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What Is It That Fanfiction Opposes?  
The Shared and Communal Features of *Firefly/Serenity* Fanfiction

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*Abstract:* The article challenges the models of resistance that are generally used as the primary way to understand the work of fandom. Instead, the article ponders the way in which the textual conventions and structures of fanfiction writing are connected with promoting and sustaining communality and maintains that fanfiction studies ought to put less emphasis on people-centred metaphors such as poachers and nomads. Significantly, as fannish activities such as fanfiction writing centre on texts, it is necessary that we analyse the processes of both producing and disseminating stories. The case study in the article is the fandom of *Firefly*, an American space western drama television series created by writer and director Joss Whedon. In addition to the devoted fan base, the case of *Firefly* is especially interesting due to the fact that the building of its fictional world and characters had barely got started when the show was cancelled, and the threads that had to be left hanging have actively been picked up by the fandom. Through the emphasis on the actual texts of fanfiction, the article also aims at casting light on why the genres of fantasy and science fiction seem to offer a more fertile ground for fanfiction writers than some other source texts.

*Keywords:* fanfiction, network culture, media fandom, science fiction, *Firefly*, *Serenity*

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Fanfiction is often seen as a democratic or liberating genre (e.g. Pugh). This premise has been used to underline various aspects of audience's freedom: for example, freedom to oppose certain interpretations deemed hegemonic and to break free of them, means to break down hierarchies between authors and readers and, on the whole, capacity to be an active player instead of being a passive receiver or consumer. One of the main reasons for an emphasis of this nature was the need of early scholarship to do away with the stereotype of a fan as an isolated "weirdo". Instead, the previously castigated category of fan was defended and rearticulated, and fans' role as active makers of meaning while talking about so-called ordinary entertainment highlighted. Another important factor in viewing fans as opposers or transgressors is the notion of textual poacher famously coined by Henry Jenkins, adapted from Michel de Certeau's work in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). In *Textual Poachers* (1992), the seminal text of fan studies, Jenkins argued that media fans are poachers, "readers who appropriate popular texts and *reread* them in a fashion that *serves different interests*, as spectators who *transform* the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture" (23; my emphases). As Jenkins's choices of words

clearly indicate, fanfiction writing, for example, can be seen as transgressing or subverting the source texts. Sara Gwenllian Jones (“Web Wars” 162) aptly notes that the figure of the “subversive fan” has become something of an orthodoxy for scholars to elevate fans to the status of modern-day Robin Hoods, busily snatching back “our” popular texts from the greedy global conglomerates who claim to own them.

As fan studies have expanded their scope, it has been increasingly recognised that the models of resistance are not the only way to understand the work of fandom.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Matt Hills has suggested that the concept of the textual poacher was strategic, “a rhetorical tailoring of fandom in order to act upon particular academic institutional spaces and agendas” (10). When it comes to analysing different features of fanfiction, the tailoring of this kind can have problematic repercussions. Juli J. Parrish notes in her recent article (4.10) that in the case of fan metaphors such as “poachers” what often gets highlighted is fans as people and, to some degree, the actions they take as fans. However, the creative processes in which those people engage are eclipsed – and, as I would like to add, so are the actual fan texts. Parrish herself does not look at a single fic, a work of fanfiction, in her article. Similarly, Bronwen Thomas argues that “close textual analysis is often denigrated on the basis that the identities and practices of fans cannot be abstracted from the sorts of texts they write, but must be analysed as socially situated practices and activities” (“What is Fanfiction” 2). In this article, I explore the ways how textual conventions and structures of fanfiction are connected to aims of sharing and promoting communality. I share my focus with both Parrish and Thomas, as I attend the processes involved in producing and disseminating stories instead of using solely people-centred metaphors such as poachers or nomads. In addition to such processes, I want us to pay more attention to the texts, both the so-called source texts and the fics being written by the fans. Why certain sources seem to offer a more fertile ground for fanfiction writers than others, and why these sources more often than not belong to the genres of fantasy or science fiction?

My case study in this article is the fandom of *Firefly*, an American space western drama television series created by writer and director Joss Whedon. *Firefly* debuted on the FOX network on September 20, 2002. The series is set in the year 2517, after the arrival of humans in a new star system. In short, it explores the adventures of a renegade nine-person crew on board a “Firefly class” spaceship *Serenity*, captained by gun-for-hire Malcolm “Mal” Reynolds. The influence of the Western genre is apparent not only in the depiction of harsh planetary environments, costumes and equipment, but also in the character roles and their social setting as part of a pioneer culture existing on the fringes of the star system. The only two surviving superpowers, the United States and China, have fused to form the central federal government, called the Alliance. Although the series received a good critical response and a positive reaction especially from the Whedon fans,<sup>2</sup> it was cancelled after ten of the thirteen produced episodes plus the two-hour pilot (“*Serenity*”) were aired. Despite its short life on television, *Firefly* has enjoyed exceptional success after its airing. It has a large fan base which is still growing and is self-styled as “The Browncoats” after the independence fighters in the series. The *Firefly* franchise has expanded from the original series to other media such as a feature film written and directed by Whedon (*Serenity*, 2005) and comics.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the devoted fan base, the case of *Firefly* is especially interesting due to the fact that the building of its fictional world and characters had barely got started when the show was cancelled, and the threads

1 In short, fandom (consisting of fan plus the suffix -dom, as in kingdom) is a term used to refer to an active and participating subculture composed of fans. It encompasses all kinds of fannish practices, which usually are born as a part of a social network. It might sound like a new phenomenon, but Merriam-Webster dictionary, for example, dates its first known use as early as in 1903 (see <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fandom>).

2 At the time *Firefly* debuted, Whedon was already well-known for creating *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, highly regarded television series which aired from 1997 until 2003.

3 As of 2014, seven comic book stories have been released under the *Serenity* title: two three-issue miniseries, two one-shot comics and three short stories. In addition to the comics, a novelization of the film *Serenity* has been published in 2006, and the *Serenity* tabletop role-playing game was released in 2005.

that had to be left hanging have actively been picked up by the fandom. In this article, I concentrate on the *Firefly/Serenity* fanfiction and the processes of producing and disseminating the stories through three viewpoints: a what-if moment, tension between the familiar and the original, and the double perspective offered by world-building.

## An anatomy of What-if Moment

Fanfiction has drawn increased academic interest only during the last two decades – despite its relatively long history. Abigail Derecho (62) has brought up the difference between the “broad” and “narrow” definitions of fanfiction. The broad definition aims to argue that fanfiction has existed for thousands of years and includes, among others, ancient Greek and Roman literature, such as Homer’s poems. The narrower definition maintains that stories can be defined as fanfiction if they originate in a self-identified fan culture, implying that fanfic can only be a body of work that explicitly labels itself “fanfic”. The narrower definition therefore dates the origin of fanfiction to the births of fan societies around the works of Jane Austen and Arthur Conan Doyle in the 1920s, and media fandom to *Star Trek* fans in the 1960s. In short, fanfiction can be defined as new fictive texts written by fans “on pre-existing texts or fictional worlds” (Page & Thomas 277). Today it is mostly published on the Internet either on forums born around a specific fandom or forums specialising in fanfiction in general, such as fanfiction.net. These are the most common channels for *Firefly/Serenity* fics, as well, although it is important to note that there are also various sites for “reccing” (recommending) the best *Firefly/Serenity* fics for interested readers (such as recs in TV Tropes) and usually blog based communities for both beta reading<sup>4</sup> and reccing (such as “Firefly/Serenity lovers” in Livejournal.com). Fics are typically sequels, prequels or stories where the world of the source text is expanded with the writer’s own storylines or characters. Perhaps for this reason, many of the biggest fandoms are related to serial narratives that trade on the idea of the plot as an “infinitely extended middle” (Fiske 180) as opposed to clear beginnings, middles and endings.

Especially in the case of expansion, writers can seize upon a single line or a similar detail to launch a book-length storyline. Therefore, Jenkins (*Textual Poachers* 156) has stated that while writing fics, fans are able to “stretch boundaries of the text”. The boundaries – as well as fanfiction on the whole – are inextricably bound up with the concept of canon. As Sheenagh Pugh puts it: “[O]ne thing all fanfiction has in common is the idea of ‘canon’, the source material accepted as authentic and, within the fandom, known by all readers” (26). Despite the fact that *Serenity* seemingly addresses all major plot points introduced in *Firefly* and closes them, the ending of the film does not so much establish a set of boundaries as offer a particularly fertile ground for sequels. The outset of numerous fics is presented briefly as “post-BDM” (the film is generally called “Big Damn Movie” by the fans) or as “post-Miranda”, which refers to the revelatory events on the planet Miranda in the film. For example, the currently nine-part series “Forward” published on fanfiction.net by the author Peptuck introduces its starting point simply: “Following the Miranda broadwave, there’s only one direction for Malcolm Reynolds and his crew to go.” Among the most important story arcs addressed in *Serenity* is the past of a young girl named River Tam, who was mentally and physically conditioned against her will by the Alliance scientists. Rescued by her brother Simon, the two find refuge aboard *Serenity*. During *Firefly* it is established that the Alliance desperately wants River killed, and that she has unexceptional abilities which are undoubtedly caused by her conditioning, while the film explains that she has been subjected to the government experiment in creating the perfect assassin. In *Serenity* River’s lethal skills are triggered, but in the

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4 Beta readers are often the most important evaluators of fics. The inner hierarchy of fan communities is therefore reflected on the fic evaluation, as beta readers act inside the community as publishing editors of sorts.

end there is a sense that she has found her place as *Serenity* lifts off with her as Mal's co-pilot. What goes on inside her head is not, however, elaborated, and a good deal of *Firefly/Serenity* fanfiction takes this as its point of departure, as fans imagine what her new life might be like after she has "faced her demons".

Other starting points for "post-BDM" fanfiction are the deaths of two major *Firefly* characters, the mysterious Shepherd Book and the ship's pilot Hoban "Wash" Washburne, who is married to *Serenity*'s first mate, Zoe. On the one hand, fanfiction writers explore the remaining crew's feelings over their deaths in fics with introductions such as in the ficlet<sup>5</sup> "Dinner Time", published on fanfiction.net by the author Jaime L. Hatheway: "It has now been a year since their battle with the Reavers and the Operative, and life continues on as usual; but the colors of the crew are gone." On the other hand, numerous writers have decided to explicitly write against the canon, and some of them explain this decision elaborately, as Peptuck does in the author's notes of "Forward":

As you can tell, Book and Wash are both alive and apparently survived the Big Damn Movie. I did this partially because when I originally wrote this prologue (and some of the subsequent chapters) it was missing "something". It wasn't until I included Wash and Book that things started to feel "right" again, and since they're as much a part of *Firefly* as any of the BDM survivors. I wanted to include them. Plus, Wash and Book rock *hard*. . . . How they survived and what they did for the rest of the movie's events may be elaborated [sic] upon later.

In a sense, this exemplifies the fans' complex and often ambivalent relationships with the source texts they draw on. A what-if moment is born as fanfiction takes something a text has offered us as inevitable – such as the deaths of Book and Wash – and unmakes it, thereby opening up a different set of possibilities. So, simply: What if they had not died? Another frequently posed what-if moment in *Firefly/Serenity* fanfiction is the romance of River and Jayne Cobb, a physically imposing brutish mercenary who in the series is contemptuous of Simon and River and even sells them out to the Alliance in one of the episodes. In fact, River/Jayne pairing or "ship" is so recurrent in *Firefly/Serenity* fandom that it is referred to with abbreviation "Rayne" in the same way that probably the most famous fanfiction pairing, Kirk/Spock is sometimes known as "Spirk". Notions of interpreting "against the narrative grain of the plot" (Bacon-Smith 232; my emphasis) or understanding fanfiction as "an actualisation of *latent* textual elements" (Jones, "The Sex Lives" 82; my emphasis) are often connected to the study of so-called slash fiction, a genre of fanfiction focusing on interpersonal attraction and sexual relationships between (fictional) characters of the same sex "against" the source text. When it comes to fanfiction, the legacy of *Star Trek* fandom is particularly visible in slash fiction, as it is commonly noted that current slash originated with the above-mentioned "Kirk/Spock" stories, generally authored by female fans of *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966–69) (see Woledge). When the role of fanfiction as a transgressive force is emphasised, writing slash fiction can be viewed as "going further" with the source text's implications. This way, it is seen offering a voice for marginalised groups and revealing the subversive potential of seemingly safe or familiar fictional worlds (e.g. Thomas "What is Fanfiction" 7). The what-if moments also have something of a rhetorical function, as the fanfiction writers can use the elements not narrated or presented in the source text in order to underline the weight of their narratives. In this, they can be compared with "the disnarrated", delineated by Gerald Prince (2) as comprising those elements in a narrative which explicitly consider and refer to what does not take place. Compared to Prince's formulation, these elements (such as the possibility

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5 Ficlet is a name for short, one-chapter fanfiction stories.

of Book and Wash mysteriously surviving) are obviously not explicit in the source text but created by fanfiction writers. Still, the rhetorical function is similar, and can be harnessed for subversive purposes among others.

As a series, *Firefly* is very character-driven – the centrality of characters is highlighted in the way how Whedon pitched the show: “It’s about nine people looking into the blackness of space and seeing nine different things” (qtd. in Brioux). It is not surprising, then, that most of the *Firefly/Serenity* fanfiction is centred around character stories, such as the mysterious past of River (“What did the scientists do to her?”) and Book (“How can a clergyman be familiar with firearms, hand-to-hand combat and criminal activity?”).<sup>6</sup> Still, it is hardly fitting to say that the fans would be, Robin Hood-like, “snatching” the characters back from the creators. For one, most writers use slogans such as “Joss is boss!” as a disclaimer in the introductory sections of their fics to denote that they do not “own” the characters and to show their respect for the creator. Parrish (5.3) notes that although “the act of taking” is in some ways the very heart of fanfiction writing, we are just beginning the larger inquiry into the creative invention that is happening in addition to the borrowing of source material. She suggests using metaphors that focus not on acts of borrowing or stealing or recombining, but “on some other actions, perhaps appearing as random strategies and gestures” (ibid. 5.4). While I agree with most of her critique of the dominant position of metaphors focused on the taking, I do not approve her choice to use a notion such as Brownian motion concentrating on chaotic or random processes. The processes of writing fanfiction are, in my opinion, far from chaotic or random, and they can better be explored if both fan texts and socially situated fannish practices and activities are taken into the account. Therefore, for the students of fanfiction, it is crucial to consider what those elements or meanings which fanfiction “goes against” or offers an alternative to, are. Who defines *how* they are opposed?

The theories on audience responses might bring up a new viewpoint on fanfiction writer’s strategies of resistance and opening up the what-if moments. The model of audience developed by Peter J. Rabinowitz (1987) and modified by James Phelan identifies four main audiences and assumes that the flesh-and-blood reader (or viewer) seeks to “enter” the position of the authorial audience, the author’s “ideal reader” (or viewer). According to Phelan (4), this is what we as members of audience do in response to a narrative text. As a result, this means that the concept of authorial audience allows us to “consider the ways in which readers can share the experience of reading narrative” (5). Although fandoms, such as the one born around *Firefly* and *Serenity*, can take the laws of interpretation and meaning-making into their own hands and in this way break down conventional boundaries between the authors and the audience, they can also be seen to form their own shared interpretations, evaluations and therefore, their own cultural canon (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 18). In the larger context of fiction studies, then, it can be suggested that fandoms also form their own, shareable experience of “we as viewers” for viewing certain television series such as *Firefly*. This experience can be determined resisting or opposed to the experiences of viewing outside fandom – or contrasted to other shared experiences inside a particular fandom, as many fandoms are known for their internal strife.<sup>7</sup> In the frame of audience response theory, responses of this kind might be termed social. But inherently subversive or, alternatively, random? Next, I explore these questions through the tension between originality and familiarity in fanfiction writing as I analyse the ways in which the strategies of resistance are actualised in fan texts.

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6 However, the need to “flesh out” Book’s past in fanfiction is not so urgent any more as his mysterious backstory was revealed in the graphic novel *Serenity: The Shepherd’s Tale* (2010).

7 An illustrative example of such strife was the recent outrage among *Harry Potter* fans when the author J.K. Rowling made the surprise admission that she should not have paired Hermione with Ron Weasley. Her fans were quick to react, with “wailing and gnashing of teeth from the camp who support the series’ ending . . . and rejoicing from the readers who always wanted Hermione to end up with Harry” (see Flood).

## Tellability and the Tension between Original and Familiar

Recognising responses such as “we as readers or viewers” as a part of larger social practices makes it possible to consider the role and the consequences of the shared nature of such responses. Metaphors and other notions emphasising the liberating or revolutionary characteristics of fanfiction overlook the fact that not only the most popular source texts easily form their own “fictional canons”, but also that fics themselves do so. As Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (9) suggest, the factor most important for the treatment of fan texts beside canon is *fanon*, the events and other elements created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated throughout the fan texts. Fanon often creates particular details or character readings even though canon does not fully support them – or, at times, outright contradicts them. However, it is crucial to note that canon and fanon are not opposite to each other, but parallel meaning-making strategies feeding each other instead. Above I already mentioned the way the pairing of River and Jayne has become such a recurrent development in the *Firefly/Serenity* fanfiction that stories imagining various ways how they might end up together are, as a matter of routine, categorised as “Rayne”. An interpretation deemed canonical (such as “River and Jayne are not lovers”) is often actualised only against fanonical interpretation (“River and Jayne are lovers”). In other words, their romantic relationship is a widely accepted part of fanon despite the fact that the canonical Jayne has a lingering crush on another female character aboard *Serenity*, the ship’s mechanic Kaylee.

Contrary to the attitude expressed by, among others, Parrish, I argue that we need to challenge the idea that creativity must involve “originality” in order to be pleasurable or worth doing. As Thomas (“What is Fanfiction” 13) points out, what keeps fans coming back to certain texts has to do with familiarity: it is the process of fleshing out the backstories behind familiar characters, situations, and events, or slightly shifting the perspective from which the familiar is to be enjoyed. This does not necessarily mean opposing the creators of canon, but making good use of the canon instead – and making good use of it together. The majority of fics keep to a principle where a *small* twist is added to a certain canonical formula or convention and thereby the perspective is *slightly* shifted. Now, I want to attend to the importance of the two emphasised words. Ruth Page (200) suggests in her recent study revisiting the narrative dimension of tellability in social media that as such contexts promote connection with others, the familiar narrative maxim for narrators to make their narratives tellable<sup>8</sup> incorporates two dimensions: to tell stories in such a way as to enable face-enhancing involvement between narrator and audience, and to avoid telling stories which damage the face of the narrative participants. Therefore, creating too big a twist or shifting the perspective more than slightly might be damaging for fanfiction writers as these moves may breach the expected norms for tellability and create a socially divisive act (Page 201). “Rayne stories” offer an illustrative example, as the relationship between River and Jayne adheres to certain communally recognised conventions in the source text, and fics add their own twists and perspectives to these. This practice is most visible in the repeated use of certain storylines, situations and elements which are reworked in an appropriate way.

One of the recurring building blocks of “Rayne stories” is the incident in *Firefly* episode “Ariel”, where River suddenly slashes Jayne in the chest with a kitchen carving knife and Jayne responds by backhanding her. In the Rayne fanfiction, the incident is often contrasted with their present feelings to create (violently) romantic tension. In “Sealed with a Kiss”, a collection of ficlets “where River kisses Jayne” published on fanfiction.net by the author Jaycie Victory, the canonical incident comes up more than once:

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8 With the “familiar narrative maxim” Page refers to pioneering work by William Labov, who recognised that narrative structures have two components: “what happened and why it is worth telling”.

He was so distracted by this observation, he didn't notice how close River was getting until she was standing right in front of him. He shifted from foot to foot nervily; last time River was this close, knives had been involved. (Chapter 2: "From This Slumber She Shall Wake")

Jayne's eyes were at war. Emotions flickering back and forth, vying for dominance. River could sympathise. She had gone through the same tumultuous process the first time he had taken her in his arms. Mistrustful of what he offered; wary since Ariel; contrite since the knife. (Chapter 9: "Kiss Me")

"Gorramit, girl, you talkin' 'bout when you damn near split me open with that butcher's knife? You wasn't helpin' – and I didn't kiss you! I knocked you on your ass as you ruttin' well deserved!" (Chapter 11: "A Kiss with a Fist")

The liberation fanfiction provides does not mean transgressing all boundaries, and it certainly does not mean engaging in random or chaotic processes. Instead, it seems to provide freedom to stretch and use certain communally recognised elements (such as the incident with the knife) and strategies (building up a romance between River and Jayne) to a purpose of your own. Fannish practices encompass certain strategies which in turn enable the writing of certain kinds of "transgressive" slash fiction, for example. In order to promote connection between other fans, the strategies used in fanfiction writing seldom deviate from conventions, formulas and other pervasively repeated fanonical elements. In other words, fandom and fannish practices provide their own canon – alternative perhaps, but a canon nevertheless.

In addition to noticing how certain elements and situations are repeated in the fanon, it is crucial to note that the source text's elements that are open to various interpretations need to form shareable points of reference. Questions such as "What did the Alliance scientists exactly do to River?" or, as an example of canonical romantic entanglement of *Firefly/Serenity*, "Why is it so hard for Mal and Inara to acknowledge their feelings for each other?" cannot be definitely closed. Inara Serra is a Companion, a high-society courtesan who leases one of Serenity's shuttles for transportation and living space. The unresolved attraction between Mal and Inara can, in Hills's words, be called "endlessly deferred narrative". Hills identifies endlessly deferred narrative as one of the family resemblances of cult texts and, by contrasting it with decentred narrative non-resolution of soap operas, argues: "The cult form . . . typically focuses its endlessly deferred narrative around a singular question or related set of questions" (134). One of the typical features of Mal/Inara stories is the repetition of the same elements which in the *Firefly* establish the endlessly deferred nature of their romance. In "Sunshine and Rain", written by virtualJBgirl and published on fanfiction.net, the tension between Mal and Inara is brought about in the novelistic ways closely reproducing the audio-visual narrative means used in the series. This is clearly visible in the fic when Mal discovers that Inara has been mistreated by someone:

She saw the shadow of wrath in his eyes.

His eyelids quivering.

His jaw stiffening.

She could feel his fingers slightly clenching her arm.

She closed her eyes.

Reacting on absolute instinct was his best way to show her his attachment to her. Once more, his silence, the depth of his glance and the touch of his hand let his weakness slip through instead of his words, so rare and evasive.

Despite a faithful reproduction of visual character traits (such as “jaw stiffening”), virtualJBgirl’s fic also shows why fans want to respond by “writing it all down” instead of creating their own fan edits for YouTube, for example. The narrative framing accompanying the actions of Mal and Inara encourages us to engage with the characters’ emotions and thoughts, beyond the level of what they actually do, in order to consider what they actually might mean, and what they may be thinking (Thomas, “Gains and Losses” 152). What about resistance, then? Catherine Tosenberger concludes in her article on the incestuous slash fiction based on the television series *Supernatural* and its pair of brothers that “the most resistant, subversive element of [this fic] is not its depiction of homoerotic incest, but its resistance on giving Sam and Dean the happiness and fulfilment that the show *eternally defers*” (5.12; my emphasis). In the *Firefly/Serenity* fanfiction, however, even the fics resolving the tension between Mal and Inara with a sex act, the familiar, endless deferring of their happiness is quickly resumed. “Firefly Untitled”, published on fanfiction.net by the author angiehodgins, begins with the description of how Mal and Inara end up having sex in Serenity’s mess, but already in the first chapter Inara leaves the ship. So, true resistance would be achieved by ending the deferral, but this might breach the expected norms. Ending the deferral by means of an explicit closure would also put an end to further writing.

In addition to the experience of “we as viewers” and the promotion of connections, the issue at stake in fanfiction is the structure of so-called network culture. This is a term coined by Jay David Bolter in 1991 to describe electronic writing culture. His description of “the electronic museum”, organised as a network, rather than a hierarchy, a space through which the visitor moves at will (231), fits sites such as fanfiction.net very accurately. Thomas (“What is Fanfiction” 19) notes that the message boards of fanfiction sites suggest that the readers’ engagement with the narrative entails much more than merely processing the words on the page (or, on the screen). Indeed, the fans may be said to participate in a form of “collective intelligence” (e.g. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*), as they work through the elements of fics. The readers of Jaycie Victory’s “Sealed with a Kiss” ficlets have come up with numerous ideas for the author to elaborate on in future fics. Beawolf’s Pen (31 July 2013), for example, prompts an idea: “River gets captured and the crew comes to rescue her. Jayne gets to her first and the [sic] share a moment before Mal comes in a [sic] interrupts” and Irishbrneyes (7 July 2013) suggests “how about one where Jayne teaches River how to kiss, and how to do it right?!” Jaycie Victory shows a genuine willingness to respond to her readers’ comments: the next ficlet in the series after Irishbrneyes’s idea is called “Educating River” and the author’s notes goes: “This one is for Irishbrneyes. Hope you enjoy :)”. Irishbrneyes reacts quickly herself and happily comments (July 9 2013): “Squee! No way! A chapter just for me? You’re so AWESOME!”

All in all, I bring these up as I want to emphasise the idea that analysing stories defined as fanfiction without taking the larger fannish practices into account is rarely fruitful. As Cornel Sandvoss points out, fans seek out texts that give them pleasure of familiarity and that fulfil rather than challenge their expectations. It is important to note that a single fic does not change anything, as the new, “subversive” or “original” interpretations are made possible by the unashamed and recognisable repetition of structures, techniques, conventions and details.<sup>9</sup> This repetition is the basis of fanon. Still, fanfiction proves that new meanings and features can be produced, but at the

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9 It should be noted, however, that there are instances where the resistance of both fandoms and fanfiction can be quite forceful. Typically, the resistance is not related to cultural radicalism or ambition to challenge hegemonic stereotypes, but to severe disappointment in the way the source text or its elements are handled by its creators. Some *Harry Potter* fans, for example, refuse to write Dumbledore’s death in their fics – a reaction similar to the way how “Book and Wash are both alive” in various post-BDM *Firefly/Serenity* fics. More notable example of fan resistance is *Mass Effect 3*, the final act to one of the most acclaimed science fiction sagas in digital role-playing genre. Its ending was considered a huge disappointment to *The Mass Effect Trilogy* as a whole, and particularly outraged fans launched a campaign to get it changed – and, to some extent, succeeded.



same time, the strategies used in their production need to be socially shared and original attributions should not stray too far. In the final section of my article, however, I look at a category of fanfiction writing that is “all kinds of too far” but popular all the same.

## Doubled Worlds: Can't Take the Fun from Me

It is still often proposed that fan texts receive their (narrative) value in relation to the source texts. However, they should not be viewed as textual “parasites” – if anything, they live in symbiosis with their source, as they can also have their effect on the readings of source text or open new viewpoints to it. Sandvoss has suggested that instead of focusing on the value of a specific text, or abandoning altogether any notion of value, we should focus on what he calls the “spectrum of textuality” (31). From this basis, Thomas (“What is Fanfiction” 5) argues that the analysts might concentrate on exploring how a practice such as fanfiction can provide different perspectives on a fictional world familiar to fans or allow fans happily to move in and out of various fictional worlds – and also between the fictional world and the “real” world of their day-to-day existence. So, to restate what I have brought forward above, the strategy which enables writing of fanfiction can be called subversive or opposing, as the reader using it consciously resists adopting the position readily mapped out for her inside a fictional world, or seek out opportunities for making her own contribution. Immersive mode of reading is still not abandoned: as a writer, then, she can attempt to imagine the fictional events of that world from another point of view, for example.

An illustrative example of such resistance in fanfiction writing is provided by stories which fall into the category of Alternative Universe stories (AU) – or, in the terms of *Firefly/Serenity* fandom, “Alternate ‘Verse” stories. For instance, in the fic “Copper for a Kiss”, published on fanfiction.net by Lady Cleo, “fate takes a turn and Simon is unable to liberate River from the Academy, Jayne finds himself accidentally rescuing the crazy girl from her tormentors”. More often than not, however, humour or “wackiness” is an important feature of AU stories. The story “Firefly High” with twenty-four chapters by Ultrawoman, also on fanfiction.net, turns the crew of *Serenity* into present-day high school kids and recasts other characters as well: Inara, for example, is recast as the school guidance counsellor, whereas Adelai Niska, canonically one of the most dangerous enemies of Mal Reynolds, plays the part of school’s principal. As can be expected, most of the story events are centred around the familiar romantic entanglements, the main pairings being “Rayne”, 18-year-old high school senior Mal who is “close to ten years” his interest Inara’s junior, Simon and Kaylee, and Zoe and Wash.

What is the point of writing such stories as “Firefly High” and how come they do not breach the expected norms I mentioned above? Tisha Turk has argued that it is metalepsis, a transgression of the boundaries between the world of the telling and the world of the told,<sup>10</sup> that so greatly contributes to the pleasure to be derived from fanfiction. She notes that for readers of fanfiction, “immersion in the fan text requires not only engaging in the pretense that the fictional world of the source text is real . . . but also engaging in the pretense that the fictional world of the fan work is part of the fictional world of the source text” (99–100). Therefore, the immersion is perhaps less in the source itself than in a (communal) way of reading or seeing. It seems, then, that the realms of the “real” and the fictional overlap as fans “enjoy flaunting the artificiality and surreality of their stories while also continuing to be engaged and immersed in the fictional worlds they help to flesh out and concretise” (Thomas, “What is Fanfiction” 9). In “Firefly High”, a two-part chapter titled as “Dance with You” remakes the events of *Firefly* episode “Shindig” as the formal society dance is turned into a homecoming dance, a traditional occasion of welcoming back the alumni of a school.

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<sup>10</sup> Metalepsis was initially identified by Gérard Genette as a narratological concept meaning “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse” (234–235).

Obviously, the fans of the series can easily recognise the whole situation and can, for example, eagerly look forward to the moment when Mal ends up in a fight over Inara with Atherton Wing, recast as Inara's "creep of a fiancé" in the fic. However, there are numerous other events and details in the story for the fans to pick up on the way, such as this dialogue between Kaylee and Wash:

Kaylee looked around at all the happy couples filing on into the school and sighed.  
 "Everybody's got someone" she lamented. "Wash, tell me I'm pretty" she urged him, and though his eyes remained on Zoe, he answered directly.  
 "Were I not attached, I would take you in a manly fashion" he assured her.  
 "Because I'm pretty?" she checked with a smile.  
 "Because you're pretty" he confirmed even as he tried to lip read what Zoe and Mal were talking about across the way.

Originally, this exchange appears almost word for word in the *Firefly* episode "Heart of Gold" where Kaylee observes others at a brothel. The reviewers are happy that it appears in the story – bookwormdaisy (3 June 2010), for example, comments: "Yes! You worked the 'I would take you in a manly fashion!' Brilliant!" As Thomas notes, it is important to recognise that, while reading fanfiction, "what might otherwise appear as clumsy gaffes and anachronisms are in fact deliberate" ("What is Fanfiction" 18). The way single fics are reviewed and evaluated in comments highlights the way recurring textual elements of fanfiction and larger social practices are intertwined. As an example of the evaluation standards, the characters in fics can be deemed either "out of character" (OOC) or "in character" (IC) by the reviewers. These are terms which are used to demonstrate whether fanfiction writer's version of certain character is successful (IC) or not (OOC). The term IC is especially interesting as it entails the view that someone else than the creator of the source text can offer a "right interpretation" of a character. In the reviews of "Sealed with a Kiss", many readers of the ficlets comment on "how realistic" Jaycie Victory's characters are. For example, deanandjo4ever1 (July 6, 2013) comments "poor mal and simon their reactions were spot on hehe" and aumontalc (July 7, 2013) approves "the fact that Jayne only wants to kiss someone who means something to him like his Ma told him". In *Firefly*, Jayne's affection for his mother is made clear in the episode "The Message" when he proudly sports an orange and yellow knit cap with earflaps, simply because his mother made it for him, to "keep him warm". The cap, which humorously clashes with Jayne's brutish imago, is one of the recurring element in "Rayne stories": in one of Jaycie Victory's ficlets (Chapter 7: "Quid Pro Quo"), for example, River steals it and announces "the girl will give the topper . . . in exchange for a kiss. On the mouth." Jayne's knit cap therefore serves as a source of "knowing humour" typical for fanfiction writing, which importantly promotes connection with other fans, especially in the case of otherwise "wacky" AU stories such as "Firefly High".

Despite being blatantly humorous and thus militating against emotional involvement, fanfiction such as "Firefly High" allows its readers to approach it as "something more" than as an artificial construction following certain logic like the conventions of the source text. A way of reading such as this is often simplified as forgetting the synthetic nature of a work and accepting the world, its characters and events as "true" or possibly existing. In the process, the reader takes up a position "inside" a fictional world and visualises it, as Basched (4 June 2010) does while commenting on the events in the Homecoming Dance: "Ooooh the tension between Mal and Saffron what [sic] just unbearable! I love how you describe their expressions, I can totally see them!" Canonical Saffron, a crafty and amoral con artist known to seduce her marks, is introduced in *Firefly* episode "Our Mrs. Reynolds", in which Mal finds himself married to her in an obscure native ceremony, as she pretends to be a compliant girl trained to be a subservient wife in order to get hold of their ship. In "Firefly High", Saffron is recast as a sophomore who initially seems like "a

sweet little girl” but soon shows her true colours. She discovers Mal and Inara are having “an unseemly affair” and blackmails Mal into taking her as his date to Homecoming Dance: “The woman that tamed the wild Malcolm Reynolds would have status, might even make Homecoming Queen”. At the dance, their exchanges successfully both follow the conventions of the relationship between canonical Mal and Saffron and contribute to a wholly different fictional world at the same time:

“We both know why we’re here, and it ain’t ‘cause neither of us is fallin’ into love with the other” he insisted, helping himself to a cup of spiked punch and handing her one too with a definitely over-the-top bow for the benefit of any audience they might have.  
“Stop being so obvious, *sweetheart*” she said through gritted teeth,  
“Just playing my part like you asked, *darlin*” he replied with an overdone smile as they both drank.

From my point of view, what is interesting about fantasy and science fiction vis-à-vis fanfiction writing is that especially stories including so-called “speculative world-building” *already* rely on overlapping strategies or attitudes. These strategies or perspectives are shared by the users of all cultural artefacts, but they are perhaps not so easily recognisable in most of other genres. Building fictional worlds that can be perceived as self-contained entities compared with “our reality” is another expression of the repetition I have mentioned above. The elaborate, multidimensional and rich worlds that paradoxically are created by the means of works that are mostly cursory, flat and linear, inevitably bear certain interpretive attitudes or strategies which, in my opinion, contribute to the fact that speculative fantasy and science fiction are such a fertile ground for fanfiction writers. Hills (137) names hyperdiegesis, the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, as an attribute shared by the cult texts and genres of fantasy and science fiction. He goes on to argue that in addition to rewarding re-reading due to its richness and depth, the role of hyperdiegesis is “also one of stimulating creative speculation and providing a trusted environment for affective play” (138). The terms such as hyperdiegesis – or, more simply, vast and detailed fictional worlds – alongside with analyses of the ways how the users respond to works of fiction can help us understand the double perspective fiction in general.

The speculative worlds of fantasy and science fiction can, at the same time, be perceived as possibly existing and experienced “from the inside, as if the events were happening to you” and recognised so obviously “made” according to certain strategies and perhaps even from familiar building blocks.<sup>11</sup> Fanfiction writing which self-consciously and openly uses repeated storylines and other such elements but, at the same time, aims at inviting the readers into a fictional world they love, makes this very visible. Turk talks of “the ongoing erotics of continuing the story” which enable the fan to immerse herself “not only in the original show but in some subset of fan works engaging it” (99). This is well highlighted in the comments left for *Ultrawoman* on “*Firefly High*”: BeckettFan (25 September 2009) urges the writer to continue as she would “love to see how they all end up friends or whatever” and dlsf (1 October 2009) comments “i love this! the idea is shiny! please write more!” In the light of interactions in the message boards and comment sections of fanfiction sites, it is also important to consider the fact that narratives can be processual, and there is no reason why endings would be more important than the act of deferring.

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11 As a small side note, in the role-playing game research the highly popular tabletop game *Dungeons & Dragons* is often credited as the one “liberating” J.R.R. Tolkien’s world-building elements for a larger use.

## Conclusion

In the cast reunion held to celebrate the tenth anniversary of *Firefly* in San Diego Comic-Con 2012, where ten thousand people lined up to get into the panel, Joss Whedon emotionally commented on why the fans of the series mean so much to him:

When you're telling a story, you're trying to connect to people in a particular way. It's about inviting them into a world. The way you've inhabited this world, this universe, you have become part of it. When I see you guys, I don't think the show is off the air. I think there's spaceships and horses – the story is alive. (Qtd. in Hibbert.)

Through all kinds of fannish practices, including fanfiction writing, *Serenity* is still flying despite the fact that the series was cancelled more than ten years ago. In this article, I concentrated on the features of fanfiction which promote communality and sharing. Typically, fanfiction has either been celebrated as a subversive force harnessed by modern-day Robin Hoods or bluntly dismissed as an adolescent trash. In my opinion, a middle ground between these two approaches is needed, and I hope that my analyses of the *Firefly/Serenity* fanfiction have contributed to building one. It should also be clear by now that research frames either focusing solely on the actual fan texts or completely ignoring them are not appropriate. Instead, it is important to pay attention to the fact that the fan texts do not result from chaotic or random processes despite the “continuous play” going on through them and despite that they can be selected and read across often in a random rather than directed fashion. One of the features illustrating this was the notion of why the genres of fantasy and science fiction lend themselves to source material of fanfiction writing.

As an expression of network culture, fanfiction sites and forums are less hierarchical than some more “traditional” modes of writing as there are almost no borders between authors and readers. However, the canonical (or, to be more precise, fanonical) nature of the actual fan texts hints that the meaning-making practices and writing strategies are far from random. It is in the very nature of fanfiction writing to aim at sharing one's enthusiasm, frustrations and creative aspirations on certain source texts in a responsive environment. It has already been noted that this nature is reflected on aspects of the interface, the design and navigation of fanfiction sites (see Thomas, “What is Fanfiction” 20), but it is also very much present in stories that are told. Ideally, the stories enable involvement between the author and the members of the audience and in this article I demonstrated how this is manifested in adding of *small* twists and *slight* shifts in the perspective. When it comes to networking and participating culture, perhaps the fact that the originally transgressive impulse of treating works of fiction as open-ended is being effectively mainstreamed is the most subversive contribution of them all.

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