Of Fans and Discourse

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Word Count: 1700+
Themes: Fandom, social media
Major Warnings: Discussions of bullying

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Intro

Platforms are a way for a diverse population to interact. Many of these people are fans of popular culture or underground alternative media. The following section investigates emerging artist Leon's experience with fan interactions online, and how platforms affected his experiences. This experience is not meant to be prescriptive or holistically reflective of any single fan community, but rather one narrative of how many fans interact with one another through these platforms.

The following illustration, artist statement, and interview reflect Leon's experience as a silent fan navigating the variety of different platforms online.

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Terms

There are many terms within fan communities that people use to discuss their favourite media as well as other fans within their own communities. Collected from fan-centric online encyclopaedia, Fanlore.org, here are a few terms that will be handy for this section:

Fandom
1. A community of fans participating in fan activity and interacting in some way, whether through discussions or creative works. The interaction may be face-to-face at gatherings such as conventions, or written communication, either off- or online.

Wank

1. A loud and public online argument, often involving many participants outside of the initiating members, and often devolving into side-taking, hyperbole, and personal attacks. Use of "wank" may especially indicate a debate occurring over and over with nobody ever changing their minds.

Note: This term has been more commonly referred to as "discourse" in recent fandom interactions.

Discourse

1. A fan term for discussion. It is sometimes capitalized, implying that the Discourse is about a particular topic or is conducted in a certain way.

Note: Previously referred to as "wank" in older fandom interactions.

Fanfiction

1. A work of fiction written by fans for other fans, taking a source text or a famous person as a point of departure. Also shortened to "fanfic" or "fic".

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Artist Statement

This illustration is meant to resemble my personal, but not exclusive, experience with fandoms, consumption, and politics on the internet. I wanted to show the concept of a bystander: through the eyes of someone witnessing the negative and positive aspects of as a result of these three subjects colliding and clashing. I chose to illustrate this in a deformed style with not entirely accurate proportions or angles to emphasize how strange it feels to be on a middle ground, and sometimes separated from connecting with others about something you enjoy.

I have witnessed both a lot of turmoil and praise when it comes to fandoms, especially ones that rapidly grow as a result of more inclusive television shows. I think there are many positive things to more accepting TV shows being produced, but sadly a lot of people will take them and "critique" them to near death. By this, I'm referring to how some people go out of their way to find something wrong with a show and try to take it out on fans who otherwise enjoy the content. Nothing will ever be good enough for these

types of consumers, and this not only builds a sour aspect to newcomers of the fandom, but also ruins the enjoyment for others. Situations like this have sadly resulted in extensive bullying and harassment towards people who just want to enjoy the content in any way they can. People have received death threats because of confrontations that have occurred within fandoms.

I personally cannot stand things of that nature; it's ridiculous. No show will ever be perfect; it will always have grey areas. I think people need to take things less seriously, but still be proud that more unconventional topics are being normalized. And not just about inclusive shows—these fans need to enjoy what they can without wearing down something so much it becomes a miserable experience instead. Television is for entertainment, and if you aren't pleased there are ways to express that without attacking others and ruining the good qualities of the show itself. If anything, you can stop watching.

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The following interview I had with Leon contextualizes this piece about fan interaction and consumption on online platforms.

How do you define platforms? This can literally be anything: in terms of games, social media, a level, etc.

For me "platforms" is a means of connection/interaction—like social media platforms where you are connecting with the site itself as well as the other people on it. But for video games you're interacting with the actual game, making choices and whatnot, you can also play with other people and connect that way. So, [platforms are] a general place or means of interaction for many purposes.

Do you think fandoms have an influence on these platforms?

I think they definitely do. Fandoms can be born from platforms and spread throughout them. Like with videogames, a fandom can be created from fans of a particular game, and then use social media to talk about and create more content and connect with other fans.

So, in your opinion, how do you think these platforms affect fandom? Like you mentioned, fandoms can be born out of a particular media—like games!— and then use social media to connect with others. Do you think this can happen vice versa as well? Like social media affecting a fan community?

Yeah, totally! It does make it super easy for the fandoms to grow because more people connect and continue building. But in some cases it makes it easy for people to cause problems and discourse and turn a lot of people off to content because of negative confrontations and bullying.

You've described yourself as a "silent stalker" type. Could you elaborate on that? Like why you'd rather observe interactions than get involved in them?

Umm, I guess it's because of past problems I've had with people [...] I have social anxiety and can be a mess when I'm trying to be confident or stand up to people. Also, I don't always know the whole story? [...] I know it's possible for people to take things out of context and make others sound terrible when something totally different happened.

I don't think people shouldn't help each other, but I think that if it doesn't directly affect you or your friend you shouldn't make it your business? Like [getting involved in situations] can help with followers [from one fandom] attract other people in [other] fandoms, which has occurred multiple times.

[*CUT FOR LENGTH*]

So just going back to the idea about platforms: How do you think platforms affect politics?

I think they make it easier to manipulate political issues and topics, but also easier to spread/ reach more important political issues and topics. Since a lot of people (i.e., almost everyone, haha) have smartphones and connection to the internet and social media 24/7, it's easy for news outlets to leave out details here and there and leave a lot of things vague since we're reading it and not hearing it. They blur the lines a little. Not always, but sometimes.

But, a lot of movements like Black Lives Matter and other movements for equality are spread faster and farther. While our news stations can be selective to our country, social media connects the world. We all see the same or similar issues throughout it, and can actually hear more about what's going on outside our country.

What about for your artwork?

Platforms help to spread my artwork to more than the five people around me, lol. I can put it out there for, and like I said earlier, the entire world to have access to. And that's really cool, and it makes me excited that so many people could be exposed to what I create. I'm honestly struggling to get back into being consistent like I once was, but it's reassuring knowing there's so many opportunities.

Also, seeing other's art through platforms help motivate me so, so much. My favourite artists have always inspired me to make art and it's wonderful being able to connect to them so easily.

What are the worst parts of (online) fandom?

I think the worst parts are how it's easier for hateful people to openly share their hateful and gross opinions, art, etc and how there's not really much you can do about it? Like, "freedom of speech" and all that, but there's not really an effective system that helps prevent online bullying or harassment. It's taken as a joke or ineffectively dealt with from what I've seen at least.

And the best parts?

The best parts! You can make so many friends and talk about the stuff that you mutually love and enjoy experiencing. And how great things like our [friend group's] Discord was made! Haha! You can just have fun making silly art and fanfics and other content for others to enjoy too. You can meet lifelong friends over the internet usually through fandoms and that's wonderful!

It creates safe spaces for a lot of people to escape to, as well! If things at home or work or whatnot aren't that great, it's a great stress reliever and source of happiness.

I totally agree with that! As much as it can be a horrible place for many, there are some really good [people] that you can befriend—all because you like the same show. It's kind of amazing.

Exactly!! [...] It's great!

You can find so many likeminded people for when you feel alone [...] You could never do that before. The only downside is that they live far away and you have no money to visit them right away, lol. But it's worth it once you do.

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To recap, Leon's story is not a comprehensive reflection of how all fans interact with each other online, but rather one artist's narrative within a greater community. Though fandoms may get a bad reputation for being toxic and harmful, there are still many communities filled with positive fan experiences. As online platforms connect people to create relationships in new ways, it's necessary to remember that there is a human being on the other side of the screen. The most important message—as with any platform someone may interact with—is for people to think critically when choosing what they consume and to understand how their consumption affects others.

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Artist info

Follow Leon online for more illustrations and fanart!
Twitter: @aiilovh
Blog: aiilovh.tumblr.com

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Edited (2021/03): Discrepancies in format, wording, and spelling in the above documents and the printed publication from 2017 were done to update Leon's name, pronouns, and contact info. This document also corrects mistakes missed before print.