

What's So Special About Fanfiction

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Abstract

Fanfiction is a rapidly growing genre of literature, with many different types of stories, characters, and members that interact within the community on a day to day basis. People of all ages and backgrounds come to the fanfiction community for a variety of reasons, with the most interesting members being the authors who keep the genre flourishing. Recently, fan fiction has provided an entirely new area of study for researchers. English and literature professionals have been studying the community avidly for the past twenty years, as the Internet has created an entirely new medium within the fan base to create and share their works faster than ever. These studies pursue myriad avenues to understand this new and heavily diversified genre of literature. From the study of how fanfiction was created, to how fan fiction authors branch out from publishing stories online, to becoming licensed authors with best-selling novels, the community is rich in research opportunities. Within all these studies, however, a common thought serves as a basis to each of them: why is fanfiction so popular? This study will identify shared writing experiences or aspects of writerly development in the fanfiction community that could benefit the creative writing education and pedagogy and the fanfiction community's ability to encourage and retain participants. Through a series of case studies, this study identifies why fanfiction is so popular, why various authors were drawn to the genre and began writing, and what some of their largest influences in their writing styles have been over the course of their time within the community.

What's So Special about Fanfiction?

Fanfiction is a rapidly growing genre of literature, with many different types of stories, characters, and members that interact within the community on a day-to-day basis. Members of this community share stories with one another, sending works back and forth to friends and other fans; they comment and “like” the content, telling the writers how much they enjoyed the latest work and encourage the authors to keep writing; many provide feedback to the author about how the stories made them feel or perhaps avenues that they are interested in seeing the story take. Despite the popularity of fanfiction, the genre is often looked down upon by society due to the risqué content that the media tends to focus on and highlight. This content generally includes stories where the characters of shows, movies, books—even real-world band members and the celebrities who portray the characters—are placed into a wide variety of sexual situations, often with increasingly graphic details. However, the risqué content that is often the subject of discussion makes up only a portion of the fanfiction world.

People of all ages and backgrounds come to the fanfiction community for a variety of reasons, with some of the most interesting members being the authors who keep the genre flourishing. Whether it be the risqué content or a simple story outlining characters in an innocent, everyday situation, authors work diligently to create new content for both their followers’ and their own personal enjoyment. In this vibrant and ever-growing community, authors both young and old can spend years writing and creating their stories, as well as interacting with their followers. Some authors begin writing in their preteen years and remain in the community well into their adult years; others come in as adults and stay long into their later lives. With many of these authors, it is easy to track how their stories change and grow over time. In a community

such as this one, authors receive all types of feedback from fellow writers, their followers, and even people who are merely there to read a story and leave a comment before moving on. All of these avenues of influence and feedback are available to fanfiction authors on a daily basis, sometimes in more volume than they can process.

The fanfiction community presents the ideal place for studying writing styles as it represents a massive hub of writing that has been allowed to flourish for years. Authors with all styles of writing have allowed a vast archive, of sorts, to amass, representing all genres, styles, and demographics of writing. By looking in-depth at fanfiction, I attempt to track the evidence of how authors' writing styles develop naturally over time in a medium that has no definite instructions on how to create and evolve personal works.

Recently, fanfiction has provided an entirely new area of study for researchers. English and literature professionals have been studying the community avidly for the past twenty years, as the Internet has created an entirely new medium within fan bases to create and share their works faster than ever. These studies pursue a myriad of different avenues in an attempt to understand this new and heavily diversified genre of literature. From the study of how fanfiction was created, to how fanfiction authors branch out from publishing stories online, to becoming licensed authors with best-selling novels, the community is rich in research opportunities. Within all of these studies, however, there is a common thought serving as a basis to each of them: why is fanfiction so popular? Many studies have attempted to understand the genre and its people in order to find an answer to this question.

For the purposes of this research article, a few of those studies have been identified as the best sources to discover major influences on fanfiction writing. Angela Lee's study contacted

several fanfiction authors directly to hear their own personal opinions on the community and what drew them to it. Lee's study investigates the relationship between author and audience online, as well as the dynamic of the members of the community as a whole and how the members view their fanfiction community (Lee 246). Specifically, she investigates the opinions of fanfiction authors on their personal experiences within the community. Instead of focusing on the relationships between the members, William Bolt deeply researched the history of fanfiction in his study to provide a glimpse into how the genre began and how it manages to remain so popular in modern times. Beginning with the rise of the *Star Trek* fandom and following fanfiction's rapid growth with the invention of the Internet, Bolt provided a detailed map from the rise of modern-day fandoms to its popularity today.

In their case study with a high school student referred to as "Laura," Jayne Lammers and Valeria Marsh observed the life of a fanfiction writer and how writing outside of school, as well as publishing works online, affected how and what the author wrote, given the feedback from their online followers (Lammers 278). They followed this student in her school and fanfiction writing and studied how her writing outside of classes and the feedback that was gained from the readers shaped her writing style, as well as the types of stories and works that she wrote. Monica Flegel and Jenny Roth looked at fanfiction as a branching-off point for authors to begin their path towards "legitimate" publishing. Flegel and Roth asked several authors who did that very thing about their views on their path to success to discover their views on their humble beginnings within the fanfiction community (Flegel 253). They discovered that while some authors embraced their "humble beginnings," others chose to think of that time in their lives as a separate entity altogether. Each of these studies attempted to answer the question of fanfiction's

popularity in different ways, yet all of them seek to understand the genre and its avid followers better.

While all of these studies have attempted to explain the legitimacy of fanfiction as a genre, as well as gain insight from its members about their own personal views and experiences within the community, researchers have yet to study the ways in which authors' writing styles change over the course of their time within the fanfiction world. The question of why people turn to fanfiction has been answered, but how does the genre affect how they write? Lammers and Marsh attempt to answer this question with a case study of one particular author, but to further verify their findings, more research is needed from other authors within the community. In this study, I attempt to identify the effects that fanfiction has on its members, specifically within its authors and their writing. Using the studies of Lee, Bolt, Lemmers and Marsh, and Flegel and Roth over the past two decades, I identify how fanfiction writing can shape the way that authors create their stories. These influences come from the community itself, in the emotional and creative support given by their peers within the fan base, seen most clearly within the thousands of comments and feedback, as well as their day-to-day interactions with other members of the community.

In order to gain accurate feedback about how the writing styles of authors have changed over the course of their time writing fanfiction, I conducted a series of three case studies with members of the fanfiction community. These case studies consisted of two parts. The first part was gathering three artifacts from various stages of their fanfiction writing careers. I specifically asked for their earliest piece of fanfiction, a work from the middle of their writing, and their most recent fanfiction piece, whether completed or not. I analyzed these pieces for any noticeable changes, specifically in the structure of the work, as well as the overall composition of the piece

itself. Had the writing matured in any identifiable ways? If so, what were those ways and were they seen across all three case studies? Then, after analyzing the works, I set up virtual interviews with the authors to get their perspectives on how their writing has changed, as well as their own personal stories about their journey to the fanfiction community. I asked them a variety of questions about how they first became involved in the community before moving on to their motivations and personal assessments of their progress within their submitted artifacts.

I personally have been a member of the fanfiction community for several years, as both a reader and a writer. I interact on a nearly daily basis with members of the community in a number of different “fandoms” and have a good understanding of how the members interact with one another, as well as the general ideals in place behind fanfiction as a genre. Aside from personal interests, as an English/Writing major, analyzing how fanfiction shapes the writing styles of authors and tracking that progress intrigues me from an academic standpoint. For years, schools tell students what and how to write, but the writing process outside of school is equally as intriguing to me. Looking at how these authors change over time just by pursuing their interests gives insight into a world that is only recently becoming legitimate in the eyes of academia, and I am eager to help bring this part of the world to light.

As stated previously, I conducted separate case studies with three authors from the fanfiction community. They are referred to by pseudonyms for their privacy. The first case study looked at Emily, a twenty-year old woman. She was a senior in college pursuing a History and English Literature degree. She could not give me an exact time that she had been in the fanfiction community, but she knew that it was definitely about seven to eight years. Emily indicated that she reads fanfiction at least once a week, but she also stated that, with her college schedule, she hadn't been writing fanfiction for a few months when we conducted her interview. The second

case study was Harmony, a nineteen-year old woman. She was a sophomore in college pursuing a Criminal Justice degree. Harmony indicated that she reads fanfiction almost daily, but she really only sets aside time to write a few times a month due to her own busy schedule. She indicated that she has been a part of the fanfiction community for about seven years. The third case study was Melody, who is a forty-seven year-old woman. She has a Master's degree in Media Ecology and Film and is licensed in massage therapy. She indicated that she had been a part of the fanfiction community for almost twenty years, reads fanfiction daily, and writes her own fanfiction at least once a month.

After conducting the interviews and looking at the writing samples, I was able to make a few significant findings. Across the three case studies, the authors all gave similar reasons for getting involved in the fanfiction community in the first place. Additionally, and surprisingly, their writing styles seemed to go through the same process of growth over time as well, no matter how long they had been writing. The process of getting involved in fanfiction seems to have followed a natural progression of sorts. The genre is defined by the members joining a particular fan base around something that they enjoy, similar in the ways that people band around sports teams and discuss statistics for that team. After getting involved in a particular series, whether books, movies, television shows, or some other medium, all members said that they wanted more from the stories. Searching on the internet gradually led them to various fanfiction websites such as Tumblr, Archive of Our Own, Wattpad, and FanFiction.Net, where they all spent various amounts of time reading.

Though all of the authors eventually ended up as authors, they all took their own paths from readers to writers. In the case of Harmony, she ran several blogs on Tumblr, interacting with the fan base for a variety of shows and bands, before she created one dedicated to the

television show *Teen Wolf*. “I had so many followers,” she explained. “I thought I was hot shit. Everyone kept asking for me to write something.” Her first work was a short piece surrounding the main character from *Teen Wolf*, Stiles. “I wanted to play off of his name. Stiles doesn’t have style, and he makes fun of himself, ya know? It’s cringe to read it now, though.” For Emily, the outside influence of followers was not there. She did not have access to the Internet for a large portion of her childhood. When she gained that access though, Emily began to do online quizzes on Quotev.com and stumbled upon fanfiction that way. For a long time, she was content to just read the works of others, usually regarding the band One Direction. However, she eventually decided to write her own stories just for fun. “There are generally two kinds of fanfics: I want to correct something in this universe, or I want to be in this universe. I was often in the second camp.” Her first story was inserting her own character into a situation with Niall Horan from the band One Direction. “I wanted to start writing it because I had been reading the fandom for a while,” she said. Even though she wrote it in a notebook and never publicly published the work, Emily still marks it as the beginning of her foray into fanfiction writing. Melody had a much more sporadic beginning within fanfiction. While she was involved, she admits that she really was not consistently participating in the community until around 2017. In her case, Melody decided to actually sit down and complete her first work, a short piece on the *FAKE* series, to become a part of the online fan base, even though her presence was still sporadic. However, it began a learning process for her. “It wasn’t a style I learned,” Melody said. “It was to sit down, writing things, finishing it, and post it. It was the first time I came up with a story from start to finish.” The accounts of these authors may not be the same, but they all share similar notions as to how they began to write their own works. Not all of them immediately turned to writing, but

after a period of time, whether a few months or a few years, they all decided to write their own stories.

Once they decided to write their stories, all artifacts of their work seemed to go through a similar process of maturity. The earliest works were rife with typos and did not have self-contained plots. Instead, the authors relied heavily on prior knowledge of the fandom that the individual stories were appealing to. For example, a story written within the *Star Wars* universe required the readers to know characters at least and the finer lore details at best without providing any other information for readers outside of the fandom. The writing itself was juvenile, in a sense. Short, choppy sentences made up the majority of Melody's first works, and Emily's first work jumps from scene to scene at a rapid pace. All of the authors' earliest works tend to cycle between two different styles when dealing with descriptions: either they give no details at all about the characters involved, or they provide so much that it interrupts the flow of the story. Overall, the first stories of all three authors felt like just that: the first stories of people learning a new skill.

Within the artifacts from the middle of the careers as authors, the individual styles of the authors were more tangible. The stories still contained typos and relied on the source material, but they felt like more standalone works, able to support their own existence. Within Emily's second work, she made a huge change in her style of writing. Within her first piece, she used a large amount of dialogue to move the story along. The best description of the dialogue was banter. The conversation had no real purpose; it was just there to entertain for a short while before moving on to the next scene. Within her second work, Emily cut down on the pointless conversations immensely. While some banter still existed, these conversations were not the main focus of the piece. Rather, they were there to alleviate some form of tension within the work.

Within Harmony's works, a major change also occurred. Her first work was very short and had no depth. It expected readers to know who they were reading about and to accept the plot immediately. Within her second work, Harmony learned to pace the information presented to the readers. She gradually introduced characters and their relationships to one another, as well as the plot in general, instead of just frontloading all of it and expecting the reader to do all of the work.

However, out of all of the authors, Melody went through the biggest and most radical change within her style of writing. While her second artifact was still very "scene-by-scene" like her first artifact, the scenes were longer and had more coherence to them. Additionally, her first work had little to no details about the characters. However, her second work had detailed descriptions for several things, not just the characters. She described the area around them, as well as the emotions that the characters were feeling at that moment. The change was astounding. When I mentioned it to Melody during her interview, she mentioned that she had a "beta" (or editor for fanfiction) help her with that story, but based on the evidence and the fact that this is a piece from the middle of her time writing fanfiction, her progress can be attributed to continued practice and having someone to help critique her work. The progress of all the authors from their first pieces to the pieces in the middle of their writing was overall positive. They learned more about pacing scenes, how to flow from one idea to the next, and how to give more detail within their works. While the change was prominent in some more than others, they all show growth as writers by this stage of their "careers" as authors.

The most recent works show the authors in their best lighting. Typos are minimal, as they have learned to edit their works and check for errors. Fanfiction will always rely on a source text by nature, but the works use that to their advantage. The pieces stand by themselves, fleshing out the characters in a more in-depth way and providing stories with actual plot, fight scenes, or

conflict (depending on the type of genre they are appealing to within the fanfiction). Harmony's work allows for her characters' relationship to be understood immediately; however, the story provides examples of how the characters interact through actions and conversation, not one or the other, as her previous works had. Emily's work developed more to the point of having more substantial events happen within her scenes. Instead of focusing solely on the relationships between characters, she added action and conflict into her work, having a fight scene with high stakes. Her sentences are no longer choppy and short. Instead, they work together, the sentences flowing more easily and developing the scene. Additionally, her descriptions have developed, allowing for a better image of what characters look like, what environment they are in, and what is happening within each scene.

As with the middle works, Melody showed the most progress as an author. As the biggest indicator, she presented the longest piece of work with 113,000 words. Her work had very few typos, despite the fact that she did not have a beta-reader this time around and edited everything herself. The number of characters in her story is much higher, having closer to twenty characters she was working with instead of the maximum of five in previous stories, and with the additional characters brought in more dialogue between them. Additionally, Melody's descriptions showed the most progress of any of the authors. Everything—characters, settings, emotions, action scenes—had very detailed explanations, even more so than she had in her middle-era piece. Despite the lack of the beta, her work showed a definite maturity in Melody's writing style and development over time. All of the authors showed progress by this point in their writing, but Melody's development proved to be the most notable.

When I interviewed the authors, I asked them about their own assessment of how they developed as authors over their time in fanfiction. Despite coming to fanfiction for the same

reasons—wanting more out of the shows, movies, and books they enjoyed—all of the authors noted that they learned different things throughout their time as writers, generally from reading other authors' works. Emily pointed to developing an actual plot within her stories. "For me, it was a shift from thinking up fun scenarios and clever description to actually worrying about plot, creating real, authentic reactions to things." She later said that fanfiction "allowed me to become more confident in how I was writing. In descriptions, and in action, definitely! I feel like I have a good grasp of how to express action, and I picked up a fair bit of that from fanfiction. Like, when I was reading, I'll find myself saying 'You could have done that better!' or 'Ooh, that was really well done!'" Harmony's learning experience covered more topics. "I didn't know how to write well," she said. "If I didn't read it, I wouldn't have written it. I learned how to use punctuation better, improve my conversations, and how to write better fight scenes in general. And backstories." Melody pointed out more detailed growths, in both her stories and in herself as a person. "[My stories] increased in complexity. I'm more willing to take challenges, but I know what I like to write and how I like to write it. I know I'm not going to use vulgar or flowery language to the extreme...I don't have to make myself uncomfortable for the sake of a scene...I had to learn how to pace myself." When it comes to her writing growth, she said that her biggest chance was learning how to research for a scene or a story. "I've learned how to do research. I'm a better researcher now than I was in college!"

The findings from my research parallel closely to the findings of the studies that I mentioned earlier. In Lemmers and Marsh's study, they noted that fanfiction provided the opportunity for aspiring authors to learn about audience expectations from reading other people's works (Lemmers 280). I found similar results in my interviews with the three authors, as all of them developed their styles via reading other works while they created their own stories.

Additionally, Lemmers and Marsh found that having direct feedback from audience members greatly aided the authors in their works (Lemmers 280-281). Within my own research, Emily, Harmony, and Melody all reported that having feedback and interacting with their readers was a highlight of their experience within fanfiction and as a main motivator to continue to write.

Angela Lee's research also found similar outcomes within the fanfiction community. She listed some of the reasons that fanfiction is so popular: staying in a story longer, expanding on the source material, and interacting with like-minded people (Lee 254-255). Lee also found a few of the advantages for writers within fanfiction: to learn new experiences that are perhaps not otherwise available and a source of feedback (Lee 254). For Melody, those experiences were understanding how to write better fight scenes and descriptions; for Harmony and Emily, those experiences were learning how to better formulate plots and develop a story to its completion. Lee's findings match my own both in reasons why people come to fanfiction in the first place, as well as why they stay and choose to write their own.

Within Bolt's study, he focused on why people write fanfiction and what the intentions behind it are. Bolt concluded that fanfiction authors write for the challenge and the experience of writing fanfiction (Bolt 13-14). From my interviews with the authors, all three fanfiction writers voiced similar causes for beginning to write fanfiction. He also noted that fans write because they enjoy writing, not because they want to steal any ideas from anyone (Bolt 26). All three of the fanfiction authors expressed similar feelings. The authors valued the things they learned, and they just wanted to experience more from the source material; no one ever intended to steal anything from the original creators. In fact, they all noted being thankful for the basis to begin their exploration into the "fandom," because without that base material, they would not be where they are today.

Flegel and Roth focused on the differences between fanfiction writers and published authors, and they concluded that both types of authors viewed writing as a skill to be developed. Fanfiction served as a “haven for published authors, and a training ground for beginners” (Flegel 267). By looking at the growth Emily, Harmony, and Melody went through over their years of writing and how each of them changed with time and practice, I concur with his findings. From my research, fanfiction definitely creates an outlet for aspiring writers to develop their skills and learn from a myriad of other authors and styles until they settle into their own niche.

Through this research, I have gained valuable insight into the growth of writers within the fanfiction community. The research allows for an ever-growing genre of literature that has, until recently, only flourished in secret, to show itself as a positive influence on aspiring writers. Through this study, I have been able to learn more about the effects of fanfiction on growing writers within its community. Additionally, I have been able to gain insight into the path that members may take as they continue to develop their writing styles and how the authors learn and grow. Finally, I have been able to learn more about the community in general, how its members view the fanfiction genre, and how they interact with one another.

Throughout the course of this study, I set out to learn how authors within the fanfiction community develop their writing, their influences and the paths that they take. From the literature that I looked at for the purposes of this study, I learned that while academia has begun to delve deeper into this genre of writing, it has not yet learned the same-but-different nature of the authors that they are looking at. From this study, I have learned that the path that most authors take is overall very similar but unique to each person. Generally, fans who want more from a piece of media (i.e. books, movies, plays, etc) go to the internet and stumble upon one of the many fanfiction sites. Whether it takes a few months or a few years, those who enjoy writing

will try their own hand at it. If they stick with it, authors learn from other authors and the feedback of their readers. With time and practice, their writing improves, becoming an author in their own right. The paths are not identical, but fanfiction provides a place for writers to enjoy their fandoms while cultivating a skill on their own terms, not because they have to, but because they want to. Even though all of the authors end up in the same place as writers, they are all unique in the ways that they ended up there, and this research has allowed me to see how each author comes into their own styles and creative voices. While fanfiction may still be stigmatized, more studies will only help to legitimize the genre for what it is: a place for authors to learn and grow.

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