

# Playing with Identity: Fan Role Playing on Twitter

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## Abstract

The participatory internet has revolutionized fandoms, making possible de-territorialized virtual fan communities with enormous global memberships. The article draws on Fiske's notion of the autonomous 'cultural economy' produced by ordinary 'active' audiences, Jenkins' notion of an emergent 'participatory culture' spearheaded by popular culture fans, and Huizinga's seminal study of 'play', to analyse two fan communities of *Harry Potter* and *The Vampire Diaries* on the social media platform, *Twitter*, focusing on fan role-playing, where fans either parodically masquerade as fictional characters while commenting on usually topical events, or interact in dramatic dialogues in the guise of fictional characters. The role-playing can be seen as a ludic *playing with identity* that foregrounds subaltern agency.

**Keywords:** Fandom, role-play, identity, fan communities, online communities, Twitter, Harry Potter, The Vampire Diaries.

With the rise of social media, fans of popular culture texts such as films and TV series have taken to new media platforms, particularly *Twitter*, to socialize and interact with each other. These fandoms manifest themselves with 'fan-talk', fan art and photography, fan fiction, fan videos, and, importantly, fan role-playing, all of which work to sustain grassroots fan virtual communities on the Internet. Fans use the characters and plots of their admired texts as springboards for creative and original improvisations. This essay will focus on our 2011-2013 ethnographic study of fan role-playing on

the enormous *Twitter* fandoms of *Harry Potter* (novels and films) and *The Vampire Diaries* (novels and TV series), which have received scant attention. In the popular (and often academic) imagination, consumers of media texts are traditionally divided into a passive mass of easily manipulated ‘dupes’, and a minority of hyper-active fan/atics whose zealotry casts doubt upon their sanity (Jenkins 2006b). This essay, by making analytic sense of the various types of fan online role-playing, will break with both these extreme accounts in order to locate the contemporary popular culture fan within an autonomous cultural economy (Fiske 1989; 1992) involving a series of practices and assumptions that reveal major shifts in our understanding of authorship, of contemporary (postmodern) culture, of identity, and indeed of the very nature of reality itself, whose constitutive fictionality suddenly rises into provocative visibility.

### **Qualitative Netnography**

The research was modelled on a cultural studies qualitative ‘netnography’ (Kozinets 2002). Participant observation (Brewer 2000: 59) was pursued for over two years (often at all times of the day and night to accommodate the time differences of its 24-hour per day global environment) of the ‘natural setting’ of two virtual communities on *Twitter* of the *Harry Potter* and *The Vampire Diaries* fandoms. User profiles (particularly those involving role-playing), fan conversations (in real time), the user accounts of media professionals such as actors, producers and writers connected with the above texts, role-playing texts, fan fiction, fan art, fan videos, blogs, and various other related online content which were either uploaded to *Twitter* or which fans provided links to other sites to access (such as *Facebook* (Social network), *Instagram* (Image sharing), *Tumblr* (Blog), *YouTube* (Video hosting)), were systematically captured, mostly from screen-capping. Six role-players were selected for major semi-structured interviews (Brenner 2006: 357) through purposive sampling (Oliver 2006), three from each of the two fandoms.

### **Fandom Theory**

The rise of the Internet has taken fandom from what was once a more

‘underground’ cultural practice amongst small grassroots groups (local clubs, conventions, small magazines distributed by post) to a mainstream practice on a worldwide scale, accessible to everyone at the click of a button (Marchione 2009: 12). The user-friendly nature of the Internet makes possible the existence of a great many 24-hour per day gigantic de-territorialized transnational fan communities, what Anderson calls non-geographical ‘cultural tribes of interest’ (2006: 63), most notably on *Twitter*, the ‘user-generated content’ micro-blog site that enables short messages to be published online in the public domain from user accounts.

Fans can be defined as a ‘collective of people organized socially around their shared appreciation of a pop culture object or objects’ (Baym 2007: 14). Fandom studies is however further interested in fans as highly active and interactive audiences who creatively generate a host of aesthetic texts inspired by the texts they admire, as well as the making ‘from below’ of virtual and autonomous fan communities, with their voluntary and decentralized sociality, ‘that lie outside that of the cultural industries yet share features with them’ (Fiske 1992: 30).

Controversially, for Fiske (1989; 1992), arguing against the political economy approach to the media (where economic control leads to ideological domination), popular culture is created by ordinary people within a ‘cultural economy’ *autonomous* of elite interests and control, and is done so through active audiences who treat the products of the mass media and commodities as ‘raw materials’ with which creatively to construct meanings and identities that exceed the interests of the elite. Media texts are ‘re-signified’ to articulate meanings and identities of value to ordinary people which are often rebelliously distinct from hegemonic values. Fans were seen in this light as particularly active audiences.

For Jenkins (1992; 2006a; 2006b; 2009), the elaborate, especially Internet-based, creative performances of fans – fan fiction of various kinds, fan art, fan videos, fan conventions, fan talk, cosplay (dressing up as your favourite fictional pop culture character at public events), role playing, and so on – speaks of an emergent democracy-enhancing *participatory culture* which, in breaking down the oppositions of professional and amateur and producer and consumer, alerts us to the contemporary broad demands of ordinary fans to play a much larger part not only in the consumption of culture, but in its very making (hence the term ‘prosumers’). Fans are no longer content to accept a cultural landscape structured according to an elitist

logic where cultural production is almost entirely in the hands of large media, and where ordinary people are almost wholly the passive receivers of that cultural production, defined therefore as cultural ‘consumers’ (Miller 2011: 87). Instead, fans in their millions are treating media texts they admire as cultural resources from which endless new imaginative textures are woven and which speak more directly of the everyday experiences of ordinary people.

With the emergence of the ‘new media’, particularly of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) and the Internet/World Wide Web, this notion of the ‘active audience’ shifted another gear, since what was clearly happening – and this was even more apparent with Web 2.0 software structured to make possible ‘user generated content’ - was that audiences were not only responding actively to the messages or texts of the media industry, but were actually *manufacturing texts* themselves. Audiences were now described as interactive: ‘interactivity implies some sort of transformative relationship between the user of the media and the media form itself. Encoded into new media is the capacity to transform the actual flow and presentation of the material itself’ (Marshall 2004: 13). With regard to fans, who in pre-Internet days were already actively writing fan fiction although in much smaller numbers, the essentially interactive nature of digital media combined with the essentially active nature of fandom to generate an avalanche of fan creativity and the blossoming of global fan communities on the Internet, such as those to be found on *Twitter*.

## **Identity Theory**

A defining characteristic of the post-modern is the notion that, rather than having subjectivities simply imposed by social institutions, individuals actively construct their (multiple and temporary – Shields 1992: 33) identities (Giddens 1984; 1991), more often than not through the intentional (and sometimes ‘aberrant’) usage of commodities and media texts (Fiske 1989; Bocock 1993). The Internet has greatly enhanced this ability, and Turkle has famously argued that in disembodied cyberspace we have the unprecedented freedom to ‘self-fashion’ identities, leading to online subjectivities characterized by ‘difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation’ (1995:185). This ‘laboratory for the construction and reconstruction of the

self' seems to provide a means for people to explore aspects of their identity which are impossible, or at the least not easy, to construct off-line (1995: 17), including assuming the character of say a vampire or sorcerer.

The performative theories of identity of Goffman and Butler are helpful specifically to understand online role playing. Goffman has alerted us to the ways in which identity is inherently dramaturgical: individuals actively perform various identity-roles in different social contexts (1956); in our case that context is the *Internet*. Butler argued that gender is not natural or innate, but something that emerges from gender identities being acted out – *performed* – with these identities then becoming naturalized through the repetition of these performances (1990). These performances are however for Butler largely the enacting of scripts written by dominant discursive regimes. Online fan role playing as we shall see is precisely the performance of identity, on the stage of *Twitter*. However, the difference to Butler's account is that (a) the role play identities are freely chosen within the autonomous space of the fandom; and (b) working in the opposite direction to Butler's analysis, identity-making is here de-naturalized and exposed as artifice (its inherent theatricality is foregrounded).

## Online Role Play

The focus of this essay is both to articulate in helpful detail the ludic activity of role-playing on the Internet, and to draw larger conclusions from this on the emergent nature of contemporary culture and identity formation.

With both Goffman and Butler in mind, role play is essentially theatrical: as in a play, the actor/role player inhabits a (usually fictional) character and performs actions within the personality traits of that character. The word 'play', when shifting from a noun to a verb, also captures the sense of non-reality (I am playing at being a fire-fighter) also associated with the playing of games. As with children playing games (as opposed to adults working), 'playing' also carries with it ludic suggestions of the imagination being let loose, of creativity and fictional worlds somewhat apart from the 'real world' of responsibility and struggle.

When we academically approach role play we are not merely indulging our enthusiasm for light escapism; instead we follow Huizinga's seminal and still remarkable study, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play*

*Element in Culture* (1949), which made a powerful argument, as the title of his book makes clear, for nothing less than the constitutive role of ‘play’ (and indeed ‘fun’) in the formation of human culture and civilization: ‘a certain play-factor (is) extremely active all through the cultural process and...it produces many of the fundamental forms of social life’ (1949:173). Huizinga (1949: 8-14) isolated these key characteristics of play:

We might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means (1949: 13).

These are all useful to sharpen our understanding of online fandom role play, including the cultural consequences of these ‘fun’ activities. For Huizinga, playing was ‘freedom’ for two reasons: it was entered into ‘voluntarily’ (it was not a ‘task’ or ‘moral duty’), and because it produced meaningful and intensely felt experiences of liberation from the ‘real’ world. Do we find here causality for online role playing, that it is a creative response to the alienations and necessities of ordinary life? If ‘it is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it’, then online role playing can be seen to be deliberately ‘standing outside’ the dominant values of modern societies, which reduce everything to a means towards a profitable end. Instead it is seen – like art generally - as a ‘purposeless’ delight in playing for its own sake that discovers a realm of human behaviour at odds with contemporary life (of course, none of the voluminous fan fiction, art, videos, role playing, etc. is done for payment).

Huizinga’s ‘freedom’ also brings to light the voluntarily assembled communities of online fandoms, that these are not activities imposed from above by elites, but worlds entirely created and sustained by ordinary fans themselves, again stressing the implicit resistance to the ‘real’ world in fan role-playing. For Huizinga, the ‘proper boundaries of time and space’ of play – a tennis court, a theatre, a ‘magic circle’, the world of *Twitter* fandom –

were centrally important, because they demonstrably separated play from ordinary life into an autonomous place (recall Fiske's autonomous fan 'cultural economy') with its own autonomous rules, and indeed play would not be play without these manoeuvres. The 'secrecy' and 'disguise' and masks of play are of course central to online fan role playing, where fans take on the temporary identities of their favourite fictional characters, now helpfully also seen by Huizinga as yet another strategy for play to distance itself from the 'real' world. This is not unlike Bakhtin's (1993) temporary autonomous spaces of carnival, including their encouragement of different temporary identities (the inversion of everyday identities: men dress as women, peasants become kings, etc. Huizinga recognised the connection of play and festivals), where the very autonomy enables a critique of the 'real' world – of its hierarchies, its restraining ideologies, its social identities – to the point where the artifice of the dominant reality becomes liberatingly apparent. Playing, like carnival, can therefore have something of the utopian about it.

With regard to contemporary popular culture, role play can be divided into (1) physical and (2) online virtual role play. Physical role play refers to Live Action Role Play (LARP), which is usually when a group of fans who share similar interests on a certain topic, meet and together re-enact scenes within books or movies (Falk & Davenport 2004: 131). It is common in the U.S where teenagers dress up as their favourite characters and then interact with other 'characters', and is usually associated with 'cosplay' (costume play: getting dressed up in the style of your favourite popular culture fictional character).

*Online* virtual role play can in turn be divided into (1) video game role play (well-known as Role-Playing Games or RPGs), where a participant plays video games which visually recreate locations in a virtual world so that they feel they are actually in a specific real world environment containing a set of rules that restrict and control their actions; and (2) literary or text-based role play on social media Internet sites such as *Twitter*, where communication is dependent almost entirely on writing, and where participants set up an online profile of a (usually) fictional character derived from popular culture, which is what this essay is interested in.

Online literary role-play fits broadly into two categories: (1) where a fan's Twitter account is in the name of a fictional fandom character, such as Dumbledore from *Harry Potter*. The role-player will typically remain in

character when tweeting on *Twitter*, even when commenting on topical events; and (2) where fans take on the identity of a fandom fictional character and interact verbally with other similar role-players, creating as it were a dramatic dialogue between two actors that can go on for hours or even weeks at a time, where they have conversations with one another as though their characters were speaking to one another, as well as role playing scenes together that haven't been seen on a TV show or film before. The first type of role play will be discussed with regard to the *Harry Potter* fandom, and the second, far more complicated, type will be discussed later with regard to *The Vampire Diaries* fandom.

### **Harry Potter: Role play**

There is in online role-playing of the first type often a light-hearted (and even respectful) *parody* of fictional characters, where fans enjoy the often comic remarks made by role-players, the humour coming from the interaction between the fictional character as known by the fans, and the particular contemporary interpretation of that character by the role-player that can be seen on *Twitter*. What is also important is that these characters take on a life beyond the original texts, and often take on a carnivalesque aspect, as Bakhtin (1993) describes, where the seriousness of their original depictions by J.K. Rowling (or in the films) is over-turned in favour of a comedic persona who gently mocks not only the world, but also the character he or she is portraying. Fandom, we need here to say, is therefore not all a mere fawning before the admired text. It also contains a healthy populist carnivalized element of ribald laughter at the original characters, as they move from the culture industries into the domain of popular culture. In character roleplaying this *parody* is precisely the strategy used by players to establish what Fiske as we have seen identifies as subaltern *autonomy*, so that the player/fan is both inside the dominant culture and separate from it.

Role-players show high levels of knowledge about and dedication to the *Harry Potter* series, including the books, films as well as actors and cast information. They do not merely quote sayings of their characters in the series, but personalise their role-play through incorporating an individual character style, mainly sarcasm, and they usually play to the fictitious characters' most dominant personality traits seen within the books and films. Below are a few selected profiles of parody *Harry Potter* accounts.





**The Dark Lord**  
[@Lord\\_Voldemort7](#)  
view full profile --

*Running around leaving scars, collecting my jar of hearts and tearing love apart...*  
[lv7thinks@gmail.com](mailto:lv7thinks@gmail.com) <http://www.lv7thinks.com>

3,643	0	1,837,039	17,589
Tweets	Following	Followers	Listed

In embracing the title of the ‘Dark Lord’, Lord Voldemort - both the *Twitter* character and the fictional character from the *Harry Potter* novels and films - does not ‘follow’ anyone. Instead, he has a large following online (notice he has over 1.8 million followers on *Twitter*). This Voldemort is a satirical and mocking character not found in the books/films and usually speaks about day-to-day topics and anything newsworthy on *Twitter*.



**Dumble-fucking-dory**  
[@Evil\\_Dumbledore](#)  
view full profile --  
Huffle-puffin some Herb

*I'm Dumbledore, bitch! Bacon + Harry Potter = life. If you don't like my tweets either stop following or stop lying. I draw -*  
<http://tiny.cc/901x7>

7,109	666	104,042	698
Tweets	Following	Followers	Listed

This user who role-plays the old and wise Hogwarts Principal, Professor Dumbledore, gives the character an evil twist through the amended name as well as by reinforcing his ‘evil’ through following exactly 666 people. Professor Dumbledore is also ‘re-signified’ as crass, foul-mouthed and a drug-user (the reference to his marijuana habit is through the use of ‘Huffle-

Puffin’, a reference to Hufflepuff.<sup>1</sup>). These very typical acts of re-signification by Fiske’s ‘active audiences’ speak of fan manoeuvres that at once both ‘defer’ to the host text and ‘differ’ from it, in the process making that text relevant and meaningful for popular cultures of ordinary people.



This *Twitter* user who role-plays the character Hermione Granger has taken one of the character’s most notable qualities – her intelligence- and exaggerated it online to arrogant and parodic levels. To describe Hermione as ‘Hermione Fucking Granger’ is of course to take a sweet and innocent girl in a direction quite at odds with her depiction in the novels and films.

## **The Vampire Diaries Role Playing**

The research on the second type of online literary role playing – dramatic dialogic interaction between fans in the guise of fictional characters – was focused on *The Vampire Diaries* fandom on *Twitter*, and works within our theoretical development of Huizinga’s model of play to include the assumption that this centrally involves a *playing with identity*. The (fictional) identities at play on *Twitter* can thus be seen via Huizinga as an experience of ‘freedom’ in both of his senses – as freely chosen identities, and also free of ‘real’ life strictures, where by contrast identities are far more policed and

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<sup>1</sup> Hufflepuff is the name of one of the four founding wizards of Hogwarts School.

determined, just as this identity play is made possible by the play's 'magic circle' autonomy from 'real' life.

That autonomy is in part made possible because of the 'mask' of disembodiment that the Internet enables. Our identity in everyday life is heavily dependent on physical attributes and displayed personality traits when individuals interact on a regular basis. It is an aspect which we are not able to hide or change as it is presented and exposed for people to see. By contrast, multiple aspects of one's identity – or multiple identities - can be displayed online, depending on what aspect users *choose* to show of themselves. This ludic sense of online identity as being open to playful improvisation (including 'blending') away from the more solidified identities of everyday life was understood by the fans I interviewed:

VampFairy23: 'Role-players choose to role-play either characters or the idea of the series because they love it. It is also a good way to escape from your normal identity. It's a way to have fun'.

DDQ: 'I met a guy who role played on my personal account, and he 'lured' me into the world of role playing...☺ I didn't want to start a role play account at first, but after we were Role playing in DM's<sup>2</sup> I thought it best cause we started blending TVD role play with real life ... So I created an account with an Original Character (OC<sup>3</sup>) to his TVD character'.

It is estimated that there are around 9000 TVD role playing accounts (in 2013) on *Twitter*. While some role players try to be as accurate as possible with a fictional character, many role players choose to create new content based on existing information from the *TVD* fandom. Role players are able to bring the characters to life just as much as they are brought to life by the TV show. They have the ability (and freedom) to portray a character in whatever light they choose and can push characters to their limits, engaging with traits in original scenarios rarely or not at all explored in the TV series. Role players that were interviewed derived a sense of gratification during the process, feeling much closer to the character thereafter. This 'customization'

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<sup>2</sup> A DM is a Direct Message, or an Inbox message.

<sup>3</sup> An OC – Original Character is a character that a person creates themselves and has them immersed into a specific fandom.

of fictional TV characters is not unlike how car customizers only truly take ownership of a car – which is to say, place their personality upon it – once they have modified it to their personal desires, whether this be the race, gender or sexual preference of the character.

## **Choosing a Character**

It was discovered that many females were role playing behind male accounts, something that was a little surprising at first, but completely made sense when we realize that the majority of *The Vampire Diaries* fandom consists of females, many of which are teenagers and young adults, and also unsurprising because as we have seen ‘freely’ playing with identities is the essence of role playing. Of course, this also brings to light the persistence of patriarchy: no doubt one of the reasons women gravitate towards male TV roles is the feeling that these afford more freedom to role-players. The research discovered that many role players often start role playing characters that they personally have a strong identification with or interest in, because in order to role play a certain character, one needs to have a deep understanding of his or her personality and how the character would react with other characters in certain situations. This intimate knowledge of individual characters also makes possible the imaginative character improvisations which are central to role playing. Many role players choose characters that are undeveloped or marginal in the TV series, and these mere outlines are then elaborately developed in role play, so that it is often the case that minor or sporadically-appearing characters in the TV series have far more complex and starring lives on *Twitter*. Fans also role play a particular character because they actually disagree with the way the character is portrayed in the TV series, and so the role is re-interpreted from a different fan perspective. As one fan put it in an interview:

DDQ: ‘My then favourite character, Damon Salvatore – vampire – was already taken by my best friend in role play, and I wanted to be able to role play with her, so I chose Klaus, because I liked him too and there was so much to learn about him. And because we didn’t know much about him it was easy to role play him in an AU (Alternate Universe) to start with. And yes, I say ‘Then Favourite

Character’ about Damon – because since role playing Klaus, I’ve come to love him even more than I love Damon. But that has a lot to do with the fact that I think Damon’s character has been ruined on the show’.

The minor *TVD* character, the witch Bonnie Bennett, for example, was seen by the role player (see figure below) as a fascinating underdog figure with a strong moral centre whose character potential remained largely unrealized in *TVD*, and which was explored at length in her role playing. What we therefore find is an endless series of creative interpretations. In the earlier novels, ‘Bonnie’ is a 17-year old girl of white Irish descent with psychic abilities who goes by the name of Bonnie McCullough. In the TV series she transforms into Bonnie Bennett, a 19-year old African-American witch. And she is then interpreted again by this role-player.



For Huizinga, all play involved specific rules (think of games), which contributed to setting the play apart from everyday life. There are of course no rules written down for role playing, but all players definitely learn what is and what is not acceptable through the experience of playing itself, with other role players quick to point out infringements. Many experienced role players are quite outspoken if they do not like the way a certain role player behaves

on the site, and they will comment, criticize, and if they are offended by what they see, will sometimes block or report the person. People are also advised to not role play or share sensitive content with minors or have clear intent to deceive or confuse other users.

Role play can be a simple conversation between characters about a certain issue – which is usually between 30 minutes to an hour, since it is happening in real time and there is a back and forth stream of replies. Or it can be a fully blown story line that unfolds over a long period of time. Story lines can last months, as role players come online and write replies to one another, even if the person who they are role playing with is not online at the time. The role player simply picks up the story as they come online since their replies can be seen on one another's profiles. Story lines are often thought out and discussed before they are role played, as the role players usually liaise with one another beforehand, conversing in Direct Messages in order to get a clear idea of what they'd like to role play. Role playing with others heavily depends on their presence online – if the person is not online, or if they are busy and take long to respond to a message, this affects how long a role play session can be.

### **'In Character' Role Playing (IC)**

'In character' (or 'Staying In Character') refers to the role-player interacting in a way that the chosen fictional character would usually behave. As a role player, it is quite hard to maintain an 'in character' identity; since the original character is obviously not you as an individual, and no role-player can ever be entirely authentic. Role players can only draw aspects from the characters and add their own twists on it. However, in order to be recognised as a good role player, one has to show the ability to portray the character as IC (In Character) as possible, and by role playing as much as possible:

DDQ: 'I try to stay as much in character as I can. My role playing varies from [the character of] Klaus in certain ways and I've chosen to see him as someone who is capable of love and emotions, and made him more likeable than what he is on screen, I guess. I have decided to see past his exterior and look to see –why– he's acting the way he does [on the show and to] give him depth.'

As a TVD RPer, I found that staying as accurate as possible to my character got praise from other well-known and more popular role players...There are different kinds of RPer. RPer who are faithful to their characters 100 percent. RPer who adopt the main aspects of the characters but put their own unique twist to them, so as to make them more dimensional, especially since the show does a bad job of giving a well-rounded picture to each character. Many characters are simply used for certain purposes and are then not seen until much later on the show when they are needed again.

DDQ shows a common perception amongst role players – that the TV series is more like an incomplete text, which encourages role players to give the TV characters more complex and sustained identities (kept alive by being incessantly role played). Indeed, role players that were interviewed also pointed out that some of the plots and traits of their characters were taken from (the enormous resources of) fan fiction rather than the TV series, which also shows how important fan-created content has become.

A role player may change the sexual orientation of his or her character. A character's looks can even be changed through using a different 'face claim' (FC: the physical description of a character) of any person of one's choosing. The majority of role players however use the actor or actress' face that they are role playing. Role players may choose to portray their characters as an antagonist or a hero, and since it is a supernatural series, vampire characters have the ability to choose whether they want their character to be utterly vampiric or with 'their humanity switch turned on' – a phrase used to describe a vampire who chooses to feel emotions like fear, loss, love and sadness. Vampires within the series are also very old, so role players can choose to role play their characters when they were human before they became vampires, or any period that they fancy, up until the present and even the future. Many of the characters on the show have been shown in flashbacks to the late 1800s, 1920s and so on. A certain group of characters are around 1000 years old, thus offering the role player the chance to explore wide ranging time frames. All of these aspects of role playing emphasise the depth of the creative improvisations that role players indulge in.

A solo is a piece of writing from the character's perspective and written by only one person; it is a good way for role players to show their ability and creativity without really interacting with anybody. Many new role

play accounts post a solo in order to share their stories and display their role play talent in order to get followers. Other role players usually follow a person based on this. A solo could be a diary entry, or even a monologue. This is an excerpt from a solo:

Someone was behind me. I should have anticipated it. I'd felt that strange shiver which shot up my spine and coiled in my neck but before I even had a chance to turn around and look, he'd gripped me. 'What the hell are you doing out here?' The glare from the headlights shone across Damon's face, his jaw, sharp and stern as he questioned me with piercing eyes. I squirmed out of Damon's grip, gingerly rubbing my shoulder as I scowled up at him, the spell to obliterate his brain cells being called off in a split of a second. 'I should be asking you that question' I snapped back accusingly.

### **'Out of Character' Role Playing (OOC)**

Many accounts make a clear distinction when they're tweeting IC or OOC ('Out of Character') by indicating through certain symbols ('#OOC' or '//') and the general tone of the tweet. When a person tweets about their real life (RL) and what they are doing, whether it is providing an opinion, or talking about what film they have watched or any other topics that do not concern their online character, they are speaking out of character (and ironically in their own character). In the figure below, we can see how a role player announces he is no longer writing/speaking in character by the use of '#OOC'.





The following example of being OOC is quite curious. PBK makes the out-of-character distinction (//), but isn't talking to another user. She instead talks to her character in her own voice. Essentially, she is talking to herself, but the conversation flows with individual tweets as though her character is present on the site. This interestingly draws our attention to Turkle's (1995) view that the Internet makes possible the performances of multiple identities online. Here a fan actually makes visible both her off-line identity and her separate on-line identity (who do not appear to be getting on that well) while showing us an example of role playing:

*//Damon, this is your PM<sup>4</sup>.*

*Fuck off, bitch.*

*//I will turn you into a rabbit and feed you to your brother if you don't come to bed right now.*

*FINE. Evil bitch PM says it's bedtime, it's bedtime. #offline*

## Storylines

Storylines (or SL's for short) are quite popular when it comes to planned role playing. Role players create their own story lines, whether continuing aspects from the show which were not explained in detail, simply expanding on what has been shown by incorporating their own twists and turns, or inventing altogether different plots. The latter is often referred to as an 'alternate universe' (AU), where one pictures what certain characters would be like outside of their regular scenarios. Role players also often create romances (or 'shipping' (from 'relationship')) - most usually of two characters that are not romantically involved in the TV series).

It is important to realize that role players (and non-role playing fans) are also constantly watching other role players performing, so that fans are not only watching the TV series, but also the supplementary fan-created content (not to mention reading fan fiction, watching fan videos, etc.), so that one has to imagine *The Vampire Diaries* as actually an intricate and dense tapestry of creative texts, some professional, and some amateur, and all available to the fan.

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<sup>4</sup> PM stands for Private Messenger and refers to the human behind the character.

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PBK: ‘I follow about 100 role players from my Damon account, which is my main one. I’m followed by about 400 and I don’t mind Rping with people I don’t follow, as long as I enjoy them. I also have a lot of RPer who follow my personal and I semi-RP with them at times from there’.

## Role Player Profiles

Role Player profiles on *Twitter* are central to the fandom because these identify active role players and other important aspects of the projected character. The example below is the profile of Damon Salvatore, a vampire from *TVD* (played by ‘PBK’, a woman who was interviewed).



A link to a blog is provided: [mr-demonic.tumblr.com](http://mr-demonic.tumblr.com), where much more of the character is explored and discussed. ‘Bi’ (bisexual) refers to the character’s sexual orientation as decided by the role player (Damon Salvatore is portrayed as a heterosexual vampire on the TV show); ‘21+’ means role play and content is only suitable for users over 21. ‘Taken’ refers to the fictional character being off the market in terms of dating. ‘Tied to Alaric’s Bed frame’ is the character’s location.

## Online/Offline Identities

For most role players, keeping their offline and online identities separate is important; besides security issues, it is also because the entire point is to be someone else, and not as it were to reveal the person behind the mask, as if that person is the reality, and the fictional character mere artifice. Furthermore – and this goes to the heart of role playing - one’s invented online identity, because it is entirely chosen, because it can do and say things one’s offline identity could find much more difficult to do, is *usually far more authentically oneself*: PBK explains the reasoning for being cautious and separating her online identity from her offline one:

First, I am working on building a writing career of my own and don’t know if a history of fan fiction is something I would want to open with, and second, my job is demanding, and fairly public, and I would not be hard to find online. I want the identities separate. Writing a lot of gay porn isn’t something I would put in an academic CV.

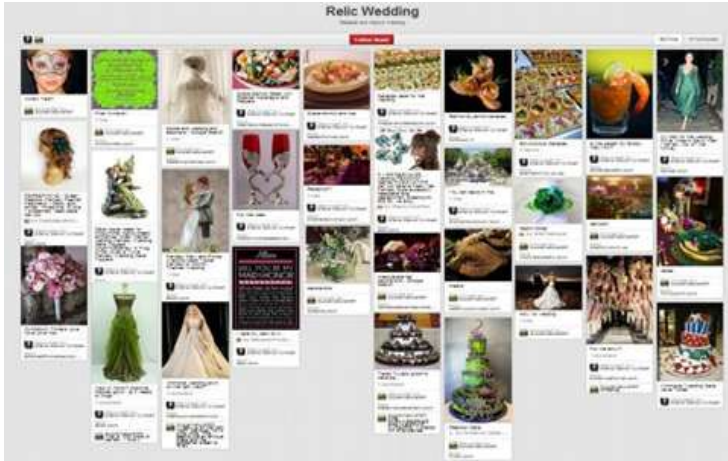
Here online identities appear as more liberated than off-line identities: writing gay porn is acceptable online but not offline in the real world dominated by oppressive ideologies.

## A Wedding in Cyberspace

One of the stronger motivations behind role playing is to place characters from the TV series in romantic relationships (‘shipping’) that have not happened in the TV series, which often leads to online dating by two role-played characters (this is a fictional relationship between fictional characters confined to *Twitter*, and not offline dating by ‘real’ people). For example the witch Bonnie Bennett has not had a decent love interest on the TV show, despite being enormously popular with fans, and this situation is resolved by role playing fans who ‘ship’ her with other male characters such as Klaus or Damon. Online dating between role playing avatars can even lead to marriage, with a full-blown wedding held on *Twitter*.

In a remarkable instance, the role player who RPs the character of Rebekah Mikaelson sent out invitations to her wedding through multiple tweets, inviting her followers and explaining the time and the dress code – it

was a masquerade wedding, therefore attendants were to change their avatars to a picture of their character wearing a mask (not unsurprisingly!). Images of the planned wedding – the cake, the wedding dress, etc. – were placed on the life-style image-sharing site, *Pinterest* (see below).



The wedding (actually?) took place on the *Twitter* site and with the use of the hash tag #RelicWedding, followers and friends were able to keep tabs on the progress of the wedding which had a priest (the role players asked a friend to role play as the priest), and both the bride and groom said their vows. Through the use of pictures which were attached to tweets, the role players were able to provide imagery on what they wanted to display to their followers. The extent of this romantic online interaction is purely fictional; however, the detail and the amount of time spent in creating such an event are given a similar amount of attention in comparison to a real wedding (except this is much cheaper and less stressful). This was a wedding made, not in heaven, but on the Internet, within the densely fictional space of role playing fandom, where what we remember as reality might very well be bad fiction compared to the alluring and liberating reality of the Web.

## **Conclusion**

Fan creativity is now so pervasive that media texts now extend way beyond

the borders of the authors and production companies that first made them, and demand that we radically revise our contemporary perceptions of media texts. Thus *Harry Potter* must now be understood as including the novels by J.K. Rowling and the Hollywood films based on her books, but alongside this ‘official culture’ must also be included what we can call a *subaltern culture* (with echoes too of sub-cultures) – the hundreds of thousands of fan stories (dispersed across a huge range of genres), the tens of thousands of fan-made *Harry Potter* videos, the fan drawings and photography, the bands who play music inspired by the novels, the dramatizing role players who improvise scenes between characters not found in the novels or films, the virtual fan communities themselves, and so on. These fans become *co-authors* of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, both ‘deferring to’ the original texts and ‘differing from’ them, as fan texts beget other fan texts in dizzying performances of a prodigious intertextuality in which fans make these texts their own, and which obliges us to revise our understanding of the contemporary popular culture text to also include all these ‘unofficial’ texts alongside the ‘official’ texts of the Culture Industries. If this is to demonstrate one's love for a particular TV show, film, or novel, then it is also not a ‘passive’ type of adulation, but a demand actively to be a part of the fictional universe itself, as if the admired (set of) texts provide a structured framework (Fiske’s ‘raw material’) within which fans *improvise* meanings and values and attitudes which begin to speak, not only of the original texts, but of the values and meanings and pleasures of the fans themselves. If for the Culture Industries the value of the *Harry Potter* novels and films lies in their ‘exchange value’, then for the post-consumer (or ‘prosumer’) fans by contrast it is their ‘use value’ that is central - their usefulness to make possible the enormous pleasures, the endless creative improvisations, and the context for a voluntary and deeply-felt contemporary sociality that gathers on sites like *Twitter*. This is not some utopian zone of freedom. Fans continue to live within the structures of a globalized capitalism (*Twitter*, after all, exists to make a profit through advertising), and it is after all the Culture Industries that produce the content (books, TV shows) that the fans engage with, but what is important to note is that within these larger structures of domination fans undoubtedly negotiate an autonomous space of creativity, expression and identity-making.

If for Jenkins, ordinary people are no longer content simply to accept culture ‘from above’ and are instead demanding to make it themselves, then it

seems that ordinary people (including fans) are also interested in the *making* of their identities, rather than leaving that to institutions ‘from above’. We speak now of identities as caught up with agency, of being negotiated, of spaces opening up in late modernity for the self-making of non-ascribed identities from the bits and pieces of discourses and media texts with which we are surrounded. Fans are people who find they can speak about themselves most successfully, can freely identify themselves, choose who they want to be, through the symbolic objects of their fandom. The Internet, with its capacity for virtual sociality, radically enhances this playing with identity, because the Internet is amongst other things a de-centralized and liberated space awash with a multitude of differing and largely unpoliced voices. Helped by the fact that one is not physically present on the Internet, fans (and of course others) can imagine themselves in ways unapproved by their dominant offline world, and because these are chosen and not imposed, they take on a richness and emotional value that speaks of the very passions of the passionate fan. Thus in role play fans inhabit the fictional identities of witches and vampires to actually live out identities which they are clearly more at home with than those offline identities imposed ‘from above’. In the virtual space of *Twitter*, the fundamental *virtuality* of all identity – its non-essentialist mutability, that it is never complete - is liberatingly revealed, and enjoyed by fans.

It is relevant to draw attention to the curious deconstruction of the reality/fiction opposition by fandoms. Perhaps this unsettling of the previously rigid divisions between these two ontological categories has something to do with the emergence of postmodernism which, as Jameson (1991) so powerfully argued, is characterised by the disintegration of the boundary between the economic (traditionally the site of the ‘material’ or, for our purposes, ‘reality’), and the cultural (the space of the imagination, of creativity, of the fictional). It is not only that capitalism colonises the terrain of culture in its relentless search for profitability, but also that culture is no longer contained, but instead spills out over all aspects of the social formation, so that what we buy is not a material motor vehicle, but cultural meanings of status and sexiness; the world of objects turns out to be encrusted with a semiotic density. The scandal of the postmodern is that it reveals that *everything* is culture, that even something as indomitably material as the economy is not only structured by discourse, but also sells cultural meanings, rather than material things (du Gay 1997). And to say this

is also to say, since it is what we invent and project into the world, that culture is *fictional*. We talk about 'black' and 'white' people. These are fictions which we generate to signify reality, and as a result we live within fictional systems called 'language' and 'culture' and 'reality'.

This deconstruction is continually lived by fans – it is the very essence of their fandom. *Star Trek* fans have for decades got dressed up in *Star Trek* costumes to attend monthly local branch meetings where, for example, plans are made to attend the next *Star Trek* convention where the actor who played the captain of the Starship Enterprise will be a keynote speaker on the subject of the TV show's philosophy about life. Reality and fiction are so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them into distinct ontological categories.

We may say this: with fandom, *the fictional becomes real, and reality becomes fictional*. *Star Trek* is lived as real, with the result that the reality of the fan is largely made up of fictional experiences. With regard to the *Harry Potter* and *The Vampire Diaries* fandoms on *Twitter*, role playing takes on a special significance, because fans take on in reality the identity of fictional characters, and even re-design them to make them more expressive of the fans' specific interests. When I role play a witch from *The Vampire Diaries* I inhabit a fictional character, and at a certain point my identity is itself modified by this fictionalizing, so that fiction becomes reality. The very *fictionality of identity-making* walks onto centre-stage, because if self-fashioning is what people typically do, then fan identities and role-playing, re-invented as they are from fictional characters, make us aware of how identities are creative inventions. This only becomes visible when people are no longer mesmerized into passivity by vast dominating institutions and structures, to the point where all meanings have been dangerously naturalized as 'reality'. But when people, such as these online fans – caught up in Huizinga's 'play' - slip effortlessly between 'reality' and 'fiction', and, most importantly, fabricate and re-fabricate reality and identities through fictional textual worlds, then the irreducible fictionality of all reality - its fabricated, invented, human-made projection of fantasies, its protean ability to be constantly re-made rather than only suffered - swims into glaring view, reminding us - radically - that reality is there to be re-made, as are our very subjectivities.

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