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TISHA TURK

(University of Minnesota, Morris)

Metalepsis in Fan Vids and Fan Fiction

In the decades since Gérard Genette coined the term, narrative metalepsis has generally been understood as a merging of diegetic levels, a narrative phenomenon that destabilizes, however provisionally, the distinction between reality and fiction. As discussed by Genette, this formulation assumes a certain degree of stability outside the text itself: narratees may become narrators and vice versa, but authors remain authors and readers remain readers.¹ In the context of novels and films, such an assumption is not unreasonable. But with the advent of what has been called ‘participatory’ or ‘read/write culture’ (Jenkins 1992; Lessig 2004), in which audiences become authors and textual boundaries become increasingly porous, we must consider how both the nature and the effects of metalepsis may be affected by these changes.

In this article, I will discuss metalepsis in fan vids and fan fiction, two major narrative genres of fan work in media fandom. Broadly speaking, fan works include the fiction, art, videos, songs, mix tapes, podcasts, critical commentaries, and community infrastructures (such as forums and archives) produced by and for fans of particular TV shows and films.² These fan works are both texts in their own right and supplements (in the

¹ “Narrator” and “narratee” designate intratextual roles or constructs: within the world of the narrative, the narrator is the storyteller, and the narratee is the one to whom the story is told. “Author” and “reader” indicate extratextual individuals, flesh-and-blood people in the real world: the author creates the narrative itself (including both narrator and narratee), and the reader—or, following Rabinowitz (1987) and Phelan (1996), the “actual audience”—reads that narrative. See also Chatman (1978: 151) for a diagram of the communicative structure of narrative.

² Following Busse and Hellekson (2006) and Coppa (2006a), I am focusing here on U.S.- and U.K.-centric media fandom, as distinct from “science fiction, comics, anime/manga/yaoi, music, soap opera, and literary fandoms” (Coppa 2006a: 42), to say nothing of, for example, video game or sports fandoms. Such a distinction is inevitably somewhat arbitrary; there has always been considerable overlap between science fiction fans and media fans, and many fans currently reading and writing in media fandom also write or have written in comics fandom or music fandom (sometimes called *bandom*). However, these fandoms, though related to media fandom, do have their own histories and traditions, as well as (in some cases) different cultural reference points; the communities cannot simply be conflated.

Derridean sense) to the original source material: fan works supplement texts that are already complete, but always with the shadow meaning, the possibility, of adding *in order to* complete.³ The creators and consumers of fan works expand the terms of audience engagement with the source texts they transform; they create the context for new variations of metalepsis in popular culture.

Unlike many forms of what we now call user-generated content, fan works are not new; they have been around for decades. They are compelling and useful subjects of study in part because fandom has been, as Henry Jenkins argues, “the experimental prototype, the testing ground for the way media and culture industries are going to operate in the future” (Jenkins 2007: 361). If Genette’s original theory cannot entirely account for metaleptic effects within increasingly participatory cultures, fan works offer a series of sites for examining where and how that theory might require modification.

Fan fiction and fan vids

Of the two genres I will examine, fan fiction is better known outside fandom and more often discussed both in mainstream media articles and in academic scholarship. The concept of fan fiction is fairly easily grasped: fans of a particular source text write stories set in and/or featuring characters from that text’s fictional world, usually in order to explore the emotions, motivations, and inner lives of familiar characters; to examine, extend, or create relationships between characters; or to put those characters in new situations.⁴ These stories have been widely circulated within fan communities for decades, first in letters and zines and more recently via the Internet. Fan fiction is thus ‘popular’ in two respects: it engages with popular narratives and it is itself widely read.

Fan vids, even though they also engage with popular narratives, are less widely known and therefore merit additional explanation. Fan-made song videos, known within media fan communities simply as vids, are short videos integrating repurposed media images with repurposed music. The creators, called vidders, seek out or happen upon songs that fit with

³ “The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence. [...] But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void” (Derrida 1976: 144–45). For more on fan fiction as supplement, see Coppa (2006b) and Derecho (2006).

⁴ Although the term “fan fiction” has been used to describe a broad range of intertextual works, I am using it here to refer specifically to amateur, noncommercial works. For a more detailed history of fan fiction and particularly the varying definitions and limits of the term proposed by both fans and scholars, see Derecho (2006).

their vision of a television show or movie; clip scenes or moments from that show or movie that correspond to elements of the song's lyrics and music; edit and arrange those clips; and synthesize these audio and visual elements into an original creation that interprets, celebrates, or critiques the original source. Vids therefore superficially resemble MTV-style music videos in that they require viewers to process a combination of images, music, and (usually) lyrics. However, as Francesca Coppa explains, the relationship between audio and visual elements is actually quite different: in a commercial video, "footage is created to promote and popularize a piece of music," whereas "fannish vidders use music in order to comment on or analyze a set of preexisting visuals, to stage a reading, or occasionally to use the footage to tell new stories" (2008: 1.1). In a vid, "music is used as an interpretive lens to help the viewer to see the source text differently" (2008:1.1): the song helps guide viewers' understanding of the images, illuminating or complicating what is seen.

When Henry Jenkins wrote *Textual Poachers* (1992)—for many years the only published academic scholarship on fans and fandom to discuss vids—vids were almost entirely inaccessible to people not already involved in fan communities. Until recently, vidding has been an underground and highly insular cultural phenomenon, in part because to date it has been practiced almost exclusively by women. Vidding began in 1975, when Kandy Fong put together a slide show setting *Star Trek* stills to music (Coppa 2008: 1.4, 3.1–3.3); during the 1980s and 1990s, a relatively small number of women, often working together and pooling resources, produced vids using two VCRs and distributed them at conventions or by mail.⁵ In order to watch vids, and especially to get one's own copies of vids, one had to know where to go or whom to contact: fans were most likely to see vids for the first time at a convention or in the home of a fellow fan who already possessed vid collections on tape. As non-linear editing software became more widely available to and affordable for the home computer user, and as more film and TV source texts were released in DVD format, vidding began to go digital; with the advent of widespread broadband Internet access, digital vids became easier to share with fellow fans, either by posting them to vidder-owned websites, by distribut-

⁵ Anime music videos, or AMVs, emerged out of the particular context of anime fandom some years later than live-action vids and are therefore different from vids in ways that go beyond merely using different source material. Among these differences: although there are many popular and influential female AMV creators, the AMV-making community has been dominated by men. While there has been considerable mutual influence and cross-pollination between AMVs and live-action vids in recent years, the two communities and their respective traditions and aesthetics cannot be treated as identical. Much of my argument here may in fact be applicable to AMVs, but it is grounded in experience with and analysis of live-action vids.

ing them via file-sharing networks or services, or, more recently, by posting streaming versions to hosting sites such as YouTube. It is now possible for fans not already in the know to find vids, as well as information and advice about how to make vids. Because of this increasing accessibility, vids are found and made by more and younger fans, and they are becoming increasingly visible to viewers outside their original audiences, including non-fans. Vids not only comment on popular or cult TV series and films but are increasingly popular in their own right; as Jenkins has observed, “there is a public interested in seeing amateur-made work almost without regard to its origins or genre” (2006), and vids, like other forms of remix video, have been one focus of this interest. In addition, as we shall see in the next section, vids self-reflexively engage with popular mechanisms of (fannish) audience response.

Textual boundaries

Genette’s now-familiar definition of narrative metalepsis (1972/1980: 234–37) explains the phenomenon as a transgression of the boundary between narrative levels or narrative worlds; the transgressed boundary is that between, for example, diegesis and hypodiegesis (story and embedded story) or diegesis and extradiegesis (story and discourse). These narrative levels are, by definition, intratextual; reality—which includes the flesh-and-blood author and reader—is extratextual. When discussing the author-narrators M. de Renoncourt and Robinson Crusoe, Genette emphasizes that “[n]either Prévost nor Defoe enters the space of our inquiry”; he is interested in “the narrating instance, not the literary instance” (1972/1980: 229), and insists that “we shall not confound extradiegetic with real historical existence” (1972/1980: 230).

Further discussions by other scholars have maintained this emphasis on intratextuality. As Monika Fludernik puts it in her discussion of Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*, “the discourse level and story level in an authorial narrative (heterodiegetic narrative with zero focalization) seem to merge ontologically or existentially (the narrator and narratee seem to have entered the storyworld at least in imagination if not in real fact)” (2003: 382). Werner Wolf defines metalepsis as “a usually intentional paradoxical transgression of, or confusion between, (onto)logically distinct (sub)worlds and/or levels that exist, or are referred to, within representations of possible worlds” (2005: 91; emphasized in the original); Wolf is thus even more explicit than Genette about the diegetic boundaries of metalepsis, the slippage between *representations of* worlds. Metalepsis, in this view, requires a text within a text; it requires a frame story, a representa-

tion of a real world, that features the rhetorical act of storytelling, whether that rhetorical act takes up a good part of the narrative, as in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, or emerges in the occasional "narrative pause," as in Balzac's *La Vieille Fille* (Genette 1972/1980: 100–101). Because metaleptic transgression, so defined, is contained within the borders of the text, the boundary that is crossed is not the boundary between the actual world and a fictional world but a fictional "real world" as represented on the page or screen and another narrative level or world within that "real world."

Such a definition rests on two assumptions. The first assumption is that the borders of the text are stable, fixed, and agreed upon by authors and readers. Debra Malina has observed as much: "the rhetorical effects of metalepsis seem to rely on a firm border between the [diegetic reader] and the [extratextual reader]" (2002: 9). Even the transformative effect, which "builds upon a dissolution of these distinctions among levels of readers," relies upon this border, as the distinction cannot be felt to have dissolved unless it was felt to be there in the first place. Members of the audience may actively negotiate rather than passively absorb meaning (see Hall 1991), but they remain outside the text; their interpretations do not change the text itself. The second assumption is that the author, and specifically the intratextual narrator in the role of author's proxy, controls the metalepsis. If, as Genette describes it, "the narrator pretends to enter (with or without his reader) into the diegetic universe" (1972/1980: 101n.33), then the narrator is the significant force in the metaleptic event, the one who is free to pretend or refrain from pretending, and the reader is subject to the narrator's whim. Malina makes the reader's helplessness even more clear: "each of these authors plays a distinct game with readers, toying in different ways with readers' roles and positions" (2002: 2).

These assumptions make sense in discussions of traditional media and established genres such as literature, films, and comics, which are generally understood as self-contained texts with impermeable borders. But they do not necessarily make sense for fan works, which redefine both the boundaries of texts and the relationships between creators and audiences. If metalepsis is "the transgression of the boundary between the real world and the fictional world," the traditional understanding of the term is always intratextual in that the "real" world is in fact fictional: diegesis and hypodiegesis are both contained within the borders of the text. As we shall see, the metalepses in fan fiction and fan vids are extratextual: they employ the actual real world, not just a representation of it.

Fan works also complicate the question of what the primary diegesis is: is it the source text, the movie or television series in which the characters originate? Or is it the fan work itself? In fact, it is in some ways, and potentially simultaneously, *both*. As Coppa has argued, "the existence of

fan fiction postulates that characters [...] are neither constructed nor owned, but have [...] a life of their own not dependent on any original ‘truth’ or ‘source’” (2006b: 230), and yet that source—the media text on which a given story is based—still exerts influence on fan works, even though it cannot define them: it acts as a sort of center of textual gravity around which a given fan work orbits more or less distantly and elliptically. These complicated relationships among texts enable an unusually diffuse set of metaleptic effects.

For fans who produce and consume fan works, the boundaries of the source text’s fictional world are not fixed; rather, they are infinitely expandable. Fans’ tendency to treat source texts as open rather than closed is encouraged by the ways in which media fandom is organized around, though not limited to, serial television. As Bertha Chin notes, narrative television has a special “longevity” that film typically lacks; “the character and plot development in a TV show, which can continue over years,” make it “easier for fans to become emotionally attached to the show’s characters and their relationships” (2007: 215). Because these characters and relationships are precisely the narrative elements that tend to interest viewers and fan fiction writers, fan works are most often based either on television sources or on movie series and franchises with serial elements: *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Harry Potter* series, Hollywood versions of superhero comics, and so on. Katrina Busse and Karen Hellekson (2006) have observed that the appeal of serial productions can be understood in terms of Roland Barthes’s distinction between readerly and writerly texts. Barthes defines readerly texts as mere “products” (1970/1974: 5) that “can be read, but not written,” that are “characterized by the pitiless divorce [...] between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader,” and that enforce upon the reader “a kind of idleness” (1970/1974: 4). Barthes values instead the writerly text, in which “the goal [...] is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (1970/1974: 4). Busse and Hellekson argue that, intentionally or not, “serial production is the ultimate writerly text” (2006: 6): fans gravitate towards these writerly texts and expand them still further with their own contributions.

A particular story or vid is therefore *both* an independent narrative *and* one component of a larger—often much larger—collective narrative. Busse and Hellekson elaborate:

Fan academics have begun to think of the entirety of fan fiction in a given fanish universe as a work in progress. This fantext, the entirety of stories and critical commentary written in a fandom (or even in a pairing or genre), offers an ever-growing, ever-expanding version of the characters. These multitudes of interpretations of characters and canon scenes are often contradictory yet complementary to each other and the source text. Nevertheless, working with and

against one another, this multitude of stories creates a larger whole of understanding a given universe. This canvas of variations is a work in progress insofar as it remains open and is constantly increasing; every new addition changes the entirety of interpretations. [...] [T]he community of fans creates a communal (albeit contentious and contradictory) interpretation in which a large number of potential meanings, directions, and outcomes co-reside. (2006: 7)

For fans, the processes of fan participation and creation are important parts of the fantext; what matters is not just the extension of the universe (commercial media tie-in novels may do similar work) but the fact that the fan community, collectively, is doing the extending. In this context, the source text itself becomes, as Mafalda Stasi says of fan fiction, “a node in a web, a part of an often complex intertextual sequence” (2006: 119). Outside fandom, a film or TV show is typically perceived as an independent self-contained narrative. Within fandom, however, it is also part of a larger textual whole that includes fan contributions, or at least the possibility of fan contributions. The source text may well be treated as a privileged piece of that larger textual whole—fans use the term “canon” to refer to events represented in the show—but for fans it is nevertheless only *one* piece. It is possible, of course, for people who consider themselves media fans to appreciate a particular film or television series without producing or consuming fan works, but such fans often describe themselves as “not fannish” about the text in question, implying that to be fannish is, by definition, to desire communal exploration or expansion of a given text.

This dedication to communal exploration and expansion of shared canon means that the boundary between canon and fantext is seldom marked within the text itself. Unlike, for example, the fantasy novels discussed by Klimek (this volume), in which the line between diegesis and hypodiegesis is clear because the “real” world and the fictional world are not the same, the premise of most fan work is that the fictional world of the story or vid *is* the same as the fictional world of the original text, or rather the fan author’s interpretation of that world; part of the pleasure of the text comes from treating these fictional worlds as contiguous or overlapping. At the same time, fans consuming fan works are perfectly well aware that there is in fact a boundary between the original text and the fantext. Especially in the case of fan works based on TV or film, that boundary is clearly marked by genre and medium as well as by commercial context: no one is likely to confuse a written story or a music video with a movie or an episode of TV, or to confuse a fan-made text with a professionally-produced one. The boundary between the two worlds is therefore extratextual rather than intratextual; it is understood by the audience rather than supplied by the author. And if part of the pleasure of the text comes from ignoring the boundaries between canon and fan works,

another part comes precisely from acknowledging those boundaries, from knowing that a fan work was made by a fellow fan.

Because these boundaries are typically extratextual rather than intratextual, metaleptic transgressions may take a different form in fan works than in conventional texts. Specifically, while an individual fan narrative, like any other narrative, may be intratextually metaleptic in any of the ways described by Genette, it is also and always what we might call extratextually metaleptic. The most significant boundary that is crossed in fan works is not the border of the fictional world but the border of the text itself, the boundary that separates creator and flesh-and-blood (as opposed to implied or authorial) audience: the extratextual reader or viewer inserts herself into the discourse level and becomes the narrator, the director. In the course of making a vid or writing a story, an individual fan transforms herself from being solely an audience member to being also (not instead) the creator or narrator of a related portion of the fantext. If conventional metalepsis appears to destabilize the boundary between reality and fiction, fan works effectively destabilize the boundary between audience and creator. Fan works, then, are always metaleptic in the sense that they represent the imposition of extradiegetic desires upon the fictional world and the transformation of a text in the service of those desires.

This exercise of creative agency constitutes a significant variation on audience behavior as imagined by Genette. Genette's formulation of metalepsis assumes readers who do what they're told, who are moved around (or left behind) at the narrator's discretion; fan works demonstrate that readers do not necessarily behave the way that narrators or creators want them to, and their resistance may take the form not of rejecting the text but of re-making it. In fan works, the audience takes over. As Jenkins puts it, "[f]andom blurs any clear-cut distinction between media producer and media spectator, since any spectator may potentially participate in the creation of new artworks" (1992: 246–47). The audience and the actual author (as opposed to the author-narrator) are supposed to stay outside the text; fans go inside it. This remarkably literal ontological metalepsis does not necessarily leave visible textual traces of the type we might find in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* or in the postmodernist fiction discussed by Brian McHale (1987: 119–21); instead, the vid or story itself *is* the trace of the interference.

Metalepsis in vids: "I Put You There"

Vids most often illustrate characters' thoughts and emotions, comment on their motivations, or chronicle their relationships. In doing so, a vid may

tell a version of the story very similar to that in the original source, or it may read the original story against the grain (as did, for example, the earliest vids, which made the case that Kirk and Spock of *Star Trek* were romantically involved with each other). In a sense, then, a vid combines at least two stories: the story contained within the original source text, and the story of the vidder's response to and transformation of that text at the level of narration. Whether we understand a visual text's narration as the product of a particular narrative agent (Chatman 1990: 127–31) or as “the organization of a set of cues for the construction of a story” (Bordwell 1985: 62), the narration itself consists of images and sounds that are subject to manipulation, substitution, and recombination. A vidder decides which camera angles to keep or discard, the duration of each clip, and the order in which those clips should be presented; and of course she also adds a soundtrack, usually a song that provides a voice for a character or in some cases for the vidder herself. From this point of view, a vid can also be understood as “a visual essay that stages an argument” (Coppa 2008: 1.1): it represents a vidder's collection of evidence for a particular interpretation of a visual text and her attempt, whether implicit or explicit, to persuade the vidwatcher to share that interpretation.

In one small but well-established subgenre of vids, known within the community as *metavids*, vidders tell stories or make arguments not about a particular source text but about fans, fandom, or fannish activities; these vids often have as much in common with the significant quantities of fan-generated written analysis and essays as they do with more common genres of vids such as character studies or relationship vids. Laura Shapiro and LithiumDoll's *metavid* “I Put You There” (2006) makes its argument through a sustained instance of what Fludernik (2003) calls ontological metalepsis, including both narratorial and lectorial metalepses; these intratextual metalepses are used to highlight the extratextually metaleptic nature of fan creations. Metalepsis, in this instance, not only structures the vid's narrative but enables the vidders' commentary on the nature of fan works and, more generally, of fannish investment in media texts.

In “I Put You There,” ostensibly a vid about the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the vidders create an original animated fangirl character and endow her with subjectivity by positioning her as the narrator/singer of the song used in the vid (Mary Schmary's “I Put You There”). The vid's tagline, with its reference to “every fangirl,” suggests this orientation even before we begin watching, and the first line confirms it: “This is a song about me,” we hear, and the corresponding image of the animated fangirl establishes that the real center of the vid will be *this* character and

not a character from *Buffy*.⁶ For audiences familiar with vids and especially metavid, the narrating fangirl is immediately identifiable as the point of the vid rather than a distraction from the “real” story. In another vid, she would be out of place both diegetically and (because she is animated) aesthetically; in a metavid, however, she becomes part of a self-conscious narrative strategy.

The vidder-created fangirl character watches *Buffy* and has a crush on the character Giles, who is positioned as the song’s narratee, the “you.” The nature of the fangirl’s interest is signaled by the picture of Giles hanging on her wall and the lipstick marks that appear on her TV screen as it displays a clip of Giles looking especially dashing in a tuxedo and smiling at the camera. The vid tells the story of the fangirl’s daily life: not only watching Giles on her television screen but thinking about him as she makes breakfast, seeing his face in the banana slices she adds to her cereal, imagining the two of them talking on the phone. The narrator knows that Giles isn’t “real”; “in real life, you’re somebody else,” she acknowledges, as the screen bursts with images of actor Anthony Stewart Head in other roles and from magazine photo shoots. Yet she is still jealous of Giles’s interactions with female characters, as we see when she defaces an image of Jenny Calendar, his love interest on *Buffy*, with graffiti scribbles. The narrator is also well aware that her relationship with a fictional character cannot be mutual: “You don’t talk to me, you don’t hear me / you don’t smell me and you don’t see me,” she sings, as the vid superimposes animated images of her actions—calling on the phone, playing the guitar, offering flowers, and waving her arms—on clips of Giles failing, inevitably, to respond. She is outside the text, and he is inside; the textual boundary, it seems, cannot be breached.

But in fact, as we are reminded in the next line, the textual boundary has *already* been breached: “You’re in this here song with me.” The song’s major trope—that the beloved can be brought into contact with the narrator/lover through the medium of the song itself—is literalized in the vid’s metalepsis. The visuals reinforce this impression of boundary collapse, showing the fangirl drawing a cage to hold Giles and policing it with her pencil. Through the fantasies depicted in the vid, she has already brought Giles out of the world of *Buffy* and integrated him into her own world (lectorial metalepsis); by the end of the vid, she is actually drawing herself into the narrative of *Buffy* (narratorial metalepsis). “Here you are with me in my song,” she sings, and we see her animated hand drawing over a clip

⁶ For a discussion of autodiegetic narration in popular music, see David Ben-Merre’s contribution to this volume.

from the show, replacing Buffy's arm with her own so that the fangirl, not Buffy, is holding Giles's hand.

The narrator cannot affect the diegesis of the original source text; we see several more clips from *Buffy* play out unaffected by her attempts to make Giles notice her, for though she offers pie and signals in semaphore, nothing gets through to him. But in the final clip of the vid, the narrator asserts her agency: "You're in this here song with me, 'cause *I put you there.*" Once again she draws herself into the frame, and this time she draws herself so that she and Giles are kissing. The vid constitutes a hybrid space within which the narrating fangirl can literally redraw the boundaries of textual worlds: once the narrator begins using her pencil, Giles and the narrator can coexist, hold hands, even kiss. The fangirl character has created a new narrative that allows her to direct the action and get what she wants. This creation is the paradigm for all fan works: the metalepsis within the vid represents the metaleptic creative practices of extratextual real-world fans.

Some of the vid's metaleptic transgressions are familiar, notably the dissolution of the boundary between fictional world and (equally fictional) animated "real world"; these transgressions are the source of much of the vid's humor. But in other ways the vid is significantly different from many if not most other instances of metalepsis. First, the fictional world and "real world," whose boundaries are collapsed, originate in different texts (*Buffy* and the vid itself, respectively), even different media (live action and animation), and are imagined and created by different authors. Second, the collapse of the boundary between these worlds is engineered not by the writers or directors of the original TV fictional world but by two of its viewers. The vidwatcher is therefore presented with multiple boundaries and transgressions: not just the narrative boundary between diegetic levels or even narrative and reality but the boundaries between commercial and noncommercial, creator and consumer.

Although the vid focuses on a single show (*Buffy*) and character (Giles), it is clearly intended—and has been received by many fannish viewers—as a universal rather than a specific story; it represents "a kind of love every fangirl knows," as Laura Shapiro (2006) writes in her description of the vid. It might be tempting, especially for a non-fannish viewer, to conflate the narrating fangirl with the vidders, just as a naïve reader might conflate Robinson Crusoe with Daniel Defoe, but such a conflation misses the point of the vid. For the vid to work, the narrator must be identified not with the vidders but with the audience: we are all that fangirl, and she is all of us. The vid's diegesis is an analogue of or stand-in for the extratextual real world: the fangirl, like the vid's invoked audience, watches *Buffy*, and she is clearly signaled as a paradigmatic fan both on her

tombstone, which names her simply as “fangirl,” and via her t-shirt, which features the logo of LiveJournal, a social blogging platform popular among members of media fandom. Like many fans, she spends a good deal of time thinking about the characters in the shows she watches, and she collects images of the actor who plays a favorite character. The vid’s authorial audience is constructed as doing, if not these *exact* things, these *kinds* of things; a fannish viewer recognizes them as activities in which fans, collectively, engage, even if they aren’t activities that she herself undertakes, even if *Buffy* isn’t a show that she herself watches.

And, most importantly for the vid, the narrating fangirl represents fangirls more generally because she transgresses the textual boundary and thus symbolizes our own transgressions of that boundary. The song tells a story of metalepsis; the visuals make that story a particular story; that particular story is a metonym for a more general story, the story of fans’ fantasy and creativity: fans make the stories they want to see. The vidders use metalepsis to dramatize the transformation of the narrating fangirl from spectator to author—or rather her expansion of her own role to include authoring *as well as* viewing, since fan authors typically continue not only to watch the shows with which they engage (often long after those shows are off the air) but to consume fan works created by fellow fans. Over the course of the vid, the narrator begins to use her pencil—to draw, to write, even, metaphorically, to vid, as indicated by the scribbling sounds that accompany the vid’s opening credits.

Many of the vidwatchers who commented on Laura Shapiro’s LiveJournal post announcing the vid (Shapiro 2006) speak directly to these issues of community, universality, and metacommentary, describing the vid as “insanely apt,” “so, so true,” or “totally relevant to fangirl nation at large.” A selection of other comments suggests the widespread community understanding of the vidders’ goals: “‘I Put You There,’ of course, perfectly encapsulates the fangirl mind”; “I’m not a Buffy fan, but we all [intuitively understand] the sentiments in this vid”; “The next time someone asks me about fandom and what it is, I am going to show them your vid”; “This is such a perfect, funny, and entirely joyous expression of who I am. Who we all are” (Shapiro 2006). The vid can thus be understood as a specific instance of metalepsis that has resonated with vidders, vidwatchers, and the larger fannish community in part because it literalizes the ways in which *all* vids (and fan fiction, and fan art) are to some degree metaleptic: they enable viewers to intervene in the story, to have their way with the narrative.

“I Put You There” is notable in part because it is unusual: most vids are *not* ontologically metaleptic in the ways described by Genette, and certainly they are not structured around that metalepsis. Fan creators typi-

cally don't write (or draw) themselves or their communities into their narratives; their presence is felt in the shape of the fan work itself, the visual and textual traces of their narrative desires, the ways in which those desires have prompted them to retell a story, reconfigure or reinvent an existing narrative. But the vid is also notable for what it tells us about vids, and by extension about fan works more generally. The vid suggests that vids and fan fiction are the hybrid space of "I Put You There" writ large; they are the points where source text and audience desires interface. The vid acknowledges—even thematizes—the fact that Giles and the fangirl are on different diegetic levels, and the absurdity of their romance is part of why the vid is so funny: nobody really believes that a media fan could have a physical relationship with a fictional character. But the vid also registers the reality of fans' emotional response to the texts and characters we love, our investment in these stories, our urge to affect them, control them, remake them.⁷

Metalepsis in fan fiction: the Mary Sue

Like vids, fan fictions are broadly metaleptic in the sense that their very existence is the textual trace of spectators immersing themselves in a fictional world, turning themselves into creators in order to transform existing stories. Coppa has argued that fan fiction is rooted in dramatic or performative rather than narrative impulses: it "directs bodies in space" (2006b: 235), providing a script—or, rather, many scripts—for familiar bodies to perform. The reader stages these performances in her own head, drawing on her "memory of [the actors'] physicality" (2006b: 236). Through fan fiction, then, fans transform themselves from audience members into writers and directors in order to (re)write or (re)direct a story in accordance with their own vision. Once again, the audience takes control of the discourse: writers of fan fiction introduce their own interpretations and desires (including, in some cases, their sexual desires) into a shared narrative; because of the change in medium, readers of fan fiction must be active participants in the process of investing these stories with meaning.

But fan fictions are in many ways more flexible than vids, because they depend far less on what we have actually seen on screen; the ability to

⁷ "I Put You There" is thus an excellent example of Richard Walsh's model of the rhetoric of fictionality, in which "participation in, and consciousness of, the game of fictive discourse" are not incommensurable (2007: 172); the narrating fangirl, and by extension the vidders and the audience, engage in and are aware of the complexities of this game as both consumers and creators of fan works.

extend the breadth and/or depth of the source story is one of the primary affordances of fan fiction. Despite technical advances in editing and effects software that enable vidders to manipulate images in increasingly sophisticated ways, most vidders still rely largely on selecting, juxtaposing, and recontextualizing images and clips from the show itself, whereas fan fiction writers routinely extrapolate from what was seen on screen, offer possibilities for what happened offscreen, introduce new characters—and, of course, produce rhetorically or ontologically metaleptic effects with relative ease.

Most media fans would not use or recognize the term “metalepsis,” but they are familiar with the concept of crossing diegetic or textual boundaries. The subgenre of fan fiction known as the crossover, in which characters from two or more different media sources are brought together in a single story, has existed at least since 1979 (Coppa 2006a: 52) and continues to be widely practiced; crossovers present a straightforward example of horizontal metalepsis, directed and stage-managed by the audience-turned-author. (Crossover vids exist as well, though it is of course more difficult in vids than in fiction to create the illusion that characters from different shows are interacting with each other.) But I focus here on a different type of metaleptic fan fiction, in which fan-created characters added to the source text’s fictional world are perceived by readers as inappropriate impositions on or distortions of the story, and in some cases even as self-insertions by the fan author. Readers use the term “Mary Sue” to refer to such a character, and the name has distinctly derogatory connotations; authors who are perceived as writing these characters are frequently mocked.

As explained by Joan Verba (1996), the term “Mary Sue” originated in 1973 with Paula Smith’s “A Trekkie’s Tale,” a *Star Trek* story satirizing a phenomenon that was already well-known to readers of fan fiction. The term signaled a character who “has one or more of the following elements: (1) a young—or ‘youngest’—officer in Starfleet, who is (2) adored by everyone on the ship, especially Kirk, Spock, and McCoy, (3) has extraordinary abilities, (4) wins extraordinary honors, and sometimes (5) dies a tragic or heroic death, after which she is mourned by everyone on the ship” (Verba 1996: 15)—or, to extrapolate beyond *Star Trek*, a young female character,⁸ invented by the author, who is the focal point of the story despite not appearing in the source text, who is possessed of special abilities or physical characteristics, who is practically perfect in every way, and

⁸ Although there are occasional instances of the male Mary Sue, sometimes referred to as “Marty Stu” or “Gary Stu,” these instances are much less common and are usually discussed by fans only as adjuncts to the more pervasive Mary Sue phenomenon.

who is therefore beloved by the protagonists as soon as they are lucky enough to encounter her.

The popular meaning of the term, however, has changed in the decades since Smith's story. Keidra Chaney and Raizel Liebler offer a succinct summary of the current connotation: a Mary Sue "tends to bear an uncanny resemblance to her creator—only stronger, wittier, sexier, friendlier, and without the glasses and bad skin" (2006: 52); her hobbies and musical tastes, for example, may be identical to those of the author. By extension, many fans assume that any fan-created female character whom they consider unrealistically strong, smart, or appealing must be a Mary Sue.⁹ And, as Catherine Driscoll explains, "the Mary Sue is generally associated with girl writers who have trouble distancing themselves from the source text enough to write about it rather than write themselves into it" (2006: 90). The presence of a (suspected) self-insertion, far from being a sign of the formal innovation and experimentation that is presumed to distinguish high culture from popular culture, is most often viewed as a sign of artistic weakness and possibly of immaturity or narcissism on the part of the author. It is worth noting that ultimately the reader, not the author, defines a Mary Sue: the character is *perceived* as an eruption of the writer—her priorities, her desires, possibly even her self—within the fictional world.

Ika Willis's reclamation of the Mary Sue figure is grounded in the political and personal possibilities inherent in the metaleptic crossing of textual boundaries. Willis offers examples from her own fiction, in which she inserts a character whom she "consciously intended [...] to be a Mary Sue" (2006: 169 n.9), and explains her reasons for doing so: "It is through writing fan fiction that a fan can, firstly, make space for her own desires in a text which may not at first sight provide the resources to sustain them; and, secondly, recirculate the reoriented text among other fans without attempting to close the text on the 'truth' of her reading" (2006: 155). Writing fan fiction, she argues, is "a way of making space [in the fantext] for my own subjectivity insofar as it is invested in and partially constituted by my investment" in the original text (2006: 163). Seen this way, the Mary Sue is "an expression of agency by female authors—creating female characters who embody everything that their writers see as good and desirable and making the story turn out just right" (Chaney and Liebler 2006: 54). Any fan fiction story represents the imposition of the writer's desires on

⁹ The tendency of some fans to label (and thus dismiss) any fan-created female character, and especially any "strong female heroine with an interesting life" (alara_r 2003), as a Mary Sue has been both documented by scholars (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992) and bemoaned by fans: "Can we not have a strong female character without her being labelled Mary Sue? [...] I mean really, what kind of female character are people supposed to write?!" (Lothy 2009).

the fictional world; the Mary Sue personifies those desires in a particular character.

One way of understanding the fan critique of the Mary Sue, then, is to see that critique as an objection to what we might call metaleptic excess: if the story itself enacts the author's desires, then a proxy for the author within the text is unnecessary; the Mary Sue is redundant in stories that are always already expressions of fan agency. Even a Mary Sue who is not literally a stand-in for the author is arguably metaleptic. In the broadest sense, we might say that *any* fan-created characters (usually called original characters, or OCs, to distinguish them from characters established by the source text) are metaleptic whether or not they are authorial self-insertions: they are fan additions both to the story and to the discourse—the storytelling strategy—of the fantext, elements introduced from outside the source text. And indeed, in some cases, fans' preference for reading about familiar characters prompts resistance to any fan-created character: if we wanted to read about other characters, the argument goes, we'd read professionally published fiction (Gobsmacked 2009, see comments).

In practice, however, many fan readers differentiate acceptable fan-created characters from Mary Sues. This differentiation can be understood in terms of illusionist and anti-illusionist metalepsis (see Fludernik 2003): some fan-created characters enhance the realist illusion of the story, giving the fictional world depth and plausibility, but a character who “overshadows the canonical cast” (alara_r 2003) or appears to be an authorial self-insertion destroys that illusion. For a reader who wishes to immerse herself in a particular fictional world through fan fiction, a metaleptic reminder of the extratextual world or the story's constructedness “produces an effect of strangeness” (Genette 1972/1980: 235) that is distracting or frustrating rather than pleasurable.

Anti-illusionist metalepsis is acceptable under certain circumstances, however, as we can see in the *NCIS* and *Due South* flashfic self-insertion challenges (malnpudl 2007; china_shop 2008). Fan fiction challenges provide story prompts for participating writers; in these instances, the prompt was to write oneself into a story based on the TV show in question. Many of the resulting stories are deliberately (and effectively) humorous; it seems that fan writers, like Genette himself, have observed that the effect of strangeness produced by metalepsis is often comic (1972/1980: 235). The responses to these challenges also demonstrate that, while Mary Sues are frequently regarded as self-insertions, self-insertions are not inherently Mary Sues. In fact, both challenges explicitly repudiate the idea of the Mary Sue: “[I]f you Mary Sue yourself as the romantic interest of one of the *NCIS* folks? We reserve the right to point and laugh” (malnpudl 2007). The stories work in part because the challenges establish special

parameters for both writing and reading: normal conventions are altered or suspended for the duration of the challenge—indeed, the suspension is part of the fun. In essence, then, the challenges provide a frame, a context, that temporarily transforms the challenge community into a special space not unlike the space that “I Put You There” establishes for itself.

Fan works and the metaleptic mode

Fludernik (2003) extends “the metaphors of metalepsis” to the critical discourse of narratology, but we might also say that the metaphors of metalepsis extend to the discourses of fandom. Because fan works are metaleptic at the level of the fantext but not necessarily at the level of narration, it is useful to think of these works, and even of fandom itself, as operating in what Fludernik, drawing on the work of Brian McHale (1987), calls the “metaleptic mode” (Fludernik 2003). McHale argues that both authors who love their characters and readers who are seduced by stories engage in relations that violate ontological boundaries (1987: 222); this love “characterizes not the fictional interactions *in* the text’s world, but rather the interactions *between* the text and its world on the one hand, and the reader and his or her world on the other” (1987: 227). As Fludernik observes, these interactions “[jump] the extradiegetic textual level” (2003: 392).

Fan works, as we have seen, also involve interactions between the spectator-turned-author and the text, interactions that, like those discussed by Fludernik, may be treated as cases of readerly immersion. Like McHale’s reader, the fan is seduced by the text, though what she desires may be not so much “the consummational effects of closure” (Fludernik 2003: 392) as the ongoing erotics of continuing the story, the opportunity to extend or adapt or analyze it and/or to read and watch the extensions and adaptations and analyses produced by fellow fans; she may immerse herself not only in the original show but in some subset of the fan works engaging it. Like McHale’s author, she falls in love with characters; in the case of the fan, these characters are not her own invention, but she makes them her own through her contributions to the emerging fantext: importing elements of shared media narratives into the extratextual world of her own creative impulses, using those elements as the basis for new narratives, sharing those new narratives.

For readers of fan fiction, immersion in the fantext requires not only engaging in the pretense that the fictional world of the source text is real (Fludernik 2003: 393), but also engaging in the pretense that the fictional world of the fan work is part of the fictional world of the source text

and/or that the characters in the fan work are contiguous with those of the source text. For vidwatchers, the immersion is perhaps less in the source itself than in a way of seeing: vidwatching requires the viewer to attempt to understand a particular vidder's interpretation of a source text, which the viewer may or may not share. For both readers and vidwatchers, immersion in the fantext depends on the ability to hold in one's head multiple competing and sometimes contradictory possibilities. As Coppa and Abigail Derecho have noted, fan fiction is characterized by repetition, the working-out of endless variations on the source text (Coppa 2006b: 236–38; Derecho 2006: 73–74). This insight applies to vids as well: watching vids based on a particular show or movie almost inevitably means seeing certain clips over and over again, but each time in a slightly different context, framed by different surrounding clips, seen through a different musical lens. To participate in the production and consumption of fan works is to be open to new discourse, to the possibility of literal re-vision: seeing the familiar in new ways.

Unlike the metaphoric transgressions defined by McHale, which affect only the individual authors and readers who engage in them, the transgressions represented by fan works can be, and indeed in most cases are meant to be, shared with fellow fans. Because a fandom is a community, or rather a series of interlinked and overlapping communities, it is not just the individual vidder or writer who participates in this metaleptic move; all fans are implicated by virtue of their imaginative work—the work of staging fan fiction and interpreting vids, of manipulating and extending the textual world. Genette locates the responsibility for metalepsis with authors; fan works show us that it can also be taken up by audiences.

The desire to immerse oneself in a text is nothing new; what is new is that more and more readers and viewers have decided to take control of that process, to appropriate and transform existing texts in order to facilitate a more complete and more satisfying immersion. The number of people participating in fannish activities and fannish readings has increased dramatically; creating and consuming fan works is no longer a fringe activity. As more and more audiences learn to treat texts as open-ended, metalepsis may no longer be “a rare, rather marginal phenomenon” (Fludernik 2003: 396). Participatory culture is inherently, if metaphorically, metaleptic; the transgressive impulse that it represents is being effectively mainstreamed. The move from read-only to read/write culture thus necessitates an expansion of our ideas about metalepsis, and indeed about narrative more generally.

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