

# From Poacher to Gamekeeper:

How Consumers Become Producers

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## Abstract

A simple Marxist economic model separates consumers and producers, but this model is inadequate in considering active consumers, and even more active fans. Some fans are amateur producers, of derivative or original works, while others become professionals. The author experienced some of the confusions involved in these statuses during a period of active involvement in several fandoms. While certain parts of fandom have an anti-commercial ethic, others aspire to professional status. This paper reveals a range of attitudes to the apparent division between fans and professionals by interviewing five active fans who are also professionals in the same field. The five subjects manage the interaction between their fan and professional identities in slightly different ways. These give an insight into the complexity of interactions between the producers of cultural content, and those who consume it.

## Introduction

Much of the field of fan studies defines fans as a form of consumers—often specifically as consumers of media. This is a result of the origins of fan studies in media studies, with its approach based on audience research and reception theory, and derived from Marx’s rigid separation of production and consumption. In some of the early work, a fan was posited as a form of active consumer. Theory could then be developed according to which the discourse of the producer of such media—assumed to be a dominant or hegemonic discourse—was being to some extent reconfigured or resisted by active consumers with their own agendas.

Such theory made possible some interesting outcomes. It undermined the common assumption of a one-way, top-down dissemination of ideas in society, showing that meaning swirled in more complex formations, more reminiscent of Foucault’s concepts of micro power (Foucault,

1977) than simple linear transmission. Moreover it enabled the rehabilitation of fans from the scandalous category into which they had previously been cast by scholarship, making them instead a useful way of exploring intense reaction to media.

The theory does run into some practical problems, however. As more and more writers asserted that all consumers were to some extent active, the use of this categorization as a means of defining fans became increasingly problematic. Furthermore, it can run into difficulty in accounting for the fact that there are people who call themselves fans in a number of fields, some of them conceptually distant from the broadcast media which so obsessed early theorists. Finally, it runs the risk of establishing a false binary by suggesting that “fan” and “producer” are mutually exclusive, and even antagonistic, categories.

This paper will take the latter as its jumping-off point. It will consider the relationships between fans and producers in a number of fields, and

in particular will examine the phenomenon of producers who also consider themselves, or who are considered, fans. What is the relationship between these roles?

### Fans

As noted above, there has been a tendency for academics to use “fan” as shorthand for an intense consumer of media texts (occasionally expanded to include sport). This paper, however, follows previous papers by the same author (Mason, *A history of RPGs: Made by fans; played by fans*, 2012; Mason, *Role-playing games, fandom and participatory culture*, 2012; Mason, *Towards a topography of fandom(s)*, 2013; Mason, *The effect of affect: How fans relate to their objects*, 2014) in attempting to introduce some doubt about this apparently inevitable relationship between fan and fan (media) object. Clearly a majority of fans are fans of *something*, which would seem to justify the media studies approach. However, there are peripheral examples such as role-playing where it is hard to define the *something* as a media text without intellectual contortions. Moreover, there are situations (one is noted later in this paper) where the importance of the supposed object of fandom seems to wither away in comparison to the fan activity itself.

For this reason, fans are here understood to be those people who are involved in fan *activities*. The “vectors” of fan activity were categorized in an earlier paper as: “*collector, community, critic, enactor, knower, spectator, transformer*.” (Mason, 2013) Notably, the community and enactor vectors do not necessarily require fan objects. Enactors who reproduce media texts (cosplayers, for example) clearly have one, but it is difficult to argue that role-players who are creating new stories are in some way fans of their as-yet-uncreated texts, as against fans of the acts of creation. Similarly, while music and sports fans have generally been conceptualised as audiences, many also participate in the activity themselves. I argue that an analysis of fans which limits them to

reception of a fan object is inexcusably narrow.

Nevertheless, in considering consumption and production, and the related binary of fans and professionals, it will be necessary to make use of existing scholarship on the subject of the text.

### Literature review

Barthes (1970) divides texts into readerly and writerly. A readerly text is a simple, populist work in which the reader receives the meaning or ideas of the writer. On the other hand the writerly text is more open, challenging and ambiguous; the reader is implicated in the production of meaning. Between these two extremes, the producerly text (Fiske, 1989) is a popular text which nevertheless lends itself to reinterpretation and appropriation by consumers. Fiske argues that this involves conflict between the forces of production and those of reception.

Henry Jenkins’s *Textual Poachers* (1992) popularized the metaphor of fans as “poachers,” appropriating popular (producerly) texts and turning them to their own devices. He takes the term “poacher” from Michel de Certeau (1984) who uses it to express how readers are subjugated in the “scriptural economy,” with voices of opposition being silenced or marginalized by the dominant producers or “authors” (and it is no coincidence that “author” is cognate with “authority”). Jenkins writes: “Within the cultural economy, fans are peasants, not proprietors.”

In his 1992 book Jenkins goes on to chart the ways in which fans and producers interact. In subsequent works he has taken on board the ways in which the fan/pro distinction may be a false binary, yet these early theories of opposition—and the mutual exclusivity they imply—have been remarkably influential. This may also be because the idea is implicit in much of the other early writing on fan studies, such as Bacon-Smith (1991), Penley (1992), and that collected in Lewis (1992), though the definition of the fan as one who reads oppositionally is subject to critique, especially by those influenced

by Theodor Adorno (1991).

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) developed matters with the notion of a spectrum of audience reactions, ranging from the ordinary consumer at one end to the petty producer at the other. In between come various levels of active fan involvement. The “petty producer” has developed fan-related skills to such an extent that she or he is able to make a living from them. Abercrombie and Longhurst are also important in that they widen the understanding of who is being studied here, by including non-media-related categories such as custom cars. At the same time, however, they reserve the term “fan” for active audiences and term others consumers, enthusiasts or the aforementioned petty producers.

In a detailed exploration of the world of comics fandom, Pustz (1999) draws attention to the variations in relative numbers of consumers, fans and producers. One suggestion is that a higher proportion of readers of comics could be considered fans. Unfortunately, this proposition is very difficult to test. Rather more reliable is Pustz’s assertion that a high proportion of comics creators are fans: “Often, it is hard to tell the difference between the fans and professionals.” One reason for this is that so many comics writers and publishers explicitly identify themselves as fans.

Bacon-Smith (2000) offers quite a detailed ethnographic account of American science fiction fandom, which gives an idea of its breadth of activity and approach. She describes how early science fiction fans formed clubs with more formal structures, but how “In the 1950s and ’60s, as fan culture spread throughout the country, it carried the idea of fanzines, conventions, and fan artistic creation with it but left much of the hierarchical corporate structure of the clubs behind.” This fan structure can be observed in other areas of fandom, as can the “corporate structure.” The non-corporate structure often espouses anti-commercial attitudes, which appear to support the Fiske model of oppositional

activity by active consumers.

In some areas of fandom, these anti-commercial attitudes form an actual barrier to fans who aspire to become professionals themselves. The idea of a fan becoming a pro is more clearly associated with some areas of fan activity than others, and its meaning will also vary. Within science fiction fandom, for example, to become a pro involves having some writing professionally published. But many active fans—and some professionals—are published on an amateur basis. The extent to which one is a pro depends on the extent to which one’s livelihood is derived from paid writing. Given that a very small proportion of published writers are able to support themselves solely from earnings based on writing, we are clearly looking at a continuum, in which the division between the producer and the consumer is far from clear.

The production of science fiction . . . is marked by a blurring of all boundaries—those within the community and those that mark what Bourdieu calls the field of economic power. This blurring of boundaries occurs because the science fiction community includes both the field of production and a large segment of the field of consumption, and because participants in both fields—production and consumption—have a marked tendency to shift roles and take multiple positions that makes it difficult to determine where power lies within the community and what any part of the community’s relationship to the field of power may be. (Bacon-Smith, 2000)

Indeed, those who aspire to becoming professional science fiction writers are well advised to attend conventions, if only to acquire the professional contacts which are now so essential in getting published.

Matt Hills (2002) identifies a problem in fan studies of positing “good” active fans against “bad” passive consumers. He also writes about the phenomenon of fan “poachers” becoming “gamekeepers”—Abercrombie and Longhurst’s

petty producers—associating this with the development of niche markets to support specialist fan demand. Hills goes on to criticize “the tainted and devalued term of ‘consumption’.”

For all that Hills regards it as tainted and devalued, consumption is central to the work of Sandvoss (2005) who even makes it part of his definition: “I define fandom as the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text.” This definition has been highly influential, even though it contains no reference to the social aspects identified by most writers on the subject, misappropriates the established word “fandom” to mean something like “fanhood” or “fanship”, and omits any reference at all to activity (oppositional or otherwise) on the part of the fan. Luckily, the definition is inadequate even in encapsulating Sandvoss’s own argument, which contains far more sophisticated analysis of fan productivity:

Consequently, fandom *can* be subversive, especially when based on textual productivity; yet there is no automatism which positions the tactics of reading in necessary opposition to the strategies of (mass) production. (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 29)

Both Radway (1986) and McKee (2004) have argued that there is an artificial distinction being made between the producer and the consumer, and thus that fan productivity is not conceptually distinct from commercial productivity. McKee cites the example of Gary Russell, identified in one case study as a “powerless” *Doctor Who* fan who had nevertheless, by the time the case study was published, become a successful professional *Doctor Who* writer:

The question is a simple one—at what point did Russell stop being powerless? When did he stop being a fan and start being a producer? Can he be a producer, in the media itself—indeed, in the mainstream—and still be a fan? (McKee, 2004)

The question of fans who become, or who are also producers, is tackled again by Hills (2010), who in passing also shows how *Doctor Who* is a quintessentially producerly text. Hills has the benefit of writing after the return of *Doctor Who* to television screens, produced by a number of creators who explicitly identify themselves as fans (and whose fan activity prior to the return of the show is well documented). It is difficult, however, to see this as a fulfilment of his earlier argument that such texts would be for niche markets.

Hills devotes attention to some of the dynamics involved in fans becoming pros. For example, he notes that businesses do not always behave in unified ways, and that there can be contradictions in positions between, for example, the creators of a television show (who may be fans), and the brand managers responsible for that show. He also notes how fan-producers may at different times, in different contexts, draw on different discourses.

The literature surveyed so far has been that of academics, albeit in some cases “acafans” (that is to say, academics who are also fans). However it should be remembered that criticism, analysis and understanding are characteristic activities of fans themselves. I therefore turn finally to a fan analysis on this theme, specifically a critique of Hills’s work:

But back to this “professionalised fan”—I’d argue (from a US perspective) that fan cultures typically, perhaps inevitably, incorporate some motif of crossing over—ranging from improbable fantasy to legitimate aspiration—and that they’ve done this for a very long time. This dynamic was most clearly embedded in (written) science fiction fandom dating back to the mid-20th century, where entire cohorts of successful published writers got their start as fans. Comic books display a similar history, starting at least as far back as the 1970s, where a number of people who’d made names for themselves

in fandom got hired as writers. Today, it's virtually taken for granted that comic book professionals (especially writers and editors, but I'm guessing this largely applies to artists as well) grew up as comic book fans, and that fandom is a legitimate (almost inevitable) point of entry for a career in comics (which would include print and online news media, as well as retail and probably distribution). (Cryptoxin, 2006)

Here Pustz's observation of the nature of comics fandom is supported, yet the reference to "crossing over" draws our attention to the fact that there is nevertheless some perception of a barrier, a point of transition between different states.

### Experience

Much fan research involves autoethnography, because many researchers themselves have experience in the subcultures they are researching. This necessitates a personal statement for two reasons. The first is by way of a disclaimer: readers are made aware of the potential for bias involved in the work, and can better understand the point of departure for the research. The second reason is that autoethnography can provide valuable insights in its own right. We accept the reflection of the scholar in philosophy—in Husserl's phenomenology, for example—and with a field which is as recent, and relatively uncovered, as fan studies, the researcher's own experience can be instructive.

The present research derives specifically from the experience of the researcher during the 1980s. In those days, prior to the advent of the World Wide Web, fan activity was less prominent than at present, and conducted by different—less convenient—means. Communication between fans was primarily by means of fanzines and conventions/meets. This communication nevertheless demonstrated features immediately recognizable to those examining fan interaction in its current incarnations on the Web (Mason,

Role-playing games, fandom and participatory culture, 2012).

One caveat here, of course, is that statements about fandom during this period are far from universal. There have been many forms of fandom in many areas (Mason, 2013) and characteristics can vary dramatically. For example, much of fan studies is concerned with so-called "media fans" and attention has been given to fan practices such as vidding (the editing of televisual texts into new, fan-created forms) and fan fiction. Although quantitative studies show wildly varying results, a wide range of research from Bacon-Smith (1991) and Jenkins (1992) onward has reported a large proportion of women active as media fans, and as producers of vids and fiction. This involvement of women dates back at the very least to the 1960s, and the emergence of *Star Trek* fandom (Bacon-Smith, 1991). On the other hand, the areas of fandom with which I had contact during the 1980s were overwhelmingly male-dominated.

The first two of these are frequently not recognized as fandom by researchers. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) would categorize their participants as enthusiasts rather than fans. The first was wargaming, a hobby which derived from simulations by the military as well as from boardgames such as chess and *Risk*. I played wargames with friends, even establishing a club at my school. I read the professionally published British magazine on the subject, *Battle for Wargamers*. From this magazine, in 1978 I became aware of a new form of wargame, called *Dungeons & Dragons*. Based on the description in the magazine I attempted to replicate the experience by modifying a set of rules I possessed for battles in J R R Tolkien's Middle-earth, in which I was already very interested. A friend then bought the *Dungeons & Dragons* rules and we attempted to make sense of them: by no means a straightforward proposition.

This new fan activity, role-playing games (RPGs), though derived from wargaming, quickly became a distinct entity in its own right (Mason,

2004; Mason, *A history of RPGs: Made by fans; played by fans*, 2012). My exposure to the wider world—or *fandom*—of role-playing came in two ways: visiting the shops in which the games were sold and visiting meets such as 1978’s Midland Militaire. The latter, it should be noted, also featured the presence of retailers. It would thus appear that RPGs are essentially a consumer activity. Nevertheless, my experience at the time was different. As already noted, I had attempted to create my own rules before my friend bought the published rules. Indeed, I never actually bought a set of *Dungeons & Dragons* rules. At the aforementioned Midland Militaire, the first meet I went to, I played in games with others, using their own self-created rules. The idea seemed widespread that the activity was the important thing, and the published rules were simply there to assist. I doubt that anyone would have said they were fans of *Dungeons & Dragons*. And yet, at that meet, I bought a number of fanzines. By the logic of some of those who research fan studies, these were not fanzines: they were produced by enthusiasts, and there was no media text as a fan object. And yet is such pedantry really in the interests of scholarly enquiry? The RPG fanzines I bought were self-described as fanzines, and they resembled the fanzines of other areas, most notably science fiction. This was, of course, sometimes because those who produced the fanzines were science fiction fans and drew on the culture with which they were already familiar.

My contact with RPG fandom extended effortlessly into other areas. This was because the fandoms were far from being hermetically sealed communities. As already mentioned, wargaming and RPGs shared common origins. The related hobby of the board game *Diplomacy* played by post had an extensive community of fanzines and conventions, and there was considerable overlap between the two, with many RPG fanzines also conducting games of *Diplomacy* in the manner of the *Diplomacy* fanzines. Again, as already noted, there was an overlap between science fiction

fandom and RPGs, not least in shared interests: many RPG players were also fans of science fiction. *White Dwarf*, the British professional RPG magazine, invited noted science fiction fan and writer David Langford to write a regular column.

At university, I became a member of the science fiction society, which included a number of RPG players. It also included fans of the *Doctor Who* television series, who produced fanzines of their own. Three of these fans went on to professional involvement with the world of *Doctor Who* (one was interviewed in research for this paper).

Upon graduation, my first job was as an editor for Games Workshop, at the time the world’s largest hobby games company, and the publisher of *White Dwarf*. This was seen by many fans as involving a transformation: becoming a “pro” meant ceasing to be a “fan.” This was not how I saw matters, but it was a common perception. Indeed, the company insisted that I stop editing my fanzine upon assuming my post.

When the company relocated, I left it in order to remain in London. I resumed many fan activities, but at the same time I continued “pro” work, including a series of books for Penguin, and articles for *White Dwarf* and other professional publications. A part of my income derived from professional activities related to the area in which I considered myself a fan. I therefore experienced the ambiguity of the distinction between fan and pro that is the subject of this paper.

During this time, in the mid- to late 1980s, many fanzines transformed into “personal” zines. Although they were still recognizably fanzines, they were no longer tied explicitly to a single fandom. Rather, they expressed the enthusiasms—explicitly fan-related or otherwise—of their creators. In this sense, they were the direct ancestors of modern online social media: blogs, Facebook, Twitter and so on. The writers of such fanzines referred to “fandom”—of which they were part—but the lack of a distinct fan object to their publications makes it clear

that this was a general community or subculture, related to but not dependent on fan-objects in the form of media texts. Like most communities, this fandom was heterogeneous. Its boundaries were highly ambiguous. Although the fandom I refer to was primarily British, it was not limited geographically. My own area of fandom had connections with US fans, as well as fandoms in other countries including Australia, Germany and Norway. Nor was it limited to the areas of interest previously mentioned. Other connected areas included comics and music fandoms.

The attitude towards fans and pros was subtly different in the various fandoms, but there nevertheless appeared to be a remarkable commonality of understanding of fandom itself, a shared understanding which made it possible for these disparate fields to interact. A common notion which mirrored the Marx-derived theory of a division between producer and consumer was that fanzines and other fan works do not partake of commercial culture because they are free or run on a non-profit basis. However, this notion runs into problems, just as Fiske's division was critiqued by later writers. Examples of not-for-profit enterprises which operate commercially are legion. Moreover, in many fields of production there are cases of creation and production being undertaken even though they will yield no direct commercial return. Professional writers are now expected to promote their own works. Such promotion involves activities ranging from personal appearances to the crafting of advertising copy. This work is not rewarded directly, and yet it would be instantly recognizable as commercial, since it is performed in support of the activities which do yield a return. What, then, of the writing a writer does prior to obtaining a contract? Many writers craft a huge body of material before they achieve commercial success. In many cases, this work is not commercially published. In some cases it is published in fanzines or other not-for-profit publications. Most writers would argue that such work was an essential part of their learning

the craft of writing. In that sense it is inextricably bound up with the later commercial success.

Similarly, many fanzine editors have commercial agendas. In my own case, ironically, though I had no commercial agenda, and enthusiastically embraced the non-commercial ideology of fandom, my first job was essentially a commercial extension of my fan productivity. I also encountered some fanzine editors who were explicitly viewing their fan activity as a means of access to the professional world. The examples given in the interviews presented here offer other perspectives on this issue.

### Other points of view

My own direct experience of the apparent conflict between fan and professional was in the area of role-playing games. At the same time, as noted above, I was in contact with *Doctor Who* and science fiction fandoms. I therefore sought out subjects for interview who were involved in these areas of fandom during the same period I was, and who were also professionally active within those fields. My aim was to compare responses and ideas about fandom: selecting a relatively narrow sample, disparities would be all the more noticeable.

Five subjects were interviewed. Of the five, four were male. Obviously it is impossible to match the gender ratios of fandom perfectly—indeed there is some dispute over various formulations of fan gender ratios—but it does reflect the imbalance of most of those fandoms covered. Of the three mentioned above, RPGs and *Doctor Who* were overwhelmingly male dominated. Science fiction had proportionally more women but still fewer women than men.

One of the first notable features of the subjects chosen is that, although each was chosen for their association with a single fandom, all but one revealed that they were involved in multiple fandoms. The fifth, David Langford, although a science fiction fan, had nevertheless written a regular column in the RPG magazine *White*

*Dwarf*.

**Lee Gold** entered US science fiction fandom in 1967, and through it subsequently discovered RPGs. She has edited the RPG fanzine *Alarums & Excursions* since 1975. She has also been active in filk singing (considered by some to be an offshoot of SF fandom) and the Society for Creative Anachronisms. She has had four role-playing game books published, as well as a trilogy of SF novels.

**David Langford** is a science fiction fan and professional writer. He has published *Ansible*, which is a fanzine and informal newsletter of British SF fandom, since 1979. He has an extensive list of published books, mostly SF. Writing became his livelihood in 1980. He wrote a column in the RPG magazine *White Dwarf* between 1983 and 1988.

**Dave Morris** is a professional writer of novels (especially tie-in novels), gamebooks and comics. He has also written computer games and books about them. He wrote professionally for role-playing games magazines, reversing the usual trend by subsequently writing for fanzines and editing his own.

**Justin Richards** is a prolific author of books and audio dramas, especially those based on *Doctor Who*. He is also the creative consultant for the BBC's *Doctor Who* book range. In his teens he joined the Doctor Who Appreciation Society (DWAS), attending the first *Doctor Who* convention in 1977. He subsequently edited a *Doctor Who* fanzine called *The Black and White Guardian* and was active in the fandom of the time.

**Marcus L Rowland** was, like Lee Gold, an SF fan who discovered RPGs through SF fandom, though in his case it was in the UK. He went on to be one of the most prolific contributors to British

professional RPG magazines, and subsequently electronically published his own RPG, *Forgotten Futures*, using a shareware model.

The subjects were not asked precisely the same questions, because it was necessary to accommodate differences in the fan experience. Instead, the questioning concentrated on three key areas, with subjects given opportunity and encouragement to elaborate on their answers within the time available.

The three key areas were: attitudes towards fandom, the transition to being a professional, and the nature of identity related to those roles.

#### *Fan experience*

Richards (2014) describes distinct phases of fan experience. The initial phase, corresponding with membership of the DWAS, is based on more-or-less passive consumption: "... going to conventions and having stuff told to you, or watching displays or presentations or whatever." For him, this phase took place during early teens.

Richards considered his active involvement in fandom to start with a review of the *Doctor Who* story Logopolis, published in the fanzine *Frontier Worlds*. He associates this active phase with a greater critical engagement with the text. Yet even in this critical phase, *Doctor Who* fans were not antagonistic to the programme itself as a whole.

It is also interesting to speculate on the extent to which these phases are influenced by wider developments, both in fandom, and beyond. For example, Richards says of his own fanzine *The Black and White Guardian*: "We wanted to do something that was different, that was irreverent. I suppose it was the time of *The Young Ones*." The latter was an anarchic television comedy that felt like a significant break from the staid comedy of the past. It was seen as part of a comedy movement that was viewed in much the same way as punk rock had been five years earlier, i.e. as an iconoclastic reimagining, a rejection of established values. Punk is closely



associated with an explosion of music fanzines, the most celebrated of which was *Sniffin' Glue* (Chick, 2011). With these two influential cultural movements happening so closely together, it is unsurprising they had an impact on the youthful fans of the UK. At the same time as *The Black and White Guardian*, for example, the RPG fanzine *DragonLords* was blazing a similar irreverent trail, which became a model for a remarkable number of other UK RPG fanzines.

Marcus L Rowland (2014) says of fandom: “As far as I’m concerned, it’s meeting with people who have similar interests to me ... [Fans] communicate with other fans, share interests, produce what I would loosely describe as fan-works, get pissed together.” Rowland spoke of the awareness of multiple fandoms. Indeed, at the convention at which I interviewed him he was chairing a panel discussing fandoms and their life-cycles. Clearly SF is considered the eternal fandom, the trunk of the tree, whereas other more ephemeral fandoms—Rowland mentioned laser disk fandom and Oolite fandom—are akin to the leaves. This awareness of other fandoms may be a relatively recent phenomenon, however. SF fan and writer David Langford says: “I remember the general air of slack-jawed wonderment that such things [other fandoms] could exist when *Star Trek* fans started to do their own conventions in the 1970s.” Clearly the nature even of the “trunk” of SF fandom has changed drastically:

There was a time when [fandom] was pretty well synonymous with publishing fanzines, usually of the giveaway variety ... Because of the spread of media, there are more people now who think of themselves as fans even if they are not, as it were, in contact. You don’t have to *find* fandom—it comes and advertises. (Langford, SF fandom, 2014)

The phenomenon that Langford describes reduces the barriers to entry of fandom; at the same time it reduces the necessity for a fan to be active.

... some older fans especially seem to mourn

the range of freedoms and flexibilities they associate with the structural distance imposed by the old order, find the increased accessibility and familiarity of creators somewhat disturbing, and regard the greater visibility and legibility of fandoms to producers and the broader world with misgivings if not trepidation. (Cryptoxin, 2006)

This point connects with Richards’s comments about distance in the next section. As well as comments about changing characteristics of fandom, it was noticeable that interviewees were not uniformly positive about fans. For example, Morris says of fans:

It does seem a lot of them, they don’t use it as a springboard to imagination; they use it as a springboard to a database of stuff, which they like moving around. I guess they’re nature’s accountants. I’ve always thought of fans in that way, but some fans, then, a tiny minority seem to go somewhere. (Morris, 2014)

And Richards comments:

I never really rated fan fiction. It wasn’t something I was interested in, because *Doctor Who* was on the telly. Once the programme finished I could see a place for it. But no, why would I want something second-rate written by someone who couldn’t get a proper writing job? (Richards, 2014)

The devaluing of fan creativity in this way is quite common outside fandom, but it is interesting to see the same attitude espoused by those who have been active fans. On the other hand, when asked to compare his professional writing of gamebooks with his editorship of the RPG fanzine *Eye of All-Seeing Wonder*, Dave Morris says: “I’m much more interested in *Eye of All-Seeing Wonder*: I mean, that’s a passion.”

*Transition from fan to professional*

Richards comments that when he was a fan, he did not see fans as in a separate oppositional role to the producers. Rather they were on a continuum. “People I knew from fandom went to work at the BBC.” (Richards, 2014)

In the world of *Doctor Who*, therefore, the possibility of becoming a producer was clearly there, and was not regarded as a betrayal or a rejection of fandom. Richards draws attention to Andrew Smith and Matthew Waterhouse, both fans who became part of the production of the programme in the 1980s, the former as a writer and the latter as an actor. While Waterhouse did attract criticism, this was more for the unsympathetic nature of his character and performance than his status as a fan *per se*; Smith attracted nothing like this opprobrium, and his script is well-regarded by fans, even though he was only 18 when he wrote it.

Indeed, at least partly inspired by the example of Smith, Richards later submitted scripts himself. These were not accepted, but Richards persevered, and after the show was taken off the air in 1989 he was successful in having *Doctor Who* novels published.

David Langford, like most SF fans, read SF from an early age, and wrote his own stories. In a sense, there is a distinct category of “fan fiction” consisting of the works of young writers. Unlike in Japan, writing original fiction is a typical element in the acquisition of literacy in the English-speaking world. Thus it is normal for most children—not just those who go on to be fans—to have written a number of stories. Inevitably, these stories will be influenced by the tastes and interests of the writer, and in this sense, they can be considered fan fiction. The difference is that the active fan continues writing even after the pedagogic necessity has been removed. An analogy would be with learning a musical instrument. Many children learn to play, at school or at private lessons. But only a certain proportion continues to do so after the lessons cease.

Contact with SF fandom offers external support to the young writer who is motivated to keep writing. Langford attended SF conventions for a number of years before making his first sale. From here it took a number of years of increased sales before he could support himself from his writing. But while expanding professional activity, Langford was at the same time active as a fan. Indeed, he still publishes a fanzine which is available for free. He comments that he does accept donations, however. Fandom is often characterised as a gift economy (Hellekson, 2009), which works not in a directly reciprocal, but in a circular, or shared, sense. Yet there clearly is interaction with a money economy. In some fandoms, such as RPG or *Doctor Who*, fanzines were sold as products—albeit usually for cost rather than for profit. In SF fandom, the donation Langford refers to is reminiscent of the charitable “fan funds” set up to allow fans deemed worthy to attend distant, or overseas conventions. (Langford, Fan funds, 2012)

Similarly, Rowland’s initial submissions to the professional RPG magazine *White Dwarf* were as fan activity. Since such creation was the norm in SF fandom, it seemed natural to him to do so, and there was no obvious categorical distinction between *White Dwarf* and RPG fanzines. As more and more of Rowland’s submissions were accepted for publication, he realised that it was a way of making money to supplement his income: “I got sucked in by economic forces, I suppose.” (Rowland, 2014)

The fan-professional boundary was even more blurred in the case of Lee Gold’s seminal RPG magazine *Alarums & Excursions*. It is technically an amateur press association (APA), which means that contributors pay for their own contributions to be printed, in return for which they receive the magazine. Some APAs are closed, meaning they are only accessible to their contributors (for example *Frank’s APA*, cited in Mason, 2014), but *Alarums & Excursions* has had relatively large sales to other interested readers.

Early issues had articles by professionals like Dave Hargrave and Steve Perrin, Ed Simbalist and Wilf Backhaus, Wes Ives and Phil McGregor, as well as a couple of somewhat confused letters from E. Gary Gyax [the editor of *Dungeons & Dragons*]. But the bulk of the zines came (as they still do) from amateur roleplayers. Some writers loved a particular game system, some had house rules, some wrote about roleplaying in general. Some wrote fiction or poetry or songs, but most of the stories that appeared were writeups. Some of us went on to become semi-pro game writers or editors. Some stayed amateurs (or returned to that distinguished status after a while). (Gold, 2012)

In *Alarums & Excursions*, the complexity of the continuum between fan and professional is revealed. One could argue that the participating professionals were doing so in order to promote their professional work, but a close reading suggests otherwise. A mechanistic system of valuing labor in monetary terms struggles to account for the work being done in such a venue. Clearly it has value to the participants, but there is little privileging of the authorized “professional” over the amateur “fan”. In *Alarums & Excursions*, the contributors with professional credentials are operating on equal terms with those who do not. Indeed, some of the most respected contributors have few, if any, professional sales. It seems that fan and professional are two possible approaches to production, which may be taken separately, or in tandem.

### *Identity*

Langford comments that professional writing and fan activity “... seem to be parallel tracks, really. One could quite easily have stayed with the writing without getting into the conventions side of things or publishing fanzines, but it turned out I liked it both ways.” (Langford, SF fandom,

2014) He goes on to say, “I didn’t feel terribly professional until I actually quit work to write in 1980.”

Richards says that at no point did he think: “I’m a pro now, I’m not a fan.” He still regards himself as a fan, but makes a subtle distinction: he is a fan of the classic series. This is the series prior to its cancellation as a television show in 1989. He watches and enjoys the new series, but has a different sort of relationship. Reflecting on the difference, he suggests that being a fan is a relationship with something you are slightly distanced from. “I think that once you are involved you have a different sort of relationship.”

An interesting analogy here is with sport. Sandvoss (2005) cites the example of Uruguayan international footballer Gustavo Poyet, who was a fan of Peñarol until he was professionally required to play against them. Yet this is not a universal state of affairs, and there are other professional footballers for whom the situation does not arise, or is coped with in a different way. Richards does not see any conflict between being a fan of the classic series of *Doctor Who*, and being a professional working on the published material (mainly for the new series, although some of his books relate to the classic series).

On the other hand, I experienced a sense of conflict myself when found that my job as a professional involved the promotion of products of which the fan in me was highly critical. As Richards noted, there seems to be a different relationship involved, and it is the management of the relationship that determines what happens. For some, the option taken by Gustavo Poyet is the only possible one: to reject the fan identity and replace it with the professional one. Others, such as myself, attempt to maintain both, but are made uncomfortable by the dissonance between the two. Still others manage to keep their identities on Richards’s or Langford’s “parallel tracks.”

One factor in the relationship may derive from a key difference between the fan and the professional, identified by Richards: the

fan “doesn’t have to think things through.” A professional position involves responsibility, whereas a fan is unlikely to have such responsibilities because of the “slight distance” which Richards suggests lies between the fan and their object. This doesn’t mean that the fan is distanced emotionally, of course; in fact fans may be emotionally far closer to their fan objects even than their creators.

Lee Gold takes up the point about responsibilities.

I don’t think [Los Angeles Science Fiction fans] thought of fans as purer than pros, but the responsibilities (legal and social) were obviously different. Consider, for instance, fan feuds (which ideally a professional author or editor or publisher shouldn’t get obviously involved in). (Gold, 2012)

The nature of the responsibilities involved varies not only by the specific position held, but also by fandom.

SF fandom (unlike, say, baseball or movie star fandom) consists of doing amateur stuff, not merely appreciating professionals, and it’s probably not a coincidence that role-playing game fandom took off among SF fans, whose fan activity is not focused on being an audience but on 1) staffing and putting on and participating in SF fan clubs, 2) staffing and putting on and participating in SF fan conventions, 3) staffing and publishing and contributing (and trading for) to SF fan publications: e.g. fanzines, APAs, .... Hence the standard SF fan-drawn distinction between “organized fandom” vs 1) on one hand the non-organized groups of people who just like SF but don’t get together to socialize and 2) on the other hand, the conventions and magazines and so on created to make a profit from attendees and subscribers who come to stare at the professionals. Check out the difference between fan-run Trek conventions and profit-

oriented Trek conventions, for instance. (Gold, 2012)

Gold’s final point here suggests that even Abercrombie and Longhurst’s petty producers come in different varieties: the fan variety and the profit-oriented variety.

As already noted, in comics fandom there is a higher proportion of fan-professionals. It may be that the threshold at which someone is considered a fan involves less activity than, for example, SF. SF fan Rowland, for example, would not consider himself a fan of comics even though he reads a lot of comics: “You can certainly be a passive reader of something and not be a fan of it. Being active is an important part if you’re going to be more than just a consumer of something.” (Rowland, 2014) On the other hand Morris, who had not considered himself a comics fan, had cause to change his mind: “I must be a fan of Marvel comics of the Silver Age, because there are guys in America who have blogs on this, and they’ll ask ‘Does anyone know who did the inking on this?’ and I’ll know.” (Morris, 2014) After professional success with gamebooks, novels, tie-in non-fiction and computer games, Morris started writing a comic professionally (Morris, Hartas, & Koutsis, 2010). He found that he really enjoyed the experience. As a child, he had written comics—this corresponds to the young writer fan fiction alluded to above—but he is careful to note that although he was reading Marvel comics, he did not write derivative works, but invented his own world of superheroes.

We thus arrive at a distinction in the usage of “fan”. Morris considers himself a fan of the medium, rather than of specific texts in that medium. Such a position is rarely acknowledged by scholars of fan studies who focus on media fandom, and who are primarily interested in audience reception and derivative works. It is perhaps no coincidence that Morris is also a role-player; this is a field in which fans are clearly fans of the medium rather than of the text.

## Conclusion

Early theorizing about fans drew on Marx to construct an overly simplistic binary distinction between hegemonic professional producers on the one hand, and powerless fan consumers on the other. Later work has gone a long way to explode the distinction, and to suggest that regarding the two roles as categorically different is essentially an ideological imposition. The research that forms the basis of this paper contains many specific cases where the failings of the theoretical distinction between fan and producer are made clear. Some of the clearest derive from the variation between different fandoms in the level of activity expected of fans, and the extent to which the fan object is a proprietary media property, rather than the medium itself.

“Fan” and “professional” are revealed as two different means of approach to the fan object, and it is possible for these to be “parallel tracks.” One way in which this might be achieved is through segmentation. There has been a tendency to consider fandom as a rather monolithic category, and this tendency is encouraged by fans themselves, who are in the habit of referring to fandom as a single entity. While there clearly is a perception of a single overarching concept, the research here has shown that fans and fan professionals frequently “segment” their involvement. Examples would be the multiple fandoms discussed by Rowland at his convention panel, and the specifics of “Silver Age Marvel” as the object of Morris’s comics fandom, in addition to the distinction between being a fan of an object, and being a fan of a medium. This segmentation of fan involvement may repay further investigation.

On the other hand, there are examples of dissonance between the two tracks, where there is conflict caused by differences in approach to the same object. As noted, professionals may be expected to have a sense of responsibility, not only to other fans, and to their vision of the fan object, but to others. In the case of popular

media properties, this responsibility is to the mass market, which is understood to be made up of consumers who are less active in their response to the media text than are fans, and to the owners of the media property itself.

There is also alienation caused by factors related to status and attitude. Professionals may assume a sense of superiority which derives from the higher (monetary) value society places on their work, as compared to the efforts of fans. Conversely, many fans reject the sense of superiority, because they value the qualities that derive from the *lack* of responsibility: the freedom that comes from not having to try to be popular, not being constrained by the monetary market.

Research has explored the non-commercial aspects of fandom and its gift economy, but there is a danger of universalizing such characteristics. Even within the relatively narrow range of fandoms examined in the present research, a spread of attitudes was found. It would be reasonable to hypothesize that a full range, from the commercial market, to total anti-commercialism, could be found within “fandom” considered as the totality of fan activity. Thus, such characteristics cannot be taken as definitional of fandom. “Given that fandom at its core remains a form of spectatorship, fan places are places of consumption.” writes Sandvoss (2005). In the wide view Sandvoss is, to be blunt, wrong.

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