fans and creators of cultural artefacts is at the heart of the documentary film *The People vs George Lucas*, in which the filmmakers examine fans' engagement with Lucas's most enormous and successful franchises, *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones*. While the film examines such phenomena as fan fiction, art and filmmaking, the film is largely centred on the contention between Lucas and his fans sparked by Lucas's release of the remastered original *Star Wars* trilogy in 1997. While fans took exception to many of the newly added scenes and CGI effects, their real issue was that, with the release of the remastered trilogy, the original versions released theatrically in 1977 – 1983 (and subsequently on VHS and LaserDisc) were no longer available to anyone to buy, or even to screen—ever again.[55]

Some of the fans perceive as unfair the fact that the producers would alter key scenes (such as Han Solo's tense encounter with the bounty hunter Greedo) in the remastered versions and deny any access to the original films—texts that were such significant cultural activators for a generation. Given that the fans are

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[54] *NoHomers.net*, "Who decides what is canon?"
[55] *The People vs. George Lucas*. Dir.Alexandre O. Philippe. Exhibit A Pictures, 2010. DVD. The 2006 Limited Edition DVD releases of the original *Star Wars* trilogy (either with *A New Hope, The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi* together in a 6-disc boxed set or individually in 2-disc sets) all state that the second disc includes the "Original theatrical version" of the films. While the versions included are not the CGI-enhanced versions most widely available today, they are also not exactly the original versions; they are the same THX-enhanced remastered versions that were released on laser disc in 1993.

responsible for the franchise's enduring cultural relevance, prominence in the years following the films' releases, and colossal financial success, perhaps they are entitled to a claim of ownership thereto. *Simpsons* fans clearly feel similar attachments and entitlements to the series with which they so actively engage.

Where a significant difference between the cases of *Star Wars* and *The Simpsons* emerges is in the two-way channel of engagement initiated by the latter's creators. The first example of this came at the end of the sixth season of *The Simpsons*, when the episode "Who Shot Mr. Burns? (Part One)" aired on 21 May 1995.[56] The notion that the creators could hold a competition for their viewers was a factor of the episode at conception, inspired by their online fans. According to showrunner David Mirkin, writers wanted to construct a complex mystery and build an episode especially for their most observant, obsessive, and committed fans:

> We really wanted to make this a mystery, particularly because we were thinking of doing it as a contest—something that was solvable if you were smart, if you paid attention, and if you used freeze-frame technology. I think you needed to be able to freeze-frame stuff. We knew that people on the internet would freeze-frame things and look at certain jokes—it was the only way you could read that. We wanted to take advantage of that, and the people that thought like that, and to really put [it] together—in addition to all the great comedy.[57]

This is Mirkin's introduction to the episode on the season 6 DVD commentary—a commentary which also includes the episode's writers Josh Weinstein and Bill Oakley (who have actively engaged on fan sites from the first

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[56] "Who Shot Mr. Burns? (Part One)", *The Simpsons*, season 6, episode 25, directed by Jeffrey Lynch, (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2005), DVD.
[57] David Mirkin, "DVD Commentary, 'Who Shot Mr. Burns? (Part One)'", *The Simpsons*, season 6, episode 25, directed by Jeffrey Lynch, aired 21 May 1995 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2005), DVD.

days of *alt.tv.simpsons* to *NoHomers* today), as well as the episode's director, Jeffrey Lynch. Throughout much of the discussion, the commentators refer to the *alt.tv.simpsons* newsgroup and its members as "the internet" (while also referring to the actual internet as "the internet"; both senses are employed in the quoted part of the discussion below, but the context makes clear to which "internet" Mirkin refers at the given instance). It must be acknowledged that the DVD was released in 2005, nearly ten years after the episode aired and the (ultimately ill-conceived) contest was held, so *alt.tv.simpsons* had long since given way to the plethora of World Wide Web-based fan sites; *NoHomers.net* had, by the time this commentary was recorded, become the primary site of fan-fan and fan-producer engagement.

Weinstein, Oakley and Mirkin engage in a brief but revealing conversation about *alt.tv.simpsons*, jogging their collective memory about the newsgroup, and remembering how quickly one fan managed to solve the episode's great mystery. However, though that fan represented the exact demographic they wished to target (online, smart, obsessive, and [likely] with access to freeze-frame technology), the creators were powerless to award him the prize he had earned:

> **Oakley**: One guy on the internet got it, only an hour after the show aired, and we've never been able to find him. We were going to send him a prize.
>
> **Weinstein**: That was the early days of the internet, wasn't it?
>
> **Mirkin**: The early days of the internet. It was somebody in college who posted on the… you know, Simpsons… uh… uh
>
> **Weinstein**: Alt tv Simpsons
>
> **Mirkin**: Yes, the alt tv boards. What are those called? We hardly—
>
> **Weinstein**: Usenet. They used to be called Usenet; I think they still are.
>
> **Mirkin**: Usenet.

Oakley: I believe you had to post through the Pentagon.

Weinstein: You had to have ARPANET clearance to be working on high-tech…

Mirkin: We used to check the internet very early on, and there was this group that talked about *The Simpsons*, 'alt simpsons dot com,' and this guy—[the email address in his Usenet user name] was a college address. He got it right. He got it right for the right reasons. He recognised the clues and he figured it out. He was the only one in all the internet that was posting on the Simpsons that figured it out. I was legally banned from contacting him, because the way you had to enter the contest was a series of other things that you had to do. You couldn't just post it on the internet, you had to contact us and write us and give us the reasons. But he actually got it right so I was going to send him some sort of prize at the end of summer when the actual answer was going to come out in September. But by that time, his email address wasn't good anymore, and we actually tried to track him down again now, ten years later and still have not been able to find the first person in the United States to actually get it right.[58]

The above discussion is quoted in its entirety as it rather importantly conveys several crucial elements of the creatives' perceptions and estimations of their early online fans. Though their memories of the newsgroup's name and online location are sketchy (their attention has since shifted to the more modern *NoHomers*), they know that their early fans were a technologically advanced group who committed time and resources to watching the show. There is also a key acknowledgment of the creatives' early online interactions with fans. The fact that

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[58] Ibid.

they "used to check the internet very early on" is both notably in the plural "we" (indicating that many creatives behind the series were compelled to access their fans' input directly), and is temporally significant, strengthening the earlier argument that this type of direct, unsolicited feedback from fans was both unprecedented and influential. It should be noted here that Bill Oakley is a well-known early contributor to *alt.tv.simpsons*, and both he and Weinstein are contributing members on *NoHomers.net*.[59]

In the DVD commentary, Mirkin in particular expresses considerable commitment to the loyal internet viewers of the series; the creators had attempted to reward their fans for their valuable cultural labour, only for the creatives to have their efforts frustrated both by the bureaucratic rules of the contest, and by the ephemeral nature of the early internet. Mirkin expands upon the renewed search for the contest's rightful winner in the commentary for "Who Shot Mr. Burns? (Part Two)," stating that preparing for this commentary had inspired them again to find their early online mystery sleuth.[60] One of his co-commentators suggests employing a search method using the airdate of the episode, but Mirkin advises that they had already tried it. Mirkin also introduces this second discussion of the issues surrounding this contest by saying that he had worked really hard to make the contest fair to fans, but that legalities surrounding contests (which co-commentator Groening confirms) had enforced the use of a randomiser on a fixed (and also randomly-selected) sample of one thousand entries. Although none of the entrants in this sample had

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[59] Bill Oakley, "*Simpsons* Season Five Update" (*alt.tv.simpsons*, 25 July 1993), accessed via Google Groups 22 June 2013: https://groups.google.com/forum/?hl=en#!searchin/alt.tv.simpsons/Bill$20oakley/alt.tv.simpsons/0rXlnoYnWYc/DAAdBacKzfgJ. See also: Alan Siegel, "Best Message Board Ever" (*Slate*, 26 September 2013), accessed 17 July 2014: http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2013/09/the_history_of_simpsons_message_board_alt_tv_simpsons.html; and No author, "Thanks To" (*NoHomers.net*, "Information: About this Website", n.d), first accessed 11 October 2011: http://www.nohomers.net/content/info/website/
[60] David Mirkin, "DVD Commentary, 'Who Shot Mr. Burns? (Part Two)'", *The Simpsons*, season 7, episode 1, directed by Wes Archer, (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2005), DVD.

submitted the correct answer, the producers were nevertheless forced to select a winner from among them.

Groening also recalls a meeting he and Mirkin attended "with Fox [network representatives] about what the prize should be, and [Mirkin] said, 'A million dollars!'" Mirkin recalls the reaction from Fox: "We never heard such silence. They just shrunk into their seats." Mirkin then returns to his narrative of the contest saga: "I was furious. We had to pick somebody who picked Smithers [as their guess for the identity of Mr. Burns's shooter], so the winner of the contest was wrong. That's who the winner was. […] The winner was a loser. The winner was wrong and we were forced to pick 'em and the contest was a shambles. […] Luckily, no one asked us about it."[61] One of his co-commentators interjects, advising that "people on the internet are always asking about it, and I think the general description of what you just described has been out for a couple years on the internet."[62] Mirkin replies, "That's true. But this is for non-nerds."[63]

It is surprising that Mirkin might not consider fans committed enough to (and interested enough in) the series to listen to DVD commentaries of the series as "nerds," but this only reinforces the elite status of the online fandom in the creatives' estimation. The proverbial torch of elite internet-forum nerd-dom was passed from *alt.tv.simpsons* to *NoHomers*; as the latter grew in popularity, ultimately rising to the top of the countless online fan sites and forums, *Simpsons* creatives focused on this new web-based forum for fan feedback. They frequently acknowledge the *NoHomers* community by name as well as by deed.

One notable instance of this is heard on the commentary for *The Simpsons Movie*. Commenting on a gag they did in the film, which required Moe's Tavern to be temporarily located next to the First Church of Springfield (which is not normally the case in the series' geography of Springfield), Matt Groening states, "This is one

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[61] "DVD Commentary, 'Who Shot Mr. Burns? (Part One)'", *The Simpsons*.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.

of those scenes that's going to infuriate die-hard fans, I can predict. 'What?! The church isn't next to Moe's bar, that's an outrage."[64] Former showrunner Mike Scully, who is a favourite target of the online fans, chimes in, "Well, as one who reads what the die-hard fans write, it's easy to infuriate them, I have to admit." James L. Brooks adds, "In fact, we did it just to infuriate you guys. Hope you enjoy it! Write away!" Mike Scully: "This is for you, *NoHomers*!" The conversation ends with one of the commentators affecting the famous vocal cadence of Jeff Albertson (voiced in the series by Hank Azaria, who is not among the commentators) to imitate the internet fans' pedantry: "Where is the marquee for the church? What has happened to the front lawn?"

This confirms Albertson's continued role as the creatives' cathartic representation of fans. However, as the character has developed throughout the seasons, he began gradually to shift roles from a *representation* of fans to a *representative* of fans. One of the first examples that clearly demonstrates this evolution straddles the line between representation and representative: in the 16th episode of season 13, titled "Weekend at Burnsie's", Marge builds a scarecrow to keep crows out of her new garden, and she dresses the scarecrow with old items from the Simpsons home.[65] As she selects each item, capsules appear on the screen next to the item, with each capsule containing an image of Jeff Albertson in a pedagogic pose next to descriptive text. Here, the *Simpsons* creatives are also propagating a non-*Simpsons* meme; in both appearance and sound, the capsules emulate the so-called "info nuggets" from the VH1 series *Pop Up Video*—a series which, at the time the "Weekend at Burnsie's" episode was produced, was no longer in production (it ran on VH1 and syndicates from 1996 – 1998, and was brought

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[64] Matt Groening et al., "DVD Commentary", *The Simpsons Movie*, directed by David Silverman (2007; Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2007), DVD.
[65] "Weekend at Burnsie's", *The Simpsons*, season 13, episode 16, directed by Michael Marcantel, aired 7 April 2002, (Los Angeles, 20th Century Fox, 2010), DVD.

back into production in 2011).[66] The text in the capsules explains the history within

the *Simpsons* world of each artefact (such as Lisa's hockey jersey from the season

6 episode "Lisa on Ice" and Bart's jockey trousers from the season 11 episode

"Saddlesore Galactica"—and one false one: "Grandpa's hat from 'Who Shot

Grandpa's Hat?'").

In this scene, Jeff Albertson remains the pedantic representation of the

internet fans who catch and recall every detail, but he is also a representative of

these fans: enlightening less-familiar viewers with references to earlier episodes,

serving as an acknowledgment of the elite internet fans who will recognise the items

on sight (a symbolic act of deference to fans' encyclopaedic knowledge), and

highlighting the self-conscious and reflexive continuity (so often a bone of

contention for die-hard fans) injected into the scene.

Himself a meme, Albertson has appeared via an adaptation of an external

meme to highlight memetic content from within the series—and to conjoin this

memetic content (in this case, objects easily recognised by long-term, elite fans)

with the memetic content that emerges from fandom, such as fans' attention to

detail and their quibbles about continuity. This scene also serves as another fine

example of the *Simpsons* creatives' enthusiasm for Jenkins (et el)'s notion of the

engagement-based model. They are clearly keenly aware of their biggest fans'

desires to be deeply knowledgeable of this dense text. The creatives

simultaneously pay respect to and rib their most committed and obsessive fans, and

acknowledgment is one of these fans' most valued offerings by the creatives.

A final point about this scene that is worth examining is that from the countless

memetic and memorable garments seen throughout the series (a pair of Homer's

blue pants, for example, or the lower half of any of his non-nuclear-power-plant role

uniforms), the creatives chose Bart's jockey shorts from "Saddlesore Galactica" as

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[66] No author, "About Pop Up Video" (*VH1.com*, n.d), accessed 17 July 2014:
http://www.vh1.com/shows/pop_up_video/

one of the four highlighted items.[67] That episode featured a strong and memorable moment of fan representation through Jeff Albertson: while at the state fair, the Simpson family is presented with an opportunity to rescue an abused horse. Marge wonders aloud: "Hmm. Should the Simpsons get a horse?" Jeff Albertson steps into the frame and says, "Excuse me! I believe this family already had a horse, and the expense forced Homer to work at the Kwik-E-Mart, with hilarious consequences." Homer calls out to the crowd, "Anyone care what this guy thinks?" The crowd responds in unison with a loud "No!"

The scene ends with a close-up of Albertson's embarrassed, shifty-eyed glance around him. In this scene, and through Homer (and the crowd), the writers make an overt criticism of the pedantic nit-picking over minute details that characterises their fan base, even shaming those who deign to vocalise their findings as Albertson has here. Several seasons later, however, they indirectly acknowledge this criticism in the context of the comparatively respectful information capsules through which Albertson shares his knowledge—indicating, perhaps, not that anyone cares yet what this guy thinks, but that someone now cares what this guy knows.

This meta-reflection (a pedantic revelation about a pedantic revelation) reinforces the strength of *Simpsons* fandom as an ideal example of Bourdieu and Fiske's cultural economy. It also echoes precisely the same types of hegemonic activity by producers that Derek Johnson describes: the surrogate fan must be humiliated and reprimanded for offering unsolicited criticism before he is acknowledged, redeemed and rewarded for his loyalty and attention to detail.[68]

In addition to his role as a representation of fans, Jeff Albertson demonstrates the self-awareness and reflexivity in *The Simpsons* by voicing insightful criticisms of

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[67] "Saddlesore Galactica", *The Simpsons*, season 11, episode 13, directed by Lance Kramer, aired 6 February 2000 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2008), DVD.
[68] Derek Johnson, "Fan-tagonism", *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, 294 – 298.

the series from within the series, and in the 23rd season's premiere ("The Falcon and the D'ohman") he makes his first overt appearance as a *representative* of the fans. Surrounded by *Simpsons* memorabilia, Jeff Albertson addresses the fans directly to introduce (but not yet reveal) the results of an online fan poll determining whether the characters Edna Krabappel and Ned Flanders would remain in a relationship.[69] He advises that the results will be revealed within the episode: a reward for those observant fans. A very quick in-episode shot of the couple lying in bed together—and a wink from Edna—confirm the results.

Fans were invited by Homer and Marge in the final episode of Season 22 to vote Yea or Nay on the show's then-official site (the now-defunct *TheSimpsons.com*) on the continuation of the so-called "Nedna" relationship; the majority vote would determine the actual outcome in the series.   During the end credits of "The Falcon and the D'ohman", a small vignette shows Ned and Edna addressing the fans directly to thank them for voting to keep them together. In text at the bottom of the screen is written "What our fans have joined together, let no writer rip asunder." Permanence has been attached to this coupling; the fans' decision proved firmly final when it is revealed in the 21st episode of Season 23 that Ned and Edna had married in secret, and that Ned's sons Rod and Todd are adjusting well to and embracing their new family.[70]

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[69] "The Falcon and the D'ohman", *The Simpsons*, season 23, episode 1, directed by Matthew Nastuk, aired 25 September 2011 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2011).
[70] "Ned 'n Edna's Blend", *The Simpsons*, season 23, episode 21, directed by Chuck Sheetz, aired 13 May 2012 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2012).
The "Nedna" relationship did end, however, albeit with the death of the Edna Krabappel character, which was prompted by the 25 October 2013 death of Marcia Wallace, the actress who voiced the character from her introduction nearly 24 years earlier. In a 26 October 2013 interview with Susan King of the *Chicago Tribune*, showrunner Al Jean was quick to reassure audiences that the Krabappel character would be retired: "I don't intend to have anyone else play Mrs. Krabappel. I think Bart will get a new teacher and Ned Flanders will be a widower again."
 The chalkboard gag for the third episode of the series' 25th season, "Four Regrettings and a Funeral", which aired just over a week after Wallace's passing, has Bart writing a single line: "We'll really miss you Mrs. K." The Edna Krabappel character was officially retired at the end of the 13th episode of the 25th season, "The Man Who Grew Too Much". In the same *Tribune* article, Jean is quoted as saying that Wallace had recorded a few lines for the series before she passed. The creatives built the final scene of the episode around these last

The "fan initiative" to determine Nedna's fate was announced rather cryptically in a Fox press release for its May Sweeps; *NoHomers* forum members quickly opened a thread on the announcement and began to speculate how they might be called upon to "change the lives of two of Springfield's favourites."[71] This "fan initiative" was the first direct call to (inter)action that *Simpsons* creatives had initiated since the "Who Shot Mr. Burns?" contest fiasco in 1995. This time the initiative would reach the show's internet fans on their turf; the only way to cast a vote was to do so online through the official website. Fans who voted could download badges for their social network sites and computer desktop wallpaper proclaiming their "Pro Nedna" or "No Nedna" status. The majority of *NoHomers* respondents on the thread do so positively, although the user "TriforceBun" grumbles that s/he is "a little concerned about [*Simpsons* creatives] making the 'fans' have a say in this […] It reeks of them not really having any solid ideas as to where to take the characters after this episode, and that's somewhat discouraging to me."[72]

It is clear how challenging it is for *Simpsons* creatives to address and meet fans' desires, particularly when they are in complete conflict with one another. "banana plantation" feels the fans ought to be afforded "more control" over outcomes in the series, while "TriforceBun" feels that relinquishing control to fans, even for a small change such as this, is an indication of declining quality in the series. The perception by fans of the show's declining quality is one with which

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lines, in which Ned remembers dancing a tango with his wife. Her final utterance is her trademark laugh, which consists of a single "HA!" The scene cuts to current-day Ned, who sits in his living room wearing a black armband and gazing at a picture of Edna (which sits next to a photo of Ned's first wife, Maude, who died in Season 11). He sadly muses, "Sure do miss that laugh." Nelson Muntz, the town bully and problem-student of Krabappel's, appears at the window and delivers his own trademark taunting laugh ("Haw haw!") at Ned's expense, then immediately exposes his own sadness, hanging his head and saying, "I miss her, too."
[71] User name "That Don Guy", "Speculation on the upcoming 'fan initiative'?" (*NoHomers.net*, 21 April 2011), accessed 7 February 2012: http://www.nohomers.net/showthread.php?95319
[72] Ibid.

Simpsons producers have grappled since the series' second season—as John R. Donald's legendary remarks on *alt.tv.simpsons* indicate.

Both fans and creatives are gradually negotiating their way around their hegemonic struggle. Given Al Jean's sentiments and intentions with *Simpsons World*, as well as initiatives like the Nedna vote and the live-Tweeting during the FXX marathon that have taken place during his tenure as showrunner, it is clear that the creatives are more inclined now than in any previous *Simpsons* era (with the notable exception of Mirkin's efforts with the "Who Shot Mr. Burns?" episodes and competition) to engage fans directly and invite their input. With a focus on fan-oriented developments, *Simpsons* creatives are finding ways to allow fans to personalise their *Simpsons* experiences and distribute the results of their own textual productivity. There is one development in particular within this initiative that has shown tremendous success, and which shows promise as the first *Simpsons* foray into true convergence and transmedia storytelling.

2.3.4 – *The Simpsons* for fans, and *The Simpsons* for *The Simpsons*: The Creatives Tap Out

The creative producers of *The Simpsons* have worked to provide auxiliary modes by which fans can engage with and consume the *Simpsons* product; there is a successful comic book series, there are novelty books (both one-off publications and series), there are video games, there is an online touch-screen game, there are DVDs (featuring commentaries by those who are creatively involved with the series), and, finally, there is an app available for American fans who, for a fee, can access all episodes of the series.

However, as has been established throughout this thesis, these products do not provide their users with new knowledge about *The Simpsons.* With the exception of the DVDs (whose commentaries and other extra features provide new

insights to the series), most of the products named above do not hold any narrative influence over the series; they are extra-canonical. They do not contribute any new, sustained information about Springfield to the collective intelligence to which Jenkins refers (via Pierre Lévy).

Change arrived in 2012, when a new ancillary text was introduced to *Simpsons* fans—and to mobile gamers, who form an enormous and lucrative new demographic: *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* was released for iOS mobile devices. Developed collaboratively between Gracie Films, Fox Digital Entertainment, and EA Mobile, *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* belongs to the family of mobile games commonly known as "freemium" games: players can download and play the game for free, but there are certain (unnecessary but experience-enhancing) elements that can only be purchased in what are known as "microtransactions" (the exchange of real money for in-game currency). This currency can be earned more gradually and in smaller amounts over time through gameplay, allowing non-paying users to partake in some of the superfluous—but desirable—items for sale. The currency in the case of *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* is, naturally, donuts. These are the iconic (and memetic) pink-frosted, rainbow-sprinkle-dusted donuts that are the long-standing favourite of Homer Simpson.

The game is written by *Simpsons* staff writers, including Matt Selman, and is run by *Simpsons* co-executive producer and writer, and *Futurama* writer, J. Stewart Burns. Initially, the writers did the work *pro bono*, "doing it more as a labour of love; now we're actually able to pay people a little money."[73] More writers from the series have since become involved, which allows them to ensure consistency with respect to tone, content, characterisation, and continuity. Burns cites the increased ability to do "fourth-wall-type jokes" as a reason he likes to write for the game; such jokes are

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[73] J. Stewart Burns, quoted in Sean Fitz-Gerald, "How the Mobile Game Tapped Out Brought Old *Simpsons* Fans Back Into the Fold" (*Vulture.com*, 25 September 2014), first accessed 2 March 2015: http://www.vulture.com/2014/09/the-simpsons-tapped-out-interview-j-stewart-burns.html.

rare in the series, as Matt Groening prefers to keep the story world adherent to a form of physical reality (Groening's concept of realism is discussed at length shortly).[74]

For each new player, the game (known to fans, and henceforth in this thesis, as *TSTO*) opens with a story—which (as becomes the game's primary storytelling method) is told through character dialogue that is presented visually as text next to an image of the speaking character's head. The story is that Homer, distracted at work by the online touch-screen game he plays on his MyPad, has caused a nuclear meltdown that has destroyed Springfield; the game even begins with a fourth-wall-type joke, in that Homer plays exactly the same type of game he is featured in. Once the dust has settled, Homer finds Lisa, who helps him understand that he must rebuild Springfield and bring its scattered inhabitants back (thus, the acquisition of Springfieldian homes, businesses, landmarks, and people is the objective of the game).

This is where the player begins their engagement: by assigning tasks to the characters, players earn donuts and other game currency (though only donuts can also be acquired through microtransactions) with which they begin building their very own Springfield. Players are even given opportunities to visit and interact with other players' Springfields, provided they are members of EA's online store/social network, *Origin*.[75] As tasks are performed and more Springfield is recovered, players increase levels. New levels are released as content updates, and familiar buildings (or landmarks) and characters are typically made available. When players acquire these assets, they choose where to place each building and landmark, and can arrange and rearrange their Springfield however they like as gameplay goes on. Some players try to emulate the established parts of the Springfield map (certain aspects of Springfieldian geography are presented consistently enough throughout

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[74] Ibid.
[75] No author, "Origin How-Tos: Connect with Friends and Play Together" (*Origin.com*, n.d.), accessed 18 August 2015: https://www.origin.com/en-gb/how-to/play-with-friends

the series to be considered canon), while others customise the town according to their own visions.

     TSTO does often introduce new characters or storylines to its players in the advent of a coming episode. These *TSTO* content updates are referred to among members of the *TSTO* and *Simpsons* fan community as "episode tie-ins". For example, the character Kumiko Nakamura, who—rather significantly to this thesis—marries Comic Book Guy, was introduced to the players of *TSTO* in its 39th content update on 8 January 2014, four days before her 12 January 2014 debut on the show in the episode "Married to the Blob".[76]

     While the knowledge of Kumiko's existence was exclusive to *TSTO* players for approximately four days, her appearance in the *TSTO* Springfield is not contextualised with respect to her relationship with Comic Book Guy (which is introduced in the beginning of and develops throughout the episode). However, in the 8 April 2013 content update for the tie in with the episode "What Animated Women Want", the Comic Book Guy *TSTO* character has a prompt for the announcement, "A new sushi restaurant? Well, I don't have a Japanese girlfriend yet—SPOILER ALERT!—but I may as well prime my palate."[77] The most astute fan-players of *TSTO* will perhaps have noted and retained that detail, knowing that much of the information supplied on the game will eventually (though in most cases more immediately) correspond to events or characters in the series.[78]

     Even if information (or knowledge) is shared with the *TSTO* fan-players before it is broadcast, it is not typically knowledge that assists the recipient toward a deeper understanding of the world of the original text. In this case, it is simply a

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[76] No author, "*The Simpsons: Tapped Out* 'Married to the Blob' episode tie-in content update", *WikiSimpsons*, (created 08 January 2014, last updated 06 August 2015), first accessed 16 February 2014.
https://simpsonswiki.com/w/index.php?title=The_Simpsons:_Tapped_Out_%22Married_to_t he_Blob%22_episode_tie-in_content_update&action=history
[77] The Simpsons: Tapped Out, "What Animated Women Want" episode tie-in, 8 April 2013.
[78] No discussion on this particular quote from the content update could be found on *NoHomers.net*, but a *WikiSimpsons* contributor acknowledged the association in the above *WikiSimpsons* entry.

foreshadowing (or, in Comic Book Guy's words, a spoiler) of events that will unfold

in the series; at best, in the case of Kumiko, fan-players knew in advance what

circumstances might take place, but the real information about the event is gleaned

from the episode alone (i.e no *TSTO* game play is required in order to understand

the circumstances completely). In this circumstance, the *TSTO* storyline is an

example of cross-media storytelling rather than transmedia storytelling. However, it

avoids the pitfalls typical of the current licensing system among franchises, which,

according to Henry Jenkins, "typically generates works that are redundant (allowing

no new character background or plot development), watered down (asking the new

media to slavishly duplicate experiences better achieved through the old), or riddled

with sloppy contradictions (failing to respect the core consistency audiences expect

within a franchise)."[79]

In analysing the Kumiko introduction through *TSTO* by these standards, at

worst *TSTO* is an example of franchise-emergent works that are redundant.

However, despite the fact that new information tends only to enlighten the player of

events to come in the series, it must be noted that several of the secondary (and

tertiary, etc.) characters from Springfield are developed more in *TSTO* than they

have been in the series. Though they may come to the game as part of an episode

tie-in content update, these characters are not always introduced to the game in

circumstances that coincide with or relate directly to events in an upcoming episode.

For example, Bernice Hibbert is married to Springfield's most competent

doctor, Julius Hibbert. Unlike her husband, and despite having been introduced to

the series fairly early on, she rarely appears or speaks in the show; she first

appears in season two, but does not speak until season 8. The series audience

knows next to nothing about her (even her name has undergone several significant

transformations throughout the series), but her introduction into *TSTO* revealed a

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[79] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), print, 107.

relatively rich, complex and intriguing back story that includes a struggle with alcoholism (which is merely suggested in the series in two visual gags: the first is that she attends a Driving Without Impairment course that Homer also attends in Season 4, and the second is that, like Homer, she loses consciousness when she learns that alcohol prohibition is reintroduced in Springfield), a romantic relationship history with secondary Springfieldian Carl Carlson, and a brother, Chester Dupree.

An interview with Matt Groening (cited below) reveals that Groening and Brooks consult with the creatives on the limits of reality within the *Simpsons* universe throughout the production process, and Al Jean divulged in a later interview that there is no meticulously maintained series bible with respect to past storylines. When asked whether the writers have a process by which they "keep track of past jokes or gags or plots", Jean replied, "[j]ust my brain and the other writers' brains. We have a show log, where you can search by the keywords, but here's no Simpson-Vac 3000. It's just me and Matt Selman, who has an excellent memory for that. Usually something slips by us, but not too often."[80]

Thus the concept of canon with respect to *The Simpsons* can be described as fluid—or, at the very least, as a non-rigid construct that remains collaborative among the creatives. Fans have also collaborated on their concepts of canon, given that the pages devoted to canon on both wiki sites are among the very few that are identical. The fans authoring *WikiSimpsons* expressly consider *TSTO* to be a "non-canon" work, so these fans would consider information that is unique to the game to have no influence upon or genuine relationship to the series or to the official timeline.[81] However, where canon is concerned, characters appear to be

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[80] Al Jean, quote in Patrick Kevin Day, "'The Simpsons' at 500: Show runner talks angry Homer, Julian Assange"
 (*Los Angeles Times*, 18 February 2012), first accessed 18 February 2012: http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2012/02/simpsons-500th-episode-julian-assange-al-jean.html.
[81] No author, "Non-canon" (*WikiSimpsons*, 5 March 2010, last updated 14 May 2015), first accessed 8 December 2012 (though the *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* entry was not added to this page until 2013): https://simpsonswiki.com/wiki/Non-Canon.

less of a consideration than events are among *Simpsons* fans. The identical "Non-canon" pages on both *Simpsons Wiki* and the associated *WikiSimpsons* feature episodes, games and comic series among the franchise's ancillary works that are excluded from the timeline that fans (and *Simpsons* creatives) tend to consider legitimate.

Characters do not feature specifically on this list as a separate category, although, according to its authors, *"The Simpsons* feature many episodes which are not considered to be official in the *Simpsons* timeline, and as such the information is regarded as non-canon. Any article about a character, place or object which only appears in these episodes, or sections in an article about these events, should have the [Noncanon] template added to it."[82]

The phrasing of this passage is somewhat (perhaps intentionally) vague, but what it seems to convey is that any information (a word which covers a broad spectrum of possibilities, such as new or drastically altered events and characters) introduced or provided within a non-canon episode, comic book or game can and should be disregarded in considerations of the series' overall timeline. With respect to characters and canonicity, the authors of both wikis have created separate "Non-canon Characters" pages; the one on *Simpsons Wiki* is a list of characters (whose names and images are listed in no particular order through 17 pages) who have *only* appeared in non-canon episodes, comics or games, while the one on *WikiSimpsons* shows an alphabetical list by character name (selected using the same criteria). The canonicity of any character is thus dependent on whether or not his or her sole appearance took place in a non-canon episode, comic or game.

Canon primary characters, well-known and established secondary characters (like Julius Hibbert), and some tertiary characters (like Bernice Hibbert)

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[82] No author, "Non-canon", (*Simpsons.Wikia.com*, 5 March, 2010, last updated 10 February 2015), first accessed 8 December 2012: http://simpsons.wikia.com/wiki/Simpsons_Wiki:Non-Canon, square brackets in the original. The above-cited *WikiSimpsons* "Non-canon" page was created on the same date and is identical, though it does feature a more recent update.

are given dedicated pages on both wikis. On these pages, both wikis' authors carefully distinguish information gleaned from each character's non-canon appearances to that gleaned from the series, marking it with a banner explaining the non-canon distinction (as per the "[Noncanon] template" cited above). This action reinforces that, according to the fans who most vocally determine and record the series canon, the canonicity of a character is dependent upon the medium in which that character appears.

Interestingly, Bernice Hibbert's non-canon exploits are only distinguished on *WikiSimpsons*; *Simpsons Wiki* does not make such a distinction for her. This could be due to the fact that Bernice's exploits on *TSTO* generally stem from information provided in the series; the only item that falls into her non-canon section on *WikiSimpsons* is that she and Carl Carlson have discussed their past relationship on *TSTO*. This piece of information has no associated content of any kind in the series thus far.

However, there is no indication that fans discount the existence of Chester Dupree. In fact, he was swiftly embraced by *TSTO* fan-players as Springfield's newest addition, and his appearance was enough to warrant news pieces. On 30 May 2014, *Rolling Stone*'s Ryan Reed published an article whose byline states: "Chester Dupree has been mentioned in a previous episode, but has never appeared on the show."[83] The article, which quotes (and echoes) a blog entry from the well-regarded weblog *Slash Film*, focuses on the unprecedented nature of Chester's introduction to Springfield via an ancillary text.[84] Both pieces acknowledge the game's introduction to Kumiko as a sort of precedent (in that she was introduced in the game before she appeared in the series), but the differences

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[83] Ryan Reed, "'The Simpsons' Reveal New Slacker Character Through App Game", *Rolling Stone* (30 May, 2014), first accessed 2 March 2015: http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/the-simpsons-reveal-new-slacker-character-through-app-game-20140530.
[84] Germain Lussier, "'The Simpsons' Debuts New Character in Mobile 'Tapped Out' Rather Than TV Show", *Slash Film* (29 May 2014), first accessed 2 March 2015: http://www.slashfilm.com/new-simpsons-character-tapped-out/.

are that Kumiko was only available as a *TSTO* character for a short time while

Chester is a permanent character, and that Kumiko appeared in the series very

shortly after her introduction via an episode tie-in content update, while Chester has

not yet appeared in the series (other than by a brief mention in the season 24

episode "Gone Abie Gone"). In that episode, Homer is having an internalised,

hypothetical conversation with Marge while deciding what to order at a drive-thru.

His imaginary version of her cites Dr. Hibbert, which prompts Homer to conjure an

imaginary version of Dr. Hibbert, who simply says, "Eat healthier!" An imaginary

version of Bernice Hibbert then appears:

> **Bernice**: You, too, Julius! I heard you were at Loretta's Diner on Catfish
>
> Friday!
>
> **Julius**: How do you know that? You got your brother following me?
>
> **Bernice**: Chester needs a job.
>
> **Julius**: I paid him to build a shed. Where is my shed, Bernice?[85]

Their conversation slowly fades out as Homer plugs Imaginary Marge's ears and

orders onion rings.

True to the glimpses into Chester's character that are revealed in this short

conversation, the character in *TSTO* is a so-called "slacker", as is observed in

Reed's headline. His dialogue reveals that he was late for the *TSTO* level 40

content update, and that he spent eight years in college (though it is not revealed

whether he completed any degree program). Most tellingly, the Chester Dupree

character in *TSTO* comes as an addition to an item that must be purchased with the

in-game currency of donuts: an Unfinished Shed.[86]

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[85] "Gone Abie Gone", *The Simpsons*, season 24, episode 4, directed by Matthew Nastuk,
aired 11 November 2012 (Los Angeles, 20th Century Fox, 2012).
[86] TSTO players have two methods by which to acquire donuts: they can purchase through
the app with actual money, or they earn them by performing tasks within the game. The

Although fans are reluctant to accept information emergent from the game as canon, J. Stewart Burns, who is the *TSTO* gamerunner, discusses how—and why—consistency between the series and the game is an important goal for the franchise:

> It was probably almost two years ago, when we started doing some small updates that tied into new episodes of the show. It seemed like a nice back-and-forth promotion: the game promotes the show, and the show is essentially promoting the game, because people are getting the game because they know and love the show and want to build their little Springfields. We try to have the updates be a little bit of a pre-story to the actual episode so that it's sort of something that would lead up to what's about to happen in the episode. A lot of times, the premise is that [the characters are] getting ready for something about to happen, or they're doing something that wasn't in the show but makes sense: this is what led up to them deciding to go to the Grand Canyon, if the show starts out with them in the Grand Canyon.[87]

In Henry Jenkins's analysis of *The Matrix* franchise as a good illustration of transmedia storytelling, he draws a particular example that bridges the videogame *Enter the Matrix* with the second film of the trilogy, *The Matrix Reloaded*: "In *The Matrix Reloaded*, Niobe appears unexpectedly in the freeway chase just in time to rescue Morpheus and Trinity, but for people who play the game, getting Niobe to the rendezvous point is a key mission."[88] This is analogous to what Burns says in the quote above; in both franchises, those who play the game are given additional

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latter is the substantially slower method of donut acquisition. Because he must be purchased, Chester Dupree is one of the game's "Premium Characters".
[87] J. Stewart Burns, quoted in Sean Fitz-Gerald, "How the Mobile Game Tapped Out Brought Old *Simpsons* Fans Back into the Fold", *Vulture.com*.
[88] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 105.

insight and knowledge about the events in the urtext. While such knowledge is not necessary for viewers to gain a functional comprehension of urtextual events, it enriches the experience of the franchise as a whole.

It emerges in Burns's above quote that the primary motivating factors that drive *TSTO*'s authors to maintain consistency are the opportunity for promotion (which could attract *Simpsons* fans to the game or *TSTO* players to the series), and the loyalty of the fan-players themselves. Both of these factors translate directly into economic value; although the game is free to download and play, new and loyal players will potentially spend money on donuts so they can acquire all of the iconic *Simpsons* characters, locations, buildings, landmarks, and items that they love from the series. This exchange provides some evidence to support the argument that memes as social capital can be converted into economic capital; fan-players' desires to amass memes from the series (in order to celebrate and display their *Simpsons* knowledge) is converted—quite literally from dollars to donuts—into monetary gain by the *Simpsons* franchise (and EA Mobile).

In addition both to their consumption of the series and its advertisements, and to their monetised consumption of individual products from a franchise-emergent work, fan-players of *TSTO* also perform the same types of cultural labour as their series-fan counterparts. These fan-players have created several forums on which to discuss and exchange information about the game (and they also contribute to the above-named wikis on the *Simpsons* universe), the most robust and popular of which is *TSTOAddicts.com*. On this site, the administrators (who call themselves "the Addicts") provide members and site visitors with game play tips, as well as a wealth of information on the game and its characters, reviews on *TSTO* content updates, and plenty of pages (in addition to the main forum) on which members can interact with one another. They are textually productive in the same ways as the *NoHomers* fans with one significant difference: the (comparatively few) administrators of *TSTOAddicts* are authoring the bulk of the site's contents, unlike

on *NoHomers*, whose many members are responsible for posting most of the site's content.

.   On the site's "About" page, the Addicts (Alissa, Bunny, Wookiee, and Mark) share how they came to run the site—and in each Addict's tale, the lack of emphasis on his or her connection to or fandom of the series is apparent, with the exception of Wookiee. It is implied that Addicts Alissa and Bunny came to the series through the game, and not the other way around. Thus, contributions by Alissa and Bunny to resources like their "Character Guide" (which incorporates information from the series with information from *TSTO* to provide a full summary of and contextualise each *TSTO* character) must be meticulously researched in order to provide a complete overview. This demonstrates considerable commitment to amassing and sharing knowledge about the object of their fandom. Each contributor's name appears on all content he or she generates for the site; in addition to each Addict's biography on the "About" page, the site is designed to leave little room for doubt about their level of expertise.

As noted above, the contributors are fastidious in their data collection for the pages on their "Character Guide", which provide a thorough overview of the characters in *TSTO.* The "Character Guide" appears to be a work in progress, as not every character's page has yet been created (i.e. some characters' names are included on the list but the characters do not yet have an associated page of their own). The pages that have been completed at the end of 2015 are replete with information, listing each episode in which tertiary characters appeared, and listing the most significant episodes for secondary and primary characters (whose appearances would be too numerous to list by individual episode).

Bernice Hibbert's character page on *TSTOAddicts* is one such page. Authored by Bunny (who in her autobiography makes no mention of her affinity for *The Simpsons* prior to her engagement with *TSTO*), Bernice's page has plenty of information about her, organised into a timeline. First, each *Simpsons* episode in

which she appears is listed in chronological order, and each of her appearances is contextualised within that episode's story. Her introduction to *TSTO* follows, with the description, "we have yet another wife to add to our growing list of characters with some tasks that point out just what kind of person she is."[89] Bernice's tasks are listed next, and these do reinforce some of the traits that are implied in the series: "Attend an AA Meeting; Pick on Marge; Look for a New Power Suit; Argue with Husband; Fall off the Wagon; Shop the Day Away."[90]

Bernice's tasks follow the small amount of information hinted at in the series, and they add even more dimension to her character while maintaining consistency with that which has already been established. As mentioned above, the game's writers—who are also writers on the series—do keep continuity with the series relatively high on their list of priorities, but they recognise that the game is not currently strictly considered to be canon:

> We've certainly started to make jokes about the game in the show, which is sort of a confusing idea, because how exactly does the game exist in the show? I don't know if any of them will make it to air. The game, to some degree, is non-canonical. Something that happens in the game wouldn't necessarily happen in *The Simpsons* universe, if you're one of those type [*sic*] of *Simpsons* nerds that wants to know what all is actually true. But I feel like because it's all of us — the writers that are doing it and we are playing the game — some stuff does bleed through. We introduced a character in the game, Chester, who is Hibbert's brother, who I think had been mentioned in the show. In my mind, he's kind of canonical, and having

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[89] User name "Bunny", "The Real Housewives of Springfield: Bernice HIbbert" (*TSTOAddicts*, 8 June 2014), first accessed 26 February 2015: http://tstoaddicts.com/2014/06/08/real-housewives-of-springfield-bernice-hibbert/.
[90] Ibid.

him in the game has made him more canonical. I would say we should keep an eye out in the show. I think he could appear.[91]

Burns addresses several key points here. The first is the self-reflexivity that permeates all aspects of the game; each time players open it on their devices, there appears an image depicting Homer interacting with an enormous index finger (which is visibly attached to an equally enormous hand) while the game loads. Of course, this index finger represents the player, who is later referred to by characters in the game as "Giant Finger", "Sky Finger" or, fittingly, "Giant Sky Finger". In some dialogic exchanges between characters in the game, it is implied that Springfieldians consider Sky Finger to be a deity of sorts.

For example, in a part of the second phase of the Winter 2014 event called "O Cannonbaum", Homer is given a task to build and use an elf cannon. After a period of its engagement, Lisa and Homer share the following exchange:

Lisa: Good news, Dad. According to our research, elf infestations like this one always end by the middle of January.

Lisa: No one is sure why, but one theory is they want to be home in time to honor Doctor King.

Lisa: So you don't have to use the Elf Cannon anymore!

Homer: Okay, Lisa, I'll stop. But I doubt Sky Finger will.

Homer: That person obviously gets cruel kicks from blasting tiny helpless creatures into space.

Homer: Sometimes I worry about our world.

[After several rounds of firing the cannon "without mercy"]

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[91] J. Stewart Burns, quoted in Sean Fitz-Gerald, "How the Mobile Game Tapped Out Brought Old *Simpsons* Fans Back Into the Fold", *Vulture.com*.

> **Homer:** Well, Sky Finger continues to show no mercy.

> **Homer:** Although it is fun to watch those little guys fly.[92]

The type of overt reflexivity demonstrated in this exchange is very common for the game, but reflexivity tends to be delivered much more subtly in the series. There are many examples of reflexive jokes in the show; the season ten episode "Mom and Pop Art" features a visual gag in which Homer appears as though he is about to be erased by a giant pencil after questioning Matt Groening's artistic skills during a tour of an art gallery.[93] However, it turns out the giant pencil is actually a sculpture from a Claes Oldenburg exhibit. Up until the reveal, the scene is reminiscent of the highly reflexive Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny cartoon, *Duck Amuck*, in which the animator (who is revealed at the end of the film to be Bugs Bunny) interacts with his subject in a very antagonistic way. Of course, as does the series, *TSTO* also features countless reflexive jokes about Fox.

Simpsons creatives have always shown great restraint in moments of reflexivity; moments of conspicuous self-awareness acknowledged within the story world are relatively rare. Consistency, believability, and realism (of a sort) have long been priorities for those in creative charge of the series. In a 2001 *New York Times* article, film critic A. O. Scott provides insight into the production methods and values practised and upheld by the *Simpsons* creatives: "[creator Matt] Groening and [Executive Producer James L.] Brooks currently serve as a kind of two-man counsel of elders, keepers of institutional memory and defenders of core principles. 'Every time I list rules for the show, some wise guy can point to an episode where

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[92] User name "LPNintendoITA", "Winter 2014 Event Part 2 Complete Guide", *The Simpsons: Tapped Out – Game Discussion* (*EA Forums*, 23 December 2014), first accessed 11 August 2015:
http://forum.ea.com/eaforum/posts/list/10256585.page;jsessionid=28E13557A4B2A2EBB8A D05E854297F0E
[93] "Mom and Pop Art", *The Simpsons*, episode 19, season ten, (Director: Steven Dean Moore, Writer: Al Jean, first aired 11 April 1999), DVD (August 7, 2007).

we've broken every one,' Groening says."[94] Scott reveals some of these rules: "animals should always behave like animals, the Simpsons should avoid reflecting on their own celebrity and the Springfield universe should never become overtly cartoonlike. […] [Brooks and Groening] share a clear commitment to something that can only, and oddly, be called realism."[95] In a 2012 interview with *Los Angeles Times* television critic Robert Lloyd, Groening commented on the limits of reality within the *Simpsons* universe:

> We debate [the limits of reality in *The Simpsons*] all the time. My attitude is that things can be improbable but not physically impossible; it's OK for Homer to fall off a cliff and survive, but he's got to be pretty banged up. There's got to be blood. I always say that we can put the Simpsons in whatever situation we want as long as they behave the way somebody in that situation would behave. I think I'm the only one who really cares about that rule; we violate that rule a lot. […] [E]very so often we have self-conscious references, too – Homer remembers, 'Oh, yeah, wasn't I an astronaut?' […] We had a dilemma at the very beginning of the show, because the way I had originally written it was that it was timeless. And then in order to tell a story we anchored the Simpsons in time and had Homer and Marge graduate from high school in 1974; if that were true, they're pretty old now. Bart has remembered a lot of things since 1989, and yet he's 10."[96]

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[94] A. O. Scott, "Homer's Odyssey" (*The New York Times*, 04 November 2001), first accessed 24 July 2013: http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/04/magazine/homer-s-odyssey.html?pagewanted=5

[95] Ibid.

[96] Matt Groening, quoted in Robert Lloyd, "'The Simpsons': Q&A with Matt Groening on reaching 500 episodes (*The Los Angeles Times*, 20 February 2012), first accessed 24 July 2013: http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2012/02/qa-matt-groening-on-the-simpsons-at-500.html

What can be taken away from Burns and Groening's points is that both reflexivity and continuity are key aspects of both the game and the series. What remains to be examined, then, is why these reflexive moments and the continuity are such important cross-franchise values to the *Simpsons* creators. As the Scott interview (and others, as well as DVD commentaries such as that for "Treehouse of Horror VII") demonstrate, Groening is particularly adherent to the principles of realism and continuity. Even on his science fiction animated series *Futurama*, which begins in the year 3000, Groening was very reluctant to allow time travel into the story world, saying, "we thought if we did time travel, all the rules would be out the window and nothing would matter."[97]

Matt Groening credits Burns with shifting his position on including the phenomenon; in spite of Groening's well-reputed adherence to his guiding principles, Burns wrote an episode of Futurama in which the characters travel back in time to Roswell, New Mexico in 1953. Groening, who describes it as "one of the best scripts", gave in and eschewed his own tenets for the good of the series.[98] If even Groening sees the benefit in breaking his rules of realism and continuity, then the adherence to consistency is not being done for the sole satisfaction of the franchise's top brass. The answer to the query about the importance of continuity, then, lies in Burns's quote: to some extent, the writers are keeping the ever-watchful (so-called) "*Simpsons* nerds" in mind when they recall a meme (such as an old plot point or an obscure, one-off character) from an early episode of the series. As discussed above, this benefits the franchise as it keeps the die-hard fans engaged (through their knowledge communities), consumptive (especially fan-players of *TSTO*), and productive (fan-authors of the content on the wiki sites and forums, along with the *TSTO* Addicts).

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[97] Matt Groening, quoted in Kyle Ryan, "Matt Groening" (*The A.V. Club*, 25 March 2009), first accessed 24 July 2014: http://www.avclub.com/article/matt-groening-25525
[98] Ibid.

When Robert Lloyd addressed the internet-based fans with Matt Groening during his interview, Groening expressed awareness that the fans' "constant criticism and analysis and reckoning of the show" is one of the ways in which these fans feel they are participating. It is his first consideration when Lloyd asks, "What's it like to be under that microscope?"

> I love it, people feeling that they can participate in something, I think that's great. The ones who are most passionate are generally the most critical. […] I attempted once to have a conversation with them […] I talked about how in any long-running pop culture enterprise it's hard to keep up with the audience's memory of their favourite experience, because you can never have that first time, first impression again. They got out the knives after I said that.[99]

The conversation to which Groening refers is recalled in the *L.A. Times* interview as an earlier interview Groening gave with *The Onion* affiliate *The A.V. Club*; however, neither Groening's 2006 nor his 2009 interviews with the publication indicate any dialogue directly with fans. Groening does discuss the longevity of the series with respect to fans and their expectations in both interviews—the above quote is a reiteration of an assertion of Groening's in his 2009 *A.V. Club* interview, in which he addresses fans with, "The criticism of the show, that it's not as good as the show you remember when you were 9 years old, is probably true, but then *no* show is as good as the one you probably thought was the greatest when you were 9 years old."[100] He precedes this with the confirmation that the *Simpsons* creatives

[99] Matt Groening quoted in Robert Lloyd, "Q&A with Matt Groening", *The Los Angeles Times*.
[100] Matt Groening, quoted in Kyle Ryan, "Matt Groening", *The A.V. Club*, emphasis in the original.

are simply trying to see if they can continue to have fun, continue trying to make people laugh, and continue doing the series.

Groening also credits the changing styles of humour with the change in perception of the series.[101] He notes that humour depends on surprise—an observation shared by Edward J. Fink in his analysis of the series with respect to the incongruity theory of humour.[102] Groening proposes that if *The Simpsons* appeared on the air now without anyone ever having seen it before and did so in its early form, that no one would pay any attention to it as a result of their roughness and lack of sophistication compared with modern fare.

> [L]ike I said, styles change, and all I ask of critics—of online critics of the show that say, "Oh, it hasn't been good since season X—is that, in the opinion of the people who work on the show, that's simply not true. I'm not saying that every episode is better than the previous, but I'm saying that to completely out-of-hand condemn a decade of the show is a very easy position to take, and the fact is, the show has done absolutely brilliant stuff consistently throughout its history. Like I said, I'm not defending every single joke in every single episode, but if we didn't like what we were doing, we wouldn't keep doing it.[103]

The Simpsons creatives have long been aware of the obsessive nature of their fans, and their fans are more than aware of that awareness; committed viewers remain extremely vocal, and are as unsparing with their criticism as they are with their praise. While in earlier episodes, *Simpsons* creatives responded to and resisted this type of fan participation with acerbic gibes, they later realised just how

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[101] Ibid.
[102] Edward J. Fink, "Writing *The Simpsons*: A Case Study of Comic Theory," (*Journal of Film and Video* 65. 1-2. Spring/Summer (2013): pp. 43 – 55), first accessed 16 February 2014: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_film_and_video/v065/65.1-2.fink.pdf
[103] Matt Groening, quoted in Kyle Ryan, "Matt Groening", *The A.V. Club.*

valuable to the series (and the franchise) the fans' desire to be part of the *Simpsons* world could be. Not only could fans' input help to maintain freshness in and inject new energy into the long-running series, but their sustained appetite for *Simpsons*-related material would also be enormously profitable and beneficial to future, more complex cross- and transmedia ventures.

Though the Jean Era has perhaps surpassed the Scully Era as the favourite target for derision among the fans who perceive a decline in the series' quality (especially the textual conservationists), this chapter has demonstrated that the Jean Era can also be marked as the era in which the creatives reached out to engage fans more than any previous period of the show. By observing fan behaviour, reading fan textual products, the creatives have developed enormously successful fan-centred initiatives. The promise and success of *TSTO* as a first genuine foray into transmedia storytelling—and its purported ability to draw alienated fans back to the fold—suggests that the series could have several years in it yet. If not, however, *TSTO*'s success and popularity, as well as the accessibility provided by (and the popularity of) *Simpsons World*, also suggest that the *Simpsons* franchise could survive the end of production of the series and continue to generate interest and income.

The future of the series is indeed uncertain; since 2011, there have been rumours of difficult negotiations and possible non-renewal of the series. There is also a huge global audience that Fox is currently failing; with the ceasing of DVD production and lack of access to *Simpsons World* beyond the United States borders, as well as the exclusion of the U.S. internet audience who are not subscribers to FXX, the network risks disaffecting a large portion of its most loyal fans. While the creatives recognise the tremendous value of fan cultural labour, they are limited by the network, for whom economic capital is the primary concern in all circumstances.

Conclusion

Introduction and Recapitulation of Findings

The objective of this thesis was to demonstrate the suitability of meme theory to the (often linked) fields of screen and fan studies. As modes of spectatorship progress (and access falls increasingly under the stewardship of the viewer rather than the producers and distributors) and as fandom thrives online, a progressive, adaptable and inclusive analytical paradigm is required to accommodate these significant changes. The more familiar I became with meme theory, the clearer it became to me as a student of screen and fan theory that memetics has precisely the right balance of structure and fluidity (as well a suitable fundamental philosophy) to illuminate gaps left by—and intersections joining—contemporary frameworks. This thesis provided the ideal opportunity for me to argue for the inclusion of meme theory in the shared and separate discourses of screen and fan studies, and to test my position by performing an in-depth memetic analysis of a case study: *The Simpsons* and its online fans.

While the exchange of *Simpsons* content among fans (and, to a slightly lesser extent, that taking place between fans and creatives) were the most obvious memetic practices occurring around the series, I was surprised when initial analyses revealed memes drove the power dynamics within and among the three main groups involved in *Simpsons* production and consumption. With the support of key fan theorists I deduce that memes both from the series and within the fandom represent tangible economic, cultural and social capital for each of the interested parties. In this way, meme theory proved to be an even more effective analytical model than I had hypothesised at the outset of this project—at least with respect to

the analysis of *The Simpsons* (more on this last thought follows in the section **Limitations of this Research** below).

Relationship of this Thesis to Previous Research

There is no existing research focusing on meme theory as an analytical model for screen and fan studies, but the findings in this thesis are broadly compatible with existing paradigms in both fields. As semiotics has long been established as a reliable, respected and useful tool for film analysis, its commonalities with meme theory imply the latter's similar suitability to the field. Many of the points at which meme theory diverges from semiotics (for example, its particular relevance to online activities) serve to reinforce the novel concepts that meme theory brings to the discourse. This is not to suggest that memetic readings of the screen ought to replace semiotic ones; the two can coexist comfortably within the discourse, as there are no glaring contradictions between the two fields.

Several of the authors in the area of fan studies are themselves (or rely upon concepts developed by) semioticians. John Fiske, whose ideas have contributed significantly to this thesis, transformed the application of semiotics in screen studies by including the spectator's semiotic activities in his notion of the semiotic democracy. While this concept assumes that the power in the relationship between producer and consumer rests primarily with the former (an assumption shown not necessarily to be the case in the memetic analysis of *The Simpsons* in this thesis), Fiske revolutionised the discourse by calling attention to the role of the viewer, and by focusing on the heavily-engaged viewer's subsequent textual productivity. Together, these concepts provide a cornerstone on which to build a case for the benefits of meme theory to screen and fan studies.

Henry Jenkins has also used semiotic ideas (such as Fiske's entire oeuvre, and Pierre Lévy's knowledge communities) as a springboard from which to launch

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several key notions for this thesis, with "spreadable media" being one that relates directly to meme theory. Jenkins rejected meme theory based on his difficulty with the exclusion of human agency by early (and some current) memeticists. This is justifiable considering that fan studies is rooted in the assumption that while most audiences consciously choose the texts they wish to consume, some audience members choose a specific text to hold over all others, engaging with that text with an intensity that supersedes average consumption to a degree that these audience members construct identities and communities around the text. These audience members are, of course, fans, and agency is a key element of the processes and activities that distinguish them from less avid consumers of the fan-text. Jenkins (et al)'s development of the notion of "spreadable media" was performed explicitly in opposition to meme theory (as well as to the notion of virality).

Fortuitously (for my purposes, as this thesis is largely concerned with reconciling meme theory with fan studies and Jenkins is a significant scholar in the latter area), Jenkins conducted and (informally) published an interview with Limor Shifman, a foremost scholar in modern memetics whose work is also essential to this thesis. She clarified her (and the increasingly prevalent) position in meme theory that human agency does in fact play a role in meme selection. Though Jenkins did not state whether Shifman's revelation had changed his position on meme theory, he has since (30 March 2015) published an article on his blog in which he focuses on election memes in the United States, using the term liberally throughout his piece.

Limitations of this Research

Craptacular Science provides investigations into meme theory's history and its present alongside the main argument for its future as an analytical paradigm. Though other texts were referenced throughout the thesis by comparative or

contextual means, only one case study of one fan text (and its fandom) could undergo extensive memetic analysis within the scope of this work. That fan-text, *The Simpsons*, boasts one of the earliest-established, most vocal and most active fandoms online. It is also one of the most universally popular television series in the history of the medium and is certainly the longest-lived of its kind. It is a unique text, and it must therefore be acknowledged that the memetic reading of an older or more obscure fan-text might not necessarily yield as fruitful results.

Also, while the fluidity and adaptability of meme theory allow great flexibility in its analytical applications, these traits also introduce potential problems. Karl Popper's well-known aphorism comes to mind: "a theory that explains everything explains nothing." It therefore became an objective of mine to ensure that meme theory's falsifiability is highlighted; there are several acknowledgments throughout the thesis that meme theory is not a universally ideal analytical paradigm, and this conjecture can easily be tested. Popper's perspective is most effectively considered primarily in the context of the earliest manifestations of meme theory, when it seemed that a case truly was being made for the responsibility of memes for nearly all things human. However, scholars in the field have begun to streamline meme theory's application, illuminating the paradigm's analytical potential for investigations of media, its producers, and its consumers in the digital era. Though it is developing swiftly and taking a solidifying shape, meme theory is still relatively nascent and remains fluid. One must be cognisant of these factors when performing memetic analysis to any given text and/or audience.

Implications of this Research (and its Findings)

The case for meme theory as an analytical paradigm in screen and fan studies has been argued at length in *Craptacular Science*. The analysis I performed in the case study offers credible evidence that meme theory can both co-function alongside

existing theoretical paradigms and reveal interconnections and relationships that other paradigms cannot illuminate, thus inviting re-readings of existing texts and audiences to uncover and examine previously unconsidered aspects thereof. It could thus benefit the fields of screen and fan studies immeasurably.

The inclusion of meme theory in the analytical discourse could also provide a reprieve to scholars struggling to shoehorn emerging texts and media—and modern audiences—into existing analytical paradigms that are not equipped to accommodate them. As demonstrated in the reading of *The Simpsons*, in which meme theory was interwoven with Bourdieu and Fiske's cultural economy, meme theory's fluidity and compatibility with established models mean that it could help to fill gaps left by current models without having to scrap analyses already performed through existing frameworks.

The flexibility and continued development of meme theory also mean that, if included in the discourse, memetics can accommodate the shifting topography of the spectatorship landscape. Modern film and television media, which today includes computer monitors, laptops, and mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones in addition to traditional cinema and television screens, might evolve quickly into yet another form, rendering those listed here obsolete. Progress comes rapidly, and meme theory is equipped to handle that change, along with the concurrent, related changes in production and distribution (from DVDs to PVRs to online streaming services, and beyond) that accompany them. Meme theory does not rely on a specific production or reception medium (nor on generic convention) for its applicability and relevance as an analytical tool.

Areas of Future Research

Meme theory boasts a wide applicability, and can thus be used in a great variety of possible future analyses. With respect to screen and fan studies specifically, one

area of further investigation would be memetic texts that are relatively obscure. My intention with the earliest incarnations of this thesis was to put forth a comparative case study in the memetic analysis in which I examined *The Simpsons* and the minimalist works of American independent animator Don Hertzfeldt. Though he works entirely on his own and enjoys a relatively small, niche distribution, Hertzfeldt's unique and highly recognisable animation style has guaranteed his works a wide memetic proliferation. Hertzfeldt's fan base and oeuvre are both tiny when compared to *The Simpsons*'s own, and though they do not have centralised fan sites or forums on which to engage one another, when congregated (whether in a digital or in a physical space), Hertzfeldt fans communicate with one another in a memetic language similar to that spoken by *Simpsons* fans.

Hertzfeldt was gregarious enough to engage in an ongoing electronic interview with me over the first two years of my research. However, his increasing workload meant long silences during which my reassessments of the thesis began to reveal that only one of my two disparate subjects could undergo intensive and thorough memetic analysis within the time and word-limit constraints. Thus, though I was unable to obtain similar contact with any members of the *Simpsons* creative team, I chose the text with the most accessible fandom, the most pervasive memes, and the most overt interactions between fans and producers. Incidentally, in searching for places where *The Simpsons* and Hertzfeldt might intersect, I had repeatedly asked Hertzfeldt whether he would consider an offer to do a guest animation of the "couch gag" meme from *The Simpsons*'s opening credit sequence, as the producers had begun inviting independent animators (and other artists) to create their own "couch gags" starting with Banksy in the 22nd season. Hertzfeldt was particularly evasive about this question, seeming not to have seen it every time he returned a message with fresh responses. Then, in September 2014 I received an email from Hertzfeldt, alerting me to the airing of his *Simpsons* couch gag on the series' 26th season premiere the following day. He had been under contract not to disclose his

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involvement, and expressed his relief at finally being able to acknowledge—and answer—that particularly burning question.

I would thus very much like to pursue the intended memetic analysis of Hertzfeldt's works and fandom. Such a study would introduce a new set of challenges (at times contrary to those encountered in studying *The Simpsons*), not least among which would be locating his online fan hub (if one exists). While this would be a challenge in studying the fan base for any independent filmmaker, there is an interesting "undevelopment" in Hertzfeldt's case. His extensive, insightful online journal (incidentally one of the oldest blogs on the internet) was initially created with the intention of turning it into an online forum for fans. The fact that the journal has always been located under the "Forum" tab of Hertzfeldt's Bitter Films website is a relic of that original purpose—which, after nearly twenty years online, has not yet been realised. With Hertzfeldt's most recent film *World of Tomorrow* being shortlisted for the animator's second Academy Award nomination, there is an imminent and distinct potential for his fan base to coalesce. Beyond my personal intentions, and as is implied above, future research into less-visible works or artists and their fandoms would be an excellent test of the capacity of meme theory as a paradigmatic tool.

Similarly, a memetic analysis of another existing work that has been the subject of extensive scrutiny through several different analytical lenses would be useful in determining meme theoy's limitations or expanded possibilities. Though *The Simpsons* has undergone readings through countless frameworks (both within and without screen studies) in its 27 years (to date) on the air, perhaps a text of even greater import to the screen community would push the limits of meme theory even further. While meme theory is adaptable enough to accommodate modern media, a text along the lines of *Citizen Kane* or *Vertigo* would test the capacity of meme theory to accommodate texts from the classic, vertically integrated Hollywood era.

Finally, I would recommend (or like to perform) a memetic analysis of a film (and its associated fandom) from a non-Hollywood cinematic tradition. The Hong Kong and Bollywood film industries produce tremendously popular texts in distinct cinematic languages (neither is necessarily a complete departure from the hegemonic Hollywood style, but each has its own unique nuances), and with differing levels of internet access, surveillance and online activity, the online fandoms might interact in significantly different ways from those examined in this thesis.

Contribution to Research

As asserted above, the foremost unique contribution I have made to the discourse through this thesis is the development and application of a meme theory framework to a textual analysis of a screen product and its fandom. An in-depth reading such as this has not yet been proposed or performed within the fields of screen or fan studies.

My purpose in this thesis is to demonstrate the suitability of memetics to these fields, and it is my hope that my findings both sufficiently supported my conjecture, and will persuade present and future screen and fan scholars to test this hypothesis with further memetic analytical experimentation.

Appendix

Literature Review: Other Key Contributing Texts

Craptacular Science and the Worst Audience Ever: Memetic Proliferation and Fan Participation in <u>The Simpsons</u> (henceforth "*Craptacular Science*") is an exploration of memes and fan participation in the Twentieth Century Fox Television series *The Simpsons* (1989 – Present). These theoretical paradigms and their applications to this thesis have been discussed in detail throughout the thesis. As *The Simpsons* is a significant cultural text, a number of academic texts have been published about the series throughout the 27 years it has been on the air at the end of 2015, as well as countless non-academic commentaries, articles and books. Some of these texts lend a significant contribution to this thesis, not only in the information and insight they provide, but also in highlighting the gaps which remain to be filled in the discourse.

In the following literature review I distinguish and discuss the significance of these additional texts cited throughout this thesis, organising them according to key areas. It must be noted that the primary texts pertaining to semiotics, meme theory and fan studies that are applied to this thesis are discussed at length in **Theoretical Engagement 1** and **2**. The most significant distinction below is that made between the other primary sources (including the series itself and the best-populated online fan sites) and those secondary to *Craptacular Science*, with each category divided into relevant topics. The goal of this literature review is to make transparent the use of the texts that support and—through both the information they provide and that which they lack—shape this doctoral thesis.

<u>Primary Sources</u>

Screen Sources

The Simpsons

As the longest-running animated series, the longest-running sitcom, and the longest-running narrative prime time series on American television, *The Simpsons* provides a profound mine of both television and cultural history and criticism.[1] From its beginnings as a series of minute-long interstitials on *The Tracey Ullman Show*, it became a series that examines, criticises and reflects American life, and which has—since its earliest days as a standalone series—had an ongoing dialogue with its obsessive audience. *The Simpsons* is also an anomaly among broadcast television shows in that its funding network, Fox, was contracted from the show's inception not to interfere with production:

> The creative content of most network television shows can be dictated by network execs, who want to channel a show's direction to maximize profitability. […] *The Simpsons* has long claimed that one of the keys to its success is that, under the protective umbrella of Jim [James L.] Brooks, it never has to deal with network notes. While the show is certainly autonomous in a way no other network shows are (cable shows have different standards and controls, which is why most innovative and well-written programming can be found on HBO, Showtime, Comedy Central, etc.), there are some different opinions on how much influence Fox has held.[2]

Brooks's established influence in Hollywood allowed him to create the conditions in which the series' writing team could experiment without much risk of obstruction by those funding the show. As Ortved's assessment above suggests,

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[1] No author, *The Simpsons on Fox – Official Site* (Fox, last updated late 2014), accessed 12 October 2011: http://origin.thesimpsons.com/.   See also Noam Friedlander, "*The Simpsons* to become longest-running US TV series" (*The Telegraph*, 27 February 2009): http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/4860381/The-Simpsons-to-become-longest-running-US-TV-series.html

[2] John Ortved, *The Simpsons: An Uncensored, Unauthorized History* (New York: Faber and Faber Inc., 2009), 234.

this enables *Simpsons* writers to prioritise (what they perceive to be) quality over profitability. The show's resulting innovation and unprecedented humour inspired fans to celebrate the series, particularly online; they created an abundance of homage sites to the series, using memes from the series to communicate among themselves and with a wider audience. They have made direct and indirect responses to fans through a variety of means and media, such as online dialogues, interviews, and DVD commentaries, the most significant of which will be discussed in this chapter.

The series is the foundation of this thesis; it is the very cultural artefact at the centre of all discussions presented here. Several episodes are cited for their examples of dialogic exchange ("Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie", "Weekend at Burnsie's", "Saddlesore Galactica", to name a few). Another single episode, "There's Something About Marrying", provides author Craig Fink with enough material to support his argument in his 2013 article "Writing *The Simpsons*: A Case Study of Comic Theory" that *The Simpsons* can credit its near-universal appeal to its producers' synthesis of every element of comedy. The episode "A Star is Burns" provides a particularly solid case study of a *Simpsons*-engineered meme that took on a life well outside the realm of television.

As it is the most important element of this work, the series as an entity is under constant discussion. Its many elements, including episodes, merchandise, writers, producers, animators, and financiers, are cited often throughout *Craptacular Science* and in a variety of contexts. *The Simpsons* provides an ideal case study for the exploration of the concept of memes, particularly with respect to the tangible economic and social implications born by particularly successful memes.

The Simpsons: Tapped Out

Chapter 3 provides a thorough analysis of *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* (or *TSTO*, as fans have called it), an online, mobile device-based "freemium" game that was introduced for Apple mobile devices in 2012 and for Android mobile devices in 2013. *TSTO* requires each player gradually to construct his or her own version of Springfield, complete with the iconic characters, buildings and landmarks that fans would easily recognise. Frequent interaction with the game is key to players' success on *TSTO*; players earn the in-game currency by having the characters they have acquired perform, complete, and begin new tasks. Players then use the currency to acquire more characters and items to populate their towns; which can then perform more tasks and earn the player more currency.

Of course, the game is not only for fans; the creatives (who are also staff writers on the series) have designed the game to be comprehensible and attractive to potential players who are not existing audience members or fans of the series. The creatives are careful to include plenty of memetic, iconic material from the series, and they also use the game to make the self-reflexive jokes that are discouraged by the series' bosses (Matt Groening and James L. Brooks).

While other ancillary texts from the *Simpsons* franchise are discussed in **Chapter 1**, *TSTO* is unlike any of the other merchandising products produced in association with the series. As the authors of the game are also the authors of the series, the game occupies a uniquely intimate space with respect to the show. Writers recognised this peculiarity early on in the game's development, and began to introduce new characters and events through the game before their appearances/occurrences in the series. In **Chapter 3**, a strong case is made for *TSTO* to be recognised as the first potential auxiliary *Simpsons* text through which true transmedia storytelling can be performed. The implications of this include, but are not limited to, *TSTO*'s position to contribute significantly to the continued

success and renewal of the *Simpsons* franchise beyond the conclusion of the television series.

The Simpsons Movie

The Simpsons Movie is not quite as significant a text as the series itself with respect to this thesis, but is nevertheless an important highlight of the *Simpsons* franchise. Its very existence demonstrates that, over ten years into its television run, *The Simpsons* remained a lucrative enough asset to Fox to warrant the significant investment in its cinematic realisation. The series was initially produced using the "classical" cel-style, but by its 20th season was being produced entirely digitally, and in high-definition. During the film's production, the new techniques being developed (such as sweeping camera movements) began to appear in the series. The film also marked the first appearance of the series' characters on the cinematic screen, which is a significant departure from its mainstay medium of television.

The People Vs. George Lucas

In **Chapter 3**, a discussion on the ownership of a significant cultural text is raised in the context of fans' claims to control over certain aspects of the content (or, at least over how they engage with the content). *The People Vs. George Lucas* is a film about that very issue; it focuses on fan reactions to significant changes Lucas made to his two most popular franchises: *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones.* The film explores perceptions of texts from both the fan and creative perspectives, offering insight into the subtle ways in which fans adopt texts as their own—and the (sometimes unsubtle) ways in which the control of the texts is seized back by its producers when an opportunity to hone or improve (or, perhaps in their view, perfect) the text arises.

While the question of whether the control over a text should belong to the fans who love it or the creatives who produce it might at first seem absurd, some of

the interviewees in this film make a compelling argument in favour of—at the very

least—taking fan opinions into account when making changes or additions to a

franchise with immense and measurable cultural significance.

Additional Multimedia

There are several sources that are vital to this thesis, but that are most efficiently

categorised under the lacklustre banner "Additional Multimedia". Specifically, these

sources are the commentaries provided by *Simpsons* creatives on the every

episode released on DVD, the roundtable discussion among key past and present

series creatives hosted by former *Simpsons* writer and current talk show host

Conan O'Brien as part of his *Serious Jibber-Jabber* series, the Audio/Video

interviews with *Simpsons* creatives and cast members, the creatives' *Twitter*

accounts, and a very important auxiliary text to the series, *The Simpsons: Tapped

Out.*[3]

The commentaries, interviews, *Twitter* profiles, and roundtable discussion

provide invaluable insight into the perspectives of the *Simpsons* creatives, who,

through these media, share anecdotes that reveal key aspects of their relationships

with fans and with Fox, as well as pivotal events in the series' creative evolution.

They also offer glimpses into the behind-the-scenes aspects of the series, such as

influences on, factual information about, and audience and executive reactions to

the production and broadcast of given episodes.

David Mirkin's audio commentaries for "Who Shot Mr. Burns (Parts One and

Two)" touch upon several issues including financial tension with Fox executives (as

well as frustration with the network over the way the episode's contest was

conducted) and, importantly, a strong connection and engagement with their online

fans (who, at the time, were using *alt.tv.simspons*). Similarly, Matt Groening and a

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[3] Of the complete seasons released on DVD, the 20th anniversary DVD release is the sole
exception.

number of other participants in the DVD commentary for *The Simpsons Movie* address fans directly when discussing a particular joke in the film that momentarily compromises the hyperdiegetic continuity. In the same exchange, Mike Scully dedicates the joke to members of *NoHomers.net*. Scully also references the *NoHomers* on the DVD commentary for the Season 10 episode "When You Dish Upon a Star," making a sarcastic reference to his notoriety on among fans and on that site in particular (a central concept to *Craptacular Science*).

During an FXX marathon of the entire series that took place to celebrate the cable outfit's acquisition of the syndication rights to *The Simpsons*, Al Jean and other creatives (including David Mirkin) took to *Twitter* to engage with each other and with fans. They live-tweeted the event, sharing memories and details about their experiences as each episode aired.

As no interview with *Simpsons* creatives could be obtained for this thesis, these multimedia sources provide a satisfactory surrogate; these hundreds of hours of commentary and spontaneous conversations among creatives—when coupled with John Ortved's work and the interviews discussed in ***Written Sources*** below— provide enough insight into the creatives' viewpoint to construct an informed portrait in **Chapter 3**.

Online Sources

The online sources listed below are central to the analysis of *Simpsons* fandom in *Craptacular Science*. As fandom—and, more specifically, online fandom—forms one third of the triumvirate for whom *Simpsons* memes bear significant meaning and tangible consequences, online fan sites and discussion groups are a fundamental source and resource in this thesis. As the fact that these sites (and the dialogues found thereupon) are internet-based is an essential aspect of their nature, these sites are distinguished from other written sources found online, such as

articles from academic journals whose libraries are also accessible through the internet, and articles from web-based magazines or web versions of newspapers. Sources like the latter, some of which are facsimiles of their original print counterparts, will be considered printed (herein "Written") sources.

As stated above, fans certainly do not engage with *The Simpsons* only—or even mainly—on official sites; there are countless fan sites and forums on which fans share information, images, fan art and fiction, and, of course, opinions and discussions of the series and its content. Some of the most significant ones will be explored in *Craptacular Science*, including the pre-World Wide Web online discussion forum *alt.tv.simpsons*, created in March 1990, approximately four months after the series premiered on Fox.

alt.tv.simpsons

alt.tv.simpsons is an entity known as a "newsgroup", and is the earliest online discussion group for *Simpsons* fans. Newsgroups are messaging systems onto which early internet users would log in order to discuss a given topic; they are comparable to an early form of today's online forums. Newsgroups pre-date the World Wide Web; the latter is the hypertext entity forming today's universally accessible and recognisable internet accessed through browsing software. As the first online discussion forum for *Simpsons* fans, this source is fundamental to any analysis of the series' fans. It is also the catalyst to the establishment of dialogue between *Simpsons* fans and creatives.

A 2013 *Slate* article by Alan Siegel, which assists in the analysis of the newsgroup in this thesis, provides a concise history of *alt.tv.simpsons*, and reveals that the *Simpsons*-dedicated newsgroup was created by University of Delaware

junior Gary Duzan within months of the first episode's airing in December 1989.[4] The timeline in Siegel's article confirms that the on-going dialogue between fans and creatives was initiated very early in the series' run; the influence of the dialogue upon the development of the series is another key topic of engagement in this thesis. This influence is examined in detail in **Chapter 3**.

It is from this site that the *Simpsons* writers gleaned many of Jeff Albertson's attitudes and critiques, including his catchphrase "worst episode ever". Writers and producers were also known to log order to gauge reactions to given episodes.[5] Siegel describes *Simpsons* writer Bill Oakley's 1992 discovery in the writing room of a ream of material printed from *alt.tv.simpsons*:

> The copious notes were posts culled from *alt.tv.simpsons*, an online newsgroup populated by some of the series' hardcore fans. To [Bill] Oakley, this was a revelation. At the time, outside feedback consisted of little else but ratings. "And the ratings never had anything to do with the quality of the episode," says Oakley, a longtime writer and producer on the show. "They had to do with what was on opposite it, or what the weather was like, or whatever." […] After he started working on the show, Oakley purchased a primitive dial-up Internet account (he compared it to what Matthew Broderick's character used in *War Games*) and began checking out alt.tv.simpsons. He didn't just lurk, either. He engaged. On July 25, 1993, for example, Oakley posted detailed episode information for the then-upcoming Season 5. For fans of the show, it's an amazing time capsule.[6]

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[4] Alan Siegel, "Best Message Board Ever" (*Slate.com*, 26 September 2013), first accessed 3 October 2013:
http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2013/09/the_history_of_simpsons_message_board_alt_tv_simpsons.html .
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

Oakley's recollection reveals that—in his experience, at the very least—

alt.tv.simpsons was the first source of criticism that the writers of the series could

really use. Siegel's own assessment reveals that the newsgroup was not only

influential on the writers of the series, but also on online television up to the modern

day.

www.simpsonsarchive.com: *The Simpsons Archive*

The very existence of a fan-generated site devoted entirely to recording information

about the series to the most microscopic detail speaks volumes to the importance of

the series' hyperdiegetic content to the online fans. *The Simpsons Archive* is a

significant site for several reasons: it was one of the first large-scale sites to be

established, and several of the earliest online *alt.tv.simpsons* fans founded (and

continue to contribute to) the *Archive*. It also contains a wealth of information about

the series, such as full transcripts of episodes, character breakdowns and analyses,

and complete histories of and links to other online sources, including non-English

sites—to name only a few features. *The Simpsons Archive* is a work in progress, as

its contributors are still mining early seasons of the series for the site's "episode

capsules", the name for its tremendously detailed breakdowns of each episode of

the series. Each capsule includes the official title and production code of the

episode, the writer(s) and director, the *TV Guide* synopsis, the title sequence (which

includes the episode's unique combination of blackboard gag, driveway gag, and

couch gag), any additional voices contributed by guest performers, trivia, reviews,

bloopers, references to films and other works, trivia that can only be caught on

freeze-frame, additional observations, and detailed quotes and scene summaries.

What compounds the site's indispensability to *Craptacular Science* is the

fact that this exhaustive resource is written both *for*—and *by*—*Simpsons* fans. It is

an outlet into which *Simpsons* fans who have accumulated large amounts of

specialised knowledge about the series (that is the fandom's cultural capital) can

unburden themselves—complete with credit, as the excerpt below from their

website demonstrates. *The Simpsons Archive* is at the axis of online *Simpsons*

fandom:

> *The Simpsons Archive* also operated a moderated mailing list "Simpsons-L"
>
> for fan discussions (1996-2010). After the service was terminated, in August
>
> 2011 we joined forces with the *No Homers Club*—the most popular Simpsons
>
> web forum of all time. The connection between the Archive and
>
> *alt.tv.simpsons* is also always present. This site was launched by the
>
> members of [*alt.tv.simpsons*]. […] Our intention is serve as a home for all
>
> useful materials created by fans of the show. Individuals who have authored
>
> Simpsons-related documents may submit them to the Archive, where they will
>
> be made available to millions of regular visitors. As you might imagine,
>
> maintainers retain <u>full</u> credit for their works, and may freely update them at
>
> any time.[7]

In this same section, under their Submission Guidelines, *The Simpsons*

Archive is also very careful to make their position clear with respect to fans posting

actual content from the series on the *Archive*. Given their intimate involvement with

and role in *Simpsons* online fandom, the authors are keenly aware of the

consequences suffered by other fan site maintainers who received and ignored

cease-and-desist letters from Fox. In this way, they make clear their sympathies

for—and unwillingness to follow the same actions as—the maintainers of those

sites.

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[7] No author, "About the Archive" (*SimpsonsArchive.com*, n.d), first accessed 12 October
2011 on the domain snpp.com, now located at:
http://www.simpsonsarchive.com/about.html#faq

The site also features a comprehensive history of *Simpsons* online fandom in its "Guide to *The Simpsons* on the Net", which provides a timeline of sites devoted to the series, and which highlights some of the most important sites to and significant events in the evolution of the fandom between 1990 and 2004.[8] This section is key to the analysis of Fox's interactions with online fandom in Chapter 1: The Fox that Released the Hounds; the "Guide" details some of Fox's most critical actions against online fans (up to 2004), as well as some of the fans' most notable counteractions, which are analysed in Chapter 2: Fans vs. Fans and Fans v. the Creatives. Eric Wirtanen, who is credited with creating the "Guide" and who has been a major figure in online *Simpsons* fandom from the earliest days, founded and runs the largest and most well-known *Simpsons* fan site online today: *NoHomers.net*.

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NoHomers.net

NoHomers.net (also known as the No Homers Club or, most simply, *NoHomers*) is a *Simpsons* fansite with a significant history. Its former incarnation, *Evergreen Terrace* (which borrows its name from the street on which the Simpson family lives in the series), was shut down by a Cease-and-Desist letter from Fox, who had taken exception to the use of copyrighted multimedia from the series and related promotional material by the site's creators and users.[9] Cecilia Ogbu's legal study of the implications of the online expressions of fandom within the minefield of copyright places this important discussion within the context of the *Evergreen Terrace* specifically, and is useful in the analyses of the Fox-fan relationships in Chapters 1 and 2.

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[8] Eric Wirtanen and Adam Wolf, "Guide to *The Simpsons* on the Net", (*SimpsonsArchive.com*, n.d), first accessed 12 October 2011 on the domain snpp.com, now located at: http://www.simpsonsarchive.com/guides/net.html

[9] No author, "The Evergreen Terrace Era" (*NoHomers.net*, "Information: About this Website", n.d), first accessed 11 October 2011: http://www.nohomers.net/content/info/website/

NoHomers is a continuation of other sites (whose genealogy begins with *Evergreen Terrace*), and it ultimately replaced *alt.tv.simpsons* as the online forum to which the most dedicated and obsessive fans took their discussions. While *alt.tv.simpsons* still exists and is still accessible through newsreader software (and, in a limited capacity, through Google Groups), newsgroups have evolved primarily into file transfer sites. *NoHomers* provides fans with a forum on which they can actively discuss anything and everything relating to *The Simpsons*, and even things that do not (the site features "Off-topic" forums for users who wish to discuss things other than *The Simpsons*). *NoHomers* has also replaced *alt.tv.simpsons* for *Simpsons* creatives; this is the site they cite when addressing their keenest fans (for example, Matt Groening addresses them in several DVD commentaries and interviews).[10] Importantly, the site boasts several *Simpsons* creatives as members, including aforementioned *Simpsons* writer Bill Oakley, his writing partner Josh Weinstein, animators Jen Kamerman and Sarge Morton, and several writers on the *Bongo Comics* team (which was born from Matt Groening's first successful enterprise, and which today which produces *Simpsons Comics*, among others).

As was established in "Theoretical Engagement 2", although anyone can join and post on the site, *NoHomers* features a hierarchical system in which the more content a given user posts, the higher that user's status becomes. The higher the status, the more authority that user commands; the hierarchy uses well-known *Simpsons* memes as categories, and these memes are references to figures or positions of increasing exclusivity and authority. The second-highest tier, "Executive Vice President", borrows its name (and implications) from a position Mr. Burns invents for Frank Grimes in an emotional episode Burns experiences after learning about Grimes's tremendously difficult life. When Grimes arrives to take up his post, Burns has replaced him with a dog whose inspiring life story trumps

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[10] No author, "Honors and Recognition" (*NoHomers.net*, "Information: About this Website", n.d), first accessed 11 October 2011: http://www.nohomers.net/content/info/website/

Grimes's own.[11] One must contribute a minimum of 20,000 posts to reach this level.

Once a user surpasses 29,999 posts, s/he is elevated to the ultimate status of "The

Chosen One", whose name is the same as the prophesised member of the

Stonecutters who would lead the secret society to glory.[12]

In a society in which knowledge is cultural capital, *NoHomers* rewards its

users with an official and overt acknowledgment of that capital. This cultural capital

for users transforms into actual capital for the site's owners and administrators; they

are compensated for the advertising featured on the site, and this compensation

relies upon traffic to the site. One way that this traffic is evidenced is in the amount

of content posted to the site, so posts are strongly encouraged. Posts to the site

are mutually beneficial to the users and the owners of *NoHomers*; they are culturally

lucrative to the posters, and economically lucrative to the site's administrators.

In its significance to and history within the online *Simpsons* fan community

and to the *Simpsons* creatives, its position as a bridge between both groups, its

sheer volume of inter-fan dialogue using memes as a communicative tool, the use

of memes by the site's administrators for a variety of reasons, and as a site that

features links to the official Fox *Simpsons* sites despite its antagonistic history with

the network, *NoHomers* is the most important online fan site to *Craptacular Science*.

DeadHomerSociety.com

The bloggers on this site are *Simpsons* fans who outright reject any episode of the

series produced after the completion of season 8. They are the most vocal (and

most ardently critical) faction of fans who identify themselves along the fan-

generated "Scully Era" boundary—this identification is so essential to these fans

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[11] "Homer's Enemy", *The Simpsons*, season 8, episode 23, directed by Jim Reardon, aired 4 May 1997.
[12] "Homer the Great", *The Simpsons*, season 6, episode 12, directed by Jim Reardon, aired 8 January 1995.

that they wrote and posted a manifesto to their blog, in which they outline their position with the same vitriolic conviction that characterises the site as a whole.

The blog's authors do not simply dismiss recent episodes of *The Simpsons* as being of a lesser quality than the classic era; rather, they call all episodes produced during or after the Scully Era "Zombie *Simpsons*". While the term "Zombie *Simpsons*" could be interpreted as an implication that, like zombies, the series is on a sort of brainless autopilot, the bloggers are very clear that the term is applied with much more severity. The *Google* search result for the blog appears as: "Dead Homer Society| Zombie Simpsons Must Die," and in the manifesto, the bloggers call for the immediate (and what they consider to be long overdue) cancellation of the series.

The *Dead Homer Society* provides this thesis with an excellent case study for memetic practices employed in *Simpsons* online fandom. Their very identity is predicated on memetic concepts derived and implemented within the fandom that carve the series up into "eras" that reflect perceived shifts in quality. The authors borrow and densely apply *Simpsons* memes as markers throughout their blog, ostensibly to guide their *Simpsons*-savvy visitors around the site, but also in an apparent effort to establish their own high level of expertise on the series (which serves to legitimise their politics). The authors are also concerned with the propagation of their own memes; they are keen to see the term "Zombie *Simpsons*" come into widespread use among the fandom.

The site exhibits a number of fundamental discriminatory processes within the fandom, as well as highlights some key areas of the hegemonic struggle between internet-based fan factions; the *Dead Homer Society* authors do not reserve their heavy criticism for the series alone. Fans who do not align with their perspective are repudiated and expressly discouraged from engaging with the blog and its authors. *Dead Homer Society* thus provides this thesis with a multifaceted

specimen around whose varied traits a clear snapshot and analysis of internet-based *Simpsons* fandom is produced in **Chapter 2**.

Worst Episode Ever Podcast

This fan podcast's name is more than a mere adoption of a famously fan-related (and memetic) phrase from the series; it is also related to the hosts' objective: to determine which is the worst episode of *The Simpsons* ever produced. The hosts watch an episode every week (often suggested by listeners of or guest hosts on the podcast), then evaluate its merits and failings in conversation with one another, ultimately rating each episode on a scale of "Worst Worst Episodes" to "Best Worst Episodes". The hosts align with the same discriminatory distinctions as the *Dead Homer Society*, frequently suggesting during their discussions that the series should have been cancelled long ago. They engage in discussions that focus on the Scully Era through which they reveal their increasing tolerance of Scully Era episodes as the series ages. Like the *Dead Homer Society*, the podcast hosts have constructed their identity around memetic aesthetic distinctions forged by fans.

While the podcast is not quoted directly in this thesis, it is cited as an additional example of fans who communicate in *Simpsons* memes, trading quotes from the series to illustrate their discussion points. The podcast also makes visible (or audible) more fans who take a firm stance on their aesthetic appraisals of the series (both positive and negative), and who are preoccupied with exposing the poor quality they perceive in the modern era of the series. Finally, it serves as a unique example of *Simspons* fan textual productivity; it keeps the series illuminated and relevant, despite the fact that it is simultaneously critical and plauditory in its treatment of the series. Thus, the podcast hosts engage enthusiastically in the hegemonic struggle among fans to produce the most knowledgeably cultivated aesthetic assessment of the series.

Simpsons.Wikia.com and *WikiSimpsons*

Two of the most prominent fan-driven sites that contribute to the thesis are the easily confused *Simpsons.Wikia.com* and *WikiSimpsons*. As can be deduced from their names, these are collaborative productions among fans to record, categorise, and make accessible the collective knowledge that fans possess. Unlike *The Simpsons Archive*, fans need only register with the site before they can begin making contributions, and as with all wiki sites, the content is subject to scrutiny and alteration by other members.

As is the case with other wiki sites (*Wikipedia.org* chief among them), the contributors to these sites are tasked with maintaining objectivity and avoiding aesthetic judgment, whereas many of the online fans who engage on or author the sites above construct their very identities around their aesthetic convictions. The fans on these sites provide perspectives that differ quite profoundly from those above, in that they provide no perspectives, other than in the choices they make with respect to the memetic content from the series that they have chosen to post.

Another key contribution the wiki sites make to this thesis is in their pages dedicated to the concept of canon. As these pages are among the few that are identical on both sites, it is clear that the contributors are committed to a collective interpretation of that which would be included in the canon. The very fact that a canon has been produced by fans is indicative of the hegemonic struggle for control between fans and producers. Producers can certainly tell any story they wish to, but fans can simply decide whether to accept or reject the information. There are several *Simpsons* episodes that have retroactively changed the continuity that was established in previous episodes (and, in some cases, upheld in subsequent episodes) to a degree that fans find unacceptable. Thus, fans have simply excised these episodes from the canon.

The non-canon episodes' lack of adherence to the established story world renders them unpopular among most fans, but as the most notorious culprits are Scully-Era episodes, they are at an even greater disadvantage from an evaluative point of view. These sites demonstrate that even the most objective fans cannot abide significant breaches to the hyperdiegesis around which they have constructed their (individual and collective) meta-texts.

TSTOAddicts.com

An abbreviation of "*The Simpsons: Tapped Out* Addicts," *TSTOAddicts* is a fan site, but one devoted to the franchise's most popular game, rather than to the series itself. This site combines popular elements of other fan sites; it includes a forum on which members can communicate with one another, and it contains hundreds of information pages about the game (and, to some extent, about the series) that are authored by the site's administrators in a similar style to *The Simpsons Archive*.

What is surprising about this site is that even though it contains large amounts of information from the series, two of its most prolific contributors came to the franchise through *TSTO* rather than through the series. The site's popularity among players and the fact that its administrators found the series through the game make for strong supportive evidence that *TSTO* is the most significant auxiliary text in the franchise to date, as it is the first such text to demonstrate a drawing power anywhere near that of the series.

TSTOAddicts contributes to this text in **Chapter 3**, in which both the game and its own devoted fandom are examined as part of an overall investigation of *Simpsons* creatives' involvement in ancillary textual production, especially with respect to memes from the series and the potential for transmedia storytelling. The site also demonstrates that an audience is eagerly poised for just such a *Simpsons*

franchise transmedia venture; without such an audience, the very notion of transmedia storytelling in the *Simpsons* franchise becomes irrelevant.

BootlegBart.com

This site specifically informs the discussion on *Simpsons* merchandising in **Chapter 1**. *BootlegBart.com* both contains and is itself evidence of the resonance of *Simpsons* merchandising and the cultural practices that were inspired by and arose around it. *BootlegBart.com* is a blog whose author's objective is to archive every remaining example he can find of the bootlegged T-shirts created during the so-called "Simpsonmania" of 1990 – 1991. While plenty of counterfeit T-shirts were created to pass as legitimate, licensed products, the T-shirts *BootlegBart* is concerned with are those that borrowed the Bart Simpson character (in all his memetic components) and adapted them to fit a particular political purpose.

Known only as "Leo", *BootlegBart*'s author contributes to this thesis in several ways. The first is that the site provides concrete information about the bootlegging practices and objectives, as well as scanned copies of newspaper articles, some of which are from obscure or now-obsolete publications. Another is that it is one of the few sources on the internet on which images of the bootlegged T-shirts can be viewed at all, let alone in an organised archival form. It also keeps visible this short-lived but salient practice from the series' earliest days, providing insight into the political climate into which *The Simpsons* was introduced and acknowledging both its resonance and its sustained relevance.

TheSimpsons.com and *SimpsonsWorld.com*

Once the series' official page, this website offers only to this thesis by its absence (save for one section in which its claims about itself are cited). The lack of care and attention paid to this site by its administrators, along with its notorious and perpetual

dearth of content, drove fans to build their own sites, which led to an epic, ongoing hegemonic battle between Fox and fans for control over the use of the franchise's content online.

The woefulness of the official *Simpsons* web page been cited by fans and those who study them (e.g. Cecilia Ogbu) as one of the primary factors driving the establishment and popularity of online *Simpsons* fan activity, but the situation has, for some, worsened. The site was removed completely in late 2015; those who type the URL into their browsers are redirected to *SimpsonsWorld.com*, which has become the new and only official *Simpsons* website.

SimpsonsWorld.com, like *TSTOAddicts*, is a promising endeavour by *Simpsons* creatives, the Fox network, and the related cable outfit FXX to bring *The Simpsons* online in an official capacity. It is the focus of much analysis in **Chapters 1**, **2** and **3**, as it is the first concrete step toward convergence that the series has seen. The creatives, who this thesis establishes are eager for fans to be able to engage with content in a sanctioned way, were also involved in the development of *Simpsons World*. They discuss the development on the site of a number of tools fans will be able to use to organise and personalise the content to suit their desires. They are also excited to see and use the data that the site will produce about fan activity and trends on the site, including the most popular episodes. Indeed, some of these data are available for all site vistors to see.

However, the content is not available to all visitors. Only those who live in the United States and have cable television subscriptions that include the FXX channels can access the all of the content (either on their computers or on mobile devices through the FXNow app). Residents in the U.S. who do not have subscriptions can access limited content, while those outside the United States can see no content at all. The site's accessibility levels, its potential as a site of convergence, its nature, and its features make it a frequent topic of (and example to) the analyses throughout **Chapters 1 – 3**.

Secondary Sources

Written Sources

The written resources contributing directly to this thesis that have not been discussed at length in the first two **Theoretical Engagement** chapters are categorised according to the types of sources they are. Some are academic texts, while others are online news articles. The distinctions below and in the bibliography have been made both to follow the primary focus of each work and to avoid repetition of sources (in an effort to provide a clear view of both the volume and the diversity of the material contributing to this work).

Academic Sources

The overwhelming majority of the academic texts that contribute to this thesis are presented in **Theoretical Engagement 1** and **2**. Only a few texts do not fall into either of the broad theoretical fields encompassed therein, and are thus included below. Each of the academic texts listed here and in the **Works Cited** is invaluable to the analysis of *The Simpsons*, its producers and its fandom in *Craptacular Science,* as each not only provides support to the arguments in this work, but also, as a collective, they define the gaps that remain to be filled. In their application in this thesis, the works listed below may fall into one or more category, so their position is selected according to their most relevant area of contribution.

The first of these texts is Robert Sloane's chapter of John Alberti's edited text *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*, titled "Who Wants Candy? Disenchantment in *The Simpsons*". While every chapter in this collection contributes to the discourse surrounding the series and augments the knowledge that informs *Craptacular*

Science, it is Sloane's analysis of the episode "The Itchy and Scratchy and Poochie Show" that provides the most marked (and cited) input to the discussion in **Chapters 2** and **3**. As Sloane points out, it is at this point that the *Simpsons* creatives show the greatest cynicism both in their treatment of their fans through the Comic Book Guy meme, and in examining their own place in popular media. This marks a turning point of several sorts, as the episode's place within *Simpsons* history (as fans record it) is near the end of the so-called Classic Era and the beginning of the reviled Scully Era.

Similiarly to the rest of Alberti's book, Jonathan Gray's *Watching with the Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* and Matthew A. Henry's *The Simpsons, Satire, and American Culture* provide insights into aspects of the series that are not part of the focus in this thesis, and are therefore not cited directly. They are nevertheless key to the thesis in that, as they focus on audience reception of the series, they are primary participants in the mapping of this area (and therefore expose the research gaps that remain to be filled).

Matthew A. Henry in particular covers some of the same topics that feature in this thesis, such as the *Simpsons* creatives' issues with the Fox News Network over representation (which is covered in **Chapter 3** of *Craptacular Science*). He also touches (but only very lightly) upon the virality in and of the series. However, as one of his primary sources in this discussion is Douglas Rushkoff's *Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (below), this discussion leaves much to be desired with respect to academic rigour.

Non-Academic Sources

There are many sources in this thesis that fall under the non-academic banner in addition to the websites listed under the **Online Sources**

subsection above; most of the latter are subjects of the thesis rather than texts that contribute to the theoretical practice or analyses throughout this thesis. Conversely, this section includes books, news articles, and (a very few select) blog entries and other pieces of amateur journalism that provide insight or information supporting the arguments throughout the thesis. These sources' applications are always carefully contextualised, and their reliability is established in the discussions to which they contribute.

Newspapers and Other Publications

As *The Simpsons* frequently makes mainstream headlines, and since mainstream news sources can report relevant stories much more quickly than most academic resources (such as budgetary decisions made by Fox that may harken the series' imminent end, or the unexpected departure—and equally sudden return—of a key voice cast member), non-academic sources play a critical role in this thesis. These online news sources also provide first-hand interviews with *Simpsons* creatives which, as the present author was unable to secure an interview with a member of the creative team to inform this thesis, are indispensible.

Many of the online news sources included herein are simply online versions of pieces authored for established and reputable newspapers. One such newspaper, whose pieces inform much of the analyses of *The Simpsons*'s earliest years (particularly with respect to merchandising revenues, ventures and misadventures), is *The Los Angeles Times*. Owing to Hollywood's geographical location, *The L.A. Times* presents a large number of reports on film and television industry events and incidents. Thus, many articles about *The Simpsons* have been published herein. Articles from *The L.A. Times* that feature significantly in this thesis include Associated

Press pieces on Bart T-shirt bootleggers (and the legal action Fox took against them), several pieces on the series's success and its effect on other networks' ratings and schedules, and pieces covering legal action taken by Tracey Ullman in light of the series' merchandising success. *The L.A. Times* also contributes interviews and other information into the present day, including a revealing interviews with Al Jean and Matt Groening to coincide with the series' 500th episode.

The discussions in the thesis on these events are also supplemented with corroborative news articles from other sources, including *Variety* (an industry magazine whose interviews with creatives, provision of ratings and publication of financial statistics are invaluable to this thesis, particularly in **Chapter 1**), *Rolling Stone* magazine (which, along with *The L.A. Times*, also provides helpful information on *Star Wars* franchise merchandising practices, as well as pieces on *TSTO* developments), *The Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The New York Times*, and other high-profile, national newspapers. This group also includes a few local newspapers, such as *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, whose information was used almost exclusively in the **Chapter 1** discussion on bootleg Bart T-shirts.

Internet-based News Sources

Some sites that are based either exclusively or mostly online provide reliable news from which important details about the series can be gleaned. In particular, several of these sources feature interviews with *Simpsons* creatives. One of the sources in this category that features most prominently in the thesis for precisely this reason is *Vulture*. Its detailed interviews with former and current writers and showrunners of both the series and *TSTO*, as well as early and exclusive reports on breaking news regarding the series,

provide official accounts (often from otherwise absent perspectives) on the franchise's most recent developments. *The A.V. Club* also had an early report on the FXX development, as well as two lengthy and insightful interviews with Matt Groening. Similarly, *Slate* offers an interview with well-respected former writer Bill Oakley, one of the most active creatives on *Simpsons* fan sites, in the context of an in-depth piece on *alt.tv.simpsons*.

VICE differs in that the interviews it contributes to the thesis provide important perspectives from people who have engaged with the franchise from afar. In particular, the key *VICE* pieces in this thesis are Patrick McGuire's article about Fox's timely legal action against a Canadian man whose website provided links to (unsanctioned) uploads of *Simpsons* episodes, which is a point of discussion in **Chapter 1**, as is Dave Schilling's interview with Leo of *BootlegBart.com*.

A Single (but Central) Court Case Transcript

The case of *Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation v. Nicholas Hernandez et al* marks a pivotal moment in Fox-fan relationship history, speaking volumes about the network's position on the value of their intellectual property. Fortunately, a complete transcript of the case including its full judgment was available online, and the case could be discussed in detail in Part 2, **Chapter 1**.

Books

News sources are, of course, not alone in this category; this list also includes the indispensable *Simpsons World: The Ultimate Episode Guide*, which features important and detailed factual information about each episode and the series as a whole up to the end of its 20th season, including original

airdates, episode titles and call numbers, exact quotes, specific references to other cultural sources, and lyrics to original *Simpsons* music. Other *Simpsons* auxiliary texts (ones that are meant to discuss the story world) that contribute to the discussions throughout the thesis are the *Simpsons* comic series (which was an overhaul of the now-defunct *Simpsons* magazine *Simpsons Illustrated*, which also features in *Craptacular Science*) and *Another Are We There Yet? Book: Matt Groening's* <u>The Simpsons</u> *Guide to Springfield*, which serves in this thesis as an example of cross-media storytelling.

The most critical non-academic title to this thesis is John Ortved's *The Simpsons: An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, which is a compilation of published and original interviews with subjects of every level of involvement with the series, from its development as a short on *The Tracey Ullman Show* to its success as a series in its 20th season at the time of the book's publication (2009).[13] The interviews herein are arranged in (more or less) chronological order, providing a coherent narrative of the series's evolution. In its provision of insight into the perspectives of the creatives—and, importantly, of fan site creators—Ortved's work proves to be as valuable to *Craptacular Science* as the commentaries on the series DVDs.

The Simpsons: An Uncensored, Unauthorized History informs every key discussion in *Craptacular Science*, from the early development of the Fox network, to the lucre of *Simpsons* merchandising and Simpsonmania, to the Scully Era, to the harassment of fans by the network, to the Jean Era. While interviews comprise the bulk of *An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, the book does include some insightful contextualisation and analysis by the author himself. Ortved's work provides an all-encompassing, first-hand account of *The Simpsons* from the producers'

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[13] The book was published under the title *Simpsons Confidential* in the United States.

perspective, which is an indispensible tool for several key analyses throughout *Craptacular Science*.

Chris Turner's *Planet Simpson* is another non-academic monograph that examines the series from several perspectives. This title is richer in the author's own analysis that Ortved's work, and without citations to support the statements made and conclusions drawn throughout the book, Turner's analysis is not as reliable as Ortved's. Nevertheless, Turner's book provides a few key fan perspectives and interview excerpts to *Craptacular Science*.

Douglas Rushkoff's monograph *Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* provides intriguing analyses of several television programmes as well as *The Simpsons* (including other animated series such as *Ren and Stimpy*), but, like Turner's piece, does not offer much to the discourse beyond the author's own opinion. It is therefore only included as part of this thesis for a very insightful interview Rushkoff held with Al Jean and then-*Simpsons* writer Mike Reiss, in which the creatives address the virality of the series directly. Unlike Limor Shifman, Rushkoff does not differentiate between memetic and viral content; he uses the terms interchangeably throughout this work.

Daniel M. Kimmel's history of the Fox network in *The Fourth Network: How Fox Broke the Rules and Reinvented Television* relies on interviews to fill in the crucial details about the network that spawned *The Simpsons* that Ortved was unable to provide for Part 2, **Chapter 1** above.

As the power struggle between the fans and the network is a prominent one, and as it is rooted in contentions over of *Simpsons* memetic intellectual property, it is prudent to open *Craptacular Science*'s case study with a brief history of *The Simpsons*, and the network that brought it to the world.

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