

# FANDOM/FAN CULTURES

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The difference between fairy-tale storytelling cultures and fan cultures is often a matter of perspective and interpretation, at times simply different names for the same practices, at other times a question of cultural value or academic discipline, and at still others intersecting but distinct groupings that could be represented as an overlapping set of Venn diagrams. In his landmark *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins argues that the term “fan” does not really specify a fixed group of people or set of behaviors, but rather identifies a devalued and even abject intersection of taste, interactivity, and mass culture (1992). By this formulation, according to cultural norms, fans love things they shouldn’t in ways that are generally deemed extreme. The definition of fans thus shifts as cultural values and tastes shift, across time and across cultures and subcultures, much in the same way that the audience and social status of fairy tales have shifted from common culture to children’s culture (Stone 1975).

Jenkins also argues that practices of modern fan cultures descend from pre-industrial folk cultures, which normalized creative participation in cultural life. Fairy tales are intertwined with this older model of interactive, participatory storytelling, as even literary fairy tales quickly exceeded their original form to inspire numerous interconnected versions and retellings in multiple media, a phenomenon that Cristina Bacchilega terms the “fairy tale web” (2013, 1–30). Thus, determining the relevance of fan cultures in relation to fairy tales requires teasing apart the many different types of fans and fan cultures, the hierarchies of cultural value at stake in the term “fan,” and whether fan culture is defined from the perspectives of scholars, mainstream culture, or fans themselves. Each of these decisions constructs a different understanding of what fairy tales have contributed to fan culture, how contemporary fan cultures interact with fairy tales, and the political ramifications of thinking through fans and fairy tales together.

## **Fandom and Fairy Tales Are Bad for You: Fan Taxonomies and (De)Valuation of Participatory Storytelling**

To understand overlaps between fan cultures and fairy tales, one must acknowledge that there are many different types of fans, fan practices, and fan cultures. Focus on fan cultures immediately brings to light an initial theoretical distinction between organized groups of fans who interact, have a social and technological infrastructure, and think of themselves as a community versus individuals or those who share their fandom with only a few friends. Not all fans want to be part of, or have access to, a larger fan culture. Although isolated, individual fans are sometimes analyzed within fan studies by scholars like Matt Hills (2002), because they do not participate in a “fan culture” they are beyond the scope of this piece, which seeks to address

the cultural practices, traditions, and social world of organized fans. Then, even within the category of organized fans, the practices and infrastructure of fans of celebrities, sports, musicians, and media vary dramatically (Coppa 2006). However, those who are not part of a fan culture may feel that they are fans, while others who participate deeply in fan cultures may shy away from so identifying (Kustritz 2015). Further, many people may act in ways that closely resemble fandom and yet are rarely identified as such by those involved or by outside observers. These complications suggest the need to consider how and why certain activities, groups, and people become labeled as fans by outsiders or mainstream culture and why some do or do not self-identify as fans. It also raises the contentious issue of the boundaries of fandom: who is a fan and who isn't.

Jenkins argues that the term "fan" derives from "fanatic" and largely names practices that mainstream culture deems excessive, oriented toward cultural objects that mainstream culture deems valueless and childish (1992); Joli Jenson would add that cultural objects beloved primarily by women, which thus become feminized, also often prompt use of the fan label (1992). Kay Stone (1975), Maria Nikolajeva (2003), and Linda Lee (2008) argue that a similar structural association between fairy tales, femininity, and childhood likewise reduce the cultural value of fairy tales. In other words, fans, and perhaps especially fairy-tale fans, have bad taste and exercise it far too enthusiastically. Other terms are used for people who are extremely passionate about activities and cultural objects generally deemed valuable, such as connoisseur, aficionado, collector, and expert. A Google image search on September 5, 2015, revealed a crowdsourced version of this cultural separation. The keyword "fans" resulted in images of a contraption for creating cool breezes, but also numerous images of large, tightly packed, homogenous crowds of people, often shouting, sometimes covered in body paint (Google 2015b). The search term "connoisseur," on the other hand, resulted largely in images of individual people alone, carefully studying their object of interest, frequently very expensive things, like wine, cigars, cameras, and fine art (Google 2015a).

The difference between these collections of images recalls Pierre Bourdieu's work on distinction (1984) and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's work on bourgeoisie separation from the crowd (1986). Conversely, "fan," like its pre-industrial precursor folk culture, is generally attached to popular pleasures, available to everyone and historically associated with bodily interaction. Thus, John Fiske charts the histories of soccer and wrestling as popular pleasures repeatedly associated with spectacles of bodily excess, the threat of mindless mob behavior, and boisterous interaction including shouting, standing, costuming, and the possibility of the crowd usurping the distance between performer and audience by directly joining in (1989, 69–102). Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs note similar references to bodily excesses and crowd mentality in news stories about female Beatles fans, who reporters often noted fainted, burst into tears, and produced other physical responses, *en masse* (1992 [1997]). Fairy-tale storytelling cultures might also be productively considered as interactive, asking teller and audience to involve themselves bodily and creatively in the narration process and to become, in a sense, part of the story, as each iteration of the tale adapts to suit the needs of particular individuals, communities, and historical moments.

In contrast, Bourdieu (1984) and Stallybrass and White (1986) argue that bourgeoisie distinction requires a theoretical separation from the crowd and its tastes, pleasures, and physicality, as well as an intellectual and analytical distance from the cultural object itself. Such detachment is achieved largely through consumption of cultural objects restricted by their expense and through practices and behaviors limited by education, gained via formal study and/or through the informal learning that leads to etiquette, manners, and what Michel Foucault might call bodily discipline (1978, 1979). Thus many of the connoisseur search images

include a magnifying glass, emphasizing their intellectual appreciation of the object, a quality that distinguishes them from, rather than connects them with, the masses and the object itself (Google 2015a). Likewise, an academic who specializes in queer theory may engage in many fan behaviors, such as collecting books by theorist Judith Butler (ideally with her autograph), obsessively studying her every publication and utterance, following her career, attending her public appearances, and hoping for a chance to meet and interact with her in person. However, rarely will such an academic be dismissively called a Judith Butler *fan* and, instead, will rather aspire to the distinguished title of Judith Butler expert. Because these terms mark different statuses within hierarchies of social distinction, an insistence upon identifying as a fan can become a defiant act of affirmation, resistance, and solidarity against class-based power structures and prejudice.

Both industrial mass culture and folk culture are popular pleasures with a low bar to participation, although their positions within capitalism differ theoretically, if not always in practice. While people can spend a lot of money on these activities, there are very often low-cost or even no cost alternatives; the extreme expense of box seats at a professional sports game contrasts to a gathering of friends watching the same game on TV at home or in a public venue. Further, excessive consumption associated with such activities is often popularly deemed a “waste of money” due to their negligible cultural value; money spent on popular pleasures is not exchanged for greater distinction or cultural capital, appears to be exchanged for nothing but pleasure itself, and is thus squandered. As a result, fans are frequently accused of wasting their money on consumerist junk, while folk cultural objects can be deemed antiquated and thus valueless, or conversely artisan and highly valuable, but unappreciated in their culture of origin where they are not studied and displayed but “put to everyday use” (Walker 1967).

This distinction connects to another basic set of analytical categories for studying fan cultures, defined according to their level of interactivity; here the analytical categories of fan culture and folk culture diverge historically at the juncture of mass production, but converge again when the culture industry borrows from fairy-tale themes. While fans are culturally stereotyped for excessive interactivity and bad objects, in practice the intensity and qualities of interactivity vary significantly. Just as many fans are derided for spending too much money on popular pleasures, many also receive social scorn for applying the behaviors associated with connoisseurship to industrial mass cultural products. One form of this behavior is associated with what I have termed “as is” fandom (Kustritz 2011; Russo 2009, 126), and obsession\_inc called “affirmative fandom,” which treats the cultural object as a closed text of great value and high artistry that must be studied and collected, often with great reverence for the original author’s intentions and authority (Russo 2009). At the other end of the spectrum lies what I have called “creative fandom,” and obsession\_inc and some theorists name “transformative fandom,” which applies to fan practices that treat the cultural object as an open system that can be edited, expanded, and interacted with by anyone, in any way, with equal authority. These categories are of particular importance to understanding connections between modern fan culture, fairy-tale folk culture, and the copyright system, as discussed in greater detail in the following.

Thus fans may be thought of as isolated or part of a culture, affirmative or transformative. While these may be used by scholars as distinct analytical categories for separate fan cultures, in practice they form more of a spectrum, and individual fan activities may incorporate both, while individual fans often participate in activities all across the spectrum. Nevertheless, from an academic perspective, it can be helpful to note that some fan cultures fall more clearly toward one or another end of this continuum. Trivia and collectables, for example, fit much

more clearly within the affirmative end, while fan fiction, original stories based on a previously published narrative, fits more comfortably in the transformative end. Although activities like collecting can certainly be part of modern fairy-tale cultures, especially when commoditized by the modern mass culture industry, highly interactive, transformative fan activities have much more in common with the collective, multi-authored history of fairy-tale storytelling.

### Fans, Fairy Tales, Storytelling, and the Market

The line between normative consumer activities and excessive consumption has shifted in recent years as the Internet makes interactivity with popular culture easier and an increasingly mainstream part of everyday life. As a result, many fan activities with roots in the pre-industrial history of folk culture and collective storytelling have slowly garnered greater social recognition, increased attention from the industry, and a modicum of respectability. This shift can be charted in the theoretical distance between Jenkins's two landmark books; while *Textual Poachers* (1992) was largely occupied with documenting and recuperating fan activities in an age when fan behaviors were seen as obscure and often ridiculous, *Convergence Culture* (2006) documents producers' deliberate cultivation of fan communities, the growing cultural power and influence of networked fan communities, and the centrality of fan behaviors like participation and interactivity across cultural registers, from education, to news, to politics. Yet, while the social consensus regarding the legitimacy of participatory popular culture has changed, the influence of the market and intellectual property laws including copyright prevent a wholesale return to pre-industrial shared culture. The interactions between fan cultures and fairy-tale cultures are thus also colored by international legal systems. The longevity of fairy-tale storytelling cultures, as they cross over and intermingle with fan storytelling cultures, offers an ideal example for tracing transformations in participatory storytelling over time.

Traditional fairy tales (as opposed to literary fairy tales with known authors like Hans Christian Andersen) originate and/or recirculate in oral storytelling traditions, wherein the notion of an original makes little sense, and every tale is adapted by each storyteller to suit the audience, the occasion, and the cultural context. This process of borrowing from and building upon other cultural objects pervaded oral and written expression in pre-copyright society, and this principle applies both to the arts and the sciences. As implied by the Sir Isaac Newton adage, "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants," discoveries in science, and movements in art and literature, are dependent upon a lineage of works and knowledge that came before (Bartlett 1994; Lenthem 2007). In addition, many forms of art and literature contain not only the traces of earlier works' influence, but direct call-and-response patterns, as well as a history of adaptation and sampling (Barthes 1977; Krauss 1986). Shakespeare's history plays and modern historical fiction like Tracy Chevalier's *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* (1999) and Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2002) are examples of the numerous stories renarrating historical events. Stock or archetypal characters like the fool, the Don Juan, the corrupt politician, and the nagging housewife are constantly re-appropriated and reused in new stories ranging from *commedia dell'arte*, to opera, to modern sitcoms. Further, many stories much more directly comment upon, reproduce, and adapt other stories, including Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Alighieri 2003 [1320]), which adapts and expands the plot, characters, and settings of the Bible, and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (2003 [1803]), a critique of gothic romances, specifically Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (2001 [1794]). In both pre-industrial and mass-mediated fairy tales one may similarly consider not only the practice of retelling, but also repetition of characters and archetypes, including the abused apprentice, the noble or vain prince, the wicked stepmother, and the innocent or precocious young girl.

Yet all this borrowing comes into question legally and philosophically under copyright law, which prohibits the reproduction of a protected work, but also its adaptation into another medium and the creation of derivative works, all means by which the vibrant fairy-tale tradition survived for centuries before the era of mass reproduction. Thus Lawrence Lessig describes copyright as creating a “read-only” society, wherein media is supplied to the population by a small group of professionals in a fixed state, much like a read-only DVD, and interactivity is forbidden (2008). Lessig, like other scholars, activists, and philosophers of the copyleft, advocates a “read-write” society, in which the participatory and interactive activities that were normative before copyright, and which have become increasingly widespread due to convergence culture, should become the legal standard. The irony of fairy tales’ interaction with the history of copyright is that despite their origin as collaboratively authored collective culture, many were also made into fixed forms of property and taken out of common circulation, most notoriously by Disney (Hendekamp 2002; Litman 1993; Sprigman 2005).

As the latter cited works detail, while anyone could comment upon, adapt, and add to the legacy of fairy tales in the pre-copyright era, once corporations began to make fairy tales into property, adding to, retelling, or critiquing their versions of fairy tales became illegal. The case of fan fiction based on fairy tales brings these processes into sharp relief, as it extends and replicates the practices of collective authorship common to many earlier fairy-tale cultures. Corporations allege copyright infringement primarily through cease-and-desist letters, rather than defending it formally through actual court cases, often because the threat of action by an entity with substantial resources is sufficient to deter creators (many of whom are not, in actual fact, contravening copyright legislation, see Greenhill 2006). The difference lies largely in semantics and the intervention of copyright law. Because works of fan fiction predominantly reinterpret mass media cultural properties, they become doubly tainted, first through association with the market, and second as a form of theft and unoriginality, as if Disney versions of fairy tales were wholly novel, rather than standing on the shoulders of the many folk storytellers who came before.

Thus, transformative fan cultures share much with fairy-tale cultures in their modern form, and that includes a troubled relationship with the market and an ironic tension with copyright. In the absence of intellectual property law, creative fan cultures essentially replicate many key characteristics of earlier folk practices, including the storytelling cultures that spread and nurtured fairy tales. Because both fairy tales and fan cultures currently exist in a cultural landscape dominated by corporate media, fairy tales sometimes seem to have one fixed or specific version, and fan creativity is derided as merely derivative, as though any culture, or any part of culture, were wholly cut off from history. Transformative fandom refers to more than just fan fiction; like the fairy-tale web, which includes adaptations and retellings in multiple media, fan creativity involves numerous forms like spoken word recordings, essays, art, costuming, and a lively process of audience response and feedback. The term “transformative” also connects back to copyright and serves as a mixed defense and apologia for transformative fan culture’s collaborative and interactive model of cultural engagement. In the United States, although copyright forbids unlicensed derivative works, it currently provides an exception for transformative works in the doctrine of “fair use.” Many lawyers, activists, and artists debate the precise dividing line between transformative and derivative, due to its critical importance in defining the scope within which people have the right to co-create their own cultural life (Katyal 2004; Tan 2013; Tushnet 1996; Wong 2008). By claiming the title transformative, fan infrastructure, like the non-profit Organization for Transformative Works, founded in 2007, stridently claims that authority over creative works must remain with, or be restored to, the people, and if the sweeping popularity of remix, file sharing, and memes are any indication, the cultural zeitgeist

is with them. The term “transformation” also brings fan cultures full circle back to fairy tales, not only due to their shared history as transformative works of art, performance, and literature, but also due to their central focus on transformation through magic and wonder. Transformative fan cultures thus overlap and intertwine with the history and spirit of fairy-tale cultures.

### Cultures of Transformation

Transformative fan cultures and fairy-tale storytelling cultures name different cultural positions and remarkably similar activities. Although increasingly imbricated in the modern industry, fairy tales harken back to the pre-industrial past, while fan culture is born of mass production. Yet both describe folk practices with an interactive, collective approach to cultural production and reproduction. This irreverent attitude to cultural objects often conflicts with modern copyright and intellectual property regimes, which seek to isolate the historical flow of ideas by making one snapshot in the development of human imagination into private property. Transformative fan cultures and fairy tale storytelling cultures place precedence on all people’s ability to become authors of their own culture and insert themselves into the ongoing narrative flow that makes sense of and shapes the world around us. In fairy tales the term “transformation” often connects to moments of wonder, when magic unseats everyday assumptions and the impossible becomes possible. Transformative fan cultures likewise challenge the limits of the possible by inserting the pleasures and demands of everyday people back into mass culture narrative products, opening space for the unexpected to emerge.

**Related topics:** Adaptation and the Fairy-Tale Web; Comic Cons; Convergence Culture; Fan Fiction; Intellectual Property; Sexualities/Queer and Trans Studies; Storytelling

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